

Charles Goodrich

Four Dispatches from the Garden

1. *Artichoke Futures*

Too hot for June. The sky is bone white, and the sun seems much too close. What am I doing out here anyway, lips chapped, eyes stinging, sweat-soaked before noon?

I'm unclogging nozzles, that's what! Setting sprinklers, hooking up soakers, dragging hoses around the yard. Who could have foreseen a heat wave this soon?

At least the artichokes are happy, their armored hearts clenched tight in spiny scales. If we let them flower, they'll open into monstrous blossoms, purple ogres with bumblebees in their nostrils. But we won't let that happen. We're going to cut off their heads, and eat them.

2. *Scar*

The big garter snake basking beside my wheelbarrow is an old acquaintance—I recognize it by that nasty scar on its side. Its sleek body has a bulge halfway back, the yellow pin-stripe interrupted by a dark lump with no scales.

I gave it that wound. Harvesting spuds last summer, I turned up a forkful of new potatoes and one writhing snake. I'd nicked it with a tine of the spading fork.

It looks peaceful enough, sleeping in the sun, but I'll bet that wound still aches. Of all the garter snakes that live in our yard, this is the only one I know on sight. I wish it weren't so, but I never forget the creatures I have hurt.

3. *Eco-Tourism*

I lift a slab of half-rotted lumber at the edge of the garden, and find myself in a teeming bug metropolis, as if I'd stepped off a train in a city

where I don't understand the language.

Centipedes, like articulated buses, cruise into freeway tunnels. A gang of ants hustle little white eggs into underground alleys. Sow bugs, a fleet of gray taxis, weave in and out of traffic. The soil itself seems to be moving, like a city sidewalk crawling with pedestrians.

Suddenly I realize it's getting late. I need to find a room for the night. Where the hell am I anyway? Does anyone here speak English?

4. *Garage Sale Ecology*

Whenever I cross paths with Maynard, he's filling his old VW with cinder blocks, short lengths of lumber, plastic flower pots, scraps of fencing, tangles of baler twine—the dregs of everybody's garage sales—stuff he uses for building raised garden beds in his backyard. He feeds at the bottom of the garage sale food chain, and always finds plenty.

Me, I'm usually looking for something specific: a left-handed tin snips, a throttle cable for my rototiller, or a pump sprayer that hasn't been used for pesticides. Most days I come home empty-handed, my time wasted.

I thought about Maynard last night as I listened to a biologist talking about climate change, how plants and animals here in the Willamette Valley may respond. The generalists, she told us, will likely adapt and thrive. The specialists are going to have to migrate or die.