

A PRIOR'S TALE

work in progress

a short excerpt

I often sit at evening after Vespers on the stone ledge of the casement. My oratory window looks out over the monastery and I can see across the walls to the river glinting in evening light. The room doubles as a study, warmed by a log fire kept burning in an inglenook that backs on to my bedchamber. A painted alcove under the north window frames a prie-dieu, a small altar-table and carved wooden stall. By the window where I sit now, a writing table and chair are lit by the rays of the sinking sun. A skein of wild geese honks past the church tower and settles in the watermeadows among browsing cattle. Late afternoon birdsong mingles with the clank of the Angelus bell. I can see a wren hopping under the pear tree beneath my window: how angelic the presence of birds, winged creatures of flight, often hidden to our sight but consecrating with song the places they visit. The awning of sky is darkening and the first star of evening winks above the thick maze of winter branches, aged limbs of a pear tree that will soon erupt with new growth.

My journey has tired me. I can still hear the pounding of hooves in my head, feel the wind in my robes. My body aches. I am too old for such arduous riding. To think I embarked on my trip to Rising Castle with so many doubts. To think I had not seen Queen Isabelle – as she then was – for sixteen years, my mind poisoned by rumours of her adultery and the crime of regicide that had led her to madness: this woman of legendary beauty and intelligence, who changed the path of my life those many years ago. The murder of her husband the King Edward the Second had, they say, unhinged her: she was a Jezebel deranged, a demented she-wolf living in semi-

imprisonment in a remote castle near the sea, her reputation soiled in perpetuity, termagant of iron whose soul is blackened to eternity. Thus is it whispered throughout the realm of the Dowager Queen, mother of King Edward III....

It was on the long ride back to the priory that I resolved to write down what I had heard at Rising Castle. I looked out into the gathering twilight for a while, then rose to my feet and moved stiffly towards the plain wooden table where I have spent so many hours writing and attending to monastery business....