

Classic Poetry Series

Victoria Sackville-West

- poems -

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And so it ends

And so it ends,
We who were lovers may be friends.
I have some weeks in which to steel
My heart and teach myself to feel
Only a sober tenderness
Where once was passion's loveliness.

I had not thought that there would come
Your touch to make our music dumb,
Your meeting touch upon the string
That still was vibrant, still could sing
When I impatiently might wait
Or parted from you at the gate.

You took me weak and unprepared.
I had not thought that you who shared
My days, my nights, my heart, my life,
Would slash me with a naked knife
And gently tell me not to bleed
But to accept your crazy creed.

You speak of God, but you have cut
The one last thread, as you have shut
The one last door that open stood
To show me still the way to God.
If this be God, this pain, this evil,
I'd sooner change and try the Devil.

Darling, I thought of nothing mean;
I thought of killing straight and clean.
You're safe; that's gone, that wild caprice,
But tell me once before I cease,
Which does your Church esteem the kinder role,
To kill the body or destroy the soul?

Victoria Sackville-West

Beechwoods at Knole

How do I love you, beech-trees, in the autumn,
Your stone-grey columns a cathedral nave
Processional above the earth's brown glory!

I was a child, and I loved the knurly tangle
Of roots that coiled above a scarp like serpents,
Where I might hide my treasure with the squirrels.

I was a child, and splashed my way in laughter
Through drifts of leaves, where underfoot the beech-nuts
Split with crisp crackle to my great rejoicing.

Red are the beechen slopes below Shock Tavern,
Red is the bracken on the sandy Furze-field,
Red are the stags and hinds by Bo-Pit Meadows,

The rutting stags that nightly through the beechwoods
Bell out their challenge, carrying their antlers
Proudly beneath the antlered autumn branches.

I was a child, and heard the red deer's challenge
Prowling and belling underneath my window,
Never a cry so haughty or so mournful.

Victoria Sackville-West

Days I enjoy

Days I enjoy are days when nothing happens,
When I have no engagements written on my block,
When no one comes to disturb my inward peace,
When no one comes to take me away from myself
And turn me into a patchwork, a jig-saw puzzle,
A broken mirror that once gave a whole reflection,
Being so contrived that it takes too long a time
To get myself back to myself when they have gone.
The years are too strickly measured, and life too short
For me to afford such bits of myself to my friends.
And what have I to give my friends in the last resort?
An awkwardness, a shyness, and a scrap,
No thing that's truly me, a bootless waste,
A waste of myself and them, for my life is mine
And theirs presumably theirs, and cannot touch.

Victoria Sackville-West

Leopards at Knole

Leopards on the gable-ends,
Leopards on the painted stair,
Stiff the blazoned shield they bear,
Or and gules, a bend of vair,
Leopards on the gable-ends,
Leopards everywhere.

Guard and vigil in the night
While the ancient house is sleeping
They three hundred years are keeping,
Nightly from their stations leaping,
Shadows black in moonlight bright,
Roof to gable creeping.

Rigid when the day returns,
Up aloft in sun or rain
Leopards at their posts again
Watch the shifting pageant's train;
And their jewelled colour burns
In the window-pane.

Often on the painted stair,
As I passed abstractedly,
Velvet footsteps, two and three,
Padded gravely after me.
- There was nothing, nothing there,
Nothing there to see.

Victoria Sackville-West

Moonlight

What time the meanest brick and stone
Take on a beauty not their own,
And past the flaw of builded wood
Shines the intention whole and good,
And all the little homes of man
Rise to a dimmer, nobler span;
When colour's absence gives escape
To the deeper spirit of the shape,

-- Then earth's great architecture swells
Among her mountains and her fells
Under the moon to amplitude
Massive and primitive and rude:

-- Then do the clouds like silver flags
Stream out above the tattered crags,
And black and silver all the coast
Marshalls its hunched and rocky host,
And headlands striding sombrely
Buttress the land against the sea,
-- The darkened land, the brightening wave --
And moonlight slants through Merlin's cave.

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The Greater Cats

The greater cats with golden eyes
Stare out between the bars.
Deserts are there, and the different skies,
And night with different stars.
They prowl the aromatic hill,
And mate as fiercely as they kill,
To roam, to live, to drink their fill;
But this beyond their wit know I:
 Man loves a little, and for long shall die.

Their kind across the desert range
Where tulips spring from stones,
Not knowing they will suffer change
Or vultures pick their bones.
Their strength's eternal in their sight,
They overtake the deer in flight,
And in their arrogance they smite;
But I am sage, if they are strong:
 Man's love is transient as his death is long.

Yet oh what powers to deceive!
My wit is turned to faith,
And at this moment I believe
In love, and scout at death.
I came from nowhere, and shall be
Strong, steadfast, swift, eternally:
I am a lion, a stone, a tree,
And as the Polar star in me
Is fixed my constant heart on thee.
Ah, may I stay forever blind
 With lions, tigers, leopards, and their kind.

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