

## Nature: harsh or gentle?

What today's first reading about the prophet Elisha doesn't mention is that the child he promised the Shunemite woman would later die and leave her overcome with grief – until he restored the boy to life again.

In her story "A Curtain of Green" Eudora Welty tells us of another grief stricken southern woman named Mrs. Larkin. She had had a somewhat romantic attitude toward life. She was happily married, enjoyed cultivating her garden, she enjoyed and trusted Nature with all its beauty.

And then one day a tree fell upon her husband's car as he was pulling up to their house. He was killed. Until then she had been living within her "curtain of green", a world of trees and flowers. Now the "curtain" had been violently pulled back, introducing her to the heartlessness of Nature. The world was no longer a friendly, happy place – it was ominous, indifferent to the way she expected things to be. Nor was there any way of getting even with raw Nature; you couldn't hurt it the way it hurt you.

Mrs. Larkin dealt with her grief, her extreme frustration, by no longer cultivating her garden but attacking it. There was violence in the way she struck the ground. *She would plant quickly, carelessly, without regard to arrangement*, until neighbors, watching from their upstairs windows, thought it now looked like a jungle – the way raw nature was before we tried to tame it.

She gave up on her own appearance. Hair tangled, she worked well after dark and then dragged herself indoors. She harbored hostility toward Jamey, the black boy who helped her in the garden. She felt a fluttering in her breast. Death? And then:

*In that moment, the rain came. The first drop touched her upraised arm. Small, close sounds and coolness touched her. Sighing, Mrs. Larkin lowered the hoe. She stood still where she was, close to Jamey, and listened to the rain falling. It was so gentle. It was so full - the sound of the end of waiting. In the light from the rain everything appeared to gleam unreflecting from within itself. The pear tree gave a soft rushing noise, like the wings of a bird alighting. A wind of deep wet fragrance beat against her. Then as if it had swelled and broken over a levee, tenderness tore and spun through her sagging body. It has come, she thought senselessly. Against that which was inexhaustible, there was no defence.*

When Eudora Welty says of the rain *It was so gentle*, Michael Hollister suggests she may have had Portia's words in *The Merchant of Venice* in mind: *The quality of mercy is not strained; it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.* He suggests "Mercy, her human superiority to Nature, has resisted the force of determinism, purging her of vindictive anger . . ."

As Mrs. Larkin faints into the flowers, Jamey runs to her side. The fluttering in her heart? May it not have been the Holy Spirit instead of Death?