



Autumn Council From Tales the Wind Told

By Brooks Mencher

Characters

Spirit of the Mountain, male, dressed in hazy violet, green and blue
Spirit of the Wind, male, dressed in white with white leaves
Spirit of the Morning, female, in burnt sienna
Spirit of the Moon, female, white with pale accents
Spirit of the Sun, ungendered, yellow and shimmering gold
Woodmouse, dressed in brown and gray with long white whiskers
Badger
Frog
Lichen
Three trees
Echo, dressed in white on one side and blue on the other, including the face

(The scene opens amid music of pan pipes and high flutes. A gentle wind is blowing across a blue-backlit stage, silhouettes obviously depicting a forest, and an occasional large gossamer leaf is carried on the wind. The characters, whose dress includes sheer flowing ribbons and leaves, are dancing a round, an autumn dance, and then they settle, like leaves, into a circle which is the Autumn Council. The Spirit of the Mountain is at the head, and rises to call the meeting to order. Each year, this gathering decides when and how the leaves will fall in autumn.)

Spirit of the Mountain: There is a motion on the floor.

Echo: (*High and seemingly far away*) The Forest floor.

Mountain: The order of business is the manner of the falling leaves for this season, in what order and pattern and so forth and so on.

Echo: The leaves blow on, the leaves blow over and about and so on. (*Quietly*) Why?

Mountain: (*Looking around to see where the “why” came from*) There is a question on the floor? A question without a questioner, by all accounts!

Spirit of the Morning: No questioner?

Mountain: None that I can see.

Morning: So I have heard; and the voice was thin and distant, like an echo ...

Mountain: So I have heard as well ... but what was the nature of the question?

Echo: Nature!

Mountain: Very well ... well within the realm of our discussion. Nature. Leaves. And such.

Woodmouse: Why is it that trees must lose their leaves when autumn arrives?

(The three trees respond, conversing quietly but animatedly, almost dancing, and Lichen begins walking nervous circles around the trees, arms stretched out but elbows akimbo, bent in the fashion of lichens)

Woodmouse: I represent the smaller animals of the field, the squirrels and sparrows, the wren and robin, vole and mole.

Morning: (*as an aside to Mountain, explaining the Woodmouse’s position*) Elected after the Spring Dance, by the lake, at the stroke of midnight.

Mountain: In office for six turnings of the moon, then. Proceed, Mr. Mouse.

Mouse: I would like to know, since the topic is open for discussion, why the trees lose their leaves at autumn, and why they do not stay green on the branches where they could catch the rain water for the smaller people to drink ...

Mountain: (to Morning) Was he, then, the questioner in this matter, who

broached the subject with the question 'Why'?

Morning: (*shakes head*)

Mouse: Why the fiery colors of crimson and gold, the liting paths from treetop to grasstop, oh, from heaven to Earth?

Morning: What would you wish, my small friend, to ride the leaves like slowly falling parasols to Earth?

Badger: (*rising, finger in the air as if making a point*) He wouldn't mind I'm sure of that, and I'm sure of many other things as well, me up all night thinking of things, of this and that, and cooking up a little something for my friends, Mr. Mouse for instance, a plate of grains or some such. Now, wouldn't the Wren wonder after Mr. Mouse, a-floating down the tree-trunk paths on a magic-carpet leaf!

(*Mountain looks over at the three trees, who appear to be sharing a joke or story*)

Mountain: Order please. Be seated Mr. Badger, Mr. Mouse.

Morning: How should we proceed? Leave the 'why' unresolved for now! For autumn is upon us! Any minute!

Spirit of the Wind: If I may ...

Mountain: The Spirit of the Wind has the floor.

Echo: The Forest floor. (*and softer*) The Forest Dance!

Wind: An autumn wind, neither strong nor furious, between cool and cold, between damp and dry: This will be the herald of the falling leaves. (*murmuring from the trees.*) The wind should be heard; the breeze that is under my power should be heard, first as a low and distant roar because of the vastness of the mountain and the silence of its dells. Then it grows closer, coming down from the mountain, down the great troughs of stone, over the high, gnarled plants and rising in pitch like the pipes of the Floral Dance.

Trees: We hear it first and then it brushes the crisp yellow leaves and sends them hopping, rolling along the thin grasses at our roots ...

Mouse: (*standing*) ... and tickles our fur!

Mountain: (*surveys the council, each member giving a sign of affirmation – a raised hand or branch, a nod, amid mumbling*) Then it is agreed that we shall first hear the wind, far away up the mountain. And secondly, we shall hear it as it

travels closer and closer, along the ground so to speak ... We will hear it before we feel it, and then we will feel it, finally!

Morning: It should very much first move the tops of the tallest trees, distant and yet not as far away as the mountaintop ...

Echo: It should move the tops of the distant trees first!

Mountain: Very well. Agreed!

Morning: ... before it approaches close enough to touch the trees of any dell or mouse or fluff the fur of any of the smaller people represented by Mr. Woodmouse.

Badger: And what then, when it reaches the dell?

Echo: And the leaves on the trees in the shadowed dell, the crimson and the gold!

Spirit of the Moon: The Moon must strike the brilliant leaves as they fall and float from the treetops, as they dip and rise and dip again, twirling in the night. Sweet leaves will twist and fall and quilt a blanket that will cover the gravel of the riverbed, for the river runs through the dell below the mountain and below the wind as it travels down the troughs of stone.

Trees: For the light of the moon!

Mountain: (*there is a rustle among the council, and Frog stands up*) Moss Green Frog has the floor.

Echo: The riverbed, the gravel floor.

Frog: A quilt of leaves to keep the autumn cold at bay, as my green people ...

Moon: Green and brown people, by all accounts.

Frog: My green and brown people will lie a-sleeping in the deep, in the mud and muddy sand below the world. And if we sniff the autumn air, that is, scootch our way up from the underworld to the overworld ... if we were to cast an eye skyward we would very much like to see the floating patchwork, the colors of the leaves that the quilt will make on the dry gravel and rounded stones that make the riverbed. The riverbed is our ceiling, and the roots of trees are our beams and rafters. We would see the leaves blown by the wind, lit by the moon, see them ridden by the smaller mice or voles down from the treetops as they curl through the air, blown from brittle branches by the wind!

Echo: Like frogs, leaping!

Frog. What delight! To watch them float down, flat islands, little flames of color, lit for us, the green and brown people, lit by the Spirit of the Moon at night, by Morning and Mountain and Wind and Water, and the Spirit of the Sun by day!

Mountain: (triumphantly) I declare it so! It is the will of the council that the wind and the sun and the moon, etc. etc. etc. (he writes something on a ledger beside him).

Lichen: The moon will light the night, white light on white tree bark, and the fingerlike shadows of my lichen people will cross the white tree bark. Above, above there, in the wind, up high, the moon betrays the autumn leaves like ghostly, fiery wisps in the silence of the dark forest! Ah, the leaves will be urged to fly by wind and moon, lonely branches – leave them bare! Leap like flaming parasols in air!

Echo: And drop slowly to touch the earth!

Frog: And then the moon will watch over all – the wind, the smaller beasts, the green and the brown people, through the long night, her white light as cool as autumn, until the rising of the sun.

Echo: But why ... ?

(The trees look about them, as if to say something.)

Mountain: Let us hear the voice of the sun in this matter.

Echo: Leave no voice unheard, no word unsaid.

Spirit of the Sun: The piercing rays of the autumn sun, which warm the white gravel of the dry riverbed, which in turn seeps down to the green and brown people, sleeping (they sleep deep underground, waiting for the warmth again), will warm the fur of the smaller beasts and glisten off the wings of birds of every size. Ah, the shimmering rays of the autumn sun will light the gold and crimson quilt of leaves by day and give descending leaves crisp shadows as they fall languidly like liquid gold. Brittle, colored leaves will tip and crack and crick against the river rocks or tap the ragged stones peppered along the forest floor.

Echo: And spin against the grass, and make brittle cartwheels in the sun, and crack, and break, and fall to dust.

Moon: The diamonds of the night become the gold settings of the day ...

(The three trees move apart, but remain touching hand to hand behind Mountain)

and the rest of the Council. Then they move right, facing the audience, and forward, so they are beside the Council, which adjusts by moving left to bring the trees closer to the center. The furthest tree stands, the middle tree kneels, and the forward tree sits.)

Tall Tree: Wind or Moon, Mouse or Wren, we will send our splendid leaves off into the air! As you wish, in any order you wish, in any style of wind you want, at any time of day or night that you may desire – but any who wonder why will not find their answer in the Wind or Moon or Mountain.

Middle Tree: Wind or Moon, Mouse or Wren, all will find happiness in the falling of the leaves at dawn, or dusk, or happiness in the smell of falling leaves, the smell of the crackling forest floor piled in fallen leaves, and the smaller beasts will chase some odd leaf across the meadow, wrap a spider's web along the brown stem (my wind-dried leaf!), and fly it like a kite beneath the spindled, angled autumn rays of the autumn sun!

Sitting Tree: Moon or Wind, Wren or Mouse, all will see the layers of my house up above the Earth, my branches reaching out, bare against the brilliant air, undisguised any longer by the green clothing of the summer. My branches are poetry! ... but my leaves are ... Why? It was some small creature asking 'Why?' I heard the voice, thin and distant ... 'Why?'

Echo: Why?

Mountain: Why, indeed. What have you to say, my trees? It is the smaller people who wonder most. What answer will you give? The Council has weighed our matters with heavy thought, and all have voiced their wishes. And we have by consensus sought, with your gracious acceptance of our plan, an autumn as lovely as any Earth has ever seen. But the Council is unable to answer the final question, to enlighten the final thought.

Mouse: Why must trees lose their leaves in autumn?

(The Council members rise lightly like leaves blown from the ground, and they tumble slowly around the trees like autumn leaves spiraling in a breeze, and settle, surrounding the three trees.)

Tall Tree: For you.

(The Council members look at one another in surprise.)

Middle Tree: For you.

(The surprise turns to glee.)

Seated Tree: For you all. Because the fall of leaves in autumn is ... splendid.



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