

Environmental Autobiography

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WRITER'S COMMENT: LDA 30 has been my favorite course taken in my first year here at UCD. The teaching style of Professor Elizabeth Boultis struck a chord with me. She always gave us a writing option for our bi-monthly artistic projects- an option I quickly took advantage of when asked to portray a memorable landscape. As an adolescent, storytelling was a big passion of mine, but over the years it wasn't nurtured enough to stay alive; partially due to myself, partially the education system. With this project, I actually felt excited to write. For the first time in years. The landscape I characterized was my father's garden, how it evolved over the years and how I evolved with it. This assignment lit a fire in me; compelled me to deal with and commit to paper the complex emotions of the past. What has now fueled my passion again was the unforgettable, heartwarming response I received from my peers. I am honored (albeit slightly anxious) to now be able to share this piece with the readers of Prized Writing.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: LDA 30: History of Environmental Design traces the roots of peoples' relationships to their built and natural surroundings, and explores how peoples across the globe have shaped the landscape in response to their changing needs and desires over time. I begin the course with an "Environmental Autobiography" assignment which asks students to reflect on how an environment has shaped them—how their own experiences and memories of meaningful spaces have influenced their present values and attitudes toward the built landscape—recognizing that there is never a single frame of reference for history. To accommodate different learning styles, students have the option of presenting their "origin story" to the class in the form of an essay or an "artifact" that they fabricate. Sarah has a wonderful talent for crafting with words. Her essay beautifully captures the significance and role of her family's garden in shaping her appreciation of nature's abundance and its role in sustaining cultural community and family

ties. Her narrative evokes a sense of care and cultivation, for to garden is to believe in the future. Winter quarter 2022 began on Zoom, and when Sarah shared her story the chat feature exploded with praise and clapping hand emojis. We all have faith that this orchard will bear fruit once again.

—*Elizabeth Boults, Department of Human Ecology*

Ever since I could remember, my dad spent hours upon hours in our backyard, building up the garden of his dreams. When I was a toddler we lived in an apartment where he sneakily grew plants of all kinds on our balcony, even though he wasn't allowed to. When we moved to a small house, he was free to plant to his heart's content, albeit the space wasn't all that large and our time there was temporary. We had to move in 2008, but every time we pass by our old house we can see the fruits of my father's labor- quite literally. That year, my parents bought a house on a small hill in Antioch, California; a house with a beautiful view of the surrounding neighborhoods, the nearby rolling hills, and Mount Diablo itself. More importantly, it came with a backyard large enough to fit almost everything he has ever wanted. *Almost.*

And so began my dad's back breaking work. He would come home exhausted from his 9 to 5 job, take a nap on the couch, and then get right to work on the garden while he still had a few hours of summer daylight left. Weekends were completely dedicated to the backyard, he'd wake up before everyone else and continue well past the sun setting into the horizon. I questioned him as a child standing at the sliding door, "*Baba, you're not tired? You don't want to take a break?*" He'd pause and lean against his shovel, using the sleeve of his white and blue flannel to wipe the sweat off his forehead before chuckling, "*This is my break! I don't feel tired when I garden.*" I never really understood that when I was younger as the work seemed so hard. He'd always try to get me to help him, but the most I'd do was dig up worms to scare my mom with. Sometimes I'd plant seeds or pull a weed or two here and there, but that was it really.

Although it was clear to my parents I didn't like working in the garden, I loved playing in it. As all kids do, I had an overactive imagination and a big, luscious garden was the perfect playground for me. Who needs swings and monkey bars when you have a cave of vines and stepping stones and an array of tools? Who needs tanbark and sand when you have as much mud and natural clay a child could wish for? The most memorable part of the garden for me was this wooden structure my dad built to grow bottle gourd, or *lau* as it's called in Bangla. It's a vegetable that grows on vines that need to be woven through a support structure. He made it three sided so you could walk into it like a room and pick all the hanging gourds when they were ready. The vines grew a beautiful, thick canopy of leaves that swallowed the wood, so naturally my cousin and I would spend all of our time in it. "*I can't believe we're stuck on this island!*" We'd exclaim dramatically, "*When are we ever going to be rescued!*" The viney box became the cave in which we had set up base camp. We would prepare mud stew, start fake fires to keep us warm, and lay down to gaze up at the *lau* stars. Being in the garden made me happy.

And it made others happy too. It provided not only my family, but also family friends and neighbors with all sorts of fruits and vegetables. Different kinds of squash, tomatoes, apricots, plums, persimmon, guava, the list is honestly extensive. *Exhaustingly* extensive! I have distinct memories of giving my 5th grade teacher a basket of vegetables as a gift on multiple occasions, which he would always rave about. My paternal grandparents would love to sit outside and just bask in the sun while picking and eating whichever fruits they wanted, and I loved to be out there with them. It made me feel more grounded, it let me spend more time with my loved ones. My favorite part of spring and summer would be the days we spent as a family in the backyard. My dad would pick weeds or tend to wilting plants, my mom would pick spinach and fruit with my grandfather's help, my *dadu*, while my grandma, my *dadi*, watched them. I would rotate between stuffing my face with plums, laying on the ground, or chasing my cat, Phantom,

around- and then of course him chasing me back. My extended family would plan barbeque nights where all my aunts, uncles, and cousins would come to my house in the morning, spend all day picking how much of whatever their hearts desired, and then end the day with bellies full of the product of my dad's hard work and *tandoori* chicken. What I would give to go back in time and experience that again.

After my *dadu* passed away in 2012, the garden never felt the same, at least not for a very long time. My dad still maintained it and it still looked as beautiful as ever, but it didn't make me as happy. It didn't bring me the same joy or excitement. It only brought bittersweet memories of my *dadu* picking nearly ripe jujubees off the tree, wiping them on his shirt, and cutting off little pieces for me. "*I know you like the ones that are more green,*" he would say, giving me a smile-inducing toothless grin. The weather wasn't the same either; the falls and springs became washed with clouds and rain, the summertime too unbearably hot to withstand more than 15 minutes outside. I stopped appreciating the garden as much, I stopped appreciating my dad's hard work. Instead I groaned and griped about how much time and money he spent out there. Maybe I wanted him to spend more time with us, or maybe I didn't want him to feel the pain of remembering his father like I did.

It was towards the end of high school that I regained my love for my dad's passion. I got a new cat named Speedy, a few years after Phantom passed away, and she spends all her time in the garden. She loves to roll around in the dirt, hide in the spinach bed, and sleep in the damp-soiled corners during the sunnier days. Spending more time out there with her made that nostalgic feeling bubble up in my chest. I remember one day just stopping, standing up straight, closing my eyes and taking everything in. The beaming rays of sun draping over my back, the gentle breeze that caressed my cheeks, and the lingering smell of the blooming jasmine dancing into my nose. I realized how much I missed it all. From then on, I spent all my free time in the spring in the garden, either relaxing,

helping my father (surprises me too, I know!), or doing school work. It was my safe haven at the beginning of the pandemic, and I attended many Zoom lectures from my garden. Having moved out now, my old bedroom isn't what I miss most about my parent's house, that garden is. It looks extremely different now, my dad doesn't have any more time or energy to tend to his "babies", as he so lovingly likes to call them. He's too busy trying to make extra money to put me through college. The overgrown, wild, mess of a garden in its current state is another reminder of my dad's hard work- just as much as the pristine version of it was. "*It's okay,*" he reassures me whenever I bring it up, "*when you become a landscape architect, you can help me make it beautiful again.*" Though I won't be becoming a landscape architect as he once thought I would, I still plan on one day reinvigorating our backyard- together.