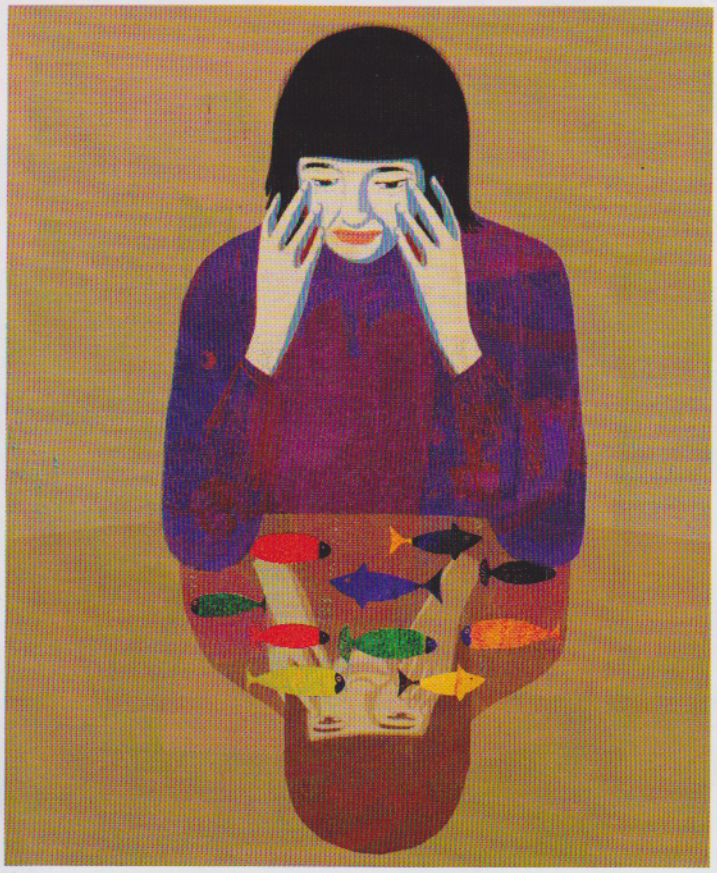
ESSAY

A Garden Despite Myself

On wreaking havoc even with the very best intentions

BY LISE FUNDERBURG



ALL I WANTED was a simple pond. Two years ago, alongside my husband and one of my sisters, I joined my local community garden. We became the stewards of a 40-by-60-foot plot on the crest of the Schuylkill Valley, along Philadelphia's northwesternmost boundary. With an enthusiasm completely untethered by experience, I imagined a back-to-the-land idyll in a garden run with only one ironclad rule: no chemicals allowed.

I put copies of *The New Organic Grower* and *The Garden Primer* by my bed, but I should have also picked up Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. We were only halfway through our first season when we realized that planting, weeding, and watering alone were not enough to ensure a good harvest. An army of free-range garden pests had it in for our plants. Beetle larvae chewed through tomato leaves while I watched. Insidious squash vine borers collapsed entire vines—always about 13 seconds before the melons were ready to pick.

It was with these enemies in mind that I began to lay plans for my pond. Mine was a basic eco-friendly pest management strategy: Enlist indigenous frogs to eat plant-destroying pests! I spent the next winter reading about ponds, dreaming of little tadpoles clustering at the edges of their new habitat. Could I really just dig a hole, fill it with water, and expect frogs and toads to be drawn to it? Essentially, the world of pond lovers assured me, the answer was yes.

Well, almost. To create a pond without a pump, you need oxygenating plants. To ensure that you don't create a mosquito-breeding ground, you need larvae-eating fish, which means you have to dig down below the frostline to keep the fish from freezing in winter. In addition, you need to pay extra for a fish-safe liner to keep the water from being absorbed into the earth, preferably one made of high-grade synthetic rubber such as ethylene propylene diene monomer (EPDM).

Let the record show that I did not cheap out on the liner. But when it came to the fish, I went to my local PetSmart and purchased a dozen two-inch-long feeder fish. These were comet goldfish, bred to bear up under overcrowded conditions. As I released them from their plastic bag into the pond, my 11-year-old niece gave them each names. I reveled in my *Free Willy* moment, glad to give little Max and Puppy and Glub and their finned brethren a better destiny than the one originally assigned them. (Most comets leave PetSmart as dinner for pet piscivores such as Oscars, turtles, and red-bellied piranhas.)

Time passed. Frogs and toads came, tadpoles emerged, and at least five of the fish survived the birds and raccoons and snakes, only to grow bigger and bolder as the season progressed. We put the garden to bed that fall, and when winter came, I spent my gardening energy pondering seed catalogs, wondering how my fish were faring, and suffering more than a few Mrs. Paul's jokes from a certain spousal naysayer.

The next spring, as soon as the ice thawed from the pond's surface, I decided to do a little tidying up. Stirring water from the bottom as I raked out twigs and leaves, I came across one stiff fish after another. Some I'd never seen before—minnow-like fish that had perhaps been dropped from a raptor's talons or delivered as an egg between the toes of a toad. I steeled myself as I helped the fish along in their cycle of life and death. As I scooped out each little fallen soldier, noting its stillness, I threw it into the adjacent bed with the slender consolation that at least it would find purpose as a soil amendment. Later that day, I shared my grief with a friend who knew his way around fish. When I mentioned the curious fact that the corpses had kept their coloring and had no white film clouding their eyes, Juan said, "Are you sure they were dead?"

Oh, I said. Oh, oh. Before I could form a full reply I realized I had trampled all over an ancient ecology. I hadn't allowed for dormancy—the curtailed blood flow and slowed respiration that sustains fish over the cold months. While trying to do right by the environment, I had wiped out an entire generation of fish just as it was on the brink of surviving its first outdoor winter. Of course there's a moral to the story, and like so many life lessons, it's mortifyingly simple: If you want to let nature take its course, let nature take its course.

ILLUSTRATION: BEPPE GIACOBBE/MORGAN GAYNIN