

DALE RITTERBUSCH

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## Assyrian Lament

From an Assyrian chamber pot  
one can fabricate almost anything—  
sunlight sparking on the sea, an awaking  
to the crumpled breeze, a rough  
rubbing of the beard while the woman  
lying next assumes a grand and luxurious curve  
arcing from shoulder to waist  
and then the rise, her hip, her dimpled  
derriere: he snuggles his beard  
into a dimple, wakes her with a warm  
devotional kiss. The walls appear  
as alabaster in this morning light,  
the chamber pot is figured,  
lovers entwined like a knot of snakes.  
The lovers are always the same:  
a thrall of carnal bliss while in the corner  
a shield and spear. After so much thrall  
there is the call of scudding clouds,  
movement other than her arched back;  
he imagines the death masks that await,  
welcomes the empty eyes of god,  
his own brimming with escape.

## Moral Intelligence

Today I woke to a film clip,  
two marines in Iraq with a puppy.  
One of them tosses the puppy over a cliff  
and they laugh.

Years ago some teenagers crawled over  
a fence at the zoo, cut the beaks  
from storks and pelicans with a hacksaw.  
The birds could not eat and had to be destroyed.

I don't know how ugly one has to be  
to do this, what religion, which parent,  
teacher or God is responsible. And now  
you want this sermon to stop.

Perhaps I should bring into play  
the architecture of our great cities,  
a museum holding our dearest possessions,  
the wealth and beauty of our civilization.

When a suicide bomber blows up  
a crowd of women and children shopping  
for textiles of the most brilliant reds and blues,  
for colorful vegetables and fruit—orange,  
green, a sunburst yellow—  
all that we see is blood patterned  
on the street, if we see anything at all.

There is no beauty, no genius that makes this  
ugliness a just compensation, that suffers  
such contrast we amaze ourselves  
at our capacity for good, for  
making a wondrous beauty  
displayed in the torture museums of our minds

Is this a tad too melodramatic?  
I thought I heard someone suggest this  
under her breath. Yet imagine (as I've witnessed)  
walking down a street in a major European  
city, shoppers stopping, admiring a window  
display—Louis Vuitton luggage,  
a manikin dressed in fur. Walking on  
not one of them stops or even glances at the photos  
of the lost, captured before their executions,  
museum hours posted near the entrance  
but no one enters, no one notes the hours.

Your resentment will rise if I note  
those who walk past Dachau and admire  
the flowing fields of daffodils outside the gates.

Yet perhaps there are exceptions:  
a woman born in a refugee camp in Thailand  
returns to the killing fields as a young adult,  
reconnecting her past, her family lost. Photos  
from the year zero are neatly, meticulously, recorded.  
She learns everything that's been withheld.  
We should note her demeanor, the expression on her face,  
how she refuses to eat a meal prepared by an older woman,  
face-worn, checkered scarf around her neck, former  
cadre of the Khmer Rouge, defender of their faith,  
one of many who still celebrate independence, April 17<sup>th</sup>

The young woman remembers stories  
of mothers who went blind witnessing  
the small bodies of their babies bashed against trees.

Separate, alone, this one young woman who refuses to eat  
amidst this gluttony of loss  
a celebration, or a sympathetic blindness, for us all.

## Anniversary

On their anniversary he calls her  
during a mortar attack, hunkers down,  
tells her he loves her, small arms  
clattering in the background, an RPG  
whooshing above his head. She tells him  
what she'll do when he returns;  
he drinks rum straight from the bottle,  
toasts their year together, imagines  
what it will be like back in her arms,  
everything always so alive. His cell phone chirps,  
warns him his battery is dying.  
He signs off, her arms his only objective:  
another round plunks short of his position,  
*thunks* in a shower of Babylonian sand.

Tour over, extended twice, he returns to find  
she's been unfaithful, but he can't let go.  
He searches her bedroom, her computer,  
the same way he searched the houses  
of insurgents, looking for weapons,  
women cowering in a corner, a sullen look in the eyes  
of the men. What he finds determines who lives,  
who dies. Search over, he walks out of his house  
past the GM plant shut down for good,  
past a block of houses, every other one foreclosed,  
just another long patrol.  
He buttons his field jacket against the cold,  
considers it simply another exercise  
in escape and evasion; he knows he has to learn  
a whole new set of skills,  
new weapons, again, simply to survive

## Probably Not the Final Destination

Last words before deployment  
*Keep your head down*—  
a trite phrase I recoiled from  
even as I said it,  
but I had nothing else to offer  
there being nothing intelligent to say,  
nothing of any value, any use.

When he came back two years later,  
he was subdued, no trace of bravado,  
no gung ho, can do, Huah!  
posturing in his demeanor—  
16,000 miles in a Humvee, the early ones  
without armor, back and forth across  
the hardscape of Iraq, a back injury  
the only physical sign. But I imagine  
a drive to work where a plastic bag  
blown across the road, hanging on a fence,  
flickers in the wind, catches his attention—  
his car slows, his adrenaline spikes—  
might as well be searching for IED's  
along Route Irish.

He tells me the VA screwed up his benefits,  
asks for some advice, and all I can say  
is nothing much has changed  
though I caustically think  
change is supposedly the basis of everything,  
just another lie we tell pretending things get better.  
I tell him the story of a marine who lost half  
his jaw when hit by an RPG in Vietnam,  
and the VA said there was no record of his injury,  
no proof his wound was war-related.

We walk to the parking lot, a few words  
that mean little passing between us,  
both of us lost in the silence of the waning light,  
the hard, angled reflections off windshield and mirror.  
He looks at the car in the slot next to his  
and says, under his breath, *Only an idiot  
would drive a KIA.*

Every way back dried blood on the highway  
the dead deer pushed to the shoulder—  
filled with explosives—chills an injured spine  
as certainly as if he'd never returned,  
as if return were something possible:

Like the time in a bar, shortly after he got out,  
when the man sitting next to him  
finished his beer and said, *Well, that soldier's dead,*  
setting the bottle down hard on the bar.  
The expression hit him like a cold chisel  
hammered into bone.

Fall semester, second week of class, a student stays after:  
his field jacket, his scruffy beard  
tell the story. *I don't know if you have noticed,*  
he says, *but when I answer your questions  
sometimes I lose my line of thought  
and I stumble a bit trying to find it again.*  
I tell him the lie I hadn't noticed, but his speech,  
slurred, slowed, gives it away—a sergeant,  
twenty-seven months in Iraq. *My wife thinks  
I have PTSD* he says. Every class he stays after,  
and there's little I can say, little I can do  
except listen: maybe there's little anyone can do,  
that old lesson we never seem to learn,  
moving from "costly their winestream"  
to the "red, sweet wine of youth":  
enough there to embarrass half the demons of hell.

At night the *NewsHour* runs pictures  
of the dead, name, rank, hometown flashing,  
holding, silently across the screen—the first man just eighteen.  
We might remember Urien’s lament: “I bear a great  
warrior’s skull; I bear a head at my heart.”  
Or has war’s paradigm so changed  
Urien’s progeny may now swear,  
“I bear the dead, the half-dead  
in my half-dead skull; I bear  
the dead in my half-dead heart.”

I pour another glass of wine, a fine Médoc,  
let my brain swirl like smoke in a small wind.  
When the smoke clears, I recall an image  
from one of the stories told by this Iraq War vet:  
Stopped at a checkpoint, sitting in his Humvee,  
a car bomb explodes two vehicles back;  
he watches the toasted, smoldering torso of the driver  
fly over his head.

In October the sergeant discovers his wife’s  
been seeing another man; she’s 23,  
he’s 38. One weekend, VA counseling  
going nowhere, he punches the bedroom wall—  
twice. I say, *I trust you missed hitting the studs.*  
*Once*, he replies, explaining how now he has to patch  
both walls, inside, outside, where his fist bulged out  
the sheathing and popped the siding loose.

Today is cold, rainy, on my way to work,  
leaves plastered to the street,  
the hoods of cars. A Beamer zips around me  
in heavy traffic, brakes hard, forces me to brake.  
I notice a magnetic yellow ribbon, faded, half of it  
broken away, half-assed support for the troops  
on the back ass end of his car.  
I wonder if the bastard ever thought to enlist,

my anger rising. In some parallel  
universe, perhaps, I'd accept any of this  
and respond charitably, a calm serenity  
coursing through my days: I'd recite  
the psalms while nations rage. The traffic  
slows, grinds, squeals to a halt, none of us  
going anywhere we need to be.

Weeks later the sergeant lies on his couch  
taking a mid-morning nap; he wakes  
to the concussion wave of exploding ordnance,  
a mortar round close and as real as anything  
he's ever known. Thinking his ears are blown  
he reaches up, softly, gently, pats the side of his face,  
feeling for a warm trickle of blood.

## Literary Determinism

*I have looked over the wall and I see the bodies floating on the river, and that will be my lot also. —Gilgamesh*

Teaching Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*,  
I go cold in the classroom,  
students texting, tweeting,  
whatever the hell it's called, some just sitting there  
blankly, without their books, so when I draw  
their attention to a specific passage  
they haven't got a clue—It's all for nothing,  
so few educable, it's merely a tactical exercise:  
*What you do in training you'll do in combat*  
is the old adage from the Army  
so I have few expectations the world will change,  
no matter the journey: up the Congo River,  
the Mekong, the Euphrates, the lesson  
never changes. I make all the parallels I can  
but only Robertson knows, an Iraq War vet,  
deployed two tours, mechanized infantry  
in continuous combat. He tells me after class  
of a checkpoint hit by a suicide bomber, the car  
explodes in a gasoline fireball, takes out  
the NCO, the lieutenant, wounds the other three:  
soldiers torn apart, but still alive and captured.  
A few days later Robertson hauls them from the river,  
the Euphrates giving up its dead  
as it always has, always will, a thousand years  
from now, just a few more lines written  
under a gritty Mesopotamian sun,  
sand cutting like broken glass in the wind.  
His voice lowers as he tells me  
the story, the image fixed, unchanging,

as the world casts lots, the river, the epic,  
altered but slightly, the outcome, the house of dust  
always the same, and so he has little left to say,  
and we grow quiet, putting on that knowledge  
of where they drink dirt and eat stone.  
He looks away; I can tell he sees  
that dumb beast rising from the sand.

## Homage to Vonnegut

A young couple runs across the road,  
hand in hand,  
a gauntlet of gunfire  
behind them; neighbors  
lie in the street, blood washing  
like rain down the gutters

Married or not, they were lovers,  
you can tell from the still photo  
of them lying in the road, like their neighbors,  
their friends: the sniper, I imagine,  
fired from a pockmarked house, a sidewall  
blown out; he stood at a second story  
window in the shadow of the eaves

Pink mist is what they're trained for,  
a head shot, one round to the temple,  
but he missed, or had aimed at their bodies:  
whatever mistake it was, she wasn't killed  
and the young man wrapped himself around  
her fallen body, pulling her close  
as if they were in bed on a cool night,  
he warming her chilled arms and legs,  
whispering as he did then  
*I love you* as the rounds tore  
through them both

Usually a photograph of a shoe in the rubble,  
a child's doll, a broken watch to pinpoint  
the time, is all we need—a mere suggestion,  
little more than a hint—and that suffices  
We know the story from all  
the shoes, dolls, watches we've seen  
before—nothing left to tell

But the couple: here we have everything  
and we want more. We ask ourselves  
questions: why were they out in the city streets?  
why didn't they leave at the first signs  
of hell? And what did they wish for—  
a boy or a girl, perhaps a house  
overgrown with lilacs or roses—  
longing as they did for something,  
anything, to make sense:  
*etcetera*

## Just Another War Story

*There's not enough left  
to be placed in a shoebox,  
but we put what remains in a full-sized  
coffin anyway.* He tells me this  
after a few too many beers,  
but we both know it is the illusion  
that serves us best, the way we pretend  
everything is other than it is,  
a fable, perhaps, the architecture  
of our minds built on  
unshakeable bedrock—  
foolish metaphors as abundant as stones.

When he leaped from the Humvee  
at the first metallic *thunk*,  
small arms fire ripping the brazen sky  
to shreds, he stepped on a chunk  
of concrete blown from a factory wall,  
and his ankle twisted and cracked, spun  
in a balletic move capturing his fall.  
His sergeant said, looking at the skewed foot  
at odd angles to the leg bone, *You can't  
have broken it or you'd be screaming in pain*,  
and then he twisted it back as if to make it  
right and true to his wisdom: like they say,  
*The Army takes care of its own.*

Now he walks with a limp  
since there are more important things to fix,  
fixing not quite so easy as breaking  
though the illusion holds like cement.

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Along a tributary of the Mekong  
his father retraced his steps,  
part way, flushing a bird from its nest,  
but the calm, so reticent before,  
cloaked memory, a heavy mist  
hanging along the Annamese cordillera,  
red dust rising in an afternoon rain.  
Only a few photographs spelled the difference.  
His father stopped at a small Buddhist shrine  
and knelt.

But his son vowed he'd never go back,  
never limp to the shrine of his friend's  
death: the sound of an RPG hitting  
a stone wall overhead, raining  
a cobbled dust, lingers like a smoke break,  
a taste of cordite always in his lungs,  
a sharp sting in his leg  
if he moves the wrong way.

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