Song of the Sparrow
I am Elaine
daughter of Barnard of Ascolat.
Motherless.
Sisterless.
I sing these words to you now,
because the point of light grows smaller,
ever smaller now,
ever more distant now.
And with this song, I pray I may
push back the tides of war and death.
So, I sing these words
that this light, this tiny
ray of light and hope may live on.
I dare not hope that I
may live on too.
I

Motherless.
Sisterless.
I am both.
But I have brothers,
   dozens
   nay, hundreds
of brothers.
Only two real ones:
brash Lavain
and my biggest brother, thoughtful Tirry.
The others are not brothers by blood.
There are so many of them;
I call a few my friends:
   Lancelot, Arthur’s second,
      but handsomer, still.
   Arthur himself, who is a captain in
      his uncle Ambrosius Aurelius’s army.
The men here follow Arthur, but ultimate fealty is to Aurelius, dux bellorum. There is Gawain, a sweet bear of a man, and Tristan, who is all mystery and mischief and glee.

We live here, in this army encampment, where drums beat and beat in my dreams and over breakfast, at sunrise and sundown. The here and home I speak of is no more than the collection of dirty, foul-smelling tents. I live here, in this army encampment, among men, because my mother is dead, delivered into the earth nine years ago now, and there is no one else. My father brought me here when I was eight years old.

Once I heard Lavain whisper
to Tirry that it was a good thing our mother lived to see me through eight years of life.
Till I was old enough to learn to use a thread and needle and old enough to grow skilled at mending clothes.
At least there is someone left to mend their clothes, Lavain said.
But I am just one girl, without nearly enough hands to sew the tears in every man’s clothing.
There are too many of them.
For, in these days, dark battles rage on.
From all sides Britain’s enemies press in on us,
the painted Picts from the north,
marauding Scots from the west,
and the barbarian Saxons from the south
and east.
Britain bleeds
and bleeds
as men like my father and
brothers
    even Lavain
bleed and bleed.
We move as the fighting moves,
as the wind moves.
So there might be peace.
Before a battle begins, the men swarm about camp as bees in a hive, making ready. Mount Breguoin is the eleventh fight Arthur will lead in the war against our Saxon enemy. As they prepare for war, the men ready their weapons, sharpening blades and strengthening shields and chain mail. I do my part, too, tearing bandages and brewing poultices of healing leaves and flowers for Cai, Arthur’s steward, to carry to the battleground. I wander through the camp,
from the stables, which lie just near the banks of the River Usk, toward the center, where dirty, greyish tents radiate out from the great fire pit that is the Round Table.

All the time I am tallying in my mind the numbers of bandages and vials of powders and balm. The tents wind in ever-narrowing circles, like the curves of a snail’s shell. Men huddle in groups outside their tents, chortling with laughter at jokes made at the enemy’s expense, rowdily singing tunes of victory. I know them all and wave or nod to many. Then I spot Arthur near the Round Table, surrounded by a small company of men, his nearest friends. Arthur’s stance is graceful
and straight, his eyes dark as pools in a deep wood.
There is an air of melancholy entwined in his celebrated courage and strength.

_The men that we fight_, Arthur told me once, _they are just men. Like us._

_Well, like me_, he said,
a crimson blush coloring his cheeks,
as those black eyes crinkled at the corners with a smile.

_And we fight, and ever they come at us, like the tide of the sea. I do not understand it._

_This fighting and killing and urge to conquer._ His gaze turned downward then.
I touched his arm, and he glanced at me, all the sorrow on this earth filling his eyes then.

_I will never understand it._
But I will fight and kill as
I must, to protect our
world and all that is
good and just in it.
And I remember asking
myself how there could
be men like Arthur and men
like our bloodthirsty enemies,
built of the same flesh, yet so
terribly unalike.
As I approach the four men, they turn
and welcome me, grins breaking
over their faces.
Elaine! Lancelot, Arthur’s
dearest friend and his fiercest
warrior calls, his emerald-green
eyes glowing.
He smiles warmly and waves me
over to join their circle.
The sight of him makes my heart
leap joyfully, and
I cannot help
but grin back at him.
Gawain is on Arthur’s other side,
his friendly face shining with good cheer.
He is large and his shadow looms
over the other men, though he
is the gentlest giant I have ever seen.
Our fourth companion is
Tristan, who is not much older than I.
His golden eyes penetrate like a
wolf’s, ever alert,
ever watching, but they are filled
with a mischief that never fails to
snatch a giggle from my throat.

Hello, I greet my friends.

Elaine, we were just discussing
strategies for tomorrow’s battle,
Tristan informs me,
a crooked grin on his lips.

I think we should eat breakfast
before going to meet the Saxons.
We shall have to climb a mountain, after all.
We will need our strength.
But Lancelot, here, wishes to
fast in the morning, saving
himself for a celebratory lunch.
What think you? His smile widens.
I fold my hands and put my
fingers to my lips, as though I
am deep in thought.
I see I have interrupted a very serious
conversation, I reply wryly.
Yes, yes, Gawain jokes, most serious!
Truly, Elaine, Tristan continues
with the charade, your knowledge is deep.
We will do only as you command.
Ha, I crow, if I believed that, you would
have taken up sewing a long time ago.
The four men break into gales of
deep, rumbling laughter.
I believe our Elaine has bested you,
Tristan! Lancelot says, winking at me.
Come, friends, the hour grows late.
Let us to bed, for we are off at dawn,
Arthur suggests. The other three
nod their heads and we bid each other
good night.
Sleep well, and fight hard tomorrow, I tell them.
And do not forget to eat your breakfast.
I throw a smile at Lancelot as I turn to go,
their laughter following me as I make my
way back to my tent.