

Gardeners

Lio Patrick

He sits with the storm—his only company. Around him, the humid air warms his bare arms and legs, although a gust of cold bursts through and ruffles his grimy T-shirt every few minutes. His long-gone ma’s clock strums inside the house, nailed just above the front door. The sun is invisible. Wind blows as if the whole world is sighing into his face. His fingernails scrape the wooden arms of his chair as he holds them tight, and he leans back as it rocks beneath him, nice and slow. Under the shifting weight, the floorboards cry. Rain comes down hard, unabashed, and endless.

The old man closes his eyes to hear the storm better. It’s not too far now. He knows it by the aches in his limbs and the thrumming of thunder in time with his heartbeat. Storms like this come through every June. They always have, at least for the seventy-six years he’s been around to witness them. But they’ve been getting worse for a couple years. Everyone that once was here is gone now. Bucky and Alma, Jodie, Muriel, his ma and pa, and Christopher—they all gave up on the creaky, broken house, and found better places to die. The house, and everything with it, is his sole responsibility. And it might just blow away someday in a storm like this. Maybe he’ll be inside when it happens. With the raging thunder getting closer, faster than his heart now, he wonders if today will be the day. He opens his eyes to see lightning tear the sky down the middle.

The wind rushes toward him, spewing cold droplets and ruffling his T-shirt again. This time it’s longer and more violent, as if it wants more than the shirt to move. He can picture the flood rolling right up to where he’s waiting, planted on his porch like one of the dead leafy things in the clay pots in the corner. Over the roof and gutters, torrents pour in thick curtains. He can’t see more than a few feet of his front yard even when the curtains are parted, but he knows that the grass is drowning. He would get up and do something, if there were something to do. All that planting and caring he did, wasted. He even bought a fertilizer in hopes that the green could be made greener. Instead the sky wants to make everything blue.

His earliest memory of thunder and rain like this is from when he was nine years old, in this same house. It is the farthest back he can go in his mind, and the image is like an old, water-warped photograph. He remembers the noise the clearest—thunder like God’s very own drums, lightning like the splitting of the universe into halves. The holy instruments of unforgiving hail and rain—weather like bullets, bearing judgment. He’d been convinced the world was ending. His ma and pa had taught him about Armageddon, so that even as a boy, he should have been able to recognize it.

He thought it was bad then. Now he just feels foolish. Foolish that he believed he could keep up a garden, foolish that he thought the house was really his, foolish that he imagined anything in the world was there to stay. There is nothing else to do; he sits in Jodie’s old chair, waiting for the storm to come take everything. Waiting for God to pull out the weeds.