Richard Kenney

Now, cast corrosive thought across the ruined Forum: illumine; impress the retina; lift; frame—

Caesar appears, on his knees, climbing a long flight. Rumor hisses around him; his face, daubed crimson, god’s mask, offers no expression. The Capitoline stairs are steep; forty elephants, holding torches, light the way. Aromatic smoke fills their huge brain cases with the careful grass-fires set in Africa, to drive all animals toward Rome. All Rome looks on, nervous, considering. Above the Forum, at the top of Caesar’s stairs, a tusked pig drums its trotters on travertine, and bleats, and shifts with fear, and shouts, knowing, as the white ox and the white ram may not, what’s coming. In the Mamertine Prison below the Forum, the foreign king Vercingetorix knows, too; they’ll murder him here, at the moment of the sacrifice. He thinks of his far fame, pacing through excrement and torchlight caroming the close walls, the flicking grillwork on the tufa floor. He hears trumpeting. His feet have carried him from Celtic Gaul, chained behind a cart whose blue wheel rim his iris is, now, encircling the dark oak forests and alder marshes of Gaul, where he and Caesar dreamed each other, circling. Who returns, Triumphator? The axletree sheared on the car carrying Caesar to the Forum today, an omen so terrible, so fraught with future, Rome holds still. Caesar atones, ascends now on his knees before the gods and the citizens of Rome. There is no room for maneuver, now—

Nor ever, but this straight form, this snail-track, etching the light or the plate or the pure sphere of the eye, where there are no such things now, in the Roman Forum.