

first garden

I have become acutely aware that how we image the body plays a central role in how we image the world—and that this in turn directly impacts how we view ourselves in relation to both.

—Riane Eisler

by Vicki Marvick

On a sunny August day, a small girl carries some coins out of a house and into a garden. Solemnly, she clears leaves and mulch from under a tree and digs a hole with her hands. She buries the coins deep, leaving a part of herself for safekeeping. As her hands delve into the moist earth, she smells its fragrance—a rich brew encompassing birth, death, and everything in between.



I am five years old. My mother and I are visiting her parents. Grandpa says that he will show me the root cellar. He leads me to a metal door in the ground back of the house. We go down steps. My consciousness implodes upon itself, folding itself into a tighter and tighter ball, until I am somewhere so far inside myself that no one can find me.

After my grandfather rapes me he presses three coins—a dime and two nickels—into my hand. Later, I bury the coins under the large trees in front of the house.

Lilacs and lavender flowers surround Grandma's house. I walk through her vegetable garden, my bare feet warmed by the dirt, reveling in the outline of a squash leaf, the rows of beans, the jungle of corn towering above my head. Here, I am safe. The colors of the plants—the myriad greens of leaves, the delicate palette of purples and pinks and whites—have a dimension beyond what my eye can see, what my mind can attach a label to. I have spent the last year in kindergarten, learning to reduce my perceptions to names. Where are the names for these colors? The colors and forms vibrate in my field of vision; I *feel* them as much as I see them. In this place, I enter the magic of these plants. I take in their presence like a cool drink after a forced march through a hot desert.

Although I have no conscious recollection of the abuse, it shapes my life. I go through childhood feeling that if I can just be perfect, can somehow never make a mistake, I will feel safe. I get the highest grades in my class, always. Yet my nighttime world holds demons. I struggle with nightmares and monsters in the closet, develop elaborate bedtime rituals, and often lie awake until two or three in the morning, too frightened to sleep. In my daytime world, I play with power. I protect children who are picked on and cultivate an intimidating stare. I develop a passionate interest in ballet, exulting in the feeling of pushing past the body's limits. In ballet, I control the pain. I view my bleeding toes and bruised feet as the price I pay for art, not as a form of self-mutilation. Self-inflicted pain feels good.

My daytime and nighttime selves do not ordinarily meet.

The person who cringes in terror every night has no connection with the defiant crusader, the beautiful clean lines of the ballerina. Although I don't remember what my grandfather did, my awareness of the magic of the plant world persists through childhood and into adulthood. I create my first vegetable garden—a row of radishes in a flower bed in back of our house—when I am six years old. In the years that follow, I don't feel at home in the world without a garden—some kind of garden—in my life. The colors, forms, textures, tastes and smells of plants bring me to a quiet place, a place of rest. A place where my disparate selves can just be. That awareness is a lifeline connecting me to that little girl, so small and so vulnerable.

For many years I receive clues that something is wrong.

I am seventeen. When I am raped by a boyfriend, I don't perceive it as rape. Isn't this just what happens to women?

I am twenty one. I drink heavily at parties, sometimes until I pass out. I have lots of meaningless sex, on my terms. I think of this as enlightened feminism.

I am twenty five. I am now a parent. In relating to my child, I struggle constantly with rage that seethes just below the surface.

I am twenty nine. A counselor listens carefully to my description of a difficult work situation. After I finish, she asks "Do you realize that whenever you say 'I feel angry' you smile?" I decide to get help.

As soon as I enter therapy I begin to dream.

I am walking the streets near the house where I grew up. I am very frightened. There is a man stalking me; he is a rapist and will hurt me. I enter my house and watch the street anxiously. I realize that if I keep my face frozen in a mask the man will not recognize me. The mask is the pleasant smile of a housewife in a floor polish commercial. I go back onto the street, confident that if I keep the mask of the nice girl in place, the rapist can't find me.

I am traveling along a road with an energetic toddler, a little boy, and a small baby in a carriage. We are searching for a key. Finally, we arrive at the home of a wise woman. Her home nestles in the earth, protected from storms and winds and clothed by plants. We enter the warm, womb-like house. This older woman, round and soft, radiates a calm strength. She hands me the key and says "Now you don't have to be so thin anymore. Now you can begin to feed yourself."

Through my dreams I become acquainted with my three-year-old self—a rambunctious toddler who is full of vitality.

I also get to know the small baby, the tomboy who just wanted to be with Daddy, and an older child who had to take care of her parents emotionally. And the wise woman, the seed of something yet to emerge.

I am thirty. I am watching a movie with my husband. In the movie, a troubled young woman experiences a flashback of her father molesting her as a child. Before he abuses her, he slips money under her door. As I watch this scene, something releases in my belly. My body is racked with sobs that feel as if they will tear me to pieces. I say to my husband in a small voice (whose voice?) "I think I was molested." Even though I hear this voice, there is another, dominant self that doesn't believe it and doesn't want to hear it.

I am thirty five. At a meeting to develop a business plan for Permaculture Drylands Institute, John Wallace asks me to name a monthly salary for my position. Anxiety spreads through my body. We agree on \$2000 a month. Anxiety mushrooms into panic. John asks me to type in "\$2000." Panic becomes terror. As my heart pounds in my chest, I tell John I need to figure out why I'm so afraid.

Later that year, I go through photographs in my parents' attic. Kindergarten pictures, first grade pictures. And then—there it is. A family portrait. Grandpa and Grandma, seated, under the trees. Aunts and uncles standing in the back row. My mother, young and smiling, with them. And me, standing next to Grandpa. His hand on mine. My body tensed, turned slightly away, poised for flight. My eyes looking out from somewhere deep inside. As I pick up the photo I remember. . .

I remember the root cellar—the smell, the darkness, the helplessness. I remember the coins, cool and hard in my hand. I remember the soil and the trees and the dirt warm under my feet in the garden.

I look at the little girl in the picture, and step by tentative step I begin to reclaim her as part of me. I see how young she was. I see there was nowhere to run and no one to listen. I would like to say that I was willing to listen to her, but the truth is I don't want to have anything to do with her. After all, I've spent a whole lifetime denying she exists. We develop our relationship gradually.

We start with honesty. For months I make time in the morning to sit in my garden and talk with her. For months, the only honest thing I can say is "OK, I showed up like I said I would, but I don't want to have anything to do with you." Gradually, almost imperceptibly, my feelings toward her soften. On Valentine's Day, I make her a valentine. I imagine holding her with the same tenderness I

feel for my own children. We both cry.

Slowly, my daytime and nighttime selves begin to come together. The nighttime self held the pain for so many years. The daytime self tried so hard to be perfect, to keep that mask in place. Eventually, a new self begins to emerge. She allows herself to feel, she lets the daytime self know it's all right to make mistakes, she lets the nighttime self know that pain can be released. She can be trusted to protect herself, and not to hurt others.

The wise woman from my dreams continues to speak. She encourages me to mourn my losses. To nurture myself, to spend time in my garden, to forgive myself. She says

The world is not a straight line. It is a web. Trust yourself to know where to go next. Find the center of your being and choose the path that calls to you. That path connects with every other path; they all lead to the whole, the one.

I am forty one. I sit down to write this article. For two weeks I think about it, dream about it, simmer it in the back of my mind. One morning I awaken, sit up in bed and turn to my husband. "I've just realized when I planted my first garden," I say. "When?" "When I buried my grandfather's coins under the trees."



I see that little girl so clearly in my mind. She has courage. She does the best she can. She ensures that she survives. She knows these coins, tangible evidence of her grandfather's violation, do not really belong to her. Somehow she knows the trees have power. They will encapsulate these symbols of her pain, and her grandfather's too, weaving roots around them for decades. They will hold the coins until she is old enough to transform them.

The little girl waits a long time for a seed to sprout. Roots grow underground long before anything appears on the surface. She must wait to be seen, to be acknowledged, to be held with genuine love. One day, a fresh green sprout emerges, then another. They grow, at first delicate and needing protection, later strong and secure. And one day, that garden bears fruit.

The wise woman looks at the little girl. She says

A seed may travel a long way before it reaches nurturing ground. Wind and water buffet it, harsh edges leave scars. It may travel through the belly of a beast on its way to a safe home. Weathered and worn, its tough outer shell finally softened, it finds a pocket of fertile soil where, at last, it can begin to grow.

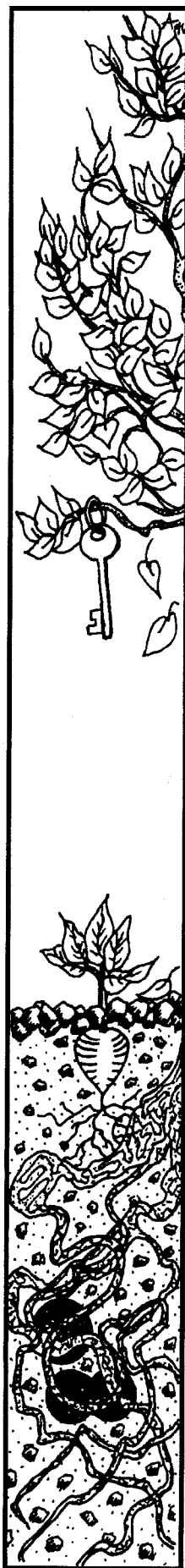


Illustration by Ann Audrey