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The Phototroph

Erin Koehler
SUNY Geneseo

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ERIN KOEHLER

The Phototroph

My mother was the first person to teach me about plants when I was younger. She taught me to rotate plants on a windowsill, so the entirety could receive equal sunlight. It wasn't until I took AP Biology my senior year of high school that I learned when a plant isn't directly in the sun it leans towards the light—a phenomenon called phototropism. A year later, the summer my biology teacher died, the sun beat down like a fist. When I started working at Welch's Greenhouses in May, the weather was brutally hot and dry. By July the ground was parched, cracked like the face of an old woman.

I arrive at eight in the morning and my water bottle is already dripping with condensation. I unlock the old barn door with the key hidden under a cement block on a shelf holding a variety of flowerpots. The barn's small interior is illuminated, showing assorted plant fertilizers, antique gardening tools, and a plexiglass case holding collectable toy tractors. Grabbing a thin, white rope, I pull the main barn door open like a garage. After it's up, I switch the sign on the small door to open.

When I first walk in I can smell the musty garlic, and the dryness of the dirt that has become part of the barn like the walls. The dust is a permanent feature of the cold, cement floors; no amount of sweeping can loosen its grip on the pavement. I quickly find the light switch and flick it on, hoping no spiders have spread webs across the spaces where I need to walk. The barn is connected to a small greenhouse, longer than it is wide. I open the greenhouse doors to let some morning air circulate the humidity. I reach above my head to feel the dirt in the hanging plants. The soil is slightly damp but could use more water. The hanging plants are attached to a water system of tubes and PVC pipes that my boss, Bill, built. I turn the nozzle and soon the

rows of well-trimmed petunias, lobelia, million bells, verbena, fuchsia, and geraniums are dripping from a satisfying soak.

Pulling a garden hose out from under a wire bench by the wall, I water each row carefully and diligently. Trays of vibrant New Guinea impatiens and sweet potato vines beg for a drink from my hose, while clusters of pink and yellow lantana stand firm, pleading for their leaves to be stroked, releasing the odd citrus smell that they hold. I pass water quickly over the begonias, which tend to dry out more slowly, and give a little more attention to the gerbera daisies and dahlias—their colorful faces spread open like decorative fans.

The summer heat is already causing my forehead to sweat. Wiping it away I wander back into the barn, which, despite the overhead lights, is cool and dark. I take a small drink from my water bottle, the condensation from the ice piled inside dripping down my arm. I glance at the clock on the barn cash register. It's almost nine; the first customers will most likely be coming soon. I walk outside towards the plants that are left out on the tables overnight.

My mother, an early riser, was always in the kitchen when I would come downstairs in the morning to be greeted with a fresh pot of black tea. Not being much of a morning person until I eat breakfast, we habitually greet each other and don't talk much, existing peacefully within a quiet morning lull. Although I can't be certain, I'm sure the morning I learned of my teacher's death was a similarly usual morning. I can see the sliding door in the kitchen pushed open wide—the stained glass my dad crafts in his basement workshop clanging familiarly to let in the morning air before the thick July heat comes in with the rising afternoon. I can see my mother's mug, steaming before her, despite it being the middle of summer. There is no doubt in my mind that July 29, 2012 was like any other shining Sunday, until my sister came down from her bedroom, her hair tousled from sleep, and her phone brightly lit in her hand.

I continue the process of watering plants in front of the greenhouse and barn, where more plants sit on long wide tables. I give the peppers, tomatoes, cabbage, and broccoli a good drink. When I reach the herb table I rub the soft, thin lavender leaves, smelling the sweet oil left on my fingertips. Next, I pinch the top leaves of the sweet basil to keep them from going to seed and to help them get bushier at the base of the plant. As I water, I pick a mint leaf and pop it in my mouth, tasting it bitter and fresh between my teeth.

As the summer progresses Welch's doesn't require more than a few employees a day, and I often work alone, but I don't feel lonely; I can see the life in each plant slowly bending stems and leaves in subtle movements. I feel responsible for them—a mother of thousands. Being by myself gives me time

to think and relax, even if the labor can be arduous: weeding, lifting heavy bags of mulch, moving full trays of flowers. After a few months of working at Welch's, I start to find that working in the greenhouse is therapeutic for me, giving me time to reflect on myself, a skill I need to focus more energy on. Only the sporadic customer, needing plant replacements or else starting their garden late, breaks my solitude.

This is one of those days where I am alone with the plants. Bill is out in the back fields harvesting corn, cucumbers, zucchini, and garlic to sell at the stand out front. Even this early in the morning I can feel my arms beginning to tan from the heat of the sun. I wipe the back of my neck; thankful I've had the insight to pull my thick, curly hair into a bun. In retaliation of my darkening t-shirt lines, I push my sleeves up to my shoulders.

My sister, Kara, has always been very thin and tall. Her height causes her to naturally slouch her posture often. She did this when she stood in the kitchen, leaning slightly in the doorway, her gray t-shirt baggy over pajama shorts.

"Kayla just texted me, and she said Mrs. Boyum's been in an accident."

My mother looked up from her Kindle, while I do the opposite and stare into the last dregs of my cereal floating in warm milk.

"How would Kayla know that?" My mother questioned Kayla's gossiping nature, thinking she would have heard through the parental grapevine sooner.

"They're really close neighbors," my sister continued. "They think she was hit by a drunk driver."

"What? How?" I asked in shock. "It's nine in the morning. Was that last night?"

Kara shook her head slightly and looked down to reference her phone again.

"No, Kayla said it was this morning. She had to go help watch the kids."

In my mind I couldn't put two and two together. *Why would someone be driving drunk in the morning?* My mother groaned, ran a hand through her short brown hair.

"From the night before?"

Her question was met with silence. I don't remember if my sister knew at that moment if Mrs. Boyum had died yet, or if I learned later that day. But I know that when I found out she was dead, I felt nothing but disbelief.

A single car rolls from the busy road into the gravel parking space as I finish watering. The entire community was shaken by Mrs. Boyum's death. My bosses told me they could see the sirens and police tape from their house located next door to Welch's. For weeks afterwards, people couldn't stop

talking about the tragic circumstances. As I turn off the hose I try to forget a customer who, a week or so earlier, had babbled on about the accident, as if the whole ordeal was idle gossip. *It's such a shame—she was so young—and a mother, too.* When she asked me, *did you hear about that?* I shook my head. I pretended not to know her—my own teacher. I couldn't tell this stranger about the grief that bounced around my thoughts like a hive of trapped wasps—the grief that I ignored for fear of what I would say or do if it escaped.

My throat tightens as I straighten a tray of marigolds. My mind shifts to the last time I saw her. We ran into each other at Wegman's. She was with her son and daughter, and she told me she was proud of my AP test results. I had worked hard in her class. Biology was not one of my strongest subjects, and I managed a 4—the second best score on the exam. I push a fat, wet slug from the underside of the black plastic tray as I remember the pride beaming from her round, kind face. Short blonde hair framed her smile—the golden glow I remember of her laugh, her being alive.

I push past the marigolds. I think of her love for her children, how she was absent for a few days of class when her six-year-old son accidentally cut off the tip of his finger while moving a piece of equipment in his karate class. I can imagine her radiance, her enthusiasm shining as she tried her best to explain the complexities of the science of living things to a class of mostly uninterested high school students.

I find myself settling in with the pots that need deadheading—pulling off the caps of flowers where the petals are dying—to make room for new growth. I don't want to think of Mrs. Boyum's body being hit from behind; first by the man on his motorcycle, and a second time by the man's girlfriend in her car. They had both been out late the night before, and they were both still drunk. I fight the thought of how, because of their recklessness, her body was flung into the road—hit by motorcycle, run over by car—and how right after, both fled the scene. I don't want to think of how she was killed on this very street, not a half-mile from where I stand gently pinching away the wilting, sticky heads of petunias. And even as I fight back the haunting grasp of this knowledge in the blazing, burning sunlight, I cannot think of her as anything but whole.

As the dust from the car in the driveway settles, I wave hello to the small old woman who starts to amble slowly around, looking at the flowers. After about a half hour, the old woman comes into the barn, pulling one of Welch's worn teal wagons behind her. I smile politely as I start to fill a few discarded boxes with her plants for easier transport home. As I box them up, I can't stop myself from squeezing one of her snapdragon heads, imagining a toothy mouth opening wide. I note she has two trays of bright scarlet geraniums.

"These are one of my favorite colors that we have," I offer for conversation.

She nods. “They’re much more beautiful than the ones I had before. The heat’s already killed the ones I planted earlier this season.”

“The weather’s been all over the place this year,” I say in reply.

“Yes,” she agrees. “Like people.”

I’m taken aback. I’m not sure why her response strikes me as so peculiar, but there is something of a cryptic truth to it that makes me feel uncomfortable but equally content, like dipping a foot into an undisturbed pool to break the glassy surface.

“These will look much better,” I say, gesturing to the flowers I’m almost done boxing up.

“Thank you, they’re for my husband’s grave.”

I give her a smile that I hope is sympathetic. This particular comment doesn’t surprise me—many people come to the greenhouse to buy flowers for grave plots. I swallow, and think about how Mrs. Boyum’s family will most likely be doing the same.

“We all age when we lose our mates—you know it breaks your heart and everything,” the old woman continues. “I was in a crowded room but I was alone. I lost him three years ago and it still feels like yesterday.”

“I’m sorry,” I offer feebly. How can I console a woman I don’t even know?

“This would have been our sixtieth year together. That’s a long time; I still miss him everyday. I find myself falling asleep in the afternoons when I never did before.”

I look at her and imagine she has the type of honesty that’s really only found in the elderly. Perhaps she lives alone, spending the remainder of her days giving away parts of her life to strangers, like tart rhubarb pie, one slice at a time. This woman is probably more than four times my age, and yet she is telling me of her sorrows, perhaps trying to make something of them. Or maybe she tells this story to everyone and this moment only means something to one of us.

After I count her change we walk to her car, and I help her load the geraniums into the trunk. The petals are dark cherry red and as silken as thin velvet. I resist the urge to snap a wilted stem that I missed when I was boxing them earlier. I remember to thank her for stopping by and turn back towards the barn, still feeling the old woman’s presence thick like the heat clinging to my sweaty arms, knocking at the buzzing wasp’s nest inside me.

When her car rolls out of the driveway, the dry dust kicked up by the wheels settles in its wake.

After my sister told us what she knew of Mrs. Boyum’s “accident,” as I kept calling it to myself, the day passed as usual. I pushed Mrs. Boyum to the back of my mind where I could pretend to ignore it, but where it sat throbbing.

bing like the engine of a machine. I called one of my best friends who was two states away at her summer job as a camp counselor, and who had taken Mrs. Boyum's class with me. Our conversation was short and informational. She was shocked, and towards the end her words caught in her throat. I was still unable to let myself feel the weight of the morning's events and tried to carry on as usual. After I hung up the phone, I thought of the candlelit vigil my high school had promptly organized for grieving students and members of the community on a place called Angel Hill—dubbed so five years prior, when a tragic car accident killed five girls from my town who had just graduated from high school. I knew a few people who were going there to meet up and grieve together, but I couldn't stand the thought of sharing my shock and sadness in such a public way.

I was not at Welch's the day of Mrs. Boyum's accident, nor did I realize until later that the scene was only a few hundred feet away from my place of work. All I knew at first was that she had been riding her bicycle down Route 250 when she was hit—but that route is a main road, twisting and cutting through almost three towns. I suppose as human beings we view tragedy from a distance, far from our own personal connections and ourselves. So I never even imagined the possibility that she was killed so physically close to where I work, less than ten miles from my own home.

A week or so earlier, my family got the hardwood flooring in our house redone. We weren't allowed in the two rooms while the lacquer was drying, but the Sunday Mrs. Boyum died we were permitted to go into the rooms for the first time. Kara and I marveled at the new shine, the floors polished and open without the large woven rugs that had covered them since we were very young. The open space was too inviting and I think at that moment my sister and I felt like we were small children again. I lay down across the new wood, smelling the clean fresh tang of the gloss. My sister tottered above me and grabbed my bare ankles. Before I knew it, she was pulling me across the shiny surface.

Kara pulled me in circles on the floor until I was gasping with laughter. I was dizzy from the motion and the childish absurdity of it all. We fed each other's laughter until I couldn't breathe, my sides aching. Suddenly, mid-spin, I felt something slowly shift deep inside me, and I was too out of control to stop it.

In an instant, my laughter was distorted into deep, guttural sobs. The spinning came to a halt. Kara stood over me, unsure of what to do. And there was my moment of private grief, sprawled out across the freshly dried varnish of our new floors.