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## BLEEDING HEARTS

KATIE MOSTAD

When we were younger, we used to play a game called Woods. It followed the same plot and featured the same characters, played by the same sibling each game. It was ongoing—continuing from one day to the next, one location to another, even interfering with plots of other games we played. I can't remember how many times we actually finished the game, or at what point in the plot we decided to restart, but somehow we played this game enough that the beginning of the story remained the same each time. Between all four siblings, the narrative of Woods unfolded as if it was a story we'd grown up hearing.

It always began with the four of us escaping an imaginary fire in our playhouse. I was the first to climb through the plastic window and land on the grass, followed by Alyssa. Somehow in every story arc, Jessica and Drew got separated and shouted at us to save ourselves and run away. Alyssa and I never went back to search for our missing siblings; the assumption was always that they had perished with the house, and the two of us were doomed to face the unforgiving wilderness on our own. We collected rainwater from the rain gutters in plastic buckets and argued over who got to go find twigs and torn-up leaves for the stew. And somewhere in the forest of the three trees in our backyard, whoever won the argument found two strangers barbarically living off the land in another part of the yard.

Like a recurring dream, the repetition of Woods encouraged us to explore the themes of survival again and again, until we found an ending we were satisfied with. Often it happened that the youngest, our brother, was the one who knew how to survive in the woods. As the game continued, Drew secretly taught Alyssa and I how to exist in the wild, and we slowly learned to trust him. Eventually, the four of us discovered that we shared the last name Woods and that Jessica and Drew were the lost siblings from the fire years ago.

This is the story we played repeatedly growing up. It was the

story of reuniting with one another, of revival, of finding strength in our abundance.

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Every spring, my father would employ us to plant a garden of flowers for Mother's Day. We learned to dread the Sunday morning he pulled up to the backyard with a truck-bed full of annuals—petunias, geraniums, pansies, alyssums, zinnias—because it meant we would be spending the rest of the day digging in dirt.

Our garden was a baker's rack with potted plants, the spots by the side of the house where my father's failed vegetables were planted, the large ceramic pots by the front door, and the small patch of dirt in the shade of the east side of the house. That patch was where my mother's flowers grew.

We spent Mother's Day afternoon tearing up weeds and dead flowers and systematically dumping the old, dried up soil and replacing it with fistfuls of the soft stuff, straight out of the bag. Our mother would call us in for lunch, which she'd spent the morning making. After lunch, we started the potting process, sometimes even getting the freedom to compose a large ceramic pot out front. It was a game of planning, and my father knew the perfect location for each and every plant we buried in the garden. In the evening, we all retreated inside and cleaned the dirt from underneath our fingernails while our mother served the Mother's Day dinner she'd prepared for us.

The day of planting was a celebration of our mother, though my father was the one who made sure the plants were watered and healthy. A watercolor wildlife artist and natural resource manager, my father's connection to the earth is physical. Mowing the lawn and gardening, along with hunting and fishing, are the ways my father escapes the claustrophobia of the indoors, and his protection of the annuals in the backyard were his way of understanding his proximity to the earth.

One Mother's Day, he cut down the Bleeding Hearts bush in the shade of the house, and made our mother cry. I wasn't sure why, but we cried too.

Our mother's connection to the earth is ephemeral. I've always found mine to be subterranean.

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I was born a houseplant. It was late summer when my mother returned with me from the hospital, and our next-door neighbors gave us a potted spider plant to celebrate my coming into the world. The plant

hung in my mother's sewing room, where she went to escape the claustrophobia of domestic life. My mother is a skilled seamstress, but she has never been a gardener. She seldom watered the spider plant, though it lived for years sprouting infant spiderettes, which cascaded over the edges of the pot and onto her fabric. When it finally dried up, we emptied the pot and reused it in the garden. Alongside the alyssums and geraniums, I found my roots in the backyard.

And where the houseplant once hung in my mother's sewing room—her sanctuary—she hung an antique bird cage. “I was superstitious of it,” she told me once about the spider plant. “It was you.”

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The alyssums were used in numerous spots throughout the garden, particularly in places where we weren't sure what else to fill space with. In case you are not familiar with alyssums, they are a moderately diverse genus of flowering plants with multiple tiny flowers attached to every stem. The root hairs are wispy and soft, always the trickiest to plant just right. Each root creates an assortment of petals, each one unique and yet distinctly a part of one plant. They are self-seeding, cropping up unexpectedly in places like the cracks in concrete and between brick pavestones. The ones commonly sold in the tents of home improvement stores are *Lobularia maritima*, or Sweet Alyssums, and are some of the most fragrant coastal flowers.

We always saved an arrangement of whites and light purples for the small, ceramic angel pots that Alyssa and I had received together one year, and the rest were used in the extra flowerbeds. Like the middle child, the flowers look tiny against the palm of your hand, compared to the rest of the annuals in the garden, but without them, everything looks a little more cluttered, a little less cohesive. The fragmentation of the alyssum inspires a mosaic within the flower pot, tying together the whites of the pansies with the purples of the geraniums. Their presence was a function, holding together the image of the garden in full bloom. For well into the summer (and often into the fall), the yard was alive with everything from sunflowers to geraniums to squash to sour pears, and my mother's Bleeding Hearts.

*They were dead anyway*, he pleaded. They'd been growing in the shade, where there wasn't enough moisture.

When my parents got married, my mother was six months pregnant. We found this out because our grandmother mistakenly put the correct year of our parents' wedding on the family calendar. We looked closer at a wedding photo and noticed the pregnancy concealed by a

bouquet of flowers our mother likely didn't choose.

*He loves me.*

*He loves me not. He loves me.*

*He loves me not.*

Gardens are an oasis for healing. The afternoons we planted flowers for our mother were a ritual that bound us to the backyard, and to each other, year after year. In the overgrown grass of May, we sat and listened. Larks and lawnmowers harmonized with our idle conversation. It never once rained on a planting day. Our mother mixed us pink lemonade from a pitcher with yellow bumblebees painted on it. We took turns pulling roots, sharing stories, and chasing the dog with water from the hose. After we'd grown too old to play together, it was the only occasion the four of us would spend time together in the backyard. A reunion of a bouquet of siblings, sinking our bare hands into the soil beside one another.

My favorite image of the planting process was the sight of the empty pots with the vibrant annuals still in their plastic, lying on top. Ready for roots to be buried, ready to stretch back into the earth.

For a great number of my childhood years, my hometown was overrun with urban deer that nibbled on the flowers we had worked so hard to plant. My father kept them out with a wire fence, but sometimes we would still catch them plucking petals through the wire. If no one was around, I would just watch the deer, letting them feed on the fruits of our garden.

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There were flowers in the yard the deer avoided, a mysterious plant that granted us infinite wishes throughout the spring and summertime. At times when I would get too eager, I peeled back the leaves of the wilting dandelion and felt its soft petals inside. The cottony petals of a dying dandelion are not wishes, but I always appreciated their softness, with blades of grass poking the back of my knees. It's been said that if you rub a dandelion on the underside of your chin and it leaves a mark, you're in love.

One of my earliest memories is of picking the dandelions outside of the fence and bringing them in to my mother as a gift. I was too young, not allowed to go outside the chain-link fence of our backyard, when I cautiously made eye contact with the neighbor's labrador retriever in the window outside the fence.

Dandelions are considered weeds because they don't reproduce through pollination but instead through a process wherein the seeds are cloned and released by external forces (wind or animals). This means a rapid and explosive reproduction process, which my father curses every spring when the yellow heads dotted the backyard again. It also means that the seeds produced are genetic duplicates of the parents' seeds.



During times of the year when nothing was alive outside, we stayed in and dreamed of springtime. Incidentally, one of the films we seemed to watch countless times growing up was *The Secret Garden*, which follows fictional Mary Lennox's struggle to adjust to a new life in her wealthy uncle's mansion, and the mystery of the faint sobbing she hears each night. One afternoon, the young orphan uncovers a hidden garden, and she begins to restore the garden to its natural brilliance. In the basement of the mansion, she meets her cousin, a cripple who has been isolated from the world. The orphan takes her cousin to the garden where he learns to walk among the blooming flowers of the spring. Mary Lennox's story is a story of revival, of honoring curiosity, and discovering her refuge in the dawn of spring.



Eve had a garden of her own where she learned to celebrate the beauty of the earth and of her body. To go down the garden path is to be deceived, to be led astray. When Eve spoke to the snake, she was listening to her intuition, telling her it was safe to eat. What Eve discovered in Eden, which I have been discovering all along, is that there is knowledge in the fruits of the earth.

When Alice honored her curiosity, she stumbled down a rabbit hole and discovered a rose garden. Searching for a way to climb the hill and get a better look, she walked a path that seemed to twist and change, leading her again and again the way she came. Exhausted with frustration, Alice finally gave up and sat beside another garden, named the Garden of Live Flowers. She confided in a tiger lily, surprised to hear it respond. She asked the tiger lily if all flowers could speak.

"As well as you can," responded the flower. "Only louder."



*Lamprocapnos spectabilis*, Bleeding Hearts, are the ones you can split down the seam to unravel the white, silky petals inside. They're slightly irritating to the skin, which is why we were seldom allowed to

touch. The roots are too delicate to withstand most weathering and disturbance, which is why they had thrived so curiously on the side of the house in the shade. My father didn't know this when he cut the bush down. The leaves had holes, and the petals had bloomed too early in the springtime, so there were none left by Mother's Day. They call these flowering plants spring ephemerals, because they're in full bloom for a relatively short duration of the year, spending most of summer, winter, and fall dormant. During the seasons in between, the plant appears to be withered. My father had forgotten that Bleeding Hearts are perennials, not annuals. My mother would forever fear losing her Bleeding Hearts to make space for the flowers she never chose.

*He loves me.*

*He loves me not. He loves me.*

Flowers for anniversaries, flowers for birthdays. Flowers at the altar at church. Flowers when you're sick, flowers for graduation. A new baby, a new job, a new wife. Rose petals on the bed, frozen corsage thawing on a trembling wrist. Lilacs for the innocent; lilies for a loss. She told me her brother used to make the snapdragons talk to her. Hyacinth and foxglove and chrysanthemums, a language, a form. Gardenias for the pure, carnations for the cheap. Baby's-Breath in the kitchen, on the Christmas tree.

For my sister Jessica's wedding, she gave out wildflower seed packets as party favors. All native wildflowers of Montana, I dumped the seeds on the side of Hellgate Canyon almost a year later and never went back.

There was a quote from Emerson on the package. "The earth laughs in flowers," and I thought about all the wildflowers—bluebells, castillejas, flax, dogwood, thistles—and how the earth also dreams in flowers. Sobs in flowers, prays in flowers, speaks in flowers, sighs drifting through fields of opaline wallflowers. A gesture. A language. My mother's Bleeding Hearts grew back crooked. My father started painting flowers on her birthday and anniversary cards instead of buying the live ones. He was always an artist, never a romantic. I knew she appreciated not having to water anything anymore.

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In the front yard of our house, the garden was almost entirely one plant called Snow on the Mountain, or Bishop's Weed. These dense plants take root wherever they can and are particularly hard to contain

because of it, so my father laid pavestone around them to keep them enclosed. Snow on the Mountain, *Euphorbia marginata*, gets its name from the leaves which taper into white at the edges. The frosted leaves resemble snowy mountaintops, like the ones they inhabit, the ones I grew up surrounded by. They are among my favorite of Montana's native plant species, although they are highly toxic to wildlife and have very little ecological significance, except to the Mourning Doves, which feed on their seeds.

Unlike most people who labor to get rid of the weed, both of my parents adored the Snow on the Mountain that grew outside our front door. It was as if the endemic plant preserved the fullness of our home, embodying our abundance, and our tendency to flourish next to each other.

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When we played Woods, it was up to Alyssa and me to make the stew. We collected woodchips from under the plum tree, berries we weren't supposed to eat from the tree behind the playhouse, overgrown blades of grass from the cracks in the concrete. Before we turned on the hose for the broth, we always picked one or two flowering clovers from patches in the grass. "These are for good luck," we'd say, and toss them in. And they were, because whoever ventured to gather the food discovered the other two siblings, living in the shade of the backyard. •