

***From A Seasonal Interlude for an Arthurian Epic:
Autumn, The Turn and Fall of Leaf.***

* * *

The restless wraiths may ride on the winds,
and hunt through the trees.

Whose hues have faltered
as if the woods wearied; or there waged against them
a strike at their strength, that strips their panoply.
For as fleeting that moment of flaming colours
the little season when the leaves were green,
sprays sprigged with growth, when Spring freshened
their nerves with nectar, new buds swelling
were juicy with sap, and gemmed in the dews
the folded knosps fanned out to the sky
in glowing greenness; when with gleeful life
the boughs would be bustling, for the birds nesting
choired, and coupled; when cooling zephyrs
soughed in the bowers of Summer's groves
dappled with sunlight, and through the dozing noon
leaf-laden trees, their limbs swaying
with rumour and surge of the rustling canopy,
would lilt their lore to listening poets.
That beauty was brief: so with butterfly swiftness
the early blush, and Autumn-tinctured
green changed to gold. Then the grey distemper
on the cusp of decay: the copper-brazened
faded damask and fainting yellows
are touched by a tarnish, whose taint spoils them
—a stain that palls— and steals their riches;
what was bright bruises; they have been breathed upon
with an uncanny cast, as if cankers gnawing
leeches their lushness: long-dwindling blight.
They wilt withering. The wizened scraps,
brown-freckled blades, like brittle husks
drained dry of pith, drossy tinsel,
cling on clawed twigs. The clattering branches
lose now their leaves —their limbs mourning—
shed in showers downwards, from dishevelled trees,
lack-lustre sere. They litter the floors;
they grovel in dirt; they are ground into dust.
Then yearns the Year, for her yesterdays
when all rose and ripened, but to rot in the end.

The turn and fall of leaf

Last leaves falling. Light is fading.
Winds awaken. They war on the forest.
Knee-deep beneath the naked trees
the leaves languish; loosed like flurrying
redgolden rain, the roots are buried
and pathways choked, by parched masses:
crinkled cramoisy, crunched underfoot
as shuffling drifts. With shift and ruffle,
they enswathe the sward; in sweeping gusts
heave up in heaps. So the hoard is gathered
of Autumn's embers: ashen cinders,
mottled and mingling. The mounting litter
is a joy to children, for jumping and chasing,
for boys to bask in, for burrowing dogs
—and for the itchy insects that eat the duff:
lockchester lurks: a lair for weevils,
dank dorbeetles, devils' coach-horses;
abode of bristletails and busy with mites;
hundredlegs' home. Haunt of earwigs.

Weathers worsen. It is wetted with rains,
dawn-dewsodden; downpours by night
mat the moultings, bemired in ooze,
to clotted clumps. The clemmed flinders
corrode like rust; their rotting structures
shrivelled and shrinking. The shreds of scale,
crazed craquelures, are crumbling away,
flayed off in flakes from flimsy stems
—wild winnowing, as Winter threatens—
and milled to swarf. The meal is powdered.
Fragile, the frames: frilled traceries
of skeins like lace, skeleton-lattice,
nerve-netting bared; anatomies
of spindly spines, sparred ribcages;
filigree filaments, in the first glances
of encroaching ice, crystallizing
to rime-relics —miraculous,
transfigured in frost.

* * *