

## The Settlement

After the trees stopped burning, he searched day by day and collected all he could of the fragile living creatures that remained. Though he nursed them tenderly many died. People knew he could not even kill a bug. “That place of his, the spiders, the slugs!” they mocked. His garden was slung about with webs. You could see them glitter in the low sun, see spangles on them after rain. The ground was studded with snails and shiny slugs where his veg grew. “It must take him hours to get a salad ready, unless he’s not fussy!” “Oh, he’s fussed, he’d never eat them.”

After the river dried he searched diligently. That was his word. People laughed at that quaintness. As before few survived of the dry time. His little ponds and barrels hosted remnants of waterlife. “He’ll lose them to cats.” He netted each oasis and the cats stalked off elsewhere.

In the years of fire and drought, people had to get used to things and had little thought for him and his eccentricities, but after the worst fire some wondered about him. “Maybe this one burnt him out.” People were packing up. Most were moving away. They had given up on good rain. Two checked up on him. They found the garden was gone to ruin. They stumbled on bits of furniture. “Maybe he moved already?” Cups and jugs seemed planted on their sides in the gritty soil. “Or lost his mind?”

All his doors and windows were propped open. Spiders wove in the tatters of curtains. The drawers were gone from the chests. His clothing and bedding coated the floors. By the rustling, they guessed that he was housing many creatures. Mice. Beetles. Moths rested on the threads of his garments. The place was disintegrating, but alive. His hospitable remains lay at the centre of the house. “He arranged this.” “He planned it.”

The roof was sunken, fit to fall, so they dropped it over him before they left.

