

(LINES WRITTEN FOR MY  
GRANDDAUGHTER SOON TO BE 13)

### QUESTIONS

‘How many miles to Babylon?  
Four score and ten.  
Can I get there by candle light?  
Oh yes, and back again.’

Where was Babylon, mother? Is it far away? Is there a town  
there now? Where was Babylon?

Who was Deirdre, mother? Who was she?  
They called her lost Deirdre of the sorrows?  
Is she wandering somewhere in tomorrow?  
Does she wait for someone? Deirdre. Who was she?

The copper kettle’s humming at the hod. But I’ve not time for  
tea and crumpets. Not today.

Who was Delilah, mother? Is it true she came in the night  
and with her scissors clipped the drugged Samson’s hair, then  
slipped away, sniffing the air like a young bitch in heat?  
Who was Delilah? And Samson, who was he?

Was there a Jason and a golden fleece? A Medusa or Medea?  
A Niobe? And did a girl named Ruth once weep for a husband’s  
death, then follow his mother to winnow the alien corn?

Is there a rumbling at the Matterhorn? And do Scylla and  
Charybdis wait for the tall ships, sing and wait?

What sort of girl was Helen? Antigone? Saint Joan?  
Anne of Cleves, Hecate, Hecuba?  
Why did Odysseus leave Penelope sitting among thieves,  
leave her to weave and weave, unravel, weave, and how could she  
believe that he would return from the uncharted seas?

What kind of woman was Eurydice, Elaine of Astolot, or Boadicea?  
Saint Agnes? Desdemona? Xantippe? Cleopatra?  
Did Buddha or Mohammed have a mother? Did Mary follow Jesus  
to Jerusalem?

Portia and Goneril and Regan, Iseult and Heloise—are they  
just shells for actors? Did you know Florence Nightingale or  
Madame Curie? They were real. Who was Ariadne, Lilith, Jezebel?  
and where's Valhalla? Were women allowed in there?  
Was it scientific curiosity that prompted Pandora to open the  
forbidden box, made Eve bite the forbidden apple, or were they  
just irresponsible?

Was I alive when men walked on the moon?  
What's D.N.A.?  
When a star bursts does it make a sound? When was the first star  
born? How and where? And what's a quark? A particle?  
A neurone? Charm and Strangeness, what are they? And how  
can my skin contain them?

Who am I, mother?      Who am I?

Can you answer?      Mother?

The kettle's singing but I've no time to stop for  
tea and crumpets.  
I'll send postcards.

“How many miles to Babylon?  
Four score and ten.  
Can I get there by candle light?  
Oh yes, and back again?”

Gwen Ringwood