SECOND NATURE

A GARDENER'S EDUCATION

MICHAEL POLLAN

AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING THE BOTANY OF DESIRE

"Second Nature is . . . as delicious a meditation on one man's relationship with the earth as any of you are as likely to come upon."
—The New York Times Book Review

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Introduction

This book is the story of my education in the garden. The garden in question is actually two, one more or less imaginary, the other insistently real. The first is the garden of books and memories, that dreamed-of outdoor utopia, gnat-free and ever in bloom, where nature answers to our wishes and we imagine feeling perfectly at home. The second garden is an actual place, consisting of the five acres of rocky, intractable hillside in the town of Cornwall, Connecticut, that I have been struggling to cultivate for the past seven years. Much separates these two gardens, though every year I bring them a little more closely into alignment.

Both of these gardens have had a lot to teach me, and not only, as it turned out, about gardening. For I soon came to the realization that I would not learn to garden very well before I'd also learned about a few other things: about my proper place in nature (was I within my rights to murder the woodchuck that had been sacking my vegetable garden all spring?); about the somewhat peculiar attitudes toward the land that an American is born with (why is it the neighbors have taken such a keen interest in the state of my lawn?); about the troubled borders between nature and culture; and about the experience of place, the moral implications of landscape design, and several other questions that the wish to harvest a few decent tomatoes had not prepared me for. It may be my nature to complicate matters unduly, to search for large meanings in small

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things, but it did seem that there was a lot more going on in the garden than I'd expected to find.

I began gardening for the same reasons people usually do: for the satisfaction of pulling bunches of carrots from one's own ground; the desire to make a patch of land more hospitable or productive; the urge to recover a place remembered from childhood, and the basic need to keep the forest from swallowing up one's house. When my wife and I bought our first place in 1983—a sliver of a derelict dairy farm on the eastern edge of the Housatonic Valley—we had been living in Manhattan for some time, in an apartment that receives approximately ninety minutes of sunlight a day, and the prospect of growing a few flowers and vegetables seemed exotic. There was also the matter of the advancing forest, which did in fact threaten to engulf our house, a little cape that had been assembled from a Sears, Roebuck kit in 1929. I had to do *something*—either mow the weed patch that passed for a lawn, or put in a real garden—if I hoped to keep the woods at bay.

So I guess you could say the forest made me do it. But there was also, mixed in with my motives, the recollected satisfactions of childhood gardens. Growing up on Long Island in the early 1960s, I'd cared for a succession of pocket gardens in various corners of my parents' suburban plot, and had spent many Saturdays helping out my grandfather in the much grander garden he tended a few miles away (Chapter 1 is a reminiscence of these places). Now I had some ground of my own, and gardening it seemed a natural way to spend my weekends, something I might even have a knack for.

Judith had other ideas. Though her position would eventually soften, she started out a sworn enemy of gardening, having been forced as a child to do yard work. I think she was also less troubled by the derelict parts of our property than I was, finding beauty in the march of brush across an abandoned hay field, or the rank, top-heavy growth of an apple tree in need of hard pruning. So she began making landscape paintings and I, with somewhat less striking results, began making landscapes.

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It wasn't very long before I discovered I was ill-prepared for the work I'd taken on. The local New England landscape—a patchwork of abandoned farms swiftly being overtaken by second-growth forest—proved far less amenable to my plans for it than the tame suburban plots of my childhood had. Here were large and rapacious animals, hegemonies of weeds, a few billion examples of every insect in the field guide, killing frosts in June and September, and boulders of inconceivable weight and number. But there were obstacles of a very different kind that proved just as vexing: the unexamined attitudes toward nature that I'd brought with me to the garden.

Like most Americans out-of-doors, I was a child of Thoreau. But the ways of seeing nature I'd inherited from him, and the whole tradition of nature writing he inspired, seemed not to fit my experiences. In confronting the local woodchucks, or deciding whether I was obliged to mow my lawn, or how liberal I could afford to be with respect to weeds, I was deep in nature, surely, but my feelings about it, although strong, were something other than romantic, or worshipful. When one summer I came across Emerson's argument that "weeds" (just then strangling my annuals) were nothing more than a defect of my perception, I felt a certain cognitive dissonance. Everybody wrote about how to *be* in nature, what sorts of perceptions to have, but nobody about how to *act* there. Yet the gardener, unlike the naturalist, has to, indeed *wants* to, act.

Now it is true that there are countless volumes of practical advice available to the perplexed gardener, but I felt the need for some philosophical guidance as well. Before I firebomb a woodchuck burrow, I like to have a bit of theory under my belt. Yet for the most part, Americans who write about nature don't write about the garden—about man-made landscapes and the processes of their making. This is an odd omission, for although gardening may not at first seem to hold the drama or grandeur of, say, climbing mountains, it is gardening that gives most of us our most

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direct and intimate experience of nature—of its satisfactions, fragility, and power.

Yet traditionally, when we have wanted to think about our relationship to nature, we have gone to the wilderness, to places untouched by man. Thoreau, in fact, was the last important American writer on nature to have anything to say about gardening. He planted a bean field at Walden and devoted a chapter to his experiences in it. But the bean field (which I talk about in my chapter on weeds) got Thoreau into all sorts of trouble. His romance of wild nature left him feeling guilty about discriminating against weeds (he rails against the need for such "invidious distinctions") and he couldn't see why he was any more entitled to the harvest of his garden than the resident woodchucks and birds. Badly tangled up in contradictions between his needs and nature's prerogatives, Thoreau had to forsake the bean field, eventually declaring that he would prefer the most dismal swamp to any garden. With that declaration, the garden was essentially banished from American writing on nature.

I think this is unfortunate, and not just because I happen to stand in need of sound advice in the garden. Americans have a deeply ingrained habit of seeing nature and culture as irreconcilably opposed; we automatically assume that whenever one gains, the other must lose. Forced to choose, we usually opt for nature (at least in our books). This choice, which I believe is a false one, is what led Thoreau and his descendants out of the garden. To be sure, there is much to be learned in the wilderness; our unsurpassed tradition of nature writing is sufficient proof of that. But my experience in the garden leads me to believe that there are many important things about our relationship to nature that *cannot* be learned in the wild. For one thing, we need, and now more than ever, to learn how to use nature without damaging it. That probably can't be done as long as we continue to think of nature and culture simply as antagonists. So how do we begin to find some middle ground between the two? To provide for our needs and desires without diminishing nature? The premise of this book is that the place to look for some of the answers to these questions may not be in the woods, but in the garden.

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Though this book is not a polemic, it is full of argument: between me and this vexing piece of land, and also between me and some of the traditional ways of looking at nature in America; I find I spend a lot of time arguing with Thoreau. Many of these arguments don't get settled; this book is an exercise in discovery rather than truth telling. It is, as I say, the story of an education, and, as will be clear from the high incidence of folly in these pages, I remain more pupil than teacher. I know more at the end of my narrative than I did at the beginning, and for the most part I have followed the logic of my experiences, as they unfolded season by season, rather than that of any thesis. Even so, there is, I think, threading through this book (and spelled out in some detail in Chapter 10), a single underlying argument: that the idea of a garden—as a place, both real and metaphorical, where nature and culture can be wedded in a way that can benefit both—may be as useful to us today as the idea of wilderness has been in the past. This might strike readers as a rather unfashionably optimistic notion. In fact I share the general sense of alarm about our environment; I do not, however, share the gathering sense of despair. I find, in the garden, some grounds for hope.

What are my qualifications to write such a book? Certainly I am no expert—not on gardening, or nature, or much of anything else, for that matter. This is very much the enterprise of an amateur. My sole qualification (if it may be called that) is the wager I decided to make at the beginning of this project: that gardening might be worth taking seriously, and that, closely attended to, it might yield some good stories and helpful ideas. Yet I suspect that once I began to garden, this book was probably inevitable. As most gardeners will testify, the desire to make a garden is often followed by a desire to write down your experiences there—in a notebook, or a letter to a friend who gardens, or if, like me, you make your living by words, in a book. Writing and gardening, these two ways of rendering the world in rows, have a great deal in common. In my part of the country, there comes each year one long and occasion-

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ally fruitful season when gardening takes place strictly on paper and in the imagination. This book is how I've spent the last few such seasons in my garden.

I have been fortunate to have the help and encouragement of many people in this undertaking, but it has been Judith's that really made this book possible. Her initial reluctance in the garden eventually gave way to a catching enthusiasm, and we have been close partners in all that follows—in the book as well as the garden. Neither would be of any account without her eye and ear and intelligence.

I'm especially grateful for the generosity and insight of Mark Edmundson who, despite a complete lack of interest in anything having to do with gardening, gave me invaluable criticism and advice at every stage. I also had crucial support from Mark Danner and my colleagues at *Harper's Magazine*. My thanks, too, to Amanda Urban, Ann Godoff, and Carl Navarre, for having faith in this project long before there was any good reason to.

There are a few other people whose influence, unbeknownst to them, has been decisive. This book grows out of my experiences in the library as well as in the garden, and I would not have gotten very far had I never encountered the work of Wendell Berry, Frederick Turner, Eleanor Perényi, Richard Rorty, William Cronon, and J. B. Jackson. Different as these writers are, they are all pioneers on the frontier of nature and culture, and that makes them superb, if perhaps unwitting, guides to the garden.

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CHAPTER 1

Two Gardens

My first garden was a place no grown-up ever knew about, even though it was in the backyard of a quarter-acre suburban plot. Behind our house in Farmingdale, on Long Island, stood a rough hedge of lilac and forsythia that had been planted to hide the neighbor's slat wood fence. My garden, which I shared with my sister and our friends, consisted of the strip of unplanted ground between the hedge and the fence. I say that no grown-up knew about it because, in an adult's picture of this landscape, the hedge runs flush against the fence. To a four-year-old, though, the space made by the vaulting branches of a forsythia is as grand as the inside of a cathedral, and there is room enough for a world between a lilac and a wall. Whenever I needed to be out of range of adult radar, I'd crawl beneath the forsythia's arches, squeeze between two lilac bushes, and find myself safe and alone in my own green room.

I think of this place today as a garden not only because it offered an enclosed and privileged space out-of-doors but also because it was here that I first actually grew something. Most of the pictures I can retrieve from that time are sketchy and brittle, but this one unspools like a strip of celluloid. It must be September. I am by myself behind the hedge, maybe hiding from my sister or just poking around, when I catch sight of a stippled green football sitting in a tangle of vines and broad leaves. It's a watermelon. The feeling is of finding treasure—a right-angled

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change of fortune, an unexpected boon. Then I make the big connection between this melon and a seed I planted, or at least spit out and buried, months before: *I made this happen.* For a moment I'm torn between leaving the melon to ripen and the surging desire to publicize my achievement: *Mom has got to see this.* So I break the cord attaching the melon to the vine, cradle it in my arms and run for the house, screaming my head off the whole way. The watermelon weighs a ton, though, and just as I hit the back steps I lose my balance. The melon squirts from my arms and smashes in a pink explosion on the cement.

Watermelon perfume fills the air and then the memory stalls. I can't remember but I must have cried—to see so fine a triumph snatched away, to feel Humpty-Dumpty suddenly crash onto my four-year-old conscience. Memories of one kind or another play around the edges of every garden, giving them much of their resonance and savor. I've spent thousands of hours in the garden since that afternoon, and there is perhaps some sense in which all this time has been spent trying to recover that watermelon and the flush of pride that attended its discovery.

I can't recall whether I tried to salvage any part of the melon to show my father when he got home from work, but I can assume he would not have been greatly impressed. My father was not much for gardening, and the postage-stamp yard of our ranch house showed it. The lawn was patchy and always in need of a mowing, the hedges were unclipped and scraggly, and in summer hordes of Japanese beetles dined on our rosebushes without challenge. My father was a Bronx boy who had been swept to the suburbs in the postwar migration. Buying a house with a yard on Long Island was simply what you did then, part of how you said who you were when you were a lawyer or a dentist (he was a lawyer) just starting out in the fifties. Certainly it was no great love of fresh air that drove him from the city. I have a few memories of my father standing with his Salem and a highball glass on the concrete patio behind the house, but, with a single exception I will come to, not one of him

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out in the yard mowing the lawn or pulling weeds or otherwise acting the part of a suburban dad.

I remember him as strictly an indoor dad, moving around the house in his year-round uniform of button-down shirt, black socks and tie shoes, and boxer shorts. Maybe it was the fact that he hated to wear pants that kept him indoors, or perhaps the boxers were a way to avoid having to go outside. Either way, my mother was left with the choice of her husband doing the yard work in his underwear, or not doing it at all, which in the suburbs is not much of a choice. So while the boxers kept Dad pinned to the kitchen table, the yard steadily deteriorated to the point where it became something of a neighborhood and family scandal.

My mother's father lived a few miles away in Babylon, in a big house with beautiful, manicured gardens, and the condition of our yard could be counted on to make him crazy—something it may well have been calculated to do. My grandfather was a somewhat overbearing patriarch whom my father could not stand. Grandpa, who would live to be ninety-six, had come to Long Island from Russia shortly before the First World War. Starting out with nothing, selling vegetables from a horse wagon, he eventually built a fortune, first in the produce business and later in real estate. In choosing my father, my mother had married a notch or two beneath her station, and Grandpa made it his business to minimize his eldest daughter's sacrifice—or, looked at from another angle, to highlight my father's shortcomings. This meant giving my father large quantities of unsolicited career advice, unsolicited business opportunities (invariably bum deals, according to my father), and unsolicited landscape services.

In the same way some people send flowers, Grandpa sent whole gardens. These usually arrived unexpectedly, by truck caravan. Two or three flatbeds appeared at the curb and a crew of Italian laborers fanned out across the property to execute whatever new plan Grandpa had dreamed up. One time he sent a rose garden that ran the length of our property, from curb to back fence. But it wasn't enough to send the rosebushes: Grandpa held my father's very soil in low esteem; no plant

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of *his* could be expected to grow in it. So he had his men dig a fifty-foot trench three feet wide and a foot deep, remove the soil by hand and then replace it with soil trucked in from his own garden. This way the roses (which also came from Grandpa's garden) would suffer no undue stress and my father's poor, neglected soil would be at least partly redeemed. Sometimes it seemed as if my grandfather was bent on replacing every bit of earth around our house, a square foot at a time.

Now any good gardener cares as much about soil as plants, but my grandfather's obsession with this particular patch of earth probably went deeper than that. No doubt my father, who was the first in his family to own his own house, viewed his father-in-law's desire to replace our soil with his own as a challenge to the very ground on which his independence stood. And maybe there was something to this: Grandpa had given my parents the money for the down payment ($4,000; the house had cost $11,000), and, like most of his gifts, this one was not unencumbered. The unsolicited landscaping services, like Grandpa's habit of occasionally pounding on the house's walls as if to check on its upkeep, suggest that his feelings about our house were more than a little proprietary. It was as a landlord that Grandpa felt most comfortable in the world, and as long as my father declined to think of himself as a tenant, they were bound not to get along.

But probably his concern for our soil was also an extension of his genuine and deeply felt love of land. I don't mean love of *the* land, in the nature-lover's sense. *The* land is abstract and in some final sense unpossessable by any individual. Grandpa loved land as a reliable if somewhat mystical source of private wealth. No matter what happened in the world, no matter what folly the government perpetrated, land could be counted on to hold and multiply its value. At the worst a plot could yield a marketable crop and, at least on Long Island for most of this century, it could almost certainly be resold for a profit. "They can print more money," he liked to say, "and they can print new stocks and bonds, but they can't print more land."

In his mind, the Old World peasant and the real estate developer

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existed side by side; he was both men and perceived no contradiction. Each looked at a piece of land and saw potential wealth: it made no difference that one saw a field of potatoes and the other a housing development. Grandpa could be perfectly happy spending his mornings tenderly cultivating the land and his afternoons despoiling it. Thoreau, planting his bean field, said he aimed to make the earth "speak beans." Some days my grandfather made the earth speak vegetables; other days it was shopping centers.

Grandpa started out in the teens wholesaling produce in Suffolk County, which was mostly farmland then. He would buy fruits and vegetables from the farmers and sell them to restaurants and, later, to the military bases that sprang up on Long Island during the war. He managed to make money straight through the Depression, and used his savings to buy farmland at Depression prices. When after the Second World War the suburbs started to boom, he saw his opportunity. Suffolk County was generally considered too far from the city for commuters, but Grandpa was confident that sooner or later the suburban tide would reach his shore. His faith in the area was so emphatic that (according to his obituary in *Newsday*) he was known in business circles as Mr. Suffolk.

Grandpa worked the leading edge of the suburban advance, speculating in the land that suburbanization was steadily translating from farm into tract house and shopping center. He grasped the powerful impulses that drove New Yorkers farther and farther out east because he shared them. There was the fear and contempt for city ways—the usual gloss on the suburban outlook—but there was also a nobler motive: to build a middle-class utopia, impelled by a Jeffersonian hunger for independence and a drive to create an ideal world for one's children. The suburbs, where you could keep one foot on the land and the other in the city, was without a doubt the best way to live, and Grandpa possessed an almost evangelical faith that we would all live this way eventually. Every time he bought a hundred acres of North Fork potato field, he knew it was only a matter of time before its utopian destiny would be fulfilled. Grandpa had nothing against potatoes, but who could deny that the

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ultimate Long Island crop was a suburban development? The fact that every home in that development could have a patch of potatoes in the backyard was proof that progress had no cost.

His own suburban utopia was a sprawling ranch house on five acres of waterfront in Babylon, on the south shore. My grandfather had enough money to live nearly anywhere, and for a time the family lived in a very grand mansion in Westbury. But he preferred to live in one of Long Island's new developments, and after his children were grown he and my grandmother moved into one where the fancy homes on their big plots nevertheless hewed to the dictates of middle-class suburban taste. The houses were set well back from the road and their massive expanses of unhedged front lawn ran together to create the impression of a single parklike landscape. Here in front of each house was at least an acre of land on which no one but the hired gardener ever stepped, an extravagance of unused acreage that must have rubbed against Grandpa's grain. But front yards in the suburbs are supposed to contribute to a kind of visual commons, and to honor this convention, Grandpa was willing to deny himself the satisfaction of fully exploiting an entire acre of prime real estate.

At least until I was a teenager, visits to Grandma and Grandpa's were always sweet occasions. The anticipation would start to build as we turned onto Peninsula Drive and began the long, slow ride through that Great Common Lawn, a perfection of green relieved only by evergreen punctuation marks and the fine curves of driveways drawn in jet-black asphalt. Eager as we were to get there, we always made Mom slow down (Dad hardly ever made the trip) in the hope of spotting the one celebrity who lived on my grandparents' road: Bob Keeshan, known to every child of that time as Captain Kangaroo. One time we did see the Captain, dressed in his civilian clothes, digging in his garden.

There is something about a lush, fresh-cut lawn that compels children to break into a sprint, and after the long ride we couldn't wait to spill out of the station wagon and fan out across the backyard. The grass always seemed to have a fresh crew cut, and it was so springy and uniform

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that you wanted to run your hand across it and bring your face close. My sisters could spend the whole afternoon practicing their cartwheels on it, but sooner or later Grandma would lure them indoors, into what was emphatically her realm. Except for the garage and a small den with a TV, where Grandpa passed rainy days stretched out on the sofa, the house brimmed with grandmotherness: glass cases full of tiny ceramic figurines, billowy pink chiffon curtains, dressing tables with crystal atomizers and silver hairbrushes, lacquered boxes stuffed with earrings, ornately framed portraits of my mother and aunt. I remember it as a very queenly place, a suburban Versailles, and it absorbed my sisters for hours at a time.

Grandpa's realm was outside, where he and his gardener, Andy, had made what I judged a paradise. Beginning at the driveway, the lawn described a broad, curving avenue that wound around the back of the house. On one side of it was the flagstone patio and rock garden, and on the other a wilder area planted with shrubs and small trees; this enclosed the backyard, screening it from the bay. A stepping-stone path conducted you through this area, passing beneath a small rose arbor and issuing with an unfailingly pleasing surprise onto the bright white beach. Plunked in the middle of the lawn was a gazebo, a silly confection of a building that was hardly ever used. Arrayed around it in a neat crescent was a collection of the latest roses: enormous blooms on spindly stems with names like Chrysler and Eisenhower and Peace. In June they looked like members of a small orchestra, performing for visitors in the gazebo.

The area between the lawn and the beach was twenty or thirty feet deep, thickly planted, and it formed a kind of wilderness we could explore out of sight of the adults on the patio. Here were mature rhododendrons and fruit trees, including a famous peach that Grandpa was said to have planted from seed. It was an impressive tree, too, weighed down in late summer with bushels of fruit. The tree was a dwarf, so we could reach the downy yellow globes ourselves. Hoping to repeat Grandpa's achievement, we carefully buried the pit of every peach we ate. (Probably it was his example that inspired my experiment with water-

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melon seeds.) But ripe fruit was only one of the surprises of Grandpa's wild garden. There was another we always looked for, only sometimes found. Creeping among the rhododendrons and dwarf trees, we would on lucky days come upon a small, shaded glade where, on a low mound, a concrete statue stood. It was a boy with his hand on his penis, peeing. This scandalous little scene never failed to set off peals of laughter when we were in a group; alone, the feelings were more complicated. In one way or another Eros operates in every garden; here was where he held sway in Grandpa's.

Back out in daylight, you could continue along the avenue of lawn until you came to an area of formal hedges clipped as tall as a ten-year-old, and forming an alley perhaps ten feet wide and forty feet long. At one end was a regulation-size shuffleboard court paved in sleek, painted concrete (it felt cool to bare feet all summer), and, at the other, a pair of horseshoe pins. Some visits these games held my interest for a while, but usually I made straight for the break in the hedge that gave onto what was unquestionably my favorite and my grandfather's proudest part of the garden—indeed, the only part of the property I ever heard anybody call a garden: his vegetable garden.

Vegetables had given Grandpa his earliest success, and the older he got, the more devoted to them he became. Eventually care of the ornamental gardens fell to Andy, and Grandpa spent the better part of his days among the vegetables, each spring adding to the garden and subtracting from the lawn. It's quite possible that, had Grandpa lived another twenty years, his suburban spread would have reverted entirely to farm. As it was, Grandpa had at least a half-acre planted in vegetables—virtually a truck farm, and a totally unreasonable garden for an elderly couple. I have a photograph of him from the seventies, standing proudly among his vegetables in his double-knits, and I can count more than twenty-five tomato plants and at least a dozen zucchini plants. You can't see the corn—row upon row of sweet corn—or the string beans, cucumbers, cantaloupes, peppers, and onions, but there had to be enough here to supply a farm stand.

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The garden was bordered by a curving brick kneewall that ran right along the water, a location that ensured a long growing season since the bay held heat well into the fall, forestalling frost. Grandpa could afford to be extravagant with space, and no two plants in his garden ever touched one another. I don't think a more meticulous vegetable garden ever existed; my grandfather hoed it every morning, and no weed dared raise its head above that black, loamy floor. Grandpa brought the same precision to the planting of string beans and tomatoes that Le Nôtre brought to the planting of chestnut trees in the Tuileries. The rows, which followed the curves of the garden wall, might as well have been laid out by a surveyor, and the space between each plant was uniform and exact. Taken as a whole, the garden looked like nothing so much as a scale model for one of the latest suburban developments: the rows were roads, and each freestanding vegetable plant was a single-family house. Here in the garden one of the unacknowledged contradictions of Grandpa's life was symbolically resolved: the farmer and the developer became one.

But what could have possessed my grandfather to plant such a *big* vegetable garden? Even cooking and canning and pickling at her furious clip, there was no way my grandmother could keep up with his garden's vast daily yield. Eventually she cracked and went on strike: she refused to process any more of his harvest, and true to her word, never again pickled a cucumber or canned a tomato. But even then he would not be deterred, and the garden continued to expand.

I suspect that this crisis of overproduction suited Grandpa just fine. He was foremost a capitalist and, to borrow a pair of terms from Marx, was ultimately less interested in the use-value of his produce than in its exchange-value. I don't mean to suggest that he took no immediate pleasure in his vegetables; his tomatoes, especially, pleased him enormously. He liked to slice his beefsteaks into thick pink slabs and go at them with a knife and fork. Watching him dine on one, you understood immediately how a tomato could come to be named for a cut of meat. "Sweetasugar," he would announce between bites, his accent mushing the three words together into one incantatory sound. Of course he would say

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the same thing about his Bermuda onions, his corn, even his bell peppers. Grandpa's vocabulary of English superlatives was limited, and "sweet-asugar" was the highest compliment you could pay a vegetable.

Eating beefsteaks was one pleasure, but calculating their market value and giving them away was even better. Having spent many years in the produce business, Grandpa had set aside a place in his mind where he maintained the current retail price of every vegetable in the supermarket; even in his nineties he would drop by the Waldbaum's produce section from time to time to update his mental price list. Harvesting alongside him, I can remember Grandpa holding a tomato aloft and, instead of exclaiming over its size or perfect color, he'd quote its market price: *Thirty-nine cents a pound!* (Whatever the amount, it was always an outrage.) Probably when he gazed out over his garden he could see in his mind's eye those little white placards stapled to tongue depressors listing the going per-pound price of every crop. And given the speed with which he could tally a column of figures in his head, I am sure he could mentally translate the entire garden into U.S. currency in less time than it took me to stake a tomato plant. To work in his garden was to commune with nature without ever leaving the marketplace.

By growing much more produce than he and Grandma could ever hope to consume, Grandpa transformed his vegetables into commodities. And to make sure of this elevated status, he planted exclusively those varieties sold by the supermarket chains: beefsteaks, iceberg lettuce, Blue Lake string beans, Marketmore cukes. Never mind that these were usually varieties distinguished less for their flavor than their fitness for transcontinental shipment; he preferred a (theoretically) marketable crop to a tasty one. Of course selling the vegetables wasn't a realistic option; he appreciated that an eighty-five-year-old real estate magnate couldn't very well open a farm stand, as much as he might have liked to. Still, he needed distribution channels, so he worked hard at giving the stuff away. All summer, before he got dressed for work (he never retired), Grandpa harvested the garden and loaded the trunk and backseat of his Lincoln with bushel baskets of produce. As he went on his rounds—visiting

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tenants, haggling with bankers and brokers, buying low and selling high—he'd give away baskets of vegetables. Now my grandfather never gave away anything that didn't have at least some slender string attached to it, and no doubt he believed that his sweet-as-sugar beefsteaks put these businessmen in his debt, gave him some slight edge. And probably this was so. At the least, the traveling produce show put the suits off their guard, making Grandpa seem more like some benign Old World bumpkin than the shark he really was.

It took a long time before I understood the satisfactions of giving away vegetables, but the pleasures of harvesting them I acquired immediately. A good visit to Grandma and Grandpa's was one on a day he hadn't already harvested. On these occasions I could barely wait for Grandpa to hand me a basket and dispatch me to the garden to start the picking. Alone was best—when Grandpa came along, he would invariably browbeat me about some fault in my technique, so I made sure to get out there before he finished small-talking with Mom. Ripe vegetables were magic to me. Unharvested, the garden bristled with possibility. I would quicken at the sight of a ripe tomato, sounding its redness from deep amidst the undifferentiated green. To lift a bean plant's hood of heart-shaped leaves and discover a clutch of long slender pods hanging underneath could make me catch my breath. Cradling the globe of a cantaloupe warmed in the sun, or pulling orange spears straight from his sandy soil—these were the keenest of pleasures, and even today in the garden they're accessible to me, dulled only slightly by familiarity.

At the time this pleasure had nothing to do with eating. I didn't like vegetables any better than most kids do (tomatoes I considered disgusting, acceptable only in the form of ketchup), yet there it was: the vegetable sublime. Probably I had absorbed my grandfather's reverence for produce, the sense that this was precious stuff and here it was, growing, for all purposes, on trees. I may have had no use for tomatoes and cucumbers, but the fact that adults did conferred value on them in my eyes. The vegetable garden in summer made an enchanted landscape, mined with hidden surprises, dabs of unexpected color and unlikely forms that my

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grandfather had taught me to regard as treasures. My favorite board game as a child was Candyland, in which throws of the dice advanced your man through a stupendous landscape of lollipop trees, milk-chocolate swamps, shrubs made of gumdrops. Candyland posited a version of nature that answered to a child's every wish—a landscape hospitable in the extreme, which is one definition of a garden—and my grandfather's vegetable patch in summer offered a fair copy of that paradise.

This was Grandpa's garden. If I could look at it and see Candyland, he probably saw Monopoly; in both our eyes, this was a landscape full of meaning, one that answered to wishes and somehow spoke in a human language. As a child I could always attend more closely to gardens than to forests, probably because forests contain so little of the human information that I craved then, and gardens so much. One of the things childhood is is a process of learning about the various paths that lead out of nature and into culture, and the garden contains many of these. I can't imagine a wilderness that would have had as much to say to me as Grandpa's garden did: the floral scents that intimated something about the ways of ladies as well as flowers, the peach tree that made legible the whole idea of fruit and seed, the vegetables that had so much to say about the getting of food and money, and the summer lawns that could not have better expressed the hospitality of nature to human habitation.

My parents' yard (you would not call it a garden) had a lot to say, too, but it wasn't until I was much older that I could appreciate this. Landscapes can carry a whole other set of meanings, having to do with social or even political questions, and these are usually beyond the ken of young children. My father's unmowed front lawn was a clear message to our neighbors and his father-in-law, but at the time I was too young to comprehend it fully. I understood our yard as a source of some friction between my parents, and I knew enough to be vaguely embarrassed by it. Conformity is something children seem to grasp almost instinctively, and the fact that our front yard was different from everybody else's made

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me feel our family was odd. I couldn't understand why my father couldn't be more like the other dads in the neighborhood.

One summer he let the lawn go altogether. The grasses grew tall enough to flower and set seed; the lawn rippled in the breeze like a flag. There was beauty here, I'm sure, but it was not visible in this context. Stuck in the middle of a row of tract houses on Long Island, the lawn said *turpitude* rather than *meadow,* even though that is strictly speaking what it had become. It also said, to the neighbors, *fuck you.*

A case could be made that the front lawn is the most characteristic institution of the American suburb, and my father's lack of respect for it probably expressed his general ambivalence about the suburban way of life. In the suburbs, the front lawn is, at least visually, a part of a collective landscape; while not exactly public land, it isn't entirely private either. In this it reflects one of the foundations of the suburban experiment, which Lewis Mumford once defined as "a collective effort to live a private life." The private part was simple enough: the suburban dream turns on the primacy of family life and private property; these being the two greatest goods in my father's moral universe, he was eager to sign up. But "owning your own home" turned out to be only half of it: a suburb is a place where you undertake to do this in concert with hundreds of other "like-minded" couples. Without reading the small print, my father had signed on for the whole middle-class utopian package, and there were heavy dues to pay.

The front lawn symbolized the collective face of suburbia, the backyard its private aspect. In the back, you could do pretty much whatever you wanted, but out front you had to take account of the community's wishes and its self-image. Fences and hedges were out of the question: they were considered antisocial, unmistakable symbols of alienation from the group. One lawn should flow unimpeded into another, obscuring the boundaries between homes and contributing to the sense of community. It was here in the front lawn that "like-mindedness" received its clearest expression. The conventional design of a suburban street is meant to forge the multitude of equal individual parcels of land

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into a single vista—a democratic landscape. To maintain your portion of this landscape was part of your civic duty. You voted each November, joined the PTA, and mowed the lawn every Saturday.

Of course the democratic system can cope with the nonvoter far more easily than the democratic landscape can cope with the nonmower. A single unmowed lawn ruins the whole effect, announcing to the world that all is not well here in utopia. My father couldn't have cared less. He owned the land; he could do whatever he wanted with it. As for the neighbors, he felt he owed them nothing. Ours was virtually the only Jewish family in a largely Catholic neighborhood, and with one or two exceptions, the neighbors had always treated us coolly. Why should he pretend to share their values? If they considered our lawn a dissent from the common will, that was a fair interpretation. And if it also happened to rankle his father-in-law, well, that only counted in its favor. (One should be careful, however, not to minimize the influence of laziness on my father's philosophy of lawn care.)

The summer he stopped mowing altogether, I felt the hot breath of a tyrannical majority for the first time. Nobody would say anything, but you heard it anyway: *Mow your lawn.* Cars would slow down as they drove by our house. Probably some of the drivers were merely curious: they saw the unmowed lawn and wondered if perhaps someone had left in a hurry, or died. But others drove by in a manner that was unmistakably expressive, slowing down as they drew near and then hitting the gas angrily as they passed—this was pithy driving, the sort of move that is second nature to a Klansman.

The message came by other media, too. George Hackett, our next-door neighbor and my father's only friend in the development, was charged by the neighbors with conveying the sense of the community to my father. George didn't necessarily hold with the majority on this question, but he was the only conceivable intermediary and he was susceptible to pressure. George was a small, somewhat timid man—he was probably the least intimidating adult in my world at the time—and I'm

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sure the others twisted his arm fairly hard before he agreed to do their bidding. It was early on a summer evening that he came by to deliver the message. I don't remember it all, but I can imagine him taking a drink from my mother, squeaking out what he had been deputized to say, and then waiting for my father—who next to George was a bear—to respond.

My father's reply could not have been more eloquent. He went to the garage and cranked up the rusty old Toro for the first time since spring; it is a miracle the thing started. He pushed it out to the curb and then started back across the lawn to the house, but not in a straight line; he swerved right, then left, then right again. He had made an *S* in the tall grass. Then he made an *M* and finally a *P*. These were his initials, and as soon as he finished writing them, he wheeled the lawn mower back to the garage, never to start it up again.

It wasn't long after this incident that we moved out of Farmingdale. The year was 1961, I was six, and my father was by now doing well enough to afford a house on the more affluent north shore, in a town called Woodbury. We bought one of the first houses in a new development called the Gates; the development was going in on the site of an old estate, and the builder had preserved the gigantic, wrought-iron entrance gates in order to lend the new neighborhood a bit of aristocratic tone.

To the builder goes the privilege of naming the streets in his development, and the common practice then was to follow a theme. Most neighborhoods had streets named for trees and flowers, but the Gates from the start pictured itself as a different kind of development—grander, more forward-looking—so it would have a different kind of street name. Alaska had recently been made the fiftieth state, and this developer, regarding himself perhaps as a pioneer or empire builder, decided to name all his streets after places there; our house was at the corner of Juneau Boulevard and Fairbanks Drive. (The word *street,* with its urban connota-

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tion, is not a part of the suburban vocabulary.) The incongruity of remote, frontierish place names attached to prissy "boulevards" and "drives" and "courts" never seemed to bother anybody.

With a new development, you chose your plot of land, one of the three available house types (ranch, colonial, or split-level), and then they built it for you. We chose a wooded acre (a vast tract compared to what we had in Farmingdale) that sloped down from Juneau Boulevard into a hollow. The topography afforded some privacy, but it meant that the floor of our basement was usually under several inches of water. As for house type, there could be no question: we always lived in ranch houses. There were two reasons for this. First, a ranch was the most "modern" kind of house, and my parents regarded themselves as modern. The second reason had to do with safety: my mother believed you simply did not raise children in a house with a staircase. You might as well invite the Long Island Rail Road to lay its tracks through your backyard.

After the contract had been signed, my father would drive my sister and me to Woodbury each weekend to follow the progress of our new house. We watched as the wooded acre was partially cleared and staked out by surveyors with tripods. My parents had chosen this plot because of its deep oak forest, and we tied ribbons to the trees we wanted saved, including a great big two-trunked oak that would stand outside our front door for the rest of my childhood. We felt like pioneers, watching as the woods gave way to bulldozers and a whole new landscape began to take shape. I remember being deeply impressed by what the heavy equipment could accomplish; who knew a forest could be turned into a yard, or a hill made to disappear? I'd never seen land change like this. The day they came to pour the foundation, my father gave us pennies to drop in the fresh concrete for good luck.

Though only twenty minutes away from Farmingdale, the Gates was a different world. Farmingdale was a blue-collar neighborhood, inhabited by electricians, engineers, and aerospace workers for whom a suburban home was the first and perhaps the only proof of membership in the American middle class. It may have been the tenuousness of our

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neighbors' grip on that identity that made them so touchy about lawns and Jews. The people who bought into the Gates, on the other hand, were the sons and daughters of the lower middle class, which in the fifties and sixties meant they were on their way to becoming quite affluent; they were lawyers and doctors and the owners of small businesses. This was a more confident class, and they sought a suburban home that would reflect their ascendancy and sophistication. Already in the early 1960s, the suburbs had acquired a reputation for conformity and squareness, and the Gates appealed to people who wanted to live in a suburb that didn't look like one. The streets were broad and, instead of being laid out in a tight grid, they curved in unpredictable ways. There was no practical reason for this, of course; the streets didn't curve *around* anything. They curved strictly to give an impression of ruralness and age. A sort of antisuburban suburban aesthetic ruled the development: the plots had been cut into irregular shapes, sidewalks had been eliminated, and roads ended in cul-de-sacs (these were the "courts").

Compared to Farmingdale, the landscaping in the Gates was wildly expressive. Not that the tyranny of the front lawn had been overturned. But even within that tight constraint, many families managed, in a phrase you were beginning to hear a lot, to do their own thing. Most of the landscaping styles were vaguely aristocratic, recalling the look of British country estates or, even more improbably, southern plantations. Circular driveways were very big. These broad crescents, scrupulously outlined in shrubbery, would curve right up to the front door. The planting served to emphasize the asphalt, which would be repainted each year with driveway sealer to restore its inky sheen. These driveways made a visitor feel he was driving up to a mansion rather than a split-level; you half expected someone in livery to open the car door for you. But the true purpose of the circular driveway was to provide a glittering setting for the family jewel, which was usually a Cadillac or Lincoln. Circular driveways make it socially acceptable to park your car right in the middle of the front yard where no one could possibly miss it.

The Rosenblums, a few doors up Juneau Boulevard from us, had

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two driveways, one on each side of the biggest, flattest, most pristine lawn in the development. Their aloof white colonial stood squarely in the middle of this vast green rectangle, framed by the two dead-straight black pavements. One driveway delivered family members to the garage and the other brought guests to a somewhat more formal entrance. The façade of the house was vaguely Greek Revival, but immense, with four ridiculous Doric columns and a giant wrought-iron chandelier hanging in the middle. It always reminded me of Tara. Just what kind of fantasy Mr. Rosenblum was working out here I have no idea, but I do remember he would get hopping mad whenever anyone used the wrong driveway.

It must have been obvious to my parents that the "S.M.P." approach to lawn care and gardening would not go over in the Gates. Fortunately, they could now afford to buy a fancy landscaping job and, even more important, a maintenance contract that would help keep my father on the right side of his new neighbors. It's important to understand that my parents were not indifferent to the landscape; even my father cared about his trees and shrubs. He simply didn't like lawns and preferred to deal with the rest of the garden at a remove, ideally through a window. But with money came a new approach to gardening, one that replaced laborious, direct involvement with the earth and plants with practices more to his liking: supervision, deal making, shopping, technological tinkering, negotiation. One must enlarge the definition of gardening a bit before his quasi-horticultural accomplishments can be fully appreciated. Perhaps the greatest of these involved the weeping birch that stood in the middle of our backyard in Farmingdale, forming what looked like a cascading green fountain. This somewhat rare specimen was my mother's favorite tree, and she wanted very badly to bring it with us to Woodbury. So as soon as the contract to sell the house in Farmingdale had been signed, but before the new owners moved in, my father arranged to have Walter Schikelhaus, my grandfather's landscape man, dig it out and truck it to Woodbury. But the tree was so distinctive, and occupied such a pivotal position in the backyard, that the new owners were bound to miss it. So my father had Walter plant in its place a weeping willow. Then he

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instructed Walter to paint the willow's bark white and carefully prune its branches to resemble a weeping birch. After mowing his initials in Farmingdale, this was perhaps my father's greatest achievement as a gardener, a strikingly original synthesis of topiary and fraud.

The man my parents hired to design, plant, and maintain our yard must have been a renegade among Long Island landscapers. Taking his cues from my father, he came up with a radical, low-maintenance design that included only a slender, curving ribbon of lawn. This narrow lane of sod wound an unpredictable path among every alternative to grass then known to landscaping: broad islands of shrubbery underplanted with pachysandra; flagstone patios; substantial wooded areas; and even a Japanese section paved in imported white pebbles. It was all very modern, and though it defied the conventions of suburban landscape design, it did so with taste. Overall, the front yard had far more ground cover than grass. Instead of foundation planting, most of the shrubs (rhododendron and azalea, in the main) were planted close to the street, forming a rough, irregular hedge that obscured the house. The retaining wall along the driveway was a terraced affair made out of railroad ties, which at the time were still a novelty in landscape design. (They weren't commercially available then, but my father arranged to buy them off trucks from LILCO and LIRR employees.) Much of the property was left wooded. And the Toro stayed behind, in Farmingdale. We may have been the only family on Long Island that didn't own a lawn mower.

Since my father's line on watering was more or less the same as his line on mowing, he decided to order a state-of-the-art sprinkler system. From his command post in the garage he would be able to monitor and water every corner of his acre, one zone at a time. An elaborate timer, working in conjunction with a device that judged the moisture content of the soil, was supposed to ensure that the grass and pachysandra enjoyed optimum conditions. But it soon became clear that the sprinkler man had taken my father for an expensive ride. We had hundreds more sprinkler heads than we could possibly need; every six feet another bronze mushroom poked out of the ground. And the system never worked properly.

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Often in the middle of the night, or during a rainstorm, the sprinkler heads would suddenly start hissing and spitting in unison, as if under the direction of some alien intelligence. From some heads the spray roared like Niagara, but most of them dribbled pathetically. My father would spend hours at a time in the garage, standing in his boxer shorts at the control panel, trying vainly to rein in the system's perversity.

From my point of view, my father's remote-controlled landscape was sorely lacking. Once the crew finished planting the shrubs and laying down the carpet of sod, there was nothing left to do but look at it. For all its banality, the conventional suburban landscape, like the suburbs themselves, was tailored to the needs of children. As a place to play, nothing surpasses a lawn. Beautiful as it was, my parents' yard, with its sliver of lawn and masses of shade trees, was inhospitable to children; it was a spectator's landscape, its picturesque views best appreciated indoors, in boxers. You certainly couldn't play in the pachysandra.

But what it lacked most was a garden. True, considered whole, it *was* a garden, but to my mind (as in the common American usage) a garden was a small plot of flowers or vegetables; everything else was a "yard." A yard was just a place; a garden was somehow more specific and, best of all as far as I was concerned, it was productive: it *did* something. I wanted something more like my grandfather's garden, a place where I could put my hands on the land and make it do things. I'd also been spending a lot of time watching workmen revolutionize the landscape all around me as they created this new development: every day, it seemed, forests turned into lawns, fresh black roads bisected the nearby farm fields, sumps were being dug, whole hills were *moving*. Everywhere you looked the landscape seemed to be in flux, and I was taken with the whole idea of reshaping earth. Meanwhile our own acre had suddenly fossilized. All you could do was go to the garage and fiddle with the sprinkler controls. I wanted to *dig*.

Most of our yard now came under the jurisdiction of the maintenance crews that showed up every Friday, but there were still a few corners that escaped their attention. The lawn never took in the backyard,

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along the narrow corridor between the house and the woods; no matter what blend of seed they tried, the shade eventually defeated the grass. When the landscapers finally gave up on this patch I was allowed to dig in it. Of course the shade precluded my planting a garden, but I had another idea: to give the property a badly needed body of water. I ran a hose underground from the house and constructed a watercourse: a streambed lined with stones that passed through a complex network of pools and culminated in a spectacular waterfall, at least eight inches tall. I spent whole afternoons observing the water as it inscribed new paths in the ground on its infinitely variable yet inevitable journey toward the woods. I was learning to think like water, a knack that would serve me well in the garden later on. I experimented with various stones to produce different sounds and motions, and no doubt wasted an obscene amount of water. Though I judged it a miniature landscape of extraordinary beauty, my water garden may have really been little more than a mud patch; I'm not sure.

When I tired of my water garden, I ripped it out and built a cemetery in its place. We had lots of pets, and they were constantly dying. Not just cats and dogs, but canaries and chicks, turtles and ducklings, gerbils and hamsters. Whenever one of these animals expired, my sisters and I would organize elaborate funerals. And if all our pets happened to be in good health, there were always roadkills in need of decent burial. After we interred the shoebox-caskets, we would rake and reseed the ground and plant another homemade wooden cross above the grave. I understood that crosses were for Christians. But a Star of David was beyond my carpentry skills, and anyway I was inclined to think of pets as gentiles. To a child growing up Jewish, the Other, in all its forms, was presumed to be Christian.

My usual partner in all these various landscaping endeavors was Jimmy Brancato, an uncannily hapless boy who lived down the street with his problematic parents. Mr. Brancato was a vaguely gangsterish character who owned a car wash in Hempstead, and who, it was rumored, had once spent time in jail in another state. Mrs. Brancato, who wore her

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bleach-blond hair in a monumental do and looked a lot like a gun moll, was a champion screamer and worrier. She was so steadfast in the conviction that her children were destined for trouble (jail in Jimmy's case; out-of-wedlock pregnancy in his sisters') that they must have gradually come to believe there could be no alternative. And sure enough, one of the daughters eventually did get knocked up and Jimmy had a serious run-in with the law.

But that came much later; at the time I'm writing about, Jimmy was nine or ten, merely on the cusp of delinquency. As you can imagine, we both preferred to hang out at my house. Jimmy loved my mother, probably for the simple reason that she didn't see prison stripes when she looked at him. And I was too terrified of Jimmy's parents to go near them voluntarily. I liked Jimmy because, compared to me, he was bold and fearless; he liked me because, compared to him, I had a brain. We made a good team.

We both liked to garden, though it's possible Jimmy was just following my lead here. I usually set the agenda, explaining to Jimmy where we were going to dig or what we were going to plant that day, citing my grandfather whenever I needed to bolster my authority. Our first garden, which we called a farm, was terraced: the railroad-tie retaining wall rose from the driveway in a series of four or five steps, each of which made a perfect garden bed. We'd plant strawberries on one level, watermelons on another, and on a third some cucumbers, eggplants, and peppers. But strawberries were by far our favorite crop. They had the drama of tomatoes (the brilliant red fruit), they came back every year by themselves (something we thought was very cool), *and* they were edible. Our goal, though, was to harvest enough strawberries to sell—this being a farm—and anytime we could get six or seven ripe ones at a time, we'd put them in a Dixie cup and sell them to my mother. Eventually we hoped to open a farm stand on Juneau Boulevard. Jimmy always worked like a dog. Even after I'd be called in for dinner, he'd stay out there digging and hoeing until his mother stuck her head out of their kitchen window and started hollering for him to come home.

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As much as he seemed to enjoy it, this form of gardening didn't fully satisfy Jimmy's taste for adventure; perhaps he sensed that it would be hard to realize his destiny in the vegetable patch (though in fact he eventually would find a way to do exactly that). Jimmy held a relatively broad concept of gardening, embracing as it did such unconventional practices as the harvesting of other people's crops in their absence. Bordering our development was a pumpkin field, and several times each fall Jimmy insisted I accompany him on a mission to steal as many pumpkins as we could pile in our wagons. Going along was the price I paid for Jimmy's help on the farm.

The pumpkin field in October was a weirdly beautiful place, with its vast web of green vines blanketing the gorgeous orange orbs for as far as you could see. Here was the vegetable sublime again, but now its experience was fraught with danger. I'd been taught that trespassing was a heinous crime, and the NO TRESPASSING sign we had to drag our wagons past choked me with fear. In the suburbs private property was such a sacrosanct institution that even young children felt its force. Jimmy claimed—probably just to scare me but you never knew for sure—that the farmers had rifles that fired bullets made of salt, and if they saw us they would be fully within their rights to shoot since *we were on their property*. These salt pellets were said to cause excruciating pain. (As if getting shot with steel bullets wouldn't have been bad enough.) We managed to get out alive every time, but I have to say I wasn't entirely disappointed the year the pumpkin field gave way to a new housing development.

After we'd arrived safely at home with our pumpkins (we'd always go to Jimmy's; my mother would have flipped out if we'd shown up with hot pumpkins), we'd divvy up the loot and then Jimmy would proceed methodically to smash his share. This was a pleasure I could not comprehend. But clearly the kick for Jimmy came in stealing the pumpkins, not owning them. Watching him get off bashing his pumpkins, you would think he'd been possessed. And the longer I knew him, the more I began to sense that he had an almost mystical attraction to trouble. One summer

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while my family was away on vacation, Jimmy was running some routine experiments with matches when he accidentally burned down most of the forest behind our house. All kids chucked snowballs at passing cars, but when Jimmy did it he would smash a windshield and then actually get caught. He wasn't a bad kid, not at all; it's just that he had some sort of tropism that bent him toward disaster as naturally as a plant bends toward sunlight.

Years after we had gone our separate ways, Jimmy figured out a way to combine what I'd taught him about gardening with his penchant for trouble. It must have been around 1970, when he was in the ninth grade, that Jimmy decided to start his own farm, one that might actually make some money. He planted a small field of marijuana. Jimmy had considered all the angles and went to great lengths to avoid detection. Growing pot on his parents' property was obviously out of the question, so he cleared a plot down by the Manor House, the abandoned mansion on whose grounds the Gates had been built. The developer had promised to turn the Manor House into a community center, but he had skipped town long ago and the place had devolved into a kind of no-man's-land, a gothic ruin surrounded by old refrigerators and derelict shopping carts. Brambles and sumac choked any spot not occupied by a stripped Impala, and clearing a patch for a garden must have been back-breaking work. Most of us didn't dare go near the Manor House during the day, let alone after dark. But each night, after midnight, Jimmy would slip out of his house, ride his bicycle down to the Manor House, and tend his precious crop by flashlight.

Getting caught wasn't going to be easy, but Jimmy managed to pull it off.

Shortly before Jimmy planned to begin his harvest, a neighborhood boy riding his bicycle around the Manor House happened upon his garden. Today, the leaf pattern and silhouette of a pot plant is as familiar as a maple's, but this was not yet the case in 1970. Unfortunately for Jimmy, this particular boy had recently attended an assembly at school where a policeman had shown the kids how to recognize marijuana. The

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boy raced home and told his mother what he'd seen and his mother called the police.

Jimmy had by now been in enough scrapes to be well known to the local police and I'm sure they immediately settled on him as a prime suspect. In the version of the story I heard, when the cops dropped by to question Jimmy and his mother, he kept cool, admitting nothing. Since they had no evidence linking Jimmy to the marijuana plants, that should have been the end of it. But the police had aroused Mrs. Brancato's suspicions and she decided to conduct a search of Jimmy's room.

Of the seven deadly sins, surely it is pride that most commonly afflicts the gardener. Jimmy was justly proud of his garden, and though he knew better than to invite anyone to visit it, he apparently couldn't resist taking a few snapshots of his eight-foot beauties in their prime. Mrs. Brancato found the incriminating photographs and, concluding it would be best for her son in the long run, turned them in to the police. No charges were brought, but Jimmy was packed off to military school, and I lost track of him.

My own gardening career remained well within the bounds of the law, if not always of propriety. Around the same time Jimmy was tending his plot down at the Manor House, I moved the farm from the cramped quarters of the retaining wall to a more spacious plot I had cajoled from my parents alongside the foundation of our house. This would be my last garden in the Gates. Even the most devoted young gardener will find that his interest fades around the time of high school, and soon mine did. But the summer before I got my driver's license I made my most ambitious garden yet. I persuaded my parents to buy me a few yards of topsoil, and in the space of a hundred square feet I crammed a dozen different crops: tomatoes (just then become edible), peppers, eggplants, strawberries, corn, squash, melons (watermelon and cantaloupe), string beans, peas. Everything but lettuce, which, since it bore no fruit, held not nearly enough drama for me. Why would anyone ever want to grow *leaves*?

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Years later when I read about European techniques of intensive agriculture, I realized this is what I had been doing without knowing it. I enriched the soil with bags of peat moss and manure, tilled it deeply, and then planted my seedlings virtually cheek-by-jowl. Since the bed was long and narrow, I decided to dispense with rows and planted most of the seedlings no more than six inches apart, in a pattern you would have to call free-form. Everything thrived: by August, my postage-stamp garden, haphazard though it was, was yielding bushels of produce.

Even my parents took note of this garden, marveling at the peppers and tomatoes I brought to the dinner table. But the person I really wanted to impress was my grandfather. By this point, my relationship with Grandpa was badly frayed. I wore my hair long and had grown a beard, and this deeply troubled him. By the time I turned fifteen, I could do nothing right by him, and visits to Babylon, which had held some of the sweetest hours of my childhood, had become an ordeal. From the moment I arrived, he would berate me about the beard, my studiously sloppy clothes, the braided leather bracelet I wore, and any other shred of evidence that I had become one of those despised *'ippies,* as he used to spit out the word. I figured that if there was one place where an elderly reactionary and an aspiring hippie could find a bit of common ground, it was in the vegetable garden. I had finally made a garden he'd be proud of, and when he and Grandma made one of their infrequent visits to our house that summer, I couldn't wait to take him around back and show him what I'd achieved.

But Grandpa never even saw the garden I had made. All he saw were weeds and disorder. You call this a garden? he barked. It's all too close together—your plants are going to choke each other out. And where are your rows? *There have to be rows.* This isn't a vegetable garden—what you've got here is a weed garden! The big red beefsteaks, the boxy green peppers, the watermelons now bigger than footballs: everything was invisible to him but the weeds. He looked at my garden and saw in it everything about me—indeed, everything about America in 1970—that he could not stand. He saw the collapse of order, disrespect for authority,

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laziness, the unchecked march of disreputable elements. He was acting like a jerk, it's true, but he was my grandfather, an old man in a bad time to be old, and when he got down on his knees and started furiously pulling weeds, I did feel ashamed.

So I guess you could say that Jimmy and I were expelled from our gardens at around the same time. But that would be too neat. For all I know, Jimmy today tends twenty acres of the finest sinse in Humboldt County. In my case, the arrival of my driver's license did more to push me out of the garden than my grandfather's intemperate attack on my technique. If gardening is an exploration of a place close to home, being a teenager is an exploration of mobility, and these two approaches to place, or home, are bound sooner or later to come into conflict. For at least a decade I probably didn't think once about plants or even notice a landscape. Eventually, though, I came back to the garden, which is probably how it usually goes. Much of gardening is a return, an effort at recovering remembered landscapes. I was lucky that when I took up gardening again my grandfather was still alive. He was over ninety by the time I had my own house, and he never did get to see it. But I would bring him pictures, carefully culled to give an impression of neatness and order, and, after examining them closely for evidence of weeds, he would pronounce his approval. By then, his own garden consisted of a half-dozen tomatoes planted by the back door of a small condominium. I would help him weed and harvest; he still grew enough beefsteaks to give a few away. He would ask me to describe my garden, and I would, choosing my words with care, painting a picture of a place that he would find hospitable. The garden I described was largely imaginary, combining elements of my actual garden with memories of Babylon and the kind of pictures that I suppose are common to every gardener's dreams. It was one of those places that is neither exactly in the past nor in the future, but that anyone who gardens is ever moving toward. It was somewhere we could still travel to together. On one of my last visits to see him, he told me I could

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have his Dutch hoe, declaring it was the best tool for weeding he had ever found. Grandpa was ninety-six, three times my age exactly, and though his step by then was uncertain, he took me outside and showed me how to use it.

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Spring

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CHAPTER 2

Nature Abhors a Garden

When I finally did come back to the garden, I was coming from the city and brought many of the city man's easy ideas about the landscape and its inhabitants. One of these had to do with the problem of pests in the garden, about which I carried the usual set of liberal views. To nuke a garden with insecticide, to level a rifle sight at the back of a woodchuck in flatfooted retreat, to erect an electric barricade around a vegetable patch: such measures, I felt, were excessive, even irresponsible. I took nature's fragility for granted, and the idea of crushing local opposition to my plans for the land simply by dint of superior firepower seemed reckless and unjust, an act of environmental imperialism. Besides, wildlife was one of the attractions of the country; the deer, foxes, porcupines, and woodchucks were what told you you were there. These animals had arrived long before the gardener, so who was the interloper here? And what was gardening about if not working out a more harmonious relationship with nature?

One of gardening's virtues is to clear the mind of easy sentiments about nature in general, and its fauna in particular. The first challenge to one's romance of animals comes in April, after you've broken your back turning the soil, humped bales of peat moss and bags of manure from the car trunk to the garden, dug these in by pitchfork, and then laid out in scrupulous rows the seedlings of early crops—lettuce, broccoli, cab-

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bage. Do all that, kill an afternoon, and see how you feel the next morning when this orderly parade ground of seedlings has been mowed down by a woodchuck out snacking.

First you will feel frustration, at the waste of time, effort, and cash. Then a sense of persecution: with all the millions of tender shoots pushing up across the countryside this time of year, why have these animals chosen to dine at this particular plot? Now consider the forlorn appearance of the mowed-down rows, each seedling neatly snipped off a half inch above the ground, as if by someone with a pair of scissors and all the time in the world. This is what indicates a woodchuck is responsible. They devour a crop systematically, whereas a doe—nervous, and possessing perhaps a more developed sense of shame—will nibble a plant here, snip a shoot there, and then, startled by a falling leaf or something equally perilous to a two-hundred-pound mammal, dash off before her meal is done. The woodchuck, meanwhile, approaches the garden as if it were a spread laid out expressly for him; he regards your plants less as a thief might than a relative. He does not worry that his repast could be interrupted, and he fully intends to return tomorrow for seconds.

And the gardener will oblige, immediately replanting the mowed-down rows. For he is not about to fold his garden in the face of this lower-order impertinence. A rodent whose brain could fit in a thimble might win a battle or two, but finally the war must go to the larger brain. All of natural history is on the gardener's side. What is our species doing on this planet if not winning precisely this kind of contest?

At least that's how I saw matters the first time I woke to the evidence of a predawn April raid on my freshly planted vegetable garden. I assessed the damage, sized up my adversary, and decided that the wisest course of action was to take the battle to the woodchuck's own territory. I went looking for his burrow.

My vegetable garden is laid out on a small, flat lawn that ends, to the north, at the base of a small slope. The slope is overgrown with vetch, a tangle of blackberry briars, and a couple of Russian olive bushes—perfect cover, in other words, for a woodchuck burrow, and not five

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chuck-sized paces from the nearest garden row. Woodchucks, being both nearsighted and slow of foot, prefer to set up house as close to their favorite dining spot as prudence will allow. I whacked at the brush with a machete and there it was: a large ugly mouth set into the hillside with a pile of freshly dug soil arranged beneath it like a fat bottom lip. The woodchuck was not only visiting my garden, he had moved in for the season.

This called for a program of behavior modification. I gathered a half dozen fist-size rocks and squeezed them into the hole. Then I mounded a few shovelfuls of earth on top and stomped on it a few times to jam the rock and earth as far down into the tunnel as possible. This ought to persuade him to dine elsewhere, I decided, with all the confidence of someone who understood not the first thing about woodchucks.

The very next day the hole had yawned open and spit out the rocks and the soil. No doubt hungry from the work of excavation, the woodchuck had emerged from his burrow to sample a fresh planting of lettuce seedlings.

The reader might reasonably wonder at this point why it was that I had no fence. I was asked this question several times after the woodchuck struck and never came up with an entirely satisfactory answer. I could offer a few trivial explanations, having to do with economy and competence. But I suspect my reluctance to put up a fence was a more visceral matter. Fences just didn't accord with my view of gardening. A garden should be continuous with the natural landscape, I felt, in harmony with its surroundings. The idea that a garden might actually require *protection* from nature seemed absurd. Somewhere along the line I had been convinced that a fence bespoke disharmony, even alienation, from nature.

I suspect I had also absorbed the traditional American view that fences were Old World, out of place in the American landscape. This notion turns up repeatedly in nineteenth-century American writing about the landscape. One author after another denounces "the Englishman's

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insultingly inhospitable brick wall, topped with broken bottles." Frank J. Scott, an early landscape architect who had a large impact on the look of America's first suburbs, worked tirelessly to rid the landscape of fences, which he derided as a feudal holdover from Britain. Writing in 1870, he held that "to narrow our own or our neighbor's views of the free graces of Nature" was selfish and undemocratic. To drive through virtually any American suburb today, where every lawn steps right up to the street in a gesture of openness and welcome, is to see how completely such views have triumphed. After a visit to the United States, Vita Sackville-West decided that "Americans must be far more brotherly-hearted than we are, for they do not seem to mind being over-looked. They have no sense of private enclosure."

In a typical American suburb such as the one where I grew up, a fence or hedge along the street meant one thing: the family who lived behind it was antisocial, perhaps even had something to hide. Fences and hedges said: Ogres within; skip this place on Halloween. Except for these few dubious addresses, each little plot in our development was landscaped like a miniature estate, the puniest "expanse" of unhedged lawn made to look like a public park. I don't know about "brotherly-heartedness," though. Any enjoyment of this space was sacrificed to the conceit of wide-open land, for without a fence or hedge, front yards were much too public to spend time in. Families crammed their activities into microscopic backyards, the one place where the usefulness of fences and hedges seemed to outweigh their undemocratic connotations.

But the American prejudice against fences predates the suburban development. Fences have always seemed to us somehow un-American. Europeans built walled gardens; Americans from the start distrusted the *hortus conclusus.* If the space within the wall was a garden, then what was that outside the wall? To the Puritans the whole American landscape was a promised land, a sacred space, and to draw lines around sections of it was to throw this paramount idea into question. When Anne Bradstreet, the Massachusetts colony's first poet, set about writing a traditional English garden ode, she tore down the conventional garden wall—or (it

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comes to the same thing) made it capacious enough to take in the whole of America. The Puritans had not crossed the Atlantic to redeem some small, walled plot of land; that they could have done in England. They, or rather God acting through them, had plans for all of it.

The transcendentalists, too, considered the American landscape "God's second book" and they taught us to read it for moral instruction. Residues of this idea persist, of course; we still regard and write about nature with high moral purpose (and, almost as often as it did in the nineteenth century, the approach produces a great deal of pious prose). And though in our own nature writing guilt seems to have taken the rhetorical place of nineteenth-century ecstasy, the essential religiosity remains. We may no longer spell it out, but most of us still believe the landscape is somehow sacred, and to meddle with it sacrilegious. And to set up hierarchies within it—to set off a garden from the surrounding countryside—well, that makes no sense at all.

Once you accept the landscape as a moral and spiritual space, ornamental gardening becomes problematic. For how can one presume to remake God's landscape? It is one thing to cultivate the earth for our sustenance—the Bible speaks of that—but to do so for aesthetic reasons has until very recently struck Americans as frivolous, or worse. Allen Lacy reports that, in combing American garden writing for his recent anthology (*The American Gardener,* which is the source of many of the historical quotations in this chapter), he found no discussion before 1894 of color or fragrance. We gardened for a variety of reasons—moral, spiritual, therapeutic, and economic—but aesthetic pleasure was not one of them. Even when we make pleasure gardens today, we do our best to hide the hand of the artist, avoiding anything that looks designed or artificial. We favor gardens that resemble natural landscapes, and that leaves little room for fences.

Long before I had read much about American approaches to the landscape, I unwittingly made a perennial border beholden to these ideas. The border runs beneath an old stone retaining wall along a narrow lawn that draws the eye away from the house and back toward a small pasture

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and a wood beyond that. I tried to design the border so that it wouldn't have a distinct beginning or end. As it moves back in space, the plants get rougher and bigger. The aristocratic refinements of delphinium, baby's breath, campanula, and lady's mantle gradually give way to day lilies, a sloppy drift of evening primrose, an ill-mannered six-foot-tall clump of rudbeckia and, finally, to proletarian purple loosestrife, a weedy plant that grows wild around here. From the house you cannot pinpoint where the border ends and the natural landscape resumes. If I wanted to put a fence around this garden, where would it go? A fence could only wreck this garden.

But so, it turns out, can woodchucks, deer, and meadow grasses. My early efforts at harmonious design were lost on the surrounding landscape, whose inhabitants promptly sought to take advantage of my naïve romanticism. The deer relished the young shoots of day lilies and delphinium. Woodchucks judged the loosestrife an ideal cover for a burrow exit. And the grasses from the meadow soon exposed the so-called hardy perennials as pushovers. Instead of the flower border pushing back toward the meadow, the meadow pushed forward toward the house and it met scant local resistance. Without my intervention, the border would not have survived its first season.

Under this many-fronted assault, it did not take long for most of my easy, liberal attitudes toward the landscape to fall. I soon came to understand the distance between the naturalist, who gazes benignly on all of nature's operations, and the experienced gardener, who perforce has developed a somewhat less sentimental view. Particularly toward woodchucks. I am not ready to see them banished from the planet altogether—surely they serve *some* ecological purpose—but I seriously doubt that news of some form of woodchuck megadeath in this part of the country would put me in an elegiac frame of mind.

But in giving up my romantic views of the local fauna, I may have gone overboard in the opposite direction. I tried everything I could think

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of to eliminate my woodchuck, in an escalating series of measures only a William Westmoreland could have completely understood. I started out with elaborately planned campaigns of behavior modification—my "send in a few advisers" phase, in which I confidently deployed the accumulated wisdom of Western civilization. I had done my research and discovered that woodchucks were scrupulous about personal hygiene. They set aside a room in their burrow to serve as a latrine. And they hate to dirty the fur on their bellies. Confident I had located my adversary's Achilles' heel, I introduced a few carefully selected substances into his tunnel: a dozen eggs, smashed and dribbled down its sides. A pint jar of molasses. Half a can of motor oil. A dead field mouse. And, lastly, a quart of creosote, vile stuff so sticky the woodchuck would need to have the fur on his belly steam-cleaned.

When this didn't work—evidently my woodchuck lacked his species' Felix Unger gene—I found myself attracted to less cerebral approaches. It's astonishing, actually, how much anger an animal's assault on your garden can incite. It was not as if I were liable to go hungry as a result of his depredations, after all. No, this was no longer merely a question of vegetables or even self-interest. This was about winning.

A rifle was out of the question; I've always been terrified of guns, and have never owned one. But I came up with something equally unsentimental: I found a somewhat flattened woodchuck along the highway, scooped it into a crate and brought it home. Then I jammed the carcass as far into the burrow as it would go. This was an act of terrorism, I admit. But either my woodchuck did not grasp its significance, or he chose to disregard it, because in two days' time, he had dug a detour around the corpse and the pillaging resumed.

I decided now to incinerate the woodchuck in his burrow. I had seen an item on the news concerning cabin fires aboard jetliners. In order to test a new, supposedly less combustible fuel, the FAA had simulated a cabin fire, and the footage they showed of fire racing wildly through the narrow enclosed space gave me an idea of exactly the sort of end the woodchuck deserved.

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Take a moment to picture it.

So I poured maybe a gallon of gasoline down the burrow, waited a few minutes for it to fan out along the various passageways, and lit a match.

Evidently there was not much oxygen down there, because the flames shot in the wrong direction, up toward my face. I leapt back before I was singed too badly, and watched a black-orange fountain of flame flare out from the earth and reach for the overhanging olive bush. I managed to smother the fire with earth before the entire garden went up.

I guess this was my destroy-the-village-in-order-to-save-it phase.

Well, if fences are out of place in the American garden, where exactly do gasoline fires fit in? Fortunately, my brush with general conflagration among the vegetables shocked me out of my Vietnam approach to garden pests before I'd had a chance to defoliate my property or poison the ground water. But my fury at the woodchuck put me in touch with a few of our darker attitudes toward nature: the way her intransigence can make us crazy, and how willing we are to poison her in the single-minded pursuit of some short-term objective. You think you know better until you've been beset by cabbage worms or aphids and then seen just how fast a shot of some state-of-the-art petrochemical can wipe them out. But after the firefight I resolved to keep my head and think more in terms of containment than victory.

I also began to see that there might be more going on here than a cartoonish war between me and a woodchuck: big creature thwarted again and again by wily little creature; numerous laughs at big creature's expense. The cartoon was part of the story, but not all of it.

I realized this during a long walk one spring afternoon in the woods near my house. Most of the land around here is postagricultural hardwood forest; the farms were abandoned starting around the turn of the century, and the forest has made quick work of reclaiming large parts of

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the countryside. You might think the oak forest was primordial if not for the stone walls and other lingering signs of onetime cultivation: wolf trees (specimens with broad crowns, indicating they matured in open, uncompetitive spaces); the conspicuous blossom of a leggy old apple tree in May; even faint plow furrows still visible in the snow cover. But on this particular walk I found an even ghostlier set of signs. Following an old logging trail, I came to an area that seemed somehow more ordered than the surrounding woods. On both sides of the trail stood stone walls—linear piles, really—marking small rectangular enclosures among the trees. Within each square was a rectangular pit lined with rocks: the foundation of a small house.

I had stumbled upon Dudleytown, an abandoned nineteenth-century settlement that I'd often heard was nearby but had never been able to locate. Traces of former habitation were everywhere, like shadows on the landscape, even though the forest had completely colonized the area. Oaks, hickories, ash, and sycamores had spread out evenly over the village like a blanket, rising up in the former yards and fields and even in the middle of the cellar pits, jutting heedlessly through spaces that once had been organized into kitchens and bedrooms, warm spaces that had vibrated with human sounds.

If you blotted the trees from your sight and followed the contours of the land, you could make out the organization of the village. Houses lined a main street. The stone walls delineated each family's yard; in some stood gnarled apple trees on their last legs, starved for sunlight by the new forest canopy. Lilacs and clumps of day lily survived here and there, along with deep green patches of myrtle: the remnants of dooryard gardens that the forest had failed to vanquish. Some yards opened onto what must have been fields or pastures. Stone walls that had once marked legal boundaries and kept cows from straying threaded arbitrary paths through the trees, accomplishing nothing.

It is a spooky place. I'm not talking only about the ghostliness of abandoned settlement, or the weight of the past one often feels among

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ruins. What makes Dudleytown spooky is the evident speed and force and thoroughness with which the forest has obliterated the place. In the space of a few decades it has erased virtually every human mark.

To the gardener in me, Dudleytown assumed a spectral presence. Every weed I pulled, every blade of grass I mowed, each beetle I crushed—all now was done to slow its advance. Dudleytown made me see that the woodchuck was no free-agent pest, snacking strictly on his own account. He was part of a larger, more insidious threat: he labored on behalf of the advancing forest. Not only the animals, but the insects, the weeds, even the fungi and bacteria, were working together to erase my garden—and after that my lawn, my driveway, my patio, even my house. Does this sound a little paranoid? Perhaps it is, but my experience in the garden has taught me that nature seems to resent our presence here. She deploys a variety of agents, different depending on where you live, to undo our work in the garden. To what end? That also depends on where you live, but now I knew her local aim: Dudleytown.

The forest, I now understood, is "normal"; everything else—the fields and meadows, the lawns and pavements and, most spectacularly, the gardens—is a disturbance, a kind of ecological vacuum which nature will not abide for long. If it sometimes seems as if she has singled out the garden for special attention, that's because the "vacuum" here is greatest. Here the soil is richest and most frequently disturbed: what softer, sweeter, more hospitable bed could an airborne weed seed ever find to lie down in? The annual weeds, first to colonize a neglected garden, come this way, around here mostly ragweed, pigweed, touch-me-not, and smartweed. But the perennial weeds—the goldenrod, pokeweed, milkweed, and bindweed—can creep into your beds otherwise, often dispatching rhizomes underground, sometimes as far as fifty feet, in search of sweet soil. Others don't even have to find your garden: thousands of weed seeds lie dormant in every cubic foot of soil, patiently waiting for just the right combination of light and moisture before setting on your plants.

And garden plants are sitting ducks. Just as cultivated soil constitutes a kind of vacuum in the environment, so do most of the plants we choose

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to grow in it. What distinguishes cultivated fruits and vegetables is that they contain carbohydrates, proteins, and fats in greater concentrations than most wild plants. They stick out in the natural landscape like rich kids in a tough neighborhood. This is where the animals come in. The woodchucks, deer, and raccoons are the flora's great levelers, making sure there are no undue concentrations of nutritional wealth in the landscape; they'd consider themselves democrats if they considered at all. They want to redistribute my protein. But if their politics appeals to your egalitarianism, keep in mind that their tactics are not those of the social democrat.

Should the vertebrates fail to intimidate me into ceding my garden to the forest, a dozen different insect species, each with its own distinctive preferences, tactics, and disguises, will march on my plants in a series of waves beginning in April and not relenting till frost. First the cutworms, who saw off the seedlings at ground level. Then the aphids, specs of pale green that cluster on the undersides of leaves, sucking the vital fluids from young plants until they turn a last-gasp yellow. Next come the loathsome slugs: naked bullets of flesh—evicted snails—that hide from the light of day, emerging at sunset to cruise the garden along their own avenues of slime. The cabbage loopers are the paratroopers of the vegetable patch: their eggs are dropped on the cole crops by troop transports disguised as innocuous white butterflies. Last to arrive is the vast and far-flung beetle family—Colorado potato beetles, blister beetles, flea beetles, bean leaf beetles, cucumber beetles, Japanese beetles, Mexican bean beetles—who mount a massive airborne invasion beginning in midsummer.

Like the vertebrates, this exoskeletal mob is drawn by the nutritional extravagance of the vegetable garden, as well as by the fact that most garden plants are, let's face it, nature's weaklings. We breed garden plants primarily for qualities that appeal to us, not ones that might help ensure their survival. And the characteristics that most appeal to us—doubleness in flower blossoms, slowness to bolt in lettuce—are about as helpful in battle as designer fatigues. ("Disease resistance" is an afterthought, and usually a case of too little, too late.) Rather than school them in the martial arts, we enter into a tacit pact with our plants: in exchange for

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their beauty and utility, we shield them from the horrors of Darwinian struggle.

So don't lecture me about harmony in the garden. Or about the continuity of gardens and the natural landscape. The forest is so vigorous around here, and so well served by its advance guard of animals and bugs and weeds, that a single season of neglect would blast my garden back to meadow, and a decade would find the forest licking at my front stoop, while that dark conspiracy of microorganisms we call rot goes to work on the house itself. In fifty years: Dudleytown. A cellar pit with a sycamore rising through it.

What was the right approach to pests in the garden? How could I halt the advance of Dudleytown without turning my garden into a toxic waste site? I was beginning now to see that these questions quickly led to larger ones about how we choose to confront the natural landscape. Domination or acquiescence? As developers or naturalists? I no longer think the choice is so obvious.

Domination, translated into suburban or rural terms, means lawn. A few acres of Kentucky bluegrass arranged in a buffer zone between house and landscape, a no-man's-land patrolled weekly with a rotary blade. The lawn holds great appeal, especially to Americans. It looks sort of natural—it's green; it grows—but in fact it represents a subjugation of the forest as utter and complete as a parking lot. Every species is forcibly excluded from the landscape but one, and this is forbidden to grow longer than the owner's little finger. A lawn is nature under totalitarian rule.

On the other side is acquiescence: the benign gaze of the naturalist. Certainly his ethic sounds nice and responsible, but have you ever noticed that the naturalist never tells you where he lives? Unless you live in the city or a tent, the benign gaze is totally impractical—sooner or later it leads to Dudleytown.

The trick, I realize now, is somehow to find a middle ground

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between these two positions. And that is what a garden is, or should be: a midspace between Dudleytown and the parking lot, a place that admits of both nature and human habitation. But it is not, as I had imagined, a harmonious compromise between the two, nor is it stable; from what I can see, it requires continual human intervention or else it will collapse. The question for the gardener—and in a way it's a question for all of us—is, What is the proper character of that intervention?

Even my limited experience in the garden suggests that finding a good answer to that question will involve a much more complicated set of choices than the usual American alternatives, which seem to consist of either raping the land or sealing it away in a preserve where no one can touch it. That the first approach is bankrupt goes without saying. Yet, right as it sounds, the second one may be a dead end too. Gardening quickly teaches you to distrust all such absolutes, to frame the questions a little differently. Must we *always* shrink before our own power in nature? We are one of only a handful of creatures with the capacity to deliberately alter our environment. To simply renounce that power—isn't that in some sense to renounce our humanity? *Our* nature? And is that nature any less real than the nature we seem to think exists only *out there?* The poet and critic Frederick Turner, in a *Harper's Magazine* essay that seeks to break us of our habit of seeing nature and culture as opposed, asks why it is we can't see ourselves, and what we make and do, as part and parcel of nature. He cites the reply of Shakespeare's Polixenes, in *The Winter's Tale,* to Perdita, who spurns the hybridized flower because it is "unnatural": "This is an art/Which does mend Nature—change it rather; but/The art itself is nature."

For the gardener, breaking free of the notion that art always negates nature is liberating. Fresh aesthetic prospects open up, of course, but more to the point, a promising strategy against pests can begin to take shape. For starters, one can now reexamine the American taboo against fences. Fences may offend American ideas about democracy, limitlessness, and the landscape's sanctity, but perhaps we need to consider the possibility that their absence offends the idea of a garden. For most of history people

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have been making gardens and most of their gardens have been walled or fenced. The word *garden* derives from the old German word for enclosure, and the *O.E.D.*'s definition begins, "An enclosed piece of ground. . . ." (Compare that to *Webster's,* which makes no mention of the idea of enclosure.) Writing in 1914, George Washington Cable pointed out that "a gard, yard, garth, garden, used to mean an enclosure, a close, and implied a privacy to its owner superior to any he enjoyed outside of it. . . . Our public spirit and our imperturbability are flattered by [fencelessness], but our gardens . . . have become American by ceasing to be gardens." The long history of gardens, which traverses so many very different cultures, suggests that perhaps there is something natural about erecting a wall against the landscape on one side and society's gaze on the other. We number the beaver dam among nature's creations; why not also the garden wall?

The time had come for me to put up a fence. I went with five feet of galvanized steel mesh stretched across posts that had been treated with arsenic to resist rot and then sunk three feet into the earth. The bottom edge of the fence runs a foot underground, to deter the tunnelers. It doesn't look at all bad, and even though the wire mesh is invisible at a distance, when I close the garden gate behind me I feel as though I've entered a privileged space.

But much more important is the fact that, so far, the woodchuck respects the fence; the cabbages have reached softball size unmolested. The woodchuck doesn't appear to have abandoned his burrow, however, and I picture him jealously pacing the garden perimeter at dawn, scheming, looking for an angle. I remain on alert.

Now four feet of fence won't impede a doe with snap beans on her mind, but I can take care of her, too. Six inches above the top of the fence, I'll string a wire that pulses every three seconds with a hundred volts of electric current. I've been told to smear the wire with peanut butter in order to introduce the deer to the unprecedented and memorable sensation

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of electric shock, after which they should be gone for good. The electricity will run off a solar panel that sits atop one of the posts, reaching toward the sun like some gigantic high-tech blossom. This last touch strikes me as a nice bit of jujitsu, turning nature's power against a few of her own.

Intervening against the insects is not quite so straightforward, but here too there may be an art that "itself is nature." The key to eliminating an insect from the garden is knowledge: about its habits, preferences, and vulnerabilities. Most chemical pesticides represent a very crude form of knowledge about insects: that, for example, a powerful chemical such as malathion somehow cripples the nervous systems of most organisms, so a little of the stuff should kill bugs but not (presumably) any bigger creatures. Even though this knowledge has been produced by Homo sapiens wearing lab coats, it is not nearly as sophisticated or precise as the knowledge a ladybug, say, possesses on the subject of aphids. The ladybug is not smart, but she knows one thing exceedingly well: how to catch forty or fifty aphids every day without hurting anybody else. If you think of evolution as a three-and-a-half-billion-year-long laboratory experiment, and the gene pool as the store of information accumulated during the course of that experiment, you begin to appreciate that nature has far more extensive knowledge about her operations than we do. The trick is to put her knowledge to our purpose in the garden.

So far, the only way to harness the ladybug gene for aphid capture is by obtaining whole ladybugs, and this can be done through the mail. For about $5 you can order 4,500 ladybugs from a company that specializes in "biological controls." The ladybugs come in a drawstring pouch that can be kept in the refrigerator; spoon out the bugs onto the leaves of infested plants as needed. This particular firm also sells praying mantis egg cases, which can be sewn onto a tree branch near the garden; when the weather warms in spring the nymphs emerge to take up stations on the upper leaves of your plants. Their patience and stillness are extraordinary, as are their reflexes: a praying mantis can snatch most any flying insect right out of the air.

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Not all of the biological controls on the market are insects; some are forms of bacteria. One of them—milky spore—supposedly will solve three pest problems at once: grubs, Japanese beetles, and moles. Grubs are the white, wormy-looking larvae of Japanese beetles. They spend the winter and spring underground, where they chew on the roots of grass, leaving dead spots in the lawn. That would be bad enough, but it happens that moles like to dine on these grubs and they ruin lawns tunneling in pursuit of them. The grubs that get away emerge in July as Japanese beetles, scourge of a great many garden plants; the beetles, which were inadvertently introduced into this country several decades ago, can transform a healthy rosebush into a lacy green frame in a matter of days. Milky spore is a bacterial parasite that knows how to infect one insect at one time in its life: the Japanese beetle at the larval stage. The spores, which come in both powdered or granulated forms, should be sprinkled on the lawn in late spring. The grubs will eventually ingest them and die, the moles will go elsewhere in search of grubs, and the Japanese beetles should never appear. According to the catalog, one treatment will last fifteen years.

Biological controls won't solve every pest problem—there are still too few of them, for one thing. But the approach holds promise, and suggests what can be accomplished when we learn to exploit nature's self-knowledge, and stop thinking of our art and technology as being necessarily opposed to nature. For how are we to categorize milky spore disease as a form of human intervention in the landscape? Is it technological, or natural? The categories are no longer much help, at least in the garden.

I won't know for a while whether I've completely solved my pest problem. But, puttering in my newly fenced garden, watching the mantises standing sentry on the tops of my tomatoes and the ladybugs running search-and-destroy missions among the eggplants, I'm starting to feel a lot more relaxed about it. Though Dudleytown remains over the next hill, I know I can stall its advance as long as I continue to put my thought and sweat into this patch of land. I still have much to learn, and there

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are going to be setbacks, I'm sure; gardening is not a once-and-for-all thing. Yet I think I've drawn a workable border between me and the forest. Might it prove to be a Maginot Line? That's possible, but I think unlikely. Because it doesn't depend on technological invincibility. Nor does it depend on the benignity of nature. It depends on me acting like a sane and civilized human, which is to say, as a creature whose nature it is to remake his surroundings, and whose culture can guide him on questions of aesthetics and ethics. What I'm making here is a middle ground between nature and culture, a place that is at once of nature and unapologetically set against it; what I'm making is a garden.

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CHAPTER 3

Why Mow?

No lawn is an island, at least in America. Starting at my front stoop, this scruffy green carpet tumbles down a hill and leaps across a one-lane road into my neighbor's yard. From there it skips over some wooded patches and stone walls before finding its way across a dozen other unfenced properties that lead down into the Housatonic Valley, there to begin its march south toward the metropolitan area. Once below Danbury, the lawn—now purged of weeds and meticulously coiffed—races up and down the suburban lanes, heedless of property lines. It then heads west, crossing the New York border; moving now at a more stately pace, it strolls beneath the maples of Larchmont, unfurls across a dozen golf courses, and wraps itself around the pale blue pools of Scarsdale before pressing on toward the Hudson. New Jersey next is covered, an emerald postage stamp laid down front and back of ten thousand split-levels, before the broadening green river divides in two. One tributary pushes south, striding across the receptive hills of Virginia and Kentucky but refusing to pause until it has colonized the thin, sandy soils of Florida. The other branch dilates and spreads west, easily overtaking the Midwest's vast grid before running up against the inhospitable western states. But neither obdurate soil nor climate will impede the lawn's march to the Pacific: it vaults the Rockies and, abetted by a monumental irrigation network, proceeds to green great stretches of western desert.

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Nowhere in the world are lawns as prized as in America. In little more than a century, we've rolled a green mantle of it across the continent, with scant thought to the local conditions or expense. America has some 50,000 square *miles* of lawn under cultivation, on which we spend an estimated $30 billion a year—this according to the Lawn Institute, a Pleasant Hill, Tennessee, outfit devoted to publicizing the benefits of turf to Americans (surely a case of preaching to the converted). Like the interstate highway system, like fast-food chains, like television, the lawn has served to unify the American landscape; it is what makes the suburbs of Cleveland and Tucson, the streets of Eugene and Tampa, look more alike than not. According to Ann Leighton, the late historian of gardens, America has made essentially one important contribution to world garden design: the custom of "uniting the front lawns of however many houses there may be on both sides of a street to present an untroubled aspect of expansive green to the passerby." France has its formal, geometric gardens, England its picturesque parks, and America this unbounded democratic river of manicured lawn along which we array our houses.

To stand in the way of such a powerful current is not easily done. Since we have traditionally eschewed fences and hedges in America, the suburban vista can be marred by the negligence—or dissent—of a single property owner. This is why lawn care is regarded as such an important civic responsibility in the suburbs, and why, as I learned as a child, the majority will not tolerate the laggard or dissident. My father's experience with his neighbors in Farmingdale was not unique. Every few years a controversy erupts in some suburban community over the failure of a homeowner to mow his lawn. Not long ago, a couple that had moved to a $440,000 home in Potomac, Maryland, got behind in their lawn care and promptly found themselves pariahs in their new community. A note from a neighbor, anonymous and scrawled vigilante-style, appeared in their mailbox: *"Please, cut your lawn.* It is a disgrace to the entire neighborhood." That subtle yet unmistakable frontier, where the crew-cut lawn rubs up against the shaggy one, is enough to disturb the peace of

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an entire neighborhood; it is a scar on the face of suburbia, an intolerable hint of trouble in paradise.

That same scar shows up in *The Great Gatsby,* when Nick Carraway rents the house next to Gatsby's and fails to maintain his lawn according to West Egg standards. The rift between the two lawns so troubles Gatsby that he dispatches his gardener to mow Nick's grass and thereby erase it. The neighbors in Potomac displayed somewhat less savoir faire. Some offered to lend the couple a lawn mower. Others complained to county authorities, until the offenders were hauled into court for violating a local ordinance under which any weed more than twelve inches tall is presumed to be "a menace to public health." Evidently, dubious laws of this kind are on the books in hundreds of American municipalities. In a suburb of Buffalo, New York, there lives a Thoreau scholar who has spent the last several years in court defending his right to grow a wildflower meadow in his front yard. After neighbors took it upon themselves to mow down the offending meadow, he erected a sign that said: "This yard is not an example of sloth. It is a natural yard, growing the way God intended." Citing an ordinance prohibiting "noxious weeds," a local judge ordered the Buffalo man to cut his lawn or face a fine of $50 a day. The Thoreau scholar defied the court order and, when last heard from, his act of suburban civil disobedience had cost him more than $25,000 in fines.

I wasn't prepared to take such a hard line on my own new lawn, at least not right off. So I bought a lawn mower, a Toro, and started mowing. Four hours every Saturday. At first I tried for a kind of Zen approach, clearing my mind of everything but the task at hand, immersing myself in the lawn-mowing here and now. I liked the idea that my weekly sessions with the grass would acquaint me with the minutest details of my yard. I soon knew by heart the precise location of every stump and stone, the tunnel route of each resident mole, the exact address of every anthill. I noticed that where rain collected white clover flourished, that

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it was on the drier rises that crabgrass thrived. After a few weekends I had in my head a map of the lawn that was as precise and comprehensive as the mental map one has to the back of his hand.

The finished product pleased me too, the fine scent and the sense of order restored that a new-cut lawn exhales. My house abuts woods on two sides, and mowing the lawn is, in both a real and a metaphorical sense, how I keep the forest at bay and preserve my place in this landscape. Much as we've come to distrust it, dominating nature is a deep human urge and lawn mowing answers to it. I thought of the lawn mower as civilization's knife and my lawn as the hospitable plane it carved out of the wilderness. My lawn was a part of nature made fit for human habitation.

So perhaps the allure of the lawn is in the genes. The sociobiologists think so: they've gone so far as to propose a "Savanna Syndrome" to explain our fondness for grass. Encoded in our DNA is a preference for an open grassy landscape resembling the shortgrass savannas of Africa on which we evolved and spent our first few thousand years. A grassy plain dotted with trees provides safety from predators and a suitable environment for grazing animals; this is said to explain why we have remade the wooded landscapes of Europe and North America in the image of East Africa. Thorstein Veblen, too, thought the popularity of lawns might be a throwback to our pastoral roots. "The close-cropped lawn," he wrote in *The Theory of the Leisure Class,* "is beautiful in the eyes of a people whose inherited bent it is to readily find pleasure in contemplating a well-preserved pasture or grazing land."

These theories go some way toward explaining the widespread appeal of grass, but they don't fully account for the American Lawn. They don't, for instance, account for the keen interest Jay Gatsby takes in Nick Carraway's lawn, or the scandal my father's unmowed lawn sparked in Farmingdale. Or the fact that, in America, we have taken down our fences and hedges in order to combine our lawns. And they don't account for the unmistakable odor of virtue that hovers in this country over a scrupulously maintained lawn.

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