

I grew up living in suburban apartment complexes. We didn't tend to yards, maintain "homes." Now, nearing my fifties, I live in a small suburban house with my wife and our young son. Tending to the yard falls to me. I'm bad at it. It doesn't come naturally to me, I don't always devote the time and attention a yard needs. But I must also admit that the exertion almost always feels good to (and for) me: the Zen of it, the heat and the sweat, the tangible sense of accomplishment. Even if the whole business also feels at least a little foreign to me too.

On Tuesday, I finally got around to weeding the front shrub beds. I'm good at growing weeds. The bed by the side fence, which used to be home to a crepe myrtle and is now home to nothing but a dead subterranean stump and some mulch, is particularly thick with a wiry, green, grass-like plant that's barely rooted in the ground. It occurs to me there's no reason to have a bed, complete with mulch and paving stones, for a dead stump and some weeds. So I dig it up, make the ground there as level as I can. Then I throw down some grass seed, fistful after fistful, water the raw brown earth, and remind myself to expect nothing. Nothing, that is, but more weeds. Still it feels like an accomplishment. I like to look at that square of soil carved into the ground, conjure a simple vision for what it might become.

We're growing some vegetables in a small raised-bed garden in our side yard. We want our son to see good things growing. We want him to see us tending to the ground, to plants and flowers. Even if nothing much comes of it. We're composting, too, and I'm learning about the mix of "green" and "brown" in a viable pile of compost. Maggots mean your pile's too green. Ours has maggots, so I gathered some dead leaves and twigs on my walk through the neighborhood earlier in the week and mixed them in, to brown it out a little.

For some reason, Roethke's greenhouse poems come to mind—I think they're from *The Lost Son*. Roethke's strange Germanic father ran a nursery, so he grew up around plants, raised by a stoic man who gave too little of himself to his son, who worshipped him. The sense of awe and lore (and loss) lives in those poems. The rich fertility of that personal soil.

A spry young rabbit has taken to visiting us. No doubt she is eyeing the cucumber plant, which has shot up in a green explosion of leaves and tendrils and what must be the beginnings of several cucumbers. The boy eyes her, wary. Her bursts of movement, her untamed straight-line speed, it startles him. That is a kind of rich fertility too—that startling speed. Maybe that's what frightened Roethke about his father: how capable a creature he was. How different an animal, even from his own son.

Digging my hands in the dirt adjacent to our small house (just barely enough house to house us), I'm not a worthy subject of a poem. I don't want my son writing poems about me, anyway. In my experience, poems and poets are, too often, melancholy creatures. I'm no one to worship, to god-fear. I just want my son to see good things growing. I want to give this little boy (capable creature) all I've got to give, even if it's not always much more than a clean patch of soil where, once, I was growing some weeds.

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