

Once upon a sprintime a rabbit's soft quivering nose came upon row after row of bright green tender shoots of lettuce, and in no time at all--well, a row a day, for as many days as there were rows--did away with it all.

"How good it would be," said the gardener to himself, "if I could get the rabbit to eat the weeds instead of what I need to eat!" Then it occurred to him that since the weeds and the rabbit both were bad news for garden and gardener, the rabbit was a weed or the weeds were rabbits....only, when an animal was a weed, it was called a "varmint."

Now as everybody knows, no weed thinks of itself as a weed and no varmint thinks of itself as a varmint. What I mean is, no plant thinks of itself as a weed and no animal thinks of itself as a varmint. Or again, plants and animals have a right to exist except when they are weeds and varmints....maybe even then, though the gardener would consider that subversive thinking needing to be brought under thought-control in the interest of lettuce and people.

"Phyton atopon : atopon zoon," mused the farmer, whom you now know was Greek. "Out of place: when out of place, a plant is 'a weed,' and just so when out of place, an animal is 'a varmint.' What I'll have to do is to arrange for them both to stay in their places, wherever that may be outside my garden. I've been doing that with the weeds, pulling them up and throwing them out of my garden. But a rabbit is a weed on legs. What am I to do?"

What do you think he did? First, he tried poison, little dishes of it between the rows of spinach. He gave that up: the rabbit didn't die, but his dog did. Then he tried rat traps between the rows of carrots. (Yes, the rabbit, by this time, had finished the spinach.) He caught two rats and his cat. No rabbit.

Why, you asked, didn't he just build a fence in the first place?

Because he didn't like fences. Something about a fence offended him. He didn't like to be shut out, so who was he to shut out the rest of God's creatures?

By now you know that our gardener tilted toward the dim-witted side, so it hadn't occurred to him that poison and traps--if you could only get the rabbit to eat the poison and/or step into a trap--were even worse news for rabbits than fences would be.

So, heavyhearted, he fenced in his garden. No, that's not quite accurate: he fenced out the rabbit. Some fences are built to fence in, like the Berlin Wall. But his fence was like the Great Wall of China, to keep the varmint Mongols out. You see, people when out of place are varmints, not weeds--since people, like rabbits, have legs. Our gardener, wits miraculously sharpened, got to thinking about this, and feeling guilty about building the fence, and more heavy hearted than before, and even depressed. To fight off the depression, he went to the tavern, where he drank too much ouzo. Far too much. Getting home on his two legs was out of the question--though he might have made it if he had four, he thought, like that rabbit. When the taverner closed up, he took the gardener upstairs to sleep off his chemical happiness.

Next morning, upon arriving home, our gardener discovered that his home had been vandalized. You will remember that the Vandals sacked Rome because the Romans had neglected to build an adequate fence on their northern frontier. The vandals were weeds on legs, that is varmints.

What would you have done if you were in his interior shape (severe hangover) and exterior condition (garden now fenced, but home a ruin)? You would have done to the house the equivalent of what he'd done to the garden? Triple locks and body-heat-trip alarm? He didn't. He just went to bed without the vaguest thought of ever getting up again. But in the late afternoon he got up to answer a knock on the door.

It was a government agent. The City of Athens--our gardener's garden was in a north-west suburb--served him with eminent domain. His land was expropriated in the interest of building a complex for the Department of Agriculture.

How sad and glad he felt! With one blow from beyond, he had been delivered from deciding for and erecting security systems! But then a cold thought crept into his consciousness: he had become like the rabbit, fenced out. And if he tried to resist, he would be a varmint, maybe even a vandal, maybe even a weed.

ASSIGNMENT: Compose a moral to satisfy your soul, not to sate your conscience.