

In The Dirt Beneath the Marigolds

I. *Age Two*

In the sidewalk cracks beneath the swingset, a single dandelion grows, shrouded by unkempt grass and dusted with gravel. There I sit, crouched on my tippy-toes in a pink floral sundress, watching a honeybee work. As she collects pollen, she hums, just like my mother does whenever she is thinking. I reach down to feel the honeybee's hurried buzz, eyes wide with wonder. Beneath the soft light, a brilliant summer sun diluted by gentle clouds, I believe more than anything else in this yellow.

In my admiration, I lean in a little too close—something I would find myself doing throughout my life—and get stung. This has never happened to me before, and so I believe it has surely never happened to anyone before. This narrow world, seen through watering two-year-old eyes, sears with a previously unknown pain. This is new and unpredicted, and I cry the whole way home, thumb swollen like my teary eyes. I sniffle until my nose feels raw.

II. *Age Three*

I have been told in gentle voices that I was the kind of child who cried often and laughed even more. There is a picture I kept tacked to my wall for the longest time, taken when I was three years old and the whole world still danced when I did. This was a time when I was still terrified to walk barefoot in the grass; I never bothered trying to be polite. Here I have the largest smile, the bubbliest toes, curious hands clutching at the string of a red balloon. The refrigerator in the background is a gallery for stick-figure drawings and crayon scribbles. I know most of my younger self only in this way, acquainted through photographs and the words of those who knew me before I was myself.

There is one image, though, I can no longer hold in my hands. It's the kind of thing my toddling self promised never to lose.

Kneeling in the dirt behind the preschool, with *Kumbaya* stuck in my wondrously tiny head and circle-songs in my staccato feet, I cup my hands. In the garden filled with ladybugs, an expanse of green and vibrant flowers laid out before my new eyes, I have found my best friend in the dirt beneath the marigolds. This shiny black beetle, glistening metallic blue beneath a happy sky, traces the mountains and valleys of my little hand with her antennae.

As if lost in some unintentional prayer, I sit. The hem of my buttercup-yellow dress rests just above where my knees meet the forgiving soil. Sharing a timeless meditation, this beetle's twitching antennae are gentle kisses on the pads of my fingers. The teacher's honey-like voice drifts through the golden air, calling me inside to the repetitious naptime during which I never sleep.

Reluctantly, I flex my palm beneath the foliage and shepherd the beetle towards her home.
Reluctantly, I set her free.

III. *Age Four*

I tower above the world—or rather, teeter—as some sort of fairy princess with places to go, people to see, and business to take care of. I hold myself like I'm some Cinderella-meets-CEO, giggling at the click-clacking sound every time my feet hit the floor. Minutes earlier I had raided the dress-up closet my sister and I used to build fantastical worlds around us, silken scarves and rainbow boas, tulle tutus and tinsel-dusted fairy wands, pirate swords and superhero capes, plastic crowns that shimmered with cheap gold paint. Beneath the masses of colorful fabric and flimsy weapons, I

found a pair of shoes: a ballerina kind of pink, shellacked fake-leather, smooth to the touch, with heels probably no more than half an inch tall that seemed to be stilettos.

Thrilled, I have run upstairs to the cool kitchen tile which rests, staggered and uneven, beneath my restless feet. I run in circles, arms outstretched, ankles collapsing clumsily with every few steps, winding in circles between the green carpeted living room and the angular wood-and-ceramic kitchen. Without warning, the world slides out from beneath me and I fall toward the stone-like floor. My arms remain useless by my sides, too unaware to catch my fragile body before I hit the ground.

Almost immediately, I feel a shooting pain in my two front teeth. My face gets hot, but I don't begin to boil over into tears until my mother runs to me, steeped in love and maternal anxiety. When I do cry, these are messy tears, large and aimless and seemingly without end.

The emergency room smells musty, the floors hollow and echoing beneath my once again flat and adventureless feet. I shrink beneath narrowing fluorescent lights, assured with kisses that I am fine, a glance to my calmly nodding parents and to the toneless doctor beside me—some Ibuprofen and a little more caution and I'd be good as new. I leave with a yellow popsicle in hand and an unprecedented smile on my face.

More than twelve years later, I am still all too careful to watch my step.

IV. *Age Five*

The preschool's main room, constructed with natural and knobby wood and covered with wool and tiny colorful beads, smells constantly of cloves and apple cider. I sit here, thinking.

Firecrackers rattling off inside my head, I remember playing here with my friends yesterday. I look around to the room full of children who are not me, bewildered just trying to imagine each little life, where I am playing now. I picture playing here tomorrow.

I feel a surge of energy, like I have just discovered something entirely new. Almost silently, I utter a truth just now discovered: "Every *today* is also a *yesterday* and a *tomorrow*."

V. *Age Six*

My best friend and I are sitting criss-cross-applesauce on the floor of her bedroom, armed gleefully with rhinestone-bedazzled stuffed animals and a disarray of elementary-school art supplies. Beneath us is a rug my mother surely would have run over with a vacuum immediately, the air around us perfumed with waxy Crayola scents and the intoxicating air of nontoxic magic markers. Fervently, we color—the six-year old artist I have always admired and I, young and buck-toothed—as the word "friend" rolls like a loose marble around my happily scattered brain.

"Oh, no!" I throw the white-paper-bag hand puppet upon which I have been dotting for hours into the air with exasperation. Tacked onto the rabbit's triangular button nose, I had drawn one whisker longer than the rest. In attempting to make them even, they had all grown disproportionately long. Cottontail, my beloved imaginary pet, became a two-dimensional mistake.

"It's ok!" my friend assured me, her smile revealing the small gap between her two front teeth. "I'll go get some white-out from my mom's office."

She returned with a small bottle of white liquid, with a smell like the air surrounding the gas station whenever my dad forgets to close the door as he's filling up. "How do I use it?"

"Just paint it on the mistake and it'll cover it up." My eyes grow wide, my mouth agape, my heart fluttering. *Surely, this must be magic, some tool of fairies.* I do not stop at the whiskers but keep going, smoothing edges until it is time for me to go.

VI. *Age Seven*

I have been waiting on the splintered, sun-faded steps of the porch for what seems like eternity while children run blindly past, lunchboxes in hand. The sound of crunching feet on gravel

surrounds me, the sun beating down against my hanging head. It is late August, the beginning of the school year, and my best friend is no longer in my class. Her promise runs through my mind again and again—*I'll meet you on the steps by the portables, and then we can build fairy houses until lunchtime is over!* I have no reason not to believe her.

Years pass in that thirty minutes, suns and moons rising and falling like my sad and shaky breath. *Why wouldn't she come?* Finally the whistle blows, like some belated relief from my newfound loneliness.

As I am lining up at the paint-chipped classroom door, she runs past, without looking me in the eye. "Brigit?" I call after her, choking, my voice swallowed up by the surrounding air.

She pauses, turns back. "Oh, sorry," she sighs. "I decided to play tag with Claire instead."

"You should have told me." I try to sound gentle, but I feel my voice waver.

She shrugs. "We can build fairy houses tomorrow."

The next day, I wait for her, bouncing my leg up and down against the wood chip-covered ground. I try not to count on her showing up. When she does, while we are collecting flower petals on which the fairies will sleep, I notice my hands shaking. I plant my feet firmly into the ground with every step, certain that if I can remain rooted our friendship will do the same.

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