

It's Raining Again

Paul Magrs and Stewart Sheargold

The Queen of Spring in her counting house, totting up the drops that come, one by one, through the punched-in ceiling of her manor. Never quite a tumult, a deluge; not even a downpour. But listless and irregular; the rain trickles through her shattered home.

She imagines the broken tiles above. Gleaming like scaled flesh; she thinks of the glittering hide of the Summer King and his easy crocodile tears. She wonders about him; in that palace of his own, not far from here, from which she, naturally, is debarred. Unless the sun comes out and then she may totter down to the very bottom of her garden...and, raising herself up on to the crumbling masonry of the garden wall, sneak a glimpse into his fields; the grass bleached and crisped to the colour of his hair.

She seethes, the Queen of Spring. She feels chilled and heady with yet another fever. She grimaces at the sound of the rain, spilling in modest torrents across her rooftops and with almost unnatural sensitivity, she can hear it touch each upturned leaf, each callow new shoot in her beleaguered province. And she can hear it patter on the hastily erected marquee tents outside.

Chatter and laughing and tinkling. Guests braving the season; her season. Waiting for her out there; the samovars piping hot; the fruits and fish imported from pleasanter climes. But she'll leave them for a while yet. They can get along without her for an hour or two.

Instead, she tip-toes through the delicate rubble to the swelling convexity of a balcony, blue with crepuscular light. She thinks of the girl, Samelene, enclosed in the ice-blue pond at the centre of the garden. Frozen in the ambivalent ice, the flashes of purple fish and heavy orange crustaceans refract in her still, dewy eyes. A witch entombed her there; there was a season for witches, here; they swept in on slender branches, mobbed as crows. A tear slips and tumbles down the Queen of Spring's cheek; her fever rises like a fervid heart.

Pale pink tulips sprout sparingly from the fertile earth between paving stones. She once dipped these compliant flowers in the richest perfume, for they surely had none, and swished them across the feet of all her concubines; a lover's branding caress.

A step rings out behind her in the vast counting house. The Spinster of Seasons; all powdered blue beehive-hair, senescious folds of canvas-skin. She places a weathered, consoling hand upon the Queen's brocaded robe, next to the heart. The Queen smiles gently, as if she would crack; she has done so before with a porcelain-smash. She reminds herself that this is her twentieth season, her twentieth renascent skin.

'Your Majesty,' she says in an elderly vibrato, 'You are very glum, today..Why? You should be happy. All these people have turned out for you.' Here she pauses for breath. 'Shall I ready your Mask of Legendary Smiles?'

The Queen, bosom heaving at the presumption, looks askance at the Spinster, aware of the old lady's ambiguous, hooded eyes. She has become used to this insinuating manner. The Spinster's devotion to the Royal Keepers correlates necessarily to her own care for the seasons; only she can transgress the boundaries.

The Queen of Spring waves a regal hand vaguely. 'I have,' she says, and her voice umbellates from deep within her chest, 'been thinking of Samelene of late. And the summer King. I wonder if he feels the same as I do. Does he blame himself?' She was not susceptible to bitterness and pondered how she might feel if she were.

The Spinster of Seasons turns to view the cornucopia of feeding below. Her naked skin billows like a galleon in full sail as it catches the breeze. The impeccably attired string quartet are playing out a frenzied vivaldi, oblivious to the rain; cold water streams down the cat gut, into the wooden bodies of the instruments; the swelling beads sate some imaginable cedar lust. 'Your Majesty,' she begins, humbly, 'I have heard rumours of his sadness; he is said to be rather difficult as he is so sad.' She pauses, the air pregnant and portentous. 'He will not eat or sleep. He stares all day long out windows. Sometimes he whispers a word.'

The Queen imagines the swish and slap of the Summer King's tail as he trails along velvet-lined halls. His crocodile eyes blistering from so many tears, closing up from the grief of enchantment; his chaff-coloured hair flopped and limp. She wonders whether his scaled flesh is hard with ridges or soft, like a baby's. She suddenly wishes for the rain to fade, so she can sneak away and peer into his butter-

yellow fields, ripe with sun. His palace brims with minarets and cupolas in the inviolable shimmering distance.

'It is an odd word.' Pause, then: 'Sam' The Spinster spills the word from the balcony, relishes its sibilance.

'Sam,' says the Queen, quietly piqued all of a sudden. The summer word for her frozen lover, her companionable Princess.

'Here', says the Spinster of Seasons. And she picks out from beneath a luxuriant flap of skin and hands to Her Majesty the Mask of Legendary Smiles; a smooth and slippery arabesque mirror, shining with light.

The Queen gives a cry of child-like delight, peers at her lined and wise face; it is brilliant with a stretched smile though she is not wearing one. She is happy for a moment, until she realises. The rain goads her into melancholy.

'Will you give my sympathies, my love, to the Summer King when you next see him?' A quick pause: 'And this.' She hands the Spinster a slim and ancient book, crumbling within its silky wrapping.

The Spinster of Seasons nods her acquiescence with a comforting smile, she leaves with a careful bow. 'I will, Your Majesty.'

The Queen of Spring, known for the meticulous disposition of herself, snatches a pink tulip and pins it on her bodice; she thinks of lips and past kisses. Her guests' laughter rises, as though at her insouciance; they are expectant for her entrance. But she will wait until the moment is perfect. It will be a long time yet. She numbers the days in molasses ink.

'Sam,' she murmurs, rolling the summer sound round in her mouth as the rain spills on endlessly.

He used to be all of pink and gold. He was a man in his prime; not quite thirty. His colouring reflected back succinctly that of his demesne; golden, overgrown hair that touched his collars and a complexion that still bloomed like fruit - pinkening, blushing to the exact shade of the poppies all tangled and narcoleptic in the rank summer grasses. And his eyes of periwinkle blue - shining with the afternoon skies - as he led his parties out onto the lawns, kitted out for a game he taught them, very slowly, throughout that last pleasurable summer. He wore striped trousers and a white shirt which, as the game went on, came untucked ...and he was rumped and

smearred in livid green juices from the grass as he threw himself down ...again and again, bemusing his guests, making the ladies modestly titter.

All that is finished with now, however. Pink and gold no longer transmogrified hideouslyslouching in the still sunny corridors of his palace ... swishing that extra appendage around after himthis prodigiously glittering lizard's tale. His hide is changeable now; shifting like taffeta ...inconstant as opal. His is a chameleon hide and its continuous alterations index his perplexing moods ... A young man no longer, the King of Summer mourns for himself.

He looks so rough to touch. He oils his scales daily with ointments and balms which, somewhat churlishly, his red-haired servant, the boy, Turlough, brings him from the marketplace. Muttering and cajoling bad-naturedly, the King's constant companion helps out with this time-consuming project, of keeping the royal hide supple and soft. Turlough smarms him; alternately loving and hating the work ... loving to be this close, keeping him in touch ...despising all the while the fact of his subservience. Turlough reminds himself ...I could have been sitting at the right hand of the Monarch of Winter ...I almost made that transition ...But he loved too foolishly and here he must work himself into the ground; full of gall and spleen and bile ...massaging the heavy neck, the gleaming back ...and the powerful thighs of his master. Just in case ...just in case, one day, the young King finds himself transformed back into his original state. Even in the torpid pit of his despair ...the Summer King knows he can't let himself go. To give up, and forget he was ever a young man, would be to consent to beasthood forever.

And so, when no one is looking, not even his manservant, he plays upon a harp, stroking out a rough kind of music in the hapless attempt to soothe his own animal heart. And he paints and he reads ...he reads Milton and Shelley and Blake ... understanding less and less with each passing gloss.

This morning, as the red-haired boy is about his usual, solicitous ministrations with the balm and a red rag of silk ...the Summer King is interrupted. Never before has anyone seen fit to interrupt this ritual. Since his curious metamorphosis he has, indeed, very few visitors presuming to ring the ancient brass bell of the palace door.

He jumps up with a snarl, knocking the boy back and making the jar of balm crash to the stone floor, where it bursts into a thousand and one viscid fragments.

'Get that,' commands the Summer King.

As the boy hastens to obey ...on the doorstep, the Spinster gazes up at the neglected eaves of the palace ...the matted and over-luxuriant growth of honeysuckle (its scent too ripe, too sweet) masking the building's crumbling facade.

The door bells open pendulously, inviting in the Spinster and all the decrepitude, the tannins of a much-maligned garden; heaving, pungent perfumes sift the air like ghosts. But sweet also, in reminder of a long-ago lush and succulent epoch. She swaddles into the shuttered light of the palace; oblongs of strong yellow punctuate the scarlet-swathed velvet length of the hall. The red-haired manservant who she knew to be named, Turlough, shuffles off down the hall, his hair momentarily spot-lit and cherry in each oblong-chamber of warm sun. They wade through the luxuriousness of the palace; paintings with tantalisingly subdued orchard colour, expensive objets, deep dense mahogany furniture; all arched inwards like an harbour of art. It was as though she had stepped into the heart: all the preciousness imbibed was here. Yet it was not without its mustiness; the sun shone stubble into the ponderous gloom; it lay funereally on the crimped dust-sheets of more than one chamber.

The red-haired boy rushes through with barely a glance at the Spinster, expecting her to follow the established routine; the thick carpet is pliable, it knows their well-worn footsteps. He wonders what she will tell the Summer King on this impromptu visit. He does not trust her serenity, her satisfaction with the seasonal dissonances; underneath her farinaceous folds of skin lay a beguiling black soul, he was sure. Her eyes are smoke-dry and as ambiguously threatening as stunned bees.

And then the Summer King, resplendent in a gilded cloak of rich byzantine-amber; each panel reflects a season that he can know only through image, colour, and hazy remembrance. He stands from the clasping bulk of his chair, his scales spangling light across the room; they are wet and glistening with unguent. He crunches across fallen smashed glass.

'The, ah, Spinster to see you.' Turlough claps hands together at the pronouncement, gestures benevolently to grant audience with the King. He feels insolent.

'Ah, Spinster,' says the King; his mellifluous voice rich and angelic with soft cupid-youth, sky-coloured eyes brilliant beneath his rumoured despondency; 'Its good of you to come. I rarely entertain a visitor these days.'

The Spinster feels warm and comfortable with the King, his atmosphere numbingly gentle, not at all like the sensitivity, the aggrieved melancholy of the Queen of Spring. 'I arrive with the Queen's tokens of love and sympathy. I had not planned on such a detour but I was in the vicinity; the Monarch of Winter has finally finished sculpturing his Ice Palace and deigns to invite me to a Soiree. He claims it will be more magnificent than any the Queen of Spring has given. Of course, as he relies solely upon my information he cannot possibly know whether I tell the truth or not!'

'And do you?' says the Summer King, glancing at Turlough, who gives a look of rolled detachment. The boy bends and begins to pick carefully through the shattered glass, the pink drops of balm slip in glutinous strings to the floor.

'Sometimes...' says the Spinster mysteriously, a sudden sinuousness in her elderly step.

'And how is the Queen?,' the King inquires; his tone has a hint of disapproval in it, as though, perhaps, the Queen were responsible for their misfortunes.

'She is as always, brooding and intense. She cares nothing for the upkeep of her season. She is constantly wearied by the unchangeable rain. She seems to believe that she was to blame.'

'Oh.' The Summer King is silent; he untangles his arm from the cool flesh of the Spinster and recedes to his heavy throne, burdened with more than just his weight. He sits with a sigh of bereavement, hiding his sorrowful eyes with a glimmering clawed hand. The manservant glowers at the Spinster, at her tactlessness. He brushes by her to the coffered door; it opens on ancient hinges rimed with rust.

'I think perhaps you should go,' he says, with a forcible hand on the door, a narrow-eyed distrustful glare.

The Spinster whispers into the velvet darkness of the room a reverent, 'Your Majesty', and leaves. The manservant sees her down all the sloping corridors, through a panoply of plump paintings, to the recessed door. She thanks him for the indulgence, for their kind time. She takes from a corpulent pocket of skin a book thick with the mottled stains of finger-oil and sweet saliva, cover crumbling its musty rind; she places it in Turlough's hand with an implied flourish, saying: 'From the Queen.' Indented in the cover - a stick of celery. A shock goes through his brain, he remembers the past.

The Spinster leaves, waddling through the furious plant-growth, snapping stalks with the brittle crack of her progress. Turlough watches for a moment, intent on her blue beehive, bobbing through the grass like a dancing animal. He remembers a time when the grass was cut toe-high, the scent of green, of chlorophyll ...a machine oily wetness saturated the warm air; the tick of the bat and the thunk of the balls in grass. He had enjoyed the simple pleasure of it all.

Beyond the vast expanse of the creamy fields, smoke rises languidly from the raucous marketplace, traders plying their foods and medicines and fine rugs with a customary cry of over-enthusiasm. Rich and heady smells permeate the air under the tents.

The Spinster has made her way to the crumbling wall at the bottom of the garden. Then the air *opens*, like cut flesh, and another season bleeds through. He can see a glistening wet fleshy morass, tendrils slippery, snaking across veined walls, heaving and bloated, more scintillating than any vortex. Beyond this short gateway, lay the glittering splash of icy blue Winter. The Spinster steps up and glides through, steps into the star-shining ice-Winter. The air gloops and coagulates and closes the rent.

Turlough is astounded; he has found the way out. Or at least the possibility of another season; the possibility of a prison-break if they could discover a weakness in the wall. He remembers the day he walked for hours through the waving wheat and never found an end to it; this was a prison season, and the scornful heat of Summer glazed the air. Winter beckons him but he turns back to Summer to tell the King of this significant news. Glancing briefly at the book, a slender volume, a note spills to the floor. It rests perfectly flat and he curls the corner to pick it up. It is a note from the Queen. He cannot read the scribbled spidery writing, replete with elegant loops and curlicues. He stuffs it in a pocket packed with notes to himself. This can wait. He wants to share the surprise of the Winter gate with the Summer King.

Inside, the Summer King is in a daze, he feels simultaneously depression and a glimmering of hopeful enthusiasm; his tail swishes, sasheying the floor in tune to his perplexing mood; his hide shimmers with coruscating hues. Books mushroom the floor around his throne; he tries to drink all the thoughts from them ...he feels the universe contracting in his head. He decides to soothe this seething sickness with the gentle stroke of the harp; the strings stipple the air with honeyed sound.

His manservant, Turlough, gushing fast breaths, runs into the chamber; a book falls from under his arm. The Summer King, startled, ceases his playing immediately.

The King is annoyed at this disturbance, but his head is clear all of a sudden, his skin lustrous as chalcedony. He turns an enquiring head, insect-like.

'I think I've found a way out of here,' says Turlough. A pause for breath. 'Here, let me tell you.'

Every leaf has a future in it, every branch rinds with upward heavenly motion. The Duke of Autumn gently kisses the leaves from the boy's body, the dry twiggy roughness tickles his nose. As they fall they are caught in his black hat. He collects the future. The boy squeals again, as the Duke plies a leaf from his body. The ropes tighten about wrists. The Duke begins to feel deliciously perverse.

'Another,' he demands and the boy weeps as another leaf is plucked from his trunk, withers, and feather-drops into the hat. The Duke wants to marvel at the boy's roots, his wetness. But underneath he finds the weathered skin, and a strange symbol. A symbol of the future! It is a blue star, pinned onto the boy's skin. The boy writhes, will not let him have it.

'It's mine!' he shouts. But his mouth is cut with sharp twig.

The Duke plucks it from him and holds it up to the light. The dell is cut with swords of sunshine. The light strikes him and the boy made out of twigs.

The boy remembers a story he was once told by a wise young man with blond hair. The name Pinnochio crops up in his memory. That was a boy made of wood. But why was he made of wood? He seems to have jumbled memories, as though his mind is a stall and someone with careless hands sifts and sorts through it - tumbling and piling. The star is the one thing he can grasp; it is important, it belongs to him. What does it represent? Sometimes he sees a white room indented with round-patterned walls. He squirms at the Duke's unpleasant plucking.

The Duke feels fortunate that he has caught this dryad. He has been hunting the boy since the crisp dawn. He flushed him out of hiding with his pouch of flames, his collection of heat from the summer season. His little secret he keeps from the Spinster. These elusive creatures are drawn from the trees when threatened with flame. Their faces push outwards into grotesque approximation of wooden bipedal shape. He needs them for the future. He knows that he is trapped in this prison

season. He is cut off from communication; the banter and heckle of his depraved servants is a constant he is now inured to. He must, he must!, see the future and has learned to take from the season all that he needs to alchemize an antidote, as it were. He toils and broils in the lab he has created under the abandoned monastery he loosely calls a home. He needs the boy's leafy skin for this. To see the way out, to thief the key.

He had tried, once, to tuck himself into a fold of the Spinster's flesh, sure she couldn't possibly notice. She had dumped him on the threshold of his home, and huffed off with a curt reprimand. He dislikes her freedom.

The boy squirms and wriggles one hand from the rope. He feels he has been a prisoner before. A gleaming metal web spins in his head. He does not like it. But the Duke has not forgotten him, and a bunched hand comes down on his wooden head. He echoes throughout, and falls into a hard sleep as complicated as a walnut.

The Duke has his prize and now an endless supply of fates and fortunes. He throws the wooden dryad across his horse, mounts, and gallops swiftly away into the slowly turning colours, the moulting forest. Leaves scatter and whirl at the clomp of the hooves.

He sweeps through the cold monastery halls, batting at his clingy irritating servants. They gabble and squabble about him, seething with libidinous intent. He makes his way down, down, down into his gloomy laboratory - sitting in the midst of the pungent underground river that flows through the monastery - lit only with sparking flambeaux; the room hisses to itself in the language of alchemy.

He sits at a heavy table, laden with notes. He dumps his hat and the withered leaves onto the wood. Then takes up a feather-pen. Papers shiver in fright from the black gum of his pen. He stabs them into submissiveness with his ink. He fills them with swirls and leaps of curled words, an alchemical mathematical language. When he reads it aloud, it sounds fat, glottal, and brutally Germanic. He translates the Autumn season, the ridges of the leaves, into a hope of escape.

His depraved servants - corpulent and stinky as pigs - fawn and lick like eager flames about his legs. Occasionally, when not squealing innuendo, they bring him tea and biscuits.

This is his fourth time, and still he has had no luck. He rages, ripping and shouting incoherence, strewing the room with papers, and smashed glass. Leaves

tumble to the floor. Then he thinks. His cowering servants begin to pick up the pieces of his anger. Snatching up his purse of flames, he rushes out.

Immolation is a painful death of crisping and withering. The dryad boy will help him, he thinks.

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