

Introduction

This series of poems is part of a book-length manuscript about the life of the British painter Vanessa Bell.

Bell was born in 1879 and died in 1961. She was a member of the Bloomsbury Group; the sister of the novelist Virginia Woolf; married to Clive Bell; had a long-term relationship with the painter Duncan Grant; and had two children by Bell, Julian and Quentin, and one by Grant, Angelica. She lived in London and a house called Charleston, in Sussex, England.

In Short: A Life

I love form, I see in groups of three.
I had three siblings, two died.
Two sisters and half-brothers
I don't like to count.
One half-sister died,
the other went mad.
I had three children, one died,
but that was later.
My husband had many mistresses,
I had lovers (of a sort).
My lovers had lovers and continued to visit.
My sister needed much looking after—
raving headaches or deathly silence.
This early painting survived the Blitz.
A medicine bottle, a bowl, a druggist's pot.
Iceland poppies, leafless stems,
straight and limp as old string.

Rosary's Opposite

Virginia ticked the name of a rival with each bead
In my necklace. Thoby, Adrian, Stella---I wasn't to prefer
any to Virginia, even for this moment.
Angry, her face as amethystine as the necklace.

After whooping cough we all turned pale as moths,
in bed she told tales of gold hidden under our floor
and stones purple as royalty: amethyst,
the stone of second sight.

London/Cornwall/Age Ten

In London the sky is grey
grey clouds that come down close and thick
 like a father
 like mad sisters
 like a pillow over one's head.

Or stud the sky
like the thud of a book
dropping to the floor.

The sea is purple
with orange clouds
green with yellow clouds
pink with blue
The waves in the sky surround the lighthouse.
The sky sounds like the sea.

What Stella Gave Me

My sane older sister

My birthday, shared with her

May 30 1869

May 30 1879

My first music lesson

My first chalks, my first chance to draw in colour

My last kiss of my mother's cold face and

a glimpse of light after mother died

My calendar of periods, she wrote in her diary

My love of her pale skin

My watch, I wore all my life

My beauty when I came out

My gold and blue enamel necklace

My first look at men's obsession lust love

My second look at death

My romance with her widower

My job to look after father and Virginia

A Widower

Mother died,
Stella died,
life at Hyde Park Gate
endless drama
 self-pity
 affected remorse
especially on Wednesdays
when father examined the accounts.

Nothing ever changed.
We were quite well off.
We were at home afternoons
and salmon and strawberries
for Aunt Mary and Lady Kathryn
would have been missed
had we scrimped at tea.

At eighteen, my pencil poised
over ledgers for hours,
accounting for money,
no sums under sundries.

No drawings.