

THE LONG LONG FALL

One night as the handsome harpist played,
the music tingled the king's blood,
and the blood rose in his seasoned arm
and his fingers gripped his spear shaft.
His brain plotted the path and hurried
his javelin's point toward the rippling chords,
toward the west wall and the heart
he hated enough to nail its last beat there.

But the musician was young and quick
as a dancer, ready as a warrior
and newly anointed of God. His name
was louder now than Saul's in Israel.

The serpent in Saul coiled and hissed day and night.
Sleeping, the king moaned and beat his bolster;
waking, he gnashed blood from his mouth
Once more he sent his loyal enemy to war.
But when the battle messengers came to report,
the feared subject was never among the killed.

Saul cursed and called his daughter, his spies,
priests, sycophants, and any he could buy
to recover control of the pounding course.
His heirs, his servants, his people
loved his rival. He saw his kingdom leaking
like a torn wineskin, all its sweetness
flowing down to David's lips.

Saul tracked him like a lion on the scent of lambing,
a lean old lion outside his pride, with broken fang
and worm-infested gut, a rogue that tasted man-flesh
and lusted ever after for salt. He pursued him
over rocks only wild beasts owned, threaded through
wilderness where many men were lost, hauled his camps
to mountains without names. And wherever he pushed,
Jesse's marked son slipped past his fist like smoke,

Then Saul, the king of Israel, grew weary
and rested in a cave away from the rattle and stink
of his troops. He slept a Jehovah sleep while
the hunted and his band sheltered deeper
in the same cavern. And the former shepherd
softly bared his sword, bent slowly over the hunter.

Saul roused from shredded dreams and stumbled
toward the light. He heard a voice behind him
shouting, turned toward David bowing, calling
honors to his king. Then David stood and raised
a swatch of color from Saul's robe. The ruler
clutched his garment, remembering Philistine
foreskins those practiced hands had gathered.