



A Parable

Thinking
little at two
Memphis
gardens

by *MARTHA PARK*

Photographs by *HOUSTON COFIELD*

of Produce

By 6:30, the morning air in Memphis is thick with heat,

and David Vaughan has been in the garden for an hour, clearing debris from last night's storm. David holds back clumps of drooping switch grasses, still drenched with rain, for me to walk through. Hardy fruit and vegetable plants grow alongside herbs, perennial flowers, and clumps of comfrey. Blackberry bushes engulf the chain-link fence that borders the garden. In the coming months, neighbors will pull over and get out of their cars to pick and eat berries warm from the vine. On my first visit to the garden, though, the unripe fruit still look more like raspberries than blackberries, their skins pulled tight and red.

From the highest point of the garden's slope, David shows me how he uses berms and swales to keep rainwater from running straight down and collecting at the bottom. From this vantage, I glimpse the road that runs alongside us, past the garden, beyond the neighboring apartment buildings with their wide parking lots, toward the intersection crowded with gas stations and fast food. Over the past three years, David has turned what was just under an acre of unused land in the Frayser neighborhood into a thriving garden for New Hope Christian Academy, an elementary school across the street.

Maybe you're thinking you've heard this one before: A young, white gardener works at a predominantly African American private school in a neighborhood

choked by poverty, its streets pocked by vacant houses, its residents cut off from the rest of the city by substandard public transportation. Over time, the garden becomes a magical oasis of community, alleviating the effects of food deserts one Instagrammable herb garden at a time. Even though I've gardened for several years now, I still bristle at this sort of story, and I arrive at New Hope's Urban Farm equal parts curious and skeptical.

DAVID'S GARDEN PATHS undulate and sprawl, inviting roaming and discovery. Barriers are intuitive: New Hope students know to walk on the grass alongside the plants, which shoot up from layers of woodchips. I follow David as he points out each project. The sixth graders planted



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a carnivorous garden of pink-speckled pitcher plants beneath banana trees and elephant ears. The fifth graders built a wooden frame in the shape of a house and ran twine between the beams. Over the summer, long bean vines will grow along the twine, covering the wooden frame, so that students can pick the beans from inside the shade of the overgrown house. The fourth graders designed and planted a huge Tennessee-shaped garden bed, which functions as a sort of map of agricultural production and natural wildlife. All the major cities are marked, and each of the rivers is carved out like a narrow ditch. A neighbor's donated plow rests along the northern border, and wildflowers grow according to their native areas. Tiny rows of cotton, corn, and soybeans shoot up along the western side of the bed, obscuring the sign for Memphis.

The soil here is healthy and fertile, one reason David is able to plant directly in the ground, rather than use raised beds. Years ago, the land occupied by the school and the Urban Farm was gently rolling cow pasture. I try to imagine the way the land here has changed over time: from farms and wealthy estates clustered around a single passenger railroad station, to the white flight that streamed into Frayser from Memphis in the 1950s, to the industry and businesses that would arrive in Frayser only to shut their doors by the 1980s, leading to another migration of whites out of Frayser and into suburbs farther east. Today, Frayser is segregated; the population is eighty-five percent black and twelve percent white, and it is one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in Memphis.

The City of Memphis annexed Frayser in 1958 in an effort to retain taxes. In time, the city has grown to encompass more than 300 square miles, though the population—600,000 to 650,000 in the city limits—has not significantly

increased. We've seen this story again and again. As city encroaches on farmland, industry triumphs over agriculture and then fades. White families flee city centers, and planned neighborhoods replace small farms. Houses are abandoned, asphalt spreads and hardens on newly paved roads and parking lots. We see less of the ground underfoot and grow less of our food there. The natural rhythms and cycles of the land become distant, mysterious, almost unknowable.

DAVID AND I ARE BOTH preachers' kids. Our fathers have long served small United Methodist congregations scattered across Memphis. David's father, Billy, helped officiate my parents' wedding. In the photos, Billy wears his black robe and stole, and David is a pink infant in his mother's arms. I was born one year and two days after David, and when it came time for me to be baptized, his father sprinkled water on my head while my parents looked on.

Our fathers' Methodist churches were progressive, non-proselytizing, and defined by a bent toward social justice. Our fathers shared many of the same heroes—theologians like Walter Brueggemann, Marcus Borg, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and writers like Will D. Campbell, Mary Oliver, and Wendell Berry—all of whom encouraged spirituality concerned with our neighbors and the world around us.

As David and I grew up, we traveled our own paths and fulfilled our spiritual impulses outside the church. For David, that place has long been a garden. In 2012, a year after the United States census designated Memphis the poorest city of its size in the country, David moved back to Memphis from Senegal, where he'd been a Peace Corps volunteer in several community gardens. Soon after, he heard from a family friend, Mary Leslie Ramsey,



A youth volunteer picks tomatoes at McMerton Gardens.

who had big dreams for a vacant plot across the street from the school where she taught science in a room filled with terrariums, aquariums, and enclosures housing reptiles and insects.

Three years later, the fruits and vegetables from New Hope's garden are served in the school cafeteria, and David sells whatever is left over at a bustling pay-what-you-can produce stand.

New Hope's faculty and administrators were interested in teaching more than how to grow and eat healthier food. Mary Leslie, who, in addition to teaching science also serves as the school's Experiential Learning Coordinator, sees the Urban Farm as a place to experience God in the world, where children might practice being stewards of their environment. Standing in a labyrinth of herbs, David tells me he designed the Urban Farm to create an inspirational space for students and visitors: "What may seem like a waste of valuable growing space to some,"

David says, gesturing toward the "jungle" section of the garden, full of non-edible banana plants and mammoth-sized elephant ears, "can be pretty awe-inspiring."

Other flora, like the ornamental switch grasses, fountain grasses, and miscanthus, are also there to provide a sense of wonder and beauty, which David hopes will strengthen students' connection with this place. He sees gardening as a necessary local response to global climate change. To protect the earth, David says, people have to feel a kinship with it. This can be hard to come by in a city like Memphis, where the land sprawls flat and paved for miles.

"One day," David tells me, "I was weeding Bermuda grass endlessly, on what seemed like the hottest day of the year. And as I was silently cursing the universe in frustration, an old woman drove by and yelled, 'This is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen!'"

A year after the Urban Farm took off,

residents of the apartment complex next to the school started growing their own crops. On the other side of the chain-link fence, towering rows of corn stalks wave in the slightest breeze.

ACROSS TOWN, DAVID'S father Billy works in one of six lots that make up the McMerton Gardens, a nearly ten-year-old community garden project. It began at the corner of N. Merton Street and McAdoo Avenue and is now scattered throughout the Binghampton neighborhood. As Billy waters six-foot-tall tomato plants, he gestures to nearby streets, telling me about fig trees behind an apartment building and a small plot of sweet potatoes near the highway. Basil, mint, and rosemary spring from stacked tires at the corner of one parking lot; strawberry and pepper plants grow on side yards and in vacant lots. In 2011, more than 10 percent of the land in Binghampton sat vacant. The gardens are both a practical use of this abundant space and a reclamation.

Before the City of Memphis annexed Binghampton in 1910, it was a racially integrated suburb. Home to farmers and agricultural workers, Binghampton had



its own main street, train station, newspaper, and post office. Over time, wealthier neighborhoods surrounded Binghampton, and the construction of Sam Cooper Boulevard in 2000 cut the neighborhood in half. Binghampton's population reflects Memphis' demographics. According to the 2010 census, 69 percent of Binghampton's residents are black and twenty percent are white, almost exactly mirroring the larger city's population.

Frayser and Binghampton are two of many low-income neighborhoods in Memphis with insufficient access to supermarkets. Local efforts like community gardens, mobile produce markets, and aggressive pushes for more neighborhood supermarkets are increasing food security.

For Billy, who's lived in the Binghampton neighborhood and served as a volunteer minister at a church here for fifteen years, gardening has helped him get to know his neighbors better and makes him more aware of the ways politics, spirituality, and environmental issues are inextricable. Billy says our distance from the land is "one of the reasons we have given so much control to corporate powers that are doing such massive damage to the environment." That distance, Billy says, "is a spiritual issue, on the one hand. But it is clearly a major environmental and political issue that includes the destruction of topsoil and packing the soil and food with chemicals."

As Billy and I talk in the sparse shade, two girls wearing backpacks and school uniforms walk past and wave, telling Billy they will be at the gardens on Saturday. Binghampton is home to a large refugee population, and many of the children who volunteer in the garden arrived in Memphis from countries like Sudan, Rwanda, and Tanzania. As the McMerton Gardens have expanded and begun selling produce at local farmer's markets, they've been able to pay volunteers six

dollars an hour for their work. If the kids who work during the busy summer season put one dollar per week into a savings account, the McMerton Gardens match those funds. The children also receive produce to take home.

Billy is passionate about helping to increase neighborhood access to fresh, locally grown food. “Most organic food is expensive and available to the wealthy,” he says, “but not the poor. And transporting food involves the need for cheap oil, which gets this country into foreign-policy issues in treacherous ways. Gardening makes me more and more aware of these issues. It affects my preaching, eating, and voting.”

When I hear Billy say these words—preaching, eating, voting—I can hear how little separation there is between them. For Billy, religion, health, and political life are strung together like beads. Tonight, when Billy is done watering and weeding, he won’t get into his car and drive to a suburb outside the city. Instead, he’ll walk one street over to the home where he’s lived for fifteen years. Through the garden, he gets to know the land and his neighbors better.

We talk until the sun goes slantwise, lighting on the cucumber seedlings Billy will transplant to empty garden beds in the morning. As I say goodbye and close the gate, Billy calls out, reminding me to come back when the sweet potatoes are ready to dig up.

IN ONE OF OUR MANY RECURRING conversations about gentrification in Memphis, a friend described community gardens as *just another way to tell poor people what to do*. The hype surrounding community gardens often carries more than a whiff of teach-a-man-how-to-fish condescension, especially when people or organizations begin a community garden without a deep understanding of the neighborhood that garden will serve.

In this regard, I am especially skeptical of organizations like The Kitchen Community, a Colorado-based nonprofit whose motto is “Community through Food,” and whose mission is to establish Learning Gardens “in schools and community organizations across America.” Co-founders Kimbal Musk and Hugo Matheson created The Kitchen Community as a philanthropic offshoot of their upmarket farm-to-table restaurant chain, The Kitchen, which has locations in Colorado and Chicago, and recently opened in Memphis. Over the past two years, in a kind of garden blitz, The Kitchen Community has installed Learning Gardens in more than sixty schools in Memphis and the surrounding area.

Meanwhile, the fruits and vegetables produced each year at David’s and Billy’s gardens would not be enough to feed the households in their own neighborhoods. Much of the yield of gardens like Billy’s and David’s is not measured: Before the food can be counted or weighed, it has already been whisked away to be cooked in the school cafeteria, carried home in children’s backpacks, or sold at farmers’ markets for next-to-nothing. Yet these small gardens are the ones I find myself rooting for. That begs a question: If we’re not measuring the amount of food produced in these gardens, and if gardening matters, *how* exactly does it matter?

IN HIS 1970 ESSAY “THINK Little,” Wendell Berry posits that gardening fosters a kind of personal environmentalism. It requires that the gardener pay close attention to the land, to his or her place. This change of perspective, this attention, will ultimately allow the gardener to “see that war and oppression and pollution are not separate issues, but are aspects of the same issue.” Both institutional racism and environmental degradation are, Berry argues, born of greed and



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exploitation: “The mentality that destroys a watershed then panics at the threat of flood is the same mentality that gives institutionalized insult to black people and then panics at the prospect of race riots.”

Berry sees the environmental movement “not as a digression from the civil rights and peace movements, but the logical culmination of those movements.” He believes that too many of the people in the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam-era peace movement were fueled by guilt and “short-term enthusiasm.” Over time, these “popular causes” became “fashionable politics.”

As for the environmental movement, Berry writes, a single gardener who is “willing to undertake the discipline and the difficulty of mending his own ways is worth more to the conservation movement than a hundred who are insisting merely that the government and the industries mend their ways.” Berry warns that if millions of individuals, rather than organizations, do not undertake conservation as a personal cause, “the energy of our present concern will have petered out in a series of public gestures—and no doubt in a series of empty laws—and a great, and perhaps the last, human opportunity will have been lost.”

It’s been forty-five years since Berry made this prediction. I wonder whether we have already missed the opportunity to reverse the effects of climate change, to become better stewards of the earth, and to create healthier communities.

As a person whose house is surrounded by tomato plants in five-gallon buckets and raised beds overcrowded with peppers and beans, I believe in gardening. But as a preacher’s kid, I’m particularly wary of writing a sermon. I can’t claim to have any answers to the valid criticisms of the community garden or Farm to School “movements.” I do think that if community gardening is going to be



more than a passing fad, it will require the kind of individual commitment and rootedness I see in the McMerton Gardens and at New Hope’s Urban Farm.

When Billy waters the McMerton gardens from a barrel of collected rain water, he’s not saving lives or reversing droughts. Industry, agribusiness, militaries, and corporations—not individual citizens—use the majority of energy resources. But echoing Berry, I don’t know how we can make sweeping changes in government, industry, or agriculture without first examining our hearts and our habits. A real movement—affecting our preaching, eating, and voting—comes from individuals, who know more about what we want, need, and can offer than any outside company ever will.

SCHOOL HAS BEEN IN SESSION for two weeks on the morning I arrive at New Hope garden a little later than I had planned. By 8:30, the sun has drawn itself up to its full height. I find David hidden between rows of pepper plants. We spend the morning picking tomatoes, peppers, and long beans. I am trimming dead zinnias, dropping the wilted blooms into a five-gallon bucket, when two boys, around

nine or ten years old, come to the gate and tell me they are reporting for flag duty.

David walks with the boys to the flagpole in the center of the garden, where I expect to see them raise an American flag. But the flag they raise is white. At first, it looks like a flag of surrender. But then I see its purple script reading URBAN FARM in funky lettering. A cartoon turtle shell forms the N, and a carrot grows out of the B. When the flag reaches the top of the pole and unfurls, I can see, under these words, the question: CAN YOU SEE IT?

I try to imagine looking out over this garden three years ago, as David must have, when it was just a vacant lot. It takes imagination to be a gardener, to regard an island of weeds surrounded by a sea of asphalt and envision what could be. It requires tending the soil, coveting worms, patiently composting, and the repetitive prayer that is weeding, all in service of a vision. In this way, gardening

is a kind of faith, a practice of seeing what can’t yet be seen. A garden is a space to re-imagine all kinds of things, where we can think big and little all at once.

ONE NIGHT IN LATE SUMMER, I ride with David, Billy, and David’s mom Joni past the city limits to watch the Perseid meteor shower. We search for darkness, pulling over on several back roads, but the sky retains the hazy glow of reflected city lights. It seems impossible to find a place where the heavens might pull back from the earth and open up into that vast distance and darkness.

Lying on my back on the side of the road, I watch the sky and try to ignore the chiggers silently gnawing my ankles. Re-adjusting the sweatshirt under my head, I hear David say he saw a shooting star, but by the time I look up the sky is settled and still. Later, I see three lights streak faintly across the gray-blue expanse. With each sliver of light, my breath catches in

Youth and adult volunteers at McMerton Gardens.



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my throat, and my voice sounds strange when I try to say I saw one, too.

In the coming months, I'll see photos of Pluto's scarred surface, of red mountains on Mars, of Jupiter's moons. I'll see news of monthly mass shootings, lead-contaminated water, and policeman fearful of those they're supposed to protect. Global temperatures will continue to rise, and glaciers will continue to melt. I'll wonder, sometimes, in the face of all this, what it might be like to start over somewhere else.

With the imagination of a gardener, digging into my own “postage stamp of native soil,” I sense the ways I might reinvent my community from the ground up. It will require imagination to renew our relationships with the land on which we live and depend, to create a South we've never seen before, a place that is healthy and safe for everyone who calls it home.

THIS ONE-DAY SOUTH MIGHT be a place where neighbors, students, and teachers get their hands dirty and reaffirm and reinvent our homeplaces, long besieged by trauma. Millions have been shackled to the land here, and millions are not yet free.

This is what I thought about when I

watched the white flag unfurl at the top of the garden's flagpole, in the same month Bree Newsome scaled the thirty-foot flagpole at the South Carolina capitol and removed the Confederate flag: I imagined a South loosed from the specters of the past and from the destructive, hateful beliefs they represent—which we have clutched so tightly, and for so long.

After we've been lying on the ground for a while, we head back home. We get in the car, and Billy drives toward the city. Joni falls in and out of sleep in the front seat. David and I sit in the back, each looking out the windows at the sky. On the way back into the city, we pull over one last time. We get out and stand with our backs against the car, our necks craned at the heavens, which seem even milkier from here, awash in the city lights, almost close enough to touch.

Across town, people turn toward sleep. Lights go out at one house, and then another. The blue glow of television screens lingers, flickering through curtains and drawn blinds. At New Hope, blackberries ripen on chain-link fences, and the peppers will be tinged with red come morning. In small plots of land alongside highways and in backyards, sweet potatoes form, bulbous and silent, underground. ♡

Martha Park is a writer and illustrator from Memphis, Tennessee. She studied creative writing at Hollins University, and was the spring 2016 Philip Roth Resident in Creative Writing at Bucknell University's Stadler Center for Poetry.



*A New Hope student with
tomatoes from the Urban Farm.*