

Subversion & the Suburban Lawn

Lily Fessenden

My suburban neighborhood appears to be an orderly, controlled and safe environment. This appearance is achieved entirely by human effort. The yards have carefully trimmed bushes, special areas for flowers, and lawns that are close-cut and heavily sprayed so as to allow only certain grasses to survive. This neat and well-manicured look is achieved by constant maintenance during most of the year. Leaves and grass clipping must be swept up, weeds pulled and luxuriant growth suppressed. The heavy investment in time and money signify the importance of this endeavor to its practitioners, and my reluctance to spend family resources in this way led me to question the benefits of constructing an environment that needs this constant vigilance.

My neighbor Miriam provided me with an excellent opportunity to explore an alternative to this particular way of organizing shared life space. Our suburban neighborhood is predominantly made up of heterosexual couples with children. One or both adults are employed, each household has two cars, and we share the idea that we are all mentally competent. Miriam is a young widow, unemployed and her behavior is unpredictable. Her car is broken, so she hitchhikes. Before her house was repossessed, she accumulated two years of garbage in her garage and lived without hot water for lack of resources to make repairs. She was often gone for long periods of time, and her absence once caused the fire department to break into her house to see if she had died. This lifestyle brought a strong element of disorder into the security of our suburban world. However, everyone seemed capable of isolating this reminder of life's diversity until Miriam let her yard go.

For two years no human hand touched Miriam's little patch of suburbia. Carefully trimmed bushes exploded into weird and wonderful arrangements until the house was

engulfed in furry shapes. The deck and chimney were dressed with vines and the lawn exhibited a diversity that was a constant delight. Like all the other houses on the street my kitchen sink has a window over it, and as I did the dishes I could observe the wilderness emerging from Miriam's once conventional yard. Heather, devil's paintbrush and huge patches of violets were allowed their full growth. Pinecones, needles and leaves lay where they fell, forming new patterns every day, sometimes every hour. The added cover of the long grass, and the seeds, worms and insects attracted many animals. Chipmunks and squirrels, skunks and woodchucks – even the local fox could be seen now and then. The birds gathered in the trees and woke me with their glorious harmonies each morning. I was entranced by this transformation. I yearned to break ranks and join this revolt against managed nature.

One morning I looked out the window to find that one of Miriam's other neighbors had cut the lawn where he shared a property line with her. The masses of violets were shorn, the pinecones shredded, and the beautiful grasses no longer shaped the wind. What was so disturbing about this freed patch of earth that enabled this man to overcome the cultural taboo against interfering with private property? There was much discussion in the neighborhood about Miriam's yard. The former owner wept when she drove by and saw its new form. Everyone seemed to be relieved when the bank took over and hired someone to cut the yard. Despite its still shaggy appearance, conformity with social norms have been reestablished, and we can once again see our neighborhood as an island of sanity in a sea of increasing complexity.

Everyone but me that is. I maintain my yard only to the extent that insures the goodwill of my neighbors. From my yard, fingers of dandelions reach out into theirs,

beckoning them to join me. Leaves from the maple gracing the northwest corner of my yard fall in great piles that dance with the wind up and down the street. Neighborhood children stare wide-eyed as I pull a carrot, point out a tomato hornworm, invite them into the pea patch. They eagerly join me in digging for treasure in the shape of potatoes.

I loved Miriam's yard because it was a window into the wildness I am missing. Its eradication illustrated the disconnection between person and nature that is the root of so much destruction. The rigid construction of a suburban lawn fosters the illusion that people can control nature and I feel imprisoned in the conformity it encourages.

Last night I crept outside, clothed in nothing but my long hair, to bathe in the moonlight and feel corn silk caress my skin. I whispered sweet nothings to the sugar beets and imagined myself free to grow into the shape that is meant for me. I was Eve in my paradise.

Today as I move about the managed landscape I plot the liberation of grasses and blow dandelion seeds into my neighbor's yards. "Every day," said Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, "the glory is ready to emerge from its debasement."