

MATTHEW BRENNAN

The Tigris River

I

(1258, Mesopotamia)

As the full moon is setting and the sky
whitens with dawn, a line of Mongols stands,
still as the night that's dying, on the edge
of waters, waiting. Then Khan's grandson lifts
his blazing torch and day begins: His hordes,
heaving themselves across the river, rage
into the heart of Baghdad burning all
that's in their way—the market, gardens, barns,
and bodies. Stragglers carting stacks of books,
armful on armful, to the Tigris
dump them in and turn the water black.

II

(2003, Iraq)

Baghdad, in April—weather never better,
the morning calm, the Tigris gilt with light;
the coalition army guarding oil
in fields so vast that they look just like Texas.
Fort Jackson's troops, like statues, never move
all day and stay inside their bureau. Even
when flames fly up a hundred feet into

the sky, three miles away. And even when
they see a man, a Brit named Fisk, sprint toward
them, waving both arms, screaming that a mob
has charged like fire into the Library, looting
the ancient legacies of Babylon,
Sumeria, and the cradle of the world:
It burns the building down, and so the oldest
Qur'an, begun a thousand years ago, is ash.
Nearby, the Tigris River, washed in light,
runs its relentless waters toward the sea.

MATTHEW BRENNAN has published four books of poems, most recently *The House with the Mansard Roof* (Backwaters Press, 2009). Recent poems have appeared in the *South Dakota Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Commonweal*, and *Trinacria*.