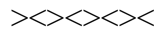


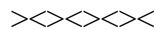
## Dandelion Flower Crowns

Weronika Koleda

Spring, although a season in itself, has always resonated with me as a particular feeling. It appears almost as a change in tone. Spring air maintains a different consistency, perhaps a softer density, that emits a kind of quietness resembling a low hum contrasting the cold white noise of midwestern winter. Silence, as the greenery thaws from the embrace of the smell of rain. There are buds emerging on the trees' fingertips, on the shrubs' follicles, freckles in the soil. How strange that nature's most productive and frenzied season occurs in silence.

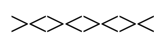


Germination is the process by which a seed or spore begins to sprout. Combined with the elements of water, time, oxygen, warmth, chill, and light, seeds begin their new awakening. Water first begins to be absorbed by the embryo, rehydrating the cells and permitting them to expand. The seed's metabolic processes begin to churn from the absorption of nutrients. Along this biological and ecological turnover, the embryo's organelles structurally evolve, changing within the cell walls. An entire shift in the framework of their being, all of it hidden beneath a layer of soil. A sunflower or pea plant adheres to such a process in accordance with their own needs and growth patterns. I can't say I know the particular time and care needed to sprout a myriad of plantlife; I opted out of horticulture in high school. I am neither sunflower nor pea plant nor fern or ficus, but I am me, I know that much.



Growing up I never anticipated that I would live past the age of 20. I don't mean this in an utterly morbid way, not like that. The idea of adulthood was unfathomable to my mind—it was something that I didn't know how to plan or assume, I wouldn't know when it hit me until I would wake up one morning and suddenly realize it had grown on me. I only knew my own youth and playing it safe, collecting fallen chestnuts from beneath the chestnut tree and hiding behind the shrubbery standing in formation protecting the household.

I always visualized the trail of my life as an expansive plateau, sunset orange and crimson like rocks in Arizona or Utah. I ran and ran and ran towards the horizon, like a marathoner crossing checkpoints, and there was happiness in that freedom. I ran and ran, unknowingly through nothingness in pursuit of the horizon. For all I knew I could have been running towards the edge of a cliff, maybe. My legs won't stop.

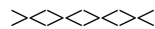


At seven years old I got my first dog. This fluffy, curly black sheep of a puppy was scared shitless (I mean, the first thing she did was shit in our front room), but I knew I loved her right

there and then. Around the same time my mother gifted me a book about Cockapoos to add to my humble collection of dog breed encyclopedias. I thought I should learn a thing or two about the new four-legged creature living in our home. I flipped to the most important page in the book: lifespan. About how much time did we have together?

Fourteen years. Short and sweet, right there on the open page. I was seven and my crooked teeth broke into a smile. Fourteen years was roughly two lifetimes away, and all I knew then was that my little legs were still running across that burnt-orange plateau.

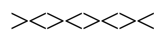
I'm twenty-one now, and my dog's legs don't work anymore.



My grandfather died a few Januarys ago. We had little to no relationship; I had only ever met him two or three times. He fed the chickens on the other side of the house while my grandmother tended to her vegetables and vibrant palette of flora. He resided in his respected side of the quaint cottage at the edge of the wood. I remember him clad in a white tank top and underwear. I think he had a beer bottle in his hand. My pale legs stung red from brushing against the nettles outside.

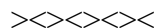
Before I knew anything, decades of churning beneath spring soil had come and gone. It was safer to teach me only to walk over the dirt. I never witnessed the roots of my mother cracking and wincing underneath, her whole framework restructuring within the cell walls. I couldn't see her, I only saw her after in full bloom. In the shell of her seed my mother lived in darkness, but for me she wanted only flowers.

She told me she forgives him.



Tulips are perennial flowers, known to bloom again year after year following the planting of their bulbs. From spring to following spring, bulbs of bright yellows, pinks, and reds peak from the ground. As their cycle continues they inevitably wilt, petals turned again towards the ground until they die. Though their beauty is short lived—one to two weeks to be exact—they must wilt if they are to bloom again.

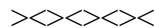
Tulips are my mother's favorite flowers.



Seed dormancy within the germination process is a state in which the seed is prevented from germinating. Due to potentially unsuitable conditions, the seed may fail to thrive. Sometimes dormancy can occur even when the environmental conditions surrounding it are suitable for

growing. The coat of the seed may act as a shield preserving the seed from water and oxygen, an armor that waits until the seed is ready. It is a survival technique. Many seeds cannot germinate until a certain period of time has passed.

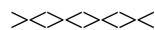
I feel as though I've been dormant most of my life, stuck in a fetal position. I appear to be planted amongst suitable conditions, and yet I find myself wearing a thick shell of armor. Is this survival? I try to crack and pick the coat away, I crave sunlight now. I'm growing tired of running, the flatness of the plateau feels monotonous now. It is this monotony that fed my dormancy, that bid me a silent spring. I have always sensed comfort in nothingness and safety in the expanse of time, but I have woken up one morning and started to feel the growing pains. The crack of the seed is painful, the intake of water and oxygen is suffocating. Something is finally happening. Finally, I'm doing something about myself. My insides are churning, tearing themselves apart and putting themselves back together again. They say spring is beautiful, but there is no beauty here.



The forest preserve enclosing the local community college erupts with greenery in the warmer months and paints the woods sunset colors in gloomy Octobers. The road cuts straight through the trees, over the Des Plaines river and towards the next main intersection. On many occasions, flooding had closed the road, and with it its scenery.

On a relatively dry day I took the road past the community college. Perhaps it was late winter, the trees were still bare and the colors dull. A twinkle of brightness caught my eye. A steady fire crawled over the forest bed, licking the soil it brushed over. I initially perceived the phenomenon as a sight of destruction, the fire nipping at the trees' heels. Yet the flames never turned angry nor did they cover the preserve with rage. It was a soft and silent burning.

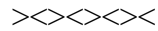
Low intensity fires are able to increase soil fertility by chemical conversion of nutrients dwelling in dead plant tissues and the soil surface. Or, the fire assists with the increase of mineralization rates as it comes into contact with soil microorganisms. And so rises the phoenix from the ashes.



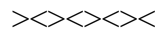
After the dandelions burst golden yellow their heads sprout gentle spores, like frail ghosts huddled upon a stem. A gust of wind or blowing out a wish, and these spores are carried away by the gentle breeze, in search of a soft landing. Unsure of where they land and how far they travel, they float away. Perhaps this isn't playing it safe after all.

Sometimes I feel like a weed. Expendable, an invasion of growing space. When I feel like a weed, I think of the little girl collecting chestnuts and turning her head up to look at the peaks of the shrub guardians in the front yard. She used to sit in the grass, freshly green from April rains,

and quietly pick each yellow dandelion within arms reach. Her fingers stained like sunshine when she rubbed them together, softly picking yellow flower by yellow flower. She sat and picked at the weeds for a few minutes, tied the stems together like daisy chains, and put the crown on her head.



For a seed to grow, everything must change. The physical makeup of the seed must change. Its shield of protection must change. Unearthing of saplings and outgrowth of roots beneath the surface is by no means a painless expression, and yet I emerge cloaked with gentle colored petals just the same. I shake the ground and tear myself open, even if it is in silence, even if no one else sees it. This is not playing it safe. I will not apologize for disturbing the soil if I must do so in order to bloom. I eventually reach towards the sun and bend towards the light because I have to, there is no other way. I did not endure the monotonous anxiety of growing just to emerge as a disposable weed.



I recently propagated a golden pothos. My hanging plant died a tragic death months ago, leaves shriveled and muted in color like burnt corners of a yellowing piece of paper. I snipped a vine off of its companion, left hanging on the other side of my window, a small sacrifice. Leaving the lone vine in a glass jar filled with water, I gave it time to sprout new roots. In weeks' time, I introduced the roots from water to soil, returning the pothos into the formerly abandoned pot. Dirt packed and protecting the roots, I returned the plant back to my bedroom window. And here it begins anew.