

*The Nature of the Moment; Country Conditions; Journey from Winter; 28 Poems; Later Poems; Selected Poems; For Sylvia: an Honest Account; Country Dealings; After Good Friday; Morning Visit; On a Summer's Day; A Multitude of the Heavenly Host; Interviewing Miss Levison; When I was in Basle; A Ghost was Born; Granny Moxon; The Village Witch; Dotty Detty; The First and the Last; Winter of Content; Urn Burial; I'll Stand by You, Whether a Dove or Seagull; Cat Characteristics; Solomon Caesar Malan; The Nature of the Moment; Country Conditions; Journey from Winter: Selected Poems; For Sylvia: an Honest Account; Country Dealings; After Good Friday; Morning Visit; On a Summer's Day; A Multitude of the Heavenly Host; Interviewing Miss Levison; When I was in Basle; Waitress! Waitress! A Ghost was Born; Granny Moxon; The Village Witch; Dotty Detty; The First and the Last; Winter of Content; Urn Burial; I'll Stand by You, Whether a Dove or Seagull; Cat Characteristics; Solomon Caesar Malan; The Nature of the Moment; Country Conditions; Journey from Winter: Selected Poems; For Sylvia: an Honest Account; Country Dealings; After Good Friday; Morning Visit; On a Summer's Day; A Multitude of the Heavenly Host; Interviewing Miss Levison; When I was in Basle; Waitress! Waitress! A Ghost was Born; Granny Moxon; The Village Witch; Dotty Detty; The First and the Last; Winter of Content; Urn Burial; I'll Stand by You, Whether a Dove or Seagull; Cat Characteristics; Solomon Caesar Malan; The Nature of the Moment; Country Conditions; Journey from Winter: The Nature of the Moment; Country Conditions; Journey from Winter: Selected Poems; For Sylvia: an Honest Account; Country Dealings; After Good Friday; Morning Visit; On a Summer's Day; A Multitude of the Heavenly Host;*

***The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society  
Newsletter Number Thirty-Nine  
for Valentine Ackland***

*Interviewing Miss Levison; When I was in Basle; Waitress! Waitress! A Ghost was Born; Granny Moxon; The Village Witch; Dotty Detty; The First and the Last; Winter of Content; Urn Burial; I'll Stand by You, Whether a Dove or Seagull; Cat Characteristics; Solomon Caesar Malan; The Nature of the Moment; Country Conditions; Journey from Winter: Selected Poems; For Sylvia: an Honest Account; Country Dealings; After Good Friday; Morning Visit; On a Summer's Day; A Multitude of the Heavenly Host; Interviewing Miss Levison; When I was in Basle; Waitress! Waitress! The Nature of the Moment; Country Conditions; Journey from Winter: Selected Poems; The Nature of the Moment; Country Conditions; Journey from Winter: Selected Poems; For Sylvia: an Honest Account; Country Dealings; After Good Friday; Morning Visit; On a Summer's Day; A Multitude of the Heavenly Host; Interviewing Miss Levison; When I was in Basle; Waitress! Waitress! A Ghost was Born; Granny Moxon; The Village Witch; Dotty Detty; The First and the Last; Winter of Content; Urn Burial; I'll Stand by You, Whether a Dove or Seagull; Cat Characteristics; Solomon Caesar Malan; For Sylvia: an Honest Account; Country Dealings; After Good Friday; Morning Visit; On a Summer's Day; A Multitude of the Heavenly Host; Interviewing Miss Levison; When I was in Basle; Waitress! Waitress! A Ghost was Born; Granny Moxon; The Village Witch; Dotty Detty; The First and the Last; Winter of Content; Urn Burial; I'll Stand by You, The Nature of the Moment, Country Conditions, Journey from Winter: Selected Poems, Urn Burial; A*

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Suggestions, corrections and contributions  
to the newsletter are always welcome. - JB

**NEWSLETTER NUMBER THIRTY-NINE**

to Commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Death of

***Valentine Ackland***

20 May 1906 – 9 November 1969

\* \* \* \* \*

Our thanks go to Richard Betts for contributing to this issue.

\* \* \* \* \*

***The Society's Next Adventure***

Member Richard Betts is organising a Reading of Valentine's works at her Grave-side at St Nicholas Church, Chaldon Herring on Saturday, 9 November. But first we will meet for lunch at The Sailor's Return, at 12:30. If you plan to come (please do!), and to Celebrate this Poet and Remarkable Woman, please contact him at richardbetts50@outlook.com

\* \* \* \* \*

**1969**

““It has been worth it?”

She spoke hastily, with a passionate unguarded anxiety. They looked at each other, startled, as though truth had been a lightning in the air.

“Yes, Minna. It has been worth it..... So you too think that it is nearly over, that we have reached the time when we can reckon up and say, *It has been worth it?*”

“Sophia, I know no more than anyone else. I only know this feeling of something in the air or underfoot, a new day or a disaster.””

As *Summer Will Show* careers to its dramatic ending, Minna Lemuel and Sophia Willoughby are confronted by the towering existential question which Albert Camus considered the only philosophical question worth asking : *has it been worth it?* They are confronted in a context not of assimilable facts or neat step-by-step logic, but of truth-as-lightning, of something in the air.

In the same year that Valentine Ackland died, Thunderclap Newman had a hit with a song I remember with particular poignancy. Aged 13 or 14, I was on a school trip to Cambridge. It was a glorious summer's day, there were lots of university students in boats on the water and God was in her or his heaven. Sitting there by the river Cam, someone spontaneously sang the first lines of the song. This came from another world and then it withdrew; but it remained, and it has done so ever since.

*Call out the instigator  
Because there's something in the air.  
We've got to get together sooner or later  
Because the revolution's here.*

It is Valentine Ackland's ability to sense that something in the air which is at the heart of her capacity to see into and through and beyond, and to express what she senses and feels in words. Spaces open up around and between those words. Motifs and themes overlap, wrestle with each other and give birth from the heart of paradox : wistfulness, noticing, salvation, exile but also exile-as-home, time, eternity, silence, summer, winter, new birth, the sea, the space between, the dead and the living, death as consummation, memory (but more than that sometimes – *anamnesis*, perhaps), and I think most powerfully of all – presence-as-absence and absence-as-presence. Ackland inhabits paradox and treads the threshold between worlds. She is a stranger in a foreign land.

*I'm a stranger here,  
A stranger everywhere.  
I'm a stranger here,  
A stranger everywhere.  
I would go home but honey  
I'm a stranger there.*

*Ain't it hard to stumble  
When you've got no place to fall?  
Ain't it hard to stumble  
When you've got no place to fall?  
In this whole wide world  
I got no place at all.*

Richie Havens is easily forgotten in the shadow of other luminaries who performed at Woodstock in 1969. Which is a shame. Those words (or very similar – there are several slightly different versions on the internet) were among many poignant lyrics he performed at the legendary music festival. Thirty or more years before this Valentine had ached:

*When I have said "I love you" I have said  
Nothing at all to tell you – I cannot find  
Any speech in any country of the mind  
Which might inform you whither I have fled.*

*In saying "I love you" I have gone so far  
Away from you, into a strange land –  
You may not find me, may not understand  
How I am exiled.....*

Her words of exile were words that she longed would be heard on their own terms; in other words, not sanitized and domesticated by the reader.

*You who read words when you want them,  
Who turn on the tap of a book, who pour a poem  
Half-emptied down drain – It is urgent you understand  
How bounteous the words looked, how coolly the mirage  
Flowed over sand.*

I have often reflected on that in reading her poems. Those words disturb any casual or glib reading. They are not just words. *They are a person's life laid bare.* A life lived amidst the subtleties and intricacies of Time – before, during and after.

*From the far past, from the far future, to this moment flows  
Time, that bears the tiger and the frail, eternal rose;  
Like a small star set in the vast firmament which holds  
A million simultaneous fires shining between ice colds.  
To Now, which is all we have, eternities deliver  
Each one of us this present from the anonymous giver.*

Valentine Ackland wrote so many quotable poems that any brief item such as this just skirts the surface. One more anyway, an arresting, startling, unforgettable and, I believe, prophetic image from a poem written in June 1969, months before she died.



\* \* \*

January 20, 1941

Dear Miss Ackland,

Many thanks for your letter of November 24<sup>th</sup>, which reached us about a month later. We all liked your modern contribution to the Greek Anthology and propose to use it shortly. We have felt it necessary to make a few small changes which I hope you'll find reasonable. In the first place, in order to make the poem clear to our readers, we have taken the liberty of inserting the following sub-heading: (on Rereading the Greek Anthology – London, 1941). Next, we thought that the Lonely Persephone stanza was too difficult and would interfere with the enjoyment of the poem as a whole, so we've dropped that one from the group. Finally, we have made a small change in the first stanza, changing "The" to "My" in the fourth line, so that it now reads "My so smooth grass verges by the riverside."

Enclosed is our check for the poem which we are so glad to have. I hope you won't feel that our treatment of the verses has been presumptuous, and that you'll be disposed to try us again.

Sincerely

G. S. Lobrano

p.s. I'm also sending along two manuscripts which, I'm sorry to say, the vote went against. Thanks for letting us see them, and I hope you'll excuse the delayed handling.

\* \* \*

March 7<sup>th</sup>, [1941]

Dear Mr Lobrano,

I wish I could tell you without seeming to exaggerate how happy I am that The New Yorker has taken my "Greek" verses. It would'nt [sic] be possible to exaggerate about it, so I can safely say that I don't care at all that it's snowing to-day & that last evening a German 'plane swung down through the clouds & into the bird-song & machine-gunned the garden. (He did'nt hit either of us but I ran like a hare!) Just for the moment, anyway, I don't care at all & for that, and equally earnestly for the cheque, and most of all for printing those verses that I did feel glad to have written. I thank you very much indeed.

If I'm lucky enough to write any more stuff that's up to your standard I'll most gladly send it along. Meanwhile I hope this letter will reach you as soon as the note I enclosed in S.T.W's, so that you won't think your letter & cheque were lost on the way here.

\* \* \*

20<sup>th</sup> April 1943

Dear New Yorker,

I was so glad you could take "Teaching to Shoot" and I thank you for the cheque. Copies of the New Yorker do reach us regularly, (at very regular, long intervals) and I shall be proud to see the work there.

Weight counts, as well as space, and so I have put all of these three notes on one of our days onto the same sheet. I hope it won't make you hate the one you might like because the other two are there, if you see what I mean. Jan Struther wrote me, during my beginnings and just after her own, that one must ALWAYS use wide-spacing even if it mean more expense of paper and stamps, because editors (maybe she implied but did not say this: I would'nt remember) found it easier to read one's work that way. Please, even if it's arduous, read – in case you may enjoy.

This is written from the office where I work in a coat labelled, on the shoulders, "REPORT AND CONTROL". I can't remember what the other, more hopeful, things were that I wished to send you and so these must go. I would like to add that the New Yorker is exactly as welcome as lemons would be & honestly [honestly typed in red] I believe we'd rather have it than them.

\* \* \*

August 12<sup>th</sup>. [1946]

Dear Mr Maxwell,

Thank you very much for writing to me when you returned the last packet. Please don't become impatient with my patience – if anything here is of use to you I shall be very happy; as it is I feel embarrassed at pestering, but if one make things there's a kind of uneasy obligation to give them a chance.

Now that travelling is easier perhaps you will be coming to England? If so, Sylvia and I would be very glad if you'd come to see this small house by the river: please remember this invitation if you do make the journey.

\* \* \*

September 3, 1946

Dear Miss Ackland:

We are very pleased to have poems from you again and I have sent them along to Mr. DeVries, who is now responsible for poetry and who will write you about them shortly.

You should know that it is dangerous to make general invitations when you live in a small house by a river, but since you don't, apparently, I will someday prove it to you.

Cordially - WM (signed)

\* \* \*

May 29<sup>th</sup>. [1947]

Dear Mr. Maxwell,

Have you time to read this story, in case it is good enough for the New Yorker?

If it needs explaining, it won't do; but as things are, outside of some of the people who write & a few of the people who read, I think I should say that I don't mean, in the story, any rudeness to You or to Us!

Thank you so much for writing to our friend, Monica Ring; I wish you had met her because she is so charming; and I hope that when you do come to England & do come to see us here, she will be home again & we may all sit placidly & watch her labour at her fish-catching. This is a very nice small river; the fish are perfectly content not to be caught \* there is nothing to interrupt quiet contemplation: even fishermen become gentle & resigned here.

\* \* \*

June 9, 1947

Dear Miss Ackland:

I'm ever so sorry but the people in "Urn Burial" seem to us to need a much longer and fuller treatment than it is possible to give in a short story, although the essentials of the story are universal enough to be clear. We hope you'll be forgiving and send us something else soon.

I wish we had your very small river in our back yard, instead of the swampy brook that dries up every July.

Cordially  
signed – Wm. Maxwell

March 6<sup>th</sup> 1948.

Dear Mr Lobrano,

The longer story of these two is about a child, & I know that editors (as agents tell us) won't endure it at any price. But if you could bring yourself to look at it perhaps you might like it.

In Gide's Journal for Feb.6.'02, I found this: "Josette Drouin tells us... about her little niece, 8 years old. Strange charm that poverty has for her... A negro juggler has taken his stand on the square; he was so filthy & ugly that everyone fled him; the little girl broke away from her family to cajole him affectionately. Finally, when her mother was dressing for some visit or other: 'Oh, Mamma,' the child sais [sic], 'don't put on your best dress. We are poor.'"

It was a strange thing to read & think about, & at last I made this story which I am sending you, although I know (aside from agents' assurances) that it's a theme which has to depend on under- and over-tones & no one, except perhaps The New Yorker, will trust readers to hear them. But you do, often, and if I've made them sufficiently audible in the story, perhaps you will like it.

"Ham" is true.

You have liked poems by me before & so I'm hopefully enclosing a make-weight.

\* \* \*

March 29, 1948

Dear Mr. [sic] Ackland

I'm awfully sorry to have to return these two pieces. "Ham" is pleasant, but we've published so many reminiscences about old servants and have so many others on hand that we're trying to limit ourselves now to those that are quite unusual. The other piece, "They are Hid in Prison," is, I'm afraid, too oblique and special for us. Please try again. And, by the way, we haven't the faintest objection, in general, to stories about children.

Sincerely  
G. S. Lobrano

July 21<sup>st</sup> [1949]

Dear New Yorker,

You have in the past sometimes liked my poems. I am sending a small packet in case you may think one or another good enough.

It is a very mixed assortment, but the times are mixed and perhaps call for limericks rather than anything else. But I can't compass them – except one about "Christina Georgina Rossetti / Cast herself off from a jetty – " But she's a good poet and so that was impious, and she's out of fashion anyway,

P.S. I do want to thank you for the food-parcels you send to S.T.W. As we share a house we share the food, & it is wonderfull fortunate for me that you and she are so generous – thank you.

\* \* \* \* \*

### *Thomas the Cat*

(an unpublished, undated typescript in the STW/VA Archive)

Thomas the Cat is now fifteen; except that he has lost a few teeth, he shows no signs of age. But he is remarkable for more than successful longevity, and perhaps some things about him are worth recording.

He was born at Frankfort Manor, Sloley, Norfolk in 1934. His mother was a slender, pearl-grey cat with fine tabby markings and a coral nose. His father was a black cat who lived "rough" in our shrubberies; he was massive and had a very thick coat and a tail like a cudgel. As he was not officially our cat he had no name in the household, but Tom's mother was called Meep.

She had two litters of kittens before the one Thomas was born in, and all the

earlier kittens were tabbies. This time, however, she had three pure greys and two, very weakly, tabbies. Only the grey were kept.

Meep had been a bad mother hitherto but she doted on the grey family. At first we thought there were two males and a female, but Meep was never mistaken; she recognized Thomas as her only son and cherished him far above rubies.

She was ordinarily a greedy cat, as well as being a harsh mother, but she would scarcely leave Thomas, even to eat her food, while he was suckling; and directly she thought he should eat flesh she began to hunt it for him. One day when he was very tiny she brought in four full-sized rats and laid them down on his straw; and he was always supplied with mice, with bird, with rats and pieces of stolen meat. She fed the other kittens too, but only as an after-thought. Everything was first laid down beside Tom.

At first the three kittens were called Thomas and Martin and Jessica; later Martin was recognized as Martha and thus Thomas came to be acknowledged as the son and heir by the whole household.

Then we had to leave the lovely house and move into a stone cottage in Dorset, so that the family was broken up and only Thomas came with us. Meep meanwhile had had another tabby litter, of which we intended to keep two kittens. But after a few days she killed them both.

Tom was rather a lumpish kitten, and even when he was more than half-grown we thought he was a little stupid. All three grey kittens had particularly lovely coats – thick, short fur and most stalwart tails, well-furred ears and long whiskers. Martha was a fairly dark grey; Jessica almost aluminum colour, with a lovely alternation of light and shade on her fur, like the scalloped pattern of feathers on a bird's breast. She had a white brooch and a discreet white apron. Tom and Martha had no white on them at all. Tom's coat was the darkest of the three, a pure iron grey, with no pattern except a scarcely discernable darker ridge along his back. All the kittens had pure yellow eyes and noses soberly tipped with grey, not copying their mother's coral.

As Thomas grew up he became rapidly more intelligent. We had various dogs at different times; a Pekinese, a little nondescript white dog, a large field spaniel and another Pekinese. Thomas liked all these except the white dog, and he liked the goat, too, but he would never tolerate a kitten. We have several times tried to make him accept one into the household, but he has always shown a devilish rancor and flatly refused to receive it, or to speak to us while it was here. At one time he made friends with a shabby little female cat who lived in a barn nearby (he is a neuter) but as she came near the house he attacked her and drove her off with imprecations.

Very early in life he displayed an adventurous taste in food; he likes chestnut pudding, Jerusalem artichokes, chocolate, stewed pears, curry (but not rice), almost any vegetable soup, cassoulet cooked with tomato and garlic, and at the last pre-war Christmas dinner he drank burgundy from my glass and ate so largely of brandy sauce that he fell asleep on the table. Recently he has several times taken a little

black coffee; he approaches it with respect but seems to enjoy the taste.

When he was about seven years old we noticed that he could understand quite a number of words, spoken in an ordinary conversational voice: now that he is fifteen he has become able to understand sentences, and when he bothers to listen to our conversation he will often clearly show that he understands what we are saying, if it interests or concerns him.

For instance, I will say, as we sit by the fire after tea, "I ought to feed the animals, but I think I'll have one more cigarette first –" If Thomas is hungry, he will get up immediately, and march to the door and rattle it commandingly. Or, when he is apparently asleep in the chair and I am passing in the passage, if I say (in an ordinary voice and without using his name) "Your dinner is in the kitchen –" he gets up and goes downstairs, and along to the kitchen. Usually he only attends to our talk if we mention food, but I have known him get up and wait at the door when I have said "I have opened the window so that Thomas can go out."

If he wants me to let him out, or to feed him, he comes upstairs to my room and scratches on the door and when I open it, if he wants to go out he runs to the head of the stairs, but if he wants to be fed, he remains sitting on the threshold. When he does this before the right time for his meal, I shut the door again, he repeats the performance once, but if I do not relent he gives it up and comes in to my room to sit in the arm chair until he is fed.

Two years ago the Pekinese he particularly liked died, and Thomas became very depressed. I decided to get a puppy after a while, but I was unsure how Thomas would feel about it. The little creature was only six weeks old and very tiny; it was cream-coloured (the other had been black) and when I put it down on the lawn and saw Thomas advance, looking like a giant panther beside it, I was fearful of what he might do, remembering his ferocity towards kittens. But he sniffed at it and then went to a little distance and rolled affably. Ever since then he has apparently considered the little dog as his own pet, for he plays with it every day, chasing or being chased, and rushing up trees to tease it; and when, not long ago, I let the dog out in the small hours of the morning, Thomas got up from bed and came downstairs especially to play catch in the moonlight.

He always sleeps on my bed, and rouses from his first sleep to walk up and sit on my chest when I first lie down. He purrs and kneads for a while, and lightly, quite painlessly, pats my face; then he returns to the foot of the bed and sleeps there till early morning, when he goes downstairs and lets himself out through the open window into the garden.

He never catches birds now; he has only killed about half a dozen in his life. He was so bitterly rebuked, so resolutely sent to Coventry when he brought a bird in, that he was shamed. Now if a bird is caught in the fruit net when he is near, he runs away from the place. But he still hunts mice and rats, and last year, when he was fourteen, he brought in a live and briskly squealing stoat.

He is still a gourmet, although in these lean times he cannot experiment as much as he would like. His normal diet is cooked rabbit and occasionally horse-meat. Fish of any kind makes him sick and he will not eat cod or hake, although he enjoys sole and turbot and even trout; but disaster always follows if he eats them.

At fifteen years old he weighs 11 lbs and measures 35" from nose to tail, and [?] round the middle. His coat is magnificent, his eyes bright and his sight and hearing perfect. He climbs trees, leaps in and out of windows, steals from the kitchen table and opens the larder door and marauds over the shelves. He likes to come for walks with us and the dog, and occasionally goes out to tea by himself. He is a little distant to strangers, affable to friends and passionately devoted to us and the dog. This devotion is returned.

That is really all there is to tell about Thomas the Cat. I am deeply thankful that there is as yet no end to the story. Some people, who have studied him, say that he can now understand French. If that is so, he has recently learned it, and if he is taking up languages now there is, it seems to me, every reason to hope that he will live for a long time yet. After all, I have been learning French for more than thirty years – and Thomas is no dilettante; I do not think he would begin the study of any subject unless he knew he could bring it to perfection.

*Valentine Ackland*

#### *Varied Opinions*

from *The Spectator*, 7 October 1938

Sir, – We do not all applaud Mr. Chamberlain. He has released us temporarily from a fear we could have faced courageously, and given us instead the burden of a guilt too heavy to bear. Even if only a small section of your readers reacts like this, will you not record it as a fact that some people in England today are most bitterly ashamed? – Yours, &c.,

VALENTINE ACKLAND,  
SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER.

*From Vauchurch, Maiden Newton, Dorset.*

#### *Non-Intervention and Spain*

from *The New Statesman and Nation*, 2 March 1946

Sir, – Are we afraid of General Franco? Why? Because we like oranges and sherry and fear he will not send us any if we are unkind to him? Or because the Pope likes him and we daren't cross the Pope? Or do we agree with the Pope in finding something loveable about the little man because he has such a healthy dislike for Communists?

But we can get oranges and sherry from the Empire: the Pope is a Christian and must forgive us even if we do cross him: and we didn't dislike the Communists during the period of the Resistance Movement – in fact, we thought rather well of

them. Mr. Bevin said he couldn't feel it right to let down the Polish soldiers, whose services we were glad to have when we needed them, and we agreed with him (though perhaps it wasn't clear that anyone had suggested letting them down). But what about Garcia, Republican Spaniard, fighter in the French Resistance, executed last week by Franco?

Let's not labour the point. It is clear enough. We were cowardly and hypocritical about Non-Intervention and Munich, and it was very bad for our national health that we were so. Disgrace is a paralyzing poison. England is not in a very good state to stand another heavy dose so soon.

Frome Vauchurch

VALENTINE ACKLAND

Maiden Newton, Dorset.

\* \* \* \* \*

Valentine published at least four stories in *Lilliput*. This is the author blurb that appeared with "*Waitress! Waitress!*" in July 1948: "As a child saw her first poem in *Time and Tide*. Has published a few books and hopes to bring out many more. Lives in Dorset; is a member of the Society for Psychological Research and the National Society for Abolition of Cruel Sports. Swims and drives a car."

\* \* \* \* \*



#### *March*

GENTLE and feeble, the first days of spring  
Creep like a batch of new-born kittens blindly  
About the place, exploring everything,  
Until a hand uptakes them, firmly and kindly,  
And drops them back in their blanket covering.

*Valentine Ackland*

from *The Countryman*, Spring 1964



*A letter to and a Poem by Valentine*

60 Upper Park Rd.  
15<sup>th</sup>. Sep. 1938

My dear Valentine,

Thank you very much for your letter and the translation. I am very glad that you like the lacquer frog box. It was coming from Fukien, the province famous with lacquer. I bought it when we started the People's Revolution there. Therefore it will be a very good thing for remembrance.

It is very kind of you to suggest to do the typing. Unfortunately, I have already arranged it. Thank you very much for your kindness. When I have done the long poem, I should like to bother you, if you can find time.

I must apologise to you that I did not reply your letter about your poetic life, because I was terribly busy and I took it for granted that you will forgive me. It was a lovely letter, though a sad one. It proves Ao-kuang Hsiu's view which I quoted in my preface. Good poems, if not always, at least, nine cases out of ten are production of sorrows. Your letter itself is a poem which I read and read again.

With affectionate fraternal greetings,

Yours

Shelley [signed]

*Reading Shelley Wang's Poems*

It is as if I sat on the floor of a deep river  
beneath the rushing water, among dusky weeds;  
when I read your poems written in the troubled years  
(your country ravaged already, mine not yet at war).  
When I read your poems I am alone in this bitter darkness  
while water races overhead,  
going angrily to the sea.  
Your poems, my poems; your life gone, mine going;  
and through bitter darkness the tide hastens to the sea.

Both of these, typed, are in the STW/VA Archive. For an amusing vignette of Comrade Professor Wang, see *STW Letters*, 10.xi.1937

\* \* \* \* \*

In her frail coracle, the rose  
Spins down the stream, and goes:  
Love, on the flood of time, sails past us –  
How deep and fast the river flows!

from *Further Poems*

*Through a Glass Brightly*

(an unpublished, undated typescript at the STW/VA Archive)

The clear air was bulged into glass and within its dome lay the snow-scene in early afternoon. The groupings and movement of a small crowd of children, dark-red or swarthy on the white slope of a field, were as particular to the scene as their voices, clashing and jostling like shaken icicles inside the brittle dome of the air.

A girl and a boy raced down the slope, and the man standing behind the window watched them enacting the only story about ourselves that we have yet invented. The boy laughed, threatening her with a handful of soft snow, and the girl, out of breath and defeated, waving her defeated hands, implored huskily "Please don't, Oh please don't, Peter!" The boy thrust his handful down between her collar and white skin. There was an immediate silence, tall as an iceberg, separating them. She turned along the field-path and he walked up the hill, to join the group of sledgers.

Down the hill and down the hill. Obedient to one track already hollowed and discoloured; with snow driven frontwards or fanned out to either side. Sleds came clumsily, like objects on a conveyor-belt, jerking along, each docilely following each. But focus on a face, thought he, and there is no docility, no conveyor-belt to be thought of them. Face flaming with violent pleasure; cold, shining and set hard as a gold nugget. Bright unpriced faces of joy and daring.

The slope, seen from his window, was scarcely perceptible; short as the walk to a next-door neighbor, and only steep enough to make the dung-cart horse lean a little backwards in the shafts when, in spring, he comes clumsily down to the field-path from the lane. But this slope had become a mountain-side to the slow procession of sledges travelling down it, and more dangerous, reflected in the shining faces, than the perilous spirals of the Cresta Run.

To his eyes, as he watched, the snow became freckled with a shower of flashing gold, the glint and dazzle of that danger, more than the riches of an Empire. It burned brighter than the sun, within its bubble of clear glass, and struck blindingly as the dawn against the panes of his window.

\* \* \* \* \*

Slowly flying against the West  
A heron goes, and the cloudy far  
Distance is grey as a bird's breast,  
Is deep to shelter a star.

unpublished and undated, from the STW/VA Archive

### *The Sign on Flesh*

The Father of my son (my Father, too,  
Father indeed to one and all of you),  
Lord of the kindly earth, the gentle air,  
Of sun itself, of all things mild and fair –  
How could this baby injure such as He?  
And yet, this mound, this stone, this mourner see!

from *28 Poems*

\* \* \* \* \*

Let down your net, once again, once again.  
The skies pour down; like silver fishes down streams the rain,  
And in the light of the flare nothing to see but where  
The great net of dark closes round the rain.

Let down your net, only once again –  
So – it was a little, inland sea, and the drowning boat straining to land,  
And the great teaming net half-hauled, half-trailing; and he  
Waiting for landfall in the darkness and the rain.

from *Later Poems*

\* \* \* \* \*

### *From the Greek Theodorides (Book VI. 155)*

These shining curls from the four-year child, beloved  
Croblylus, were shorn as a gift to Apollo, and the fighting cock  
Sacrificed in his splendor, and a fine sweetmeat too  
Offered to pray you, Phoebus, for perfect manhood  
And that in due time his house and all his possessions  
May be blessed by your hands, by your hands held over them.

undated and unpublished, from the STW/VA Archive

### *A Working Checklist of the Non-poetic Periodical Publications*

- "Country Dealings" (essays) – a series of three articles in the *Left Review* of March, May and September, 1935. These were gathered together in 1936 to form the book *County Conditions*.
- "Two Occasions" (stories) 1. After Good Friday 2. Morning Visit – *London Mercury*, February 1936
- A review of *Reporter in Spain*, Frank Pitcairn; *Spanish Front*, Carlos Prieto; A Preliminary Official Report on the Atrocities in Southern Spain, issued by The National Government at Burgos – *Left Review*, December 1936
- "The Spanish Struggle" (review of *Behind the Spanish Barricades*, John Langdon-Davies; *Spain in Revolt*, Gannes and Repard; *Spain Today*, Conze) – *Left Review*, January 1937
- "Two Pictures of the Spanish War" (review of *The War in Spain*, Ramon Sender and *The Spanish Cockpit*, Franz Borckenau) – *Left Review*, September 1937
- "On a Summer's Day" (story) – *Lilliput*, October 1940
- "Recent Novels" (review of *Death Into Life*, Olaf Stapledon; *In Search of Stephen Vane*, B. Ifor Evans; *New Short Stories, 1945-6*, John Singer, ed.; *The Shoes Men Walk In*, David Martin; *You Forget So Quickly*, Ashley Smith; *Of Our Time*, James Gordon) – *Our Time*, December 1945
- "A Multitude of the Heavenly Host" (story) – *The Pleasure Ground: A Miscellany of English Writing*, London, MacDonald & Co., 1947
- "Interviewing Miss Levison" (story) – *Lilliput*, February 1947
- "Sunlight on the Camp" (story) – *Life and Letters (continuing The London Mercury)*, April 1947
- "When I was in Basle" (story) – *Life and Letters*, June 1947
- "New Novels" (review of *Emily*, James Hanley; *The Last Frontier*, Howard Fast; *Men of Forty-Eight*, Jack Lindsay; *The Forgotten World*, William Goldman) – *Our Time*, September 1948
- "Waitress! Waitress!" (story) – *Lilliput*, July 1948 (also in *The Bedside Lilliput*, London, Hulton Press, 1951)
- "A Ghost was Born" (story) – *Lilliput*, October 1948
- "Granny Moxon" (essay) – *The Countryman*, Winter 1949
- "The Village Witch" (essay) – *The West Country Magazine*, IV/3, 1949
- "Dotty Detty" (essay) – *The West Country Magazine*, Autumn 1950

- “The First and the Last” (story) – *The Countryman*, Summer 1950
- “Winter of Content” (story) – *The Countryman*, Winter 1952
- “The Man in the Balloon” (story) – *The New Statesman and Nation*, July 24, 1954
- “Urn Burial” (story) – *The Berkley Book of Modern Writing*, No. 3, New York, Berkley Publishing Corp., 1956 (In *This Narrow Place*, Wendy Mulford states this story first appeared in *Modern Writing 1953*, ed. P. Rahv and N. Philips.)
- “Cat Characteristics” (essay) – *The Countryman*, Winter 1958
- “Solomon Caesar Malan” (essay) – *Dorset Worthies #11* – Dorset Natural and Archaeological Society, 1962 – 1969

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**Diary. 1932. Summer.**

(unpublished typescript in the STW/VA Archive)

19th June.  
Sunday.

Grannie Moxon brought us a little owl which she had caught on the side of her bird-cage, which hangs on her cottage wall. The owl had clear bright green eyes, with cat’s pupils to them, and a malevolent, proud look, which is arrogant in the extreme, and threatens us all with its vengeance. And small wonder. For, obedient to Grannie, we have shut it in a cage – but only for this day, for to-night I shall free it, and let it go where it will, hoping that it will choose to stay in our garden. This freeing of it is as generous, or more so, in me than if I freed a mistress –

I have been cast down for some weeks now, because my poems were returned by Leonard Woolf, and I have had other reverses, too. It was hard to bear that I should have minded so much. I thought I should not. But I did, and, worse still, I was incapable of showing that I cared. Except that I managed to confess to Sylvia, by means of a poem I wrote about it. But it shames me that I am not magnanimous enough to confess my disappointment.

I am very much weighed upon by Ruth’s hopes of me. It is hard for her to have to defend me against Joan and Bessie, and all and sundry. I am ashamed of myself, for I feel sure that it is largely my own fault. I know that I am cowardly, as far as my poetry goes. I dislike having it read, and, worse, far, I dislike increasingly writing it. It hurts me too much. I am a great coward about pain. I spent yesterday alternately copying extracts from Dickens for this anthology which Sylvia is making and trying to write poems. But no poems came.

I am slightly in love with my own poetry, which is a queer state, and new to me. I think it must be a bad one. Most new states, of mine, are. I feel defiant, as if I were in love with an old and ugly woman, and yet hopelessly epris – defensive and

easily angered, and as if my mistress were not only old, but a whore. Furiously on guard against any slight to her virtue and propriety.

Granny Moxon is a great relief. She is ruthless and unsentimental and unafraid. I wish I were any of these.

I have found a good poem by “H.D.” called “Lethe.”

Francis [Powys] is a bad creature to have here. He casts an evil spell. He means to. He is full of hatred, and I feel it infecting me. That is another bad thing. Perhaps I should go away.

11.vii.32. Chaldon

The Fleet is in Weymouth Bay. We walked to Ringstead two days ago and admired and trembled. The largest submarine and the aircraft carrier were coming in while we sat on the beach. They were as dark as death, although the sun was shining, and they moved at an incredible smooth speed, conducted by four destroyers, which looked harmless and almost domesticated beside these brutes. We were overshadowed by fear of war while we watched them. But our terrors were quieted by the weight of the sun on our bare necks and heads, and we dabbled our feet in the icy sea, and frolicked about around an antlered root of tree which had been washed up, and on which we inscribed with an indelible pencil and a pen-knife “GERALD BRENAN: HIS HORNS. AND LI.POWYS: HIS. AND GAMEL WOOLSEY: HERS.” and then, sans further word “SIN CHILD.”

Then we came home, weary and hot and pleased, to find that time had gone more quickly than we thought, and that Mr Taylor came almost as soon as we had got home. But I still like him, and was glad to see him again. He was charming to me while we were out, and became confidential, and very pathetic. I’m afraid that is his only charm, now – that and his Keats-like profile and bright and strange eyes. His voice is intolerable. A Cambridge Nancy’s, and a stammer.

Theo came to tea too, and was very sweet.

That was on Friday, the 8<sup>th</sup>, and on Saturday I heard the news of Mr Porter’s death at Winterton. This is a very sad and wasteful thing. In its own way (though not to me personally) as bad a thing as Dickie’s [Powys] death. He was the best parson that ever I have met or heard of, and Winterton will be very lost now. I was deeply disturbed for Ruth, who is very upset and was most devoted to the little parson.

There is no news at Chaldon, no news except that a girl of 26 has died of T.B. at West Chaldon – she was the wife of the shepherd there, a young man, and has a child, or two. It is a dreadful thing for him, but the people seem only (or mainly) concerned with their own disappointment that it is nothing more exciting and unexpected – the Passing-bell rang early, and set everyone agog to hear some really fine news, and then there was only this –

I awoke the other night, while I was laid up with a rather severe migraine, saying decisively: “Man is 50% Time and 50% Eternity.”

I am in a bog of poems. None will unleash me. I am caught and I am smothering. It is a pity, for I think two of them might be good.

My Sweet is in the chapel, writing the beginning of her Lesbian novel. It promises to be finer far than her others. But the quality will have to be different – and this is exciting. Eleanor Barley and the True Heart were as insinuating as the scent of that rose in our garden, which is called Hebe's Cup – but this must be a Rose of Flanders, I should think. But it's easy enough to talk, when one can't do.

I insert here a note I made while I was in bed. It is not, worse luck, a poem (I not being Robinson Jeffers, or whatever he is called –) but I like it, and wish it would live, but it is an oddity, and best left to be exposed.

2.vii.32.

Waggon loaded with fresh-cut hay looks like a great bison standing in the evening field.

Children run towards it and away from it, as smoothly as flies in a hot room.

Shorn green field, ribbed with honey-coloured hay.

Pale evening sky, ribbed with bright mackerel clouds.

The sun is a bison on the sky.

We went up to Chydyok to see Lulu, [Llewellyn Powys] who is ill in bed, on last Thursday evening. Starting at about seven-thirty. We met Brenan, proceeding in his car up the Chydyok lane. We hid from his return, behind a haystack at the top of the hill. Where we saw a lark drop from high air to a clod of earth on which he sat to sing – 3 times or more descending from the sky to the ground, and sitting to sing – sometimes singing as many as four songs over before he started up again. I have never seen this before. His song was marvelously pure and sweet, heard without the wavering of air.

The car stood outside Chydyok for a little time, and then drove past our stack, with Gamel and Gerald in it. We, spontaneously, bounded and bounced up and down on the balls of our feet, like young apes do when they are angry or excited. It must have been a curious sight, and I wondered if Brenan's car has a mirror, and if he was looking in it at that time...

The Sin-Child\* is still at home, and apt to walk about the village in a dark crimson shirt, scowling horribly.

\*[in pencil – the diary is typed] Francis Lawrence Powys' description of himself, in his early poems. A manifestly unfair nickname, given in malice.

## LETHE

Nor skin nor hide nor fleece  
Shall cover you,  
Nor curtain of crimson nor fine  
Shelter of cedar-wood be over you,  
Nor the fir-tree  
Nor the pine.

Nor sight of whin nor gorse  
Nor river-yew,  
Nor fragrance of flowering bush,  
Nor wailing of reed-bird to waken you,  
Nor of linnet  
Nor of thrush.

Nor word nor touch nor sight  
Of lover, you  
Shall long through the night but for this:  
The roll of the full tide to cover you  
Without question,  
Without kiss.

H.D. (Hilda Doolittle, 1886-1961)

### *The Story of CAPTAIN POMPEY*

(unpublished, undated typescript in the STW/VA Archive)

Written for Gregory  
by Valentine Ackland,  
and illustrated by  
Sylvia Townsend Warner.

Once there was a black Pirate called Captain Pompey. When he was a boy, he travelled from Africa, where he was born, to Egypt, and there he stole a felucca and sailed into the Spanish Main.

After many adventures he managed to get aboard a fine lugger, when most of the crew were on shore and the captain was asleep in his cabin.

"Now I am Captain Pompey the Pirate," said the black boy; and he ordered six Spanish sailors, who were still aboard ship, to set sail; and he made the unfortunate Spanish captain walk the plank; and then away went the lugger in fine style, to sail the seas in search of treasure.

Captain Pompey grew tall and strong, and whenever he and his men captured a treasure ship it was always very difficult to deal with the prisoners they took, because almost all of them wanted to serve as pirates under Captain Pompey, and this was very awkward. It would have needed four or five large ships to hold all the men who wanted to be pirates, and Pompey didn't want to be bothered with a fleet. "I don't care to be an Admiral," he said, "A Captain with a fine lugger of his own is quite enough for me!" So he and his faithful pirate crew used to put all the prisoners ashore on a small, rocky island, which is now called Gibraltar.

This all happened a long time ago, when it was still possible for clever people to work magic and spells, and the black Captain Pompey knew a little about such matters, because his father and his grandfather had been African magicians – or "Medicine Men" as they call them over there.

Fearing that so many fierce and disappointed men, being left on this small island, might band together and get hold of a ship (or even make one for themselves) Pompey decided to work a spell. And so he did. And every one of the men on that island turned into an ape. That is why there are still quite a number of mischievous monkeys on the Rock of Gibraltar. They seem to be very happy there, and no one knows whether they still remember that once they wanted to be Pirates and sail the Spanish Main.

After this, Captain Pompey went on merrily; sometimes raiding the mainland to collect food and clothes for himself and his crew, and getting ammunition there too, for he had four heavy, as well as twenty brass cannon.

When he had enough ammunition and food, he set sail, and waited about till he spied a large treasure ship returning from the New World to Spain. Then he boarded it and captured it, and he and his men took what they wanted of gold, ivory, silk satin, velvet, tobacco and rum. And because Captain Pompey was very fond of cats, whenever there was a ship's cat they always brought it back to the lugger, for Captain Pompey to keep.

After a time, of course, they had far too many cats on the ship, and the cats did not always like travelling by sea, which worried Captain Pompey. He set about finding another island on which to put his cats, so that they would be happy and live quietly on land, which they so much preferred. That is how there comes to be, to this very day, an island called St Kitts; but I do not know how many cats there are on the island now; probably a great many, because the name suggests that most of the cats had kittens there, and I suppose they grew up to have kittens themselves.

Meanwhile, unfortunately, Captain Pompey was becoming rather silly. He became so greedy for gold and treasure that even his own men, pirates as they were, thought he was going rather too far; and one of them (who had also studied magic and spells) spoke seriously to the others:

"You know," he said, "I think that even pirates should retire when they have got enough treasure put by."

"Agreed!" cried all the others, for they were growing a little tired of the sea, too.

"But Captain Pompey is so greedy for gold and treasure now that I don't believe he will ever allow us to go ashore and settle down to enjoy what we're got. So I have made a plan, boys, and I hope you'll fall in with it."

"Tell us what it is, first –" said the others.

"It's this. I know a bit about magic and such things. Suppose I make a spell to turn our Captain into something else – a dog, perhaps, or a horse, or even a stone statue. Then he won't trouble his head any more about gold and treasure, and we can put ashore somewhere in foreign parts, where no one knows we are pirates. Then we will sell the ship and buy ourselves suits of landmen's clothes, and settle down and marry and have families and houses and gardens, and live all happy and comfortable for the rest of our lives. What d'you think of that, boys?"

"Aye-aye!" shouted all the pirates enthusiastically.

"But –" said one of them after a while, "Captain Pompey has been very good to us on the whole and I for one shouldn't like to see him turned into a stone statue that can't have any fun and pleasure. Nor yet a dog, for I never knew him to take to a dog as a pet –"

"Aha!" said the first pirate, "That's given me a better idea! I'll turn him into a CAT! He's partial to cats and they to him, and I reckon he'd make a fine cat himself; now, wouldn't he?"

"That he would!" said the other pirate, "and being black – if you can keep him so – he'll be sure to find a good home, for everyone likes a black cat because they bring luck to a house."

So it was settled, and the first pirate got to work, and after three nights spent in making his magic and his spells, everyone was ready and he had a small bottle full of what looked like clear water, with which he intended to turn Captain Pompey into a cat.

Meanwhile the Captain had seen another treasure ship, and he ordered full sail ahead and told his men to be ready to board her. Their hearts were not in it now, but they were a good crew and they obeyed him. They boarded the ship and captured it, and found it was full of treasure. But just as the prisoners were all lined up and being told that one in ten of them would be kept alive (to be later taken off at Gibraltar, although they did not know this) and the others must walk the plank because there was no room for so many on board the pirate lugger – one of them suddenly turned on Captain Pompey, and drew a sword that no one knew he still had got, and with one blow severed the poor Captain's left arm, just above the elbow.

Of course, there was a great to-do; and instead of saving one in ten of the prisoners, they were all sent along the plank and down into Davey Jones's locker as quickly as could be managed. And then Captain Pompey's wound was attended to, and after a long, long while it got better, but now he had only a stump instead of a

good left arm.

“What shall we do now?” whispered the pirates to their leader, and he answered firmly, “I shall do what I was going to do.”

And that very night he poured the contents of his little bottle into Captain Pompey’s evening tot of rum, and when they went to his cabin next morning to take him his cup of tea, there was no Pirate Captain to be seen – but instead there was a very handsome, proud-looking, but rather small black cat, with only three legs.

“Why is he so small?” asked one of the pirates.

“I’m afraid I must have made a mistake,” said their leader, “I believe I went wrong in one part of the spell, and instead of making him a very large, strong cat, I put all the strength into his lives, and whereas most cats have only nine lives, he will have at least ninety! It’s too late now, and I can’t alter it. Perhaps he won’t mind –”

Evidently he did not mind, because Captain Pompey purred and rubbed against their legs, and was so affectionate to the crew that they really felt very sad when it was time to put him on shore, and sell their boat, according to the plan. However, they did it, and found Captain Pompey a kind home, where he stayed for a while, and then he took to his travels again.

The pirates had sailed their craft to England, because they were not known there, and Captain Pompey was landed at Weymouth Bay, where the ship was sold. His first home was on Portland, but he felt restless, seeing all the ships in the harbor and hearing sailors talking of their adventures with pirates or their discovery of treasure when they were ship-wrecked on a desert island or along a tropical coast.

This kind of talk made Pompey unhappy, and so he made his way to the mainland, and after a long, long time (many years of time, but he had all those extra lives the pirate had given him by mistake) he was journeying toward Beaminster when a snowstorm overtook him. It was almost dark; the snow fell thickly, and because he was already very tired and had not had anything to eat for at least two days, he was overcome by the cold, and scarcely could walk a step further. He found his way to a garden by a small river, and there, in front of a house, he discovered an empty box, and lay down in it.

“I must sleep,” he said to himself, “And I daresay I shall die, because if you fall sleep in the snow, you usually die. Never mind – I am so cold and so hungry that I do not much care.”

So he lay down in the box and fell asleep, and very nearly did die, too. But he was a black cat, and so he was lucky; he was found just in time, and taken indoors to the fire, and given food and warm milk with glucose in it, and after a while he recovered. And now he is a very fine black cat again: rather small and with only three legs. But his eyes are as gold as Spanish doubloons, and he purrs all day long.



The Annual General Meeting of the Society was held on 11 May in Dorset. The Minutes will appear in Newsletter 40, but in the meantime if you would like a copy, please email me.

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Sylvia Townsend Warner @ Tanya Stobbs

The Society's website is [townsendwarner.com](http://townsendwarner.com)  
The Estates of Sylvia and Valentine are at [sylviatownsendwarnerestate.com](http://sylviatownsendwarnerestate.com)  
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