

Ruins and Bones

In memory of Khaled Muhammed al Asaad,
murdered by ISIS in August 2015,
and of Palmyra, the *Pearl of the Desert*



I

*"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.
Percy Bysshe Shelley*

In ages far beyond our ken,
These stones weren't set by mortal men.
In friendly fields and foreign lands.
They say these walls were by giants' hands were raised.
But few, few remember when.

With mortar mixed with blood and soil
And leavened thence with sweat and toil.
The masons and the muscle
All are bones, bones, dry bones,
And nothing else remains.

Their histories are carved in stone.
Their mysteries are locked in stone.
And so the monuments decay
As lonely sands stretch far away,
And hide the stones.

Razed down to the bedrock
Like Jerusalem of old, and built and built again.
The past now rises up like prayers
Emerging from the very layers of dust
That cover time and man.

On sweeping plains and on high places
Where those who went before us left their traces.
By lonely towers and standing stones,

Amidst the castles and the shrines,
Tracing lives and story lines,
Lie the ruins and the bones,
The ruins and the bones,
Ruins and bones.

II



كان يا ما كان، في قديم الزمان، وسالف العصر والأوان
kan ya ma kan fi qadim izzaman wsalifi al' asri wal'awan
Once upon a time in ancient times

Time and tide and warp and wind,
Ah, see what ship by waterside
Takes us far, and what betides us
To look back, and watch, and wonder.
Oh yes, we wander.

And sing such songs as we might hear
In dreams before day breaking,
As ancient echoes hide between
The slumber and the waking.
We remember,
Yes, we remember

Iskander marched this way and back
Across these battlefields of old.
Persepolis he burned and in Babylon he died,
And now, embalmed in gold,
He lies waiting.

The killer khan in death reclines
Amidst his guards and concubines,
Who died so none would ever see
The final resting place where he
Lies waiting.

And in our own imagining
The fabled, once and future king
Upon an island in a lake,
He slumbers still but will awake
One day.

To tumbled towers and fallen stones,

Broken statues, empty tombs.
Ghosts of commoners and kings
Walk the walls and catacombs,
The castles and the shrines,
Marking lives and story lines,
Lie the ruins and the bones,
The ruins and the bones,
Ruins and bones.

Pictures: Sundown in the Dead Cities of the North, and the Decamanus of Apamea in Spring. Syria March 2009