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.