

Tongues Bloody Tongues: 11 July, 1926

(an excerpt)

words by Joseph Tepperman

The Characters -

Gertrude Bell: *Oriental Secretary for the British Empire in Iraq*

Haji Naji: *Iraqi farmer and friend of Bell's*

Huzaima bint Nasser: *wife of Iraq's first modern king, Faisal I*

Kinahan Cornwallis: *Bell's colleague at the Arab Bureau*

Saddam Hussein: *narrator*

[Overture.]

*[We find **Saddam Hussein** alone, appearing to only just notice the audience.]*

Saddam Hussein: These are people here now? I have so wanted to speak to them, to speak with someone.

In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful. *Assalamu Alaykum*, O great nation. I address not only you, but all nations, all humanity. God is Great - *allahuakbar* - and great are the bearers of justice among His people. My name... My name is not important. It is sufficient to say I am the son of my people, the loyal and faithful son. I was also once the father to them.

[he pulls down a map of Iraq]

My nation is Iraq. My people, the Arabs of Iraq. This is the land from where all civilization has proceeded, these are the people who have stirred the world to heights of wisdom beyond all other. Though today, as at certain other points in time, our culture has fallen prey to outside envy, to the decadence of ones who wish us to abandon our message.

Today's aggressors join their destinies to the destinies of history's best-known colonialists, in Iraq and elsewhere. It is a very long list so I will not bother you with all of the names. But these include the English. The Persians. The Greeks. The Mongols. The Ottomans. The Romans. The-

[noise of flocking parrots]

You hear these? These, I think they are parrots? They are so loud. I have not yet heard such parrots here. But I know these birds. Two very bright yellow of them were once given me by... it is not important. I continue.

So, yes. The Romans. The Assyrians. The Akkadians. Now the Americans. The Chaldeans. The Sassanids. The Parthians. You understand what I am meaning to say.

For comparison, let us examine the history of one, of any one of these invaders. Maybe the English.

[pulls down a map of the U.K.]

Do you know, I was once a school teacher? Yes, it is true. Many do not know this, but I was.

So: the English. Yes. In their many years, the English native lands have been challenged by outside aggressors only four times: by the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons, the Vikings, and by a French people, the Normans. The English nation, we must remember, they were at the stage of receiving knowledge when Iraq's light shone the brightest. But history is not a contest, and today we find ourselves at a critical moment in the struggle for our renaiss-

[noise of parrots]

Again we have the parrots. I did not know there would be such parrots here today. Their sound is... very sad, their sound.

Please forgive me. I awoke here eleven days past. It has been very dark here. And without company.

*[The scene changes to early morning, in Baghdad. **Bell** has returned home from a swim in the Tigris and is drying her long gray hair in front of the mirror.]*

I was saying, the English. And so from this, their received knowledge, the English people came to govern Iraq. One hundred years in the past, when the Arab Bedouin men first made meeting to a traveler, her name Gertrude Bell, a person from England was very new for them to see. They said, "If this is an English woman, then the English men must be as lions!" Yes, this is what they said. Such was this woman's strength, very uncommon.

Early her life was spent in climbing mountains, and even she published her translated poems from I think the Arabic. Then she would help with to choose the first king in Iraq after were expelled the Ottomans, a king she believed felt in him sympathy for English invaders. But I do not wish to explain into these events. Gertrude Bell, she did not ever marry and mother children, and her way of coming to her end is well known. To tell the last of Ms. Bell's too many days in Iraq, days she was always to start with swimming... this story, it becomes like the last in all of English days in Iraq.

Gertrude Bell: Weep, weep, Tigris, for the sun has grown so faded my red.
Weep, Tigris, or weep I for my sunlike red ungrown.
I had once grown so red a fade, so to want the Tigris sun's sowing growth.
Once they wept, and wept red. Wept they grown men, men of war,
for my woman's want of sun, or my ermine fur to war women so wore once.
For once fated so, or my fading forward grows?
So lay faded a fate, and so grew worn my love's men,
men my love read its fating as theirs.

Read so, I was once their poet once. Once had I a poet's tongue
so love-read. As its poet, Love laid a tongue light of mine:

"Light of mine eyes and harvest of my heart,
And mine at least in changeless memory!"

And mine the thirty-year memory of these lines,
lines easily found changeless these thirty years!

"Ah! When he found it easy to depart,
He left the harder pilgrimage to me!"

To me, yes, pilgrim - but was first a poet once.
Yes, but my first love was "poet" to Persia's pneumonia ice,
knew Persia's moaning ice tongues' lay.
My poet's tongue left no lay to my gone love's known moans,
gone where my knowledge knew nowhere.
But Love laid again its pilgrimage upon me,
And upon love again laid I, gone tongue-against.

And like they later said, the Baghdad streets to me, "I know London."

Once Baghdad said "London," each street knew me less my later likes.
They saw less to the likely wants once, and less London saw I.
My many gone pilgrimages saw to making Kings,
kinging Baghdad on my London tongue's likings.
But my many gone tongues against love again laid no gain,
no lay upon my again gone many loves.
Gone and where we nowhere know no nowhere where.

Of these I have me three pilgrimages left.
Three then have I of my leave then.
Pilgrimages these then where? "Where we know nowhere"?
No: to know then where the ice's moaning tongues left Love then.

Saddam Hussein: The start of these pilgrimage was to her friend - a farmer, his name Haji Naji. Still today, in Iraq a man who is friendly for Westerners - and in particular for Western women - this man is a Haji Naji. The first Haji Naji, he was most close to Ms. Bell of all among my people.

Haji Naji: Oh brightest of honors, she rises with the Sun herself to bless my broken fast. Do say you'll stay, Ms. Bell, to as much shine on my sugared apples' trellis as you have this once-shadowed heart.

Gertrude Bell: How very delicious here this all seems apart, Naji. This very shade, Naji, seems how all delicious day gardens are made. Hear how these, my made shades, are gardened all apart this day? Seems to shed a delicate guard on all my hearing, is how.

Haji Naji: No, the ghosts here don't haunt. There is a many-fingered wind enforcing their lonely whispers, like so many unintelligible prisoners through the separate cells' bars. Do these again suffer you with more of, as you say, their "visits" then?

Gertrude Bell: As though these whisperers have ever truly eased upon my living here! Though truly, these have whispers upon me as to ease these here of the living ever. Whose whispers are easier - the living's... or whoever's?

Haji Naji: Nonsense - the Iraq calls to its Khatun as would a groom of his youth, new-wedded and not yet attendant to his unabashed jealousies. For none else will glad assuage such continued frivols

but the wife of our State's first whispered lusts.

Gertrude Bell: Naji, do you remember,
the night we sat still your roof and silent listened?
And we listened to your night's silence roofing, remember?
Still the night's sit do you do, Naji.
Remember to do still listen and remember. And remember still.

Saddam Hussein: Very interesting these words, are they? Next she would to visit the wife of the king she helped to make, one that Ms. Bell called Queen. But this English idea of Queen is not there in our tradition.

Gertrude Bell: God save and hold you, your High,
as God saves all His high household.

Huzaima bint Nasser: Well if it isn't my little heir apparent's girlfriend,
come to pay me flattery's call. Your pardon, lady,
if I'm aware of just one monarch proper at court late this morning.
You know well which one of us all of al-Iraq really sees that way.
And they, meaning we, are rarely wrong.

Gertrude Bell: The Uncrowned Queen they namely call me - why?
If they unknown knew, why, on me they'd crown another name.
Queen Elizabeth knew why, if called as other on the Crown's
Elizabethan name than they Elizabethed.

Huzaima bint Nasser: If you're referring to your shared English virginity
- either imagined or not, I don't want to know -
the Hashemite woman's harem life is in truth little different.
Consider even my only wife's isolation, waited on all day with slaves
while her one son's served Cambridge manners
and the King drinks tea in Switzerland or wherever he is this week.
At least the House of Saud has the decency to divorce theirs first.

Gertrude Bell: Ibn Saud has times married been.
Upwards of fifty has Ibn Saud of many married-up times.
As many days does a married time have of Ibn Saud.
If said fifty days does a marriage be, then said marriage had me
a good many before my fiftieth time.
And if Ibn Saud's days of marriage say before good time his reign's,

say then of mine and mine.

Good day - and reign forever, my forever married Queen.

Saddam Hussein: So quick she was, am I right? Very bold to speak this way. And last Ms. Bell made visit to her collaborator at the English their Arab Bureau, an officer who was that day with sickness. We can together picture well the type of their friendship.

Kinahan Cornwallis: Gertrude, did I not command you to forego your visits so long as this long desert influenza has sought my life? Though I suppose I feel well well enough to receive tidings of the dig. How fare our latest disinterred texts? Steeped still in history's infinite inks?

Gertrude Bell: We found maybe an inscription of Babylon's last king, Ken - a lasting script of the sun or moon wonder this king of Babylon maybe founded. How found Babylon much to last this a summer, Ken, I wonder. A wonder, to king much this sun's summer foundry. Much as we, Ken, last to this, maybe.

Kinahan Cornwallis: My survival of recent seems to rest as much on the stars as on one certain sun's summer difference in five degrees. Foresaw the Babylonians such their seeming astrological follies in the face of modern science, is the question. And what of Cox's missile tests - I trust you were in attendance for this, his first demonstration?

Gertrude Bell: Indeed, it was wonderful, what they did with the village. It was horrible. It was not indeed the village, not what they horrible did. The village was made for us where we did imaginary. Then the imaginary village was not the village. The village was then the flash the village did when they hit it. The flash hit was what they horrible with the village did. It was wonderful.

Kinahan Cornwallis: Splendid. And as for ferocious little Tundra, is she back at again capturing her scaly domestic pests?

Gertrude Bell: Ken, if things. Ken, things happen, and if any were to take. Things were taken to me, Ken. I would happen to happen, if anything. Ken, can you. You would take her, you would, if?

Kinahan Cornwallis: Why, I have never known you for one prone to these theatrics, Gertrude. But if it is for a sincere answer's sake you ask, you know already well my nuptial obligations. Again, my wife and I are lately reconciled, and our coming reunite-ment looms. That said, rest assured that no unlikely orphan among your darling dogs shall want so long as I serve the Iraq on HM's greater interests. Now enough of this silly foregoing - and from one so fit in physique as to foment my invalid's envy immediate!

Gertrude Bell: You were always so kind with me, Ken. With all my kinds you were you, in ways. And so with this country you, Ken, treated in kind. My ways were with what you treated them with treated. What all kind of all kindness? All with you, Ken.

Saddam Hussein: The end to Ms. Bell's story is from here straight, without my needing for to explain. For me it is not to say if this is the destiny for every woman such as she.

[in the Baghdad streets, as the sun sets]

Gertrude Bell: There's nobody. Nobody there knows. Their bodies know no another one's ones, read no other one's all body all.

We all read now, and when we read all now,
we alone all now read alone.
Yes, when all alone is how reading is now read - rarely out loud.
Yes, and rare that we when reading aloud call out as called once one
- a rare one who read - would once when unalone reading would read.

Yes, "we" - I call me out as one. But I was once a poet once.
Now I but repeat repeat. A repeat I repeat.
Now - but poet once I once, I repeat.
But a repeat poet I repeat now? Once I was, was now.
Once I repeat a poet, I but repeat now now. I *now* now. Now:

"The sun sets as set bricks. The sun in setting curtains
brick fact curtainings, blackens as thoughts brick to black,
thought to in absence rhapsodize eyes,

to absent stunt their rhapsode search, eyes their mortar order.
To stunt eyes' search to ordered mortar facts."

Am I finally all mind, do I prove out no more here?
Mind I do here more outward provings, finally:

"Dying leaves' shadows as the leaves, they dying sprint to shadow earth.
Their sprints show along the earth as show the long grass tails of
racing parrots, as all parrots racing tail and all."

...yet capable of but the trivialest similes, me.
But trivialists seem so of my dissimilar capacities, yet.
Who else sees, who sees else as so, so...

"so blue the setting sky, to seem imposed each individual leaf
sets as a leaf individual blue imposed"

- to this, who else imposes eye to this?

These years my eye agape was seeing else,
or seeing then not any of what gaping was.
This then was what these years or any year was of, or not.
Do not we any eye so open see?
See? We do walk, not we so any open of it.

[*She sings a solo aria.*]

"So many are we afraid to face,
we many walking are for fear of facing stillness still.
Afraid of impressing one another's eye,
we fear impressed remembrance for one eyesight other's press,
of remembering every many memory of a face
once eye-instilled in every member of still stillness.
We go timing every thing in time to go in time away,
as in time things will everything go way its way away.
As go many, we go walk against its song,
its song we faces' eyes go to to sing away still facings.
Again timing things at last to fall
with night against its every daytime day.
With night day falls at last things every time away.

Away, and where know we nowhere..."

- where we know no nowhere where?

No, there are every everywhere wheres again to last.

No, they every there again know we again again.

We know they again last there. They're last there.

There. At last! And away night-with:

"Know they're that they're happy where they're
where they are there. Know they're that they're happy where they are."