

GRAHAM BARNHART

Pissing in Irbil

Behind me an old Kurdish woman
holding cherries in a plastic bag
rustles gravel

the way you might clear your throat
if you caught a foreign soldier
pissing in side-alley rubble

that had been the walls and ceiling
and staircase of your home. Even rocks
drag shadows away from me.

Old men beneath the street
squat in catacomb cellars,
drinking chai, selling rugs:

Turkish, Iranian, Persian woven
patterns: old maps, unforgotten
transgressions, borders made soft,

reassuring to bare feet so that color
might bloom crimson in the pattern
pressed by a hundred thousand steps.

Irbil is like Rome in this way,
it is like Athens, each city suturing
new skin to the skeleton.

And this is what passes
for ablution: splattering dust from rubble.
The woman coughs her black shoe

in the gravel again. Laughing, she offers
a cherry and slow Kurdish

This was an Arab's house.

With cherry seeds
and the hem of her dress
she disturbs the dust.