LESONS FROM THE GARDEN
{Winner of the 2014 Echo Creative Nonfiction Prize}
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The weed asks the flower, "What makes you different from me?"

The flower tells the weed, "They tell me I am beautiful, I have a reason to
be."

The garden tells its children they are valuable because they came from this
earth. "You have much to give, even if they can't see your worth."

The gardener shuns the weed, exhumes its body, and picks the flower.

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I remember the summer I fell in love with flowers. Not the packaged roses
crumpled in vases at the grocery store. Not even the potted plants at the
nursery. Flowers that grew out of the ground and over my head. Standing
in the garden nestled in the wall of Cashiers Valley and staring up at the
trees scraping the sky, I felt so small.

My grandparents brought me down to the garden for the first time near the
end of my seventeenth summer. We put on long pants to protect us from
the bugs and sturdy shoes to scale down the mountain. Around the side of
the garage, past the row of hydrangea bushes, down the steep hill coated
with leaves and lined with trees, and beyond the tan rocky clearing beneath
the porch towering overhead on sturdy wooden beams like stilts, lay the
rectangular plot that would come to define my mountain summers.

My grandmother taught me how after the blooming season, you must dig
the dahlia bulbs from the ground and store them in the cool, dark base-
ment for the winter. She recited the name of each flower proudly making
its way into the world, like a walking gardener's encyclopedia. My grand-
father stood outside the picket fence bordering the garden, examining the
tomatoes. Together, as if nurturing were in their DNA, they make things
grow. They grew a family around them, planted a garden, and built lives
around both.

The promise of flowers draws me back each summer, a hope that still reso-
nates within me, calling me home.

 Flowers speak a language that weeds don’t understand. But maybe they just haven’t been taught.

 Petals become letters that grow into deeper meaning.

 If you open a dictionary and run your finger down the L’s, you will see Primrose, Ambrosia, and Anemone; Carnations, Lilacs, and Roses. They speak different dialects of love but tune to the same pitch.

 If a lover gives you a rainflower he is drowning you with sincerity. He will never forget you. He will atone for his sins. He will love you back. You can give thanks with a rose the color of raspberries. He will reciprocate with a Hydrangea for the gratitude of being understood.

 Orchids reach for the clouds but want not their tears. They are refined, a cultivated beauty. Geraniums stand vibrant on porches over valleys, the scarlet clusters accented with stars and stripes speak to gentility and determination. Dahlias flourish in valley gardens, their heavy rainbow heads reaching towards the trees with dignity.

 Rosemary for remembrance, olives for peace. While ivy tells of good news, mint harbors suspicion.

 But the sunny heads of marigolds bring pain and grief, where Love Lies Bleeding overflows with hopelessness. Morning Glory unfurls for the sun, but retreats as the trumpets curl, its beauty lost in vain.

 Weeds speak lessons of resilience, of hardiness. But the gardener does not speak their language.

 Together we foraged the garden for the prettiest blooms, admiring their vibrant colors and reveling in their perfect symmetry, careful not to cut the buds. My grandmother and I carried our collection of dahlias, daisies, hydrangeas, and ferns back up the hill in a tin watering can. As we stood at
the kitchen sink arranging our floral plunder, she taught me about balance and shape. *Peel the leaves from the stem to keep the water fresher. Balance the bright blooms with tall swoops of green fern. Keep in mind the scale of the vase. Three is a golden number.* With beginners luck, I wielded my power as my grandmother worked on a large arrangement and I, on many smaller ones. She praised me for my eye, but it seemed to come naturally, the arranging itself as well as the love that blossomed the moment I completed my first vase. I felt almost like an artist of the earth, stealing some of Mother Nature’s power of arranging the world, and assembling it the way I wanted, a way that allowed me to keep it for myself.

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Any and every gardening magazine will educate inquiring gardeners on the most sought after advice. How to kill weeds, in increasing order of severity:

Plan your approach. The garden is a battlefield and weeds are the invaders. Be vigilant.

Cut off their supplies. Do not aid the enemy with extra water and fertilizer rations, even at the flower’s risk.

Pulling weeds is most effective when they are young. Pulling them from surface level will not win the war. Attempt to eradicate their taproots before their grasp grows too far from your reach. Use a shovel like a gun if you must.

Use chemical warfare as a last resort. Be green, if possible. Herbicides can kill germinating lawn seeds, pose risk to animals and humans, and damage the environment.

Prepare for sacrifices. And good luck to you.

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If you want to kill flowers, use scissors and put them in a vase.

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But now, on some level, I dread the arranging. Dread the sound of my
grandmother's refined southern drawl: "I'll let you do it. You're always so good at arranging them. I can't wait to see what you come up with."

It's not the miniature bugs that get brought into the house, hiding behind the folds of the dahlia's petals. It's not the wet clumps of leaves and stalks and stems that collect in the sink. It's the worry of arranging them just so. The demands of balance, cutting tall blooms down to size, desperately willing shorter ones to reach the water. But also, the disappointment of always trying to recapture that first moment, summers ago, and like the stems, coming up short. My grandmother and I, like artists at the sink, collaborating over our designs. She would lean in, occasionally holding up a bloom so I could insert another one into my collection, admiring my work. "You're good at this, Jennifer."

And like an apprentice, thrilled by praise from the master, I understand what I imagine to be the slight remorse of taking the master's place. Of graduating. Of doing it alone.

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Humans make weeds. They decide what a weed is and what is not, defining nature to their fancy. A weed in one garden is a flower in another. A weed to a gardener is a prize to a child.

Humans have made weeds uglier. We have tainted nature’s green growth, however undesirable, with unpleasant undertones. Pearlwort and Liverwort yield to Ragwort and Ribwort Plantain's unsightly names. Fat Hen, Hairy Tare, and Hairy Bitter Cress are made more unwelcome in this world despite their blooms.

Humans turn to language to determine a weed's worth and to justify its unworthiness.

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I struggle with definitions. I worry over what I am to be and how I am to get there.

Am I a garden? Do I wall out the world with wooden fences, protecting what's inside? The garden can't survive the winter. How can I love a 10 x
5 foot world for its natural beauty when human hands put it there? *Can I exist on my own?*

Do I have enough power to be a gardener, to shape the world I want to my liking? They must get their hands dirty. They must plant seeds that might not grow.

Am I a writer? I often find inspiration in sadness. I can write a weed beautiful, but do I believe my new definition?

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The dictionary says that to find a weed, you must simply look for a plant growing where it is not wanted. In the garden. In the roof gutter.

A weed would say you must simply look where nothing else can grow. In the desert. In the cracks of the sidewalk.

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Weeds can be beautiful, if you look the right way.

They need not be so unwelcome. They are the stuff of ancient remedies in faraway places. They are the stuff of child’s play. Searching for luck among the clover. The dandelion crowns on children’s heads, their wispy wishes sent on the wind.

Give up the chemicals; let the weeds protect your garden. They can attract beneficial insects to your garden, and also deter or distract the pests. They can blanket the soil, harboring the rainfall and sharing it with the flowers. Their deep roots can uncover elements deep within the soil, bring them to the surface. They can break through hardened soil, helping other plants reach their potential, letting them grow their roots deeper, like good neighbors.

Let them teach you a lesson, in growing, in nurturing, in tenacity.

Look closer, look deeper. Do not be at war with the earth – let the weeds save you the trouble.
The world opened up for me, down in that garden. The earth let me in and told me the secrets of the breeze that made the stalks dance. I took those cherished moments – the gleaming sun, the cool air, the immense height of the sky above – and folded them in my heart like petals pressed between pages.

I am no gardener. I can only hope the green thumbs of my grandparents have nestled in my DNA as well. Hope that maybe one day I can replace all that I’ve taken. Hope that I can build a garden and a family to revolve around it on my own, someday. I know their green thumbs have molded my heart like clay. I can be any number of things: a weed, an encyclopedia, a watering can.

When the plants speak to you, open up your heart to listen.

Flowers remind you to acknowledge and treasure the beauty around you. Beauty you do not have to ask for. They teach you to admire the strength of small blooms, with their heavy heads and skinny necks, reaching toward the sun. They help you say the words buried in your heart, fluent in the language of human emotion.

Weeds teach you to be indiscriminate, teach you the value of meager things. They grow without praise, grow in spite of threats. And in their hardiness, they speak languages of tenacity. Their tone is insistent – they are always reaching for something.

Flowers and weeds may speak of different experiences, but their message is the same:

Bloom where you are planted, and whatever you do, grow into something brilliant.

I’ve done some digging of my own.
I brought a camera that day, on August 14, 2010, when my grandparents brought me down to the garden for the first time.

The first photo: My grandfather standing behind the thicket of cosmos outside the borders of the garden. His face is obscured by the bush taller than his head, but he holds up a perfect red tomato above the clearing. *Papa, smile!* And he does, even though I can’t see his face, I know he is smiling for me.

The fourth picture: My grandmother in front of the stake of deep red dahlias with sunny centers, long, thick stems leaning towards her. Scissors raised. Shot before the moment of impact.

My grandfather emerges from her right shoulder, bent over. Again, a branch covers his face. I almost didn’t see him.

I take a picture of the cosmos even after my grandmother says she hates them. “They grow too high, too fast. I’m going to clear them down next year.” They are weeds, despite their thin orange petals that burst open to greet the universe.

My grandfather beaming, holding his basket of tomatoes. The flash glints off of his glasses, the yellow cosmos dot the background. Looking back at this picture, my heart beams as well.

Later, my grandfather holds the camera. A shot of my grandmother looking down, holding up two bright red blooms with orange streaks, one in each hand. I can hear her saying *Look at these. Aren’t these gorgeous?* as I look on with a small smile. We put them in the watering can.

The last photo from the garden: my grandmother and I standing side by side, holding our containers full of flowers, scissors still in hand. Daisies grace the bottom left corner and a heavy pink and white striped dahlia leans its way into the frame. I lean in towards my grandmother; dark red flowers fill the space between us.

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I went down to the garden in November, but I couldn’t go all the way. Standing on the hill, I looked down at the clearing, the leveled ground,
the fence keeping nothing in. I came to the wrong place to find comfort, I think to myself.

From this angle I see that the garden hangs over the hill. I can see the wooden beams that hold it up from underneath. I see the branch poking up from the clearing, missing the home that belongs on top. The emptiness startles me. The colors that I expect to wait for me at the bottom of the hill are replaced with the brown dirt, the brown leaves on the ground, the brown bark of the naked trees.

I am reminded that nothing is unsupported. The plot of earth that harbors so much life is held up by dead logs, the dahlia stalks are held up by stakes, the garden is held up by the hands that tend to it and the hands that weed it.

I try to let the emptiness bed my worries. I look to the ground for answers. The next time I return, in May or June, I will stand in this spot a different person. The ground will meet me, beneath my feet as it always does. The garden will meet me in my search for answers with its flowers, with its weeds, saying This is all I can offer you. I will stand in this spot, looking at new versions of old flowers, harboring new fears to old questions, but I will be different. If I buried my worries on this hill, I wonder what would grow. The ground will meet me in its constancy, and I will be left to decide whether my footprints are flowers or weeds.