

From the Website of the National Museum of Iraq

(i) *Harp*

Buried with its harpist, whose finger bones curve  
over the space of vanished strings, the Harp of Ur.  
A glory of gold, silver, shell and lapis lazuli,  
nothing is known of its musician, found  
in a human pyramid of girls murdered  
by blunt force to the head, and re-arranged  
after death to lie peacefully in each other's laps  
around the central figure of their queen.  
More is understood about the fate  
of the Harp, looted from the museum,  
broken to pieces in a car park, its sacred  
bull head drowning in a flooded bank vault.

(ii) *Tablets*

Perhaps this was Eresh, this cluster of low hills  
on the flat plain, next to nowhere.  
Layers of mud brick dwellings generations deep,  
abandoned when the Euphrates changed  
its course. Robbers cut into the mounds, but left  
the herringbone brickwork and sunken basins,  
the fire pits, damp courses, and the clay tablets. Dug

from beneath the scorched end wall, along with bitumen,  
potsherds, burnt matting and fish bones, is sacred wisdom;  
also lists of names and occupations -  
lost over again in looted Baghdad, when the museum fell.

(i) *Gertrude Bell's Letter*

Baghdad, July the Second.

Darling Father,

Today, a practice by the Royal Air Force.

A quarter of a mile from where we sat  
on Diala dyke, they dropped two heavy bombs  
from three thousand feet, a village set alight.

Later I went swimming with Major Gore.

A blazing afternoon. You cannot think  
how fine it is to drop into the cool  
swift river! He agrees no other Arabs  
have the chance we offer these. And yet I wonder  
are they men enough to take it? Please send me  
news of Herbert, and dearest Elsa.

Ever, my dear, your very affectionate daughter.

## Illustrated Plates for an Unauthorized Biography of Gertrude Bell

(i) *Red Barns*, 1963 (Courtesy of Redcar Public Library)

Your childhood home, my childhood puzzle;  
the afternoon school boys - hoop-capped, blazered,  
scarved - slipping in the wicket gate, as I trekked  
homeward in my Start-Rite shoes A smell  
of creosote and honeysuckle in the summer air  
as markers older than the alphabet  
incised my female clay with their prestige.  
I knew their leather satchels contained  
empires. Was that the year *Lawrence of Arabia*  
swept my mother off her red plush seat  
in the Regent Cinema? Cantering back  
along the esplanade, between the steel works  
and the cooling towers, she snagged  
on marram grass and chilly sand,  
the tether's end of kids, the strap for cash.  
Lost in plain sight on Red Barns' weathered wall  
a plaque as blue as Peter O'Toole's eyes:  
'Gertrude Bell, Friend of the Arabs.'

*(ii) Highway of Death, 1926 (Courtesy of Baghdad Museum)*

You tell the maid to wake you in the morning,  
but restless on your pillow in the night,  
lighting the lamp, you see loose freckled skin  
on the hand that drew the map that made Iraq.  
Feeling its tremor you shake a few more pills  
from the hidden bottle, choose a deeper sleep.  
Bad dreams of war make the British  
civil cemetery a god-forsaken place to lie,  
Khatun, but the cold ground in Redcar  
churchyard presses my mother harder.

## **Girl, Woman, Refugee**

When the electricity fails, as it does most nights,  
the camp is full of noises. Boys turn into wolves,  
howl for us to come to them in the dark. Uncle Zak  
who winks at us at lunchtime from his falafel stall  
stands in the dry gulley bellowing like a bull in heat.  
We do not slip out of our airless tents for such lovers.  
We are not like you, Sappho, powerful and shameless;  
We wear our family's honour or a shroud. So tonight  
I sit between my sleeping mother and my sleeping  
father, on our cardboard floor, and I take my little sister  
on my lap. I stroke her damp hair and murmur songs  
of home, and all the while I am thinking of a girl I saw  
in the shower block, who, when she felt my eyes on her,  
turned towards me, showing her full white breasts.

**Sylvia Plath wanders across the Bosphorus**

*"I am now flooded with despair, almost hysteria, as if I were smothering.  
As if a great muscular owl were sitting on my chest,  
its talons clenching & constricting my heart."* Sylvia Plath

Her poems are moulded out of clay,  
fired in the kiln of her belly. She blows  
on the sparks, knowing they will catch,  
blaze hot enough to burn her whole  
house down.

When they mewl she lullabies.  
Rocks them in the crook of her arm.  
Sews for them, cutting her blood  
red cloth into coats to warm them.  
Teaches them their alphabet  
till time runs out.

Bovine, milk-heavy, bellowing, stung  
by gad-flies, she goes wandering  
at the behest of this god or that.

Served cold, on the rocks,  
that dead girl looks a lot  
like Prometheus.

## After London

It was the quiet that saved us. The  
whisper of grasses, self-seeded,  
defying the curfew. Sea-grasses  
greening the shallow coastal waters,  
meadow grasses spilling out of the  
park into the pavements. Some days  
the hum of bees seemed to drown  
the flower drenched verges. At night  
the silence was pierced by owls and  
foxes. Hedgehogs mated in the roads  
where cars were rusting. The only  
visitors to the broken high street  
were fallow deer, tripping quietly.

We hid indoors as instructed,  
waiting for nature to reset, waiting  
for the anger against us to subside.  
We listened to the blame on the  
internet and said our prayers.  
We only came out when some of us  
were dead and all of us were famishing.  
We only came out after the night  
when there was no news, just a repeat  
of yesterday's. We knew then they had  
gone, our leaders. We did not care where;  
they had been no good for us. We came out

and stood in groups, pale in the sunshine.

There was no one to tell us what to do.

It was the strangers who carried quiet inside  
them that saved us. The ones we had always  
resented, who had lost their own cities already.

The man who hauled his sewing machine  
across Europe, swimming rivers and ducking  
under barbed wire. The girl whose mother  
taught her how to bottle pears in a ruined cellar.

The boy who crossed the desert, who could  
fix any machine you gave him. They showed  
us what to do as the quiet days turned into  
seasons, into lifetimes, and London broke into  
a hundred villages, the length of a day's walk.