

## ***THE GARDEN AND THE MOON***

By Michael Ventura

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“Woodstock,” the song -- written and recorded after Woodstock, the concert -- expressed the longings of that summer of 1969: “We’ve got to get ourselves back to the [capital G] Garden.” I don’t remember anyone at the time questioning the worth or the downside of fulfilling such a wish, but a mostly unconscious acceptance of paradox was typical of we wished for then. We wanted liberty – and security. We wanted the war to end – but not the excitement of being against the war. We wanted the fall of capitalism – and all that capitalism could supply. We wanted innocence – but did all we could to experience its opposite. We wanted to “drop out” – so long as we might still order pizza, which meant that someone, somewhere, had to keep the mechanisms of society going. We wanted holiness – and publicity. We wanted the self-knowledge of meditation – and to be stoned. Yes, these are vast generalizations (I, for instance, didn’t want to get high). But if we are to believe our own music (and there is no doubt of its sincerity), through the technology by which it was created and disseminated we wanted all this and more, not the least paradoxical of which was how we wanted somehow to transcend the technological world that supplied the means by which the music connected us all. And one more thing, one more beautifully impossible paradox: Like many before and after us, we wanted a freer sense of order.

One irony lost on most, as it was certainly lost on me, is that the summer we yearned to get back to the Garden was also the summer we celebrated humanity’s presence on the moon.

Surely they are opposites, the Garden and the moon. You can’t go back to the Garden and also go to the moon. A people that tries for the one can’t have the other. But yearnings aren’t rational, especially the yearnings of that summer, and, in the most stunning image of that era, the garden that is this planet was photographed from the moon and we saw our home whole for the first time.

As it turned out, the moon was merely a picnic site, visited for show, then abandoned. The dream of the fabled Garden, too, was abandoned. Overwhelmingly, my generation gardened mostly on real estate that they owned on terms allowed by bankers whom they would spend their lifetimes obeying.

As for me, to employ a city usage, I didn’t know from gardens growing up in Brooklyn and the Bronx. I was 14, maybe 15, when I got my first taste of “the Garden” – and it scarred me silly. I lived, by then, with my foster family in Maine. One night, we drove a country road. They stopped the car. The woods all around were, as Robert Frost wrote, “dark and deep.” The stars overhead were bright. For the first time in my life I saw the night as my ancestors saw it, without electric lights or any human light. This terrified me. Precisely: It terrified my body. I felt a helpless terror in my flesh. Tried to hide it. The others left the car and walked a bit, exhilarated. I made as though I was leaning on the car. In truth, I was too scared to lose touch with that manufactured artifact. The city and the car were a “nature” I knew in my bones. The wooded, starry night was as alien to me as the moon, and scarier. If I’d walked the moon, I might have felt wonder: “Oh my god,

I'm on the moon!" In that ever-ancient nighttime of forest and stars, I felt a pagan's terror before the unknown.

What I felt, I see now, was *why* we left the Garden. The Bible is mistaken. We did not fall; we journeyed.

In that Garden, or that dark and deep forest, we could not express and live out the fantastic multiplicity that is human nature. To do so we needed agriculture, villages, roads, and the creation of every society that expands beyond the primitive: a city. Be it Athens, Tenochtitlan, or Manhattan -- a city. They rise and fall, they change over time, they've been arranged in myriad forms under myriad systems, but the constant of human aspiration, ancient or modern, is the city.

What were we dreaming of, going to the moon, but one day to build a city there? And, from there, to build cities wherever possible, on Mars, on the moons of Jupiter, on some planet in Andromeda. It's what we do.

Surely that was the root of our excitement the night of the moon landing. We believed Neil Armstrong when he said, "One small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind." We believed we were headed thataway.

Toni and I watched the broadcast of the moon landing from her apartment in Manhattan's West 80s, a rough neighborhood in those days. They called Central Park "Needle Park," and it deserved the name. Nobody sane ventured its byways in the dark -- except that night. Too excited to sleep or stay indoors, Toni and I gravitated, as if by some basic instinct, to Central Park. Hundreds of others obeyed the same impulse. People played music, danced, greeted each other, laughed, or just stared at the spectacle of it all. "We" -- represented by three white male astronauts -- were on the moon! The greatest journey (so we thought) had begun.

Some three weeks later I was at Woodstock with Duke, surrounded by the celebratory sense of "We've got to the back to the Garden." I'm sure I wasn't the only one at Yasgur's farm who had also cavorted in Central Park to celebrate landing on the moon. It's not that none of us were thinking; it's that we were thinking in several directions at once and were pulled toward whatever most strongly attracted us on any given day. Later, if only because we couldn't help it, we grew up.

In an episode of *Dollhouse* scripted with Jane Espenson's usual excellence, a character refers to Eden as a prison. "Eden wasn't a prison!" exclaims another. "Are you kidding?" says the first, clinching with, "The apples were monitored."

Woodstock deserves its status as the most legendary concert of all time, but paradox is a necessary ingredient of legend. Who helped us survive and escape that muddy, Edenic prison but the very butts of our protests! The Army, bringing in doctors and supplies, and the cops. The DVD box *Woodstock: 3 Days of Peace and Music: 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ultimate Collector's Edition* notes that the evacuation of Woodstock was aided by "100 local sheriffs, [and] several hundred State Troopers and deputies from 12 counties." We rebels against society needed all society's resources to get our asses safely home.

The moon landing, too, richly deserves its legend. Our country was at a crossroads. Would we be mighty like the Romans or find a new and more creative way to be mighty? We chose the way of the Romans, wasting ourselves in exploits of empire, and we'll go the way of the Romans, only much faster. Space is still Gene Rodenberry's "final frontier," but, if it is to be humanity's greatest diaspora, it will be under the banner of

someone else's civilization, not America's – though we'll always retain the honor of proving it could be done.

As yet, we are still a species that reaches the brink of a truly new age, then backs away, preferring the dream to the venture. Greeks know something about that, their great new age having lasted not two centuries. I think of the Greek poet Kostas Palamas (1859-1943), who saw in our longings a pattern: “the new age,/ which we always await, which always tries to arrive,/ and is always lost, a fragment, at the turn of the cycles.”

But it would be a mistake to underestimate the value of that fragment and its capacity, unexpectedly, to renew itself, revive us, and send us again on our way.

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