The *Trumpeter*
ISSN: 0832-6193
Volume 23, Number 1 (2007)

Battle of Britain

How it is that I'm not a vegetarian

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For an American in Essex, this is as far in as you can get. In the village, in the allotments, in my garden, in the soil. I can sense Phil somewhere off to my right. He'll be doing something to his already perfect runner beans, his Battle of Britain hat securely affixed to his head. Teresa is off behind me amongst her geometrically precise raised beds.

Essex is the sunny part of a cloudy nation, and the spirit of contradiction is manifest. If you meet Phil at the front of his house, he'll be happy to tell you, perhaps in more detail than is strictly necessary, about chasing Rommel, desert fox and worthy opponent, across North Africa in the war. Phil is a cripple who drives a little-old-man golf cart around the village. He's a broken warrior. Behind his house, where the allotments begin, however, yeoman Phil walks with hardly a limp and

puts in seven-hour stints with heavy old-fashioned tools that, now that I think of it, actually do look like swords beaten into ploughshares.

East Anglia, east of England, east of Eden: the idea of a better garden lingers in the collective unconscious. Things grow, history presses in. The pillboxes on the rivers and tidal flats were for fighting Germans, but the vines and the children have taken them over. With my boys last year, I found a pitchfork blade six feet up in a tree, and the tree has engulfed it. The month before, five miles away, archeologists unearthed the largest horse-racing forum outside of Rome. “When in Rome,” I say to myself, digging into my garden. Sometimes ten or fifteen pieces of broken pottery come up with each shovel load, but if these are the Roman shards everyone else finds, I won’t know it. I’m holding out for gold coins, and in any case this was a rubbish tip before it was allotments.

The true Essex oldsters are still here, even if the East Londoners have crowded in on top. Brian, another allotment senior, is a young man still. He’s had one hip replacement but when he brings his shearing clippers into play, nudging his hedges in the direction of topiary, his triceps press out sturdily against the fabric of his button-down. When he was a boy, a German plane went in nose-first at the back of the allotments, and not far away in Langham across from the Ardleigh House pub where the American 8th Air Force aerodrome was, Brian saw a Thunderbolt pilot land but be unable to get out of his burning plane.

Brian actually lived in the pub, which for a kid was like having a front-row seat.

Liam and I climbed into the stinging nettle back of the allotments last week, looking for the downed Messerschmitt. Liam can tell which ones sting and which don't, and he spent his time waving the non-stingers at me. Or at least the ones he said were the non-stingers.

Phil is roguish out front on Rectory Road, and will offer class-based comments to strangers. English people really are reserved, but sometimes the exigencies of class will bring them out of themselves, just as in America it is race which is likely to make street scenes memorable. In back, Phil is kind, and without his help my garden wouldn't work at all, though Teresa says that if Phil gets his Battle of Britain hat on, he is likely to be more assertive. So I keep a weather eye on Phil, and am careful to water the marrow plants he has given me. My garden is a disgrace, as if a number of horticultural and aesthetic theories had had an accident here.

In truth the garden is a peaceful space but it has also enabled me to extend the range of my instinct for existential crisis. My vegetarianism has faltered in the face of the apparent necessity to fold, spindle, and mutilate thousands of sentient creatures. The English word for plowing—harrowing—is also the word for distressing, as in "the harrowing of hell."

The other day the stray tom who sleeps sometimes in our kitchen left the perfect semblance of a rabbit in the back yard—the garden, as even the yard is called here—four paws and two ears but no body, as if he were teaching the bunny how to be a Cheshire cat. Tough love. But it is only today, when Teresa points to where the rabbits have been grazing on my allotment lettuces, that I understand why the lettuces just outside our kitchen haven't been touched. The tom and I are in collusion, a lettuce protection racket, though I meant only to stroke her soft fur and admire her ears, notched in battle with Mary's cats, in the house next but one.

Brian used to keep ferrets, and set them into the rabbit holes. Now he uses traps, and when he gets a rabbit he holds it dangling as comfortably as he would a turnip, and I don't look too closely to see if it is alive. "Little bastards," says Phil, but he says it cheerfully and without the animosity he reserves for life at the front of his house, and for rich Londoners.

In a part of my allotment which I meant for low tillage, where I have broadcast lettuce seeds in non-rectilinear patterns and discovered too late that straight lines are a way of arranging information to aid the process of weeding, I am now performing triage on the lettuces. Instead of pulling the weeds I pull the lettuces and set them up elsewhere. My original patch has been doing a good job of subverting the monocultural hegemony of the lettuces. Which is to say it's been doing a bad job of being an English garden. "Weeds are a social construct," I say to myself. But in the high street outside the bookshop I meet the formidable Celia O'Donnell, and she hints at the polycultural perversity of weeds and their reproductive stamina and gracefully dismisses it at the same time. "Don't worry about your thistles, Fat Hen, bell vines and Flander's poppies," she tells me with alarming specificity. She shakes my hand and hers is strong and calloused. Unlike America, England still has bookshops, and villagers outside them likely to have noted in some detail your struggle—or insufficient struggle—with weeds.

Today I stand here, my Stetson angled against the sun, weeds and grasses around me like recovered American prairie, the gentle breeze tossing thousands of random seeds into neighboring allotments, and I feel absolution transcending my shame. "Don't worry," is Celia's message. It's going to be okay.

But as I splice small cones of black loam topped with leggy green lettuces into new configurations two yards away, orange ants bleed

from the soil cross-sections like thin streams of lava. If you don't look too closely, you might not notice the interpenetration of these ant structures with those in the target patch. If you don't think too hard, you might avoid the implications of your incursion: hours- or days-long struggles between the creatures of different nests. If you don't think at all, you won't be conscious of the maimings your trowel has caused. It's all a matter of perspective. We think of getting food as a struggle, but in this case the struggle is all on the part of the small creatures. They do nothing to hurt the lettuces. For me, the unharmed lettuces, green battle pennants on a dark but verdant field, register less as an oversight than an active kindness, like the solicitude of the Essex villagers. It might make me feel better if the ants actually offered to injure the lettuces, but they don't.

I used to define my vegetarianism with a kosher clarity which kept rennet—bits of a cow's body—out of my cheese, and left honey for bee babies. But a few square meters of English garden soil offer little clarity. Even to get there you've probably crushed several animals with your elephant bulk, and calling them insects defers the problem rather than solving it. No matter how closely you look in a spadeful of soil there is another event horizon farther down, another cluster of animals interacting, smaller and smaller, apparently approaching infinity, world within world. The capacity of a single vegetarian to wreak havoc is endless. It's true that I don't eat meat but I think it might be time for me to call a spade a spade and start thinking how it is that I am not a vegetarian, consider more fully the extent of my non-vegetarianness.

The soil conservationist Stephen Lewandowski says that Darwin favored his treatise on worms—it features the activities of worms in a few square meters of English soil—over his other published works. If that's true, that would include Darwin's preference even for his study of Patagonia, which tells a tale of origins and is in one sense the ground of being for modern science. The back garden is the final frontier of the unknown, deep space, wilderness.

My friend John, also a war survivor, says simply, "you gotta eat." By this he means something very English, that your class affinity ought to be the strongest expression of your being. To eat, you need a job. It annoys him that pubs in England have fawning monarchical fantasy names like "Rose and Crown" or "The Stag" (upper classes hunt stags). "What about 'The 1945'?" John proposes, referring to the year Churchill was ousted in favor of a Labour government.

If a spadeful of soil from the emerald isle is a microcosm of village life, it does rather look like class struggle, the tool-wielding gardener fitting neatly into the profile of the owner of the means of production, who is unlikely to have the welfare of the villagers as a central concern.

Do vegetarians have to eat? Possibly not. If a vegetarian is someone who doesn't hurt animals in order to eat, then the vegetarian doesn't have to do anything, because he or she surely does not exist.

Here in the allotments, I can tell without looking that Phil is making his way toward me, adjusting his hat as he comes. I thrust my blade deep into the earth. My eyes are runny from allergies, so I can't see things in great detail. With allergies, if you were crying, you might never know it.