

THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. SEBASTIAN

Someone had put a scythe to the sweet grass—
its torn blades, like fistfuls of emerald
fire, bled into summer dusk the scent of something
half-remembered, while crows drifted
in wide arcs as if to mimic the farmer
who paused in his work to watch them thrust
toward the sun, their hollow feathers
like those which kept the sleek Mauretanian arrows

true as the soldiers kissed each silver tip
pulled from quiver to bow, to level
with their squinting eyes on the Palatine
Hill, each shaft singing against the small
breeze, going deep as love into the young boy's
flesh, slim thighs, chest oiled with sweat, one
blade ringing against the bones of his left ankle
like a grim toast, though his executioners were less

cruel than drunk on sour wine which spilled,
almost black in the half-light, from earthen jugs,
Sebastian's hands drawn tight above his head
with three straps of fine leather, one arrow
driven hard into the pit of his arm, though even
then he refused to break, would not look away
from that final, beautiful light which sent copper
spears into the feathery clouds; and when the moon

began to rise the soldiers left him for dead or
for the faces of exotic women veiled
in showers of perfumed hair so that the faithful
crept out of the sheltering black and cut him
from the wounded tree, brought him back from the light
he wished to fly into, though he was intent
on death's certain fame and appeared, weeks after,
before the emperor, opening his robes to flaunt

a scar on his groin which resembled a crow, until
he was beaten with clubs, cast into a common
sewer where he was later found, though this time he
could not come back. Finally, in death, he was
broken, not by unbelief, but by young men
with names like swift rivers who fingered the dark
silk of his hair, then severed him
from himself. Head to the west, heart to the south.