

Classic Poetry Series

Victoria Sackville-West
- poems -

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Victoria Sackville-West(1892 - 1962)

English poet and novelist, born into an old aristocratic family, proprietors of Knole House in Kent. Vita Sackville-West wrote about the Kentish countryside and she was the chief model for Orlando in Virginia Woolf's novel of that same title from 1928. Sackville-West's best known poem, THE LAND, was awarded the Hawthorne Prize in 1927.

The country habit has me by the heart,

For he's bewitched for ever who has seen,

Not with his eyes but with his vision,

Spring

Flow down the woods and stipple leaves

with sun.

('Winter' from The Land)

Victoria Mary Sackville-West was the only child of Lionel Edward, third Baron of Sackville, and Victoria Josepha Dolores Catalina Sackville-West, his first cousin and the illegitimate daughter of the diplomat Sir Lionel Sackville-West. She was educated privately. As a child she started to write poetry, writing her first ballads at the age of 11. "I don't remember either my father or my mother very vividly at that time, except that Dada used to take me for terribly long walks and talk to me about science, principally Darwin, and I liked him a great deal better than mother, of whose quick temper I was frightened." (from *Portrait of a Marriage* by Nigel Nicolson, 1973) Vita's mother considered her ugly - she was bony, she had long legs, straight hair, and she wanted to be as boyish as possible.

Between 1906 and 1910 Sackville-West produced eight novels and five plays. CHATTERTON, A DRAMA IN THREE ACTS, was privately printed and appeared in 1909. In 1913 she married the diplomat and critic Harold Nicolson, with whom she lived a long time in Persia and then at the Sissinghurst Castle in Kent.

Sackville-West's father died in 1928 and his brother became the fourth Baron Sackville, inheriting Knole. Her husband decided in 1929 to resign from the foreign service and devote himself to writing. They purchased Sissinghurst

Castle, a near-derelict house, and started to restore it. In the 1930s Sackville-West published *The Edwardians* (1930), *All Passion Spent* (1931), and *Family History* (1932) which were bestsellers and portrayed English upper-class manners and life. *Pepita* (1937) depicted the story of her grandmother, who was a Spanish dancer. Her passionate gardening was rewarded in 1955 by the Royal Horticultural Society. Sackville-West also wrote several books about gardening and kept a regular column at the *Observer* from 1946.

In 1946 Sackville-West was made a Companion of Honour for her services to literature. She died of cancer on June 2, 1962. Harold Nicolson died six years later. Sackville-West believed in equal rights for women. She is best remembered for her novels but her most enduring work was perhaps the garden at Sissinghurst Castle, evidently the joint creation of Harold and Vita, and as Nigel Nicolson suggested the true Portrait of their marriage. Nicolson published in 1973 a book, *Portrait of a Marriage*, which was based on her parents' journals and notes, and described their private life and marriage. The book was made into a television mini-series in 1990, starring Cathryn Harrison, Janet McTeer and David Haigh.

A Saxon Song

Tools with the comely names,
Mattock and scythe and spade,
Couth and bitter as flames,
Clean, and bowed in the blade,--
A man and his tools make a man and his trade.

Breadth of the English shires,
Hummock and kame and mead,
Tang of the reeking byres,
Land of the English breed,--
A man and his land make a man and his creed.

Leisurely flocks and herds,
Cool-eyed cattle that come
Mildly to wonted words,
Swine that in orchards roam,--
A man and his beasts make a man and his home.

Children sturdy and flaxen
Shouting in brotherly strife,
Like the land they are Saxon,
Sons of a man and his wife,--
For a man and his loves make a man and his life.

Victoria Sackville-West

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

Bee-Master

I have known honey from the Syrian hills
Stored in cool jars; the wild acacia there
On the rough terrace where the locust shrills
Tosses her spindrift on the ringing air.
Narcissus bares his nectarous perianth
In white and golden tabard to the sun,
And while the workers rob the amaranth
Or scarlet windflower low among the stone,
Intent upon their crops,
The Syrian queens mate in the high hot day
Rapt visionaries of creative fray;
Soaring from fecund ecstasy alone,
And, through the blazing ether, drops
Like a small thunderbolt the vindicated drone.

But this is the bee-master's reckoning
In England. Walk among the hives and hear.

Forget not bees in winter, though they sleep.
For winter's big with summer in her womb,
And when you plant your rose-trees, plant them deep,
Having regard to bushes all aflame,
And see the dusky promise of their bloom
In small red shoots, and let each redolent name-
Tuscany, Crested Cabbage, Cottage Maid-
Load with full June November's dank repose,
See the kind cattle drowsing in the shade,
And hear the bee about his amorous trade
Brown in the gipsy crimson of the rose.

In February, if the days be clear,
The waking bee, still drowsy on the wing,
Will sense the opening of another year
And blunder out to seek another spring.
Crashing through winter sunlight's pallid gold
His clumsiness sets catkins on the willow
Ashake like lambs' tails in the early fold,
Dusting with pollen all his brown and yellow,
But when the rimy afternoon turns cold

And undern squalls buffet the chilly fellow,
He'll seek the hive's warm waxen welcoming
And set about the chambers' classic mould.

And then, pell-mell, his harvest follows swift,
Blossom and borage, lime and balm and clover,
On Downs the thyme, on cliffs the scantling thrift,
Everywhere bees go racing with the hours,
For every bee becomes a drunken lover,
Standing upon his head to sup the flowers,
All over England, from Northumbrian coasts,
To the wild sea-pink blown on Devon rocks.
Over the merry southern gardens, over
The grey-green bean-fields, round the Sussex oasts,
Through the frilled spires of cottage hollyhocks,
Go the big brown fat bees, and blunder in
Where dusty spears of sunlight cleave the barn,
And seek the sun again, and storm the whin,
And in the warm meridian solitude
Hum in the heather round the moorland tarn,
Look, too, when summer hatches out the brood,
In tardy May or early June,
And the young queens are strong in the cocoon,
Watch, if the days be warm,
The flitting of the swarm.
Follow, for if beyond your sight they stray
Your bees are lost, and you must take your way
Homeward disconsolate, but if you be at hand
Then you may take your bees on strangers' land.
Have your skep ready, drowse them with, your smoke,
Whether they cluster on the handy bough
Or in the difficult hedge, be nimble now,
For bees are captious folk
And quick to turn against the lubber's touch,
But if you shake them to their wicker hutch
Firmly, and turn towards the hive your skep,
Into the hive the clustered thousands stream,
Mounting the little slatted sloping step,
A ready colony, queen, workers, drones,
Patient to build again the waxen thrones
For younger queens, and all the chambered cells
For lesser brood, and all the immemorial scheme.

And still they labour, though the hand of man

Inscrutable and ravaging descend,
Pillaging in their citadels,
Defeating wantonly their provident plan,
Making a havoc of their patient hoard;
Still start afresh, not knowing to what end,
Not knowing to what ultimate reward,
Or what new ruin of the garnered hive
The senseless god in man will send.
Still their blind stupid industry will strive,
Constructing for destruction pitiably,
That still their unintelligible lord
May reap his wealth from their calamity.

Victoria Sackville-West

Bitterness

Yes, they were kind exceedingly; most mild
Even in indignation, taking by the hand
One that obeyed them mutely, as a child
Submissive to a law he does not understand.

They would not blame the sins his passion wrought.
No, they were tolerant and Christian, saying, 'We
Only deplore ...' saying they only sought
To help him, strengthen him, to show him love; but he

Following them with unrecalcitrant tread,
Quiet, towards their town of kind captivities,
Having slain rebellion, ever turned his head
Over his shoulder, seeking still with his poor eyes

Her motionless figure on the road. The song
Rang still between them, vibrant bell to answering bell,
Full of young glory as a bugle; strong;
Still brave; now breaking like a sea-bird's cry 'Farewell!'

And they, they whispered kindly to him 'Come!
Now we have rescued you. Let your heart heal. Forget!
She was your lawless dark familiar.' Dumb,
He listened, and they thought him acquiescent. Yet,

(Knowing the while that they were very kind)
Remembrance clamoured in him: 'She was wild and free,
Magnificent in giving; she was blind
To gain or loss, and, loving, loved but me,--but me!

'Valiant she was, and comradely, and bold;
High-mettled; all her thoughts a challenge, like gay ships
Adventurous, with treasure in the hold.
I met her with the lesson put into my lips,

'Spoke reason to her, and she bowed her head,
Having no argument, and giving up the strife.
She said I should be free. I think she said
That, for the asking, she would give me all her life.'

And still they led him onwards, and he still
Looked back towards her standing there; and they, content,
Cheered him and praised him that he did their will.
The gradual distance hid them, and she turned, and went.

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

Evening

When little lights in little ports come out,
Quivering down through water with the stars,
And all the fishing fleet of slender spars
Range at their moorings, veer with tide about;

When race of wind is stilled and sails are furled,
And underneath our single riding-light
The curve of black-ribbed deck gleams palely white,
And slumbrous waters pool a slumbrous world;

--Then, and then only, have I thought how sweet
Old age might sink upon a windy youth,
Quiet beneath the riding-light of truth,
Weathered through storms, and gracious in retreat.

Victoria Sackville-West

Full Moon

She was wearing the coral taffeta trousers
Someone had brought her from Ispahan,
And the little gold coat with pomegranate blossoms,
And the coral-hafted feather fan;
But she ran down a Kentish lane in the moonlight,
And skipped in the pool of the moon as she ran.

She cared not a rap for all the big planets,
For Betelgeuse or Aldebaran,
And all the big planets cared nothing for her,
That small impertinent charlatan;
But she climbed on a Kentish stile in the moonlight,
And laughed at the sky through the sticks of her fan.

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

Making Cider

I saw within the wheelwright's shed
The big round cartwheels, blue and red;
A plough with blunted share;
A blue tin jug; a broken chair;
And paint in trial patchwork square
Slapping up against the wall;
The lumber of the wheelwright's trade,
And tools on benches neatly laid,
The brace, the adze, the awl;

And framed within the latticed-panes,
Above the cluttered sill,
Saw rooks upon the stubble hill
Seeking forgotten grains;

And all the air was sweet and shrill
With juice of apples heaped in skips,
Fermenting, rotten, soft and bruise,
And all the yard was strewn with pips,
Discarded pulp, and wrung-out ooze
That ducks with rummaging flat bill
Searched through beside the cider-press
To gobble in their greediness.

The young men strained upon the crank
To wring the last reluctant inch.
They laughed together, fair and frank,
And threw their loins across the winch.

A holiday from field and dung,
From plough and harrow, scythe and spade,
To dabble in another trade,
The crush the pippins in the slats,
And see that in the little vats
An extra pint was wring;
While round about the worthies stood
Profuse in comment, praise or blame,
Content the press should be of wood,
Advising rum, decrying wheat,

And black strong sugar makes it sweet,
But still resolved, with maundering tongue,
That cider could not be the same
As once when they were young;
But still the young contemptuous men
Laughed kindly at their old conceit,
And strained upon the crank again.

Now barrels ranged in portly line
Mature through winter's sleep,
Aping the leisured sloths of wine
That dreams of Tiber or the Rhine,
Mellowing slow and deep;
But keen and cold the northern nights
Sharpen the quiet yard.
And sharp like no rich southern wine
The tang of cider bites;
For here the splintered stars and hard
Hold England in a frosty guard.
Orion and Pleiades
Above the wheelwright's shed.
And Sirius resting on the trees
While all the village snores abed.

Victoria Sackville-West

Mariana In The North

All her youth is gone, her beautiful youth outworn,
Daughter of tarn and tor, the moors that were once her home
No longer know her step on the upland tracks forlorn
Where she was wont to roam.

All her hounds are dead, her beautiful hounds are dead,
That paced beside the hoofs of her high and nimble horse,
Or streaked in lean pursuit of the tawny hare that fled
Out of the yellow gorse.

All her lovers have passed, her beautiful lovers have passed,
The young and eager men that fought for her arrogant hand,
And the only voice which endures to mourn for her at the last
Is the voice of the lonely land.

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.

Victoria Sackville-West

Sailing Ships

Lying on Downs above the wrinkling bay
I with the kestrels shared the cleanly day,
The candid day; wind-shaven, brindled turf;
Tall cliffs; and long sea-line of marbled surf
From Cornish Lizard to the Kentish Nore
Lipping the bulwarks of the English shore,
While many a lovely ship below sailed by
On unknown errand, kempt and leisurely;
And after each, oh, after each, my heart
Fled forth, as, watching from the Downs apart,
I shared with ships good joys and fortunes wide
That might befall their beauty and their pride;

Shared first with them the blessed void repose
Of oily days at sea, when only rose
The porpoise's slow wheel to break the sheen
Of satin water indolently green,
When for'ard the crew, caps tilted over eyes,
Lay heaped on deck; slept; mumbled; smoked; threw dice;
The sleepy summer days; the summer nights
(The coast pricked out with rings of harbour-lights),
The motionless nights, the vaulted nights of June
When high in the cordage drifts the entangled moon,
And blocks go knocking, and the sheets go slapping,
And lazy swells against the sides come lapping;
And summer mornings off red Devon rocks,
Faint inland bells at dawn and crowing cocks;

Shared swifter days, when headlands into ken
Trod grandly; threatened; and were lost again,
Old fangs along the battlemented coast;
And followed still my ship, when winds were most
Night-purified, and, lying steeply over,
She fled the wind as flees a girl her lover,
Quickened by that pursuit for which she fretted,
Her temper by the contest proved and whetted.
Wild stars swept overhead; her lofty spars
Reared to a ragged heaven sown with stars
As leaping out from narrow English ease

She faced the roll of long Atlantic seas.

Her captain then was I, I was her crew,
The mind that laid her course, the wake she drew,
The waves that rose against her bows, the gales,--
Nay, I was more: I was her very sails
Rounded before the wind, her eager keel,
Her straining mast-heads, her responsive wheel,
Her pennon stiffened like a swallow's wing;
Yes, I was all her slope and speed and swing,
Whether by yellow lemons and blue sea
She dawdled through the isles off Thessaly,
Or saw the palms like sheaves of scimitars
On desert's verge below the sunset bars,
Or passed the girdle of the planet where
The Southern Cross looks over to the Bear,
And strayed, cool Northerner beneath strange skies,
Flouting the lure of tropic estuaries,
Down that long coast, and saw Magellan's Clouds arise.

And some that beat up Channel homeward-bound
I watched, and wondered what they might have found,
What alien ports enriched their teeming hold
With crates of fruit or bars of unwrought gold?
And thought how London clerks with paper-clips
Had filed the bills of lading of those ships,
Clerks that had never seen the embattled sea,
But wrote down jettison and barratry,
Perils, Adventures, and the Act of God,
Having no vision of such wrath flung broad;
Wrote down with weary and accustomed pen
The classic dangers of sea-faring men;
And wrote 'Restraint of Princes,' and 'the Acts
Of the King's Enemies,' as vacant facts,
Blind to the ambushed seas, the encircling roar
Of angry nations foaming into war.

Victoria Sackville-West

Song

If I had only loved your flesh
And careless damned your soul to Hell,
I might have laughed and loved afresh,
And loved as lightly and as well,
And little more to tell.

But since to clasp your soul I strove,
(That mountebank, that fugitive)
Anrl poured the river of my love
Through meshes that, like Danae's sieve,
Drained all I had to give,

Now nightly by the tamarisks
I pace, and watch the risen moon
Litter the sea with silver disks;
And pray of night one only boon:
Let my release be soon.

Victoria Sackville-West

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.

Victoria Sackville-West

Trio

So well she knew them both! yet as she came
Into the room, and heard their speech
Of tragic meshes knotted with her name,
And saw them, foes, but meeting each with each
Closer than friends, souls bared through enmity,
Beneath their startled gaze she thought that she
Broke as the stranger on their conference,
And stole abashed from thence.

Victoria Sackville-West

Tuscany

Cisterns and stones; the fig-tree in the wall
Casts down her shadow, ashen as her boughs,
Across the road, across the thick white dust.
Down from the hill the slow white oxen crawl,
Dragging the purple waggon heaped with must,
With scarlet tassels on their milky brows,
Gentle as evening moths. Beneath the yoke
Lounging against the shaft they fitful strain
To draw the waggon on its creaking spoke,
And all the vineyard folk
With staves and shouldered tools surround the wain.
The wooden shovels take the purple stain,
The dusk is heavy with the wine's warm load;
Here the long sense of classic measure cures
The spirit weary of its difficult pain;
Here the old Bacchic piety endures,
Here the sweet legends of the world remain.
Homeric waggons lumbering the road;
Virgilian litanies among the bine;
Pastoral sloth of flocks beneath the pine;
The swineherd watching, propped upon his goad,
Under the chestnut trees the rootling swine
Who could so stand, and see this evening fall,
This calm of husbandry, this redolent tilth,
This terracing of hills, this vintage wealth,
Without the pagan sanity of blood
Mounting his veins in young and tempered health?
Who could so stand, and watch processional
The vintners, herds, and flocks in dusty train
Wend through the golden evening to regain
The terraced farm and trodden threshing-floor
Where late the flail
Tossed high the maize in scud of gritty ore,
And lies half-buried in the heap of grain
Who could so watch, and not forget the rack
Of wills worn thin and thought become too frail,
Nor roll the centuries back *
And feel the sinews of his soul grow hale,
And know himself for Rome's inheritor?

Victoria Sackville-West