

Rahul Gupta**Spawn of the Lightning: An Army of Hallowe'en Toadstools**

*The Samhain-section from a seasonal interlude to an Arthurian epic-in-progress.
In context, this episode from the narration of the Wheel of The Year in Arthur's
Albion foreshadows the advent of Mordred.¹*

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It is as if uneasily all is waiting.
A charge changes. Through the chafing airs
tension tingles, it tightens the wire:
a harpstring humming.

Above the haze-layers
the ether troubles. In eddying broils
slur the jetstreams, slewing vapours
—their vectors veer —vortex twisting—
amid cloud-clashes: cold, with sultry-
wet dogday warmth that wafts aloft
rising surges. The wreathing blasts'
currents of counter-winds cool the welter,
down-draughts whirling their drizzling chills
through shifts of airmass; shear-lines pilot
the turbid fronts.

Trance steals over
a world watchful of a wavering noon,
as if holding its breath. Hairs stand on end
from goose-prickles, the gathering pressure
brow-burdensome. In a brooding calm
midges are miming their mute rainedance.
The creeping scalp acrawl with sweat,
at the nape of the neck are knots bunching.
Bough-riding birds break the stillness
with piping cries. Poised in silence,
tree-tops are hushed. In the taut visage,
eyesockets ache. The aura bodes;
leers leadentinted: its livid aspect
warns with wanness.

At the weathergleam's verge
round the horizon racks are scudding
fogged with fallstreaks. Like the frown of dusk
the murk musters massed banks of cloud,
thronged thunderheads: their threat mounting
towers topheavily on the tempest's wings;
their blue-blackness blots out the light.
Swift-swarmed dark swallows up the sky;
unfurls its fume wherein fires smoulder
that catch and kindle: coruscations
shudder sheet-flickers in shroud-nimbus
as rumbles prowl.

With a roar and wuther
the flashpoint flares. Floodgates unsluice
slashing downpours of slanting rain

¹ An abridged version of an earlier draft of this passage from the *Arthuriad* was previously published in Dennis W. Wise's book, *Speculative Poetry and the Modern Alliterative Revival: A Critical Anthology*. Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2023.

on galeforce gusts. Guns drums and bombs
 —an astounding crash— and Storm explodes
 as atmospheres, in avalanches
 collapse like landslides. In the loud tumult
 —blunderbuss boom, bang of ordnance,
 hubbub and rumpus and hammer-battering,
 the thudding thump of thundercracks—
 lightning bolts launch from louring billows.
 A fleeting glimpse like the face of the Moon:
 the illumined landscape with its leaping skyline
 brands bright its image in the backs of the eyes.

A late-summer storm

Zigzagging tines, zedshaped lightning's
 pronged weapon impales the primy soil:
 and we follow the flash, foin groundward with
 pathfinding probes to pierce the turf.
 Let the earth open. We enter inside.
 Here levels below our living daylight
 an otherworldly under-earthen
 landscape layered below the surface
 nests beneath us.

Follow the lightning into the earth: Katabasis

This unknown domain,
 her roofs writhing with roots of trees,
 is the nameless netherdepth, benighted regions
 of an occult kingdom:

Necropolis grins
 catacomb-sockets;
 sarcophagi
 decay in crypts,
 caves inhuming
 the putrid matter,
 sepulchral swaddlings
 wombed in warrenlike,
 winding, myriad
 charnel-chambers;
 chimneys venting
 fougous' fætor;
 foul souterrains;
 deep-delved dungeons:
 dusky vaultage
 —heaped headpieces—
 —hoards of longbones—
 of grave-galleries.
 Groping steeply,
 tombpassages twist
 through turnagains
 to undercrofts,
 while oubliettes
 fold fathoms downwards
 to Filth's Mansion.
 Pellmell we plunge:
 in panoramas
 horizons range,
 as we reach deeper,
 like tumbledown
 topsy-turvy

Necropolis of tombs

sunken citadels,
 a sewerscape
 of tiers and wards
 with terraced platforms;
 doors downfallen
 to dark culverts
 their grille-gratings
 green slime-curtained;
 canted causeways
 on the chasms' brink:
 skewed screwthreading
 escalier-spires
 leaning, looming;
 the labyrinthine
 abyss beckons:
 the bowels of the Earth.

Sewerage

Here are tribes of rats trapped by cave-ins,
 wriggling rodents, their runs thwarted:
 dead-ends their doom. Dens are shrinking,
 their nests narrowing as numbers grow,
 in blind alleyways and blocked cisterns,
 to a mangy mass of mating bodies.
 Like their neighbour vermin, knotting reptiles,
 keystones crushing they are kittening yet
 till the chambers choke to chink and cranny
 with tangled tails. Teeth start to gnaw.
 From the maze of tombs the morgue-ullage
 and grave-gravy, gluey-curdled,
 bleed to these bilges; their black vomits
 milk out and merge, commingled blend
 of what seeps from cellars with sordors leaching
 to Earth's entrails. For from all the jakes'
 clotted courses; through clogged spillducts,
 dreckcrusted drains' downspout scuppers;
 from every addlepool and each latrine,
 ripe reredorter and reasty midden,
 siegehouse and cess, in our sunlit world,
 garderobe nightsoil of the gong-farmer,
 loose cack of lasks, and laystall-slops
 —helter-skelter, the whole system's
 countless catchments of the accursèd share,
 in a swilling swelchie —is swallowed down
 by intestine-tunnels and tewel-pipework
 from the upper echelons to the enclaves beneath:
 sickly surfeit of sewage-waste,
 engulfed by gulches. The gurge of sludge
 empties ordures to the uttermost sump
 where lurks waiting, in a lake of slime,
 a prodigious dungheap.

Cloacæ

Dirts steam. Dritt of foxes,
 deer-turds. Merd and fewmet,
 scat, spraint; fiants, scumbered
 skite of otter-crottels;
 brock-muck. Brown waggys
 brew, mix: sharn of vixen,

The Catalogue of the Excrements

critters' crap, hare-buttons,
 crudded spoor, boars' lessees
 in a cradling crucible.

The crawling lees
 amalgamate, transmute fusing.
 The realm of rottenness is rich with life.

From clouds to clods, cleaving lightning
 wracks with raptures rainpuddled loam,
 and by split seconds the expanse between
 the Heavens on high and humble Earth
 is bridged in brightness: embracing partners
 space sprung apart espouse again.

Once twins entwined, that twain sundered:
 the husband halved from the whole forebear;
 now sibling-father, and sister-wife
 marry for a moment, to mate powers
 high, dry and hot with the humid deep.
 Attraction triggers the trident-bolt,
 the warm wedding to wettish and cold,
 the air to fire; earth to water:

as when Burn-the-Wind, at his blade-forging,
 that the redshort rods are wrought to temper
 steeps them in moistness —the steel is slaked,
 amid sputtering fumes sparks light aflame,
 in quenching oils, to quell its ardour
 (and the venoms unveil viper-chevroned,
 woven-welded, worm's-tongue markings)
 —so the glowing glaive, in glutting thrusts
 shooting downward, ensheathes his length.

Ground engulfs him. In her gravid belly
 the charge is channelled; for change kindles
 where his liquid lightnings enliven dust.
 Behold the happenings of the hidden places;
 witness wonders —from the worms' vantage.

Shocks shaking her, he sheds darting
 fork-formed currents, forces spending
 their virile virtue.

Pervading the clays
 are pores pooling with pregnant fluids.
 Through dropsied ducts, drenched syrx-glands
 in coral clusters, course her issues,
 unctions oozing, by ebbs and swells:
 what subtle liquors seep and filter,
 yeast-yielding brines with yolk-syrups
 and saps surging, sift lispig through
 fistule-fissures? Fertile venters
 congest with juices like the jellied slobber
 that showers downward from shooting stars
 estranged to earth; the sticky chrisms
 spill into spiracles; from sponge-bladders
 limbeck-tinctures, elixirs stilling
 hoarded honeydews, like the harvests culled
 from the bread of bees, brood-comb drizzlings
 —a moist motherlode milch with nectars.

The stagnant gulfs stretch out for leagues

Autumn Equinox

Ω

Hieros gamos

Lightning fecundates the Earth

under fens' fastness, fog-bound marshes,
 mould-mildewed tarns, and misty fells:
 like troves of ore, as treasure-laden
 rills running through the rankling dung;
 mine-wealthy malm. At the Moon's fullness
 her beams are bathing foreboding depths:
 the lodes ripen in the lunar rays,
 and the mire is rife: with minims thriving,
 krill-creaturely kinds of plankton,
 with embryonic animalcula
 at their feast of filths; feeding, battenning.
 Its sweats swelter, the swamp-mosshags
 humming with humours; the heats brooding
 in queachy quags quicken to frissoning
 eggs underground. An urgent drive,
 for a spell, spurs them.

Spores are stirring
 awake to sprout in their weird springtide;
 pollen pullulates to the pulse of the Moon:
 cells seedbedded. These seminal motes,
 cocooned kernels, chrysalises,
 shake in their swaddlings: shoot spicules forth,
 chaffhusks chinking as chits are hatching
 from bulging orbs, with bats' squeakings,
 in throbbing throes. Threadlets burgeon
 to knosplike nebs, whose nipped spires
 unfurl feelers with fanning strands
 and barbs burrow from the umbilical stalk;
 spikes spawn outwards, their spidery talons
 sneaking snake-wise.

Snail-horn probings
 that creep and recoil then crawl anew
 reach runners out with ramifying
 antenna-twiglets that tillow again:
 look how alike the lightning-flash
 to the pattern printed, its repeating figure
 izzard-emblems in the angled forks
 of vein-branches against the varves' blackness,
 pairing, parting: puny scions
 like marbling maggots, the murky clods
 riddled with roothairs, wriggling vivers,
 weevils delving worm-farm layers
 and rifted vugs. The ravelled suckers
 flex flossing wide, in flower-whorling
 trees topdownward, their tufted plumes
 glairy gauzes like gossamer skeins
 of squirming thongs.

Squirreltail, thistledown-
 filigree fibres are fronding tassels,
 twisting, twining; the twirling bines
 will splay and split, then splice oscules
 as tentacular reticulating
 chenille nervures. Thus the node-weaving
 germs engender a giant ganglion
 cat's-cradlewise, a mercurial web.

Lobe knits to lobe, as a loom shuttles
 a weft-texture, the wiry members
 tendril-tissued: a teeming polyp,
 quicksilver-quarl. By quetch and spasm
 the molten mass is mapped in darkness;
 leviathan-vast.

It is vivifying;
 inhales and heaves: a heart panting,
 a brain beating, or as breathing lungs
 work the entrails; and wavering sobs
 retch restlessly. With rippling surges
 the sprawling globe spreads still farther
 by ceaseless seethings, circulating
 its lymphs and ichors; till in labour-pangs
 its ballooning shape dilates warping;
 the mesh morphing is transmogrified.
 With thrilling shudders it thrusts aloft,
 climbs in corkscrews up to the cloaking sward:
 fat fruitbodies force through the turves.

From shaded taths shapes come pricking;
 grope over grass. The growths teeming
 are bald and gibbous; bulbs are swollen,
 puffball-like pods whose pimpled membranes
 are groined with gills: glabrous-wattled,
 blanched blubberflesh, bloated organs,
 limbs lepercankered, of lazar-scurfy
 sepulchral pallor are poking upwards
 from cadaverous depths

—Dead Men's Fingers;

Sickenning Milkgall,

Sallow Puckfist,

Bearded Bellywark;

Bugs' Agaricus,

Dwarrow Dwalecup,

Dwimmer-Goblet;

Skewbald Hoodwink,

the Scaly Funnel;

Phantom Fangteeth,

Fool's Punktinder,

the lewd Stinkhorn,

Loathly Earthshank;

Coven's Cockleloaf;

Carrion-Parasol,

Wormy Skullcap,

Witches' Nipple,

Corpses' Candles,

Cowlsathed Deathshead,

the Charnel Bonnet;

Chilly Waxglove,

Squires-and-Beldames,

Squeamish Dungtuft—

squame-warted squabs squeeze in sending
 stems stiffly out. Staves like truncheons
 unsheathe their shafts to show helmets,
 raise round bucklers with rimmed umbos;

espy their spears: a spectral levy
troops the gardens. Their targes serried,
they parade in rings, ranks of circled
midnight-mustering homunculi
corpse-coifed in hoods and clinging veils,
wan weaponedmen in winding-sheet
and coffin-costume accoutrements
lift lances high, lock the shieldwall—
earthborn armies. From under the ground
—the reek of decay— rotting scarecrows
advance in onslaught, an invading horde,
wraiths risen again arrayed for battle
in dark dreamings dawn breaks shattering
their feinted front fade, melt, blurring
to stipes like straw ...the stuff of shadows
that dwindles to dust. The day broadens
on wilting culms and caps withering
we can tell are but —toadstools.

Nekyia

Autumn Toadstools

It is the time of Samhain's

Cross-Quarter feast: Calends of Winter
and the season's end. From the Summer uplands
they drive the herds. Now the darker half
—the Sun's in Scorpion, sinking early—
of The Year opens, from Yule till Springtide's
Beltaine brightness, with the blossom of May;
and on this Day of the Dead, dolmens open
ajar their jaws. On jambs like menhirs
—great grey longstones— of the greedy mouths
of the humped barrows hived with chambers,
on their sarsen kerbs, the silvered spirals
—sidewinding swirls, Sun's wheel-annules,
chevron, lozenge— shine like snailtracks,
hoarfrost mirroring the Hunter's Moon.
The King of Planets declines at twilight;
the Red Warrior roams the Goatfish.



♃

♄

They set up the firedrill. Flame else is quenched.
On the day of Samhain the dawn sunbeam
shall pierce the portals. They prepare the wake.
Force-fires alight, with fumes they bless
the bairns and beasts, and the bright embers
hasten deasil to hearth and torch.
On window-ledge, west-facing door,
guard goggle-eyed gruesome baubles;
thresholds are thronged; enthroned on sills,
snubnosed or snout- or snaggle-toothed,
scalp scooped-empty scarecrow-faces,
hollow headpieces with hideous grins:
turnip-sconces. The tapers smile
in the carved grimace, candles making
glaring sockets glowing peepers.

Hallowe'en

With such punkie-lanterns, apparelled as ghosts,
or by feather-garments or in fishing-nets
both bare and clothed (to baffle the spirits),
gangs of guisers go dance their rounds

trick-or-treating, to try their luck
—skullfaced skeklers, skeleton-mummers—
from door to door, with doggerel catches
to the tongs and bones and the tabor-whistle
for fuel and food for the festal banquet
of apple-bobbing, auguries read
from hazel-nuts amid horns of mead;
and meat for the *Manes*: milk, grain and honey.
Reechy rushlights and roasting smells
herald them homeward to the hall of feasting;
but in the noman's-lands —numb, footstepless
fence and carfax, crossroads and ford—
restless the wraiths may ride the winds,
hunt haunting the trees.

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