

A Passaggio for The Knights

by Julian Bishop

(Caravaggio painted *The Beheading of St John* in gratitude for his *passaggio* (or admission) into the Knights of Malta in 1607)

When a tragedy approaches its climax,
this is how the last act plays out –
first a jangle as Death wrenches a key
in the padlock fastened onto life.
Lines of cord unspooling since
birth slip the adamantine knot.
Set: the granite fortress of loneliness
behind whose walls all men stare
through bars of sorrow and remorse.

From beneath the arch's backdrop
enter the cast – a gaoler, a love lost,
distraught mother, two partners
in crime. Freeze-frame the play
as blood clabbers at the edge
of the stage. As life evaporates,
the damned man scribbles his name,
a long-running stain at the base
of a stage he'll never escape.