Rahul Gupta, *The Beginning of Winter*, from an Arthurian Epic

Albion Tetralogy
II. Interlude: The Island of the Mighty

The Beginning of Winter

(Chronology: The onset of Winter, to Midwinter Night)

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The winter squalls, in wild harryings
—swart swarms the rack, swirling tempest—
would wrench roots up in their ruthless course,
buckle branches, beat down the trees
(stormtimber stands, on stalwart trunks),
sky-skirmishing obscure armies
of evil omen, auguring war, *The Wild Hunt rides*
hell's harbingers: they haunt the midnights
with phantom voices on the fitful gales,
with howl of hounds, with horns blaring
the tantivying *troo-roo-ro-oot*,
hunt hue-and-cry, harum-scarum
in quest of quarry. Over quailing wastes
roughshod they ride, on rip-snorting
he-goats and harts, with hooves drumming,
lashed by lightnings. Their leader is known
as that wood warlock of the warrior-band *Herne the Hunter*
by his antler-frontlet, for his entourage
with blackened faces, blue-stained with woad,
sable targes in sooty fists,
who spur their steeds to spoil and havoc,
are Herne's henchmen, harbourless souls,
bearsarks, werwolves: the blood-quaffers,
redtongued in rage. With rolling eyes,
garbed gruesomely in grinning masks,
tailed pelts and talons of their totem beasts,
they charge in their chase, chew the shieldedge,
whippers-in whirl the whistling thongs;
the noise of the hounds nears yet dwindles
—skewbald their skins: they have scarlet ears—
flanks are lathered; foam is spuming;
the pack stampedes. The pall is fading:
its clouds clearing, as the clamour of The Hunt,
hoofbeats' hammering, the horns' recheat
—*swef! swef!* the cry— swells, then dying
is wafted away.

The winter stars
open at evening in an icy sky
and sparkle like rime, bespangling the heavens
—where Hounds and Hunter are hovering still.
Outlined in air, the arcs of her crown
hung high aloft —a horned crescent
ghost mirrored in glass, her glyph as etched
far up and faint amid the fathomless blue
expanse of space spied by daylight—
the Moon has not sunk but mounts orbit
at her rival's rise: mirage-planet,
after-aura from the hours of dreams,
has wrought her fetch, a wraith-semblance;
the mask of a moon. The mapped features,
rimecrystal-rimmed corroded clock
of her blemished aspect, blur with ether
where eclipse claims her as clear blueness
half hides her cusps, and the hollowed sphere's
glimpsed globe tapers: gleaming profile,
shell sheen-mantled, shaped in nacre.
As with a wizard's wand, Winter conjures
the silent season, and summons his power *Onset of Winter weather*
to bind and loose. Bonds of slumber
enfold the farms; field and woodland
stand hushed and still; stealthy numbness
fastens eyelids. His finger is on lips
in speechless trance while his spell-binding
contrives the change— transformations
blend boundaries, blur through the atoms
as charmed exchange in the chain of matter
refashions forms; phases cycle
from subtle to solid: his secret craft
shifts shapes of things. What is shed from clouds
is forged as it falls; the fierce volleys
are changed to sleet then to chill kernels,
corns of coldness: an unkindly sowing
of grain gravellike that grows no harvest
is the hail-shower. Harsh broadcasting,
it is weather-wielded, the wind drives it
to meet the earth, where it mingles with dew.
Re-making rain, the rimy essence
congeals to jewels, by his magician's sleight
starburst-structured in stark-bladed
sixpointed cells —the seeds of his realm—
so nimbly wrought, notched and fretty
forked fins and vanes, affixed to hubs
with wires welded by a wily hand:
spine-spoked caltrops, or like spur-rowels

filed needle-fine, with feathery burrs
and angled awns, edged with splintered
sheer shards of mirrors. The shimmering prisms
glisk glass-brittle: englamoured gemstones
in brilliant cuts, their bright facets
rainbowed with rays.
This rapt moisture
—mysterious stuff: stone from liquid—
of uttermost cold, with an eerie shine
fair to beholders, is fickle to keep.
Sleekly slippery, it slides from fumbles,
cheats its handler, or chafes to the touch;
a trickster's treasure, it betrays the hoarder,
mage-minted trove, when it melts to water:
he builds his kingdom bound by the miracle
of its chill enchantments.
He can change the world:
he can tether the torrent; it shall turn to bone,
water wave-shackled, wear his harness. *Snow & Ice*
Ironhard the earth.
The air biting,

dew doffs its skin. By his druid's art
it quickens to quills. With a quiver, grass is
crystal-clustered: encrusting ice
locks it in lacquer. Lake-ripples tense.

Rime-raimented wreaths of cobweb
necklace with nets naked hedgerows;
sealed in silver, seed-pearl threaded,
they are turned to tressours tricked out with gems.

The roads are rinks. Roofs are thistled;
icicled eaves. An angry pallor
enthrals the sky, the threat of snow.
Grey gripes the frost: ground is frozen.

Cunning branchwork, cold tracery,
etched on windows, the ice tightens
wonder-fetters. The water-fall
hangs hard on-course: it halts on the brink

as sparkling spikes, its spate a fossil.
Pools pave with glaze. The pinnacled trees
show shockheaded shaggy antlers,
hoar-matted horns. The hastening rapids'

flows are trammelled: the floes of bergs

fasten their swiftness. With the fall of snowflakes
Time ebbs its tide. The tempests loom
in the gnawing dark. The north musters.

Blind blizzards strike. They blanket the shires.
Robin is writing runic footprints.
The land's likeness is lost in drifts
and all is owned by emptiness.

As in an elder age, the ice conquers.
Rime rules on earth: the reign of Winter.
Lanterns quailing, their lights are quenched.
The wind rises. Wolves are howling.

Nears nightshadow. Nigh draws the time
when the wavering Sun's wasting sickness
must lessen his strength till The Longest Night:
wastelands await Winter Solstice.

And yet for the children the changed landscape
is a garden of games. Gathering snowballs,
they mould in mittens missiles to shoot *Children's Games in the Snow*
as battle-volleys; they build snowmen
and in homespun hoods, hairy leggings,
bones bound to soles of buskined shoes,
skid in sledges or skate on ponds
amid prattle, and pratfalls.
With prayers to the tree,
the youths bring in the Yuletide Log:
Oakstump or ash, or apple-daddocks,
the roots and ramage rough-hewn by adze;
the trunks are trimmed and trundled homewards *Bringing in the Yule Log*
to hallow the hearths —from the hall's firepit
to the inglenook of every cottage.
They haul the caber, hamstrung by snow,
the breath steaming from burning lungs;
but the tree-bearers are trailed by lurking
gawping gadabouts: their gangs of scamps
besiege such processions. They assay ambush.
From the white hillsides, whipper-snapper
boys are baying; bent on mischief,
tykes tag along with tear-aways
in a rowdy rabble of ragamuffins,
armed with snowballs —aimed shrewdly to
hoots of laughter. They rehearse teasing
sing-song heckles, insulting japes
to a taunting tune, with tongue-yarming
gleeful sniggers, the glowing-cheeked
nosethumbing knaves; for shenanigans' sake,

childer-chattering, chase to and fro
cutting capers or cocking snooks,
murgeoning mugs in mick-taking
-faced buffooneries. Phizzog-pulling
irks their elders: they answer back
jackanape-gibes with joshing banter
but the lads' malarkey beleaguers their gait
and the pack pounces. Portage falters
—criss-cross of legs casts blue shadows,
long and slender in the low-slanting
westered sunlight's wintry glimmers—
they accost the carriers, kick snow-divots
in the lunge forward, and they launch themselves
into scrum-scrimmage. Amid scrambling brawls
mirthful mayhem mobs the timber.
Egged on to deeds —oafish gurning—
foolhardy friends, to guffaws from their mates,
jump jostling out to jockey on the log,
clamber clownishly. They clasp with their knees
or with stubs for stirrups and as stang-riders
goad giddying-up as if gaumless knights,
tilt at tourneys; till the tree-keepers,
with shake or shunt of their shouldered burdens,
topple the jousters. Tossed from their saddles
they bask on their backs and with beaming faces
wave wings with their arms in the wallow of snow.
Damp-draggled bodies, daylight failing,
ache now with ice, and urge them home.
Delight has lessened. It has lost its charm,
to be sneaped by the snow. With snivelling noses,
their feet numbing, fingers clumsied,
weary the wading back. Wetshod trudging.
The frost's on mittens; and frore the breath.
Dins die away. Dusk is falling:
its blush tinges blue horizons.
In the chill sunset children's voices'
faint rumour fades.
Defaced, the whiteness—
riddled with ditches and rutted troughs
foot-fall printed; the furrowed channels
trespassers' trekked with trampling boots
or scathed with skis, scored by trenchant
sledge-runners' slots to slush-gullies
—muffled moonscape under a mackerel sky
frosts freeze by night; then with fresh snowfall
it glows in the gloom: glistens like stardust.
The logs lugged in, they light the grate:
churn the firedrill in its chafing notch,

swivel the spindle till it swirls with smoke;
the tip catching, tinder kindles
—the showers of sparks show them futures—
and as the flame is fanned, feed it pieces,
smoulder-smutted smithereens and chunks
—the charred relics (charms for toothache,
lucky for lightning) are the left-overs,
cinder-salvage saved through the months
from yester-year's Yuletide Carlin.
There is baked Bannock with bumpers of ale
as they huddle at the hearth, to hear stories
in the circle of the fire.

Solstice Morning: *Winter Solstice begins*
and the girls gathering garlands and wreaths,
evergreen emblems, for their Ivy-Queen
—maidens' mascot, Our Mother of Bines,
Lady of Tendrils leashed in creeping
festoons of stems, her stranglehold
suckers' holdfasts, serpentine limbs—
are harried by hotheads of The Holly King, *The Holly & The Ivy*
bough ripe with berries. With his beard and hood
and rude retinue, a riddle-poser,
gift-bestower who grants wishes,
wassail-toaster and wise-acre,
this merry prankster, the Master of Revels,
is Father Yule, the feast's patron,
and totem of the boys. The teams haloed
with the leaves of their sex laced in chaplets,
green and glossy garnish of fronds,
bear boughs and sprays, barbed or coiling,
snares of thickets and thorn snagging
—sprigs spinethistled, spiked like briers,
or the lasses' lovestone, loyal bindwood's
twined ivy-tods, tangles sprouting
purpled pomanders not prickly tines—
and parade their rites in round-dances.
Brought bravely home, the battle is joined:
as they deck the halls duels of insults
are exchanged in song. They chant carols *Carols*
of 'Hail Hollin!' (to humble Ivy)
and 'Blight on Holver! Bless Dame Hivy!'

From ancient groves oak-knowers reap *Harvesting The Mistletoe*
the magic bunches of the mistletoe-bush
—they are gowned in white— with golden sickles,
to hang in the house. Thus at hall-thresholds
those halves of a whole, The Holly and The Ivy,
are coyed to accord: in the kissing-game.

In his life-cycle, the Lord of the Year *The Midwinter Sun*

and sacred sovereign, Sol in splendour,
the calendar's king —whose court progress
(reigning monarch, his round table
of potent paladins the pictured twelve)
as he steers his circuit by star-sigils
as time-keeper, is the tale of seasons
measured through the months; the master of day's
quotidian term, as between horizons,
from his orient dawn till his hour of sinking,
waned west at dusk in waves of ocean,
his journey spans; the jewel of heaven,
his birds greeting with bardic praise
each uprising on the eastern sky's
highway of hawks, beheld alone
in this eagle's vision, at his eyrie of noon
—dodders to dotage: darkness threatening
cold's conqueror, whose kingly glory
overthrew them. He thawed the ice,
night's gnawing shades, numb and chilling
deathly forces, the foe of the dark
who melted frosts with his murk-quelling
belovèd light. The life-giver,
he stays to shine into stone-circles;
barrow's womb abides his beam's entry;
his heart of gold hubs all Nature:
his fire fathers the force of growth.
Rays reaching out caress the blackness:
saps circulate in seething veins
to wake with warmth, from winter slumber,
the secret germ. Seeds are quickened.
Tubers teeming, at his touch the corm
and bulb burgeon: for his beams they strike
their rippling roots. Runners are shooting
fine fingerlings: feeling nimbly
they thrive to his throbs. The thrusting spikelet
sprouts with tendrils. The spretched fledgeling
chick he cherishes; every childing thing
in his ardent embrace for Earth's breeding
starts its stirring, sustained by the Sun's
all-tending orb. His ever-kindling
spark drives the spore: he inspires the bud,
as twigs whiten, untwist her whorl,
he parts her petals; the pollen to smoulder
from flaunting catkins; enflames the blood
of libidinous beasts: of bull for heifer,
of stags to strive with stark antlers,
of the mettlesome sire, in mating season
when the stud's stallion in the stable-yard

mounts mare and filly; for the moor-hunting
hen-harrier's swoop, the hare's madness
to fight in fields, in the far-swimmer,
urged on to spawn in his ancient redd
by his salmon-leap; for the serpents' wreathing
reptilian knots (their tangles birthing
glass *glains* of adders, conglobed from their slime,
the druids' egg). By his dragon-power
in the mine's matrix transmutes from ore
new noble metals; naked pasture
to a worthier cache, the wealth of crops:
in eared acre, orchard and park,
grain ripes to gold, and the grafted stock
yields its bounty. The Year has passed.
Heat and harvest; the hunt and rut;
the burnished berry, and the barley-corn.
His race is run. His rule failing, *Winter Sunstead*
worn weary with age, the worshipped planet's
faint and feeble. He fares on-course
haloed in haze, amid the hoary fogs
and drifting rack, drives his chariot
marestail-misted and masked in shadow.
Wall-eyed and wan, his withered nimbus
glimpsed pale in glooms, glares down weakly
or scowls askance. The Sky-Rider
has risen to fall.
— The rock and spindle
for the warp and weft of the weird sisters
sly sleight changes, like a slough of raiment,
their shapes showing a shift of aspect
as they reform to frame the felly and nave
for their widows' weaving, witchcrafty loom
that whirls to their whim: the Wheel of Fortune.
Blindfold and blonde, in her blackest guise,
she spins the spokes —spider-goddess—
and the fatal cycle of that fickle queen,
the cruel crusher of crowned monarchs,
wends widdershins.—
As on the weapon-acre
(or game-table) when gallowglasses,
or caterans and kerns, kilted redshanks,
are shoulder to shoulder and the sheltron's wall
—the sweeping cloudscapes their swagging banners—
hems the hero round with a hedge of pikes,
and trapped by treason of traitor barons,
the king is captured, and succumbs to his wounds,
clouds closing in eclipse the glory
of his lion's mane. The beleaguered star

reins mid-career. The meridian fades
to the climacteric stage of his mortal term
and his day is done. Doom is fated.

Still stands the Sun.
Stumbles haltingly
then veers in his stead, the steep vertex
of his stop stooping. Stark in ruin
as humbled from his height, headlong he sinks,
thrust low from his throne —the throes of his fate
blaze bloodreddened— to the abysmal, void
western ocean, to the world's margin:
dives downfallen; darkly shrouded
in palls of cloud.
His pyre kindled
with phoenix-fire
fades to embers
and gledes glinting,
the glowing coals
fume, and guttering
founder, and smothered
slake their cinders
in salt water.
Dusk dims swiftly.
Day is ended:
a peep of noon;
pitchblack nightfall,
dark deathshadow.
Deep-whelming gulfs'
swirls swallow him down
in swaddling waves.

The Sun is in the Sea.

Her sucking maw
drags him under drowning spirals
of her coiling currents, cold fathoms downward
to the tears-tasting, entombing deep
womb of waters.
They who watch the stars
from their standing stones, study the emblem
of the Sun's snaring in the snake-strangle
of the world-girdling water-monster,
the lore-masters, relate in story
that a boat embarques, from some berth or wharfage,
and his voyage ventures, travailing westward
beneath the world on benighted tides
in search of dawn.

Thus the Sun's passing:
the least daytime, then The Longest Night. *The Longest Night*
And not many are idle. The island wakes:
folk rove afoot to feast the vigil.

See, silhouettes: processions nearing *Yuletide Mummers*
in winding troupes with the woven paces,
high-leaping hops, of heys and capers
(bell-baubled pads bound to their ankles,
their steps jingle). Stuck-out elbows
cocked akimbo, they kick their heels,
or linking hands, with laced fingers,
strut straddleleggèd to strains from the waites:
the tattoo of the tabor, the tippers beating
rough ratamacues, the rowdy-dow
of drums drubbing, the droning vamp
of the bladder-bumbass; blare and gurgle
as they puff on pibgorns, pump doodlesacks;
with strings strumming, strike up the skirl,
to crowdy-crawns and crooning fipples,
of the bawling chanter: the bag-pipers'
wild wails shrilling, with the warbled buzz,
hoarse rote and honk, from hurdy-gurdies.
Clown-clodhoppers, clad in motley;
with sway and lunge, lurch and swagger,
jackpudding jigs, and such jolly frolics
—with splayed fingers when footing sprawls—
they straggle through the snow.
Strange, the costumes
we perceived vaguely; as they advance, discern
faceless dancers, their features masked:
obscured with blacking, or scarfed in sashes;
men mobled up, their moonlit figures
in bizarre guises —a zany's wardrobe
hides who they are, hugger-mugger
by vizzards and veils— who cavort in hoods
pinked with peepholes, point-steepled hats
or crownless brims; crones and maidens,
who with tongues trolling are tripping the measure
in girdled gowns with gaudy flounces,
frilled fripperies fringed with tassels,
yet are men in drag, the molly-dancers
with their wobbling bosoms, bewigged with plaits;
who parade in rags, rattling trinkets,
gew-gaws chiming on their gaberdine-skirts;
beakmasked as birds, in back-to-front
peasant paltocks (and particoloured
their galligaskins), are garbed in ribbons,
in tatter-jackets turned inside out,

fard fake eyebrows, or have false whiskers
—are the lewd galoshins, lawless soulers,
tipteering boys: teams of rhymers
who mooch in moonbeams to the Mumming Rites.
They surround the halls, rhyme out the squire; *The Mumming Play*
lighting torches, they lay their scene
amid staring eyes, and steaming breath:
parade the ring, harangue watchers
with loud palaver, and lilt doggerels,
sing-song patterings, they recite by heart.
Masks muffle the words as they mouth speeches
in stiff poses, with stilted mimes
—well-worn hokum. Their wonted roles
the familiar cast of the mummers' comedy:
the feuding Knights; the fair Damsel;
a juridic King renders sentence.
But then comes a surgeon, for the scene at the end,
who performs his cure as the fifth business,
quizzed by Chorus, The Quack-Salver:
a logic-chopper, but he's leech-crafty,
this medicine-man; his mumbo-jumbo
restores the dead.
The stage is set.
Dumbshow and dance the traditional mode
for the play's action, the plot a fable
every yuletide always the same:
it never changes and is known to all.
As the sword-dances on Summer's threshold
portrayed the triumph, and the tryst of Robin
with the Maid of the May, the moons of Winter
are The Fool's regime. Phase ascendant
since Autumn Equinox, he ousts The Hero *Hero versus The Fool*
as eternal tanist who returns to reign
the waning year, Winter's moiety
when the Holly King is at his height of sway,
Midwinter-month: a mock-sovereign
for his allotted term, the Lord of Misrule,
his hour of glory the eve of his downfall.
Old archetype of an annual strife,
the lore of the land's love-triangle,
is retold as legend: of the Two Brothers
sibling suitors of the sacred Maiden
(her beauty embodies the budding life
in crops and cradles, that crowned Goddess
whose kiss is kingship); of their combat to win
The Bride's embrace; but the brothers are doomed
to be the twain champions who twice a year
must fight and fall in a feud of the ages,

for the yearly cycle is the youths' wooing,
of Oak for his May, the Ivy by Holly, *Oak-King versus Holly-King*
in the ceaseless tourney of the seasons' wheel:
as Robin and Wren, rival heroes, *Robin versus Wren*
as bright Belinus and Brân the raven,
sue for sovereignty by civil warfare;
growth springing green, then the grim withering
to Winter's waste.
As in the womb of Britain,
at the island's centre, angry monsters,
scales scathed by talons, escape thwarted,
writhe restlessly, their ravening fangs
gnaw at the navel —the nest of worms
broods embroiled there: with braiding necks
the twinned dragons twist and rankle,
chafe in the chamber, till they chew their own
lizardly limbs and the links of their coils
fold to fasten in figure-of-eight
entangled turns, as the tail-biters ∞
clasp close-grappled, and cleave twining
—so these ancient enemies, in their endless battle.
Stalled stalemated, still-vying duel's
strange stranglehold, the struggling powers
are locked in a loop.
Release denied,
champion and challenger exchange their roles
and counterchange, contrariwise:
each kills the other, his own likeness,
turn by turn about. Thus they taste the oneness
—yet the nuptial night is never tasted—
of woman wooed and wedded bride,
of victor and victim; and reverse again
the face of defeat, as they perform their roles,
mirror-selves' miming, in the mask of triumph
time and time again, to-and-froing
from yesterever till the yarn of Time
spins out her span. As in the spiral dances
of the Mayday morris the maze-stepper
of the town in the turf, Turning Castle,
moves motionless, thus the mummers' plays:
of bout worsted and waged battle
and winner losing till world's ending.
Ruddock fallen, the Wren of Yule
kills Cock-Robin. Yet the conquering hero,
the hedge-kinglet, the Holly Lord,
is but mock-monarch. Midwinter Night;
who waxed is waning. Winter ages.
It seemed they saw Summer's vanquishing;

enter The Doctor.
But dawn's in the air.
For hours of blind, endless-seeming,
numb night-vigil, a noise has muttered
its summons to the land. The sound thunders
in rumbling rolls, rub-a-dubbing
over every shire, and in each county
the crowds have gathered: cromlech and henge *The tribes muster for dawn*
thronged for worship. The throbs pulsing
—goatskins thudding gut-tugging pudder—
from druid drums draw the people
on holloway and harrowpath, on huntsman's trails,
by tree-tunnel, and trampled drove,
winterbourne-wath, watershed ridge,
to the sacred Sarns (processional routes
from end to end of Arthur's kingdom)
to causeyed camps by cairn and barrow,
ringforts and raths, royal stronghold,
sarsen-circle, single menhir-
holedstone, hoarstone or hallowed Tor,
dolmens and Dins: in dark landscapes,
on the king's highways across the island,
they flock to their fanes.
In flaming torches
gonfalons gleam, garnished with skulls
as tribal totems, the talismanic
animal ensigns, antlered banners,
as the assembled septs process with their standards.
Against the chill they gulp bragget,
heather-ale in horns, honied metheglin;
and as round-dancers ring the bonfires,
fuelled fierce and stoked the fateful nightwatch,
eked out by the blaze their overgrown
flame-flung shadows flash then taper
in the red radiance then reaching out
sprout spindleshanks; spiky outlines
waver, melt, or —warped out of scale—
jump jaggedly up: their gyring figures
that with lengthened legs leap in gambols,
writhe and ripple over the rock-faces
of jambs and lintels, are like giants dancing.
Or are the triliths turning? Torch and firelight
shuffle giddy shapes. Shadows are spinning.
They trick the eye —try to count them.
—Do the sarsens move? Menhirs circling,
un-earth-fastened; would the obelisks sigh,
stiff bulk astir, stretching, quivering,
their shells shaking as they shudder alive,

the stark pillars like statues waking
—masks are breathing, marble thawing—
from the enchanted dream that chained them in stony
slough of slumber? Are the slabs birthing
fossil-foetuses? Forms like lava—
huge beings hatch. Could husks of rock
unleash the lithe limbs of titans
to dance again? *chorea gigantum*

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