

An Oracle in *Ariel*

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It was in Creative Writing class my senior year of high school: We were studying a poem on the recto of *Sound and Sense*, a textbook I failed to return when the year was over, and during the tedious discussion my eyes wandered across the page to find Sylvia Plath's "Mirror."

In my mind's eye the mirror was that baroque gilded monstrosity my mother had hanging in the dining room. The woman is blonde with stringy hair, the fish gapes at me like those ridiculous singing bass available in Walgreens. *Pink, with speckles*: like peppermint bark, or the wall of the ladies' room in a 50s-style diner. I know this colour. You have my attention, Sylvia. I'm listening.

I read *The Bell Jar* at age 21. I checked the book out of the library, a hardback in green twill. The voice was immediate and modern, unexpectedly so. It was vibrant and alive, bitchy and boisterous. We clicked.

Like many women before me, like many women after, I recognised myself in that book; the frustration of being misunderstood, of being sensitive and gifted, bored but special. And ego: ego and arrogance.

Plath's vitriol gave me liberation: this smiling, sunny '50s debutante spat nails in her poems. She looked cuddly and happy yet her work was abrasive and vicious. This duality intrigued me. Five years older than my mother, Plath seemingly carried much of the same 1950s goody-goody charm my mother embodied: freshly scrubbed, carefully coiffed, red lipstick'd and Noxema-scented. And much like my mother, Plath smiled brightly in her photos despite her inner tumult. My mother will go to her grave meeting the camera's lens with a smile plastered on her face.

Plath's work became a touchstone for me in times of personal crisis. Separated by a generation, by death, by class and education and skill, we still shared enough that I could take solace in her life and the product of that experience. Her biography chartered a course that reassured me.

My life choices are unconventional; I don't personally know anyone who has done what I am doing. So when I moved to London, she comforted me; knowing she had gone through the culture shock as well made me feel better about my own reactions.

I often think of Dido Merwin's rant about Sylvia eating all the cheese at the back of *Bitter Fame*, that snide 'ooh yes Her Nibs had to have a brand new cooker and fridge didn't she' dig about wanting new white goods. I've had a fair number of flats since moving to London and I don't blame her one bit for wanting new appliances. There were days I'd sell my soul for a damn mixer tap in the bathroom. And that's *fifty years later*.

I think of Plath appearing in the dreary black-and-white of Britain in glorious American Technicolor, a red patent leather bomb going off, and the befuddled British staring at her uncomprehendingly, just as they stared at me: not matching the stereotype they'd constructed of what American women are like.

Reading *Letters Home* rings familiar, these messages about funding child care and transatlantic money transfers; a worried mother so far away from her daughter and grandchildren, the assertion Plath couldn't move back to the US when she had access to the NHS, Sylvia's impatience with Aurelia's worry.

She is there when I need her. The autumn I was pregnant for the first time, relieved to be back in Britain after a harrowing six weeks' bedrest resulting from a pregnancy complication while on holiday in the U.S., I spent her birthday week at her husband's house in Heptonstall on a writing retreat. I lazed around Lumb Bank, popping logs on the fire, reading poetry, listening to the lull of cows; felt the baby kick as I wandered the rain-streaked streets of Heptonstall to find a miniature White Goddess glinting on Plath's grave in the wet Yorkshire sun. It was my Yaddo: I wrote two poems for her birthday.

Her lines scroll inside my eyelids, little incantations: "Fever 103°" while curled on the cool tile of my mother's bathroom (*Lemon water, chicken water, water make me retch*), "Morning Song" when playing with my infant son's feet (*Love set you going like a fat gold watch. The midwife slapped your footsoles*), "Wintering" when I rescue downed bumble bees (*The bees are flying. They taste the spring*).

I know her work because I've lived her work. Plath conveys moments only poetry can truly capture like horoscopes: you've either had your life read to you or your future told.

It saddens me sometimes to think of her lost work. What poems would she have drafted had she found the strength to go on? What would she have had to say about her 40s, that age when women own who they are? The academy largely regards her *Ariel* Voice as the apex of her talents, but what if it wasn't? What if *Ariel* was her breakthrough collection but her masterpiece was still to be written? What about her 50s, her 60s, all the changes she would have seen, the recognition she knew was her due? The romances she was still to have, the challenges of her children, all those chapters in her mythology unwritten, unlived.

It scares me a bit that I don't have her guidance anymore: whatever new ground I face, I face alone. There are no more poem-omens.

So in the blue hour when the baby fidgets next to me, I think about getting out of bed to write, like she did. Instead I snuggle in with him deeper, stroke his back and kiss his hair, tickle him to make him giggle. I won't produce my *Ariel* by this road; I am deliberately diverging from her course. These moments are fleeting. Sylvia has taught me much about what depression can give you, but also how much it can take away.