

Classic Poetry Series

Thomas Pringle

- poems -

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Afar in the Desert

Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:
When the sorrows of life the soul o'ercast,
And, sick of the Present, I cling to the Past;
When the eye is suffused with regretful tears,
From the fond recollections of former years;
And shadows of things that have long since fled
Flit over the brain, like the ghosts of the dead:
Bright visions of glory -- that vanish too soon;
Day-dreams -- that departed ere manhood's noon;
Attachments -- by fate or by falsehood reft;
Companions of early days -- lost or left;
And my Native Land -- whose magical name
Thrills to the heart like electric flame;
The home of my childhood; the haunts of my prime;
All the passions and scenes of that rapturous time
When the feelings were young and the world was new,
Like the fresh bowers of Eden unfolding to view;
All -- all now forsaken -- forgotten -- foregone!
And I -- a lone exile remembered of none --
My high aims abandoned, -- my good acts undone, --
-- Aweary of all that is under the sun, --
With that sadness of heart which no stranger may scan,
I fly to the Desert afar from man!

Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:
When the wild turmoil of this wearisome life,
With its scenes of oppression, corruption, and strife --
The proud man's frown, and the base man's fear, --
The scorner's laugh, and the sufferer's tear --
And malice, and meanness, and falsehood, and folly,
Dispose me to musing and dark melancholy;
When my bosom is full, and my thoughts are high,
And my soul is sick with the bondman's sigh --
Oh! then there is freedom, and joy, and pride,
Afar in the Desert alone to ride!
There is rapture to vault on the champing steed,
And to bound away with the eagle's speed,
With the death-fraught firelock in my hand --
The only law of the Desert Land!

Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:
Away -- away from the dwellings of men,
By the wild deer's haunt, by the buffalo's glen;
By valleys remote where the oribi plays,
Where the gnu, the gazelle, and the hartèbeest graze,
And the kudù and eland un hunted recline
By the skirts of grey forests o'erhung with wild-vine;
Where the elephant browses at peace in his wood,
And the river-horse gambols unscared in the flood,

And the mighty rhinoceros wallows at will
In the fen where the wild-ass is drinking his fill.

Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:
O'er the brown Karroo, where the bleating cry
Of the springbok's fawn sounds plaintively;
And the timorous quagga's shrill whistling neigh
Is heard by the fountain at twilight grey;
Where the zebra wantonly tosses his mane,
With wild hoof scouring the desolate plain;
And the fleet-footed ostrich over the waste
Speeds like a horseman who travels in haste,
Hying away to the home of her rest,
Where she and her mate have scooped their nest,
Far hid from the pitiless plunderer's view
In the pathless depths of the parched Karroo.

Afar in the Desert I love to ride,
With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:
Away -- away -- in the Wilderness vast,
Where the White Man's foot hath never passed,
And the quivered Coránna or Bechuán
Hath rarely crossed with his roving clan:
A region of emptiness, howling and drear,
Which Man hath abandoned from famine and fear;
Which the snake and the lizard inhabit alone,
With the twilight bat from the yawning stone;
Where grass, nor herb, nor shrub takes root,
Save poisonous thorns that pierce the foot;
And the bitter-melon, for food and drink,
Is the pilgrim's fare by the salt lake's brink:
A region of drought, where no river glides,
Nor rippling brook with osiered sides;
Where sedgy pool, nor bubbling fount,
Nor tree, nor cloud, nor misty mount,
Appears, to refresh the aching eye:
But the barren earth, and the burning sky,
And the black horizon, round and round,
Spread -- void of living sight or sound.

And here, while the night-winds round me sigh,
And the stars burn bright in the midnight sky,
As I sit apart by the desert stone,
Like Elijah at Horeb's cave alone,
'A still small voice' comes through the wild
(Like a Father consoling his fretful Child),
Which banishes bitterness, wrath, and fear, --
Saying -- MAN IS DISTANT, BUT GOD IS NEAR!

Thomas Pringle

Makanna's Gathering

Wake! Amakósa, wake!
And arm yourselves for war.
As coming winds the forest shake,
I hear a sound from far:
It is not thunder in the sky,
Nor lion's roar upon the hill,
But the voice of HIM who sits on high,
And bids me speak his will!

He bids me call you forth,
Bold sons of Káhabee,
To sweep the White Men from the earth,
And drive them to the sea:
The sea, which heaved them up at first,
For Amakósa's curse and bane,
Howls for the progeny she nurst,
To swallow them again.

Hark! 'tis UHLANGA'S voice
From Debè's mountain caves!
He calls you now to make your choice --
To conquer or be slaves:
To meet proud Amanglézi's guns,
And fight like warriors nobly born:
Or, like Umláo's feeble sons,
Become the freeman's scorn.

Then come, ye Chieftains bold,
With war-plumes waving high;
Come, every warrior young and old,
With club and assagai.
Remember how the spoiler's host
Did through our land like locusts range!
Your herds, your wives, your comrades lost --
Remember -- and revenge!

Fling your broad shields away --
Bootless against such foes;
But hand to hand we'll fight to-day,
And with their bayonets close.
Grasp each man short his stabbing spear --
And, when to battle's edge we come,
Rush on their ranks in full career,
And to their hearts strike home!

Wake! Amakósa, wake!
And muster for the war:
The wizard-wolves from Keisi's brake,
The vultures from afar,
Are gathering at UHLANGA'S call,
And follow fast our westward way --
For well they know, ere evening-fall,

They shall have glorious prey!

Thomas Pringle

Song of the Wild Bushman

Let the proud White Man boast his flocks,
And fields of foodful grain;
My home is 'mid the mountain rocks,
The Desert my domain.
I plant no herbs nor pleasant fruits,
I toil not for my cheer;
The Desert yields me juicy roots,
And herds of bounding deer.

The countless springboks are my flock,
Spread o'er the unbounded plain;
The buffalo bendeth to my yoke,
The wild-horse to my rein;
My yoke is the quivering assagai,
My rein the tough bow-string;
My bridle curb is a slender barb --
Yet it quells the forest-king.

The crested adder honoureth me,
And yields at my command
His poison-bag, like the honey-bee,
When I seize him on the sand.
Yea, even the wasting locusts' swarm,
Which mighty nations dread,
To me nor terror brings nor harm --
For I make of them my bread.

Thus I am lord of the Desert Land,
And I will not leave my bounds,
To crouch beneath the Christian's hand,
And kennel with his hounds:
To be a hound, and watch the flocks,
For the cruel White Man's gain --
No! the brown Serpent of the Rocks
His den doth yet retain;
And none who there his sting provokes,
Shall find its poison vain!

Thomas Pringle

The Bechuana Boy

I sat at noontide in my tent,
And looked across the Desert dun,
Beneath the cloudless firmament
Far gleaming in the sun,
When from the bosom of the waste
A swarthy Stripling came in haste,
With foot unshod and naked limb;
And a tame springbok followed him.

With open aspect, frank yet bland,
And with a modest mien he stood,
Caressing with a gentle hand
That beast of gentle brood;
Then, meekly gazing in my face,
Said in the language of his race,
With smiling look yet pensive tone,
"Stranger -- I'm in the world alone!"

"Poor boy!" I said, "thy native home
Lies far beyond the Stormberg blue:
Why hast thou left it, boy! to roam
This desolate Karroo?"
His face grew sadder while I spoke;
The smile forsook it; and he broke
Short silence with a sob-like sigh,
And told his hapless history.

"I have no home!" replied the boy:
"The Bergenaars -- by night they came,
And raised their wolfish howl of joy,
While o'er our huts the flame
Resistless rushed; and aye their yell
Pealed louder as our warriors fell
In helpless heaps beneath their shot:
-- One living man they left us not!

"The slaughter o'er, they gave the slain
To feast the foul-beaked birds of prey;
And, with our herds, across the plain
They hurried us away --
The widowed mothers and their brood.
Oft, in despair, for drink and food
We vainly cried: they heeded not,
But with sharp lash the captive smote.

"Three days we tracked that dreary wild,
Where thirst and anguish pressed us sore;
And many a mother and her child
Lay down to rise no more.
Behind us, on the desert brown,
We saw the vultures swooping down:
And heard, as the grim night was falling,

The wolf to his gorged comrade calling.

"At length we heard a river sounding
'Midst that dry and dismal land,
And, like a troop of wild deer bounding,
We hurried to its strand --
Among the maddened cattle rushing;
The crowd behind still forward pushing,
Till in the flood our limbs were drenched,
And the fierce rage of thirst was quenched.

"Hoarse-roaring, dark, the broad Gareep
In turbid streams was sweeping fast,
Huge sea-cows in its eddies deep
Loud snorting as we passed;
But that relentless robber clan
Right through those waters wild and wan
Drove on like sheep our wearied band:
-- Some never reached the farther strand.

"All shivering from the foaming flood,
We stood upon the stranger's ground,
When, with proud looks and gestures rude,
The White Men gathered round:
And there, like cattle from the fold,
By Christians we were bought and sold,
'Midst laughter loud and looks of scorn --
And roughly from each other torn.

"My Mother's scream, so long and shrill,
My little Sister's wailing cry,
(In dreams I often hear them still!)
Rose wildly to the sky.
A tiger's heart came to me then,
And fiercely on those ruthless men
I sprang. -- Alas! dashed on the sand,
Bleeding, they bound me foot and hand.

"Away -- away on prancing steeds
The stout man-stealers blithely go,
Through long low valleys fringed with reeds,
O'er mountains capped with snow,
Each with his captive, far and fast;
Until yon rock-bound ridge we passed,
And distant stripes of cultured soil
Bespoke the land of tears and toil.

"And tears and toil have been my lot
Since I the White Man's thrall became,
And sorer griefs I wish forgot --
Harsh blows, and scorn, and shame!
Oh, Englishman! thou ne'er canst know

The injured bondman's bitter woe,
When round his breast, like scorpions, cling
Black thoughts that madden while they sting!

"Yet this hard fate I might have borne,
And taught in time my soul to bend,
Had my sad yearning heart forlorn
But found a single friend:
My race extinct or far removed,
The Boor's rough brood I could have loved;
But each to whom my bosom turned
Even like a hound the black boy spurned.

"While, friendless thus, my master's flocks
I tended on the upland waste,
It chanced this fawn leapt from the rocks,
By wolfish wild-dogs chased:
I rescued it, though wounded sore
And dabbled in its mother's gore;
And nursed it in a cavern wild,
Until it loved me like a child.

"Gently I nursed it; for I thought
(Its hapless fate so like to mine)
By good Utíko it was brought
To bid me not repine, --
Since in this world of wrong and ill
One creature lived that loved me still,
Although its dark and dazzling eye
Beamed not with human sympathy.

"Thus lived I, a lone orphan lad,
My task the proud Boor's flocks to tend;
And this poor fawn was all I had
To love, or call my friend;
When suddenly, with haughty look
And taunting words, that tyrant took
My playmate for his pampered boy,
Who envied me my only joy.

"High swelled my heart! -- But when a star
Of midnight gleamed, I softly led
My bounding favourite forth, and far
Into the Desert fled.
And here, from human kind exiled,
Three moons on roots and berries wild
I've fared; and braved the beasts of prey,
To 'scape from spoilers worse than they.

"But yester morn a Bushman brought
The tidings that thy tents were near;
And now with hasty foot I've sought

Thy presence, void of fear;
Because they say, O English Chief,
Thou scornest not the Captive's grief:
Then let me serve thee, as thine own --
For I am in the world alone!"

Such was Marossi's touching tale.
Our breasts they were not made of stone:
His words, his winning looks prevail --
We took him for `our own.'
And One, with woman's gentle art,
Unlocked the fountains of his heart;
And love gushed forth -- till he became
Her Child in every thing but name.

Thomas Pringle

The Bushman

The Bushman sleeps within his black-browed den,
In the lone wilderness. Around him lie
His wife and little ones unfearingly --
For they are far away from 'Christian Men.'
No herds, loud lowing, call him down the glen:
He fears no foe but famine; and may try
To wear away the hot noon slumberingly;
Then rise to search for roots -- and dance again.
But he shall dance no more! His secret lair,
Surrounded, echoes to the thundering gun,
And the wild shriek of anguish and despair!
He dies -- yet, ere life's ebbing sands are run,
Leaves to his sons a curse, should they be friends
With the proud 'Christian-Men' -- for they are fiends!

Thomas Pringle

The Caffer

Lo! where he crouches by the cleugh's dark side,
Eyeing the farmer's lowing herds afar;
Impatient watching till the Evening Star
Lead forth the Twilight dim, that he may glide
Like panther to the prey. With freeborn pride
He scorns the herdsman, nor regards the scar
Of recent wound -- but burnishes for war
His assagai and targe of buffalo-hide.
He is a Robber? -- True; it is a strife
Between the black-skinned bandit and the white.
A Savage? -- Yes; though loth to aim at life,
Evil for evil fierce he doth requite.
A Heathen? -- Teach him, then, thy better creed,
Christian! if thou deserv'st that name indeed.

Thomas Pringle

The Caffer Commando

Hark! -- heard ye the signals of triumph afar?
'Tis our Caffer Commando returning from war:
The voice of their laughter comes loud on the wind,
Nor heed they the curses that follow behind.
For who cares for him, the poor Kosa, that wails
Where the smoke rises dim from yon desolate vales --
That wails for his little ones killed in the fray,
And his herds by the Colonist carried away?
Or who cares for him that once pastured this spot,
Where his tribe is extinct and their story forgot?
As many another, ere twenty years pass,
Will only be known by their bones in the grass!
And the sons of the Keisi, the Kei, the Gareep,
With the Gunja and Ghona in silence shall sleep:
For England hath spoken in her tyrannous mood,
And the edict is writing in African blood!

Dark Katta is howling: the eager jackall,
As the lengthening shadows more drearily fall,
Shrieks forth his hymn to the hornèd moon;
And the lord of the desert will follow him soon:
And the tiger-wolf laughs in his bone-strewed brake,
As he calls on his mate and her cubs to awake;
And the panther and leopard come leaping along;
All hymning to Hecate a festival song:
For the tumult is over, the slaughter hath ceased --
And the vulture hath bidden them all to the feast!

Thomas Pringle

The Coranna

Fast by his wild resounding River
The listless Coran lingers ever;
Still drives his heifers forth to feed,
Soothed by the gorrah's humming reed;
A rover still unchecked will range,
As humour calls, or seasons change;
His tent of mats and leathern gear
All packed upon the patient steer.
'Mid all his wanderings hating toil,
He never tills the stubborn soil;
But on the milky dam relies,
And what spontaneous earth supplies.
Or, should long-parching droughts prevail,
And milk, and bulbs, and locusts fail,
He lays him down to sleep away
In languid trance the weary day;
Oft as he feels gaunt hunger's stound,
Still tightening famine's girdle round;
Lulled by the sound of the Gareep,
Beneath the willows murmuring deep:
Till thunder-clouds, surcharged with rain,
Pour verdure o'er the panting plain;
And call the famished Dreamer from his trance,
To feast on milk and game, and wake the moon-light dance.

Thomas Pringle

The Hottentot

Mild, melancholy, and sedate, he stands,
Tending another's flock upon the fields,
His father's once, where now the White Man builds
His home, and issues forth his proud commands.
His dark eye flashes not; his listless hands
Lean on the shepherd's staff; no more he wields
The Libyan bow -- but to th' oppressor yields
Submissively his freedom and his lands.
Has he no courage? Once he had -- but, lo!
Harsh Servitude hath worn him to the bone.
No enterprise? Alas! the brand, the blow,
Have humbled him to dust -- even hope is gone!
"He's a base-hearted hound -- not worth his food" --
His Master cries -- "he has no gratitude!"

Thomas Pringle

The Kosa

The free-born Kosa still doth hold
The fields his fathers held of old;
With club and spear, in jocund ranks,
Still hunts the elk by Chumi's banks:
By Keisi's meads his herds are lowing;
On Debè's slopes his gardens glowing,
Where laughing maids at sunset roam,
To bear the juicy melons home:
And striplings from Kalumna's wood
Bring wild grapes and the pigeon's brood,
With fragrant hoard of honey-bee
Rifled from the hollow tree:
And herdsmen shout from rock to rock;
And through the glen the hamlets smoke;
And children gambol round the kraal,
To greet their sires at evening-fall:
And matrons sweep the cabin floor,
And spread the mat beside the door,
And with dry fagots wake the flame
To dress the wearied huntsmen's game.

Bright gleams the fire: its ruddy blaze
On many a dusky visage plays.
On forkèd twigs the game is drest;
The neighbours share the simple feast:
The honey-mead, the millet-ale,
Flow round -- and flow the jest and tale;
Wild legends of the ancient day,
Of hunting feat, of warlike fray;
And now come smiles, and now come sighs,
As mirth and grief alternate rise.
Or should a sterner strain awake,
Like sudden flame in summer-brake,
Bursts fiercely forth in battle song
The tale of Amakósa's wrong;
Throbs every warrior bosom high,
With lightning flashes every eye,
And, in wild cadence, rings the sound
Of barbèd javelins clashing round.

But lo, like a broad shield on high,
The moon gleams in the midnight sky.
'Tis time to part: the watch-dog's bay
Beside the folds has died away.
'Tis time to rest: the mat is spread,
The hardy hunter's simple bed:
His wife her dreaming infant hushes
On the low cabin's couch of rushes;
Softly he draws its door of hide,
And, stretched by his Gulúwi's side,
Sleeps soundly till the peep of dawn
Wakes on the hills the dappled fawn;

Then forth again he gaily bounds,
With club and spear and questing hounds.

Thomas Pringle

The Lion Hunt

Mount -- mount for the hunting -- with musket and spear!
Call our friends to the field -- for the Lion is near!
Call Arend and Ekhard and Groepe to the spoor;
Call Muller and Coetzer and Lucas Van Vuur.

Ride up Eildon-Cleugh, and blow loudly the bugle:
Call Slinger and Allie and Dikkop and Dugal;
And George with the elephant-gun on his shoulder --
In a perilous pinch none is better or bolder.

In the gorge of the glen lie the bones of my steed,
And the hoofs of a heifer of fatherland's breed:
But mount, my brave boys! if our rifles prove true,
We'll soon make the spoiler his ravages rue.

Ho! the Hottentot lads have discovered the track --
To his den in the desert we'll follow him back;
But tighten your girths, and look well to your flints,
For heavy and fresh are the villain's foot-prints.

Through the rough rocky kloof into grey Huntly-Glen,
Past the wild-olive clump where the wolf has his den,
By the black-eagle's rock at the foot of the fell,
We have tracked him at length to the buffalo's well.

Now mark yonder brake where the blood-hounds are howling;
And hark that hoarse sound -- like the deep thunder growling;
'Tis his lair -- 'tis his voice! -- from your saddles alight;
He's at bay in the brushwood preparing for fight.

Leave the horses behind -- and be still every man:
Let the Mullers and Rennies advance in the van:
Keep fast in your ranks; -- by the yell of yon hound,
The savage, I guess, will be out -- with a bound.

He comes! the tall jungle before him loud crashing,
His mane bristled fiercely, his fiery eyes flashing;
With a roar of disdain, he leaps forth in his wrath,
To challenge the foe that dare 'leaguer his path.

He couches -- ay now we'll see mischief, I dread:
Quick -- level your rifles -- and aim at his head:
Thrust forward the spears, and unsheath every knife --
St. George! he's upon us! -- Now, fire, lads, for life!

He's wounded -- but yet he'll draw blood ere he falls --
Ha! under his paw see Bezuidenhout sprawls --
Now Diederik! Christian! right in the brain
Plant each man his bullet -- Hurra! he is slain!

Bezuidenhout -- up man! -- 'tis only a scratch --
(You were always a scamp, and have met with your match!)

What a glorious lion! -- what sinews -- what claws --
And seven-feet-ten from the rump to the jaws!

His hide, with the paws and the bones of his skull,
With the spoils of the leopard and buffalo bull,
We'll send to Sir Walter. -- Now, boys, let us dine,
And talk of our deeds o'er a flask of old wine.

Thomas Pringle

The Slave Dealer

From ocean's wave a Wanderer came,
With visage tanned and dun:
His Mother, when he told his name,
Scarce knew her long-lost son;
So altered was his face and frame
By the ill course he had run.

There was hot fever in his blood,
And dark thoughts in his brain;
And oh! to turn his heart to good
That Mother strove in vain,
For fierce and fearful was his mood,
Racked by remorse and pain.

And if, at times, a gleam more mild
Would o'er his features stray,
When knelt the Widow near her Child,
And he tried with her to pray,
It lasted not for visions wild
Still scared good thoughts away.

"There's blood upon my hands!" he said,
"Which water cannot wash;
It was not shed where warriors bled
It dropped from the gory lash,
As I whirled it o'er and o'er my head,
And with each stroke left a gash.

"With every stroke I left a gash,
While Negro blood sprang high;
And now all ocean cannot wash
My soul from murder's dye;
Nor e'en thy prayer, dear Mother, quash
That Woman's wild death-cry!

"Her cry is ever in my ear,
And it will not let me pray;
Her look I see her voice I hear
As when in death she lay,
And said, 'With me thou must appear
On God's great Judgment-day!'"

"Now, Christ from frenzy keep my son!"
The woeful Widow cried;
"Such murder foul thou ne'er hast done
Some fiend thy soul belied!"
"Nay, Mother! the Avenging One
Was witness when she died!

"The writhing wretch with furious heel
I crushed no mortal nigh;
But that same hour her dread appeal

Was registered on high;
And now with God I have to deal,
And dare not meet His eye!"

Thomas Pringle

To Sir Walter Scott

From deserts wild and many a pathless wood
Of savage climes where I have wandered long,
Whose hills and streams are yet ungraced by song,
I bring, illustrious friend, this garland rude:
The offering, though uncouth, in kindly mood
Thou wilt regard, if haply there should be,
'Mong meaner things, the flower simplicity,
Fresh from coy Nature's virgin solitude.
Accept this frail memorial, honoured Scott,
Of favoured intercourse in former day --
Of words of kindness I have ne'er forgot --
Of acts of friendship I can ne'er repay:
For I have found (and wherefore say it not?)
The Minstrel's heart as noble as his lay.

Thomas Pringle