

15 April 1851

Di Sylvester



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Author's note

This collection speaks to the heterogeneity of human experience by engaging with a melange of Victorians—all living in England, but each living a very different 15 April 1851.

Each poem is tethered to at least one historical artefact—most to a letter or a newspaper article. I have used these artefacts to spark imaginings.

The extent to which each poem is grounded in the past varies. To enable the curious reader to determine the extent to which any particular poem is grounded in historical sources, I have included endnotes identifying the sources for each poem, together with a reference list.

Unless otherwise indicated, any italicised text is sourced from the relevant historical document.

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April 2024

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There are days, and there are other days. There is an endless string of days. Days on which we light. Days on which we land. Days on which we linger. Some days drift beyond us, shrouded in yearning. Some days lift. Others dump, abandon us downstream. There are days the buds peep open and squint into the sun. There are days on which they wilt, weary of its glare. There are blue-sky days that beckon. And black-cloud days that thunder. Some days, a crescent moon loiters, paste-faced in the afternoon. On other days it hides, then rises, full-bold into gloaming. But each day comes just once. And once it came: fifteen April, eighteen fifty-one.

Euphemia in the National Gallery, with Constance: ‘Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba’

after Claude Lorrain

We enter the space of the room
and see the heavy frame—gold and grooved
and fruity. It sidles a deep-red wall.
It cannot hold the light that flares

beneath a pale of blue, that spills
pink into cloud-mist, that pours itself
onto turquoise waves—wakes the Red Sea,
laps apricot sands, and pulses a watery scrawl.

On either side, milk-white columns brace
the morning sky, gather the light and slide
it into the harbour. The sands contain
the water—but the light spills on us.

Constance smiles, and speaks:
*Turner wept here when he was young,
stood right here and wept. Thought
he would never paint light, like this.*

But see the Queen of Sheba, stepping down,
flushed beneath her golden crown. See her place
her hand on the courtier’s arm, lest she slip
between quay and tapestried tender.

Lest she never sail her treasure-hoard to camel-run
Jerusalem. Lest she, and her hairy legs, miss out
—never kneel before King Solomon or consummate
her quest, never hear his breath-notes, never ask

difficult questions.

She steps (might we follow?) carefully.

She seeks her far-off erudite.

She seeks his sure acuity.

She seeks her quiet enlightenment
and she will have his secret.