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building eden

a novel
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Dedication:

In life, it is not rare that people whom you do not even know support you in your endeavors; be it that they build bridges that you so thoughtlessly walk, or blaze trails you never knew did not exist. Whatever the case, it is rare that you are afforded the opportunity to thank them, and given that chance you should be gracious and kind, for it is untold what they may still do for you.

Thank you Brother Dr. Joseph Cantrell and Dr. Margaret Cantrell for your continued support. May God continue to look favorably upon you as you begin a new period in your life together.
A Note From the Author

Building Eden is truly an experimental text. Though it is not avant garde literature from a language perspective, its purposeful handling of language arts, social history, philosophy, environmentalism, and the natural sciences is unique and in some ways novel. I say this because I feel knowing this is essential to an equitable reading of the book.

As a reader, if you read the arguments and judgments of the characters as being solely stylized attempts at moving the story along, you will miss out on the bigger issues examined within. I have written a story that looks specifically at the cultural history of a location. In your encounter with this piece, please keep in mind that the story itself is a part of what the text hopes to communicate.

Perhaps you are an academic, a student, a factory worker, or maybe you choose not to define yourself by what it is you do everyday. No matter who you are, however, you cannot deny that vital to the interpretation of cultural messages is the medium through which they are delivered. One cannot ascribe the same level of credibility to a comic book as one does to a newspaper. Likewise, the types of “truth” found in business journals differ greatly from the “truths” found in religious texts. Keep this in mind when sifting through the distinct types of literature found within.

I hope that I have succeeded in communicating what I feel are the “real essentials” of nature and humanity in this novel. But let it be said that that is not my goal as a writer, nor is it the goal of this book. Instead, Building Eden will be a success if it encourages you as a reader to think about what it means to be human, and what it means to “encounter” nature.

Best Wishes,

Erasmus N. Jenkins
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Chapter 1

On the first Sunday of every month, a solemn group of souls gathers and seeks direction in a cold gray structure, in mid-town Manhattan. Inside they assume postures that garner them as much “personal” space as possible. No one is happy on these mornings. There are few smiles. These communions of anxious and reserved souls are the staff meetings of *The New Yorker* magazine.

Marilyn Stevenson is presiding over this meeting. After one of the most public shake-ups in the history of the periodical, she has replaced Mark O’Reily and is the interim editor-in-chief. Inwardly, she is trapped between trying to run one of the most widely read journals in the country and making her mark as a new voice in the “old boys’ club” of the publishing industry. Despite all the things she wants; respect, affirmation, the freedom to do the task at hand, and job security; she knows that all she has for sure is the mandate for all editors: sell magazines.

Marilyn looks around the room and sees everyone’s eyes.

Two seats down, Jimmy Levine’s eyes are skeptical. He still has an undying allegiance to O’Reily. Situations like this happen in life. Jimmy is not a threat.

Across the room Erasmus Jenkins’s eyes are quiet. He does not want to be anywhere at eight in the morning, this much is obvious. He is a top writer and is reportedly being wooed by another publishing house. He is a bit of a prima donna simply because he can be. He is a threat.

Three seats to her right, Marilyn sees Virginia Israel’s eyes. Virginia, the young prodigy from the Bronx is a comforting sight. Her eyes tell her story. They are brown and soft like the eyes of child, but their gaze is strong and concentrated. Virginia has
seen something that makes her focus so, but she looks at her mentor with a yearning for direction.

“This meeting will be brief, I suspect some of you will find that fact of paramount importance, Erasmus –” Marilyn’s voice drops singling out one of the nearly two-dozen people in the room. Erasmus looks at her and nods, silently communicating that yes, 

*brevity is a good thing.*

“I have here your assignments for the next month,” she says cautiously fingering a stack of burnt-yellow envelopes. “We have selected them based upon your suggestions, altering them where it was seen necessary. These assignments are not negotiable. The packets also include expense sheets, transportation waivers and a one page statement of objective. Good luck. Remember we are not just reporters, we are journalists.” With that she walked away and watched as her staff scurried to the box of envelopes like children to a tree on Christmas morning.

Marilyn is pleased: she remembered to say “we” implying that there was a collaborative process in the selections, she was firm but encouraging, and she remembered to end on a positive statement. The book she had stayed up reading, *How to Conduct an Effective Meeting,* was helpful.

She watched the faces of the writers as they opened up their assignments. Jimmy Levine let out a very audible sound of discontentment, expected. Erasmus Jenkins walked away without opening his letter. His letter had one word on it: editorial, and a blank check for expenses. He acted as if he knew this, having not even read the letter, and Marilyn realized that he knew how valuable he was to the magazine. Around the
room there were looks of anxiety, confusion, relief, and outright elation, the usual mix.

One face stood out.

Virginia, with her soft, focused eyes, looked lost. This was anticipated. “Meet me in my office at six tomorrow morning. We can discuss it then,” Marilyn said. She did not have to force her reassuring tone.
Chapter 2

My name is Virginia and I am good at what I do. I have to keep reminding myself of this. This thought, this silent prayer, has been my beacon for as long as I can remember. I am a writer. I have to keep reminding myself of this, too. It’s easy to forget such things at 35,000 feet.

Outside of my cabin window there is nothing but miles of farm-field under a blanket of clouds. Already, my heart longs for the radiant heat of the asphalt and steel of New York. Who knows when I’ll be home again.

When the plane lands, I will get my bags and meet some student who will take me to the university (making lists comforts me). The thought of a place more remote than Cincinnati is indeed terrifying. My name is Virginia and I am good at what I do.

I keep telling myself that this will be a great assignment, that Mary said it has a good shot at being the feature, and it could really help my career. I don’t believe it.

Instead I wonder: what did I do to get shipped out to Nowhere, Ohio? what am I going to write about? and why am I so afraid of going back to college?

~end

Virginia Israel is a remarkable young woman. At twenty-four, she is a staff writer for The New Yorker magazine and is said to be on the fast-track to making editor two years before her thirtieth birthday. Still, she is nervous about her current assignment.

In the last thirty-six hours she had re-evaluated her whole life. On Sunday morning she went to a staff meeting and received an assignment that at the time she
thought must have been a mistake. Monday morning her mentor confirmed that indeed
the words printed in thick black print on the pulpy white *New Yorker* letterhead were
intended for her. Now she was on a flight from the only place she had ever wanted to be
to a place she knew and cared nothing about.

She remembered her conversation with Marilyn. “This itinerary says that I am to
write a story about a pond at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio?”

“Yeah, I think you’ll do a great job at it.”

“At what? I don’t mean to be short Mary but I don’t understand what the hell is
going on. I thought I had been doing a good job here, and the next thing I know, I’ve
been sent to the cultural equivalent of Siberia.”

“Calm down, sweetheart. Oxford isn’t nearly that bad. In fact, Western College,
now a part of Miami, is my alma mater. The pond you are studying is where my husband
proposed to me.”

“That’s all well and good, but I don’t get why you are sending me there.”

“There are two reasons you, in particular, have this story. The first reason is that I
want to feature it. You see, Miami is like a lot of American universities in that it is
simultaneously trying to scale down its operation and trying to emerge as one of the top
15 colleges in the U.S. They are undergoing substantial budget cuts, a cut in
governmental funding, and a huge tuition hike. Every academic department is scaling
back its operation. Yet Miami prides itself on having one of the prettiest campuses in the
country.

“The Western College Pond is in many ways a microcosm of events transpiring
all over the country. That brings me to the second reason I want you to cover this story.
As an editor, I want to devote more time in this magazine to discussions of importance to more than just our traditional demographic. I want you, a woman writer, to look at the environmental, social and cultural clashes down in Oxford. It is a conservative town with a liberal population of college students, two things that make for juicy stories.”

“That’s just great Mary. Way to put a positive spin on the assignment from hell. See you in a couple of weeks,” Virginia left angrily. As far as she could remember this was the first time she had ever left Marilyn’s office disappointed.

01/21/02
4:06 pm

My name is Virginia and I am good at what I do. I need a little reassurance right about now. If there was any part of me that believed that my coming out here wasn’t punishment, it died on the ride from the airport.

The kid Geoff who picked me up looked like a hippie. He had long curly hair tied in a bandana, sandals, and I swear his pants were made out of hemp. He was nice enough but, clearly, he was not what I was expecting, or what I was used to. We rode back to town in his pick-up, on one long red bench-seat.

He kept asking if I was feeling okay. I felt sad for him and embarrassed at the same time. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to be there (ok, so I didn’t), but he smelled funny and the country out here looks like something out of Mayberry.

I just kept sinking down into my seat, quietly looking out the window. Even I thought I might disappear. I could imagine the headlines: “Young Black Reporter Vanishes into Hippie’s Pick-Up Truck,” or something of the sort.
The road we spent most of our trip on, state route 27 (I saw a sign), was like a slow, hilly death. For miles all I could see was grass and trees. It was two narrow lanes and I was convinced that we were going to fall off on at least four occasions. Geoff said this was “God’s Country.” It’s more like “The Forgotten Land.” I understand running from suburbanite, “minivan-and-mall”-dom, but where the hell are the people? It is so quiet out here I’m convinced that if I screamed it would be swallowed up by the hush.

Geoff said some things about the hills in the area being there from water erosion over a really long period of time, but I wasn’t even listening. (I know this is bad, but don’t I deserve a chance to sulk?) Anyway, I’m sure he’ll say it again later (he never shuts up).

Oh well, I’m glad it’s over now. Not that he delivered me to much. This apartment is smaller than some of the ones in the city. The complex is called Fox & Hounds and I don’t even think these places are fit for a dog. The prospect of listening to little sorority girls whine and scream and their frat boy boy-friends yelling about beer all night doesn’t comfort me. (A voice inside my head, probably my mother, reminds me that I’m only 24).

I’ve got to cut this little rant short. Geoffrey decided that he would make me dinner because I didn’t know anyone here. It was a sweet gesture and I’m going to need his help so I rationalized that it would be ok if I went even though I didn’t want to. He’ll be here in a few and I still have to get ready. Don’t worry, there’s plenty still to come…

~end
Chapter 3

“Dinner is almost ready. Have a seat in the living room. I put out a little something I wrote for you to look over while I finish up in the kitchen. I guess I’m kinda intimidated, you being a writer and all. Still I think it is appropriate to your work here.”

Looking at Western Pond

From Peabody Hall the world looks green. About a hundred feet from the porch the earth falls down. The waters of time, channeled through a forgotten creek, have worn away what was once sod and soil.

Trees and grass color the hills a million shades of green. Spots of purple, yellow and white leap from the pastoral picture. At the bottom of the hill in front of Peabody Hall is the Western Pond.

The pond is at the base of a natural watershed formed by the floodwaters and its tag-along sediment over the last few thousand years. Looking up from the pond, one can see where the hands of time have carved a path for the water walk.

In the spring it floods and the pond runs over its banks. Once-visible mounds of mud and soggy soil become mere memories, replaced by water that hides any trace that they ever existed with its tricky mirrored face.

When it rains, the slow creek that feeds the pond becomes a mischievous little river running wild over rocks, rough and white. The murmur of the mild stream becomes a mocking almost malevolent hum, a devilish little melody.
The pond is home to beautiful flora and fauna. There is a pair of swans that look like floating chunks of alabaster dancing along the water in the light of a new moon. A family of ducks wades in the swans’ wake, quietly, like peasants in a foreign land.

There are two other fowl, large and strange that walk the pond’s banks too. Unlike the swans, rulers of this quaint little kingdom, these birds seem to carry themselves with the slightest bit of shame, undoubtedly aware that they will never be the center of attention.

A school of goldfish mingles around the oft-murky waters of the pond. Most days they can be found near the small alcove just a few feet from where the pond is fed. The fish give the community a depth that only fish can.

On a summer’s eve, when lovers sit in the soft grass next to the pond, underneath the shade of the tall maple across from the boathouse, a picture of the pond itself might say that there is nothing wrong with anything in the world.

But if you listen carefully to that same picture of the pond, you will hear it saying that it is just a painting, one that will fade and wash away, one that is never as good as the real thing. The Western pond is nothing more than farce, a well-executed scheme carried out by tricksters who hide in the shadows of beauty, controlling beauty and all who view it as well.

A century and a half ago, someone dammed what was a naturally flowing creek and formed what is now the pond. Since then, the pond has become a meeting place for lovers, hockey players, ice skaters, and photographers. It is an item of note, a pretty landmark, a stop on a tour. And those who made it maintain it, like murderers who keep returning to the scene of the crime.
The green hills in front of Peabody Hall are fertilized. None of the white, purple, and yellow blooming trees are indigenous to what was once a beech-maple forest. What would be dense forest soil is trampled by footpaths littered with beer cans, candy bar wrappers, prescription pill bottles, other drug paraphernalia, and condoms.

The ponds banks are no longer soil, instead they are sculpted rock. The wildlife has been fully stocked. They swans cannot fly away in the winter because their wings have been clipped. All the animals are fed every week.

The natural riparian corridor has been replaced with grass that is mown twice a week in the warmer months and few random plants dedicated to people whose last wish was to set aside money for the continued degradation of a natural space.

As a result of the aesthetically pleasing landscaping, the pond fills with sediment at an alarming rate and needs to be dredged every eight to nine years. Instead of tearing down the dam, the decision was made to put aerators in. These pumps help circulate oxygen which keeps the pond from filling so quickly. It is also a reminder that there is nothing natural about the pond at all.

Since so much time and money has been spent in keeping up the pond, simply walking away is not an option. It is only adequate that some serious time and effort be spent finding the most functionally appropriate way of reducing the level of human management. Still it is clear that time is of the essence, the quicker human interference is minimized, the quicker the watershed has an opportunity to naturally correct itself.

Nature is not a toy to be manipulated for the enjoyment of people. It is much, much bigger than humanity will ever be and it deserves to be respected as such.
The first time I looked at Geoffrey, with his long curly hair and funny pants, I doubted he could tell me anything. It is a good thing I am woman enough to admit when I am wrong. Within the length of one essay, the meal that I had been avoiding had become a visit I did not want to end. He had intrigued me, and I what I thought of him did a complete one-hundred-and-eighty degree shift.

We spent the remainder of the evening talking about the impact that human management of watersheds has on their overall health, not just in this pond but everywhere. He told me about the serious degradation of the Blackfoot river in Montana (which apparently has similar issues with riparian borders), as well as how over-management of the Colorado river has made it more saline than the ocean. Admittedly, a few hours before, I did not even know what these things meant, but all of sudden I was really concerned. I think Geoff’s attitude was contagious. Over sticky pasta and warm wine, I was romanced into caring about a duck pond smaller than a big city puddle.

My friend Erasmus once said that my attraction to idealists would only lead to heartache. He is probably right, but that somehow doesn’t change the fact that all it takes is an impassioned argument to when me over. Call it the crime of being a writer.
Geoff put me in touch with some great sources. There is actually a course being taught on rivers around the area, and a few groups of students are studying the pond. The kids put me in touch with the Western College Alumnae Association, told me about the college archives, showed me the relevant books and pictures in Lane Public Library’s Special Collections, and even took me along when they interviewed the workers at Miami’s Physical Facilities plant. Honestly, the assignment is almost writing itself.

A lot of the stories I have come across are really kind of powerful. I am starting to appreciate how one can get attached to this little pond. Still, I hear Geoff’s voice in the back of my head reminding me that this pond is the work of the devil (laughing!).

I’ve been seeing Geoff almost everyday too. Who knows what will come of it but I enjoy hearing him talk about the world as he sees it. Certainly we don’t see eye-to-eye on a lot of things (most things in fact), but he’s articulate and well thought and that combination is certainly refreshing.

Tomorrow I have a meeting with Dr. Stanley Adams (doesn’t that name sound imposing), a professor of philosophy here at Miami. He’s a noteworthy guy around campus and apparently he’s going to “enlighten” me with a different set of views. We’ll see.

~end
Chapter 5

Dr. Stanley Adams is an interesting individual. He gardens. He writes poems, but admittedly is not a poet. He teaches philosophy at Miami University. His classes are always at full capacity (in fact there is a wait-list). Rumor has it that last year he convinced three juniors that they weren’t really human in a formal logic demonstration.

His office door is brown and has a frosted glass window. There is a poem attached to the center of the window with masking tape.

I Am the River

I am just a river

But the Blood of life flows through my veins

The coarse wet water

Weighs heavy upon the rock

And flows furiously

With an abandon that brings forth life.

The crisp cool of the air along the top of the crimson tide
Saturates and satiates my being

And as it flows

Along the canyons and up the heights

Around the bends

And through the blackest dives

It knows me

And I know life.

Dr. Stanley Adams is a well-liked fellow by most, but not by all. As an academic he has achieved a bit of notoriety for his theories of “Human Potential.” A short synopsis of his doctoral work reads:

The role of the human in the universe is to achieve goodness in reverent homage to God who is infinitely good (see argument for “God as good” within). Because this is man’s chief goal, his life must be directed toward this. He must equip himself with virtue and he must orient his life decisions toward goodness (in short, live virtuously). If he does this, he will see natural life processes and endeavors in terms of their ultimate good potential, their “human potential.” Understanding this will enable him to use the world around him in ways God intended for purposes God intended (Adams 3).
In recent months, he has given several lectures on the role of the Christian Steward in contemporary America. Today he is to meet with a New York journalist and discuss how he sees the campus on which he teaches.

“Hello Virginia, it is all right for me to address you by your first name, or would you prefer Ms. Israel?”

“Whatever you are comfortable with Dr. Adams. That is honestly not a question reporters get asked often.”

“Please call me Stan. I enjoy the informality of first names. What would you like me to talk to you about?”

“Well I am studying the Western pond. I guess a good place to start is to get a feel for how you feel about artificial landscapes from a philosophical perspective.”

“Well that is a great place to start Virginia. The first thing I would say is that there is no such thing as an artificial landscape. All landscapes are made by God and they are all composed of the same things. Whether people influence them has no bearing on their “realness” in that regard. It is a popular view that human interference in natural systems detracts from their “pristine-ness.” Many of the people who hold that view would also argue against the dominion of human beings over animals. If humans are indeed no better than animals, how can we view human interaction with nature as “interference” and animal interaction as “natural?”

“But what about the fact that humans use unnatural processes like combustion engines in cars, or the aerators in the pond to affect natural processes?”

“There is nothing unnatural about an engine or a pump. They work according to the laws of physics. If they did not, they would be unnatural. The use of tools to make
work easier is one of the things that identify man as having a superior intellect. Though some would argue otherwise, surely you Virginia, would agree that man is the smartest animal?”

“I would agree to that Stan. But I am a little confused, are you suggesting that humans creating pollution is natural?”

“Yes. All living things produce waste. Humans have a responsibility as a result of their stewardship to keep the waste we produce to an absolute minimum. That’s how it all works as far as I can see it.”

“I see. Well what is the inherent value of man “influencing” nature, as you see it Stan?”

“All over the world, in places like Easter Island, Stonehenge or even the Western pond, people have modified what God created. The modification itself shows an emulation of God, what I have termed “an emulation of good.” We are remaking out of what God has already created. This is the same thing as taking a picture or painting a sunset, or writing a song. When done correctly, it is more than just art, it is an attempt to describe beauty, Beauty itself being God.”

The interview went on for hours. Thoughtful questions, measured answers. The journalist and the philosopher discussed the world as they saw it to one another. Afterward, both of them were genuinely thankful for the opportunity to hear what the other one had to say.
Chapter 6

“I appreciate you both taking time to meet with me again. Over the past few weeks you have both been real inspirations to me. I can’t express how much you have both informed me about the importance of that little pond to this area. I thought I’d have you over just as a token of thanks. I can’t cook for shit so I ordered out. I hope you guys like Indian. If not, I’ve got some Lunchables in the pantry.”

“Indian sounds great.”

“Ditto. Hey, Virginia. I came across this short story and thought that this one part in particular might be significant to you,” said Stanley.

“Sure, I’d love to hear.”

“‘The Black man has been tricked by this country, this is true. But the real ploy of America is how it fools the Black man into tricking himself.’” His speaking voice was captivating and challenging at once. “‘America has built a world for Black people, with the slave labor of Black people. America has made you participants in your own demise. You have become prisoners of your own way of thinking. You are unready or unwilling to look at anything bigger than your projects, your basketball courts, your dope dealers, your junkies, your prostitutes, your rent, and your check. You fail to acknowledge that there are bigger relationships than those you have with that nigger down the street, or with your boss, or even with your family.

“‘In Africa, my Black brothers and sisters, we knew who we worshipped and we were thankful for what we had. We acknowledged that the earth was the source of our sustenance and we took care of it. When we were brought over here, we dragged our heels, praying that the earth would wrap itself around us and that we would be planted in
it forever. When we came to America, we worked the white man’s fields with that same reverence for the earth. We were better farmers than they were. Our fathers plowed the ground with their fists. Our mothers watered the soil with their blood, sweat, and tears. Then we were freed, and all we wanted was some land of our own. We are all from the South. We all had Big Mama’s and Papa’s who tended some land of their own. If it was a garden or a plantation, they made it work. They fed everybody with what they had. And they never forgot to thank the soil.

“'What I’m getting at is this, sisters and brothers. We tried real hard to get away from the oppression and shame of slavery, but while we were busy running, we failed to realize there was nothing shameful about farming. Agriculture is a most distinguished science and feeding your family with the gifts of Allah is a most rewarding enterprise. Many of us don’t even own property today. We have bought into the lie that doing for ourselves in the ways of our ancestors is shameful. We have refused our birth right. We believe that the earth is too distant a concern of ours. Instead we think of only the immediate. We look at city problems as our problems. We are from societies but not cities. We do not need the subway or television to live. But we need the earth.

“'We need to redress and refocus ourselves, Black people. Open up our eyes and see that our future is tied to that of the planet, not the policies of this country.’”

I looked at Stanley with a hope that I had no longer believed I had. Somehow this story that he read had made me believe that there was something more fundamental than money, policy, or even education. There is something humane about knowing what the earth means to humanity. I was already so taken back, there was no way I could have expected what Geoffrey said.
“I agree, Stan, economic policy should not govern the way we see the Earth, but the fact is it does. The White House decides its time for another war. Congress won’t spend any more money on ‘weapons of the future,’ weapons that will never be used for good if they are used at all. Some bureaucrat does a budget analysis and decides that too much money is being spent on education, some of that money can go to defense, and just like that, it’s done. Now state governments have to decide to either raise college tuitions or send kids to high school without textbooks. Tuition goes up and funding gets cut. And now there is an ethical debate whether or not a public institution should maintain a pond when its primary objective is to educate. And all this is all right because as you believe, the Earth is just something for us as humans to enjoy.

“Well it’s not all right, Stan. It’s not fine to impose upon a natural system and when it is no longer feasible to walk away. It is not okay to clip the wings on birds because they look pretty. It is not acceptable to cut down the natural vegetation of riparian zones so sweethearts can have picnics. It is not okay to introduce exotic species that out-compete natural ones as a recruitment tool. Nature is not just to look at. And when humans decide they have had enough, we can just pick up and go? No, Stan. No, that isn’t cool.

“Let me ask you a question. Can the swans in the duck pond fly away when they get tired of the aerators? Or how about if we forget to feed them? Can the plants get up and walk away when we stop fertilizing along the banks? Can the fish find new waters because the ones they currently inhabit are undergoing eutrification at an alarming rate? Or because the school needs to dredge the pond? Stan, I don’t give a damn if you can quote a book about people respecting the earth. As long as we look at it from an “us”
perspective, we are not affording the planet the respect it deserves. It is going to outlast us. You are an ethicist Stan, where is the compassion in the duck pond? Where is the Christian Stewardship? It all sounds like a bunch of bullshit to me.”

“Well I’m glad you can articulate your point with such tact, Geoff.”

“At least I have a point, Stan. You Christian conservatives talk out both sides of you mouth like it’s nobody’s business.”

“People who live in glass houses, Geoff, shouldn’t get dressed with the lights on. The environmental movement is currently approaching stagnation after about 50 years because its members can’t decide whether to be extremists or work within the existing paradigm. Meanwhile the church has been going strong for just over two thousand.”

“Whatever. The church is based on justifiable exploitation; meanwhile the Green Movement is really trying to make the world a better place.”

“By doing what? Suggesting that people have a number of children based upon species propagation and maximizing food resources with stats that are suspect at best? You all are both accusatory and fallacious!”

This argument was just beginning. I just sat there and watched $60 dollars worth of food get cold as they worked themselves up to the point they could no longer eat. Erasmus would love this: Little Virginia letting her love for idealists ruin her first dinner party. Oh well, what he doesn’t know won’t hurt me.
Chapter 7

The Pond

By Virginia

Oxford, Ohio- I met two very different men recently. One is holy, the other whole. Both want to remake me in the waters of the Western pond.

On the campus of what was formerly the Western College for Women (now a part of Miami University), lies a little pond that is the center of major ethical debate. The pond’s history is colorful and rich, but its future is unwritten. Some, like professor of philosophy Dr. Stanley Adams, believe that the pond is essential to the small rural community as a tie that binds today’s students with those of the last 150 years. Others, like graduate student Geoffrey Stewart view the university’s maintenance of the pond to be unethical and destructive to Miami’s physical environment and academic landscape as well.

The Western pond is an artificial landscape, a man-made oasis of sorts. It has been dammed for over five generations. Over that time, it has become part of the local lore of Oxford, itself a quaint college town. With the escalating cost of education and increasing awareness of the serious environmental implications of the dam and the physical upkeep of the pond and surrounding areas, many are saying it is time for the pond to go. Some, like Stewart are in favor of “letting nature take its course” and scaling back university efforts with regard to the pond. Others say that “letting the pond go” would come at too high a cost.
Dr. Stanley Adams is a quiet and captivating man. He often talks of grandiose things in plain ways, as though he has a genuine reverence for the abstract phenomena that shape our lives that the rest of us too often lack. Undoubtedly, some of his students refer to him as a mystic; his fellow faculty members look at him as both well-versed and zealous, an adventurous thinker.

Adams is the author of several scholastic articles, many of which deal with a concept he calls “the Human Potential.” Adams’ “Human Potential” is an unabashedly anthropocentric way of interpreting the larger issues that have puzzled mankind for thousands of years. Adams believes that it is appropriate for humans to limit their understanding of the world to what affects them, as many other species of animals do, but the application of his theory may be quite different than what you would expect.

“I am a Christian, and by virtue of that alone, I am a philosopher. I adhere to the tenants of Christianity both as moral code, and as a guide to handling or interpreting the universe around me. My being a Christian, and obeying the Bible is what led me to philosophy as a field of study” says Adams.

“Christianity is a skeptic’s religion. It is not the enemy of science some would have you believe it is. ‘Seek and ye shall find’ sayeth the Lord. Investigate. Challenge your own belief system. It is only then that you will know for certain if what you profess you believe is fit for you to believe.

“God created the Earth for man to have dominion over it. But He also charged man with the responsibility to keep watch over the Earth. He makes it clear in Genesis that the planet is on sort of a cosmic loan; one day He will return and the planet is to be in as good a shape as he left it.”
Geoffrey Stewart does not agree. Stewart is an Environmental Studies graduate student at Miami. Around campus, he is known for his fiery personality, his sharp wit and intellect and his impassioned arguments of behalf of nature. He has organized a group of undergraduate and graduate students to take survey of the “ecologically inappropriate” actions of Physical Facilities, or Pif as they call it, the on-campus department responsible for the handling of Miami’s green spaces. His take on humans and the environment comes from an ideologically opposite viewpoint than that of Adams.

“We as humans are at a point in our understanding of the universe where we can appreciate that we are not ‘it.’ Whether or not other intelligent life or supernatural beings govern reality, science has shown us that the planet existed and supported life billions of years before us, and barring catastrophe will support life long after we are gone. At this point in time, it is childish to look at the Earth, its geologic history, and its ecological health in terms of human beings.”

As I traveled to Oxford, a town of about eight thousand when school is not in session, I would have never thought that these arguments would have derived from talk of a duck pond. Alas, there were a great many things I did not know about the Western pond, things that make this very debate that much more vital and relevant in our current global climate.

For the students and residents of Oxford, the Western pond is as familiar as perhaps the Statue of Liberty is to New Yorkers. Neither structure is natural but both have become points of reference to both residents and foreigners. Both are backdrops for the incidental moments that can define a lifetime.
The Western pond has seen more than its share of late-night serenades, picnics, wedding proposals, class outings, and double-dares. Years ago, it was home to annual winter hockey games and summer cookouts. Rumor has it that female students of the Western College sunk a cannon in the pond and put an impromptu halt to Miami’s plans to become a military academy. And the oral tradition even goes deeper.

An African American stonemason named Cephas Burns led a team of builders that hand-polished and set every stone on the bridges and boathouse around the pond. He did it to pay for his daughter’s admissions fees to the college. His story, like so many others, seems to hide behind the surface of the water, threatening to be lost forever.

Having spent a considerable amount of time in Oxford, I can attest to the simple majesty of the pond. The way it is small and neat but far from quaint. The way it seems to capture the moon on cloudless nights, and hold it steadfast until dawn. When you are sitting on top of the boathouse, the whole world seems to fall down the hills and sit right beside you, overlooking the pond in quiet contemplation.

But I can also speak to the jarring reality of what Western Pond has become. The pond no longer freezes in the winter because of the aerator that sits in the middle. The pump circulates oxygen, which slows the rate with which the pond fills with algae and sediment. This is only a temporary solution; the pond still has to be dredged once every ten to fifteen years.

The pond is fully stocked with wildlife, an act itself that is worthy of serious ethical debate. The birds that call the pond home have had their wings clipped – they cannot fly away. Many of the plants that grow around the pond, no matter how beautiful,
are not natural and threaten the ability of those that are to survive. These are some of the reasons Stewart thinks it is time for Miami to let the pond go.

“The maintenance of an artificial landscape is more serious than keeping fish as pets. These animals have a right to be free. Instead they have been mutilated and forced to live in a foreign environment for our aesthetic pleasure. In addition to this, we are destroying the natural layout of the land by mowing the banks and not letting larger trees and shrubs take root. These plants would hold the soil, instead we have grass that is perfect for picnics and letting the ground it is planted in wash away.”

Adams rebuts, “We have dominion over animals. It is our duty to protect and respect them, but it is not inappropriate to have them as pets, and that is essentially what these fowl and fish are. Beyond that, the Western pond has a tremendous “Human Potential.” It is among the most photographed places on the campus. It inspires poetry, fiction, and prose. It is a place that lovers go to be alone with the natural world. In short is serves humanity well, and that is what nature is supposed to do.”

What will become of the Western pond is unclear. Despite campus-wide budget cuts, however, Physical Facilities has been given a budget that will allow them to continue feeding the fowl and fish, mowing the grass regularly, and fertilizing the natural and exotic plants in and around the pond.

Certainly what can be said is that the Western Pond is a social and cultural landmark as much as it is a physical phenomenon and that as such it has certainly sparked one of the most interesting and articulate debates Miami has seen in a few years. Who knows, maybe a university is the perfect place for the pond after all.
Chapter 8

It is Valentine’s Day and I only got two calls, and one from an environmentalist I dated a year ago. The second, however, was from my new beaux.

Geoff called needing a favor. It seems that he has presented a paper on the degradation of the Western pond and needs a faculty member to back him up. After talking to everyone who knows anything about the pond, he has had no luck and now needs my help. It seems that Stan has read the paper and has indicated he will back it up only if Geoff asks him in person (Stan would do such a thing even though they haven’t shared as much as a glance since the dinner party debacle at my apartment last year.).

Now this will be an interesting little scene indeed. Me back in Oxford, standing in a room tense with the kind of friction only academics can produce trying to smooth the waters between a former lover and my current one. Who knows how it will end up, but it is sure to be a story to tell…
Discussion Questions

• In the opening chapter of the book, we have a representation of New York City that is extremely vivid and descriptive. The language (i.e., “cold,” “gray,”) encourages us to read the scenes a certain way. How is this contrasted with the descriptions of Oxford throughout the novel?

• Many authors pay special attention to the names they give characters. What things (if any) do the names of the main characters tell us about their belief system or their role in the narrative?

• Author Erasmus Jenkins has spoken publicly about his use of symbolism in the text. Each of the main characters is to represent a broader group of people who adhere to the beliefs the main characters espouse. Are the representations effective/realistic/helpful? Do they speak to a broad set of issues or to a small one?

• Throughout much of story, we see the characters interact outside of the context of the pond. What (if anything) do these interactions tell us about their belief systems? (Keep in mind the fact that Marilyn is never at the pond during the actual narrative.)

• Author Jenkins spent a great deal of time researching this book. He even hired as a consultant hydrological scientist Tess DeSamples. Did you appreciate the incorporation of scientific data in the story? What does this do for the narrative? Is the subject appendix helpful?

• Virginia never fully articulates her stance on the pond. Why might this be? Is it a good decision on the part of the author?

• The relationship triangle between Virginia, Stanley, and Geoffrey is an apparent aside to the direction the novel is taking at this point. Why did Jenkins include it? Is it appropriate? Is it effective?

• Visualize the implied last scene of the novel that finds Stanley, Virginia, and Geoffrey standing around a table. Stanley and Geoffrey have yet to resolve their personal and ideological issues and Jenkins does not give any clear indication that they will. Still Jenkins argues
that the ending is not elliptical or elusive. Is his argument strong?

- After reading Building Eden, how do you feel about the environment/artificial landscapes/anthropocentrism?
Appendix

The Science Behind the Text:
Field Research, On Location at the Western pond

Introduction

One of the goals of Building Eden was to be a true to fact as possible. For that reason, we established a research team and studied the natural phenomenon in and around the Western pond. Our working hypothesis was clear: sediment load being carried to the pond by its stream is building up there, not escaping downstream over the dam. This would explain the dredging and aeration that seems to be necessary to maintain the pond in its current state. This is a reasonable hypothesis to make, as it is the case with many dams in the United States and the world. Our goal was to find out if the process gradually filling up Lake Mead is occurring in Western Pond.

We chose this aspect to study because the dredging, aeration of the pond are visibly and ecologically significant to the pond environment. Included in this part of the text is a discussion of our research methods and findings. Interestingly, we found the process of research, more so than the final results, most beneficial in assisting the writing of the book.

To test our hypothesis, we tested how much sediment flows into the pond and out of the pond. We had an upstream measurement, one right at the inflow to the pond, and also measured the water coming over the dam. We tested for sediment load and flow rate so that we could calculate amount of sediment moving into and out of the pond.
Data Collection

We had to revise our testing methods several times. At first we were going to sample one liter at five sites for ten consecutive days. We tried making one round of collection following these guidelines, and it took forever for the full liter of water to go through the coffee filters, which were specially dried in the oven for purposes of accurately measuring weight of sediment gathered. An outside consultant (Dr. Hays Cummins, Miami University) informed us that it would be more beneficial and a better use of our time if we were to measure multiple times at fewer locations, and rather than simply many days in a row, measure on a “rain day” and on a “dry day” so that we could better compare the two, hypothesizing that there would be a significant weather-based difference.

We changed our sampling methods accordingly, also cutting down to ½ liter in order to speed the testing process and adjusting for this when making the calculations. While the more statistically accurate flow meter worked very well for the in-stream locations, we couldn’t get it to work for the water falling off the end of the concrete dam structure. So we emptied the 5-gallon bucket, and recorded how many seconds it took to fill (averaging five tries), and converted this to liters per second, as the liter container filled too quickly to measure accurately on the ‘rain day.’

Next we took a dataset using these new guidelines – sampling 5 half-liter at each of the three places mentioned in the first paragraph – shortly after a large rainstorm. However, our head researcher was unable to take measurements at the inlet to the pond, as the swans’ nest was right next to our testing location, and they became rather territorial.
and prevented her from obtaining accurate samples. On another rainy day, we took measurements at the inlet. We hypothesized that this day would correlate in amount of rain and therefore have a similar sediment load. Looking at our data, this hypothesis was likely wrong. On this day, our research team craftily outwitted the swans. We took measurements at all three locations on a dry day, once again being prevented by the swans from gathering all our information, not obtaining any measurements other than sediment load.

In many places our results showed that filters lost mass after having collected sediment. We hypothesized that this was due to removal of some of the filter material by the water as it was poured through. To test this hypothesis, the team established a set of control filters. We took three dried filters, weighed each one and poured half a liter of distilled water through each of them, re-dried them and re-weighed them. They each lost .003 grams. Thus we revised our data by adding three thousandths of a gram to each ‘after’ measurement. While this is a very small number, it proved meaningful in our results.

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1 Head researcher Genevieve Knight was standing on the little jut of land at the southern end of the pond, preparing the equipment for testing, and both of the swans glided rapidly up to the bank right next to her. One climbed out and rushed at her, beak outstretched toward her leg, clearly intending to bite it if given the opportunity. Realizing her vital role to the project, she defended herself by hitting the swan on the head with the 5-gallon bucket holding the equipment, an act which merely stalled it, not even stunning the swan, and retreated for benefit of the whole research team.

2 Field scientist Ben Spinks distracted the swans with bread and popcorn on the other side of the pond while head researcher Genevieve Knight hurriedly gathered samples and ran as many tests as could be afforded before the swans noticed her and came streaking back across the water, sending her running back into the woods.
Results

Due to the difficulties we experienced at the inlet test site and the subsequent missing data as well as a second “rain day” that did not correlate with our main one as we had hypothesized, we decided to exclude it from our results. Based on our raw data (see data chart on page A-8), we were able to calculate the sediment load and flow from the two remaining test sites.

Our findings regarding sediment load and flow rate are interpreted graphically below:

** please note: the flow rate results from the dam outlet are not actual discharge rates, rather, they are bucket fill rates. While these are not the same, they closely related and thus we use them in the same manner.

The above charts show that less sediment and less flow leave the pond than enter it. This indicates that the pond is both collecting sediment and growing larger as water accumulates there.

The following three charts were constructed based on an analysis (conducted in Super ANOVA) of the data before we adjusted for loss of filter material based on our control findings. As every datum was adjusted in an identical matter, the relationships among them remained the same, and as the relationships are more relevant to our work than the exact numbers, we did not re-run the analyses. Note that ‘Change’ refers to
change in grams of the weight of the coffee filters, and thus the weight of sediment collected. These graphs tell us, in order, that more sediment was collected on the “rain day” than on the “dry day,” that more sediment was collected at the upstream location than was collected flowing over the dam, and finally compares the two sets of amounts to each other. The final graph shows seems to show that there was more sediment going over the dam on the dam on the “dry day” than there was flowing into the stream. However, once rate of flow is taken into account, as the above two graphs show, this relationship reverses itself. As the charts above each graph show, none of these relationships are statistically significant.

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Dependent: Change
Summary

Due to unforeseeable problems, our data set is incomplete. Specifically, we have a “rain day” that has no data for the inlet, a “rain_1 day” that has data only for the inlet, and a “dry day” that has data for all locations, but no flow or width/depth data for the inlet. These missing pieces of data affect the interpretation of our results as well as our critiquing of our experimental model.

Based on our results, it is easy to see that more sediment is entering the Western Pond than is leaving the system. Although the results are not statistically significant, on both dry and rainy days the amount of sediment flowing into the system dwarfed the comparably minute amount exiting the system. This relationship is best seen in the first two graphs. These findings make sense given the fact that Western Pond needs to be dredged occasionally and continued, year-long maintenance has also been found necessary.

The swans were a major source of error, as were our assumptions about the “rain_1 day” being the same as the “rain day.” Additionally there was the ever-present possibility of human error with the spilling of the water, misreading of the measuring tape or flow meter, etc., as well experimental error like assuming that the ½ liter we sampled was representative of all other ½ liters flowing through at that point, and assuming that we are able to average depths and flow rates as we did to produce what we used for calculations and analysis. The most likely reason for lack of statistical significance in our findings lies in our choices of days. Had we been able to take samples during a storm and on a day when it had not rained for a week, we would have likely come up with significantly different results. While this may not have changed the
relationship between the upstream site and the dam site, performing more tests may have.

Our suggestions to future research teams include a longer study period, greater research into the effect of weather on stream stages, and bring a professional to handle the swans.

**Raw Data:**

*Sediment Load*

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Short Story

A Word About “Monday”

“Monday” is a short story I wrote that is the inspiration for Building Eden. It has been included for two reasons in particular: the first is that one monologue from Monday appears in Building Eden. The second is that it is a text that I feel appropriately contextualizes a narrative about humanity and the environment. It has been a guide throughout and hopefully it will help you see what it is we tried to achieve in this text.

MONDAY:

Man, that alarm sounds like hell in stereo. I reach over and turn it off and contemplate how wise of a decision was it to go out on a Sunday night. Oh well – the damage is done – literally. Let’s get the hell up.

After my shower I head down-stairs to see my little brother still eating breakfast. My mother is rinsing of the pan she cooked his pancakes in over the sink. I call out ‘good morning’ to the both of them, then I tell them I’m running to the gas station to fill-up. I tell my little brother, “when I get back you better be in the driveway and ready to go, we’re late.”

Man, it sucks being in a house full of people, none of whom like the morning. Shit, I think I have an allergy to 6 o’clock. Needless to say I need to medicate myself.

After I pump my gas, I go into the mart and grab a pack of shrink-wrapped doughnuts, a ‘Tahitian Treat,’ and a pack of Newports. My total is over $20 dollars. Damn, “that seems real high,” I think to myself. Too bad you can’t protest the rising cost of gasoline. I feel like I just took out a life insurance policy to fill up my Cutlass and grab a breakfast of champions.

When I get home, sure enough, there is no little brother to be found. My head is still spinning a little bit from the night before, and against my better judgment, I honk my horn. He comes darting out of the house, his tie untied around his neck, shoes flopping of his feet, shirt untucked – damn I miss high school.

“You know she’s gonna yell at you for honkin’ this early.”

“You know I told your little ass to be ready to go,” I retort as we back out of the driveway. “We gotta go the Gardens before I drop you off. Plus she ain’t gonna be pleased you jumped over her flower bed either.”

“At least I didn’t jump in it!”

“Stupid.”

My mother loves her yard. Despite the fact that she works all day, volunteers at night, raises my little brother and finds time to yell at me at least twice a day for being the biggest disappointment she’s ever seen, she has the most meticulously cared-for yard and garden in the city. She doesn’t use any fertilizer because she said she didn’t have any growing up and back then they had to eat off what they grew. To me, when a blind man gets the gift of sight, he shouldn’t walk around with his lids taped shut, but she loves it, so she does it her way. Plus fertilizer costs.
As we pull into the lot of our old apartment complex, I can’t help but smile. It’s ironic to think about grass and yards and then come here. I’m not sure if all of the kids here have even seen grass. I pull into a parking spot by the basketball courts and me and my little brother jump out of the car. I walk over to my best friend and give him a pound, my little brother is already stripped down to a ribbed t-shirt, khakis, and dress shoes, talking shit on the basketball court.

I look at my friend, and it occurs to me that I love him so much that calling him friend is an insult. He knows that and I’m sure he feels the same way. We have been through everything together and the only reason we are alive to talk about it is each other.

“What’s the deal, my nigga?,” he calls to me.

“You know man, ain’t shit goin’ on but the rent. I just came by to make sure you can pick that biscuit head up from school” I motion to my little brother who right on cue steals the ball and dunks emphatically.

“Of course, you know I got your back.”

And I do know he does. He’s the most responsible high-school dropout/ playground basketball legend/ drug dealer I know. Sometimes I wonder why he is the way he is, why he’s not out charming the country into electing him president, but then again I already know the answer to that.

“Oh shit my nig, I almost forgot. I sent your mama a letter. If she needs anything, you know the deal.”

“Good lookin’ out my nig. I gotta run but I’ll holla at you later.” I turn to the court where my little brother is now putting on a dribbling exhibition, “C’mon punk! You gotta be to school in 20 minutes.” I here the other kids laugh at him and I know this tactic will have him running to the car – partly out of embarrassment, partly out of anger at me.

“What the fuck? Why you always trying to front on when we’re out and shit?

“Yo, I ain’t frontin’. You need to go to school. You goin’ to college for sure, but it ain’t gonna be on no basketball scholarship. You goin’ on the strength of your books. Do you wanna end up like me?” and just like that, the conversation is over. I would have made a great lawyer because I never ask a question I don’t know the answer to.

The truth is, me and my best friend only know each other through our older brothers. They were best friends who played basketball together everyday all day. I remember when my mother would literally chase them from the courts all the way to school because that was the only way they would stop shooting. They introduced us, and we quickly emulated them. The five of us (us and my younger brother) would run the court from when we got there till we left. Half of the crowd that always seems to gravitate to playground basketball spectacles thought we were arrogant because we played with an eight year old. The other half knew that that eight year old was one of the best players on the court.

That was like another world. We buried my friend’s older brother two years ago. Mine has been in jail for four. They were not bad kids, they just got touched by that hand of misfortune that tends to frequent places like ‘the Gardens’.

Two things happened when my brother was sent up. The first was my mother moved us the hell out of the Gardens. The next was she started getting “letters.” These letters contained $800 and came on a monthly basis. It was drug money sure. But it helped with the court costs and bills. It was a gift from my friend’s brother. When he got
shot, my friend took over the responsibilities of the letters. He upped their contents to $1000, he says “due to the rising impact of inflation,” but I know better. He’s afraid that he might not have too much longer to send the letters.

As we ride down to my little brother’s school, he gets dressed again. We get caught up in traffic, so he reaches into his bag and pulls out a book about something or other.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“It’s a book we’re reading for science class. It’s about the environment.”

“Why do they have ya’ll reading that bullshit?”

“What do you mean? I thought you liked science.”

That’s a fair statement. When I went to college, I was a pre-med major. I wanted to be a doctor. “Yeah but the shit I was into had an application. I was trying to heal people. Not talk about trees and shit.”

“That’s not what it’s about dumb ass. It’s about how we as humans affect the environment. I talks about how the earth is getting hotter and it’s mostly because of humans and our activities.”

“What activities?”

“Running cars, and machines that put out carbon and shit into the environment.”

“Yeah but what does that really do?”

“Think about it. Carbon traps heat into the earth’s atmosphere. Heat that under other circumstances would escape into space. Meanwhile, the sun is getting hotter. Add all this up and you get me ballin’ in a t-shirt in December.”

“Yo, that shit’s deep but it can’t be that simple. Don’t forget I’m not picking you up today.”

“I won’t. Be safe and have fun tonight,” he smiles and winks before he gets out the car. I should have never told him I was going out on a date tonight. He’s never going to let it go.

Those were the last words I would say to my brother that day. Something about what he said stuck with me, though.

On my way to work I picked up my phone and called my mother. “Mama, I just dropped that little knuckle-head off at school. He’s got a ride home. I won’t be in ‘til late.”

“Like last night?”

“Yeah Ma, like last night. You know I’m too grown for you to be checkin’ up on.”

“Oh yeah, but you still live in my house.”

“Yeah, but I pay rent too.”

“Exactly. I’m just watching my business interests.” Damn her. “And don’t honk anymore at 7 o’clock in the morning. You’ll wake the neighbors.”

“They needed to get up anyway. Hey, you wouldn’t believe what I paid for gas this morning.”

“Was it the gas or the cancer you smoke?” I ignore the second part of the question.

“It was well over $1.50 a gallon”

“That’s because of that clean fuel tax.”
“I hate that. I already have to pay to get my car emissions tested. Why should I have to pay a tax on gas?”

“Because we are close to an earth emergency,” she says with deadpan conviction.

“Have you been watching the Today show before work again?”

“Shut-up. Seriously. Haven’t you been watching the news? That sister that works for the president has been trying to get him to sign this Kyoto Agreement. It will govern global Carbon emissions.”

“Yeah, we were just talking about those earlier.”

“Well, the president doesn’t want to sign any agreements because it is basically a commitment to reduce the county’s dependence on fossil fuels. He’s an oil man and a whole lot of his friends will take it on the chin, if he signs the agreement.”

“This all seems a little silly to me. I just want a reasonably priced fill-up. All this carbon stuff just isn’t that serious as far as I’m concerned. I got bills to pay, and in order to pay them, I have to get money. In order to get money, I work. In order to get to work I drive. I pay too much for gas and I have to work more. Therefore, I drive more. I just want some cheap gasoline!”

“You have no brain. Go to work. Be good. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Probably.”

“Whatever Mama.”

I hung up with her and finished the drive to the docks. Life is funny. As I finish talking to my mother about the energy emergency that nobody even knows will happen, I arrive at my job where I unload crates of oil, off an oil rig, that is powered by oil.

The day is like none other. As me and the rest of the crew break our backs dragging drum after drum of crude off the boat, we amuse ourselves with dirty stories and dirtier stories. I smoke all but two of my Newports on the docks. I’m cutting back. Once someone asked me why I would smoke at work since I move oil drums for a living. I answered truthfully, “We all gotta go sometime. Why not with a bang?” I really am not afraid of dying. I just am afraid of what it would mean if my mother has to say goodbye to another son. That’s why all I just can’t get into all this environment shit. My environment is enough for me. Before I can worry about what’s going on in the atmosphere, I have shit to worry about down here in the streets.

After eight hours of hard labor, I clock out and ended my bid. I run home and take a shower before I go out tonight. I’m actually a little nervous about tonight. The girl I’m taking out means the world to me. And I can’t even tell her. Maybe she’ll be able to explain to me why all this shit about carbon (a gas that I thought was benign) is such a big deal, and why it affects me.

As I pull in to the driveway at home, I remember thinking about this book we read in high school. I think it was called Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. I thought it was a cool book in high school because I remember the author using an interesting narrative style. The book kind of unfolded in a way that echoed what it was trying to say. You see, I think her point was that nature was neither good nor bad, it just was. It was impractical, illogical, just a flat waste of our time to try and qualify nature as having a plan or being even conscious of its actions.

I liked this message for a couple of reasons. See I always looked at myself as just a blue collar type of guy (my mother says this is an elaborate defense mechanism. She says I do this so I can be lazy and not exercise my potential. Don’t you love moms?). I
felt like this book argued for everyone to kind of downplay their importance and try to grasp how much bigger than you nature is. I also felt like there were actions that me and my friends took that were, shall I say, less than legal, but that these actions were really part of our survival, not to be judged as right or wrong, but just as what we did to get by, the same way that she said nature just did.

Now that I’ve been out of high school for over five years, I know that my latter argument has some serious holes in it. But what concerns me now, as I make my way to the shower, is how much can we affect nature if we are just a small part in it. I remember the book talking about how we don’t even know how birds fly – how then can we start to understand how something like driving a car affects the whole world.

I hop out of the shower and get dressed and drive into the city. I’m meeting her at this bistro downtown I really can’t afford. The things men do for women. Anyway, I have to park a few blocks from the restaurant. As I am walking, I pass a Muslim standing out on a stepladder in front of his mosque. He is talking with such a passion that I can’t but look up. When I do, I see this crowd of people around. I look at my watch and realize I am about ten minutes early. I don’t want to get there before she does because I’m really trying to play it cool. So I decide that I can stop and here what this brother is talking about.

“The Black man has been tricked by this country, this is true. But the real ploy of America is how it fools the Black man into tricking himself,” he bellowed. His speaking voice was captivating and challenging at once. I listened more intently because he made me mad with what he said. I am nobody’s fool. “America has built a world for Black people, with the slave labor of Black people. America has made you participants in your own demise. You have become prisoners of your own way of thinking. You are unready or unwilling to look at anything bigger than your projects, your basketball courts, your dope dealers, your junkies, your prostitutes, your rent, and your check. You fail to acknowledge that there are bigger relationships than those you have with that nigger down the street, or with your boss, or even with your family.” He was a good speaker but he had me mad as hell. I listened as he told me that my concerns were trivial. That there was something that should be more important to me than my mother.

“In Africa, my Black brothers and sisters, we knew who we worshipped and we were thankful for what we had. We acknowledged that the earth was the source of our sustenance and we took care of it. When we were brought over here, we dragged our heels, praying that the earth would wrap itself around us and that we would be planted in it for ever. When we came to America, we worked the white man’s fields with that same reverence for the earth. We were better farmers than they were. Our fathers plowed the ground with their fists. Our mothers watered the soil with their blood, sweat, and tears. Then we were freed, and all we wanted was some land of our own. We are all from the South. We all had Big Mama’s and Papa’s who tended some land of their own. If it was a garden or a plantation, they made it work. They fed everybody with what they had. And they never forgot to thank the soil.

“What I’m getting at is this, sisters and brothers. We tried real hard to get away from the oppression and shame of slavery, but while we were busy running, we failed to realize there was nothing shameful about farming. Agriculture is a most distinguished science and feeding your family with the gifts of Allah is a most rewarding enterprise. Many of us don’t even own property today. We have bought into the lie that doing for
ourselves in the ways of our ancestors is shameful. We have refused our birth right. We believe that the earth is too distant a concern of ours. Instead we think of only the immediate. We look at city problems as our problems. We are from societies but not cities. We do not need the subway or television to live. But we need the earth.

“We need to redress and refocus ourselves Black people. Open up our eyes and see that our future is tied to that of the planet, not the policies of this country.” The applause was tremendous. I sat there completely dumbfounded and mystified by what he was saying. How could he be talking to me like that?

While everybody kept applauding I looked at my watch. Shit. I’m late. I run the next two blocks and walk the last, just so I don’t look flustered when I get into the bistro. She’s waiting for me and she looks stunning. She is sitting at a table in the back that is barely lit. I can’t help but think bad things.

“And where have you been, Doll?”

“I was on my way over here, and I got caught up at the mosque.”

“Oh really? Does your mom know your going to convert?”

“Naw, it wasn’t like that. This brother was speaking on Black people and the environment and shit and it was so tight I just lost track of time.”

“Did you like it?”

“I don’t know. For some reason or another, I’ve been thinking about this all day. I guess it’s ok to be gnawing on something while I’m at work though. Helps me get through the day faster. But now I want to talk about you,” I think to my self, “Damn I’m good!”

“No, I’d rather talk more about your day. It sounds kind of interesting.” I mutter a short but efficient string of curse words under my breath. “And you need to stop swearing,” she adds.

“Well this morning, I was talking to the little brother about a book he was reading for class. It was talking about how humans have made the earth hotter than it should be. That’s why I’m wearing a leather coat instead of a parka right now. Then I was talking to my mother about the president and this conference or agreement or some shit, I mean some stuff, that would reduce the amount of carbon we put into the air. So if the president signs this ‘whatever,’ then the world won’t get any hotter and every one is happy. Except me. And the boys at the dock who make a living shipping oil. And everyone who wants to drive their car. And heat their house. And cook dinner. It’s all so complicated to me. Plus I thought that nature and the environment was what made us happen. So how can we ‘hurt’ it? But then this brother at the mosque was saying that Black people stopped caring about the environment and that’s why everything is all fucked up now.”

“First of all, watch your mouth. What did the guy at the mosque say?”

“He said that we have forgotten that we used to grow plants and feed ourselves and love nature just ‘cause we didn’t want to be slaves.”

“Well that’s very different from saying Blacks are the cause of our current environmental crises.”

“Why does everyone want to make this a crisis?”

“Because it is, Babe. Remember a few years back, all that stuff about aerosol?”

“Yeah.”
“Well that was because there were chemicals in aerosol called CFCs. They got into the atmosphere and destroyed the o-zone layer. Now dangerous UV rays can come into the earth. The radiation can cause cancer and a host of all sorts of bad news.”

“Yeah I remember that. But I also remembered we took care of it. The same way they stopped putting stuff in the lake that killed it.”

“That stuff they were putting in the lake was phosphorus. And just like with the CFCs, we only really got concerned after things were already going wrong. But this carbon problem, it’s more like the CFC’s than the phosphorus. Both carbon and CFCs cause long-term damage to the atmosphere. The later we take steps to fix it, the worse off we will be. The problem won’t be fixed in our lifetime either way you look at it. But if we don’t change, it may not be fixed in time for our grandkids.”

“Yo, that’s deep, but isn’t it true that we all go extinct anyway? What difference does it make if it’s in 500 years of or 5000? I mean, the way you put it, I recognize that this is important, but so is a lot of other stuff too.”

“But this is important to a lot of people right now. It has been all over the news and it was even a big deal in the last election.”

“It wasn’t a big deal to me. I don’t remember anybody breaking it down like you just did.”

“Maybe they should have made a bigger deal out of it, but the reality is that it isn’t a real attractive issue. It’s easier for candidates to play into people’s fears about the economy, than to raise serious issues about domestic and international policy that affects the energy lobby. The energy lobby is one of the largest and it doesn’t hurt that the president is an oil man.”

Throughout dinner, she and I talk more about policy and even some of the science behind these chemical cycles that are supposed to mean so much to me. Not exactly the date I had in mind, but it will do.

After dinner we decide to go the Omni-max and watch a movie about Antarctica. I just can’t shake this nature thing today. Oh well, if it ain’t broke…

The movie is a lot of fun. The theater always reminds me of growing up, probably because we because I feel so small in it. When look up at the screen, I see this ice. It is so white. I can feel the crisp biting of the air. The penguins darting across the screen hypnotize me. I am caught up in a film about a place. I try to act reasonably happy but not too impressed – I still don’t want to blow it.

We drive back to her place for a nightcap, and now I can’t stop talking about the environment. I am amazed that humans have the ability to corrupt something as pristine and remote as Antarctica. We don’t even live there.

We get home and begin to drink. The conversation shifts from the environment to me and her. Although I can’t deny that today’s activities have had a serious affect on me, I am still a man and she is still my friend with whom I’d like to become more acquainted.

In between our kissing and touching she tells me about a scientist she studied in school. His name was Lovelock. She said he had this theory that everything living and non-living was related. He looked at the earth as a kind of living organism itself because of all the intricate interactions and sub-interactions within it. He called all this Gaia. Now dirty old me, I was thinking of connecting with her, but I still heard what she was saying. She said that even though the amount of carbon humans put into the atmosphere compared to what the earth itself does (through natural processes like volcanoes) was
almost inconsequential, it was enough to disrupt the delicate balance between the earth which releases carbon, and vegetation which consumes it.

Eventually, our conversation turned into drunken jibberish. We both had had too much to drink and I was trying to make sense of a whole lot in a short time. The night ended with me trying to communicate to her that I loved her, and failing miserably. I called my friend (I was way too drunk to drive) and kissed her good-bye.

On the way home, I cursed the way I grew up. My mom says the reason kids play basketball at 6 in the morning in the Gardens is because that’s all they have to live for. I wish aloud I grew up in a place where I had something more to live for. Maybe then I could tell her I loved her. Maybe then I could appreciate something more than just this drunken stupor that I am in. My friend reminds me that I do know what love is. He says that my mother says it at least 50 times a day. He is right. And I am drunk and confused. He drops me off and tells me to sleep it off. He says he’ll call me tomorrow to see if I’m fit for work and if necessary he’ll drive little brother to school. I stumble out of the car and say “I love you, Bro,” and head into the house.

I get to my room and it’s hot. My mother feels compelled to run the heat because it’s December, regardless of whether or not it’s cold. I turn on the ceiling fan, and lay down on my bed fully dressed. I watch the light come in through the half-opened blinds and get distorted even more by the fan. I reach over to pick up the phone, apologize for making an ass out of myself, I am still drunk mind you, but then I feel a note. (Upon later review, I’m glad I didn’t call). I rolled over and read “Call your father as soon as you read this. AS SOON AS YOU GET THIS! I figured that I should call him so I did.

My father and my mother have been divorced for a long time. He is as absent-minded as they come but he means well.

“Hello, Dad?”
“Hello? What time is it?”
“Three somethin’. What’s goin’ on?”
“I just wanted to see how you were doing,” he yawns.
“I’m cool,” I respond as I wait for the catch.

“Yeah, well Son, I was talking to your mother and basically you need to bring your ass home before the roosters. And preferably sober—at least on Sunday’s.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m just tryin’ to figure some stuff out right now Pop. Like today, I been thinkin’ about the environment and shit. I know it sounds absurd for me, a 23 year old Black man with a blue collar job to even give a damn, but I just can’t seem to stop thinkin’ that I’ve got some sort of responsibility to the environment. I don’t know, I’m drunk.”

“Well you are drunk, but its not that big a deal for you to be thinking about the environment. Do you want to go back to school and ...”

“Hold on cowboy. I ain’t said shit about goin’ back to school. I just been thinkin’ bout how we as Black people ain’t really got no reason not to be aware. I mean, we live on the planet too. And I’ve been hearin’ shit all day about how this is serious right now. And how it’s big. Real big.”

“Yeah well it is all of those things. I remember reading a book by this politician who said that there were three levels of environmental problems: local, regional, and global. Problems like polluting water with fertilizer are local. Acid rain is regional
because it affects people in larger areas, like across state lines. Global warming is obviously a global issue.”

“When did you start reading stuff written by politicians? Or about the environment for that matter?”

“The old man ain’t all piss and vinegar you know. Shit ain’t a book written I ain’t read!”

Now you talkin’ crazy!”

“No but seriously son, there is a lot of good stuff out there that deals with the issues you are thinking about in a one-person context. There is a book out called *The End of Nature*. I can’t remember the author’s name, but he talks about how nothing ‘natural’ really is anymore. We have put our foot in everything so you can never know if a sunset is beautiful or if the smog is heavy. Is the weather unseasonably warm, or is the Earth heating up. But we’ll talk more later. Go to bed. I have to go to work in the morning and so do you. That job is a good one and since you don’t want to go back to school, I suggest you keep it. I love you, boy.”

“Love you too, Pop.”

I lay in my bed. The room is spinning because of my drunkenness and my head is hurting because I am convinced in my drunken stubbornness that I need to make sense of all of today’s events right now. I remember my grandmother telling me that everything is written in the Bible. As has become my custom as of late, I sit on the side of my bed, and underneath my lamp, read scripture and try to figure out what the fuck is going on in my head. I read some passages that deal with stewardship. From them I get the feeling that God put the Earth in our hands to take care of and not abuse. But also, that if we mess it up, we have a responsibility to do something to fix it because it is His and we just have it on loan. Then I read this passage from the Book of Revelations that said in short, God will come back some day and reclaim the Earth which up to that point he put humans in charge of. When he comes for it, it better be in the right shape. Somehow, that excerpt triggered a series of coherent thoughts that eventually gave me enough peace to go to sleep.

Humans are given the responsibility of taking care of the Earth by God. The responsibility comes with a large degree of freedom, because until he comes back, we can pretty much do what we want with it. Still, when he comes to collect, it can’t be broken. This poses a little bit of a problem though, because we are currently in the process of breaking it. Breaking something made by God is certainly a tough task, but we are more than ready for it. Around the time we forgot about God, we started finding ways to make money off of it. Currently, we make money off both the idea of nature and energy, two things that I’m not sure we should be able to sell anyway. Still, we have profited so much off of energy, we are reluctant to give that up (note: see the president). Likewise, we act to make money before we understand what the outcome of our actions may be (i.e., that little CFC situation).

Now, however, we are aware of the impact of our actions, and we must now deal with whether or not we are going to take responsibility for our actions or not. We know that the Earth, at least as we know it, is dying and that we may not actually make it to the time when God gets back (I would suspect that this would piss Him off a tad). Still, whether or not we shape up, the Earth won’t stop (at least if that Lovelock fellow is to be
believed). That is actually a little scarier. What if God gets so pissed at us He’s like fuck it, I’ll try again. I am going to Heaven, dammit. I have put I too much time on my knees praying to just get erased.

But the big issue is this, this whole nature/earth/ environment shit is real big and real important. It is so complicated that we can’t know if what we do wrong can be corrected, but we do know enough to do right. Now I am too drunk to figure out all the logistics, but I think if we make a conscious effort to treat the earth better, it will benefit us all in the long run.

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