the backyard parables

MARGARET ROACH

GRAND CENTRAL PUBLISHING

NEW YORK BOSTON

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Grand Central Publishing
Hachette Book Group
237 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10017

www.HachetteBookGroup.com

Printed in the United States of America

RRD-C

First Edition: January 2013
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Roach, Margaret.
The backyard parables / Margaret Roach. — First edition.
pages cm
Summary: "A memoir by the author of And I Shall Have Some Peace There about how Margaret Roach's surrender to gardening saved her life" — Provided by the publisher
ISBN 978-1-4555-0198-4 (hardcover) — ISBN 978-1-4555-0197-7 (trade paperback) — ISBN 978-1-4555-1823-4 (ebook)(print) 1. Gardening—Philosophy. 2. Gardening—Psychological aspects. 3. Roach, Margaret—Philosophy. 4. Parables. 5. Roach, Margaret. 6. Women gardeners—New york (State)—Columbia County—Biography. I. Title.
SB454.3.P45R63 2013
635.01—dc23

2012027206

Preface

Once upon a time, a faithless twenty-five-year-old got down on her knees and fashioned her first garden. It was a sorry thing, but also a matter of great pride, this perennial checkerboard imprinted on a sloping bit of ground outside her family's kitchen door.

As if pricking through a preprinted canvas pattern of counted cross-stitch, she populated the tiny strip of inadequately cultivated soil with an equal number of two kinds of perennials. Half were low-growing, succulent rosettes called *Sempervivum*, or hens and chicks, houseleeks, or live-forever—since as she tucked these first roots in, she unwittingly entered a world where all the characters masquerade behind multiple nicknames, and where art and science collide so that there's no straight answer to anything (which miraculously somehow makes everything perfectly clear). The others were *Kniphofia* (a.k.a., red-hot pokers, torch lilies, or tritomas) a tall thing with vaguely obscene wand-like flowers striped in hot sunset shades.

She did not leave proper space between, nor note the light conditions either plant required. But for that moment, there was peace on earth, and trust in her heart.

In the practice of blind devotion to living things called gardening, that is where I got started: assuming a posture of supplication and gridding out an alternating arrangement of plants that should never be combined, but what did I know? Just one thing, really:

I knew that the postage-stamp-sized color photos on their

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plastic nursery labels had made lust rise up in me. Over all the other choices at the garden center where I had innocently wandered that morning, seeking a distraction from things at home, I wanted these beauties for myself.

This is how it begins: with the deadly sin of lust. Then you kneel a lot, and when you finally get up again, you're not meek or humble quite yet but filled with the germ of another transgression—that of pride, which is said to be the worst of all and often the root of the others. Like the knees of your trousers, you will never quite recover.

Thinking back, I wonder: What was I greedily praying for as I knelt that very first day? Was it for the thousands of hapless perennial seeds—the entire contents of each of many packets whose cunning cover photos had also won my heart during that same nursery shopping trip? I had planted them in too-close quarters, set them in a porch where they'd be guaranteed too little light, and overwatered for good measure.

As I poured instead of pinched them into place, like a kid happily suffocating cookies with sprinkles or a card for Mom with glitter, I was imagining riot-of-color, meadow-sized beds that never stopped blooming. I don't think I knew enough to know what trouble the seeds, and I, were in.

No, I had probably come to these first two naïve, concurrent experiments of mad science seeking something with at least a little hope attached. Inside the house, just beyond that kitchen doorway and the ad hoc propagation porch, these were not sunny days but ones where a loved one struggled with illness, and would not get well. I flailed in various ways as I tried to find the answer to *why*, and sought any shred of optimism—the powerful potion of possibility or, better yet, belief. I got a garden (such as the wretched patch was), which in itself can feed the

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soul and even the body, but I also got occupational therapy, then eventually faith in the bargain, faith cultivated by a sequence of life lessons that all the digging and weeding and watering that followed brought to the surface.

Even now, thirty years in, new ones are turned up, and my collection of backyard parables—deceptively simple, instructive stories from a life spent digging ever deeper—grows. Preposterous as it seems, since we are not exactly quoting catechism but merely talking about lily-beetle larvae (revolting) or what deer won't eat (nothing) or how to keep a fifteen-foot *Viburnum* in a spot that can only accommodate six (you do the math, then cut it down), the parables illuminate and help me puzzle out every corner of my existence, providing a lens sharper and brighter than the default one I came with.

"I believe in parables," Barbara Kingsolver wrote in *Small Wonder*. "I navigate life using stories where I find them, and I hold tight to the ones that tell me new kinds of truth."

Me, too; me, too.

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What Is a Parable?

Like a thornbush brandished by the hand of a drunkard
is a parable in the mouth of a fool.

—PROVERBS 26:9

Trust your gut if you wish to garden (or write books). Then, before anyone notices your rough edges or other shortcomings, do some serious homework.

I came to the start of my work on *The Backyard Parables* semi-ignorant of what a parable is, even though I was aware all along that the word—which I now know derives from the Greek *parabolē*, for "juxtaposition" or "comparison"—would be the main event of the book's title. I had in fact suggested the title myself, but when I delivered the proposal with *The Backyard Parables* typed confidently across the top, I thought, as I suspect others may, that all parables were in the New Testament, stories a man named Jesus told to his disciples and other followers in attempts to articulate aspects of life and God. I vaguely recalled from my brief, none-too-rigorous religious instruction that they read like extended analogies or metaphors, meant to shed light on something other than the facts of their actual plot.

Indeed, depending on which expert's count you adhere to, there are between thirty-seven and sixty-five parables in the Gospels (in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, specifically). No religion corners the market, though, and the ones in the New Testament were not the first, nor the last. There are parables and parable-like sayings in virtually every cultural tradition and

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religion throughout history: in Hinduism, and in Buddhism (as well as from philosophers of the Confucian tradition, and from the ancient Greeks, such as Socrates and Aristotle). For all their often-acrimonious differences, the root traditions and most holy books of Islam (the Koran contains forty parables), Christianity, and Judaism agree on at least two things: that parables are an effective way of teaching, and that it is hard to find a more bountiful source of compelling script material than the examples set by the natural world and mankind's interactions with it.

There are budding (or barren) trees and vines, some that bend in the wind and some that break; all manner of seeds sown on all manner of ground; farm fields filled with weeds or rich with hidden treasure; harvests reaped—and those lost, to flood and drought and all extremes of dramatic, heaven-sent conditions. Nature is no fool, nor does it suffer them; from its mouth come utterances that we should not disregard because it sets the best example of life's rhythm. It has busy times and down times, it surges *and* it rests. Nature also utters a constant invocation to look past the in-your-face stuff of life, to where the real action is. So do parables.

Parables are not fables—that is, there are no fantastical happenings, such as talking animals, to entertain. Who needs such invention when you have the distinct character of each season and its displays of the almighty elements—when you have the natural world, and the man-made contrivance within it that we call a garden, all ripe with "aha's."

There is one definition of parable that I like best, from contemporary New Testament scholar Klyne R. Snodgrass. Parables, he says, are "stories with intent," and that phrase became the title of his massive work on the subject, published in 2008.

They are provocative.

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Like the garden is for me.

To my ear, and heart, the garden is a perennial dharma talk—a meditation, a reminder to reflect. It teaches us to live with intimacy and attention, and asks that we feel the pulse of more than just our own interior life force, instead seeing ourselves as part of a vast, complex organism and story. As Emerson wrote in *Nature*, "every natural process is a version of a moral sentence."

The garden and its backdrop of nature are good—the best?—places to learn something beyond how many clutches a robin can lay each spring (up to three) or how deep to plant a herbaceous peony if you want it to bloom, not just survive (a mere inch or so, and by the way, if you are south of Birmingham, Alabama, don't bother planting them at all, since as with lilacs, a real winter chill period is required—*let it go*). I'll cover some such tactical dirty secrets in these pages, in a series of practical sidebars, but I do so in the hopes that the facts of horticulture and of botanical science will serve as catalysts to deeper engagement. The tips are my bribe, but not the main ingredient—they're like the literal surface level of a parable, but by no means the whole story.

Not long ago, I was speaking to a garden club and as always mentioned my connection to the garden—our relationship, the garden's and mine, and how it has a powerful spiritual quality. Afterward, over china pots of tea and plates of homemade cookies in the historic church's basement, a woman with nearly fifty years of horticultural experience came up to me.

"I never thought about it before listening to how you spoke about your place today," she said, whispering almost conspiratorially, as if we were back upstairs, in the church nave, "but now I do think I'm intimate with my garden, too."

We Westerners call gardening a hobby, but how can "hobby" do descriptive justice to the way garden and gardener become

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one, interlocking pieces of the same puzzle that's bigger than the sum of its parts? I often wonder who's tending whom, really, but never have to wonder who's actually in charge. It's not me.

"It is, you see—though many people find the idea amusing—the garden that makes the gardener," said the late Alan Chadwick (1909–1980), founder of the French biodynamic school of horticulture, an early inspiration in my love of growing things (and of my loathing of chemicals). Are it, and I, some equation of cause and effect, or simply "not-two," or Advaita, as the concept is expressed in Hinduism? Yes, that's more it. *Not two.*

Does bowling or bridge or knitting invite this depth of communion, or explain so many bigger-than-us mysteries, or bring us into full awareness and contemplation of the cycles of life on earth? From the garden I have had to face my powerlessness, and the limits of exerting control. I have embraced losses as opportunity; put aside pride and asked for help; faced facts and started over. My upright stance and larger brain notwithstanding, I have come to see myself as a cog in the food chain—for truly, are we any more, or less? Realizing that has been the biggest payoff, the prizewinning pumpkin at the county fair.

If I am an evangelist for anything, it is for harvesting the *something more* in every season spent sowing, tilling, weeding, and hopefully reaping. Gardening is not outdoor decorating. Do tackle the philosophical equivalent of double-digging every time you step outside; *please do.* Frankly, this other level is the best part, and it's also where I derive my basic approach to gardening, a style I call "horticultural how-to and woo-woo." Even the worst weather can't trash the *something more*—in fact, adversity can foster a bumper crop of it. I have said many times since I began writing about the subject twenty-five years ago

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that gardening is my spiritual practice, a moving meditation not unlike the motions of a well-practiced *vinyasa* in yoga. It's as if gardeners—provided we pay attention—have an invitation to receive the secret from the source. Like those disciples of diverse masters who were privy early to the lessons that made their way into all the holy books full of parables, dare I say gardeners are in a position to really start to see the light?

Saved by the Garden

I can state with conviction—and did, in *And I Shall Have Some Peace There*—that my garden saved me. It would not be an overstatement to claim that it has all the answers, but most simply put, gardening lifts the spirits. Even the esteemed mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell was struck by that fact:

"I've made an odd discovery," he wrote. "Every time I talk to a savant I feel quite sure that happiness is no longer a possibility. Yet when I talk with my gardener, I'm convinced of the opposite."

I'd venture to say it's because his gardener—any gardener—feels part of something: Perhaps for the first time, he finds true connection, clear purpose, and even the sweet, succulent hope of a potential homegrown harvest (the most local form of locavore-ism).

So many beginner gardeners give up after a nonstop-color English herbaceous border dream or wildflower-meadow fantasy fails to materialize out of that first tricky seed packet, as it did with mine. Feeling gypped—as if it were a Duncan Hines mix but the cake just didn't rise—they are gone. I am grateful that I am not among them, despite my embarrassing start, with the

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grid of *Kniphofia* and *Sempervivum*, and that what I have never dropped since I found it is my long-handled shovel, a seeming divining rod for life's impalpable jackpots. If you keep at it for more than four seasons, until the patterns inevitably repeat themselves, that should give you that first big hint: *This has been going on like this since before you ever stepped into the circle, and will do so after you leave.* Perhaps you'll get lucky and glimpse the elemental cycle playing itself out outside—and recognize that it's not that different from the measurements of our own human lives. That's why I have always counted six seasons, not just those official four, in my anthropomorphic gardening calendar of sorts. In my head, at least, the year goes like this:

It starts with the season of *Conception*, in January–February, when you order seeds, conceive of the garden on paper, and otherwise make plans.

Next is the season of *Birth*, in March–April, as the first shoots of snowdrops or hellebores push through, offering signs of life again and new beginning.

Youth comes next, in May–June, when everything grows so fast. It's the Jack and the Beanstalk, high-energy time as the days get longer and the kids outgrow the space you allotted them the way you once outgrew your sneakers and winter boots—along with every other article of clothing—before each new school year.

In July–August it's the season of *Adulthood*, when full potential is reached. In my temperate climate, most things are at the peak of growth, before this next tricky stage comes on:

Senescence (in biology, the process of deterioration that comes with age of a cell or larger organism) takes hold here in September–October, or at the current time in my own life. It's the start of the downhill slope, the winding down—a wise, rich,

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and also unsettling moment of letting go in our lives and backyards as we witness and hopefully start to embrace the inevitable.

The season of *Death and Afterlife* arrives in November–December, where—here in the North, at least—parts of the garden go into hiding. But life will rise again, dust to dust, from the compost heap, where you just buried the remains of the latest casualties. Whatever our diverse and sometimes discordant belief systems, all gardeners can agree that there is reincarnation in the compost pile, no?

It was this six-phase structure that organized the first garden book I wrote, *A Way to Garden*, the one I named my garden website for almost a decade later, in 2008, and I still find it very helpful (and comforting, frankly) to think that way. But lately, in the years since I moved from a city career and weekend country life to full-time rural reality, I have come to feel quite a lot smaller than ever in the face of things—more speck than spectacular. This time, therefore, I will let the other side of the equation—not my comparatively measly humanness, but nature and specifically the *elements*—inspire the section titles. Isn't gardening, and all of life, simply a matter of repeatedly confronting the elemental?

The Backyard Parables, then, has just four chapters, beginning as the calendar year does where I live in a time dominated by *Water*—albeit in its wintertime frozen state, which puts the garden out of reach and does its best to disrupt activities as simple as opening the back door across its frost-heaved threshold.

Earth is chapter 2, as an emerging spring welcomes me back into reassuring contact with the soil.

Summer is the time of *Fire*, of intense sunshine (*fiat lux*: "Let light be made!") and hot, often dry days, the hardest season to stare down.

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The *Wind*—the actual element, air, at its most insistent, when it is almost visible and feels like a solid—comes next, blowing in the stiffest change of the year each autumn and, on its heels, another frozen time. And so it goes.

I'm informed by the seasons—however we name them—and by how each element behaves in turn to give each its distinct character. I'm also regularly brought to awareness by other gardeners, such as my late grandma Marion (the first gardener I knew); my delightfully extant, outspoken sister, Marion (who coined the phrase, "I've got an urgent gardening question" as a hook left on my answering machine to start us speaking again years ago after a terrible rift during our mother's decline to early-onset Alzheimer's, when we were in our early twenties); and my longtime inspiration Marco Polo Stufano ("I garden from a compulsion to make things beautiful," he says, but kindly tolerates my "woo-woo" talk). He and I met more than twenty years ago, shortly after each of us had lost someone close to us to illness. I like to think we made space for each other the way that gardeners do for new plants after a storm or a wicked season, when beloved things are felled—hurt and in mourning, yes, but also knowing that if those losses hadn't been suffered, we might never have had an opening for this new creature in our lives. Marco, the founding director of horticulture for Wave Hill in New York City, one of the nation's most-loved gardens, was my literal silver lining to such sadness, a silver-haired and bearded wise man who also has a particular inclination toward silver-leaved plants.

And then there is the case of my other dearest friend, Erica—not a gardener, exactly (and sadly lacking the *Mar-* prefix to her name that the aforementioned three share with me) but nonetheless a lover of flowers—to whom I gave paperwhites one year

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as part of her holiday gift. I had the best intentions, I swear that I did.

"Why don't I have flowers yet?" Erica's phone call started, a little ashamed and also somewhat panicky, but with just the touch of gift-horse-in-the-mouth undertones. "Why do I just have all this white spaghetti growing up out of the soil?"

Oh dear . . . and then some. I guess I forgot to tell her which end was up.

Maybe that's the biggest lesson of all: Which end is really up will show itself to you if you garden long enough. Would that we were all innately as smart as bulbs and seeds planted other-than-upright, who, thanks to gravitropism—a response to gravity causing stems to grow up and roots down—will in time right themselves, unless stuck in a tiny pot in Erica's apartment, where all bets are off. The more we engage with growing things, our consciousness shifts, too. We can learn to have a bright take on "bad" weather, or at least within reason (the boundaries of which the ailing planet seems to regularly go beyond these days). We learn the senselessness of grasping as if anything living can be permanent—even if it is just the right rare, slow-growing tree that you set in the perfect spot so many years ago, where it became the garden's focal point, the tree that simply didn't leaf out this year but stands as a defiant skeleton, because there is no budget quite yet to have it taken down. *That will show you for relying so heavily on me, Missy.* Our senses sharpen to the point where on a breezy fall day we can differentiate whether the tree above us is an oak or a maple just by listening—eyes closed—or detect a mourning dove taking flight anytime, or know that the rufous-sided towhee's *just over there* because the distinctive scratching in the leaf litter sounds different from a chipmunk's (really: no peeking).

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There is no greater practice for cultivating sensuality than shutting your eyes and smelling long-needed rain hit soil and plants that couldn't wait much longer, or standing silently in a bed as noisy bumblebees cover their velvety selves in taxicab-colored pollen by darting hungrily in and out of every last flower in the joint. Oh, to be able to touch their cherubic forms without recrimination. Some longings—*many* longings—will never be fulfilled. If all our desires were sated, what would the fun or motivation be?

Through gardening, we learn that even some of those who are not "like us" turn out to be, when you overhear them at the post office telling the postmaster, who prides himself on his tomatoes, how their dahlias are doing—not talking about the politics you might so heatedly disagree on. And then, as if they heard your unspoken disbelief that you have anything in common and want to erase that doubt, they turn to ask if you could use some tubers this fall, once they're dug and cured, and at almost the same instant another person pulling mail from his box across the little lobby asks if you need help getting that damn rabbit he keeps seeing scurry under your fence lately. *Happy to pop it for you, Margaret; just say go.* Brethren, all.

Though the pursuit of horticulture is all about control—asking nature and particularly plants to submit to cultivation at our hands—it's also where everything is totally out of control. Things die when they feel like it (making big holes). Others self-sow where you didn't place them, outlining and then coloring in pictures prettier than the ones you intended, but for which you can take credit if you desire, maybe using words like "serendipity" or "happy accident" with false modesty (and perhaps a sense of relief that at least *something* looks really good).

It's there—in risking surrender to the possibility of what on a

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scorecard might read as a losing round some years, and there will be plenty—that the real growth we're all after begins.

Why This, Of All the Years?

While helping a prominent charity evaluate gardens that are applying for preservation advice or funds, Marco came back from one such site visit with his highest form of praise:

"It was wonderful—you know, right on that fuzzy edge where it's all about to fall apart and be lost forever."

I remember that edge with fondness. I glimpsed it here in a few corners of the place not long ago, and then it—and those parts of the garden—got away from me, as gardens have a particularly exasperating compulsion to do.

It is a bit in that good-news, bad-news, sweet-and-sour way that I was contracted to write a garden book at this particular moment in my life, and in the life of my garden. The assignment, one I'd hoped for because there is nothing I like to write about more, is rife with irony—or perhaps it's just that my garden has my number and is quite the prankster, acting out and acting badly because it knows I'll always be there, even if it takes me for granted, as I sometimes do it.

Like an old married couple, the garden and I have been together a very long time, and we are both showing our age—facts that make for a different sort of story than the one of the blind exuberance of our rising-sap phase twenty-five years ago, or even the one I wrote about in my first garden book, *A Way to Garden*, in 1998. As with any relationship, it was much easier before it got so big and involved. In this case, familiarity has bred not contempt, exactly, but chores, endless chores. I know we are going to have to make some serious adjustments if we are going

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to last the rest of the way through to the till-death-us-do-part phase—for every time you buy a plant and bring it home, that's the implied commitment, no? *Till death.*

We are intimates, but also antagonists at times, and truthfully, I have on many days lately come to doubt that I know how to do this any longer. Accepting an assignment to write about the relationship has only heightened the crisis of confidence that perhaps I am a fraud or at least a burned-out case who just doesn't have what it takes. Nothing like being surrounded by your subject matter 24/7/365, and for every weed pulled or swath of turf mowed to be undertaken with *how does this fit into the book?* on your mind.

Despite any such reservations, I am grateful that the overriding emotion is that of a consuming devotion. I know we could not live without each other, for better or for worse. A garden without a gardener is a jungle waiting to happen (another vintage Margaret-ism), and a gardener without a plot is soon in tatters, too. But where did that person disappear to who toiled happily until she could not even climb the stairs at night, blithely wearing her yellow-jacket bites and *Berberis* and *Rosa* scratches as if they were merit badges? The one who was happy to sleep on the couch—a sofa covered in drop cloths, actually, since the house was gutted at the time, with endless DIY works-in-progress inside and out—and start all over again at dawn?

Oh, yes, of course; she's outside mowing. Mowing, with its instant, visible signs of progress, is the way I productively procrastinate these days about tackling the jobs that a middle-aged garden requires—not just the brutal decisions about what to do with misshapen shrubs now too closely planted after decades, or masses of bulbs that no longer bloom because they are likewise overcrowded or in too much shade, but also the actual

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work. How *do* you divide thousands of square feet of overzealous perennials, or all those many thousands of sulking bulbs? I sometimes think it would be easiest to advertise for people to come take it all away—you know, like kittens: "free to a good home"—and start from zero, but of course there is no shortcut through to our next stage of life, the garden's and mine, except to dig in and do it, to stay put even when it hurts. But wait, look—there's another chance to defer and delay: *The grass needs cutting again . . . phew!*

I came to this latest writing assignment and this latest year of gardening feeling grateful and panicky, and then the plot sickened: Would it surprise anyone to know that the heavens didn't hear my plea to help me craft a dynamic narrative by delivering a dramatic year, but one with only happy endings? That winter stayed too long, followed by the spring-into-summer of pounding rains and hail—which amounted to the best weather anywhere in a nation otherwise violently flooding or baking without relent? That the one week it stopped raining, a postcard arrived from the power company saying they'd be on this dirt road soon to do their every-ten-year "pruning," and that the results were not what I'd seen in any pruning manual, and worse, they dropped limbs from the giant native roadside trees so carelessly that things in the garden below got crushed, yielding needless extra casualties?

That the smartest team of woodchucks I have ever played chess with took up residence, along with three battalions of chipmunks, who carved tunnels with openings just big enough to lose a foot in (and I did, repeatedly)? That following a nighttime hunting injury, Jack the Demon Cat—a stray who was for nine previous years my protector, my living rodenticide on four legs, and an outdoor cat (ah, the days of no pet hair!)—would

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morph into an almost-total wuss, signaling to the chipmunks and yet another rodent relative, the rabbits, that all was fair game around here: no guard on duty; enter at will? *Have at it, guys.*

That the ample rain would require twice-weekly mowing of the grassy parts (a total of seven hours' work every seven days from late April well into November) and that my favorite mower would give out, the only one I've ever found that I could easily push around the endless curves of this place with all its amoebic, sloping beds and borders? That while humping the new, much heavier and less nimble machine, my left shoulder capsule—the tissue around the joint—would give out or at least get stuck, rendering it painfully frozen with only limited range of motion, for months and months? That the driveway would wash away—twice?

That a relative of the yellow-bellied sapsucker who killed a precious lacebark pine not so many years ago, this year targeted the most prominent remaining tree in the garden? By systematically drilling into a magnolia that has stood across from my kitchen door since I arrived and planted it, he is well on his way to delivering to it (and to a little part of me) a very slow unwind. And then, deciding all that was just the pregame show, it really got going, nature did, so that by the time a sixth of the year still remained, we were fourteen inches (about 30 percent) ahead of "normal" precipitation for the year, with most of that delivered in pounding deluges.

As I often remind myself and anyone listening, there is the one thing I know with certainty about gardening after thirty years of study and practice:

Things will die.

But not everything does—which is what keeps those of us who are in the game addicted—and besides, I am getting ahead

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of the story. You cannot rush a garden, or a season, even in its retelling. All of that will unfold in due time in the year portrayed on the pages to come. Let's start at the beginning and see what the elements—those bossy bastards who hold almost all the cards—had in mind for us.

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