

PROLOGUE
Vanzetti's Garden

Whenever the people whose stories you are about to read asked me why I wanted to talk to them about their gardens, I would tell them this story. It's how I earned their trust, and why they shared so much with me.

I told them how I grew up in a huge extended family that spoke a richly embroidered tongue, an English made to lurch and sing and wail by the Neapolitan dialect it was stitched onto. My mother's people—Natales, Iannaconis, Piambinos, and Pescatores—were cooks and tailors, casket makers and seamstresses. My mother's parents, who grew up in Caserta, met in the Italian enclave of Hoboken, New Jersey. They came over separately in steerage in the first decade of the twentieth century, the epic period of European immigration to America. My grandfather, Antonio Natale, traveled with his brother, Stefano, in 1907. My grandmother, Virginia Delia Miggliaccio, came with her brother, Amadeo, in 1908. They left from the port of Naples and steamed

into New York Harbor past the Statue of Liberty, landing on Ellis Island, where, after the long and anxious wait to be processed, they struggled down the ramp with their baggage to take their first steps on American soil.

I told the gardeners how I didn't inherit my Italian grandparents' language except for a few choice expressions. Growing up, I heard exactly one story about my grandfather's life in Italy—how he saved a crust of bread from his lunch on a hike into the mountains and was glad to find it in his pocket on the long, hungry walk back. I knew nothing at all about what it had been like for my grandparents and their brothers and sisters to leave their families in Italy and cross the Atlantic to begin the difficult process of becoming Americans. Our past was a blank. We were so new to America that we seemed to have no history.

All of this changed on the afternoon of my father's funeral, when the innocent wish to preserve what was left of our family stories brought to light a photograph that connected my family with one of the greatest betrayals of ethnic Americans in the twentieth century—the trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti for a crime they did not commit. These two Italian immigrants were avowed anarchists who had fought for the laboring class's right to a just wage and decent working conditions. Their real crimes were their ethnicity—as Italians, they represented the largest group of the “darker races” of immigrants arriving in America at the time—and their politics, which frightened many in 1920, when America was still in the grip of the Red Scare.

Violet, my mother's youngest sister, handed me a small black-and-white photograph, its surface scratched and stained, then waited expectantly for my response.

“Who are these people?” I asked her.

Obviously, they were Italian Americans, this small group of children sitting on the wide wooden stoop of a fine house on a bright summer's day. But whose? There had always been so many of us.

“What do you mean, who are these people?” Violet said.

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“Don’t you recognize us? That’s your mother.” And she pointed to the dark-haired girl in the center of the group.

I’d never seen an image of my mother as a girl before, so I stared and stared. *She was so beautiful.*

She sits on the stoop of her parents’ summer home on Bay Avenue in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey. Elegantly dressed in the long, slim style of the twenties, she is flanked on her right by her brother Joey (Giuseppe) in knickers, on the left by her sister Nancy (Nunziata), who would die young.

“That’s me,” Violet said, pointing to the child dressed in a little sailor’s suit, her hair cut like a boy’s, one knee crossed over the other, an apple in one hand.

Set apart from the beautifully dressed Natale children sits an Italian man with a mustache, wearing a chef’s hat and an apron. Joey mugs for the camera; the cook looks grim.

My mother, Esther (Esterina), and Nancy hold up newspapers. Nancy, whose daily shouts some sports scores, looks tentative. My mother has a look of mild derision in her eyes, as if she is thinking, *What has this to do with me?* and holds her paper stiffly upright, as if following an order from the person with the camera. Clearly, she is not reading. It is we, who would see this image on some future day, who are meant to read the huge banner headline across the front of the *Hoboken Daily Mirror*:

BRANDEIS DENIES SACCO’S APPEAL

“When was this taken?” I asked my aunt. “What do you remember about Sacco and Vanzetti?”

But no one in the room that day, including my mother, could tell me. Their blank faces only deepened the mystery. I knew that Sacco and Vanzetti had been put to death and that their trial and execution had been a cause célèbre, but I didn’t know why or when.

The absence of memory among my mother’s generation, and

my own failure of recognition, soon propelled me across America to collect the stories of ethnic Americans for whom the making of a garden is a way of keeping memory alive and protecting their cultural heritage from everything that threatens their survival as a people.

Back home, I showed the photograph to a reference librarian at the public library in the small New England town where I now live. “Come with me,” she said, leading me into the stacks. She pulled out a small paperback, *The Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti*, and handed it to me.

I dated the photograph from Vanzetti’s last letter, written from the Death House of the Massachusetts State Prison in Charlestown. It was August 22, 1927. My mother was twelve. She would turn thirteen exactly one month later—and decide to change her name, hoping to disguise her ethnicity so that people would stop calling her things like dago, wop, guinea. On the afternoon she was wearing her stylish dress and elegant shoes, Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a fish peddler whose Italian neighbors testified that he had sold them eels for their traditional Christmas Eve supper on the afternoon he was supposed to have committed the robbery and murder for which he and his friend Nicolo Sacco, a shoemaker, had been condemned to death, wrote to H. W. L. Dana, a Harvard professor who had become a passionate advocate for justice in the case.

Dear Friend Dana,

... I am writing now because it seems that nothing and no one is going to stop our execution after this midnight...

Yesterday, Judge Brandeis repelled our appeal on the ground of personal reasons; to wit, because he or members of his family are favorably interested in our case, as demonstrated by the facts that after our arrest Rosa [Sacco’s wife] and her children went to live for a month in the empty house of Justice Brandeis in Dedham, Mass.

... The Defense Committee, the Defense, our friends

here, Rosa and Luigia [Vanzetti's sister] are working frantically day and night in a desperate effort to avoid our execution, and they fail second by second and our execution appears always nearer and unavoidable. There are barely 12 hours to its moment, and we are lost . . .

In New Haven, I spooled through hundreds of pages of the *New York Times* in the basement of Yale's Sterling Memorial Library until I found the headline for the morning of August 23, 1927:

SACCO AND VANZETTI PUT TO DEATH EARLY THIS MORNING;
GOVERNOR FULLER REJECTS LAST-MINUTE PLEAS FOR DELAY
AFTER A DAY OF LEGAL MOVES AND DEMONSTRATIONS

Less than twelve hours before Sacco and Vanzetti were put to death in the electric chair, while thousands of people stood in vigil outside the Death House, which was guarded like a besieged medieval fortress, my illiterate Italian grandfather, who was Vanzetti's age and had come to America the same year Vanzetti had come, posed his children on the front steps of their summer house and took their picture. Not only was my family's past not a blank, it had been shaped by the tragic force of history.

"Sacco and Vanzetti," the novelist John Dos Passos wrote, "are all the immigrants who have built this nation's industries with their sweat and their blood and have gotten for it nothing but the smallest wages it was possible to give them . . . They are all the . . . factory fodder that hunger drives into the American mills through the painful sieve of Ellis Island." And in their passion for justice for the working class, Dos Passos added, they stood for "the dreams of a saner social order."

The Sacco and Vanzetti case, Edmund Wilson noted gravely, "revealed the whole anatomy of American life" and "raised almost every fundamental question of our political and social system."

In the aftermath of the tragedy, the Italian ethnic community turned in on itself. Silence closed over the wound.

My mother learned to be ashamed—of her name, her black wavy hair and dark eyes, her olive skin, her parents' accents, her very name—*Natale*, from the Latin word for birth and the Italian word for Christmas. She vowed that she would never marry an Italian—only an American—so that no one would ever laugh at her again. She would put it behind her. But forgetting did not protect her; it only robbed her of a context for her shame.

Now when I studied the photograph, I could feel the pressure of history behind the silent image of my mother on the front porch of the house I visited all through my childhood—Grandpop Natale's house, where he made us pastina with pats of butter for lunch when we'd walk over from St. Agnes Elementary School, and gave us red wine diluted with a little water in jelly jars painted with oranges and strawberries. For so long, all I had of my Italian heritage was the memory of food: my grandfather's thin-crustured pizzas—bizza, to us; the pastries my beloved great-uncle Giro, the casket maker, would bring when he came down from the city to play the horses at Monmouth Track; my mother's thick red sauce, her pasta e fagioli on Friday nights; and a little red glass pepper, a charm against the evil eye, that she gave me when I was in my twenties. Now I had something more.

My Italian grandfather had not wanted this moment of America's betrayal of the immigrant to pass unrecorded, and now his silent act of witness had come to me.

But what could I do with it? The more I learned about the case, and of the history of injustice toward ethnic Americans, the darker it all became. For a time I felt it would sink me. I returned to the letters Sacco and Vanzetti had written in prison and began to read them through from the beginning. That's how I found Vanzetti's garden.

On October 7, 1926, just two weeks before Sacco and Vanzetti's eighth and final attempt to win a new trial was rejected by Judge Thayer—though someone else had confessed to the crime

and two FBI agents assigned to the case had sworn affidavits stating their belief that Sacco and Vanzetti were innocent—Vanzetti answered a letter from a woman named Mrs. O’Sullivan, who had written to thank him for a gift he had sent her. From the way he responds, I see that she must have expressed her hope that he and Nicola Sacco would be granted a new trial and then described her family’s farm in Kansas.

“Dear Friend,” Vanzetti’s reply to Mrs. O’Sullivan begins. “Your letter of the 1st of October was handed to me the day before yesterday. I am grateful for all you are doing in our behalf, and glad that you appreciate the little pen-holder.”

Next he answers her hope with his own frustration and despair. “Your letter voices your hopes and optimism on the good outcome of the case. Would it be as you believe,” he begins, “—but I cannot share your good expectations . . . Only the thunders of a mighty world-wide agitation and protest could induce the enemy to free us. In Europe it cannot be done; in America it is not done—to explain why, would drive me crazy.”

Then, without pause, Vanzetti moves from anguish to peace, from despair to joy, as he describes his father’s gardens in Italy. His mother had died when he was a young man; grief over the loss of her had impelled him to emigrate to the United States.

“You speak of wheat farms . . .,” he writes. “My Father has plenty of good land and a beautiful garden . . . As for our garden, it takes a poet of first magnitude to worthy speak of it, so beautiful, unspeakably beautiful it is.”

The catalogue of what they grew is astonishing. Acres of corn, wheat, and potatoes. Mulberry trees for silkworms. Vegetables, some for market, the rest harvested and stored for their family—onions, garlic, red and yellow peppers, carrots, spinach, cabbages, fennel (*anicettes*), tomatoes, parsley, lettuce, asparagus, cucumbers. Next the fruits, including grapes for wine: “We have fig trees, cherry trees, apple trees, pear trees, apricot trees, plum trees, peach trees, rhubarb shrubs, and three hedges of grapes—two lines of black and one line of white.”

And then Vanzetti pushes beyond the edges of the cultivated fields. For him, the garden includes its grassy paths and the meadows beyond, comprehending a great web of relationships that includes the wild with the cultivated, all on an equal footing.

And the singing birds there: black merles of the golden beak, and ever more golden throat; the golden orioles, and the chaffinches; the unmatched nightingales, the nightingales overall. Yet, I think that the wonder of the garden's wonders is the banks of its paths. Hundreds of grass leaves of wild flowers witness there the almighty genius of the universal architect—reflecting the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars, all of its lights and colors. The forget-me-nots are nations there, and nations are the wild daisies.

If his friend were to walk in his father's garden, Vanzetti writes, a "rainbow cloud" of pollinators would rise up with each step she took—"the king wasps, big velvety. . . and the virtuous honey-bees. . . the hedge's butterflies and the variated armies of several genuses of grass eaters, the red conconcinas, the meadows gri-gri." She would be enveloped, he told her, by the sound of the "multiphoned vibration of wings."

What power does a garden have that a condemned man can turn from anguish to rapture in remembering it? Even in his extreme circumstance—he was allowed only one hour a day to walk outside—Vanzetti relished the aesthetic and sensual satisfactions of a garden. To dwell in the garden, even in memory, is to experience ecstasy—to be ravished, as the flower is ravished by the velvety bee. The garden offers solace, consoling him in his loneliness and grief.

But the energy in the details of Vanzetti's garden suggests that the garden, as he understood it, means far more than this. A moral universe is mapped here, one that transcends intolerance and injustice. Remembering the garden, Vanzetti returns to what

it means to work the land, where the harvest offers a just reward for his labor. The garden reminds him who he is and who his people are. To walk the garden's paths, even in memory, surrounded by clouds of insects, singing birds, and drifts of wildflowers, restores to this man stripped of his freedom—a man in exile, stateless, soon to be robbed of his very life—a place in a vast and intricate community that reaches well beyond the human. Here in his father's garden, Vanzetti is a citizen of the land. Remembering his place in the community of living things in the garden provides him with a sense of coherent meaning, distinct from the chaos and tumult of the legal battle raging around him.

If a garden holds this power for the gardener in a moment of extremity, might it hold this power at all times, but we just don't see it?



Garden metaphors have always been used to describe the experience of migration. The titles of two classic studies of the American immigrant experience, Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted* and John Bodnar's *The Transplanted*, reflect our tendency to conceive of immigrants as if they were plants, not people. But this makes them the objects of history, at the mercy of huge impersonal forces—war, persecution, poverty, famine. What if I reversed this metaphor? What would become visible if I focused on the immigrant as a *gardener*—a person who shapes the world rather than simply being shaped by it?

For three years I traveled the United States, visiting the gardens of ethnic Americans whose stewardship of the land is an expression of their desire to preserve their cultural identity from all that threatens their survival as a people. I told them about the photograph, about my family's loss of our heritage, about Vanzetti's vision of the garden. When I asked whether they thought a garden could be about justice, every one of them said yes. Then they told me their own stories, and in this ritual exchange of narratives we forged a bond.

I asked how gardening was traditionally practiced in their homeland, what compelled them to leave, and how they adapted their garden traditions to the United States. As I listened, I came to understand that I was hearing a people's history of America and the making of Americans. I began to see how gardens map worlds. They hold within them the human side of the story of how and why plants migrate with people. I began to ask very simple questions about things that no longer felt obvious to me. What are seeds, that people carry them thousands of miles to an unknown land and treat them as if they were kin? What have we forgotten about food that people of traditional cultures remember when they regard a meal as a ritual offering?

Very soon, I realized that I had to include the stories of other ethnic Americans, people whose ties to the land predate the drawing of our national boundaries—Native Americans, African Americans, descendants of the Spanish settlers who followed the conquistadors—and the last of America's colonial people, Puerto Ricans.

Like immigrants, all these people have endured the loss or suppression of important elements of their traditional culture, including their religion, ceremonial dress, and mother tongue. Their personal stories have rarely, if ever, been included in books about gardens, though they have helped to shape American land, culture, and cuisine for centuries. Using seeds inherited from their ancestors and techniques passed down over generations, all of them create gardens that are a form of living, embodied memory.

The focus of nearly all the gardens described in this book, from the ten-by-twenty-five-foot plots of an inner-city community garden to a four-acre field of Asian vegetables, herbs, and fruits, is food—food as a form of deep cultural memory, food as a source of sustenance that answers many hungers—for beauty, for connection to a place, for a sense of community. For these gardeners, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, urban, suburban, and rural, to garden is to claim a portion of

American soil as their symbolic home, even when they can never hope to own any land.

Many of the gardeners talked to me about the spiritual power of the act of gardening. The land is said to “speak,” and the gardener learns, from wisdom passed down orally through generations, how to listen for its voice and respond with reverence. With this, a second reason for collecting these stories emerged. I began to understand that in preserving and restoring their own culture, these gardeners are also conserving and restoring the land.

I came to see the ethnic gardener as both culture-bearer and citizen, not only of “the lovely organism of America,” as Aldo Leopold once put it, but of the larger, more encompassing community—“the land,” as Leopold described it in his classic work of environmental ethics, *A Sand County Almanac*. Since all ethics begin with a sense of community, a “land ethic,” he argued, “simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” To live by this ethic means we take our place “as plain members and citizens” rather than as conquerors or masters of the land community. This is what I had no name for in Vanzetti’s all-encompassing catalogue of the plants and creatures with whom he shared the world of his father’s gardens in Italy.

In keeping alive their heritage, ethnic gardeners also keep alive a wisdom about our place in nature that is all but lost to mainstream American culture. In this, the garden can be a powerful expression of resistance, as much a refusal of one set of cultural values as an assertion of others. This, I felt, was a little-noticed or little-understood aspect of the contribution of ethnic peoples: in refusing to assimilate fully to mainstream American values, ethnic gardeners keep alive, and offer back to us, viable alternatives to the habits of mind that have brought us to our current ecological crisis. The irony of the pressure to assimilate, then, is that it not only robs people of their heritage and their dignity, it robs the dominant culture too, impoverishing us all.



In *The Unsettling of America*, Wendell Berry warns that our ecological crisis is a crisis of character, inseparable from the irrational waste that defines our agriculture. He brings to the urgency of our debate over how we might restore ourselves and our land to health the essential question of culture. *Who are we?* he asks. What vision of America can we call upon now to restore our sense of obligation not simply to our native land but to the earth?

E. O. Wilson brings to this question the long view of an evolutionary biologist. In “The Environmental Ethic,” the closing chapter of *The Diversity of Life*, he too offers us a warning. “Our troubles,” he argues, “. . . arise from the fact that we do not know what we are and cannot agree on what we want to be. The primary cause of this intellectual failure is ignorance of our origins . . . Humanity is part of nature, a species that evolved among other species. The more closely we identify ourselves with the rest of life, the more quickly we will be able to discover the knowledge on which an enduring ethic, a sense of preferred direction, can be built.”

Wilson describes our disregard for the intricate ecosystems that sustain us as an “amnesiac reverie.” A long forgetting defines us.

Where might we begin the work of remembering who and what we are? The simple answer I offer here is, in the gardens of ethnic Americans.



Who are the gardeners whose stories you are about to read? From dozens of interviews, I have selected fifteen gardens to write about. The stories of the people who created these gardens will, I hope, resonate with the experience of many other Americans, including the one in five among us whose parents or grand-

parents came here as immigrants and the one in ten of us who is of foreign birth.

My idea of the garden is broad and runs counter to the strict distinctions observed in most garden writing—the separation of ornamental or formal gardens from cultivated landscapes devoted primarily to the growing of food, which are usually treated like less cultured kin.

Some of the people I spoke with refer to the land they cultivate as a garden, while others call their landscapes farms. But the distinction has little to do with the size of the piece of land in question or what is grown there. The “farms” are often smaller than the “gardens”: one family calls the intensively planted land behind its house a farm, while another refers to its four acres of vegetables, herbs, and fruits as a garden. One inner-city community garden made up of thirty-odd small plots bears the name *La Finquita*, Little Farm, more because the men who first created it are all retired migrant farmworkers displaced from their rural homeland than because of what they grow.

I offer these stories of people keenly aware that they straddle two cultures in the hope of changing the way we think, see, and write about making gardens. Each chapter is an independent narrative. You can open to any one of them and begin reading without losing the thread of the whole, though the book is clearest if you read the chapters in sequence, as the parallels and echoes among the stories accumulate.

The book opens and closes with stories that reach back to the European conquests of America—the Spanish conquest of the Southwest and the English conquest of the Northeast. Both show how corn passed from the conquered to the conquerors, and how its sacred meaning was transformed as it was adopted into the foreign culture.

Two family gardens in the Rio Grande Valley of northern New Mexico open the book. At Tesuque Pueblo, a group of Native Americans hoping to restore their land and their people to

health are renewing a thousand-year-old garden tradition that was two family gardens away from being lost. Forty minutes' drive north, a Hispanic family whose ancestors came with the conquistadors has embraced its heritage on the land after the pressure to assimilate to Anglo culture nearly persuaded its members to let it go. The Indians, adapting ideas from leaders in the international movement to promote sustainable agriculture, and the Hispanics, through the Santa Fe Farmers' Market, keep their local cultures alive through contact with the world far beyond America's borders.

The stories of two islands, one off the South Atlantic coast, one in the Pacific Northwest, both fragile ecologies and places where ethnic peoples have waged historic struggles for the right to own and keep land, come next. On St. Helena Island, South Carolina, the gardens of two Gullah elders reflect both the enduring legacy of their African ancestors and the sacred place of land in their emergence from slavery into freedom. And on Bainbridge Island, Washington, a Polish American vintner and a Japanese American berry farmer wage a passionate fight to preserve the largest and oldest remaining farm on the island—a farm nearly lost once before, when the Japanese family who worked it was rounded up and taken away to Manzanar, one of ten “relocation centers” constructed in the desert for Americans of Japanese descent after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

Both the idea of America as the land of refuge and the far older idea of the garden as a sanctuary are given new life in the story of the Khmer Growers. For these survivors of the Pol Pot regime, who rent a four-acre field from the town of Amherst, Massachusetts, it is work that heals—hard work in the garden, all day, every day, even though they still bear the scars of years of forced labor, starvation, and torture.

The stories of two Italian gardeners, one from the north of Italy who lives in California and one from the south who lives in New England—one who fled as Mussolini was coming to power,

one who came here just after Mussolini's defeat—capture two distinct ways of transmuting the memory of self-sufficient rural village life in the garden. Their stories, more than any others, capture the power of the experience of migration and the complex negotiation with memory, identity, and loss that is an inevitable part of coming to America.

The next chapter tells the story of a woman who, barred by social custom from working the soil in India, finds not only freedom of conscience in coming to America but the chance at last to plant her own garden. In her tiny backyard in a dense suburb of Los Angeles, she has used the skills she learned from her family's gardener and rural villagers to create a Punjabi garden filled with rare and beautiful fruit trees, flowers, and herbs. Among them is a tree held sacred in India, both for its extraordinary healing properties and for its place in the story of an emperor who renounced war and turned India onto the path to peace. But the neem tree she has planted is also the subject of a heated legal battle that pits the rural poor of her native land against wealthy transnational corporations and the government of her adopted homeland.

Next come the stories of the gardeners of *Nuestras Raíces*. By way of small garden plots created on vacant lots all over the blighted industrial city of South Holyoke, Massachusetts, members of a Puerto Rican gardening association have lifted a community up from dejection and despair. From one garden and a loose band of gardeners, many of whom are retired migrant farmworkers, *Nuestras Raíces* has expanded to include over a hundred families in seven community gardens. Through the gardens—and their greenhouse, community kitchen, and ethnic restaurant—these members of a disenfranchised minority are creating a model of a truly sustainable local economy.

The book closes with the story of a Yankee farmer in Stonington, Connecticut, whose land came down to his family as a result of America's first war of extermination, the notorious Pequot Massacre of 1637. Now, as he contemplates the end of three cen-

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turies of harvesting this land, which has never left his family, he is returning seeds of sacred Indian corn to the tribes from whom his English ancestors first received them. The story of the loss and return of the seeds of the most sacred plant in the oldest garden tradition of America has much to teach us about the role of gardening in the restoration of justice for people and the land.

“It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for the land, and a high regard for its value,” Aldo Leopold wrote in the concluding paragraphs of *A Sand County Almanac*. By value, he of course did not mean economic value but “value in the philosophical sense.” If you asked the gardeners interviewed for this book if they are philosophers, they would most likely say no. But every one of them lives by the ethic our most eloquent environmental philosopher outlined as the best hope for the land. Their knowing love of the land they till is their birthright, a portion of their cultural inheritance. One of the most important gifts they offer America is the refusal to let it go.