Sylvia Plath

A Pre-Raphaelite Notebook

Primroses; salutations; the miry skull of a half-eaten ram; viscous wounds in earth opening. What seraphs⁶ are afoot.

Cold seraph to gold worm in the pierced slime: greetings. Advent of power-in-grace. The power of flies distracts the working of our souls.

Earth's abundance. The God-ejected Word resorts to flesh, procures carrion, satisfies its white hunger. Salvation's travesty

a deathless metaphor: the stale head sauced in original blood; the little feast foaming with cries of rapture and despair.

5. That is, of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of nineteenth-century British artists and writers who took medieval art as a model, combining representations of man and nature with hints of elaborate allegorical reference.

6. Highest order of angels, the guardians of God's throne.

SYLVIA PLATH

There is a tradition in our culture that the writing of poetry is a dangerous vocation, that great wits are, in fact, to madness near allied, and that poets sometimes court emotional disaster, discovering within themselves areas of pain, confusion, and heartbreak which they transform into works of art, occasions for their readers for fear, trembling, and compassion. In plain English: sometimes poets near the brink of emotional disaster fashion poems which comfort and heal. In the poetry written in English in the last thirty years, that written by Sylvia Plath is a signal and undisguised example of the agonizing and yet creative relationship between pain and creativity. Sylvia Plath's first years were years of solid bourgeois success: she did all the things and won all the prizes that a young American woman was meant to. Yet tacking within her was the inevitability, as it seems to us now, of her tragic poems and her self-inflicted death. Sylvia Plath's poetry is a document of extremity. Her sensitivity is inordinate, but so is her ability to express it. The result is a holy scream, a splendid agony—beyond sex, beyond delicacy, beyond all but art.

The poems began in trouble. In Crossing the Water, "Stillborn" criticizes its companions:

These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis.
They grew their toes and fingers well enough,
Their little foreheads bulged with concentration.
If they missed out on walking about like people
It wasn't for any lack of mother love.

The vital maneuver was the fusion of art and madness, the poet's control of intolerable pain, the direct flight of dew to the sun, the unwavering suicidal course. The passionate response that Sylvia Plath evokes is proof of her testing of our time. She exercises a fury, a possession.

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When he was from Grabow it university and went 1932. Thereafter operatively 1
1935, about two Otto Plath died assault on the p

Nothing on the of a brute like ye daughter admit mistaken for "D from the father's accounts, the eva Sylvia Plath's cards, scholarsh a election to Phi E year, a breakup final at Smith through a secon They come to A reading of stude ten, the couple 1960, and Nicho moved back alone then with her. I pair, girl or "int at the age of thir

There is always tional sense of th it suggested cruel shames. This wa observation, conv sight. In her now confined, but alc

For Americans, the familiarity of Sylvia Plath's history heightens the irony. Everyone in New England knows the hotdog stands on the edge of the water, and everyone in America knows the ineradicable progress from primary school to high school and to college. The sheer banality of Plath's beginnings—in, for example, Lois Ames's account—is stunning—all saddle shoes and report cards. She is proof that talent is independent of environment—how very much she made of very little.

When he was fifteen, Sylvia Plath's father, Otto Plath, came to the United States from Grabow in Poland. As an adult, he taught biology and German at Boston University and wrote a treatise on bees. His daughter, Sylvia, was born on October 27, 1932. Thereafter, the father anticipated the birth of a son as well, whom Mrs. Plath co-operatively produced—almost exactly at the time her husband specified, April 27, 1935, about two years after Sylvia. (This brother is the subject of several poems.) Otto Plath died in 1940, resulting in his daughter's elegy, "Daddy," an unnerving assault on the parent:

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygook.
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—

Nothing on the family surface prepares us for this outburst, "the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you." One feels perhaps a twinge of sympathy for Otto Plath. And his daughter admitted that her father, long dead and scarcely known, was not to be mistaken for "Daddy," cruel, destructive, the masculine principle gone mad. Apart from the father's premature death, the daughter's history is shallow. In biographical accounts, the events are generally innocuous, even hackneyed. At its time, one arrived at Sylvia Plath's suicide without much premonition of its causes. There are report cards, scholarships at Smith College, prizes like a month's editing of a magazine, election to Phi Beta Kappa, a summa cum laude graduation. At the end of the junior year, a breakdown is recorded in The Bell Jar, but this is succeeded by a triumphant final year at Smith. A Fulbright year at Cambridge University is won, and extended through a second year. In 1956 Sylvia Plath marries the English poet, Ted Hughes. They come to America for more than a year, and she teaches at Smith. But the reading of students' papers consumes all her energy, and, after a short time in Boston, the couple return to England. They have two children: Frieda, born on April 1, 1960, and Nicholas, born on January 17, 1962. By the end of 1962, Sylvia Plath has moved back alone to London from the family home in Devon, and brought the children with her. In the few months before her death, she is still talking about an au pair girl or "mother's helper," to relieve her for writing. Next, on February 11, 1963, at the age of thirty, she is dead:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

There is always, with her, a sense of not knowing her, and consequently an exceptional sense of the poetry as truth. Her appearance was deceptive: it gave pleasure, it suggested crude health. The only tell-tale sign, perhaps, was the blocking of her phalanges. This was indicative, suggesting Sylvia Plath's repeated barricades against observation, conviviality. In all her suicidal attempts, she preferred a crawling out of sight. In her novel, The Bell Jar, there is not only the sensation of being caught and pinnied, but also that of unerring light. As she says in "The Hanging Man,"

By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.
I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.
The lights snapped out of sight like a lizard's eyelid:
A world of bald white days in a shadeless socket.

The blessed privacy and oblivion of sleep were denied her. In her final success, her head is stuck into the gas oven.

At the same period of her life in London, she concentrates with a dreadful honesty on painful facts. "I am inhabited by a cry," she had written in "Elm," and the cry is heard now in all its ferocity. Tulips were sent to her in the hospital—never was a gift so rudely received! "The vivid tulips eat my oxygen," and they are "A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck." Even the children, whom she cared for faithfully, are abandoned in the verse. A rare tribute to Nicholas occurs in "Nick and the Candlestick":

You are the one
Solid the spaces lean on, envious.
You are the baby in the barn.

More representative is the comment upon her daughter, in the poem "Lesbos":

You say I should drown the kittens. Their smell
You say I should drown my girl.
She'll cut her throat at ten if she's mad at two.

Yet these poems are not solipsistic. "Daddy" expands to indict Nazism:

I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene
An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

And "Fever 103" remembers Hiroshima:

Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin.

Always the expansion is by conviction: the self pains and the world pains too. The interchange of person and world is at once seamless and profound.

The Colossus

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.
It's worse than a barnyard.

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
Thirty years now I have labored
To dredge the silt from your throat.
I am none the wiser.

Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of lysol
I crawl like an ant in mourning.
Lady Lazarus

Over the weedy acres of your brow
To mend the immense skull plates and clear
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

A blue sky out of the Oresteia
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.
I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress.
Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered

In their old anarchy to the horizon-line.
It would take more than a lightning-stroke
To create such a ruin.
Nights, I squat in the cornucopia
Of your left ear, out of the wind,

Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.
The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
My hours are married to shadow.
No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
On the blank stones of the landing.

Lady Lazarus

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it—

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?—

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

1. The trilogy by the Greek tragic playwright, Aeschylus, in which the murder of King Agamemnon by his wife Clytemnestra is avenged by their children, Elektra and Orestes.
2. Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus Christ (John 11:44).
3. The skins of some Jewish victims of the Nazis were used to make lampshades.
And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot—
The big strip tease.
Gentleman, ladies,

These are my hands,
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

"A miracle!"
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart—
It really goes.
And there is a charge, a very large charge,
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer,
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

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**Elm**

*For Ruth Fainlight*¹

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root.²
It is what you fear.
I do not fear it: I have been there.

Is it the sea you hear in me,
Its dissatisfactions?
Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?

Love is a shadow.
How you lie and cry after it.
Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,
Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,
Echoing, echoing.

². Primary root, hence, anything that has a central position in a line of development.
Sylvia Plath

Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?
This is rain now, this big hush.
And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic.

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.
Scorched to the root
My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
A wind of such violence
Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.

The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me
Cruelly, being barren.
Her radiance seathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.

I let her go. I let her go
Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.
How your bad dreams possess and endow me.

I am inhabited by a cry.
Nightly it flaps out
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?

I am incapable of more knowledge.
What is this, this face
So murderous in its strangue of branches?

Its snaky acids kiss.
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
That kill, that kill, that kill.

Poppies in October

Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts.
Nor the woman in the ambulance
Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly—

A gift, a love gift.
Utterly unmasked for
By a sky

Palely and flamily
Igniting its carbon monoxides, by eyes
Dulled to a halt under bowlers.
O my God, what am I
That these late mouths should cry open
In a forest of frost, in a dawn of cornflowers.

Ariel

Stasis in darkness.
Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor and distances.

God's lioness,
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels and knees!—The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to
The brown arc
Of the neck I cannot catch,

Nigger-eye
Berries cast dark
Hooks—

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
Shadows.
Something else

Hauls me through air—
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.

White
Godiva, I unpeel—
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child's cry

Melts in the wall.
And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

8. The airy spirit in Shakespeare's The Tempest; also, the name of Sylvia Plath's horse.
Daddy

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one grey toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du'

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
Fever 103°

And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die.
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf² look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I’m finally through.
The black telephone’s off at the root,
The voices just can’t worm through.

If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two—
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There’s a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.

Pure? What does it mean?
The tongues of hell
Are dull, dull as the triple

Fever 103°

² Mein Kampf (My Battle) was the title of Adolf Hitler’s political autobiography.
Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus\(^3\)
Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable
Of licking clean

The aiguey tendon, the sin, the sin.
The tinder cries.
The indelible smell

Of a snuffed candle!
Love, love, the low smokes roll
From me like Isadora’s scarves, I'm in a fright

One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel.\(^4\)
Such yellow sullen smokes
Make their own element. They will not rise,

But trundle round the globe
Choking the aged and the meek,
The weak

Hothouse baby in its crib,
The ghastly orchid
Hanging its hanging garden in the air,

Devilish leopard!
Radiation turned it white
And killed it in an hour.

Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin.

Darling, all night
I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.
The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss.

Three days. Three nights.
Lemon water, chicken
Water, water make me retch.

I am too pure for you or anyone.
Your body
Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern—

My head a moon
Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin
Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.

Does not my heat astound you. And my light.
All by myself I am a huge camellia
Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.

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3. The three-headed dog of Greek mythology which guarded the gate of Hades.
4. Isadora Duncan (1878–1927) American dancer, was strangled when her scarf caught in the wheel of her car.
Blackberrying

I think I am going up,
I think I may rise—
The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I

Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim,
By whatever these pink things mean.
Not you, nor him

Not him, nor him
(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)—
To Paradise.

Blackberrying

Nobody in the lane, and nothing, nothing but blackberries,
Blackberries on either side, though on the right mainly,
A blackberry alley, going down in hooks, and a sea
Somewhere at the end of it, heaving. Blackberries
Big as the ball of my thumb, and dumb as eyes
Ebon in the hedges, fat
With blue-red juices. These they squander on my fingers.
I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me.
They accommodate themselves to my milkbottle, flattening their sides.

Overhead go the choughs in black, cacophonous flocks—
Bits of burat paper wheeling in a blown sky.
Their is the only voice, protesting, protesting.
I do not think the sea will appear at all.
The high, green meadows are glowing, as if lit from within.
I come to one bush of berries so ripe it is a bush of flies,
Hanging their blue-green bellies and their wing panes in a Chinese screen.
The honey-feast of the berries has stunned them; they believe in heaven.
One more hook, and the berries and bushes end.

The only thing to come now is the sea.
From between two hills a sudden wind funnels at me,
Slapping its phantom laundry in my face.
These hills are too green and sweet to have tasted salt.
I follow the sheep path between them. A last hook brings me
To the hills' northern face, and the face is orange rock
That looks out on nothing, nothing but a great space
Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths
Beating and beating at an intractable metal.