

Babylons

I.

In January you read religiously. A war begins inside the television. You can, owing to a mind that collects facts as profit, turn it off when you've had enough for one day. Even if you haven't, you can wait to see how it ends, reminded that "it's better as history than news." Your name is Marshall and the window across from your window is at the foot of your neighbor's bed. She's beautiful; her hair is raven dark. She screams when her husband hits her. You hear falling asleep. Her calves make fists when he's on top of her. You want to be part of that scene, plan to meet her folding laundry, weeding the front lawn, taking out the trash. Then carry her home, up the stairs, let her down on your side of the bed. Her mouth will make groans. You want to balance power, form a triangle where there's now a line—because it's better as politics than desire. Your lover claims you need to dominate but she's behind a different window and the shades are drawn. If you wait long enough, or not at all, everything comes together nicely. Four birds perch in a tall cedar outside your back door. You can see them from a window in your bedroom.

II.

Four birds set on a tree, five beasts graze
below. The trunk grows out of Nebuchadrezzar's
navel as he dreams. Jung reads this as
megalomania, the roar that caves
regulation, Daniel reads shadows
in that place, Jung diagnoses
medieval scenes, there, in ink. *Session one*.
Christ appears later, but not in this
interpretation: a city, encircled by a double
system of walls, eight gates access
the interior. Jung stands at three of them.
The British are still fighting the Turks
in nineteen twenty-three, four years
after World War I, seven after Jung's first
diagnosis. A German excavated
the city's streets, thirty to fifty feet wide,
paved with blocks quarried in Lebanon,
impressed with the king's name. When wheeled down
down the road, his god passes one hundred lions,
five hundred seventy-five dragons
and bulls—in profile—arranged in
thirteen rows, one for each of the ways
Nebuchadrezzar sees himself as powerful
and holy. Like a god with four faces
he could stand on top of a ziggurat
and see nothing but kingdom under his
influence, regulated: his inscription
in each grain of sand, the gardenscape of walls,
gates and paths, beasts counted as the number
of ways to become what's underneath the layers.

III.

The desert is an occasion,
space pictorial, an experience.
It measures the Orient between
us: lost in the swelter forever, or
recollected in flashback. Deformed.
The desert plays cinematographic,
the bedouin, character actors back-
grounded in heat. Out of it rises
Gertrude Bell, single and alone
in Baghdad. She administers
to Arabs freed from the Ottoman.
One day, she writes, *Old man at the door*.
She is reading, lifts her eyes from the page,
tells him to speak. Outside Damascus, he
says, in the spaciousness Allah subdued
for his servants, he saw a woman
“of stupendous stature and luminous
countenance.” High and bright. He sinks
to his knees, amazed, asks who she thinks
she is. “The sun.” He doubts it, looks up, asks
again. “The British government,” she replies.
He understands this, walks the miles necessary
to give Bell the report. “His Excellence.”
Bell smiles, closes her book, begins the letter.
She imagines a tasteful hat
and muslin dress tailored in Paris.
It billows, spreads across the desert. She
looks north, translates visions into English
and sends them back to her father,
losing a fortune in London.

IV.

O Andrey Vislyevich Kovrin! Had
only the mirage been conjured on
the steppe rather than the horticulturist's
lurid acres, you could have chosen
a pilgrim's staff and walked ever
widening circles to intersect the path
of the black monk, redeeming your
marriage and your life. Even if you
kept traveling the barren, you'd appear,
a revolutionary figure, in steppe tales
told around the smoldering fires, scattered
like so many fallen stars. But
you weren't wary of transcendence
given to the over-worked and nervous,
knowledge that strings this afternoon
to the next without a busy signal.
You were brilliant and could make a
killing in the market, such as it is
for treatises on the geography of truth.
Fat and comfortable in Saint Petersburg,
you would revise manuscripts to account
for body processes, dreams, and last night's
news. Tanya sleeps nearby. *Magister*,
the end could be prescient and brief:
Kovrin sits in his softest chair and hears,
from the floor below, three women sing a folk
song about a ghost walking circles on the steppe.
The black monk appears, takes his hand and
pulls him out of the chair, moving Kovrin
toward his perihelion, knowing what Lenin knew.

V.

As if to critique the political economy, Marcia had twins, a dialectic. They lived in the matter-of-fact lines on a residential street and the swift low movement of sky between, learning quickly that on the end of each decision stands a heretic. They always found themselves opposed, it made no difference whom their mother favored—conflict breaks the law of scarcity. Their father could be a number of men. No syllogism will account for their positions: it's a pea-and-thimble trick with thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, the kernel of truth revealed only after you've lost your investment. Still, they'd lie together, finish dreams for each other and wake unmoved, as if returning to a movie after a special report, or coming up for air while something sinks bottomward. If their lives depended on each other and a fire raged everywhere, the first born might put a hand on the door and square a shoulder to it. The other wraps arms tightly around and whispers, "Come to your senses." The moment is erotic. No matter how they would have aged separately, they'll die together, their nature dependent. Marcia will always remain, grieving.

VI.

My brother's wife is between us
and we each present a cheek
to kiss. She holds two glasses of water
and a baby beneath the white linen
of her dress, kisses me first, then
my brother. She carries his name,
mine, and my father's into the shadow
of the house, disappears on the steps.
We dig, pull out turf in order to clear
space for flowers. I do not know
their names, nor when they bloom. I hear
my brother's wife striking cookware.
My brother presses a foot to the spade
and, breathing heavily, speaks about top soil,
thirty year mortgages and room
for a third. My hands are soft, they blister
frequently, I peel back a small piece
of skin, tear the flap off with my teeth
to show him how hard I work. He
nods and pitches sod onto a compost
heap. I walk away from my shovel
as night lies flat on the street;
each light succeeds the next,
coincident with the script of trees
light arcs through as I pass, a
half-circle of shaded almanac
moons, on my palms a ring of iodine,
between my fingers
like dark between leaves,
nothing and its progenitors.

VII.

Memory is the genealogy I admit
when you ask me to explain
myself. It's usually more noble than
it ought to be, a kind of ascent,
the firestorm end of a dull day
wasted in sleep and inane
labor, language that confesses
the best case for me before you,
a rhetoric. In turn, I remember
what you've said of your past, mark
the impresse acted into the shape
of your body under mine, a mnemonic
for the rising where both
our bodies are who we claim to be
before sinking into forgetfulness.
In this way, destiny is always
manifest: we can lift progress from
misdeeds and misfortunes that otherwise
seem like unrelated circumstance
or bad timing. History is rewritten
so all voices herald the present
before receding as grave
misgivings. Love, memory is what
we present to receive the greater
gift in exchange, what I say
about my lineage to become part
of yours, where we can imagine
no loss occurring in the bitter
division when we're together,
the colony of our desire in time.

VIII.

Bell's claim of illustrious descent
gained her access to the most
influential Arabs: as good as a hand
on the tent pole. Bedouin grace
opens doors, parts goathair weave, sets
out the pestle to grind coffee.
He respects the power of holding others
to the table. And the *wergild*.
At twenty-three she was engaged
to a functionary in the Persian
embassy. In love over Hafiz
and Catullus, translating each in turn.
Her stepmother became nervous:
propriety before passion.
Bell broke it off, consented to wait
for something "surprising and remunerative."
It didn't matter she meant to wait
for him, he died one year later,
after a swim in river ice.
In Iraq, Bell was called *Khatun*,
"Lady of the Court." In London she was called
by Bertrand Russell, Virginia Woolf—
she spoke to *everyone*. Henry James told
her at a dinner party that ambiguous
plots drive the nail further into art's
coffin. A vision in tongues of flame,
Sadi's rose at her throat, Bell
knew the cost of carrying dialogue
across thresholds, the price of *le mot juste*,
the manners "too lovely not to be sad."

IX.

The manner of clay is its formal account.
I, likewise. Tabs, tabulations, 30,000 tablets
in the lovely hand of Sumerian
scribes. Ledgers of booty, gifts and taxes,
cattle thriving in offspring inventory
in the quotidian style: *1 she-goat*
1 gazelle dead 1 fair barley fatted
sheep accepted the year the King of Ur
built the Western Wall the year the deep
sea going ship was built the year the goat
1 lamb for omen the year the year
the city 1 cock was destroyed 1 stag
1 ewe. Premiums for flood and groan
of women's labor. The body and its walls.
Smuggled past Turkish officials
into European collections, these
figures, beneath men eating clay instead
of bread, speak like the merchant with his thumb
on a scale: profiting from the measure.
These signs, cut, covered over, re-cut, leave
no marks for the loss in sacrifice—
the price of exchange in temple,
heart, or home. No room for lyrics
passing. The song of a boat drifts
beyond the Euphrates, sadness lingering
like the old lament of a husband
for his wife dead in childbirth,
“your thwarts are all broken
your mooring rope cut.”
“Pardee! We're all baked clay with signs.”

X.

“Sir, the noble and interesting
Euphrates is far too celebrated.”
It may afford, Colonel Chesney,
route to England from India;
survey plain for the postdiluvium
seat of mankind; biblical navigation;
deep channel of nine fathoms; two hundred
to more than a mile wide; expedition
in four volumes, “with nineteen maps and charts,
embellished with many plates, besides
numerous woodcuts.” The river runs
the length of Genesis—Adam
tricked into camping East of Sinjar,
overlooking the plains from where Cain went
to build a city, become a husbandman.
It winds through the exactions and
monopolies bribed out of Turks, passes
the manufacturing city of Job where cold
from the north came in snow and treasures
of hail, rain from the mountains, friends from
the silver and brass mines in the neighborhood.
Chesney marks the fields where Satan walked
to and fro, up and down in them composing
ways to win judgment, where Job’s neighbors
knelt and pointed their elongated hands
in accusation, where Job’s cattle
grazed before carried off in a raid,
*Here twilight is lengthened. The idolaters
of the day were on hand to fall
upon oxen ploughing in Latitude 37° 9'44".*

XI.

At this point, suppose our deepest concerns
might be eased by a cycle of speeches given
while, on our knees, we face each other and
argue in turn. Would it do to call the other
a heretic as the proposition? Are
dualism and megalomania the only
legitimate recourse to our troubles,
purity and self-pity? Did Cain strike because
Abel had too much time on his hands,
because Cain continually dug, stopping to imagine
a city in smoke which refused to rise?
Is our property stolen only by idolaters
from the desert, mountains, across the river?
You always said what's outside doesn't
matter—but see, when inside, somebody's
usually knocking on the door with bad
news, or the telephone rings. Could sex
be the one act without interruption
before dying? Suppose it means something
to say, "This did we habitually."
Perhaps the danger that enters sleep
wears your face behind the diabolic mask,
an accusation settled when you let
it lie comfortably in bed, stilled by
the calling for air, asking nought but
skin from skin, words from words, before
a high pressure storm intervenes,
or the voice behind, that, although
overwhelming and desirable, defers
the questions before you finish your turn.

XII.

Ishtar's in the dark, like an author
unable to live outside the domain
of her characters, unable to find
the way between reproduction and feminine
desire, war and the company of other
women. As a result, irrigation
ditches are dug, grain is warehoused, her
shepherd is sent down for ransom.
The daughter of Sin sleeps on a slab
breathing clay, until a transvestite
juggles in hell and revives her. For that,
he's condemned to eat bread baked in ashes,
drink water out of a jug—urban life
as banishment. When Ishtar descends,
like a Platonic character, she moves by
commands masked as dialogue.
Gertrude Bell's at the fourth gate
without her breastplate, Marcia's at the third
sans girdle of birth-stones. There could
be a character at each threshold, leaving
a trail of adornment, naked in the house
from which no light comes forth, star dust
settled on door and lock. Not that it's true,
nor does it count—"the courtier in his
chamber/the lady in her court." Yet,
if she, who is male in the morning
and female at night, leaves the man
who saves her life by dancing in a dress,
could their roles be arranged so that when
she's gone he misses a lover, not mate to his matter?

XIII.

“Only I shall read no more letters
from you yourself to me myself no
more in the mornings on Half Moon Street,”
C.H.M. Doughty-Wylie (his intimates
called him Dick) to Gertrude Bell in nineteen
thirteen. “The man whom she loved,” we are
authorized to state in nineteen sixty-one.
“Show me something of your mind,” he
begged. Married to “quite a pleasant little
wife” with no children. Shot through the head
at Gallipoli. “Wretched spinsterhood,”
relates Bell’s biographer. “Shallow
cup,” Bell intones, “desire.” She hands over
a body mangled by dogs for Dick to
exorcise, “Remember him in your
prayers.” He was buried where he fell,
the affair unconsummated. Military
officials wondered whether to march
toward Baghdad. When Bell heard, she made
her way to Hampstead, then the Middle East,
“this sorrow at the back of everything.”
Behind intelligence reports on Arab
tribes and sheiks, back of their lineages
she drew by heart, the place-names, family-
names, back in Mesopotamia,
waiting for Turks to attack the canal.
Sorrow in the language “a charming little man”
brought from Syria and with whom
she exchanges parts each morning,
“constantly held up for a familiar word.”

XIV.

The voice weakens around words of the same family, struggles past lines of mutual descent. Translation is failure in correspondence. It counts debits. Sleep offers the dream of acquisition and point, upon awakening, to leave on the way to common sense. We continue traveling by night with no pause to orient or repair the conversation that started without us. Either we missed the call to prayer or don't understand, unable to find a niche in the wall that marks the direction to face. Letters get mixed and arrive too late to prevent the drama from beginning; so characters read backwards to discover when fate crossed the curve of their fear and followed in pursuance relentlessly. We grow dizzy at the advent of retrograde motion displacing our site at the center: a small room where lovers argue and end in bed to face opposing sides, an azimuth between them. If they watched their house turn above trees silvered in ice, its walls framed in chains of glass that throw back light in periodic waves, they could tell time. Then to say the nothing behind, "What does that mean?" seems important because it takes up space in the window.

XV.

The birds have gone south on cue, my beloved
withholds his eyes and still I'm pinned
to the cedar, pierced by compass arrows.
Without his face the landscape wounds;
I wander in the reach of images,
fifteen miles from water to water
and a taste only for wine. My love
travels through winter while I search
for fall, hair mixing in leaves
at my feet. Lost, I look six
ways from Sunday hunting down his
command—the body's map, rooms
of memory, or my throat exposed
in receiving—but read instead
the tally of market laws that place
me here, without change. I strip
to feel his points sooner,
suffer in labor of an idea
which bears itself blank.
He offers progeny vast as
the desert, wealth as fierce: I burn
in his promise. He shows me Babylon,
then disappears to teach patience
to the captive of his veil: the dark
heals my limbs. I lie at the third gate
and see a woman come as a ghost in
a rose garden. Near a stream where men sit
and weep, she blooms. I watch in silence
and envy, wake, anxious for home,
blind, the sun dawning in all directions.

XVI.

Two men meet at crossroads: a traveler and a dervish. The latter asks that his drinking bowl be filled. "Speak," says the traveler, "I am thirsty as well." Pebbles follow them here, sucked smooth, marking a path in the sand, a line. The dervish spits his out, fixes an eye on the horizon's frame, adjusts his tattered cloak. "Suppose seven men sit in a circle and divide grazing rights and daughters. Coals warm their coffee. A wind knocks their tent down and it is enflamed. They are burned beyond recognition. Who names their bodies so that claims can be settled?" The traveler considers this a riddle having to do with days of the week, whether God has memory, or the way Gertrude Bell kept notes. The wives come to her and she tells them where to find their husbands: she has it written down. The women leave weeping. Bell falls asleep with a pen in her mouth, journal on her lap, Foreign Office documents at her feet, archaeological reports beneath her wicker chair. Suppose when she wakes she can't remember her dream about a frustrated man with pebbles in his pockets he throws, sometimes, at birds that fly disturbingly low. He walks out of the blue into a background wide as cinemascope.

XVII.

He believes he once had a home
because he misses his mother. She's gone.
He sucks a pebble. The road takes a
body, the horizon a face: occasionally
his, often bearing an uncanny
resemblance to ideas. None tell him
how to orate this travelogue, though he
practices with a full mouth. A falcon
among owls, he's in the wrong glory,
the wrong sky. The further he walks
the more he forgets. What's left of
experience is pennies on the dollar—
coins passed along and effaced where once
were tiny copper wings. This is not an
allegory of love or death—he'd like
it to be—nor pleasing, though
desire brands each foot fall.
His trail is sand script, desert writing.
Memory leads, faithless, but the only
account he has of himself. If
its corpses are summoned, standing
without ornament before him, the horizon
will yawn. He won't know if he's coming
or going. Maybe his arrival moves
from the future to meet him. When
it appears, he'll know where he left from.
That would be his homecoming. Then he'd
find himself in a field of green,
hearing, at last, the faintest ring
of peals from some distant, bitter, bell.

XVIII.

The telephone rings Marshall out of a dream,
not about catching a rock edge
in a slide down water or granite,
nor the woman of whom he writes,
as a drunk man would. It is not
a weightless trek through his childhood
home dislodged, disfigured by age
and real estate brokerage, the front
door staged between audience and props
for oncoming scenes. He doesn't know
the next lines and his mother Marcia's not
there to prompt him. Like me, he forgets as
soon as he answers the call. His sister
is on the other end: she's forgotten
why she dialed, so they speak for hours
improvising on silence. This is how
it goes, sex strings the subjects together.
He gazes outside as he speaks:
streets, tracks, wires spread across the pane,
geometry partitions the morning,
writes its business as weight-bearing
wing structure ready to lift off the glass.
Their talk continues out of time,
the black sea dreams part,
words are a kind of exodus, invention
is forgetting and he refuses
to have his position categorized,
wishes only to keep talking through wars,
economies, loves, and windows until
he tires of other voices and hangs up.

XIX.

News spreads itself as names—*The East, Near East, Farther East, Middle East*, (the sick man of Europe)—latitudes of trade routes, the Baghdad Railway project, longitudinal. “Geography is an eye of history,” astrology read in light of Germany, France, England—ordinated spheres of influence—“They move borders, charter your goods as long as they change your name,” Sumeria, Mesopotamia, Iraq: shaded groves on a chart, black and white ordnance caught in American video, broadcast over fourteen channels—multiplied—soon to be a movie with the setting, if not scope of *Lawrence of Arabia*. Wanting to fly from a middle age crisis like the Jew, Arab, Englishman across this space. The first looks for settlements of his kind; the second for hospitality and Mecca, the last for advantageous maps, history’s Anglo smile, the turn of the Euphrates. “The River that cometh running through Paradys” runs through them—those who went looking there, those who imagined they did and made it up for others, a tightly knit cast of ten thousand years, when one sneezes, they all get sick.

XX.

“I stammer with pleurisy, wondering
why, instead of getting up I don’t lie
down and die.” On her bed, “The museum
a short walk from my head board,” rose
bush at the foot. “I woke to Arab
graffiti on alabaster columns,”
after a nightmare of fossils in flint.
“The mosques rage on the word *mandate*,”
the problem with the translation, “not
the word itself.” In reprisal, bombs drop:
“the impossible angles of
politics. I had,” divided by love
“a general feeling,” and regulation,
“I was slipping into great gulfs.”
Mountain-climbing in the Alps, Bell
gains her metaphor, strengthens her hold,
“hanging by my eyelids over
an abyss.” Her first vision of Persia
split her, “Here I am not I,” as I
cannot be, “it’s like writing to
an idea, a dream,” until we live
there long enough, write back to families
who’ve become fantasy. We’re fastened
to directions that turn clockwise
ahead of us as we move, “in the chains
I live in, it’s right to bear them
easily.” She’s on a rock in Babylon.
I strain to see her rise, a jinn from
personal papers, before words bury her,
“A last greeting to the distant present.”

XXI.

My niece greets me by pointing to objects
she's named, refusing to say mine,
despite coaxing her since a few days old.
She runs from room to room showing
me things I helped my brother move
to a house with a bigger yard,
three miles from where we grew up, four
years from our mother's death when South
America seemed the cure to
homesickness. She presses her face
to the back window and begins
a chant of syllables she understands
the world to be. It opens for her as
it opened for me, hungry at each edge,
staring at the cedar she tries to
fit inside. It grows in an exotic
grove outside the self peopled with
characters who dance in pain or pleasure—
we decide which until taken by our
own—what we seem to share shards of,
law written in its lack, the father's
legacy to his poor sons and daughters.
Do others starve from absence? Do
we wait until everyone's fed before
we turn the material over, dis-
mantle its administration,
air our hunger in sky that's
travel map, flight path, horizon?
Will we know it's the same then or
doesn't pain those who die distantly?

XXII.

What happens when you can't hear through
the tumult of bloodlines winding loudly
around your skull? Your headaches are
critical, force you into bed with others—
Marcia's there. And Marshall. His sister? She's
in America writing. Gertrude Bell's
not in this poem. There's a chance she
may be a virgin. No one knows—
the fact's withheld. Biography's
another fiction that falls now
in our reading: the vacuum of the lived.
"It might be found down here," my knees
on a dirty floor. I'm looking
for your call: once an unfaithful
woman out of grace, then a man
with four faces, not enough
to nurse the stars, but plenty to
talk incessantly. Now, quiet in
the company of ghosts and saints,
I wander in chains of substitution,
a strange marriage of suffering
and joy that crosses flesh in
the rattling search for the familiar.
Sometimes, being chaste and forsaken is
the same thing—a virtue. The wind
beats on the window, telephone off
the hook, the room empty—stations marked
by sign and number. They're in a circle
around me. I stop at each one,
contemplate, and settle for deferral.

XXIII.

He moves like Kovrin's monk across
the steppe, his mind elsewhere. He
fingers a rosary, in his breast pocket
a bible, and letter addressed
to a merchant's son in Odessa.

*Book this beggar passage to
Constantinople.* From there he'll ride
with goods on a ship to the Holy Land,
as Hugo Bell will, later, with Gertrude.
The anonymous pilgrim steps in time
with breath, his heart, engines
his will, pulls him toward Irkutsk, one
bead at a time. His understanding be-
comes an expanse that diminishes him
in perspective: poverty of the road
is sufficient condition for
humility; solitude profits
the soul in unrest. A bag of dried bread,
bark jug, an ounce of salt's enough for
revolution the kingdom of heaven
promises. His mouth moves in his sleep,
praying. The dead starets taught him
this in a dream; often he reappears
and tells him what to read. In Odessa
he meets a banker who speaks of trouble
in Crimea, blood feuds in Palestine,
strikes in Chicago. Via telegraph.
The pilgrim finds the right address. The house
is shuttered. The son is dead. His widow
meets him on the steps, sends him on his way.

XXIV.

You do not ask about ships docked
in the harbor, head north again,
relieved by the unworthiness
that empties you for ecstasy,
readies you for the bridal chamber.
You'll be taken there in a shower
of light, a daughter sacrificed
when the son won't do, a vessel
rising in tides of corruption—
what floods this world out carries you
closer to the voice that commanded it.
You listen to walls for their message,
make no bones, only the account
of your travels, a monastery:
each cell holds a story of providence,
peasants whose paths you crossed, throats you
blessed, gardens you tended in exchange
for food. Narrative is architecture.
You are text. No Jews here, they'll remain
unconverted until from Babylon
the clamor of discourse comes,
shatters into practice of the dying
day, a brilliant profusion of theories,
dusk even sense won't swallow.
The noise agitates the sky. It swells with
indifference, darkens unceremoniously.
You are content, my friend, cloistered
in certitude, laid out below the deck
repeating three words you've been reduced to,
at peace, waiting for the rain to fall.

XXV.

The river will bear it away,
lock jaws at the waterwheel, change
the face of the landscape, darken
its skin, uproot gardens that hang
on its flood plain, drown books floating
water-logged: jetsam on turbulent
contour lines turning around those who tread
above layers a geologist
could identify, silt of ages, oil
pressed in refinement, burned from all those years
at the bottom like a class speaking
in tongues of fire experts can't understand,
though they agree the temperature
is rising globally. We're desperate
for old incantations that protect
us from headaches. Leave now; go north:
women who die barren, men who fight
to master strength their fathers lack,
the heartache of consummating only
love circumstance allows. Go South:
demons that steal into chambers, snatch
our children, teach them idolatry. Go East:
those who plant bombs underneath our cars,
call with threats, bring locusts, spread plague,
arm our enemies. In the West retreats
the sun, an ailing economy, choked
on the throat bone of consumption.
Let the current bear it away,
carry it awry, bury it. Let it
be done by us who make the dams.

XXVI.

A bund is built from “weighty material, refuse,” reed bundles, rocks laid piece by piece across a river. A bund diverts water into ditches to irrigate sorghum, rice, hard wheat; soaks bi-level gardens, channels kellecks to warehouse: cities grow this way. Chesney reports Cyrus built a bund for the siege of Babylon with “thirty thousand men and the hordes that followed Asiatic armies.” They attacked through a dry bed during the festival when servants don their masters’ robes, one hour after Daniel read writing on the wall, two thousand five hundred forty years before we bombed Baghdad on television. The body politic “numbered, weighed and divided by gods of wood and stone, iron and bronze, gold and silver.” See it shudder, a mind for each state, canals dug in its face, mirages for eyes, midsection of citadels, oil instead of blood, heart of desert, husband to commerce—excavation site. Look at mounds that stud the plains where Cyrus stood. Archaeologists call them *tells*. First they strike a datum rod, grid the site cruciform from that spot, point of departure, arbitrary and fixed. They remove artifacts surgically.

XXVII.

Bombs drop from the bellies of planes
onto coordinates imaginary
as Mandeville's map. Destruction
renders them incarnate, delivers
pictures where women mouth their grief
over the awful angles of bodies
before deposition. Beauty
renders their pain perfect, turns it to stone.
Power needs fieldwork around its interests,
made real and sovereign. If the Baghdad
museum were damaged, the Iraqis
could sift through the rubble to prepare
their case, lay bomb parts on a table
for the press to photograph. The camera
owns the image, distributed
among all that circuitry. Monument,
document, sentence. The sun occasionally
splinters through sky clouded by oil fires.
The effect is transient. There's
no assemblage of artifacts
whole: the day's lit just long enough
to memorize details, categorize
them, at night invent the grammar
that rules their breaking apart. So it is
the ruptures we study, apertures
light closes, faults in foundations
that hold the weight of the walls
between inside and out—somehow
their dark traces can be read back
here to an "I" more symbol than sign.

XXVIII.

If the space behind the eyes is desert,
there must be a garden it never was
or will grow into. The space in front
naturally mirrors the desire
to exchange locations without moving.
History retreats from the difference
in this minimal pair. Memory
confuses them, lights the land unfolding
as a film projected from the past.
This figure proposes two ways out:
describe the intrigues of production
and uncover stagecraft as far
as the eye can see, or change the subject
and find yourself, like Lawrence or Burton,
cross-dressing to get inside Mecca.
Particulars may speak autonomously
but our habit is to borrow
words from other languages, ignoring
the syntax in which they lie. The landscape
reemerges as doubt the idea of order
won't quell without abstraction,
reflection, opposition, cardinal
errors that fail feeling but allow
speech, the discourse of Marcia's family.
I'll put them to bed in a house
surrounded by greenery. The place
is vaguely familiar, lends meaning
to return, four directions, five gates.
I take from Arabian script a digit,
"zero," the practical nothing.

XXIX.

“I have never returned to the ‘Iraq without returning to Babylon.” She cancels a vacation to England fearing doctors would forbid the descent to the Middle East. “The keynote is *romance*.” O, she’s in repose there, “flat-chested,” “daughter of the Arabs,” “Diana of the desert,” “her body broken by the energy of her soul.” She stands alone at a railway station, “a leaf blown away by a breath,” a name, room in the museum, brass plaque, eulogy. She watches Russian dancers during her last royal dinner, overdoses on barbiturates ten days later. Suicide? Were irony not distance without risk, I’d mention she couldn’t stack books without writing a letter, but left no note to tell us if it’s so. “How they leapt with grace in that cool ballroom. We felt so civilized.” She was dead when the description arrived home. King George sent condolences written in first person plural. King Feisal sent representatives. Twenty-two years later his last reigning descendent was murdered by revolutionaries, died, like Bell, “in harness.” Now she’s dust stirring in the sirocco, “that’s the trouble with wandering, it has no end.”

XXX.

Outside the window I hear strains
of spring wood winds could narrate, shivering,
voiced, coincidence repeated
annually in the Midwest. Words drop
their stone, praise weather corresponding,
finally, to the field hope clears
for itself in days darkness claims: respite,
not resolution. Listen to children
shout outside! It makes sense to return here,
the call season laws indifferently.
Someone dies on the steppe. We answer
with mimicry. *Rise and descend.*
Fear conserves the rite in artifice,
material, and the plots to gain
and bury it. *A woman yields*
in the garden We look elsewhere
when work exhausts our interest,
the tale is manly told walk away beneath
the masonry sky. It rains. We grow
larger than life. *Someone dies in the desert.*
The homeland is scaffolding. We dwell there:
a construction taken apart
as it was put together, inside
a map drawing geography
in exact measure, with warrants
of direction, reference, and burden, in a city
negotiated by intersections.
Two choices: stay in that ruined place
and build. Or read the desire to stay
as a sign. *Time to leave*