

Ad Lacum Curtium

W. Travis Helms

The dream had spelled the city at such length
so many days, that none, for sure, could say
with prophecy or heart what was the way
to salvage their sworn ground, begun to sink.
“Beside himself, the boy was standing there,
just staring, staring down into the vent,
wondering what the prophetess had meant,
and then we saw him leap upon the mare—”
Everywhere, the clean, familiar trace
of ficus effloresced. “Fortune loves the bold—”
someone had said, to make it ordinary.
They cut an ox to consecrate the place,
and praying, tied a rope around the hole,
as daylight caught the polished statuary.

Note: As Livy (vii.6) describes, the Lacus Curtius is a sinkhole in the Roman forum, named for a young nobleman, Marcus Curtius. As legend had it, a contemporary oracle had proclaimed that Rome would be delivered from impending military defeat if it sacrificed that which it held most dear into the chasm. Curtius thereupon plunged into the opening in full armor, on horseback, whereupon the earth closed over him and the city was saved.