

Joanne Jacobson

My Mother, Gardening

CAN YOU SEE ANYTHING INSIDE?" HIS COMPANIONS CRIED OUT TO THE archaeologist Howard Carter when he opened King Tut's tomb, secreted in the sands for thirty centuries. "Yes!" Carter called back, "Wonderful things!" It was November 4, 1922: two and a half years before my mother was born. Carter and the others dizzily wandered the chambers where the young pharaoh had been buried, his sandals exquisitely carved, braided in solid gold to simulate woven reeds. All of Tut's organs, his heart and his liver, each kidney and his stomach, were embalmed and laid in stoppered canopic jars, then fitted into golden coffinettes. Coffers of fish and assorted meats, thirty jars of wine, four complete board games, one hundred thirty-nine ebony, ivory, silver, and gold walking sticks, fifty linen garments—for the Egyptians believed that earthly human affairs continued in the afterlife—were preserved in the airless, crowded rooms.

I wonder what my mother would wish to take with her on such a journey, a journey beyond time. Surely she would hope to leave behind the damaged lungs that are slowing her down in her eighties, though she has already lived so much longer than the Boy King, dead at nineteen. Without a doubt she would have her Scrabble board folded up and set beside her, the soft old cotton sock still filled with worn tiles, the little wooden racks on which she'd sorted and re-sorted so many letters, made so many words. Her tennis racquet, just in case strength and flexibility should be granted to her once again. Perhaps she would keep the autumn leaves that I ironed in grade school between sheets of waxed paper and cut into bookmarks; and the clove-studded oranges that I made with my Girl Scout troop, shrunken and fragrant as the aged, perfumed offerings surrounding Tut in his tomb.

And she'd want to take the flowers she had gloriously preserved all her life: the light blue salvia that she'd grown and hung to dry in pipe-cleaned bunches over the kitchen sink, the Queen Anne's Lace that she'd collected on weekend walks in the country. She always saved the loveliest of the roses from gift bouquets, at Mother's Day and birthdays, and sank them one by one into finely sifted sand. When she gently drew them out, the fragile blossoms would be perfectly fixed, hovering forever at the grayish edge of pink. *Wonderful things.*



My grandparents came to America from the small Jewish villages of eastern and

central Europe: from dark, gardenless places. Gardens glowed at the very center of the new landscape that their children built around themselves, a landscape of hope.

In their first spring of suburban homeownership my parents drove the six-lane Lake Shore Drive that hugged Chicago, to the annual flower show on the south side of the city. From the back seat of the car my sister and I watched Lake Michigan's just-thawed water lapping crystalline along the entire route. On view at the vast McCormick Place were the newest innovations in home gardening: riding lawn mowers; racks of seed packets inviting amateurs to grow eggplant and other exotic vegetables; trowels, hoes, pruning sheers; wheelbarrows scaled to suburban backyards and weekend work; peat containers that stretched the limits of the growing season by making it possible to start flowers and vegetables indoors. The end of wartime rubber rationing had already put giant coiled hoses into the hands of millions of optimistic home gardeners. My mother and my father entered a hungry trance as soon as they crossed the threshold of the exhibition hall and came into the presence of Burpee and Scott, the great merchandisers who'd plastered the long walls behind their booths with enormous photographs of gardens in bloom and flawless green lawns flowing infinitely into the distance. These were the dreams with which my parents loaded our car and drove home along the lakeshore, with which they began to plan and to plant.

The Yellow Climax Marigold—capable of growing as tall as three feet, of producing giant blossoms as wide across as five inches, of blooming as long as twelve weeks—was the Burpee Seed Company's featured hybrid in 1958, the year that my mother planted her first garden at the house she and my father bought together. At the height of summer my mother would clip the most luxurious marigolds that she had successfully grown from seed, handfuls of intense yellow bobbing in the hot wind, reaching above her waist. She'd dip them in wax so that they would outlast the season, lighting her kitchen into dusky autumn. The marigold was the personal passion of David Burpee, the son of the company's founder—who became a registered lobbyist in 1960 so that he could campaign in Congress to name the marigold the U.S. national flower. My mother bought seeds from the glossy catalogues Burpee pumped out during the years following World War II, showcasing a series of brand-new floral hybrids whose very names exuded drama and expectation: the Yellow Climax Marigold was followed by the Double Supreme Hybrid Snapdragon in 1960 and the Firecracker Zenith Hybrid Zinnia in 1963. When Burpee's plants blossomed in my mother's garden—luxurious flesh in pink, yellow, orange, white, and red—they transformed the day.

Arthritis and chronic lung disease have now—half a century later—made it impossible for my mother to bend to the level of dirt and plants, and to breathe outside during Chicago's humid growing season. This year my mother has twice had to be hospitalized for a week or more when pneumonia clogged her lungs and could only be reached by intravenous antibiotics. Since she sold the big house that she owned with my father, and, in turn, the townhouse and then the

apartment that she bought on her own after their divorce, these have become the new obligations of her hands: filling her oxygen tank; opening the spigot and listening for the sound of gas sucked into the vacuum; turning back the handle until she can hear the seal clicking safely closed. Her palms hug the metal for an extra second or two, she brings her ear close to listen for a leak before she sets the little tank in its sling. In the open air of a car or in my sister's kitchen, evaporation steadily empties even the spare oxygen tank that my mother takes everywhere, filling her with anxiety. She often chops the air as she speaks, as though her words too could disappear, could evaporate into the greedy air and leave her stranded.

Winter's cold, spring's wind, summer's heat keep my mother indoors. When I visit, I sometimes find her slumped at night in the bathroom chair where she sits for her inhalation treatments, her little masked face sunk to her chest. "It's okay, I'm fine!" she reassures me when I prod her, panicking that this time she will not wake up. She carries a saucepan to the breakfast table, sets it at her place, and unselfconsciously eats her morning oatmeal directly from it, saving the few steps and the breath that searching for a bowl would cost her. Her spoon clanks against the old, dented metal of the stainless steel Revere Ware that she and my father received as a wedding gift.

It has been more than five years since my mother could care for her condo's garden. The weeds there grew tangled, and the paths that she had kept trimmed when she was younger slowly closed over. But now she is delighted to be gardening once again, here at her new home—"independent living"—where she has been assigned her own small plot, raised to waist level so that she won't have to stoop. When I walk out with her, my mother signals proudly what's hers, sweeping her hands, purpled from the many blood draws that have left too much stale leakage to be reabsorbed by her aging veins.

High stalks of pink snapdragons hang over the tiny garden, their buds at once lush and delicate, more of them waiting to open at the top. Nasturtiums and zinnias—and, as always, marigolds—flash orange and yellow, summer's richest colors not yet flattened by the harsh Midwestern sun. She walks me around to see what her seventy- and eighty- and ninety-year-old neighbors have grown nearby: dense clusters of flowers, strategically selected to attract monarch butterflies; aromatic strings of blooming tomato plants. Across from my mother's plot is an elegant Japanese garden, rocks laid out beneath the gnarled branches of bonsai evergreens, a dark square of sand absorbing sunlight, the created universe in miniature.



I roll down the window on the taxi ride from my mother's place to the airport, letting my hair fly in the wind. This busy road is lined with flowers, Parks Department plantings, and surviving fragments of what used to grow wild here. Milkweed bobs in the narrow rectangles of green at the curb, releasing fluffy pods that coast across the sidewalk and float, heedlessly, into traffic. A meadow

bird—a finch?—suddenly flaps upward from the rough grass, and takes off into the late summer air. It's still surprisingly easy to peel back the human surface of things here, to see that these suburban streets and strip malls have been carved out of living prairie and fields.

In the years before air conditioning, when she first was single again—stung by hurt she never spoke of to her children—my mother would steer us out of the city to the thick aroma of freshly mown grass. Morning's early heat whipped between the cranked-open windows as we rode onto the highway, the ramp's arc slowly turning us, finally pointing straight ahead. What sweet distances we covered in those days, tunneling into the wind at eighty miles an hour, the rush all around us too loud to make talking worth the effort, the AM radio crackling as reception came in and out, goldenrod passing in a blur as we moved down the forever stretch of asphalt under the dome of heaven. Only the mileage postings broke our sweep across Illinois and Wisconsin, toward the Mississippi and toward the Minnesota border: *Rockford 55; Milwaukee 29; Minneapolis–St. Paul 275*. At lunchtime we would stop at a roadside table to eat the tuna sandwiches and celery sticks that my mother had packed at home, stretching our stiff legs over the rough wood of the sun-soaked benches. Velvety cattails swung back and forth in the low ditches nearby.



In Eden, it was God's voice—“*Where are you?*” (Genesis 3:8)—that called Adam and Eve back to their bodies. They were not just deep in the garden, they suddenly realized with alarm, but intimate with it, their own delicate, fresh skin close to the plants and trees growing there, brushing directly against rough stems and leaves. “I heard the sound of you in the garden,” Adam tried, lamely, to explain, “and I was afraid, because I was naked.” In that place, no longer untouched by time, their human flesh was revealed among the blossoming trees as what it really was: a fragile servant of appetite; mortal, likely to be wounded. The garden, as well, was revealed as vulnerable to violation, unequal to its own promise. And yet, many generations later, Eden would still color the prophets' imagining of release from exile: “my people Israel . . . shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them . . . they shall make gardens and eat their fruit” (Amos 9:14). What lonely men those prophets must have remained! Wandering ministers of abandoned gardens, their fantasy of remaking the wounded world forever threaded with anger and doubt; layered over an unyielding assurance of abandonment.



Even today, when her movement must be frugal, her breath slowed, my mother seeks out her garden in the morning coolness. She carries a trowel, and the plastic bags from the grocery store that she's saved to collect weeds and dead

flowers. She pauses when she comes to the end of the path, assessing what has grown in the sun since the day before, and slowly circles her plantings. She disconnects the oxygen tubing when I ask to take a picture: that is not who she wants to be, especially here, where she has renewed in her last years her refusal of loss. She does not think about dying, she tells me when I ask, nor does she think ahead many mornings beyond this one. My mother has no interest in death's deals, in giving up even a little of the time remaining to her in order to set aside beloved objects for a chanced afterlife, much less to furnish a lavish tomb; in sacrificing even for a moment the gift of *now* that she has been granted.

She gently cups a low, fresh flower, something that wasn't open last time she worked in this little garden. Isn't this what we all dream of, the promise of forever starting over, the human means of making new life and—even—beauty still close at hand? My mother reaches deep into the thicket of stems and blossoms, expertly feels with her eyes closed for what has died, and nips it between two fingers, drawing it out, dropping it into her bag, and moves on.