

ERBIL IS ARBIL IS IRBIL IS SOMETIMES HEWLER
OR HAWLER

Even the name of this city lacks consistency. Sometimes beginning with A or I or E, sometimes in clay and sometimes in steel.

It's difficult to edit. Difficult to edit and hot. Eye-pricking hot and creaking with metal hooks of hung snakes glistening black, splayed long-ways down the middle. Especially in the dense center, where air evaporates by noon, and watermelons under wool blankets in carts become hard to look at. And the crowd, and the coughs. Dust. Wires at every angle, sagging down on every street electric pole, thousands and thousands, sagging black blockage.

Today, some corner opens and out comes blue tattoos spiraling over a stretched out palm, a black headscarf tight over a small head and a voice like dropping gravel.

What the voice says can't be said but the palm is loud.

Between a star-shaped apple and a half-glass of ouzo, the editor-in-chief lets her know it's not just her, *it's just no one's been paid. The money's all tied up in Baghdad and they have bigger issues down there. Corruption, here, is not a moral issue. It's not a matter of right or wrong.*

AZ the translator, eye spark, earnest turn, clean pause, the near violent set down of his teacup.

Was it you who edited my title? Truly you must know why it worked there, the word whilst?

I avoid editing titles when I can, she says, her irritation peeking through.

And also, I wondered. . . where you are from, isn't it strange to not be married at your age?

Trees? The two stories explaining the absence of trees in Kurdistan, illustrate why her driver hates it here:

The Kurds hacked the woods themselves, for the sake of mountain bonfires.

It was Saddam and the Baathists—a tactic stripping the Kurds of all hiding places, any shield from bullets, sprays and chemicals.

Both true and both signs of fools, he says.

So, avoid doing tree stories, she says.

Fools! His word, a reptile tongue whip. A thin slap at her slumped frame.

She slumps further and the road spreads too quietly ahead.

ISHTAR WAS HERE

The ancient citadel, the original city, an abandoned clay fortress on a high dirt hill, sick cats, where the peshmerga soldiers slip to sleep, just past the rusty pile of sunflower oilcans and left of the blue-bronze gated bathhouse, a shanty corner of couches, armchairs, soldiers slugged under mildew carpets, smurf curtains, cockeyed rifles and trousers, inside the scalloped horizon of satellite dishes, an illusion of tight containment. The newspaper says, *make a story out of it*.

So far, she has the slack-eyed rug seller, saying he knows Ashurnazipal was here 900 years before Christ, and Nebuchadnezzar stole it from Sennacherib, and Darius from him, then came Alexander the Great, Mithridates and the Mongols, then Ishtar.

Confused, she asks, Ishtar lived here? The goddess?

Yes, of course (his eyes barely, and leaving) they came here to pray at her feet for good battles.

He knows because this is where his father was born—in a hole carved from the clay wall. He's not sure of much more, except he knows the ground would rise each time someone came and stole the city from someone else. The new king hung the flayed skin of the last on the wall, letting everyone below know a new city was crushing the last, countless times, piles upon piles, until no one could say what was.

If Ishtar lived here, shouldn't there be some sign? Like, a statue? She asks.

AZ says there are no facts. Don't look. Last year they forced everyone to leave, saying they would preserve it. Excavate and preserve it. But so far it is just an empty home for broken pieces. There are many worlds underneath us, but no one can be bothered to dig deep enough to find them. Not much story for you is what you're thinking I know, but think as the Romantics would. Think with intuition, no reason necessary. Think with what Wordsworth said: fill paper with what your heart breathes.