

Sober Child

Mark D. Bennion

How many times had he dashed past me?
He'd run and run, climb onto the thick
stone walls, stretch his arms into the ribs
of morning light, shake his head,
then jump down into a steady stride,
spinning his feet until exhaustion
or the layered light near the end
of day. He coughed some, as if
he didn't know what to say, but got after
the mules so they would harrow the earth,
his eyebrows raised in the slight vault
of wonder. For his father, he first tossed
jasper, then hauled buckets of dross,
the dregs of metal dusting his arms
and embedding in his fingertips. For his mother,
he'd slit and hang a young ram, seethe
its caul and kidneys, prepare the hocks
just for himself. He must have been close
to his tenth year when I caught him carrying
unleavened bread across a field. He sensed

somehow that burdens would hunt him down.

And he knew I'd watched him hearken
in the synagogue, its hard seats and elegant trim,
cherubic gilt, how it had always been,
how it shall be, edged in his voice down
to his knuckles, in his hands and back up
out of his mouth after he passes through the shaft
of night's inevitable plea, after he
understands the scorn for plain words and shadows
when he will soldier between heaps of the dead
for one more hoist of flag and sword
and will keep advancing in the open road
while the armies shriek at his calves and heels
like a pack of dogs, jousting and feral,
jaws, snouts, and teeth slitting skin; how I
believed him when he said he could bank
a fire during the coldest night in winter,
then he pointed to the stars and affirmed
the zeal in gold plates, agreed to the record-
keeping charge, and ran on.