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Poems

of

West and East

By V. Sackville-West

(The Hon. Mrs. Harold Nicolson)

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To the unkindest of critics H.G.N.

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### POEMS

FOR \*\*\*

NO eyes shall see the poems that I write  
For you; not even yours; but after long  
Forgetful years have passed on our delight  
Some hand may chance upon a dusty song

Of those fond days when every spoken word  
Was sweet, and all the fleeting things unspoken  
Yet sweeter, and the music half unheard  
Murmured through forests as a charm unbroken.

It is the plain and ordinary page  
Of two who loved, sole-spirited and clear.  
Will you, O stranger of another age,  
Not grant a human and compassionate tear  
To us, who each the other held so dear?  
A single tear fraternal, sadly shed,  
Since that which was so living, is so dead.

### SONG: LET US GO BACK

LET us go back together to the hills.  
Weary am I of palaces and courts,  
Weary of words disloyal to my thoughts,—  
Come, my beloved, let us to the hills.

Let us go back together to the land,  
And wander hand in hand upon the heights;  
Kings have we seen, and manifold delights,—  
Oh, my beloved, let us to the land!

Lone and unshackled, let us to the road  
Which holds enchantment round each hidden bend,  
Our course uncompassed and our whim its end,  
Our feet once more, beloved, to the road!

### SONG: MY SPIRIT LIKE A SHEPHERD BOY "Convalescente di squisiti mali"

MY spirit like a shepherd boy  
Goes dancing down the lane.  
When all the world is young with joy  
Must I lie here in pain?

With shepherd's pipe my spirit fled  
And cloven foot of Pan;  
The mortal bondage he has shed  
And shackling yoke of man.

And though he leave me cold and mute,  
A traitor to his care,  
I smile to hear his honeyed flute  
Hang on the scented air.

### CONVALESCENCE

WHEN I am in the Orient once again,  
And turn into the gay and squalid street,  
One side in the shadow, one in vivid heat,  
The thought of England, fresh beneath the rain,  
Will rise unbidden as a gently pain.  
The lonely hours of illness, as they beat  
Crawling through days with slow laborious feet,

And I lay gazing through the leaded pane,  
Idle, and listened to the swallows' cry  
After the flitting insect swiftly caught,  
—Those all-too-leisured hours as they went by,  
Stamped as their heritage upon my thought  
The memory of a square of summer sky  
Jagged by the gables of a Gothic court.

TO KNOLE

October 1, 1913

I

I LEFT thee in the crowds and in the light,  
And if I laughed or sorrowed none could tell.  
They could not know our true and deep farewell  
Was spoken in the long preceding night.

Thy mighty shadow in the garden's dip!  
To others dormant, but to me awake;  
I saw a window in the moonlight shake,  
And traced the angle of the gable's lip,

And knew thy soul, benign and grave and mild,  
Towards me, morsel of morality,  
And grieving at the parting soon to be,  
A patriarch about to lose a child.

For many come and soon their tale is told,  
And thou remainest, dimly feeling pain,  
Aware the time draws near to don again  
The sober mourning of the very old.

II

Pictures and galleries and empty rooms!  
Small wonder that my games were played alone;  
Half of the rambling house to call my own,  
And wooded gardens with mysterious glooms.

My fingers ran among the tassels faded;  
My playmates moved in arras brocaded;  
I slept beside the canopied and shaded  
Beds of forgotten kings.  
I wandered shoeless in the galleries;  
I contemplated long the tapestries,  
And loved the ladies for their histories  
And hands with many rings.

Beneath an oriel window facing south  
Through which the unniggard sun poured morning  
streams,  
I daily stood and laughing drank the beams,  
And, catching fistfuls, pressed them in my mouth.

This I remember, and the carven oak,  
The long and polished floors, the many stairs,  
Th' heraldic windows, and the velvet chairs,  
And portraits that I knew so well, they almost spoke.

III

So I have loved thee, as a lonely child  
Might love the kind and venerable sire  
With whom he lived, and whom at youthful fire  
Had ever sagely, tolerantly smiled;

In whose old weathered brain a boundless store  
Lay hid of riches never to be spent;

Who often to the coaxing child unbent  
In hours' enchantment of delightful lore.

So in the night we parted, friend of years,  
I rose a stranger to thee on the morrow;  
Thy stateliness knows neither joy nor sorrow,—  
I will not wound such dignity by tears.

## DISILLUSION

I WROTE the burning words to you  
That meant so much to me.  
I sent them speeding straight to you,  
To you across the sea;  
I waited with sure reckoning  
For your reply to me.

I waited, and the counted day  
Fruitlessly came and went;  
I made excuse for the delay,  
Pitiable confident.  
I knew to-morrow's light must bring  
The words you must have sent.

And still I stand on that dim verge  
And look across the sea;  
The waves have changed into a dirge  
Their volubility.  
And in my disillusioned heart  
Is a little grave for me.

But still with shaded eyes I gaze  
As mournfully I sing,  
And one by one the trailing days,  
As they no message bring,  
Fall with their slow monotony  
As beads fall from a string.

## THE BANQUET

WINE ran; rich yellow wine upon the marble floor  
Recklessly spilled; the Nubians ran to pour  
A fresh libation; and to scatter showers  
Of red rose petals; candles overturned  
Smouldered among the ruins of the flowers,  
And overhead swung heavy shadowy bowers  
Of blue and purple grapes,  
And strange fantastic shapes  
Of varied birds, where lanterns hung and dimly burned.

The melon and the orange, turned to use  
As golden balls with laughter lightly tossed,  
Lay burst and drained of their sweet juice,  
Uselessly ripened and for ever lost;  
All glowing as they lay upon the ground,  
As envious of their fellows,  
Who, piled in luscious reds and yellows,  
Enriched the tables all around,  
The tables low,  
Sheltering the reclining grace;  
Here, through the curling smoke, a swarthy face,  
And jewelled turban bound about the head,  
And here the glow

Of red carnation pressed to lips as warmly red.

And as they lay in their luxurious ease,  
Playing with grapes and rose-leaves, slim  
And willowy slave-girls, in the hope to please,  
Twisted and danced before them, to the dim  
Uncertain music in the shadows played;  
Some came with supple limb,  
With Mystery's aid  
And snake-like creep,  
Others with riotous leap  
And made festivity to Bacchus wed;  
Others with stiff Egyptian tread,  
And straight black hair hanging in glossy braid,  
They danced, unnoted, and exhausted fled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Still floated from beneath the acacia-tree  
The droning Eastern music's minor key.

### **MCMXIII**

SO prodigal was I of youth,  
Forgetting I was young;  
I worshipped dead men for their strength,  
Forgetting I was strong.

I cherished old, jejune advice;  
I thought I groped for truth;  
Those dead old languages I learned  
When I was prodigal of youth!

Then in the sunlight stood a boy,  
Outstretching either hand,  
Palm upwards, cup-like, and between  
The fingers trickled sand.

"Oh, why so grave" he cried to me,  
"Laugh, stern lips, laugh at last!  
Let wisdom come when wisdom may.  
The sand is running fast."

I followed him into the sun,  
And laughed as he desired,  
And every day upon the grass  
We play till we are tired.

### **A CREED**

THAT I should live and look with open eyes  
I count as half my claim to Paradise.  
I have not crept beneath cathedral arches,  
But bathed in streams beneath the silver larches;

And have not grovelled to the Sunday priest,  
But found an unconfined and daily feast;  
Was called ungodly, and to those who blamed  
Laughed back defiance and was not ashamed.

Some hold their duty to be mournful; why?  
I cannot love your weeping poets; I  
Am sad in winter, but in summer gay,  
And vary with each variable day.

And though the pious cavilled at my mirth,  
At least I rendered thanks for God's fair earth,

Grateful that I, among the murmuring rest,  
Was not an unappreciative guest.

## TO A POET WHOSE VERSES I HAD READ

I WOULD not venture to dispraise or praise.  
Too well I know the indifference which bounds  
A poet in the narrow working-grounds  
Where he is blind and deaf in all his ways.

He must work out alone his path to glory;  
A thousand breaths are fanning him along;  
A thousand tears end in one little song,  
A thousand conflicts in one little story;

A thousand notes swell to a single chord.  
He cannot tell where his direction tends;  
He strives unguided towards indefinite ends;  
He is an ignorant though absolute lord.

## NOMADS

FROM the shores of the Atlantic to the gardens of  
Japan,  
From the darkness of the Neva to the courts of  
Ispahan,  
There is nothing that can hold us, hold our wandering  
caravan.

Leisurely is our encamping; nowhere pause in hasty  
flight.  
Long enough to learn the secret, and the value, and  
the might,  
Whether of the northern mountains or the southern  
lands of light.

And the riches of the regions will be ours from land to  
land,  
Falling as a willing booty under our marauding  
hand,  
Rugs from Persia, gems from China, emeralds from  
Samarcand!

And the old forgotten empires, which have faded turn  
by turn,  
From the shades emerging slowly to their ancient sway  
return,  
And to their imperial manhood rise the ashes from  
the urn.

We have known Bzyantium's glory when the eagled  
flag was flown,  
When the ruins were not ruins; eagled visions have  
I known  
Of a spectral Roman emperor seated on a spectral  
throne.

We have tasted space and freedom, frontiers falling as  
we went,  
Now with narrow bonds and limits never could we be  
content,  
For we have abolished boundaries, straitened borders  
have we rent,

And a house no more confines us than the roving  
nomad's tent.

## THE GARDEN

We owned a garden on a hill,  
We planted rose and daffodil,  
Flowers that English poets sing,  
And hoped for glory in the Spring.

We planted yellow hollyhocks,  
And humble sweetly-smelling stocks,  
And columbine for carnival,  
And dreamt of Summer's festival.

And Autumn not to be outdone  
As heiress of the summer sun,  
Should doubly wreath her tawny head  
With poppies and with creepers red.

We waited then for all to grow,  
We planted wallflowers in a row.  
And lavender and borage blue,—  
Alas! we waited, I and you,  
But love was all that ever grew.

Long Barn  
Summer, 1915

## THE DANCING ELF\*

I WOKE to daylight, and to find  
A wreath of fading vine-leaves, rough entwined,  
Lying, as dropped in hasty flight, upon my floor.

Dropped from thy head, sweet Spirit of the night,  
Who cam'st, with footstep light,  
Blown in by the soft breeze, as thistledown,  
In through my open door.  
Whence? From the woodland, from the fields of corn,  
From flirting airily with the bright moon,  
Playing throughout the hours that go too soon,  
Ready to fly at the approach of morn,  
Thou cam'st,  
Bent on the curious quest  
To see what mortal guest  
Dwelt in the one-roomed cottage built to face the  
dawn.

Thou didst pause  
Shy, timid, on the threshold, though there laughed  
The mischief in thy roguish eyes, then soft,  
Thou crosst the room on tiptoe to my bed,  
One finger on thy lip,  
Cautious to make no slip,  
—I saw the wreath of vine-leaves on thy head.

Then with a twirl  
Thinking I slept,  
And a joyous whirl,  
Into a dance leapt  
The careless spirit too long restrained;  
The purest dancing,

Feet sometimes chancing  
To touch the ground;  
Then starting up with a fresh high bound,  
To hang for a moment poised in the air,  
And a glimpse of white teeth glancing  
And a laughing face beneath tossing hair;  
An orgy, a revel, a living joy,  
Embodied in one slim woodland boy,  
Dancing forward, backward, now here, now there,  
Swaying to every impulse unconstrained.

Thou wert too pure for Bacchus, and too young for  
Pan.

What wert thou? In the daytime dost thou sleep  
In a cave  
Like a grave,  
Till the moon calls thee, in the sleep of man,  
To thy light revels through the sombre deep  
Wood's shadows to a space among the trees,  
Where the breeze  
Makes music through the branches for thy dance,  
And the large-eyed and silent deer stand round  
Peeping through tree-trunks, and each forest sound  
—The trickling stream's  
Murmur in its dreams,  
The shepherd's pipe, far-echoing by chance,—  
Melt all for thee  
To one soft harmony,  
While for the lighting of thy mossy slope  
The moon thy lover sheds an opal glow,  
Pale silver-green, the colour of the leaves  
Of olive-trees,  
The limelight on the stage for Youth and Joy and  
Hope?  
And at the first rose menace of the dawn  
Must thou go,  
Fly to thy cave, thou little pagan Faun?

The fount of joy was bubbling in thine eyes,  
Dancing was in thy feet,  
And on thy lips a laugh that never dies,  
Unutterably sweet.  
Dance on! for ever young, for ever fair,  
Lightfooted as a frightened bounding deer,  
Thy wreath of vine-leaves twisted in thy hair,  
Through all the changing seasons of the year,  
And tread, to Autumn's gorgeous hymn of praise,  
And to the happy Spring's light lilt of pleasure,  
And to the dirgeful chant of Winter's days,  
And ever varying, ever suited measure;  
And in the Summer, when the reeking earth  
Swings a vast censer, as it is most meet,  
Praise thou for lavish gifts, new hopes, new birth,  
Praise with the dancing of thy tireless feet!

I woke to daylight, and to find  
A wreath of fading vine-leaves, rough entwined,  
Lying, as dropped in hasty flight, upon my floor.

\* Reprinted by kind permission of the Editor of the "English Review," where it first appeared in August 1913



DHJI-HAN-GHIR. For H.N.

FOR years it had been neglected,  
This wilderness garden of ours,  
And its ruin had shone reflected  
In its pools through abandoned hours.  
For none had cared for its beauty  
Till we came, the strangers, the Giaours,  
And none had thought of a duty  
Towards its squandering flowers.

Of broken wells and fountains  
There were half a dozen or more,  
And, beyond the sea, the mountains  
Of that far Bithynian shore  
Were blue in the purple distance  
And white was the cap they wore,  
And never in our existence  
Had life seemed brighter before!

And the fruit-trees grew in profusion,  
Quince and pomegranate and wine,  
And the roses in rich confusion  
With the lilac intertwine,  
And the Banksia rose, the creeper,  
Which is golden like yellow wine,  
Is surely more gorgeous and deeper  
In this garden of mine and thine.

And the little bright flowers in the grasses,  
Cyclamen, daffodil,  
Are crushed by the foot that passes,  
But seem to grow thicker still;  
In the cool grey fig-tree's shadows  
They grow at their own free will,  
In the grass as in English meadows,  
On the slope of an English hill.

Is it best, when the lone flute-player  
Wanders by with his strange little tune  
And the muezzin sings out for prayer  
Thrice daily his Arabic rune:  
Once, when the sunset has faded,  
Once in the brilliant noon,  
Or once in the daybreak, rose-shaded.  
A farewell to the dying moon?

### LEBLEBIDJI\*

I KNOW so well the busy cries  
That echo through the quarter  
Till daylight into evening dies  
And stars shine in the water,  
So dear they have become to me,  
Leblebidji! leblebidji!

On peaceful English country nights  
Their rapid gay succession  
And all the sea-reflected lights  
Will pass from my possession,  
But never from my memory,  
Leblebidji! leblebidji!

Past English evening scents and sounds,  
Past English church-bells ringing,

The Turkish watchman on his rounds,  
The Turkish pedlar singing  
Through narrow streets above the sea  
"Lelebidji! lelebidji,"

Will surely pierce a ghostly way,  
The music underlying,  
And in the shades of falling day  
As in the distance dying,  
A little call will come to me,  
"Lelebidji!" ...

\* Little white beans

## THE MUEZZIN

ABOVE the city at his feet,  
Above the dome, above the sea,  
He rises unconfined and free  
To break upon the noonday heat.

He turns around the parapet,  
Black-robed against the marble tower;  
His singing gains or loses power  
In pacing round the minaret.

A brother to the singing birds  
He never knew restraining walls,  
But freely rises, freely falls  
The rhythm of the sacred words.

I would that it to me were given  
To climb each day the muezzin's stair  
And in the warm and silent air  
To sing my heart out into Heaven.

## THE GREEK HAN

A SUNNY court with wooden balconies,  
And wool hung out to dry in gaudy skeins,  
A fountain, and some pigeons murmuringly  
Picking up yellow grains.

Pass through a little tumble-down green door  
Into the dark and crowded shop; the Turk  
Crouching above the brasier, smiles and nods;  
'Tis all his daily work.

Here marble heads and alabaster jars,  
Fragments of porphyry and Persian tiles,  
Lie heaped in ruin, and at our dismay  
The old Turk shrugs and smiles,

And sips his coffee, reaching out a hand  
To throw upon the brasier at his feet  
A handful of dried herbs, whose sudden smoke  
Rises up incense-sweet.

## YANGHIN VAR\*

AS the baying of wolves from afar,  
Borne on the wind from the Golden Horn

A cry in the distance, long-drawn,  
"Yanghin var! yanghin var!"

Suddenly waking the silent night,  
Suddenly breaking the sleeping calm,  
The long, far, wailing alarm,  
And the watch-tower startles a warning light.

As a torch passed from hand to hand,  
As a beacon springing from hill to hill,  
The cry draws nearer though distant still,  
And the watch throws it on from stand to stand,

And the voices rise as a tempest far,  
As the swell of waves on a rocky shore,  
Each rumbles louder than before,  
"Yanghin var! yanghin var!"

And as the angel's unpausing feet,  
The angel bearing the wrath of the Lord,  
The angel bearing the flaming sword,  
The voice passes onward below in the street.

Faintly it travels again from afar,  
And as an echo of terror past  
The wind from the Bosphorus bears the last  
Yanghin var. ...

\* Fire!

## MORNING IN CONSTANTINOPLE

SHE has an early morning of her own,  
A blending of the mist and sea and sun  
Into an undistinguishable one,  
And Saint Sophia, from her lordly throne

Rises above the opalescent cloud,  
A shadowy dome and soaring minaret  
Visible though the base be hidden yet  
Beneath the veiling wreaths of milky shroud,

As some dark Turkish beauty haughtily  
Glances above the yashmak's snowy fold.  
—Beyond Stamboul's long stretch, a bar of gold  
Falls from the sun across the distant sea.

## RETOUR EN SONGE

AFTER a dream-dim voyage  
We came with sails all set  
Towards the city of the sea,  
And it was wonderful to me  
To find her reigning yet.

Oh beauty that my eyes and heart  
Had feasted on before!  
The evening mosques were brushed with gold,  
The water lapped a lazy fold  
Upon that lovely shore;

The gardens of her terraced hills  
Rose up above the port,  
And little houses half concealed

The presence of a light revealed,  
And here my journey's end was sealed,  
And I reached the home I sought.

Those windows I had opened wide  
To welcome in the sun!  
Those stairs that only happy feet  
Had measured with their running beat!  
That well-remembered winding street!  
Twelve months that were as one!

Should others with their sordid cares  
And troubles enter here?  
Love hung about the rooms like smoke,  
And peace descended as a cloak,  
Should I allow the vulgar folk  
To desecrate that year?

—I laid the fuse with steady hand;  
We sailed into the night,  
From deck I watched the flames arise  
Remorseless as my tearless eyes  
That, with the waves and reddened skies,  
Flung back the angry light.

## CONSTANTINOPLE, MARCH MCMXV

I  
QUEEN of a double empire still she stands,  
And watches with superb indifferent eyes  
The eager wooing of Imperial hands  
Towards so fair and coveted a prize.

Royal and imperial suitors has she known  
Pass one by one across her dreaming years,  
And some a while have climbed the golden throne,  
And some have passed away in blood and tears;

For many emperors have sought her grace  
Since the first Constantine in sweeping cloak  
Her seven hills with broad unhurrying pace  
Measured, and rested not till Heaven spoke.

A haughty fatalist Byzantium waits  
What chance the storing centuries bring forth:  
Another lover almost at the gates,  
Heralded by the cannon of the North,

A Northern King to wed the Eastern Queen,  
An iron clasp to set the shining gem,  
Thrice-changed Constantinople to be seen  
The Jewel of a Russian diadem!

II  
O Saint Sophia, where the footstep falls  
Softly beneath the roofs of burnished gold,  
Shields of the Caliphs hang upon thy walls,  
Brand of bereaved dishonour ages old.

His charger raised on Christian corpses high,  
—O ravished bride of Christianity!—  
Here struck Mahomet's hand as he rode by,  
And seared the lustre of the porphyry,

And, interrupted in the sacred feast,  
Hearing the advent of the conqueror surge,

Into the wall miraculous the priest  
Entered, and waits the summons to emerge.

So on that high and ceremonial day  
When Russian Czar and prince, and Christian lord  
Throng Saint Sophia in their packed array  
To see the church's heritage restored,

When from mosaics re-established saints  
Look down once more upon a Christian crowd,  
And Echo startles into life, and faints  
With rapture at Gregorian chanting loud,

And Mass magnificently moving on  
Towards its climax, brings the moment near  
After the lapse of many centuries gone  
For Christ in priestly hands to reappear,

When the exultant organ's chord has ceased  
And every head is bowed expectantly,  
—Then at the altar the Byzantine priest  
Shall hold aloft the Host triumphantly!

## RESOLUTION

I SEE the work of others, and my heart  
Sinks as my own achievement I compare.  
—I will not be irresolute, nor despair,  
But battle strongly for my struggling art

Convinced against conviction that my part  
Equally with my masters I can bear;  
Although their monuments are very fair,  
Enriched with statues, and I stand apart

And gaze upon my little heap of stones  
Which I was given to build with, very few  
As yet laid into place, but I will lay

—Blind to these marble monuments and thrones,  
Building as though I confidently knew  
My ultimate end,—a stone in place each day.

END

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