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A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K



*From the
Sketchbooks of*

VANESSA BELL

POEMS BY ALLISON FUNK

ALLISON FUNK has published two books of poems, *Living at the Epicenter*, which won the Samuel French Morse Prize (Northeastern University Press, 1995) and *Forms of Conversion* (Alice James Books, 1986). Her third full-length book will be published by The Sheep Meadow Press in 2002. She has received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, the George Kent Prize from *Poetry* magazine, the Celia B. Wagner Prize from the Poetry Society of America, and the 1995 Award for Poetry from the Society of Midland Authors. Her work was included in *The Best American Poetry, 1994*. Individual poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Shenandoah*, and other journals. Educated at Columbia University, she is Professor of English at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville.

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*“The point about you is that you are now mistress of the phrase.
All your pictures are built up of flying phrases.”*

(Virginia Woolf in a letter written to her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, 5 March 1927, from *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*.)

Self-Portrait of the Artist

I am wading through masses of currants,
stripping them into bottles,
six done, three more now,

and the bushes are laden. Currant red,
goya, blood underlying vermilion.
A painter starting over

scrapes off layer after layer.
How small the berry becomes
under the knife, how still.

Inside, near the tart center,
where the eye is a liar,
the tongue remembers.

It's a shudder of mind
that seizes the globe,
swallows it whole.

*Study for an Interior With the Artist,
Leslie Stephen and Virginia Woolf*

A green eyed brat?

Not quite, but Virginia was always Father's favorite,
just outside the room

when he slammed his fist against the book
shouting, "I am ruined. Have you no pity,
standing there like a block of stone?"

Though she could see through the door standing open
how, as skillfully as the best models at the Academy,
I did not blink, did not stretch a limb,

she couldn't have known how much I missed Mother,
dead then two years, how alone without her,
the eighteen-year-old mistress of the house,

I feared the inquisition those Wednesdays
Father checked my accounts,
weeks I was ten, eleven pounds over.

No one knew
how by picturing a scene
I learned I could leave it.

I am drawing Vanessa still,
now, as then, determined not to alter a feature
in my rendering,

the arms ending at her waist
in one quiet fist.
Eyes marooned in that resolute face,

she could be at sea, so far
is she from her father,
who, in his rocking, gets smaller

and smaller, his voice fading away
until it makes no difference if his mouth still moves,
she no longer hears what he's saying.

Study for "Adam and Eve," 1913

She was never far from us,
floating spirit
at the edge of a scene,

flame in the Florentine evening.
May, 1909—
Virginia, asleep in England.

Clive and I after dinner
on the verandah of our hotel,
32, Via Romana.

Imagine a woman
admiring the forms and fading colours
of olive and grape distant from London's scrim,

the man who seeing in his wife
her sister's face
reaches for her hand. *She*

is in his fingers, on his breath,
the woman thinks. And now the firefly
in the grass dazzles them both.

When the chapter ended,
we were all expelled from the garden.
I, who cannot speak of my pain,

Virginia, always wishing to be forgiven,
and Clive, who learned from her
the words to betray me.

The Artist in Her Studio

Finally alone, without daughter
or sons, my brush the only tongue moving.
Curves and hollows,

deep shadows and silver edges.
In the quiet, even the tiresome coal scuttle
assumes a secret life.

Sometimes, beneath the touchable surface,
mine reveals itself, cobalt blue
beneath the body's apparent blush,

interlocking circles, intersecting lines.
It's a particular window, north light,
everyone else is sleeping.

Look and look
and you can leave the material world
for a vanishing point.

Study for "Interior With Two Women," 1932

When she wrote *Orlando*
my sister imagined a single life
in which one could be a man

and also a woman.

I have never imagined myself
like that. But I know the tissue-thin division.

Shoreline. The least wind altering the fringe.
The indeterminate hours, dusk
and, sometimes, if we're lucky,

the awakening.

Where there was one woman,
there are two when I step back,

put down my pencil,
pick it up. The seated figure in sleeves
seems about to smooth the pleats in her skirt

while opposite
the nude covers the place
where her sex folds in on itself.

What would they say to one another
if they could speak, for once
more than oil and dust,

the slippery medium
that quiets the whispering in the hedge,
the secrets the garden would tell,

except for this.
I will paint the coal stove
dead center in the canvas

like the vertical support
for a balance.

Breast for bodice, lit face

counterweight for the dark,
the beam levels: this is my balm,
my art.

Untitled Drawing

Shrapnel. That light
blinds fail to shut out.
I cannot bear to see.

When I open my eyes, my son's chest
opens. Closing them
changes nothing.

What has art to do with this, Velázquez?
I cannot even begin—
every way an impasse

between the Prado and the grave
where his beloved Republicans
buried my Julian.

Landscape in Wartime, May 1941

I imagine it's like blackout driving.
All the landscapes one has known,
the margins of the road obscured.

A kind of fog.
And for those the loved one's left behind?
For them as well the road goes on and on—

one cannot recognize a thing.
The windows with their blackout curtains
drawn, brick like stone, colour gone

and over all of this—the gloom,
the lamps that one has navigated by
put out—the Germans fly unseen.

Madness. The way they'd invade Sussex.
The static of guns. Nothing
intelligible. Broken syllables,

then something
like the current
that carried my sister away.

Self-Portrait: 30 May 1944

All night, powered by a dynamo
that thunders away in a nearby field,
a searchlight scans the sky for the enemy,

and I, turning over the drawings
I've made through the years,
look into these mirrors

for some other shape the light might return to me,
nothing the soldiers camped close to us
could see, no, in the still field

of my house, this room
I would fill the frame like the giant moth
I remember against our pane.

As large as a bat, bird, nothing
could kill it—not even chloroform.
The moth took its own slow time.

Landscape, Virginia's House

Today the light is irresolute,
pastel rising over the hills,
levitating in the mist,

then settling down over the tomatoes
and onions, the kitchen garden.
I follow it across the yard

as it skims the water lilies
in the pond, the columbine,
to the great elm

where Virginia's ashes lie.
I am less interested these days
in how we fell away from each other.

The light that dusts the surface,
sticks and the grey-blue stones water burnishes,
flowing over everything, may be perfect,

though what it glazes is flawed. Love,
love seems lately
to abide in the light.

Ruined Frescoes, 1949

Here now in Pisa I imagine the stench
on that blistering day,
German, American bombers over the city,

the lead roof of the Campo Santo
melting down over its walls, ruining
all those beautiful frescoes.

Incendiary heart,
when will the burning stop?
What can appease it?

Surely not a birthmark or breast,
a child's braided hair—
the whole panicked town

at best a blur from the cockpit
as Giotto's vision, holy mother
and son, darkened and ran.

What remains? The rubble of Pisa,
my firstborn dead, I am thinking
on the long walk from the station.

And then, to find what the war revealed
under the plaster applied bit by bit
as if beneath consciousness,

deep as earliest sight:
the elaborately human studies of saints,
drawn in the freest hand.

Our semblance,
what is finally
unfinished.

Study for a Portrait of Virginia Woolf

I will paint her one last time,
not from life as then,
1912, my easel propped upon the lawn,

Virginia still young
in a wide-brimmed hat,
head tilted back,

after her long flirtation
with Clive. Four years—between us
the rope that was my husband.

Listen.
A child is crying
from another part of the garden,

a stray gull seeking its bearings. This
and the postman knocking,
the cows at milking, a distant hammering,

all of it, the din
of conscience. But no apology,
no confession.

Half hidden by my easel,
I pressed my brush against her nose and mouth
till she could neither breathe

nor see—losing face that time
literally. To finish her
I knotted red about her neck;

choosing brown for her last dress
I lay her out—
the only way I had of saying how I felt.

Now I imagine her begging for her life:
Nessa, what were those four years
against the forty since? she asks.

After everything, Sweet William,
her namesake, blooms this spring, floating pink
above the lawn's green rim,

the porcelain
I place the clusters in to paint
again. A flower in water,

the face I catch now in my studio mirror
seems for a moment her own.
Full Stephen mouth, eyes the grey-blue

of pebbles along my garden's path,
or darker, where they lie unsettled,
buried in the River Ouse. Water by bending the light

so blurs the here and now with before
I turn from my palette.
Her last portrait will be a silhouette,

for my hand remembers the outline
of her face as well as an old horse knows
the way home, uphill and down,

where the road curves, gravel turns now
to dust. In the late afternoon sun of Sussex
I am drawing her, in ink this time.

She might call what I'm doing
revision, understanding the light we're in,
like the story, keeps changing.

Notes on the Life of Vanessa Bell

The following biographical background may be interesting to readers who are not familiar with Vanessa Bell's life.

Born Vanessa Stephen May 30, 1879, in London, the painter was the sister of writer Virginia Woolf (b. 1882). Their complex relationship, loving and troubled, is documented in the letters that they wrote to one another (in which Vanessa often addressed Virginia by her nickname, Billy). Their siblings included Thoby (b. 1880) and Adrian (b. 1883), as well as two half brothers, George and Gerald Duckworth, and two half sisters, Stella Duckworth and Laura Stephen. Their parents were Julia Jackson Duckworth Stephen, who died in 1895, when Vanessa was 15, and Sir Leslie Stephen, well-known biographer and literary historian.

Vanessa, who had wanted to be a painter from early childhood, entered the Royal Academy Schools in 1901. In 1907 she married Clive Bell and gave birth to their son Julian, in 1908, and second son, Quentin, in 1910. Around 1909, Clive began a flirtation with Virginia which profoundly affected the sisters' relationship. From then on he was rarely without a mistress. Though they remained married and friends, Clive and Vanessa lived largely apart from one another.

Vanessa fell in love with the painter Duncan Grant in 1913 and she spent most of the rest of her life with him at Charleston Farmhouse (near Firle, in Sussex) and in London. They had a daughter, Angelica, born in 1918. Vanessa's son Julian died of shrapnel wounds in 1937 in Spain, where he had volunteered as an ambulance driver for Spanish Medical Aid. In March of 1941, Virginia killed herself by drowning in the River Ouse near Monk's House (in Rodmell, Sussex), where she and her husband, Leonard Woolf, were living during the Second World War.

From 1910 through the First World War, Vanessa Bell's art placed her in the vanguard of British modernism. Her work was included in Roger Fry's Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London in 1912 and she co-directed the Omega Workshops, which wed Post-Impressionism and interior design. She painted and exhibited her work all her life. Vanessa Bell died of heart failure on April 7, 1961, at Charleston.



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by Allison Funk

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