

THE WORM IN THE WOOD

By James Dorr

*"But, forasmuch as it was on this wise that they possessed them of the country, it hath been only by an injustice that they have taken tribute thereof. For nought that is taken by force and violence can be justly possessed by him that did the violence."*

Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, IX.16

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*"And so as he yede, he saw and hearkened by the moonlight, how the pillers and robbers were come into the field, to pill and to rob many a full noble knight of brooches, and beads, of many a good ring, and of many a rich jewel; and who that were not dead all out, there they slew them for their harness and their riches."*

Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, XXI.4

As so it lies, spoilage for ravens and robbers,  
the *Alpha* and *Omega*, I, who speak to ravens,  
ken of them tales both of future and past, know  
to this it comes, always.

I, who now through ravens' eyes  
see Lucan bending, lips whisper to Arthur  
that, wounded, he must be moved;  
Bedivere, butler to him in more noble times,  
bowing as well, lifting in his arms that king,  
Lucan from this labor also expiring. I,  
through ravens' ears hearing also the king's request  
see, too, how greed's grasp even now causes

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loyal Sir Bedivere's hand to hesitate,  
holding the sword too long, seeing its hilt sparkle  
bejeweled beneath the moon, twice instead hiding it  
before returning it to the lake whence it came --  
even here, at Death's side, loyalties divided:  
just as Sir Gawain's must for his lost brother  
supplant the kinship he owes noble Launcelot;  
Launcelot in his turn trysting with king's wife,  
love for lust trading; King Arthur for his part thus  
tearing his kingdom --

Oh, it was not Mordred's fault --

I, who through ravens' eyes foresee the future  
know, yes, that some will blame *him* -- but  
this playing out Fate's game was no whit more his  
than the doing of Morrigan-named king's half-sister,  
the Lady le Fay, for all that blood may join us,  
she through her dead father, her learning of death-lore;  
I through ravens'-speaking, carrion-formed kinship to  
Fea and Macha, she of "Macha's acorn crop,"  
enemies' heads piled in empty-eyed windrows, to  
venomous Nemon, to Badb of the battle-cry  
crow-formed and banshee-voiced -- all of these *bean-sidhe*,  
the women of fairy-mounds, even Queen Morgan herself  
at the end of it -- so taking Arthur, too,  
to appled-island vales; but not *their* blame  
either.

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Nor was it even mine, instrument though that  
I willingly was, I who have seen the past as well,  
that of my people, who lived here before Celts came,  
those of the mainland who called themselves "Soldiers' Sons"  
they in turn conquered by ravening Romans,  
they themselves also by Saxons and Angles --  
even the *name* of the island thus stolen --  
then Arthur, at last, in blood the land reconquering:  
land that was never *his*.

I and the others  
so biding in shadows as blood upon blood soaked  
an earth once green, peace-formed, of  
dappled sunlight on leaves, fair winds on flowered-  
fields, meadows grass-mounded for cattle to feast on --  
this field that I and my carrion-fed sisters  
now pick through as robbers, and not *rightful* owners --  
thus we, the worm in the wood ever waiting  
to sting where chance offers, watched as Arthur's city rose.  
Dwelt we in forest then, blue-woaded, tattoo-disguised  
so as to blend with dark, watching the blood well up  
even in *games* -- the "tournaments" as these new  
conquerors called their sport -- more so in war-making,  
blood upon blood always to earth returning,  
blood upon blood to *pay*.

And so we waited.  
Some of us now, too, to seek work as scullion-maids  
within the kitchens and larders of Camelot,

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to be set there by Sir Kay to scrub pots clean  
as he, as seneschal, so doled out duties  
for us the most menial; others to dress the hair  
of noble ladies, enduring their pinches  
their pique-filled, spiteful slaps; others, the men of us,  
to work in stables -- thus, always, our time staying --  
thus learning where chinks lay, where lay their weaknesses,  
screed we their secrets.

Learned we of ladies, too,  
not content to let the men alone spill life, so  
attired they themselves all in single colors --  
rather had *us* dress them, we who worked as their maids  
otherwise fading to invisibility, we the unnoticed  
save when we were *needed*; which suited our purpose --  
thus decked out, they made delight that they as lovers  
would take none but he who in battle-clash killed *three*,  
so claiming by this ruse to save their chastity.  
So causing more blood to soak the gore-laden ground;  
the ground that was not *theirs*.

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This ravens told me,  
or this, perhaps, I had seen, I who toiled also  
in Camelot's pantries, poisoning not the food  
but rather minds of men, filling their thoughts with fame,  
far-ranging quests to try: Gawain perhaps the most  
noble, once, of them all, now to test axe-strokes  
against a lord, forest green -- one of *our* kind,

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you see -- there to be found wanting, even if so slightly  
as to be scarcely (as *we* were scarcely, oh we made sure  
of *that!*) if at all noticed; others to crave a cup  
that sinners could not seek (and who of them were not  
sinners, at least, in blood?); others for women's love.  
Thus for idleness depleted the court of its most doughty,  
*itself* its enemy, scattering loyalties,  
sending its life-blood forth, serving no purpose  
though no doubt most well-meant, most nobly intentioned,  
save spilling more blood *en route* -- on way to nowhere;  
while elsewhere the land's peasants labored just as we,  
who within Camelot's marbled walls took the tasks  
nobody else desired; we did the drudge work,  
yet careful to bide our time; I in the kitchen  
who found me a cow's horn, who whittled it, tapering,  
into a bow -- a tiny arc, barely two hands' spans  
from point to point, yet powerful -- who strung it  
with my own hair.

And hid it in my cloak's hem.

While outside others toiled, waiting as we did,  
who gained no gifts as a king's noble knights might,  
those who were of the court, or, through noble birth --  
stealers of their own lands, just as *this* king was,  
in that way, perhaps, kindred -- came to seek entry  
and, so, shared in his largess: others, as I say,  
those left without, of the land, we who were here *before*,  
we gained no favor but rather in forests skulked,

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fields labored, kitchens toiled, bedchambers laid out  
and swept indiscretions out with other secrets,  
on our selves, you understand, thus *supported*  
the glory of Camelot, yet gained nought from it.  
We, the little folk, the *aborigines* -- whose land it was  
they *took* -- bided us, so, our time;  
whispered we with ravens, Morrigan, Nimue -- she  
of the Moon's brightness -- Vivien, Ana, Badb,  
Nemon and Macha. . . .

~

We the worm in the wood.

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And nought that is taken by force and violence  
can be justly owned by the one who conquered it --  
Mordred was just a tool.

While on that last morning,  
Mordred himself facing, fourteen knights with him,  
Arthur with *his* fourteen, both hosts arrayed behind,  
every man watchful as king and knight parley, each  
waiting the other's first hostile wavering,  
swords sheathed by agreement --

*I*, I in the grass waiting  
*now* took my little bow. Now took I also  
a needle I borrowed from some lady's bedroom,  
fixed into an arrow, and creeping, unseen,  
I shot --  
stinging one's ankle, of which side I do not know,

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one of the knights alone, but he, confusing  
that prick for an adder, a poisoned snake at his feet,  
so *drew* his sword out. . . .

So started the battle.

And so now, by nightfall, a hundred thousand laid dead  
upon the down, Mordred and Arthur at it with each other,  
one slain as well, one wounded, soon to die also --  
thus Camelot ended.

And after, I who see with ravens' eyes wandering,  
thus later I visited Glastonbury in guise of a servant  
and saw with my *own* eyes the stone with its carving, of  
*Hic jacet Arthurus Rex, quondam Rex que futurus,*  
and, later still, still disguised, visited Almesbury,  
to which the queen had come to pray there as a nun,  
and whence came Launcelot seeing her there but once,  
taking the robe himself; and in these both resorts  
where those within might have reason to wish me harm,  
*everyone* saw me --

Yet not a one noticed.