

HELEN MOORE

Succession, Hampton Court Palace, 2012

King Henry ghosts the Great House of Easement –  
slapping the thighs of courtiers beside him  
(doublet and hose lying by their feet), he boasts  
of mammoth stags he's hunted in the park;  
or how he spanked the bottom of his mistress  
behind the Hornbeam hedges of the Wilderness.

Outside the head gardener is winding his watch;  
he'd like to check the Great Vine, feel its grapes  
coming fat as plums. But the preventative  
conservator recommends a spot of maintenance,  
and so the gardener reviews the list – yes, the *Hedera*  
is next – remove for conservation of the royal ironwork.

Leaves glossy pennants flicking in the breeze,  
for years the Ivy's gripped these square bars,  
which blacksmiths forged to keep the rabble out –  
her tentacles slowly constricting,  
bending this iron as if red-hot from the hearth.

This Ivy isn't hurried – she's always the last plant  
to flower, and not setting seed till March,  
when Collared Doves fatten up before they breed.  
Now with steady tensile focus, she pauses  
to consider the gardener, long-toothed saw in hand.

Face buried in its chequered shade  
of hat, he bends to draw his tool  
into petrol-hungry life. At its nasal snarl, her fate  
seems clear – tentacles must surrender  
their tender shales of rust.

But the Ivy plays it cool; she knows  
she'll always succeed, and today her time has come –  
this future perfect when the saw will just sleep  
in the man's hands; when the world's reserves  
of ancient sunlight fail; and tourists milling  
in the Orangery become statues.

Likewise, inside the palace front-of-house  
is grounded, while costumed guides enter a prolonged state  
of coma – frozen like the courtiers in 'Sleeping Beauty'.

Only the gaunt forms of Henry's wives patrol the cloisters.

Now the restoration work can begin in earnest –  
in cavernous kitchens CCTV stands by  
as Rats run riot over mocked-up Tudor dishes.  
In the Rose Garden spent heads fade on stems;  
herbaceous borders bear weeds, and the Great Vine goes  
untended, its fruit the prize of birds.

Months pass, draughts blow casement windows  
open. Hedgehogs huddle in piles of unswept leaves,  
as Fallow Deer graze the topiary,  
styling it altogether wilder.

Inside the Great Hall, Death-watch Beetle  
burrows in the marrow of the hammer-beam ceiling,  
ticking like a bomb. Soon clouds march  
over the red-brick chimneys, release  
their load; gargoyles no longer spout,  
and water seeps inside and out.

In the State Apartments damp grows happy and  
glorious – it redraws murals by Verrio,  
warps mouldings by Grinling Gibbons,  
and sheds pustules of plaster  
on four-poster beds.

As centuries of grace and favour glide away,  
a colony of Bats has come home to roost;  
from the exalted heights of the Chapel Royal  
they hang like gnostic gospels on the lips of beggars –  
a high kind of treason  
as Henry retreats to his grave.