

Tulips in California-the winters are not cold enough. But the obsessive among us, the true lover of flowers, of garden, earth, and growth persists. Women mostly, women like my mother, know that tulips will not bloom unless they have six weeks of cold, yet they persist. My mother simulates the growing conditions: she places the tulip bulbs in a special drawer in the refrigerator. A drawer empty but for tulip bulbs, resting, maturing for six weeks long. During these six weeks, my father is periodically chastised for placing softening apples in the refrigerator so they will not rot on the kitchen counter. Chemicals released by apples stunt the maturation of tulip bulbs and prevent blooming.

"How many times do I have to tell you? The bulbs will not bloom with apples!" my mother screams at my father, when she discovers a bag of apples in the adjoining drawer. He knows this-he has watched the thwarted growth of her tulips time and time again. He refuses to waste good fruit, and he will sacrifice a year of tuliping for the sake of saving.

And my mother goes to the nursery and buys another bag full of bulbs. "I have to be on constant look out for those goddamn apples," she says to me over dinner. It amazes and befuddles me, that my mother, who does all the grocery shopping, who chooses all of the fruit, buys apples and only apples, apples in great numbers and different sizes. It is a war they play over and back to each other-wasting money by saving money, wasting fruit by saving tulips, buying more apples to replace the lost fruit, wasting tulips to save the fruit. And so the battle goes-sacrificing to save and saving to sacrifice.

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It is like this with everything, with everything with my parents. They love each other very much. They are furious in their love-it is an uncontrollable, full-blown process, like the blooming flower, one I will never fully understand. My father goes into fits of depression; he furls his brow, he turns inward, and goes crazy over things like overflowing garbage cans, unfolded laundry, shoes left in the center of the living room floor. His head shakes and his eyes muddy-you can see the pressure and smell the mood. Then he explodes.

She stands there and watches him, my father burning like a branch, with her finger pressed to her temple. He is the smoke lacing through her arms. Or she pretends not to notice-she fixes her eyes on the TV or through the living room window to the garden, counting the space she has for new flowers. She looks out upon her flowers, welts of wound, arranged without order. Purple cone flower, 40 inches tall, white balloon flower, Canterbury bells, Fparrieshoop wrapping around one another in the center bed. A clematis woman climbing up the wall, spooning her arms around the telephone pole, pansies-pale blue and white-at her feet. This is where my mother pits her rage: Johnny jump ups, Marguerite and Shafta daisies, correopsis, Mexican Evening Primrose. Purple catnip, lavender, mint, bellflower, Sally Holmes. Abraham Darby that smells of mur. Graham Thomas, New Dawn. And of course, at the entrance to our house, filling the front beds, are the parrot tulips.

Tulips are perennials: after the tulips bloom, you must continue simulating their environment. You must let the leaves dry, pull the shriveled bulbs, and put them in the refrigerator for next year, for six more weeks of winter. But my mother, in her impatience or in her wasting or her anxiousness for growth and re-growth, treats tulips as annuals and just lets them wilt. After she has harvested their flowers, placed them in various vases and bowls around our house, she will let the tulips die and leave them there like lost bodies.

It is unearthly, for as the leaves and stems are wilting in the garden, the tulips will be blooming, full and angry, in our house. Parrot tulips-flamboyant reds and purples and oranges. With their thin black stamens, the flowers get older, change shapes, becoming increasingly dramatic. They change shapes, my mother says-it's almost like they are rising in the vase.

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In the years that my parents were separated, we met in the courtyard, my father and I. My mother would drop me off at the mouth of the driveway, twenty feet past the red mailbox that hung sideways from the post. She'd linger in the driveway for a while, the motor in lull, her arm resting on the windowsill. Hand the hairbrush we shared to my father, perhaps a pony tail holder, a clean pair of socks. Late at night, when I had fallen asleep on the corduroy couch, he'd part the bristles of the brush, pick our hairs from the cracks-first my mother's hair, then mine. He'd try to straighten her curls. He'd hold them between his fingers, he'd press his wrapped fingers to his face.

There was a space in the back of his rented cottage for a garden. We cleared away the branches from the shedding apple tree, we sifted rotted apples from the soil. Then, kneeling into the earth, we began to dig. I went at it barehanded, I scooped the topsoil, tossed it behind me. After I had made small holes, my father dug deeper. He took the spade in his wide hands and created larger holes in the earth. Soon we had a series of twenty holes. We had planned a vegetable garden. We had wanted rows of Tomatoes, peas, peppers, cucumber, and carrots. But the nursery had run out of peppers. Cucumbers were too expensive. The carrot seeds, which were stored in my pockets, had been lost in the wash. So we only had peas-sweet peas-and tomatoes-cherry and pear. We began to plant. We took a radio out to the garden and spent the entire Saturday gardening.

Three weeks later, our sweet peas bloomed. They bloomed and bloomed, yet they yielded no fruit. Our neighbor visited the garden; she saw our masterpiece and laughed: sweet peas are flowers, not vegetables. Had my mother been there, she might have told us. My mother, who knows the language of the garden, who can distinguish petal from pea, might

have told us.

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The Rules of Gardening: 1. Use good earth: extract all dry, caked earth from garden. The soil must be moist and rich with nutrients. 2. Give your plants space. Roots expand. 3. Weed remorselessly. 4. Water. 5. Water. 6. Water.

The separation, my mother would explain to me later, was the result of an absence of growth. My father was stunted. She gave him love, she gave him more love, but he would not budge. The same problems arose-the screaming, the wars within wars, the ever-burning smoke. So she arranged the separation just as she would cut flowers for a bouquet. She separated belongings, she tore leaves from the stems, she extracted dried petals, she discarded dishes and photographs. And then she submerged us in water.

Years later, my child years almost gone, she would take the wet, rotting flowers from the vase and try to revive them. She would cut the ends of the roses, the daisies, the tulips. She'd rinse out the old vase, fill it with bleached water. And she'd place her husband, my father, feet first, in the center. He was the central flower, the largest rose. My mother and I were clematis, smaller-petaled, surrounding, entwined with leaves.

We are now one. We live in one house. We use one bathroom. We cut from one garden.

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Snails and slugs are the gardener's nightmare. They creep in during the wet, warm season. They leave their slime tracks on the grass, on the bricks, on the flowers. They suck and they gnaw, leaving holes in the leaves, in the petals. The best remedy: beer.

Tonight, my mother takes her nicest bowls from the cabinets. She lines my father and me up at the sink and hands us the pottery, which we fill with beer. My father bemoans the loss of this expensive liquid, but for some reason, he complies. He watches as she kicks her sandals into the center of the kitchen floor, as takes the first full bowl outside and begins to embed it into the earth. After she has strategically placed twenty traps around the garden, she sits on the porch and watches triumphantly as the slugs appear from hidden leaves on her plants and move in packs to the beer where they will slowly drown.

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The following day we will drive to San Francisco in the rain. We have just spent two hours arguing about how to spend the Saturday. To add to the tension, someone left a load of newly washed laundry in the washing machine for three days. Now my father will have to wear mildewed shirts for two weeks; he is too stubborn to do another load of laundry, a waste of water, soap, and energy, he complains. So, for two weeks, he will smell of wet places, of corners, of rotten fruit.

After we have calmed him, coaxed my father to the car, there is another argument, over the time. We are driving and he is shouting: "Jesus Christ, we can't even get out of the house until one. What is the point? What is the point?" And my mother, in a listless attempt to quell or ignore him, tells my father that she has set the clock twenty minutes fast. "Really, Joseph, it is only 12:40." "Goddamn it! Goddamn it! What is the point?" "Jesus Christ, Joseph, will you let it go?" "It's always the same." He mimics her: "let it go, Joseph, let it go. I have to let every goddamn thing go." My mother throws the car door open as we are moving. "Stop the car! Stop the fucking car!" He continues driving. She steps onto the moving road. He slows the car, then drives away.

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"You learn to live apart," my mother tells me two days later. "You learn to live separately from him and to find beauty elsewhere, beyond the love. You just have to isolate yourself from it. You can't love everything." I don't know if this is the right way to go about relationships, about loving, jumping from moving cars, hiding behind bushes in the rain while your husband searches for you. I don't believe this is the right way to love, to be loved. I am angry at my mother for not leaving, for hanging onto to something so permanently wrong, for continuing the war in her wistful way: purchasing, replacing, and exchanging bulbs for apples, driving her sorrow, her anger into the dirt, planting it alongside her flowers.

I am angry with my mother for living separately from it, for ignoring the meaning of her wars, for burying herself in her garden. Yes, my mother loves her garden. But she does not understand it. It is her retribution, her savior, her release. But it is her imprisonment as well. She loves it so much, she takes such relief in it; it cures and soothes her problems so well that she will never escape what truly haunts her. The flowers, the roses, the tulips are too strong. They are perpetually rising in the vase. They are perpetually hiding what is really there.

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Am I condemned to gardens, to the tulip, the rose and their compatriots just as my mother is condemned, just as her sisters, her mother, my grandmother is condemned, just as my great grandmother was condemned? It terrifies me that I might be condemned to this love, not because I do not love gardens-I do-but because if I am sewn to one of my mother's fates, why not others? It feels inevitable that I will make the same mistakes she did, that I will become as my mother has become to her husband, my father, that I will begin wars and fight them illogically as they do, that I will choose a lover who will love me as my father loves my mother, or even worse, as my mother loves him. My fear, then, perhaps is in love. The imprisonment within love in the ever-presence of the roses and tulips that bloom unceasingly.

My father refuses to buy my mother flowers. My father has never bought my mother flowers. He says we have enough in the garden. "Isn't it enough that we bought this house for the garden?" he will throw back at me when I beg him to bless

her with roses for their twentieth wedding anniversary. I find myself driving to the florist alone. The flowers are arranged neatly in the cases. "Canterbury Bells, clematis, correopsis please." Why am I choosing the very flowers she has in her garden? I am handing the man a twenty-dollar bill. He wraps in beautiful blue paper, ties with ribbon. Flower water drips on my arms as I drive away.