

‘Inspire’ so Close to ‘Expire’:

*Riding out the Pandemic with Poet
Partners Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath*

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illustrated by Nat Taft



Cambridge, England:

allowed out for only one hour a day to exercise
(Ted riding on the back of Sylvia's bike is
not deemed exercise)
no moors within walking distance and for only one hour
barely time to warm up much less to find love
too many people are strolling along the Cam

officials say punting is not considered *proper* exercise
(so much contradiction from the health authorities)
one mask doesn't know what the other is saying
officials today say declaiming poetry to the cows is too much like singing
officials tomorrow that exhorting Chaucer is too much like singing
the frowsy officials mansplain with more expectorate
than an a cappella choir

please stop or you will face a stiff fine
one that will cost you [the price of five poems]
distanced Sivvy translate-calculates in her head
she doesn't want that!
her poems hard-earned
as is this brand-new fiancé

Benidorm, Spain:

the pestilential Plath carrier
no desire to flatten any curve
sheds fetish DNA and sore-throated sequins
on a red carpet to nowhere quickly anywhere

at last!
Spain, but only one person from a household allowed to shop
Ted doesn't bargain well enough for the potatoes
annoyed at her annoyance

They chafe under lockdown
no more afternoons in the sea
just empty day on empty day
with the other
one's double
The long expanse of dining table between them shrinks
until each other's face is in each other's face



they breathe in the other's air
they are each other

dawning duplicate smiles
delighted they sing

North Yorkshire, England:

Sylvia:
rolling in the bracken, the heath
the nuthatch grey blue with a yellow belly
flits like a sunny puzzle piece of sky
greenly translucent damselfly alights on fern, foxglove
I can see through Ted not transparent enough
he too lifts up off love over

the moors are undulating, ululating, singing

an injured grouse calls *Go-back, back, back*
Ted stands above, fractures its skull with a rock
puts it out of its misery
tells me it is a favour

I can't breathe
Why? Why? Why?
am winded to my bones, wuthering
too long a silent walk

sobering stones in the Haworth graveyard
slanted by the light
the parsonage museum visit
infected? incubating?
Emily never married
I reach out an ungloved finger to rock the Brontës' cradle
Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, Anne, all babies once
Dead at 38, 31, 30, 29
Was the tuberculosis that took dear Emily
a precursor to COVID?
no need to socially distance with the dead

cunning miniature books house
the Brontës' shared childhood worlds so big
maybe Ted is brother Branwell rather than Cathy's Heathcliff
My iron man and I not so much ill-fated lovers as siblings of the soul?



but I need moor love
no need for stupid masks in the hollows in the moors
the little privacy given by Ted's parents here is small bother
--open air better for love
marriage, in sickness and in health
cruelty excepted, accepted?--
our two-person orb able to float far with the wind
diaphanous, gossamer

(like that wretched virus)

the moors are undulating, ululating, exhorting, expectorating, spewing--

Come-back, back, back! my beloved says above
I struggle against distraction
my air sacs stronger than any bird's
test and trace
Ted is all heath, all health
I flutter to our love

breathing and heart beating as wide as our grassy sea



Cambridge, England:

Though now her husband, shhh! their marriage is secret. Will the pandemic burst open this bubble? They try to stay in her room at Whitstead but can cook only so much on that single fucking gas ring, not even two rings to echo their coupledness, even stodgy dorm food (a plague on the dining hall's restricted COVID hours) has its charms, though she must smuggle it back to the room for bunking-in Ted, not as if he can just go out and fish for trout. And her Newnham dormmates think it's another silly Sylvia story that Ted is one of her household. As if. Though she has been bringing fewer men 'home' lately. Other girls have been chided for entertaining their fuckbuddies while under quarantine.

The marriage is official
They move to grungy 55 Eltisley Ave
She studies Ted as much as her books
his lack of hygiene less writerly not artful
fingernail scrapings and dandruff on his desk
Ted's befouled secretaire, his black pen, fabulous fomites
the love of his pheromone-y pong

careful what she breathes in

inspire so close to
expire



Eastham, Massachusetts:

A poor boy from West Yorkshire--

in that small cottage community, all she does is bake cakes, often flat, never frosted properly with his mother's seven-minute boiled icing. And her mother to have wasted so much money on this small cardboard cottage in an ersatz community. Like a leper colony, he thinks, but does not say. The lighthouse is miles away and no proper, real way to reach it. Every step precarious. The bikes don't run well, and nobody will pick up hitchhikers during COVID, even if they were allowed outside. But. They. Do. Go. Mask up for a secret swim in their sea.

--believes salt kills germs.

Northampton, Massachusetts:

The plague comes too late for her to get out of teaching. And he likes *his* students. The colleges, universities and schools will close soon enough, but by then, the young marrieds will be gone.

Child's Park signage. "Walk with only members of your own household." "Capacity limits in effect." "Trespassers will be prosecuted." Did he see what he thought he did?

Prosecutors will be trespassed.

The clock strikes thirteen, and all are not welcome here.

The rhododendron pickers are not thinking of the common good, just their good. They are rapacious. And they are not two metres apart. Sylvia wonders when she can shuck off the Smith school marm seriousness and go blonde again. Hating rule breakers, she strokes her pilfered rose. If only she could like the aesthetics of illness, if only she could find some way for it to work for her.

Ted is looking with interest at the smiling illegal-dance-preparing girls, none of them wearing masks, hair long and streaming. Sylvia is wearing a mask with a smile painted on. She takes it off and puts it on upside down. Ted needs to have things spelled out for him.

What is his wife saying, wanting now? Why does her mask look different?

Sivvy in a pandemic?
She'd be horrible
let's get that clear up front
unlike the colour of her mucous

in early stages of sinusitis symptoms
she would use up that window
ever narrowing
to party hardy
worse than those rhododendron stealers
knowing she'd be bed-bound for weeks
with stuffed-up dead head raging fevers

worse than small children in playgrounds
those wandering right now in Child's Park
worse than transmitting bat and bird vectors
she'd be an infection mechanism
her whole body a ready syringe
from the tips of her toes to the top of her head

with her brown roots
up in the air
Sivvy and her hair!
an updo ponytail, in coronets
long blonde like the girl
in that old Faberge shampoo commercial
you'll tell two friends
and they'll tell two friends
and so on and so on
the TV screen erupting in multiple frames
trajectories of transmission

Not long after, they find an abandoned baby bird. (Sylvia tries not to think about the Yorkshire grouse.) Book-learned, neither thinks of it as a possible vector for contagion. But so much about the disease, so much about each other, is not yet known. Like children, they make it a nest in a shoebox. They feed it with an eyedropper. They are unable to nurse it back to health. Ted gasses it to death. Sylvia wonders if it were her bird-bony body in the box. What a rich symbol! If only COVID offered as much. But COVID is also in that nest.

never mind if this overachiever were pre- or asymptomatic
social distancing not for her
quarantines only of her own making
when she hunkers down
in writerly self-isolation



Travel restrictions come into effect—Sivvy uses these to keep Aurelia in Wellesley and away from Northampton and then away from them in Boston. Don't let her in. Let the rules work against her. But not against Sylvia who after her teaching stint is not staying in Northampton for love or money. She'll take her love with her.

Boston, Massachusetts:

Suddenly the slicks want different kinds of articles, different kinds of stories, on pandemic pivots, and goodness gracious, what can she write about? Paula's snowsuit seems less than useless. Sylvia panics and doesn't want to continue with her hospital job when all are wearing masks, and ventilators are in short supply. Maybe Massachusetts General will become the epicentre of the virus. She quits early on. The fish in the aquarium in their new apartment sicken. Should she offer to give them mouth to mouth? She strokes the gills and wonders if they can breathe in COVID. Can fish transmit it? Are the public swimming pools open? Not that she would go into one. Should she Wim Hof in the Charles to keep up her immunity? The fish die on her watch. Well, on Ted's too.

She becomes nervous that other faux poets will get ahead when everyone is in lockdown. Others will steal her idea. She thought of it first! She didn't need a global pandemic to stay home and be with Ted and write and be with Ted until she feels sick in the head and would rather lay in bed and feel sick with dread to be with Ted and/who would sooner be dead. (Famous last words: One of us had to die.)

Others use the pandemic and their increased time at home to learn new things such as crafts. Sylvia tries to collage with the daily paper, but she can't wrest irony and comic juxtapositions from the pages. It's all COVID COVID COVID, daily numbers, rates of transmission, viral strains, as if it's a war effort and there's a war going on. Besides, she has too few old magazines with which to work, wants to save back issues of *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, and especially *Poetry*, in which their work appears whole, save it whole, so the poems have a frame, a place, a space, a context, unlike what they have now in this libidinous never-ending Mary Ventura lockdown on a train that goes nowhere because it never leaves the station of the heart is where the home is where the heart is where the hate is.

And she doesn't want to try shadow boxing because she wants a target, and she knows he will hit back; instead, she marches in place, and her sinews become secateurs. How her legs could crack his



head like a nutcracker if he comes close enough to give her pleasure with his wily word-entreated tongue.

They could have dance parties, but she is too proper, it is too silly, and what good is dancing except to attract a mate?

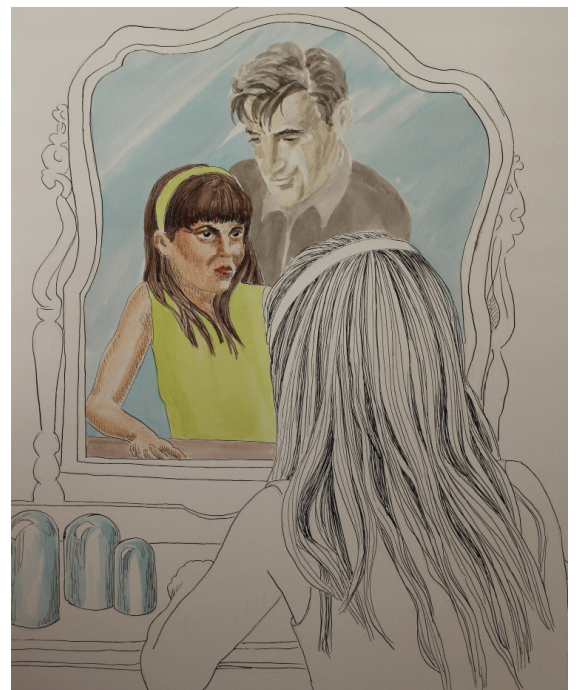
Where is he? Where did he go? Why is he in the stairwell? To whom is he speaking? Those wretched Sassoons? Surely, with the travel restrictions they can't have come over. Isn't the UK variant increasingly virulent? Why does the blackness follow her everywhere? Shouldn't someone just build a wall? Why is he entertaining thoughts of them, and isn't it dangerous to be sharing the same air? Already encrusted in coal, already blackened. Like most of her cakes. Others use the time wisely, learn how to bake bread, but she is not interested in that. Cake and cake and cake: it is enough. The smell of the sourdough—she did try, though she pretends not because it was not successful, and she is all about success—is as rank as semen, and she did not want to watch the inevitable rising so like a pregnant belly or to have to cope with the impacted horror of dead yeast, something flat and barren, not on her watch. And Ted's loaves are so silky high and delicious! Why is it always Ted? Should they use their time productively in the bedroom? People predict a rash of new babies nine months after lockdown, but she doesn't want to be pregnant now, not now, it is too early, it is too late.

She has been locked down already, by the harsh Taskmistress Poetry who doesn't give time off for good behavior except to offer more of the same, more time in which to rhyme too narrowly, to pattern too constrictively. Sylvia is sick of writing. She is sick of writer's block. Sick of Poetry and, mostly, sick of Ted.

Ted has gone off on another walk though he's already had his hour. He says he'll risk the fine though they can ill-afford it. He laughs at her fear. She is too wifely, he says, too feminine. He says that what the pandemic has taught him and what it should be teaching her is to manage risk. He says, there will always be risk. Without risk there is no edge, no future.

Sylvia's dreams:
cauldron of hot loathing
his grey face my mirror image
clawing against the Plexiglas of the bar cart
on the train and bell jars everywhere
climbing up and out
Ted penetrating bubble after bubble
his penis a syringe
loosey goosey women their heads in their hands
like those disquieting muses, lop-headed

crucible fever fever
bell jar with two inside scraping as they strive to escape
a glassed-in desert island
with his rank breath



surely COVID can't be any worse

notes for her future novel:

Doreen's college mates will have pocketbook covers to match every outfit

matching masks too

perhaps made by Hilda, the pivoting hatmaker

(would *Ladies Home Journal* be interested?)

Esther unable to sew

pretty scraps of fabric into such fashionable

non-medical masks

yet another thing she can't do to add to her list

but will they serve a greater good?

keep the pestilence in or out?

Sylvia has been getting out.

Guru Lowell tells them to write about Corona, but Ted has already suggested this. She is interested in the purple-blue lesions on COVID toes. The synecdoche appeals. She thinks in body parts. Would Ted's privates turn blue, fall off leprously?

Then Lowell's auditors are told not to come back. The university will figure something out for the *proper* students of whom Sivvy is not one. She struggles. She even misses rival Anne Sexton, her martini twin, though the bars are closing ever earlier: to fit in an after-class drink, they'd have to be there before the class even started, though there no longer is one.

Sylvia wants to follow Lowell's suggestions at the same time she wants to spurn him. She's not yet ready to write about her mental instability but maybe she should catch COVID to have something physical to write about? She debates, doesn't wash her hands. Ted scoffs at "good hand hygiene." He thinks hand sanitizer is ridiculous, says, "Alcohol has a much better use," so maybe the choice will be taken out of her hands, and he will just give it to her as he's given so much else.

She squeezes sanitizer onto Ted, but he's impatient, shoves her away, yells at her for her ablutions of neat bleach, her douching with it to prevent pregnancy before she is ready. She thinks the president idiotic and histrionic, but who knows? So many believe him, he is almost a Poetry for the unwashed masses, she dunks her diaphragm in and then wonders at the searing exquisite pain. The



apartment stinks of bleach, miscarried poems, sourdough starter, resentment, deflating hopes.

they are allowed out for only one hour a day, to exercise
they argue about which hour, witch hour

Ted wants to see the sunrise
she doesn't
she is slugabed for her aching
she wants to see the sunset

he suggests separate walks
he at the beginning of the day
she, its end

she is gobsmacked
how can they still be a couple
never mind the remaining 22 hours
of each other's company

he is light lissome effervescent when making his escape
it is legitimate
it must satisfy even her rules
he wants never to come back

that first morning
the sun is full on, risen
when he grudgingly returns
plots more plots, more escapes, in his head and elsewhere

she tastes the workings of his brain
she knows he wants her left behind

as the shadows lengthen in her setting sun
stranger than De Chirico's
she muses
thinks of killing him
getting rid of her competition
a loving slam over the head with a frying pan full of
the potatoes and onions he so loves

she'll do it after her walk
after tea
scalding the cups
heating the dollops of milk
doing it his English way

he won't see it coming
because he will be
writing writing his endless black scrawl
in his endless black Borgesian notebook
extracting yet another poem from his dawn-walk
insidious rivalry and ribaldry

she walks more quickly as she plans
she could be the source of her own transmission no sneezing into an elbow
could flagrantly pick her nose odious olfactory organ
lovingly expound on the viscosity
the colour
the turgidity
--Lowell was right!--
essence of putrescence dabbed behind one ear
pestilential perfume
the mucous, its crusted jelly so jewel-pretty
she will collect gummy globules in bud vases
drop in insolent secreting flowers for the sickbed tray
actively inject infection

cook exotic recipes
sustain Ted affectionately, lavishly
like a mother bird feeding her young
I know you like your sweet and savoury Sivvy
Here's a loving spoonful
a couple of droplets for flavor
Sivvy's secret sauce

she will stir her brew
of contagion
making sure to use again and again
the same spoon
with which she tested for
more sugar? more salt?

a spoonful of Sivvy will help the medicine go down

and he
like others before him
begging bowl in tremulous inflamed scabrous hand
will come back for
...more

Sylvia smiles, enters the building



but the plan doesn't work
better in theory than in practice
he is immune to her contagion-charm

she weeps
and he tuts at her tears
not touching her
no solace but no necessary transmission
plans his next solitary walk and the one after that

Everything now on lockdown:

Sylvia's nightmares:
penicillin does nothing for the virus
nor cocaine sprays, codeine, nose drops, pyribenzamine
former sinusitis saviours
COVID not just a two bed-sheet cold
he refuses to nurse her
she snips sick-bed food
to bite-sized pieces
swallow, gurgle, choke
wakes strangled in hot sheets
Ted gone

Sivvy:

We will be waiting a long time for the vaccine. Poets are not paramedics, poetry is not an essential service, though Poetry begs to differ, but her declaiming voice is as high-pitched as an autistic dog's, so that very few can hear her, though Ted is able to do so, and Poetry is able to reign him in suddenly with a sharp yank of her leash, and why am I unable to do so? The leash puddles around his ankles, and he looks at it with a grin, and then meets my eyes so steadfastly, spitefully. He knows I can do nothing, and he knows I know. Then he laughs. How I hate that sound.

inspire so close to
expire

After the fish, they require a small animal to nurse and fail to save. A house fly in their Willow St. apartment? One from the bedroom bay window where he writes? No, it will have to be one from the living room bay window where *she* writes. There is no end of faltering flies. They might as well expend their energies on something even more purposeless than poetry.

Sivvy:

...but noose control is necessary, and he won't stay under mine. He laughs again and consults the Ouija. I pretend not to listen to the words that are really in his mouth with a thinly disguised American accent as if that is enough to fool me, just saying what he wants to say and pretending it's

other, those words about sickness and sacrifice and the long sharp odds.

Ted's nightmare:
a mad bad Typhoid Mary
whispering love and contagion
into yet another new boyfriend's ear
why she needs so many of them
The graph reveals cases going up and up!

after a long monologue more nasal than usual
hand to sweaty hand, French-kissing
moist laryngeal whisper to lure victims closer
PS I'm contagious, pass it on

Sivvy:
The disease, it is coming. I write sequels to "Fever 103°" and "I am Vertical." Perhaps better if Ted gets it and not I, so that I can observe him. Will there be buboes? He sneered at my Benidorm fever. Payback time. Has he brought in the pestilence from his most recent walk?

He smells like sourdough. Has he been fucking someone else in the fecund fields in the little pockets of shrubbery along the Charles River? Did he do so along the River Cam? Here I thought I was clever reminding him that he could not go inside anyone's house, but he has found the loophole. He knows how much I liked our fucking out-of-doors, and he has betrayed me in that too, there's the smell of rabid pussy on him, and the stink is COVID pestilent. He breathes her droplets on me, and I know I am taken I am caught I am caught. I can see my end as I feel the constriction of a beginning headache. He, vector, and I, soon, dead queen. I did not know it would come to this. I won't be able to see my
sunset
today
sunset
will
come to me.

London, England:

Back in the UK
Sylvia is broody, nesting
they could save neither bird nor fish
but what about a human being?
Frieda started off so small, two cells
the gamete even the zygote
smaller than a fly

ecstatic to quarantine with Ted



for longer than the required fourteen days
for another trimester and another
to exchange oxycontin for oxytocin
as purposeful as poetry



Devon, England:

Nick is about to be born just as the news comes about a strange virus in Wuhan. Sylvia laughs about the name. Is there such a place? She brays like a horse. She isn't much for anything "Oriental." They are so far from London now with their young daughter, their thatched house, their writerly half days, share and share about, it now seems a made-up place, like something in a story book.

The baby comes at the same time as a new round of restrictions. They are already bubbled and fraught, no baby 'help' allowed in. Sylvia is frantic. Journalist Siv Arb can't come; Ted can't go to the BBC; the Wevills will stay trapped in London. Choose your ending. Plop over a different half page of the board book if you don't like the one in your hands.

But in all versions, Ted is fighting to get away. He can't recognize the new baby boy as his own, his milky sour wife so shapeless and alien, her breasts again no longer for him. He doesn't fear the disease. He is of the earth: it won't get him. But he dreads what the officials will make people do because of it. He is already isolating. He is already quarantined. He must get away. He must. Their property is big enough, but it is not enough. He can circle it in no time with his seven-league boots, able to return almost before he starts.

Devon is deserted. Not even one curtain twitches. Is everyone dead already? Has his small family been so cut off that they are unaware of an apocalypse? He walks through vacant North Tawton; perhaps it is just the raw late winter cold that keeps all inside, surely, he is imagining things, why, the fishmonger whose trout is never fresh enough will greet him as he reaches the next corner, but no, he is all alone, now in his own bubble of one, and he wonders if this is what he wanted all along, as he stands waiting at the train station for a train that never comes.

He stands for minutes, or is it hours? He looks at the trees, the far fields, hoar frost on the grass. The blades move in a slow jeweled dance. It is meadow, not moor, its own self, but enough. He spies a bird of prey, some type of hawk, a Peregrine falcon, he believes. Watching it is centering, calming.

His breathing slows. He remembers Sylvia on their wedding day, her fierceness as she types out his poems, her smooth skin, her chameleon hair, her own poetry. She has given him such a dear daughter, whom he loves and already misses, and now a son. There is no need for rivalry. Like the elements of the landscape, they are all in this together.

With that, he strides home but not before he has picked something up from when he slammed his fist down on the contaminated sill of the empty ticket booth, twice: once when, enraged, he realized it was empty and another when he had his epiphany, but it doesn't matter on which occasion, and Sylvia keeps Court Green so meticulously clean, you could eat off the floors, lick the sill of the ticket booth were they to have it in their home, which they do not, but that doesn't matter now, and he brings the pestilence into the household, piggybacking it, as he once did his daughter. All the painted hearts and flowers in the world won't do any good. Nothing will prevent its coming.

The train station will be decommissioned soon enough. After the many deaths.

handshaking to seal the deal
index case
Sivvy no patient zero
always has to be first in everything

she unprotected from villagers in gloves and visor masks
she unprotected from the bees, from the potato people
yes, but more so
they from her

Sivvy's lank hair horse-like when critic/lover/Ted-stand-in Alvarez smells/smelled/will
smell it
she reeks of flu contamination, mutation

One last time, Ted and Sylvia will attempt to nurse another dying animal, but not Ariel: Their use of tweezers, specialty implements, is exacting, is impossible. They try on smaller and smaller animals and insects. They are hopeful about the bee, really put their full selves into it, it is an effigy of themselves, but no. Then they move on to an amoeba and then the Coronavirus itself. By then, so late in the pandemic, it is about to sicken and die.

inspire so close to
expire

but they save it
she is orbiting moon to his earth
she is but a light particle to his blazing sun
she the glycoprotein spike transfiguring
for this is what Poetry does
he the Coronavirus ssRNA
he remains the same, immutable

she is fickle, female, opportunistic
she will make things more deadly
more easily transferrable
they are part of a whole
stronger when united than when separate
crowning their love
they can never part
and through them
it lives

Notes:

- *The Brontës as children and into adulthood created fantasy worlds, writing small books about them.*
- *Wim Hof (Iceman) touts the health benefits of cold-water swimming and bathing.*
- *Plath and Anne Sexton audited Robert Lowell's creative writing class in 1959.*
- *Plath suffered from frequent bouts of sinusitis, for which she received a host of treatments in the States, less so in the UK.*
- *Sylvia rode a horse called Ariel, its name the title of one of her most famous poems in a collection of the same name.*