

*We can't really help who we are.*

I remember those words, the words to my father's favorite tune. They would come on the radio, ever so often, and he would hum along, and then the starlings would sing along, as though they agreed with every note.

*We can't really help who we are*

*For she was the sun*

*And I was the flower facing it*

*Never really sure whose names we bore*

*Even when we were as good as none*

*Even when that was what we had knit*

My father, who claimed to face the sun, but whose fingertips came covered in dirt. His eyes a dim brown, it was clear all he had ever kept his eyes on was the ground. And yet he claimed to have faced the sun, to have knit a place where he had been a flower and then none.

I remember my father, and he was no clever man. Too soft to be smart, in a world where all were too sharp to think of being soft. He lived as though blowing into a rough windpipe, always out of breath before the tune had ended. He worked as the town gardener, not a farmer nor a salesman, not smart enough to be either. He lived with the birds, his feet caught in the roots of his flowers, his head stuck up in the leaves. He had not money nor a square of land to his name, no means of reason but his silver pipe and gravelly voice and seed-filled pockets.

I remember my father, and that I resented him. He came home at dawn and left an hour later, never knowing anything beyond his squares of land. He had never touched a stove nor a sponge in his life, never touched a child's rosy cheeks nor an infant's fuzzy head. No

one loved him, no one resented him but I, and I resented him fearlessly. I resented his absence and his presence, his tunes and his silence.

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I remember my father, I remember how he couldn't read or write or see, but that he could sing. I remember wondering if he knew what he was singing at all, if he had ever gone to school, sat at a desk, stood anywhere other than the garden he called home. I remember wondering if he was even my father at all. But any time I spoke to him, he would smile, and sing the words I knew I resented more than I did him.

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And then the starlings would repeat it, as if they knew something at all. Repeated like an age-old excuse, day and day, it was the only thing my father spoke of to me at all. I used to think they might have been canaries, but they aren't yellow, nor do they live in Canada. Even when they share the first four letters.

When I turned fifteen, he passed away. He started finding it difficult to walk, and so my uncle took him to the hospital, where they said he had a month left to live. And yet, even then, he spent every minute in his garden, barefoot in the dirt, hunched over when he could barely stand. My uncle gave up coaxing him out, and I never bothered, kicking clumps of grass at the garden as I passed it on my way to school. They say my mother fell in love with him at first sight, and died four years after.

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The day after the new month came, I was on my way to school when I saw he wasn't in the garden. I walked back home and found him dead, laying on the floor, fingers covered in his dirt and scratches, seeds spilling out of his pockets, a photo of my mother tucked in his arms. I called my uncle and left as soon as he came, furious with my father and my mother and the garden.

A week after his death, tulips began to bloom. I noticed their bright colors every morning as I passed them by, like the vibrant pairs of heels my teacher wore. Then came the peonies, just as the tulips began to wilt, their blossom pink akin to a newborn's gums. From June to August came lavender, the scent of its detergent clinging to my clothes, alongside the roses that began to wilt in September. And from then to November, just as they had begun to wilt, the chrysanthemums began to bloom, fair colors like the shades of lipstick I found in my mother's drawers.

It was then when I began to understand the meaning of the garden. When one began to wilt, another began to bloom. Each death made way for new life. I thought it was my father's last words to me, for his way of speaking was stubborn and rarely easy to decode. I remembered kicking pebbles at the sight of my dying father, as he patted seeds into soil with a smile on his face. In every passing field of flowers, I saw the ghost of my father, hunched over the empty soil where they now stood.

But it was years later, when I saw a batch of sunflowers from a distance, after years of having tended to the garden myself, soil between my fingertips, that I remembered the words to my father's favorite tune. My father whom I resented, the tune that I resented, and then the both that came between the lines of resentment and love.

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