The Work of Beauty

by Gregory Conniff

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When I was in church as a boy, the priest would shift from the mystery of Latin to the dailiness of English for a series of prayers requesting, among other things, the conversion of Russia. I liked this prayer for Russia, with its goal both miraculous and attainable. The prayer that followed I did not like so well. It lacked the refreshing specificity of an attack on Godless Communism, veering instead into a lament that included a reference to our world as this "vale of tears."

I had to look up "vale," since I heard "veil" and that didn't make sense, even allowing for the poetic locutions that marked my parish's conversations with God. Once I had a grip on "vale' as a piece of geography though, it jarred me every time the priest brought it round. It troubled me that a "place of tears" was not an accurate description of the world I lived in.

Our church, a small, graceful wooden building built in the late nineteenth century, was beautiful. My town was also beautiful, having developed along the face of a ridgeline a dozen miles outside New York City in the same years the parish was building the church. The town's houses had great variety

and character, and were substantial without being grandiose. I could see little to complain about and much for which we should be grateful. Even as a kid, it struck me as short-sighted to be signing off from services on a sour note to our Host.

It also troubled me that at the spiritual heart of my church community there was little interest in taking positive notice of the immediate and simple delights of the physical world we shared every day. If there were ever any ecclesiastical impulses towards joy in the everyday perhaps they were repressed upon seeing the radical world-lover, Francis of Assisi, reduced to sharing gardens with bird feeders and plaster gnomes.

The Catholicism of my youth made the next life its principal focus. The nuns and the brothers in my schools wrung their hands over the temptations of the flesh and how they might lure us astray. And they were right, but over-broad in their anxiety. Even then I felt that to turn away from what we can know through touch and smell and sight and taste and hearing is to turn away from a full understanding of the gift of life, and beauty, in this world. That we might fall into hedonism while pursuing knowledge through our physical selves is less of a danger than missing out on life altogether while fattening our pride on abstemiousness.

It wasn't wasted on me either, that in furthering its spiritual ends the Church made full and highly developed use of sensuality. I saw great theatrical knowingness in its ritual deployment of light, sound, imagery, scent and in the spatial embraces of its holy places. It was possibly the very density of these elements that first drew me across the communion rail and onto the altar as an altar boy.

But outside church, out of doors—walking alone after midnight mass through deep snow lit up blue under a wash of stars—I felt the reach of infinity. On the night I refer to I was suddenly pulled out of myself and drawn briefly into something else of which I felt that I was a part, albeit an infinitely small part. And it was something I had experienced once before, years earlier. I felt overwhelmed by a sense of simultaneous infinite largeness and infinite smallness and I knew that each contained the other. Somehow I had been

absorbed into an unadorned mystery living at the heart of quotidian elements of winter. Half an hour later I was asleep.

This moment was memorable and part of an incrementally transformative series of moments out-of-doors that continues irregularly to the present. What drew me away eventually from altarplace religion was in substantial measure the difference between the tendentious and hermetic beauty of the temple of belief and the wild and open beauty of the world outside its doors. Even when looking at religious paintings from the late medieval period or the Renaissance I would find my eye drawn past the principal figures and the message and into the landscape beyond. There seemed to be genuine affection in the rendering of the land and more room there for my imagination; it was the part of the painting that felt the least bought. Years later, visiting northern Italy, I would recognize these same landscapes and realize that what I had felt in the paintings was a subversive artistic connection to loving the world. Even when artists learned to fake their landscapes, the very idea of the depiction of geography still rose from someone's paying attention to the locus of daily life, Hieronymous Bosch excepted.

For a time as a young adult, at an hour when I would ordinarily have been in church, I would wander in various nearby woods. While exploring the world first-hand, I was conscious of being more connected to a larger order of existence than I ever was while sitting through a round of worship that pointed my attention elsewhere. But this consciousness was not about a "larger order," it was instead an unexamined awareness during these walks when my sense of autonomous self, the "I" watching, made itself absent, leaving only sensation and the ability to remain, somehow, upright.

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What I found in the woods and by the ocean and walking city streets were places that were indifferent to my presence, unlike church, which was there precisely to serve me by directing my focus. The indifference I found in the world is the same, I think as the indifference described by scientists, although it felt benign, which softened the indifference, and which was not at all scientific. While I did not find nature's disinterest any reason to

reconsider my love for the world around me, I began to be aware that many people did not appear to experience anything like my sense of connection to the places that we shared. And it seemed that a large number of them did not appear to notice where they were at all, their attention taken by something I could not see.

A friend of mine, intending to drive 300 miles south, instead drove 300 miles west, realizing his mistake only when he noticed that the sun was setting in front of him. My wife once walked blithely into the side of a bus with the same baffling ease that another friend, an Eagle Scout, drove into the side of a parked train. On my first trip to California I almost drove a Volkswagen over a cliff because what I thought was a poorly maintained road was in fact a fire break. In the dim reaches of prehistory, such lack of conscious attention to where one is no doubt eliminated numerous lines of genetic material. I think of this every time someone takes a late night snowmobile ride on river ice in early spring in Wisconsin and does not come back. Bliss can be an unforgiving element of natural selection.

By definition our evolution as human animals has been in response to the world around us. Paying attention to that world has paid off in survival. Paying attention is adaptive behavior, some of which is hard-wired into us as fear and desire. Even babies turn from the smell of rotting meat and have an innate revulsion for snakes and spiders. Our personal survival requires that we know some things without being taught them. The fact that we are still here is in part because we have intuitive knowledge of what to run from and what to run to. Coupled with conscious attention through our evolved senses, an intuition of danger helps us navigate our environment.

What we run *to*—in the foods we eat, the textures that seduce us, the scents that arouse us, the colors and movement in the world—are the things of pleasure that ensure our health as individuals and encourage our procreation as a species. We have human history because desire draws us out of ourselves and into families, tribes, and culture. In tandem with deliberate attention, our innate appetites, our reasons for living, help us build lives rich with experience. In one form or another, the elements of the world

that threaten us and the elements of the world that attract us are part of daily existence. They are day-to-day, they are common, and our body chemistry shifts in rapid response to their presence. My concern in this essay is with beauty as both an ordinary part of life and as a necessary part of human development.

A good part of what I think of as our relationship with beauty is, I believe, a wired response to the textures, flavors, sounds, smells, and spaces of the natural world. It is something Wordsworth described as "a pure organic pleasure." This is the beauty that calls us to pay attention and has led us to see the satisfactions of order as a sign of merit, a concept that inhabits mathematics as naturally as it does a garden.

The inference for me, in the idea of a wired connection between our surroundings and ourselves, is that, underlying the human project, at foundation level, is one code that reads: "It matters how things look." Beauty is part of the pattern language of our environment. We absorb it, paying attention to the details of our home ground. This attention in turn leads to love of place and eventually can bring us to take responsibility for its condition. Beauty as a part of ordinary life is a dependable outcome when culture and nature interact in an environment of attention and care.

Commercial/industrial culture, like the Church of my childhood, has evolved by attempting to sever this "wired" connection to the world. This culture has replaced the patterns of nature (and the Church) with alternative patterns. Our culture has split off, almost with a sigh of relief, from the attention demanded by the unpredictable natural world. It has given us, in our cars for example, something very close to a private environment in the public world. With the windows up, the climate control set, and the bass boosted the experience is very much like traveling in a womb with an accelerator.

But when we live in a corridor of insistent billboards, characterless retail sprawl, and personal audio, we are, I think, close to the condition of cattle at an abattoir led to step along a wooden chute as if it were just another walk in a field. The numbing landscape isn't pretty, so given our adaptation to the patterns

of the industrialized world, it isn't surprising that we, like cattle, often don't notice or care where we are. The landscape of commercial culture conditions us to disconnect. This is as dangerous for us as a people as inattentive bliss is for us as individuals.

There was a time when we Americans could think of ourselves as "citizen farmers." In today's commercial culture, however, we have accepted the description of ourselves as "consumers," something closer to "locust" than "citizen." This shift in our sense of identity has accompanied a steadily attenuating relationship with the highly specific qualities of land, no two parcels of which are identical. We have altered land beyond recognition (Manhattan Island, first). We created abstract real estate by drawing grids upon the west with concern for development, but not topography, (a project begun by Jefferson). And now we occupy, with so much life energy, a world sold to us as "virtual," a diverting technological whimsy. With each step of revised self-consciousness, we have become less physically connected to the places we live in. As a result of this diminishing connection, this buffering, we have lost conscious sensitivity to the effect our immediate world has on our individual lives and our culture.

If beauty is a component of the shared environment within which humans have evolved, how will this continuing evolution be affected by manufactured landscapes increasingly devoid of beauty and increasingly not even shared? The wildfire spread of industrial culture, its expression of itself, its clutter and gossip, has become the hall-of-mirrors environment within which we are evolving as a species. We may well be, as a species, branching off in response to a changed idea of beauty, one engineered and mechanical. Perhaps this is a stretch. Nevertheless, I think that it is a leap of hubris to dispense with the patterns of the world's natural order whenever there is a profit in it or simply because we can.

My own cultural evolution is in reverse, in fundamental ways. My thought is this: for all our culture, for all our vaunted intelligence, for all our knowledge and machines, we are still animals in a habitat and this habitat, especially the visual habitat, matters. It matters in important ways that regulations on

health and safety never address. We can monitor the quality of air, soil, and water in our ecosystem, but there is no equivalent scientific measure for beauty, which is nevertheless a part of our natural ecology. Nor can there be any such measure, given that every unbuilt place is unique, with a beauty that varies with every change in the elements.

In our culture, when we say "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," we are usually taking the easy way to dismiss another's taste (or to rationalize the destruction of a public view or the construction of one more eyesore). But in this gesture, in its very casualness, we dismiss as well the idea that beauty is significant to our shared daily life. And with this dismissal we cede to economic forces those aspects of our home ground that are beyond price, that feed our hearts, that might open us to sudden unprogrammed insights. In the early nineteenth century, as this country began its commitment to industrialization and mechanical efficiency, arguments along these lines were dismissed as Romantic European affectations and inherently effeminate. Little has changed. Except how America looks. Think about it: next time you plan a trip—where would you rather go—northern New Jersey or southern France?

Whether or not the place we live inspires affection, we are nevertheless influenced by its physical nature, our evolved responses bathing our minds in their own reactive chemistry. Xenophobia aside, if we love where we live, I believe there is an internal mechanism that sweetens our living in that place. This is true for gardeners who are, almost by definition, besotted with affection for this planet. But this is not so true for the rest of us—at least in our cars, in front of our televisions, on the Internet—when we pursue life through the medium of our machines, sitting still while they live for us, and faster, too.

For a rich, active life we need to live in a world that reaches to the human animal with at least as much understanding as it now extends to machines. For one thing, we need a world that responds more to walking and standing still—with textures, details, spaces, and sudden juxtapositions that reveal themselves only to someone afoot. It is from walking attentively through a place at different times and in different light and

weather that we can most assuredly come to know the character that abides within that place despite its changing appearances. Out of this direct knowledge almost inevitably grows understanding, affection, and an impulse to take some responsibility for where we are.

A world built truly for people would provide daily nourishment to the spirit from ubiquitous, subtle and specific moments of lyrical reality, moments when we can see the world with clarity and recognize life as a stroke of good fortune. Our main source of this necessary human experience of lyrical reality ought to be the immediate world we inhabit when we step outside the doors of home and work. (Where else and why not?) Instead, what most of us encounter beyond those doors is a world where local and fragile beauty is displaced to ease the production and delivery of the rewards of a consumer economy. It has been a canny trade for industry, which promotes its products to us regularly as a means of deliverance from this selfsame commercialized environment.

A world in which beauty is absent, a world treated primarily as an economic arena, is home to chaos and conversation by bumper sticker. It is home to a parade of rude visual encounters that are a form of serial mugging. Power lines sutured thoughtlessly across the face of the land, the billboard jammed in the middle of the best view as you crest a hill, the alien microwave antennae in spiny mobs atop the heretofore unsullied ridge, the soulless malls and housing developments, are blows to the spirit. The only escape is to disconnect, to withdraw into the radio, or the cell phone, or to become, in some way, blind.

For me, these blows activate an emotional wire to that reflex we describe as “fight or flight.” I doubt my response is unique. While some of us will react to visual insults by withdrawal, others will not and may lash out. I see “road rage” as an almost inevitable consequence of confining a person to an environment that a human animal perceives, reasonably I think, as an attack. We survive abused landscapes by hardening our minds to the spaces between our destinations and hardening our hearts as well to the people trapped there with us in traffic. Then, when we arrive at our destinations, the tension of that hardening persists as a hormonal hangover that poisons our work, our play,

whatever we come to do. Beauty can be beyond price, but ugliness always exacts a toll.

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I am a gardener and have been for a long while, but I have been driving a car far longer. When I am behind the wheel, I metamorphose, like you (and Mr. Toad), from a drifting pedestrian to an alert and decisive motorist. On the road and moving well (and disconnected from my relationship with the land) I think sometimes that I am in love with asphalt. But this is less love than an arrangement of convenience. I know that roads are not ethically neutral parts of the environment. I need the road to take me to my work—even though expanding roads help wear away the world I love, the world I photograph. My behavior and attitude is a conundrum I deal with less effectively than I wish, especially when I find myself reaching for a stone to cast. Decades ago I heard a man rattling on about his idea of beauty, which was a marsh with a road running through it. I thought he was joking as he reeled off one example of highway beauty after another, until I found out he was a lobbyist for the road-building industry and merely possessed by the energy of the happily employed.

For a long time I held this in my head as an angry buzzing example of what is wrong with our thinking as a nation. As industrialized Americans, we can rationalize the destruction of nearly anything in the name of jobs and economic efficiency, with no sense of long-term consequences, no definable end. We build to tear down and build again, each time more careful than before to construct something no one will miss when it's gone -- since to achieve something good might require that we take care of it, maintain it, love it. Better to keep dreaming forward than to reflect on where we are and how we got there. Having the road go on forever is a way to deny that we ever arrive, to be always some kind of pioneer, and in great measure never to have to grow up and love something outside of ourselves.

Later I got to know the highway lobbyist and discovered he was also a gardener (I had discovered by then too, that a road running through a marsh is an effective way to organize a picture). His large property held sprawling and somewhat chaotic perennial

beds that he worked himself, unlike his neighbors, whose hired landscape services yielded respectable gardens, but with a predictable order that is not beauty. It was here that I came to see him more clearly, especially through the lens of the two enormous beds of roses that were his pride and chief love. I felt chagrined that I had judged him on the one note of how he made his living. In that garden (and when he visited mine) there was generosity to him that eased the reckoning glitter I had seen in his eyes around his other enthusiasms of politics and the camaraderie of power.

In a garden that one works oneself there is only the seasonal turning, round and again, of gardener and worked ground. When it is great, visiting a personal place such as this is to experience the world lit up from within. To work such a place as this is to be lit up oneself, as if the energy of its beauty inhabited one's labor in much the way current passes through the filament of an incandescent lamp. My gardener friend understood that gardens like his are outside the common ambitions of men of his achievement. He understood even better the necessity of their beauty to the fullness of his life and the complexity of his self.

Certainly it is possible to be lit up, to feel electric, in a car as well. When I was young and dating in New York City I would make a game of racing up 10th avenue above 42nd street in my car, trying to see how far I could get before I was caught by a red light. It was thrilling urban driving. It made me laugh and it made my blood hum and was, unfortunately, sometimes the best part of the date. This was not the New York I loved, however.

That New York was the one I walked: beginning in the 1950s, accompanying my father when he crossed the Hudson River on business, later as an undergraduate at Columbia, and still later as an outlander adult bringing my photographic work to interested people. What attracted me at first, I think, was the crazed, layered, saturating physical energy of life feeding accidents of beauty on all fronts. As a child I had no context for this experience beyond immersion in a vortex of sensation, but even later, understanding better the character of this great city, this wild river of jazz in stone never failed to sweep me

away on its currents. I imagine the great rivers of the west – the Missouri, the Colorado, the Columbia – must have had this addictive power before they were dammed, carrying in those days flecks of human consciousness through what must have seemed an incomprehensible vastness of grass, forest, and sky.

Today, of course, those rivers are mostly fat lakes and New York City is steadily becoming more theme park and mall than complex metropolis. Part of the problem is the spread of chain stores, but in addition, a diminished vocabulary of building materials and surface detail has produced a city that increasingly fails to catch light in a way that engages the intuitive eye. And when we don't look, we don't pay attention and then we don't care and, finally, we don't remember. And then where are we?

Even so, when I am in New York, I take time to walk late in the day from the Battery at the tip of the island north to about 100th Street on the west side, hypnotized by the rhythm of the older buildings and the light playing over them, and later, in the dark, by the office lights within and the patterns of enterprise they represent. Each of these walks rekindles my romance with New York. I don't feel this way on the subway or on a bus or in a cab. Each motorized trip is about the destination, while the walk is about brushing up against as much of the city out-of-doors as I can. As I walk, the air blows over me and I am awash in sights and sounds and smells that soak the city into me through all my senses. But I am not drunk on sensation. I retain enough alertness to avert a mugging. Even in a garden there are things that bite and sting.

My reengagement with the city comes from moving through it with no other intention than being there and by the simplest means possible: using my feet and following my nose and eyes. And I pay attention to details. As a result of each walk, I know new temporary truths about some of New York's constantly changing neighborhoods. But more important than this to me is the renewed affection I feel for the city after I have moved my body through it, surrounded by New Yorkers, who are – in this place of stone – themselves the natural world. My high-speed drives up 10th Avenue left me in love with myself. At the end of my long walk, I am in

love with the city. But this love, real as it is, is an affair and not a marriage. I do not live here. This is not my home any more. And that makes a difference.

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To love a place as home is to develop roots. This means, in part, a sensory relationship with a landscape that has individual character and mystery, but which is usually neither wilderness nor park. The landscapes I am concerned with photographically are the rural middle landscape, the margins of cultivation, and the ordinary landscape of home and yard—where most of us live and dream and where we deserve a setting that strengthens us for the challenge of living well. I am interested in spaces where the human spirit can catch its breath.

I grew up in densely populated northern New Jersey. Although my town was beautiful, much of the region was not, having succumbed, in the twentieth century, to highways, industry and dense, featureless housing—the sort of area that makes the phrase "beautiful New Jersey" an oxymoron. Fewer than seventy-five years before I was born, though, the region near my home was rural and the subject of paintings by the artist George Innes. His presence was strong enough that my town named a public school in his honor. His home was less than two miles from mine.

Today, Innes's paintings of Montclair and Bloomfield, and the landscape work of other artists, too easily finds itself grouped as nostalgic depictions of a world gone by or of a world that never was. Romantic twaddle, too sweet for thought. Never mind that these places *did* exist, and some still do, and that they have an intoxicating beauty. Rare is the museum-goer who will move past the brushwork and take the painter's vision as a suggestion of what the artist actually saw with pleasure, and what we might also see. A painting is not a report, but it does contain information about what its painter valued and at what emotional pitch. When I was young and living in his town, I was aware, despite the changes to the landscape, that I was living in the same light Innes did.

A century after Innes painted north Jersey meadows graced with mist, I moved to the

upper Midwest, to a part of the country where there were then more cows than people. It took me awhile, because the cultural shift blinded me, but eventually I realized that I had come to live in a place that looked like Innes's New Jersey in the nineteenth century—but with the winters of a planet farther from the sun.

Because I arrived in late fall, Wisconsin didn't offer my eyes a lush or physically gracious welcome. It was farmland, a working landscape, a harvested one at that. Life had retreated indoors or underground. But the region had, especially in its unglaciated folds, a plainish mystery that hinted at a beauty I could learn to see. What confused me, at first, is that I was unused to the cycles of a small-farm agricultural landscape and ignorant of its seasonal narrative. I was lulled into inattention by the fact that a well-maintained agricultural landscape was the norm. It was *everywhere*. And how could everywhere possibly be beautiful?

I was unconsciously in thrall to the idea that beauty must of necessity depart from the norm. I think I saw it, in landscape and in other things, as an inflation of desirable characteristics to the point where they made my heart beat faster in their presence. Think Frederick Church and the luminous mythic west or Ansel Adams at Yosemite. In the Midwestern landscape, with its distinct absence of grandeur, this hyperbolic beauty is not available the way it is, say, among the Rockies or along the Oregon coast. The Midwest is mostly flat, and even when it rises a bit, that rise is just a roll of minor difference at highway speed.

In time I learned that the Midwestern landscape, too, though spare and open, has a singular beauty. The origin of this beauty is in the land, as Aldo Leopold professed; the way it turns with the seasons and responds to light passing across it. It is the mind's job, as it reflects on the pattern of experiences with the land, to bring to consciousness the character of this beauty and its range. The body knows, however, as it knows how to breathe, that our grasp of the pleasure of this beauty begins with the flesh. It was my body in motion that first opened me to the large beauty of the place, as well as to the beauty of *being* of the place. Later, snow ducks made it local and brought it home.

Initially there was the bike, which took me into a landscape I had known hitherto only by car. Free of the car's cocoon I began to experience familiar places as *terra nova.* I began to see Wisconsin for the first time, only two thin tires and a bit of fabric between the world and me. The cycling experience was (and is) that of me matching my body to the topography over and over again, across the seasons, balanced between sensory absorption and alertness (potholes, deer, turkeys). With each rise and descent and flat sprint, I took geography into my muscles, feeling the shape of the land in the pressure on my lungs as my new home place entered my blood and filled me with heat. This was the gift of a beautiful place, taking me out of myself, literally reshaping me, and then bringing me back to where I belonged now and as part of it.

On the bike I found the world by meeting it halfway, touching it. But in that touching I found a different self, as well. It is similar to the way consciously touching someone else can help relocate one's center. It is not simply the reaching out, it is also the warm pressure flowing back. When it snows I step into my cross-country skis and it begins once more. I am on fire in a cold and empty place. This is not 10th Avenue. This is home.

And where we are, most of us, most of the time, is home. The character of home is made of many things, one of which is local beauty, either natural or built. This came into focus for me late one night alone on a small bridge in my neighborhood during a glorious blizzard. There, along the bridge's familiar concrete balustrade, I was surprised by a row of ducks, a mother and her young, that someone had sculpted from the snow. They fluoresced in the glow of a nearby streetlight while the flakes, which continued to fall, fattened them with a glittering down. In the sculpture of the ducks I felt the presence of someone who had absorbed much local beauty and who, when circumstances allowed, passed the favor along. I went home and got my camera and woke my wife to come and see.

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It is in our homes and in our hometowns, between work and family, that we live the story of our lives. Our challenge is to make a setting for that story so rich and sustaining that we won't want to seek relief from it by

fleeing to some manufactured elsewhere—some tourist Eden, if you believe the brochures. Why not live in a place of the sort people travel to? We could do this if we understood better the sustaining relationship we can have with our local landscapes.

The injunction to tend one's own garden is a familiar one, which can be taken either as metaphoric counsel or as a literal invitation to act. Suppose we were to stop this useless religious fretting over our exile from paradise and instead see our relocation as an opportunity to garden for ourselves. Just that. No more. Suppose we were to ignore the American romance of a new Eden and simply love this imperfect world being itself—love it as if we truly loved ourselves as part of it. If we could love being here, where would we be then? And who?

My friend the lobbyist gardener is gone. And gone too, are his rose beds, which he maintained on a bluff above a large glacial lake and smack in the middle of the view. Many of his other plants are in my garden now, in a neighborhood where there is no struggle with a large view. Where a view might have been I have neighbors, all of us on narrow, deep lots in bungalows built in the 1920s. The architecture is historic vernacular, which guarantees a certain character, but does not ensure a sense of beauty. So we garden.

The cultivation of the place where I live has grown slowly over a quarter century. When I arrived on the block, the only real garden was a small perennial one newly developed by the woman living in the house directly behind. The yard that is my garden now was overwhelmed with suckering elms, thorny black locust, goldenrod, white snakeroot, and an aspiring forest of maples. My first year of gardening was principally one of clearing space, the digging of a few small beds, and the planting of a double handful of plants assured of returning next year and not needing much immediate care.

The second year was one of staring at what grew. That fall I built more beds and the next spring ran the garden along the back property line underneath ancient and untended lilacs. When the neighbor in back saw this, she extended her plantings to that property line as well and *de facto* made one garden out of hers and mine. We talked as we worked and,

stepping back and forth at one corner to consider our efforts, created a path between our yards that we use to this day. (Only many years after the fact did I learn that this neighbor was the sculptor of the snow ducks I encountered on the bridge.)

The third year I understood finally that gardening is not so much the imposition of order as it is the inviting of the unknown. The former is landscaping, the latter is weaving texture, volume, line, and color into places that welcome surprise. Gardens are invitations written on land.

The response to the gardens we built was a change in the nature of our place. The biggest initial change, as the gardens grew into their fourth and fifth years, was a return in quantity of songbirds and insects. I was startled to see how even a little bit of tending the earth had such a strong, positive effect on the life of a place, and an urban one at that.

And that life, over the years, began to include other neighbors, none of whom had been in the habit of spending time outdoors. It became easier for the couple next door to be in their yard after their view—my garden—improved. It became easier for me to get to know them in casual exchanges over yard work than it had been in the ritual of occasional social gatherings. In the garden, I became less likely to say something regrettable. Tolerance grew alongside the plants. And we have become friends. On their side as well, the property line is now a perennial bed of borrowed scenery and shared work. Today on the block there are seven properties linked consciously along the back property line as an extended garden, a visual commons—yards expanding into landscape.

Behind our homes we have torn out the fences, leaving lilacs, mock orange, honeysuckle, junipers, and one espaliered apple tree to mark divisions that are screen dividers rather than walls. We have wound paths across the property lines so that we can enter each other's gardens to visit, to cut across the block, or just to look. We exchange plants, advice, food, and stories. We share tools. We are not alike, but through a willingness to open ourselves through the medium of the garden there is respect and pleasure mixed with our awareness of significant difference. And under our gaze, children zoom through a small Arcadian wonderland as if it were simply natural, which it is.

The beauty of this place, a beauty we made, is the binding energy that makes my neighborhood a place people are reluctant to leave. The work of making this beauty, the planting, the weeding, the negotiating of borders, the reaching out to new neighbors, is what has given us knowledge of each other possible only from working physically side by side. The beauty of what we have made by thinking beyond our borders, by seeing our yards from our neighbors' point of view, is what brings us out-of-doors time and again for chance encounters that enlarge our lives in small but meaningful increments. It has been the work of beauty to make it good to be here. It has been our work to recognize the patterns of beauty and to extend them.

In my part of town, gardens are spreading—along terraces, on open land adjacent to railroad tracks, and, of course, in back yards. Beauty is evolving and we are changing with it. Some of us have formed associations that are restoring riverscapes in the neighborhood. Some of us are taking responsibility for parks. We are creating a culture here, even if it is a small one, and we have created it on our own. When we step out of doors the world we see helps persuade us, day in, day out, that life is good and that there is hope for better if we will work at it—and if we will begin again daily. This is where we live, and it is not free of disagreement or trouble; but by working the ground together we have arrived at a place that is better for our having been here. And we are better, too, for the care we have taken of a piece of the ordinary world—the worker and the worked, the viewer and the viewed, all tangled together in a singularly full life. The tangle is inevitable. The fullness is the work of beauty.

Gardens are a small step; they are small fields, openings on the land. To Thoreau's sweeping insight that in wildness is the preservation of the world, I would add two ideas that these days fall closer to home: in open land we hold the health of our culture; in gardens we nourish the roots of community.

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I believe that beauty is in the world, not in the eye of the beholder. I believe that the eye is one window through which beauty reaches us, but it is the world itself that is the source even of the idea. I believe that when we recognize beauty and take responsibility for its increase we are changed for good in the process—returned from exile and awakened

to the knowledge that the world washes over us in never-ending transformation and renewal.

END