

SELF-PORTRAIT AS EXILED DESPOT

Because I'm hated everywhere, I no longer
have color-coded maps of enemies.
I no longer have maps, spies with knowledge
to report. When my appearance mattered
to morale, I shaved twice a day, wore uniforms
that reeked of starch. Now pants with elastic
waists, a beard that's uneven and too gray.

From my father, I learned *fear* rhymes
with *revere*. I taught my sons the same,
though if they want power they'll have
to seize it—I've nothing to pass down.
Even my wives don't show proper respect.
I've considered rebukes and courtyard
beatings, but I'm too tired to follow through.
For years, I escaped assassins, foiled
coups, carried a knife in one boot,
gun in the other. Now even my body
betrays me, my heart weakening
with every beat.

Every day I watch
the news on satellite, then sit in the garden.
I say I'm putting my affairs in order,
planning revenge against scholars
who honor the wrong truth. Really
I'm just waiting for the death
I know will come. When it does, I hope
I keep my dignity, don't plead or cry
or try to run, hide behind a woman
or a too-small chair. I practice standing
with my shoulders squared, spine rifle-
straight, chest braced for the bullet I deserve.