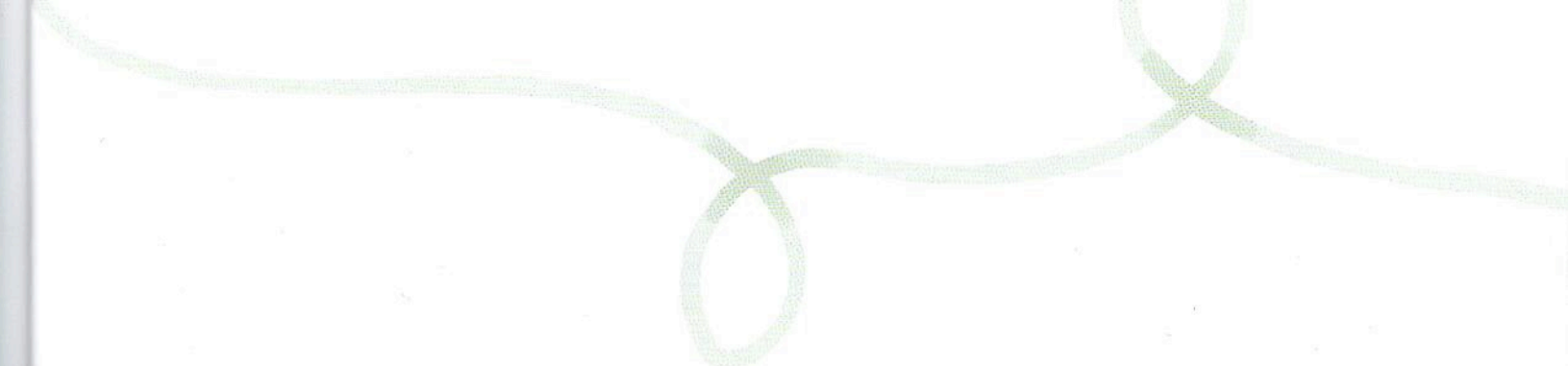




Flour, Needles, Soil, Pen

WHAT SUSTAINS US

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALICIA BINT



There are so many endeavors I turn to for solace and sustenance, regardless of my talent or time: baking, knitting, gardening, scribbling words on the page. Given limited time and energy, it probably makes sense to let go of any (or all) of these, but in the most desperate of times I find myself turning to them again and again.

When my first husband died in his early thirties, it felt like the world both stopped abruptly and began spinning at an incomprehensible velocity. In those bewildering early days of grief, I turned back to what I knew, what I could do with my hands, and what I could do by myself. I started with the simplest tasks. I baked banana bread and started a scarf; I planted peas and I wrote journal entries, though some days I could manage only a single sentence.

Eventually, my ability to engage from a place of joy and light returned. I welcomed a new love. I tried my hand at baking pavlovas and macarons, and I knit sweaters, intricate lace baby blankets, and hats. I dreamed the variegated rainbow of seed catalogs and garden beds, and I began to write poems that were not entirely steeped in sorrow.

Then the pandemic shut everything down, just a few weeks after my youngest daughter was born. We were grateful she arrived early, as the stay-at-home orders and states of emergency spilled forth, and we hunkered together as a family while the world spun and tumbled around us. Like so many, I baked

feverishly, stirring, kneading, shaping, holding in my two hands the mixing bowl, the bread dough, the wooden spoon. I floured my fingers and fed my children.

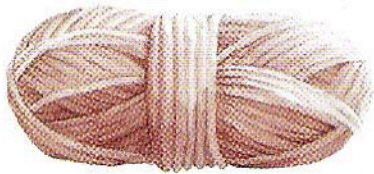
When my second husband was deployed with the U.S. Navy several months later, a new ferocious grief flooded me. My older daughters stood at the window and watched him go as I held the baby in my arms, and once again everything both shuddered to a stop and carried on in a dizzying spin. It's not the same as a death, but it is most certainly a grieving. That night I sat alone at the kitchen table and wept into my hands.

I cannot remember what it is like not to carry grief with me in my body, but I have lived with it long enough now to know where I will turn to help bear its weight.

And so, even though most days it feels like I never stop moving—like the dishes, laundry, baths, cooking, tantrums, and homework will never end, like I am failing at my job, my parenting, my marriage, and my homekeeping, like there is never enough time or enough of me for any of it—I still find myself carving out slices of the day for what sustains me. A few extra minutes of mixing and shaping the sourdough loaf, or knocking out a few rows of a sweater during a virtual conference. A poem scratched out on the back of a grocery receipt. Or this essay, when I am so tired and all the children are finally asleep, but I feel the need.



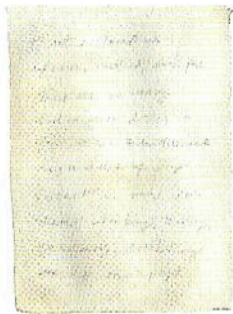
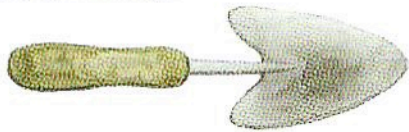
flour



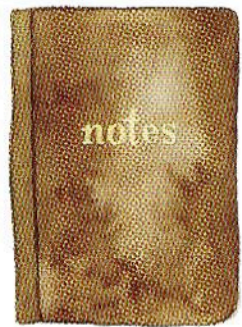
needles



soil



pen



This winter, as we marked off the deployment days on a large wall calendar, I gathered my older daughters to help choose seeds to plant in the spring. When the box was delivered, my preschooler squealed, and we sat down on the living room floor to examine each packet, sorting the seeds into early and late plantings, flowers, vegetables, and herbs. I am exhausted and chronically stressed, and I would be the first to tell you that my patience with everything is wearing painfully thin, but I have found that gardening with my girls is where ease and peace stretch out before me like a dream. As the season grows warmer and we mark more days off the calendar, we will plant these seeds together and nurture them to life. As they grow, we will water and thin, weed and love and shoo away bugs, and, eventually, we'll delight in the harvest.

When my children ask to bake cupcakes or cookies, or when they beg for homemade pancakes for dinner, I try to say yes. Even when my fatigue feels like a permanent fixture in my bones, I know that the joy from dusting flour off noses and holding the mixing bowl still while my three-year-old stirs with all her might will help sustain me through these long days and nights, even if it means more dishes in the meantime. I also try to be gentle with myself on the nights when takeout feels like the only feasible way to get everyone fed.

Though the projects take many more months to complete these days, I still work at gifts for my daughters, stitch by knitted stitch. And even when I know there are always more pressing things to do, I try to honor what I know of my grieving process—that words on the page are how I navigate turbulent waters and make it through the hard days.

When everything feels like it's falling apart, and I don't know how I'm going to do it; when I tell everyone I am just taking it one day at a time, but I'm really not sure how I'll make it through one more minute; when grief, acute or chronic, seizes my throat, I am always returning to the flour, the needles, the soil, the pen. My hands forming and making, moving and shaping.

Some nights the dishes and laundry don't get done, the bills sit unpaid, the work emails have to wait for tomorrow, and I stay up too late baking muffins, clicking needles, or perusing a seed catalog. Some nights the never-ending list of all that needs to be done falls away, and I manage to put pen to paper, and the words come together, and every one sustains me. ✨