

Zacharias and Elizabeth

—a painting by Stanley Spencer, 1914

By Ross Cogan

An English offering. There in the top
reach of the home meadow, near where it shades
into the scrub as sleep folds into sleep,
he burns the scraps of lamb as one might burn
raked leaves – drawn down and sheepish while he feeds
the pale flesh to the flame. And his wife runs
to him, the rumour of new life in her
like talk of a new war passing from lip
to lip. “In these days he has shown his favour,
and taken away my disgrace” he thinks
picturing heaven’s crisp ledgers. Men chop
wood, mend the hedges, build up the banks
set for the blessing of the October rain
that drops like a libation on the land.
Wind parts his wife’s white hair and sends a skein
of thin smoke skirling skywards, and the small
girl sees all this, sees it and understands
that signs and wonders happen over the wall.