Running from Eden

"They paved paradise, and put up a parking lot..."
--Joni Mitchell, "Big Yellow Taxi"

Near the center of town, there is an empty lot on death row. I have been observing its sacrificial death by transformation for some time now. A few days ago, the muscle-bound executioners arrived with mud-splattered instruments of torture. They chewed the pretentious flowers away from their roots with shovels, tattooed the sullen grass with tire tracks, gang-raped the naked brown earth until she bled muddy water, and began impregnating her with concrete. Soon their lust for vengeance will be satiated, and they will seal their deeds in a black asphalt coffin, shake hands and cut a ribbon. And they will have done us all a big favor; for its crimes against humanity, nature must be put to death.

I have spent many afternoons here in this place, gathering evidence against nature. I have extracted, bagged and labeled plants, I have observed the suspicious, conversation-like exchanges among the motley array of wild animals, and I have traced the comings and goings of the vagabond balls of seedling fluff that hitchhike on the breeze (an undoubted accomplice). It is just as I suspected; these are the fingerprints of a rival Supreme Being.

Fortunately, though it has been neglected for some time, the large, rectangular lot’s temporary emancipation has not rendered much growth for the developers to fight against. Most people driving past do not even seem to notice it. It has been partially scraped clean of plant life and layered with gravel, and what weeds remain have been mercifully euthanized with vehicle exhaust. Pieces of delicate trash float and flutter in the breeze—a brilliant blue cup, a sparkling six-pack ring, and an immortal white plastic bag that gives birth to a small, half-empty soda bottle before my eyes. Triple-strand, barbed-wire fencing and construction debris have had to suffice as prison guards until the real transforming power of our tax dollars could begin to squash the uprising of the natural world.
Now we can satisfy our vengeance. We can tear the petal crowns off of the heads of the flowers that defy our control and reestablish the royalty of a superior life form. Then, finally, we can be God.

We have been searching for a way to disconnect with nature for a long time. That’s why we seal ourselves in houses, entertain ourselves in indoor amusement parks, and put our wild animals in cages. Each step we take toward de-naturalization is a giant leap away from the origin that has been crammed down our throats by those who are, arguably, as the Evil One in the movie *Time Bandits* says, “mercifully free of the ravages of intelligence.” This supposed origin tries to humble us by reminding us that we are subservient creations rather than existential individuals who answer to no one and manifest our own destinies. What a relief when Darwin came along and gave us a scientific excuse to dismiss a Superior Being and place ourselves on top of the food chain. “We can no longer argue that, for instance, the beautiful hinge of a bivalve shell must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by man. There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings, and in the action of natural selection, than in the course which the wind blows.”

Darwin has a point. If an all-knowing Creator carefully designed us, why would men have nipples? Besides, our current sophisticated status is much more punctuated when we see how far we have evolved from algae soup. If an all-powerful Supreme God created us as intelligent beings in the first place, our condition would be that of erosion rather than evolution. Darwin’s version is much more appealing—especially since he predicted that we will achieve “perfection” eventually.

We’ve been capable of this evolution from subservient to superior for some time. We have universities full of knowledge and cranial capacity that has only barely begun to be realized. Albert Einstein said it best, “In the temple of science are many mansions…” And, to guarantee our ownership of those mansions, we should begin by mowing the lawn.

This plot of land is, fortunately, one of the last of its kind in this town. Seven decades ago, a convent sat across the street, and nuns used this area to “commune” with nature and an invisible Creator. It makes sense that nature would
be so important to these people. Anyone who has been exposed to the Bible recognizes the ulterior motives in place here. Psalms, chapter 23, is a prosaic piece describing what it is like to be a sheep, led by a Shepherd in the meadow and spending time beside cool waters. Other poetic pieces urge the readers to “look to the hills” when they are in trouble and “consider the lilies, how they grow.” There is a problem with this method of thinking; if we are busy sitting in the grass beside still waters watching flowers grow, we are wasting valuable time that could be spent in pursuit of knowledge and power. While we are considering the ants, as King Solomon suggested, nature is free to conduct its destructive business as usual without interference from a human species that is mesmerized and not thinking clearly enough to fight back, to defend itself. This plot, however, has been uncovered, and not many intelligent people are still foolish enough to fall for the wiles of nature and the Bible. In fact, the convent was torn down, and the handiwork of superior minds began appearing across the gravelly meadow.

Suddenly, my attention is captured by a crow that sails into the tangled grass and begins picking through the garbage. He, too, has benefited from the inventions of humankind. He finds something edible, swallows with two grotesque jerks of his oily neck and then is frightened away by an invisible assailant. Regardless of his acculturation to human innovation, he is still suspect—another reason for the faith-mongers to shove God into our faces, as well as a scavenging reminder of the uncivilized world of nature that would attempt to swallow everything we build should we hesitate our production for any length of time. I sigh and return to my notebook.

Those who choose to suspend their disbelief and operate from an intangible, invisible foundation called “faith” say it all started when we got kicked out of the Garden of Eden. They say we mourned it for a while, then scoffed at it, then forgot it. The truth is, we’ve planted our own asphalt gardens, with tall, willowy skyscrapers, where cars and trucks meander through the streets like insects, and puddles of swimming pools and fountains glimmer in the sun and waft chlorinated perfume on the breeze. We are the master gardeners, and the only thing getting in our way is the destructive power of nature.
That’s why, as I sit here at the perimeter taking notes on the scene, I am incensed by the sprigs of stubborn moss and myriads of innocuous-looking, pinpoint leaves that are clawing their way through the sprawl of clean white gravel; I am disgusted by the deformed yellow flowers that have sprung up together like a colony of lepers; I am incredulous at the audacity of plants that have been scraped from the earth and piled to resume growth at every odd angle, each presumptuous green blade and dirty petal ultimately curving and reaching toward one thing: the sky. There’s something eerie about the persistence that runs through their chlorophyllic veins. Some would say we feel the pang of Eden lost—the reminder of impending mortality. In reality, we probably just have allergies. If this is Eden, we should be running from it. If this is God’s rough draft of a planet, we can and have done better already. Apparently, our science and technology exceeds the capacity of their limited Creator.

An exciting article in the February 2002 issue of *Science News* announced humanity’s breakthrough progress in synthetic creation. According to the results of rigorous testing conducted on 2,500 volunteers, we now have 116 pollutants coursing through our veins. “Two independent teams of scientists report that bodily fluids carry chemical cocktails that include toxic metals, artificial hormones, and ingredients of plastics, flame retardants, pesticides, herbicides and disinfectants.” Some might argue that we’re destroying ourselves and the planet, rather than making improvements. On the contrary, this is an indication of just how advanced our society has become, because most of these chemicals didn’t even exist mere decades ago! These are the products that separate intelligent man from other mammals. Clean air, clean water, and clean veins only serve to show backwardness and lack of intellectual sophistication. Our veins may be intoxicated, but they are intoxicated with knowledge.

When examined from a distance, even this scraggly lot is an unwilling testament to the power of humankind as curator of the world. In the early 1900s, this area was untamed—dotted sparsely with houses that were no match for the destructive power of nature. Tony, one of the visionary executioners of this development, tells me that the real battle took place in the 1950s, when a shopping center emerged victorious over the sinister forces of natural undergrowth.
Skirmishes between developers and nature have broken out over the years, but the city has been ultimately successful at keeping the land under control. Nature has not fully remunerated society for her war crimes, and the executions continue on a daily basis.

We have the tools to erect buildings higher than the tallest trees. We have the technology to perform a facelift on the planet and produce artificial immortality. We no longer need soil to grow plants, or sunlight for Vitamin D. We are no longer at the mercy of the changing elements or confused by what lies beneath our skin. We are finally able to reduce the overpopulation of trees enough to close down the logging mills and focus on real industry such as technological advancement. We have near-perfect biological weapons to use against our enemies. No one challenges the humans on this planet except the humans themselves. It is the poetry of the survival of the fittest in motion.

This is our destiny. We should welcome the colorful litter on the streets, breathe the fragrant exhaust deeply into our lungs, and enjoy the shade of nearby condominiums. We should point our children's little faces toward the sky so that they can see the magnificent display of explosions as our space travel debris re-enters the atmosphere and ignites. This is the world we created for ourselves. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

I close my notebook and move away from the construction site. My work here is done, and my presence, similar to the presence of nature itself, only hinders the progress of supreme intelligence in action. I have all of the evidence I need.

The verdict has been passed down. It's time for nature to be punished—annihilated. Don't leave a single green reminder. Put up office buildings and apartment complexes and restaurants. Spray the sidewalk with weed killer and genetically engineer the food we eat. Put silk flowers in the vases and stuffed deer heads on the walls. Harness the wind to power our enterprise. Show the universe who is boss.

Now, if only we could claim credit for the rising and setting of the sun, and the perfect orchestration of the planets in a thousand galaxies. But, then again, we are the supreme form of intelligence. I'm sure we'll think of something.