

I

SAND



A breeze from the slow morning,
black sky painted through fingers
of orange-red-lapis-blue,
subtle stamps in pastel hue
trapped on matte where night lingers.

In half-dark He stirs,
warm there on his wooden bed.
Hands drag him upright (instead
of keeping Him in pepper-pocked furs),
and He flutters to a child's cry.

Elders push Him forward, Boy feet
guided by palms brushed golden wheat,
their hanging skin a parchment sigh
all loose and pale and naked warning.

Outside, the stars burn and watch Him.

From the window, He watches back.

They strip Him bare,

bathing His arms, His hair,

cold water stretching a river's track

smelling sweet as desert smoke.

He steps shivering into red wool.

Balancing barefoot in the drip pool

run-off, The Boy shifts to choke

a yawn and rub sleep from His eyes.

Parchment wraps brown around His hands,

pressing grains of too-fine sand

in grooves to complete the disguise.

Dawn becomes a dwindling dim.

Oh, to sleep again and be on the brink
of year nine and not ten
and faced with this passage right
before Chieftain and kin and all night
terrors loose in the Feral Dune Fen.

His body trembles.

They wrap a scarf around His waist
looking Him over with haste
in their mouths as the village assembles.
A hum, then, baritone as a coyote growl.
The drone from man, woman, child
swells, a chant so dark and so wild
it is the throated hum of a wolf's howl.
Oh, He wants to sleep and to sink!

The Boy steadies Himself, stepping out
into the peach-pale glow.

His robe forms a slithering train
following serpent-like to the refrain
echoing from the half-moon row,

Boy leading snake leading Elder through the climbing song.

He kneels in the dirt,
surrounded then by thrum and eyes alert
on His tiny frame within the throng.

He swallows.

“Here! Boy!” The Chieftain’s drum.

“Here! Boy!” A rumble strum
of rock-on-rock which follows
each word in a blistered shout.

They cover Him in ash,
staining black across His lips,
smeared soot made white in crooks
of flesh where black is black before hooks
of white spread in swift drips
of color made murky, made gray.
They form on Him the Shadow Mask.
They hand to Him the Copper Flask.
He drinks. Swallows. Begins to pray.
The chorus, again, softer this time:
"Here! Man!" (The Chieftain's drum).
"Here! Man! (A rumble strum).
The chorus, now, forms a line
to kiss His forehead and yellow sash.

At the end of this, The Gift of Faith.

His Grandmother smiles,

her face all leather valleys,

hills and canyon alleys

creating ancient sun dials

now dust. She hands Him the Prize

wrapped in animal hide,

bound by twine dyed

copper, too. "Listen," she whispers, "to the words Wise

Women speak around campfire rings.

At night as you wander the darkened Dune Fen,

remember the Spirits start clamoring then,

searching for life and the sound that it sings.

A murderous man makes a murderous wraith."

A shudder and a shake.

The Boy places palm over wrist,
calming fingers and hands and all the way down
through wobbling knees to the barefoot ground
where toes curl and uncurl stirring mist
motes of fine swirl dust.

Grandmother leads Him away.

In a daze, the mud huts sway,
shifting, the woman's touch a gust
of wind there on His shoulder.

Now beyond the wall,
He turns and the village seems so small,
a pebble and not a boulder,
swallowed easily by the lowest snake.

Before Him: crests and tides,
sand hills rolling new-day
red toward an unseen horizon.

And behind: a village which lies on
bare earth He now abandons without hope or delay.

The sun climbs east.

He follows.

Over dune and peak, around hollows
once red, now yellow, white – every feast
of color The Boy, too, wears.

Desert parts before Him, behind,
the sky deepening and lined
by partitioned cloud and frequent sun glares.

He trudges forward with steady strides.

Come noon, the sun is an angry sphere.

Sand has given way to stone.

No. A mix of the two.

Rock in dust in rubble, a hazardous stew
of nature and monuments long forgotten, blown

down by time. He is stumbling,
only hours in and already weary.

Still noon and frightened of eerie
cliff-shapes rising here or crumbling
there, wicked shadows of wicked things.

He pulls Himself upright

watching light

push through faux wings

of faux mysteries, and He conquers His fear.

The Boy removes His wraps.

Mops His brow.

Even here in shade,
the sun finds ways to evade
plateaus and plow
around His eyes, His cheeks.

He walks.

Rippling sand again, green stalks
of brush sprout and speaks
water with no answer but wind.

He walks.

Hiding Himself later in rocks
to escape the heat, the sphere pinned
(lower now) on blue: He naps.