



Raven Ballads



poems and
songs from
The Bone Ransom

Bruce
Byfield

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This book is dedicated to Trish, as always.

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The Battle of Rerry Ford

The Margram sits in Glathing Hall,
Drinking the spice-mulled wine,
“Where are the swords,” says Borogrim,
“To save this town of mine?”

“Oh, the Dyr-am-Syr range over the land,
Before them farmers flee,
The Lady Pilsape lies dead in the snow,
And her housecarls gone to the trees.”

The Margram calls for the blood-red beef,
He’s drained his bowl to the lees;
“Much wine I’d need,” the Margram laughs,
“To see all that you see.

“When there’s a beard upon your chin,
“Soon enough for urgency;”
“All witness here,” says Borogrim,
“This is thin courtesy.

I’ll sell a field, I’ll sell a calf,

To arm my little few,”
“Do that,” the Margram says, and laughs,
Lest the Dyr-am-Syr win through.”

He’s ridden north, he’s ridden west,
To the great ones in their halls,
To the Alfhounds and the Hringesthorns –
Thin courtesy’s in them all.

He’s sold his fields, he’s sold his herds,
His rings and pillars, too,
He’s staked the ford at Rerry town,
And not a foe’s won through.

The sun rose up, the sun fell down,
The Rerry folk died in their tracks,
But Pilsape’s carls burst from the trees,
And the Dyr-am-Syr fell back.

Then the Dyr-am-Syr fled over the fields,
Through woods and town and knoll,
And Borogrim sits among the best,
When he’s come to Glathing Hall.

“Give up, give up,” says Hringesthorn,

“The lands beyond the ford;”
“Six years ago,” says Borogrim,
You might have bought for gold or sword.

In Rerry I have cows and coin,
In Ilvarness, ten times ten,
When the ford washed at my knees,
Fellow, where were you then?

I have built me a keep on Jobbles hill
Tongue and sword for pedigree,
I have pardoned all Pilsape's carls,
I am lord in that far country.”

The Raven in the Hawks

“Oh, tell me friend, what news, what news?”

“I saw the great hawks in their mews,
As the hawks prepared to take their rest,
The Raven came and fouled the nest.

No tasselled bells the Raven wore
As the hooded hawks he drove before,
No jesses bade the Raven, “No,”
None bade the Raven come and go.

The falconer lies in the snow,
Her lands belongs to wolf and crow;
The Raven sits on her high seat,
Her house and land are Raven’s meat.”

The Oracle Tree

Go and ask the tangled yew,
It knows the past and future, too,
Go when the wind begins to rise,
The yew may twist, but never lies.

When and what, who and how
All gust through the yew tree's boughs,
Why and where, and if likewise,
All these the crooked yew supplies.

Write or whisper, all's the same,
Come a blessing or a blame,
And if the answer fails to please?
Why take your questions to the bees.

Daughter, You Can Have My Sword

My mother's mother said to her,
When war began to stir,
"It's cut from a sheet of iron,
It's all I can afford,
But here: Daughter, you can have my sword."

My mother marched till I was born,
Then guarded hearth and watched the corn,
And when I was a woman grown,
And went to serve my lord,
She said, "Daughter, you can have my sword."

Now you're grown to womanhood,
And I have left the ranks for good,
Today when our farewells are made,
To see the balance is restored,
I'll say, "Daughter, you can have my sword."

And if you bear a girl one day,
When her time comes to march away,
Cast aside all the misgivings,
That love and tears record,
Tell her, "Daughter, you can have my sword."

Kermane's Exile

“Kermane the Sailor, Kermane the Raven,
Where is your home and where is your haven?”

“Oh, my home it lies in back of me,
My haven ahead and over the sea.”

“Why did you leave your kin and your home?”

“I killed a man, and now I must roam,
Lordless I'll wander, know exile's pain,
Never more to see my home again.”

“Tell me, Kermane, has outlawry vexed?”

“Only when thinking of what must come next,
Kinless and causeless in exile's track,
Forever I'll wander and forever must lack.”

“What now, Kermane, tell me what now?”

“Wherever my ship points its prow,
From hearth to hearth is how I'll live,
With the little my luck sees fit to give.”

“Kermane the Sailor, Kermane the Raven,
Where is your home and where is your haven?”
“With sorrow for drink, and pain for my bread,
No haven nor home I’ll have till I’m dead.”

Lament in the Reign of Skordis

I've walked cold and wind-chewed,
doubt-fed known dark, unsleeping,
tasted hunger and been fare for horror,
gnawed away roads, nibbled by home-loss.

That passed; this perhaps, too.

To barter in butchery with bloody men
pumped strength from my arm with each pulse in my youth.
Knees buckled with waiting, but to bolt seemed worse.

That passed; this perhaps, too.

Wrapped in ruin, I rave in song:
I'd a falter-limbed father, folded with age,
and a boy in first beard. Broken by Skordis,
they slouch in sleep, stretched under hill.

That passed; I, perhaps, too.

Purcirm's Lady

One autumn night as the dark drew in,
I fell asleep to the ocean's din,
I dreamed a dream and I wished it true,
Concerning Purcirm and his vanished crew.

Young Purcirm sailed from out the west,
Oak in his hull, gold in his chest,
To sail the Silvorn to its mountain head,
Far away from our marriage bed.

Past the Pocbeth Marshes in the dawn,
Past silted beds where the salmon spawn,
Past white water and above the falls,
Long ago he sailed beyond recall.

Through the Lorgrune Shore, where the fishes stalk,
Up in the hills where the wind-things walk,
Where the hill-clans in cedar canoes,
Are the only ones who ever win through.

By the head waters where the lightning's cast,
Did young Purcirm ever come at last?
Did he find a passage through the pass,
Far away from his loving lass?

Oh, how I wish, and wish in vain,
That young Purcirm comes home again,
Ten thousand pence I would see paid,
To know where Purcirm this night has strayed.

The Death of Dicer Rungest

The Ursebrim lord has fled the Thing,
And stole from Glathing Town,
With twelve forsaken men he's sworn,
To bring the Dicer down.

They came in the mists of winter-tide,
When the winds blow chill and loath,
Meat and drink he has not stinted them,
The Dicer has given them both.

They came with smiles upon their lips,
And mail beside their skin,
The Dicer has sat them among
His hearth-folk and his kin.

The Ursebrim sits upon the high seat,
The Dicer has straddled a bench,
To the Ursebrim falls the sheets and bed;
The Dicer's stretched by the fire-trench.

But never a moment the Ursebrim slept,
But stared up from the Dicer's bed,
And ran a thumb along his blade
Till the steel grew slick and red.

And when the night grew thick and lulled,
And the frost made nails in the ground,
The Ursebrim's men have crossed the yard,
And passed each sleeping hound.

Never a whine the great hounds made
As the Ursebrim barred the hall,
But the Dicer awoke from a dream of woe,
And leapt to his feet to call,

“Who comes with stealth, who comes with steel,
“Who dishonors the guesting bed?”
“Oh, my daughter is wronged,” the Ursebrim says,
“You dispensed her maidenhead.”

“Never by me,” the Dicer cries,
“Has your daughter suffered harm,
“She pledged herself by her mother’s side,
“She left on the Margram’s arm.

“And many a carl would be barrow clay
“Who her wedding has gifted with breath” –
The Ursebrim spits on the ground, and cries,
“Sooner her groom had been Death.”

The Dicer says, “I have a knife,
“And you have thirteen swords,
“But I have diced with a god in my time,
“Would I not duel with a lord?”

The Dicer has roused and dropped his cloak,
His knife leaps to his hand,
Three have fallen in his rush,
Dumbstruck where they stand.

Three more gamble, and three are lost,
From the seventh he has a blade,
“What?” The Dicer smiles and laughs,
“One man, and all afraid?”

“Linen clothes me side to side,
You rustle in your chain,
Such early leave you take, my guests,
Let me fetch you back again.”

Flames hiss with the blood of ten,
The next man cries, “Oh, shame!
“I am your eldest sister’s son,
“My name it is your name.”

The Dicer says, “Though you walk the cold,
“And are outlawed by the Thing,
“I would not kill my sister’s son,
“Go from this gathering.”

Then the Dicer has pierced the next man's side,
With a hole both trim and neat,
But his sister's son crept up behind,
And the Dicer fell at the Ursebrim's feet.

His sister's son has taken steel,
And through the ribs has smote,
But the Dicer's knife has made reply,
And sliced the traitor's throat.

The Ursebrim lord has laughed and knelt
To despoil him in the soot,
But the Dicer's hand has found his throat,
And the Dicer's steel his foot.

"Twelve were with you," the Dicer says,
"When south you galloped forth,
"Three curses from a dying man,
"Alone you must bear north:

“Five senses to pry at your slumber,
“Five toes never to bound,
“Five years to hobble landless
“Till you sleep underground.”

Lord Ursebrim he has knelt the night,
Bleak inside his coat,
He has torn away with the coming dawn,
The Dicer's hand at his throat.

The hall sent out the hounds in the snow
To fetch the Ursebrim back,
But he rode his horse into the storm,
And no one found his track.

And five senses did pry at his slumber,
And his five toes never did bound,
And five years he hobbled landless
Before he slept underground.

The Margram sat in Glathing Hall,
When he heard how the Dicer died,
It seemed as he clutched his wife and child,
That the dark crept close outside.

The Seagrave stared out from Sigestrاند,
Awaiting the wind and the tide,
Saying, "I'll brave the spring tides to raid,
"Now my dearest enemy's died."

The pyre was built by Rerry Ford,
All wept as the flames grew tall,
The Dicer was called the truest lord
To bonder or guest in his hall.

A barrow was raised for Rungest Lord,
Jade and gold piled for his rest;
Now send us all good company,
And make each an honest guest.

The Marriage Broom

Over the broomcorn, over the yew,
We jump together to start anew,
Hand in hand, come bale, come bliss,
We take our oath now, kiss to kiss.

The Ilvarness Hymn

From the hill-clans and night-walkers,
From scarecrow and barrow-guest,
May Grammarung guard us.
From windprowlers and wild dogs,
And the one who walks behind,
May Tavanne deliver us.

From the stones of the arched ruins,
From the whistles at the third milestone,
May Grammarung guard us,
From the watchers in the reeds,
And their riddles at mid-summer,
May Tavanne deliver us.

Never thank the hanging man,
Nor answer the singers at twilight,
May Grammarung guard us.
Never walk the blood trails,
Nor brave the winds or open hills,
May Tavanne deliver us.

Between walls and beside fire,

With wrought edge and iron
May Grammarung guard us,
With yew and the true path,
May Tavanne deliver us
Who cannot save ourselves.

Shield Oath

When the sword is yours, the shield is mine,
I am the shoulder beside yours, your shelter on the field.
When you fall, I face our foes for you.
Your wounds shall be in front while I can fight,
Back to back in battle we stand.

Lady Aglachad

She came into Ilvarness, her life crammed in a sack,
Wherever she had come from, they didn't want her back.
No one knows what happened, but in a year or two,
She had herself a husband, and her household quickly grew.
"It's a mystery to me," she said, "but this I understand,
My second cousin once removed is master of the land."

Far behind the battles, she bought and sold supplies,
And those who say she profited, they surely tell a lie.
No one knows what happened, but when it came to an account,
Three wagons had gone missing and four or five remounts.
"It's a mystery to me," she said, "but this I understand,
My second cousin's first son is master of the land."

Now the trade along the Pass sits beneath her thumb,
And if she sometimes taxes twice, be sure it's just a crumb.
No one knows what happened, but from whatever start,
She has a hall and high seat that's packed with ancient art.
"It's a mystery to me," she says, "But this I understand,
My second cousin's first son's wife is master of the land."

The Haunting of the Market

O, Lord Elzymer's dead and gone
(Ware of the chill that comes from the hills)
He's risen up, both pinched and wan
(Oh, for a coal when winter comes on).

He's walked up and down the marketplace,
He's freed two oxen in their trace.

He's tossed a brick at a simpleton,
He's kicked through the streets the cutler's son.

The merchants, the farmers and chimney sweeps
They've quitted the market for the keep.

"O Bronwy, O Bronwy, in the town,
Your husband's turned everything upside-down."

She's walked the market with her hen and her plaid,
At the sight of her, he's begun to fade.

"Bronwy, O Bronwy, my lady wife,

I but give the justice I gave in my life.

The oxen were stolen without an alarm,
The simpleton's begged the price of a farm.

The cutler's son charged twice the price,
He lied to his mother and so cheated twice."

She's batted him over his ghostly ear,
"I rule the town and do justice here."

He's fled on the wind and shown his heels,
Against his wife's laws, there's no appeals.

O, Lord Elzymer is buried and dead,
It took a woman to keep him in bed.

Elzymer's Haunting

Salmonberry, huckleberry, raspberry, black,
From the dead Elzymer's back.

Plum and apple, pear and quince,
In the market he's been walking since.

Wheat and barley, oat and rye,
Pray that he's not walking by.

- A Children's Rhyme

Torhte House Leave

When we get down to Torhte House
Far from the Raven and the Mouse,
We'll get fresh linen and be de-loused,
Stay up all all night till we're well-soused,
When we get down to Torhte House.

When we get down to the roadway's end,
All our boots will have a mend,
Just think of the back pay that we'll spend,
And all the hearts we're bound to rend,
When we get down to the roadway's end.

There beneath the apple trees,
We'll steal the honey from the bees,
Though loaded dice are up our sleeves,
We'll all be skint when ending leaves,
There beneath the apple trees.

And when we march back along the Pass,

Grown flabby in the arms and ass,
Wishing to desert as a mass,
We'll slouch about and pout, "Alas!"
When we march back along the Pass,

Till we return to Torhte House,
Around the fire, we'll sprawl and grouse,
With all our sorrows in cider doused,
We'll curse the Raven and the Mouse,
Till we return to Torhte House.

The Prophecy for Skulae

Scorned, now skalded, Skulae the Raven,
Beware your brother, his brotherly dearth,
Your sister the same, no sister by birth.

The Hill-Clan's Feast Gifts

Pennies for the toddler all silver and round,
Rattles and whistles to make the children's sounds,
Amphoras for the guests, wherever they may roam,
Weavings and grease carried to the clan-folks' homes,
Furs for the house-heads -- goats and other beasts--
Carved cedar for the chieftains to give at other feasts.

Runes on Two Flutes

I

By Kermane's runes for music I am wrought,
I am Marthlin the Mighty, the maker of songs,
Ward against the wasting, the warping's undoer;
Hear me: in harmony you have my power.

II

At Kermane's hand I was made for dream-craft.
I am Daroman, the duet-master,
Sibling-thane of the second thought.
Truer than one the twain together.

Curse for a Liar

Tongue-tainted, turn more flawed:
lungs tangle in smoke-twist,
shin and thigh fall, shattered to shards.
Warp your life on the next word you bend.

Red Blood and White Bone

A lad marched away from Jobbles town,
In the spring when the clans swept down,
And his fellows warned, in a worried tone,
Of red blood painted on a white bone.

“It waits in the earth, like snakes in a knot,
A careless step, and your skills go for naught
Twisted you’ll sicken and die alone,
From red blood painted on a white bone.”

But never a word the lad believed,
He said, “Some wander away and are grieved,
But it’s the dark that lures them and the winds unknown,
Not red blood painted on a white bone.”

He marched in the day, he watched in the dark,
Saw the wounded wither, laid stiff and stark,
Saw winter swirl in, and day overthrown,
Like red blood painted on a white bone.

Fear festered, and, bound to their beds,
His fellows faltered and broke in their heads,
“Ill luck,” he persisted, and would not atone,
“Not red blood painted on a white bone.”

Then the clans crept close, cloaked by night,
And throats were slit to his left and right,
And in his right hand, with a weight like stone
Lay red blood painted on a white bone.

His back it twisted, one arm grew feathers,
The other cracked like drying leathers,
Words faded, and left him only a groan
And red blood painted on a white bone.

He left his gear, he stole from the camp,
Four-footed he fled, feeble with cramp,
And blind in the snow, he died overthrown,
By red blood painted on a white bone.

So beware you all, both lad and lass,
When you march to war along the pass,
Stand firm and heed the bagpipe's drone,
Not red blood painted on a white bone.

You'll lose your years, you'll lose your form,
Gripped by a chill no flame can warm,
In the rune-haunted hills you'll die alone,
From red blood painted on a white bone.

The Hearth Guards' Marching Song

Away from the cobbles and sprouting wheat,
We march to the pipes and the drummer's beat,
Limping with blisters on our feet.

Chorus:

We are the runts from Jobbles's streets,
First in the field, last to retreat!

We scorn the cold, disdain the sleet,
We march our road till it's complete,
We'd rather a bed or a fireplace seat.

We are the weaned, lost to the teat,
We drink our sweat and swallow neat,
With boots and old nails for our meat.

Among the damned, we're an elite,
Our skulls are thick, limbs obsolete,
We win at dice because we cheat!

We are the runts from Jobbles's streets,
First in the field, last to retreat!

Naming Game

Lords and ladies of the land,
Sing out if you understand.

Calf and cow, bull in the field,
Ring the horns, refuse to yield.
(Hringesthorns)

Pedigree and mutt, bitch and cur,
Loyal to a fault, and always pure.
(Alfhounds)

Rings of war, merry and mocking,
Friend of friends, all interlocking.
(Guthwares)

Captains of ships, the sea-bear's git,
Wallow in waste, or drown in debt.
(Ursebrims)

A pipe to play, a tune to ply,

Call the black birds from the sky.
(Ravenpipers)

Lord and ladies, we know their names,
Salute them all, and end the game.

Jobbles Town

I'm going down to Jobbles town,
Horns sound and puppies bark,
I'm going down to Jobbles town,
Think I'll wait till it gets dark.

I'm going down to Jobbles town,
Going to clear a little land,
I'm going down to Jobbles town,
No more an unpaid hand.

I'm going down to Jobbles town,
I'm going to kiss the river jade,
I'm going down to Jobbles town,
Doing all my lord forbade.

Oh, the wains they keep on rolling
From all the towns around,
Ask anyone upon the road,
They'll say they're eastward bound.

I'm going down to Jobbles town,
Going to find where I belong,
I'm going down to Jobbles town,
Do you choose to come along?

Notes

I hope these poems and songs stand on their own, even if all the references are not always clear. However, for those who would like a few more details, some notes:

All these work take place in or around the province of Ilvarness in Torsmyr. Ilvarness is ruled by the Ravenpiper family, whose history goes back several centuries. The Ravenpipers fought for several decades against the hill-clans, who shortly before their final defeat resorted to blood magic to defend themselves. At the start of *The Bone Ransom*, Talson Ravenpiper, the main character, is assembling material for a collection called *The Raven Ballads* about his family. My *Raven Ballads* overlaps with his, but is not identical in contents.

Most of the poems have one of two structures. Many have a ballad structure, with verses of four lines, with one or two rhyme pairs. Others are in a loose variation of Norse and Old English alliterative verse. Both these forms provide a loose structure with plenty of flexibility. And if you catch echoes of actual ballads – well, the ballads of our world borrowed from each other, so I saw no reason not to do the same.

1. “The Battle of Rerry Ford”: A narrative of how the Ravenpipers re-emerged as a great family after decades of neglect. The Margram is the chief lawgiver, roughly equivalent to a monarch. Each of the great families rules a province. The

Ravenpipers' rise to prominence began Pilsape Hringisthorn led her troops into a massacre. Before then, the Ravenpipers owed fealty to the Hringisthorns, which is why Pilsape's successors insist that Borogrim's conquests should belong to him.

Other great families consider the Ravenpipers upstarts, partly because of the conquest of Ilvarness, but also because Borogrim later abolished serfdom as a way to settle the province – a gesture that greatly increased the cost of labor across the country and caused a huge social migration.

2. “Raven Among the Hawks”: A piece of propaganda against Borogrim Ravenpiper and his conquests. Jesses are a leash tied to a hawk's leg to keep it from flying.

3. “The Oracle Tree”: The Tree stands in the mountains, a few days southeast of Jobbles, the main city of Ilvarness. Centuries ago, a villa was built beside it. Now, the villa contains the rotting donations given to the oracle over the centuries.

4. “Daughter You Can Have Your Sword”: The war with the hill clans lasted decades, and was fought by women as well as men, so I wanted to give women a military tradition.

5. “Kermane’s Exile”: Kermane was the first Ravenpiper. Exiled four centuries ago from the Fallyodes Islands, he became a major figure in Torsmyr, both as a politician and a rune-painter.

6. “Lament in the Reign of Skordis”: Kermane’s sister, Skordis was an evil rune-painter who was defeated by Kermane. The details are obscure, saying only that he made a darkness to meet her in, and walked out alone.

7. “Purcirm’s Lady”: Purcirm was the oldest son of Kermane. He disappeared while exploring the river that is now the eastern border of Ilvarness. No one knows what happened to him.

8. “The Death of Dicer Rungest”: Dicer Rungest was one of the famous Ravenpipers in the past. He stopped a civil war through an arranged marriage. In the process, he sacrificed his hand. According to legend, he once dined with the gods to save humankind. In memory of his sacrifice, the civil war is now known as The War of the Hand.

9. “The Marriage Broom”: Jumping over a broom used to be a common form of marriage for those without access to a priest.

10. “The Ilvarness Hymn”: An atmospheric piece that describes the supernatural dangers of the province. Grammarung is god of smiths and the civilized arts, while Tavanne is the nature goddess who oversees reincarnation.

11. “Shield Oath”: In *The Bone Ransom*, two warriors would pledge mutual support for each other. The oath has its origins in a elite company of homosexual warriors, but is used by mixed sex couples as well.

11. “Lady Aglachad”: Aglachad Torhte is a remote relative of Borogrim Ravenpiper. She came to Ilvarness to use the relationship for social advancement. She was a quarter-master in the war with the hill-clans, and her house is cluttered with indiscriminate relics of the ancient empire of Valicon Through the rule of Borogrim, his son Elzymer, and Elzymer’s wife Bronwy, she has ruthlessly fought for greater status, never getting as much as she thinks she deserves. As the poem indicates, her ambition and tactics have not gone unnoticed. She is the embarrassing relative that everybody has.

12. “The Haunting of the Market”: Two years after his death, Elzymer Ravenpiper, the ruler of Ilvarness, appeared in the market. He was banished by his wife – nobody knows how. This is a comic look at the incident.

13. “Elzymer’s Haunting”: A children’s rhyme, which takes a more serious view of the after-death appearance of Elzymer.

14. “Torhte House Leave”: Torhte House is the last outpost of Torsmyr along the Cyrilith Pass. During the war with the hill clans, soldiers went there to take a rest from battle and to do the things that soldiers on leave always do. Torhte House is the seat of Aglachad Torhte, the subject of “Lady Aglachad” (see above). It marks the end of the paved road built by the nation of Valicon centuries ago. The Raven and the Lady Mouse are social divisions among the hill clans.

15. “The Prophecy for Skulae”: Skulae Ravenpiper is the oldest sister of *The Bone Ransom*’s protagonist Talson. The prophecy is invented as a piece of propaganda.

16. “The Hill-Clan’s Feast Gifts”: This is a piece written by a member of the hill-clans while he was learning Torsmyrian.

17 “Runes on Two Flutes”: The inscription on two magic fluted crafted by Kermane.

18 “Curse for a Liar”: Flyting or insult contests are a common street entertainment in Torsmyr. This is a brief sample.

19. “Red Blood and White Bone”: In the final war, the hill-clans resorted to blood-magic of a terrifying sort. However, blood-magic can turn on its sender, and was a major reason why the clans were defeated.

20. “Naming Game”: Another children’s rhyme, which gives a simple punning riddle on the names of the great families.

21. “The Hearth Guards Marching Song”: The Hearth Guard are the militia troops. Like many marching songs, it is full of self-deprecation and complaints.

22. “Jobbles Town”: A song from the days when bonders streamed into Ilvarness to find freedom and claim their own land. The river jade is a reference to a giant stone in Jobble’s market. Kissing the stone in front of two witnesses was an official indication that a refugee was free.

– Bruce Byfield