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Small Antiques: Six Poems for Valentine Ackland

Sylvia Townsend Warner*

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*(1893–1978)

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Abstract

A sequence of six poems by Sylvia Townsend Warner dedicated to Valentine Ackland and presumably inspired by some of the antiques in which she started trading in 1952.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; Valentine Ackland; antiques; Mr Edom; sequence of poems.

Editor's note: Warner wrote to William Maxwell in August 1952 to tell him about a new enterprise: 'the other thing that has happened this week is that Valentine has burst into business, and has opened, not a shop but the room of indetermined purpose that houses the piano and the sewing machine and the geraniums, for the sake of Victoriana and antiques' (The Element of Lavishness, p. 35). The blossoming of the business led to Warner's charming sequence of stories about Mr Edom, the owner of Abbey Antiques, and also to this previously unpublished sequence dedicated to Valentine and dated 1953–54.

Small Antiques: Six Poems

1

The drought of time has parched the heavens away;
But though in shrivelled strands they fall
The stitchworks rooks are flying still,
And still the Boy is gay.
Trailing his flag, waving his feathered hat,
Out from his cottage home he runs to greet
The morning of an irrecoverable day.

2

The lady sat sewing at serges and hopsacks,
At taffetas, calicoes, muslins, and cambrics,
And flannel and nainsook and bombazine;
But her wandering heart was away in the Trossachs
Or down by the shores of Loch Katrine.

Her sight was weary of lockstitch and garter-
Stitch, gathers and gussets and cuff and collar,
And tuck and picot and ruffle and roux;
But loud in her soul rang the song of the Harper,
Like wine was the warcry of Roderick Dhu.

3

It was my mother's maiden name –
Elizabeth Wall –
She thought not so for ever;
But stormy seas did rise and whelm
And drowned the giver
Who gave her me, a child of shame.

He carved it on this parting pledge –
Elizabeth Wall –
I never got another,
But lived a virgin sad and sage;
As I did mother,
Snuff comforts me in my old age.

4

Daniel is shriven from the den,
 And must the lions remain?
 They grieve at this disparity
 For they were good as he.
 Their eyes with solemn tears are ripe,
 In vain their tears must fall:
 Daniel is Jesu's antetype,
 While they are Death and Hell.

5

Long-a-day the Ox drew,
 Hauled the load and tugged the plough,
 Work was bred into his bones,
 Gender filched from out his loins.
 On his rump the stick taboured,
 Under heat or wet he laboured
 Till the one day came to pass
 Of salting slaughtering Martinmass.

Then upon another day
 Wit took up a vertebra
 And discerned a judgment seat
 For minister or advocate.
 With his paintbrush and penknife
 He brought the mannikin to life –
 Rosy, pawky, pursed and bland,
 And set off with wig and band.

Advocate or Minister,
 Skill of this or next world's lore,
 Perch like butterflies upon
 Labour as on the oxen-bone.

Small was the hand, and gloved,
And its ring-finger grooved
By lawful matrimony,
That to mass or to market
Was wont to carry it.

For the considered purchase
Of brie, romaine, cervelas,
Out came the little money,
With a sou for the beggar
On the steps of Sacré Coeur.

Female use and wont
Polished the bold front
Of Delacroix's Liberty
With a smoking gun
Urging her rebels on.

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