The Black Umbrella

David Waller*
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The rain comes in floating droplets, not falling down. It is merely in the air, infinitesimal and moving with drafts and puffs, a fine-grained fog pressed onto the earth by the sky, and everything is wet in it and gray through it.

You walk briskly, thinking quickly: what you have just done, what you are doing now, what you must do next; where you were, where you must go; whom you have seen, whom you will see soon. Someone?

And the rain floats in the air, suspended from the looming sky, and a slight wind strews everything with a gossamer of water drops. Tree trunks are cold coal-black and grey. Their doomed and dying leaves shine under the glow from a slash in the lowering sky: wet and brilliant greens; some yellow-grizzled or bleeding red where the frost has burnt them. Soon the larch will orange, you remember.

The floating rain is silent, covering everything with a satin wetness, and gathering in drops to hang breathless on leaves and blades and your face, hesitant, pendulous an instant, and drop. You hear this quiet splashing under trees and your quick steps gritting on the brown cement.

You walk through the chill brush of the rain and think in your step's rhythm, of where you must go and what you must do and whom you will see soon. The larch will be orange cones in a week, you remember. You hunch your shoulders against the rain.

You see two black figures ahead of you under a black umbrella. You are catching up to them. A man and a woman, you can see now, walking slowly. The woman laughs and steps out from beneath the umbrella, but crowds back under again with the man. The man is talking to her around the stem of the black umbrella he grips in his hand, and she is smiling back. What is he saying?
You are catching up to them. The man is young, you can see, and black hair falls on his forehead. His suit is black and old, hanging in folds and bags on his slight man-body, the wet cuffs turned up.

They walk closely abreast, together under the black umbrella. Now the woman is talking to the man, smiling yet, and he is listening around the umbrella stem. What are they saying to each other?

You are catching up to them. The woman, too, is young, and her black hair strains straight and tight back across her skull and mushrooms in a black knot behind. She wears black, like the man, a suit fitting close over her woman-body, and the bottom of the skirt sways around her legs.

You are catching up to them. You are close now, but their voices are still soft and dim, far away, and now they walk in front of you, still speaking and laughing under the umbrella.

You pass and see a grey drop of rain fall from the bat-fingertips of the black-webbed umbrella. The skin of their faces looks alive. They stop speaking.

You have passed now, and behind you the voices start again, still soft, distant, imperceptible. They fade to nothing as you walk on, and you can only hear the quick grit of your steps on the brown cement and feel the pendant rain. The larch will orange soon, you remember.

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Fantasy

From beyond a colored wall
thick with vermillion plants
Mixed with blue-green clusters
along a surface
Stretching into the distance
Comes a whispered touch