

An Uncanny Wintering

by Eva Stenskar

In *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Ludwig Wittgenstein likens a person's subconscious thoughts to an underworld, a hidden, uncanny secret cellar (25), and in *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard states that cellars are made up of passages with padlocked doors, and further refers to the cellar as the place one goes to dream and to "(lose) oneself in the distant corridors of an obscure etymology, looking for the treasure that cannot be found in words" (166). Anthony Vidler, meanwhile, refers to the cellar as something damp, in which bric-a-brac is deposited, and that if it weren't so, our memory would be released from its unhealthy preoccupations and we would be able to live in the present (*The Architectural Uncanny* 64). That, in turn, suggests Sigmund Freud's idea of *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny, something that used to be familiar but has, through repression, become estranged. (*Uncanny* 148). There's obviously something deeply uncanny about a cellar. And it is in a cellar, that "Wintering", the last poem in Plath's bee sequence, takes place. The first stanza confirms the space, and introduces the activity:

This is the easy time, there is nothing doing.
I have whirled the midwife's extractor,
I have my honey,
Six jars of it,
Six cat's eyes in the wine cellar,

What is the speaker doing in the cellar to begin with? Is she hiding something? Can she not perform her activity in daylight? The extractor along with the whirling suggest some kind of magic machinery, and magic, along with sorcery, is mentioned in Freud's *The Uncanny* as one of a number of unheimlich factors (149). In *Totem and Taboo*, he expands on the meaning of magic, and describes it thus: "Magic must serve the most varied purposes. It must subject the process of nature to the will of man, protect the individual against enemies and dangers, and give him the power to injure his enemies" (67). It also picks up where "The Bee Meeting" left off, with the resourceful magician's girl who doesn't flinch. There are also the jars of honey, which seem to have a luminous sheen to them, which prompts the speaker to liken them to the eyes of a cat, adding to the sense of magic. For what is magic without a cat? The jars themselves suggest test tubes or beakers, the type of paraphernalia typically found in a chemical laboratory. There's also the fact that the extractor belongs to the midwife, which has an old-fashioned ring to it, something hinting at magical powers, and also of course life and the producing of life. It is not life per se, but honey, that is being produced here, a Biblical allusion to hope for deliverance, for Exodus 3:8 mentions how the Israelites will be delivered out of the hand of the Egyptians and be brought to the land "flowing with milk and honey".

Wintering in a dark without window
At the heart of the house
Next to the last tenant's rancid jam
And the bottles of empty glitters –
Sir So-and-so's gin.

The second stanza confirms the sense of a confined space at the center of something, "the heart of the house", as if it the poem takes place in the realm of life and death. The sweetness of the honey and its symbol of hope has been replaced with old jam, "rancid", implying something contaminated or musty, very much like the idea of the cellar itself. Something old and stale. Here no cat's eyes shine, rather the glitter of old gin bottles.

This is the room I have never been in.
This is the room I could never breathe in.
The black bunched in there like a bat,
No light

David Holbrook, in *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, recognizes the cellar as the same cellar in which Esther Greenwood in Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* tries to kill herself, which was an autobiographical recount of Plath's own suicide attempt, which took place in the cellar of her family home (227). The cellar, viewed with that knowledge, becomes a space filled with anxiety and despair: "The room is like one that can recur in dreams – the room of the self that one fears is empty, decayed, deathly – the room which symbolises the fear of the internal breakdown," (228) Holbrook goes on to write. The poem also intimates that the cellar is a coffin, which yet again brings about the idea of being buried alive – "dark without a window", "the room I have never been in", "the room I could never breathe in" for instance, are good examples – bolstered with such graveyard effects as cats and bats. Suddenly we are far from the promise of the land of flowing honey and all suggestions of life have evaporated, as

the very basic activity of someone alive, that of breathing, is no longer possible. The title of the poem suggests not death necessarily, but hibernation (the bees in the poem hibernate), or something akin to holding one's breath, patience perhaps. Meanwhile there's the image of something "black bunched in there like a bat", recalling the panic bird of "Elm", that dark alien thing the speaker feels inside.

If we are to read "Wintering" in a similar vein, it brings us back to Holbrook's idea of the cellar as the room of the *self*, rather than a physical space outside of the self. That would position the "black bunched in there like a bat" *inside* the speaker, as anxiety – perhaps – amongst other feelings, "honey" for real hope, "rancid old jam" for, as it says in "Elm": "the isolate, slow faults" that the speaker cannot seem to overcome, the false hope of the "glitter" of the gin bottles that belong to somebody else.

No light
But the torch and its faint

Chinese yellow on appalling objects –
Black asininity. Decay.
Possession.
It is they who own me.
Neither cruel nor indifferent.

There is light, however vague and disappointing. The light is yellow, a color which value is difficult to decipher in Plath's poetry. In an earlier poem, "In Plaster", yellow stands for something old and ugly, but in later poetry that doesn't necessarily hold true. However, here the faint light falls on appalling objects: "Black asininity", "decay", "possession". It is fairly obvious now, that the focus has shifted from the cellar as a space *outside* the speaker, to the speaker's secret innermost core, the faint light illuminating her faults. Holbrook argues that there is paranoia in the word "asininity": "it is as if she fears an animal predator in the dark, which

she projects from her inner world – as Mahler does when he sees (and hears) the howling ape of existential nothingness in *Das Lied von der Erde* (228). That nothingness, again, is a continuation from the maddening “voice of nothing” that the tree in “Elm” detects in the poet. Holbrook, however, seems to indicate that the predator is projected from the speaker’s inner world onto her outer world, while perhaps the cellar is her inner world. The speaker cannot get out of herself, she cannot command her anxieties to go away, it is they “who own (her)”. She calls that ownership neither cruel nor indifferent, only, as we see in the first line of the following stanza, “ignorant”:

Only ignorant.
This is the time of hanging on for the bees –
the bees
(...)
Filing like soldiers
To the syrup tin

I read the “hanging on” as further evidence that this is not death, not a complete “burial alive” scenario, but instead a kind of hibernation. It seems also as if the speaker identifies with the bees, like them she is in for a long season, a “wintering”, when there is nothing much – the “nothing doing” of the first stanza - but waiting to do. A season for slowing down, for hanging on, something to endure.

The whirling activity taking place in the dark, the turning of one thing into something else (extracting honey from the honeycomb) may also very well suggest a metamorphosis not unlike that of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly, which in this case would suggest the cellar space, whether mental or physical in nature, as a version of the dark encasement of a cocoon. “Filing like soldiers” also lends itself to the idea of “hanging on”, as in “soldier on”.

That this is a season in suspension becomes

even clearer in the sixth stanza, where the speaker reveals that the syrup tin the bees crowd to, is just that, an ersatz for the real sweetness they cannot have:

To make up for the honey I’ve taken.
Tate and Lyle keeps them going,
(...)
It is Tate and Lyle they live on, instead of
flowers.
They take it. The cold sets in.

The next stanzas offer a shift, the binary couple “black” and “white” is introduced. The bees balling in a black mass, which the speaker likens to a “mind”, against the whiteness of the “smiling” snow. The poem goes through a shift here, the “I” was dropped already in the sixth stanza, and the next lines seem to want to break out of the physical as well as mental space of the cellar into the open. It takes on a new path; from the dark and damp, from the black balled mass of the mind to the outside, and the white snow, and – eventually - up in the air.

Now they ball in a mass,
Black
Mind against all that white
The smile of the snow is white
It spreads itself out, a mile-long body of
Meissen

Into which, on warm days,
They can only carry their dead.
The bees are all women,
Maids and the long royal lady
They have got rid of the men,

The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors
Winter is for women –
The woman, still at her knitting,
At the cradle of Spanish walnut,
Her body a bulb in the cold and too dumb
to think.

The resourcefulness of the women has made survivors of them – like the bees themselves – it is the women alone who survive the hard season. But what of the speaker? What happens to her? Since the “I” was dropped, she must have merged her identity with that of the bees, and the women, for whom the winter season exists. Thus, the speaker too is a survivor of the cold season. The trick for this survival is patience, to “hang on”, to quietly be doing “hanging on” activities such as whirling honey, knitting, watching the baby in the cradle, being still like a bulb in the snow, making do with ersatz sweetness, waiting for spring, not thinking. The speaker, like the bees, is ready to break out of the cellar, the cocoon of both physical and mental space.

Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas
Succeed in banking their fires
To enter another year?
What will they taste of, the Christmas
roses? The bees are flying. They taste the
spring.

The theme of rebirth was one well used by Plath, especially through exploring the Biblical story about Lazarus (John 11:1-4), the dead man who was brought back to life by Jesus. She had used it as a theme for “Poem for a Birthday” already in 1959, and then, in the fall of 1962, she revived it in the poem “Lady Lazarus”. Earlier journal excerpts shows that her fascination with the story began as early as 1956 (Plath 199) and one particular entry, from June 15, 1959, points to her thinking of Lazarus as a theme for short stories and possibly even her novel *The Bell Jar*: “MENTAL HOSPITAL STORIES: Lazarus theme. Come back from the dead. Kicking off thermometers. Violent ward. LAZARUS MY LOVE.” (Plath 497). The trajectory of “Wintering”, starting in the dark cellar and ending with the flying bees tasting spring, very much suggests the Lazarus theme, which – translated into unheimlich – might read “the

return of the dead”. One may of course push the Lazarus envelope even further and argue that it is the Jesus story itself that “Wintering” blooms out of. While Lazarus was brought out of the grave, Jesus also *rose and ascended* into Heaven. There are a few clues in the poem, that point to this. Apart from the movement from the grave to the sky, which I just discussed, there’s the bees “flying”, suggesting a further upward ascent, not just a departure from the grave, and the reference to the Christmas roses, blooming in the snow, perhaps a somewhat vague reference to Christ. Christ figures quite a bit in Plath’s later poetry. In the poem “Years”, written about a month after “Wintering”, she writes about “(t)he awful / God-bit in him / Dying to fly and be done with it?” While these particular lines suggest a desire to die, rather than a hope for spring and renewed life, it is of interest to demonstrate the idea of Christ and flying. I found, quite by chance and quite uncannily, a reference in Nicholas Royle’s *Uncanny* that speaks to these lines. It is written regarding the death drive in the poetry of T.S. Eliot but might as well have been written about the death drive in the poetry of Plath: “T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) is one of innumerable literary texts that provide correspondences with Freud’s theory. Pervasively characterized by articulations of the desire to be *still*, to have it all over and *done with*” (Royle 98). The italics are mine.

Plath’s poetry hinges a great deal on suspense, shock, and fear, and she utilizes almost all of the concepts, which Freud files as “uncanny”. In “Wintering”, as I have shown, the dark cellar – a grave of sorts – is an uncanny space suggestive of something repressed while simultaneously being a place where creativity surges and magic can happen.

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