

Sestina for Hiraeth

With Titles of Plath Poems from Early 1963

by Jane Satterfield

*Sylvia Plath visited the Brontë Parsonage Museum on September 28, 1956
My own visit took place in December, 1994*

One thing I won't miss is freezing fog
casting feathery ice crystals in some mystic
pattern impossible to divine. (As a child
years before, I'd known England in summer, my totem
of Shakespeare sonnets held close, the weather a kindness.)
I do miss the cool hush of cathedrals, exchanging words

with strangers. The Brontë siblings imagined worlds
of explorers and warrior queens cleaving the fog
of battle. Crows gathered as Sylvia threw kindling
on the fire, her private thoughts a mystery
even to Ted, the soulmate she trusted, to him
always both lover and stranger. I remember the chilled

flagstone entry hall at Haworth, the *Child
Ballads* I bought at the market, how insects whirred
in the henges, a stand of silver birch, bonfires totemic.
The rose-wreathed tea cups, moors in fog—
for Emily, these held the power to scatter Belgium's mist,
her exile eased by memory and her sister's kindness.

Did she miss the creatures she viewed as kin—
a hawk hand-fed, two cats, a pheasant—denizens of childhood
realms. The Welsh gave us *hiraeth*, a word that's mystical,
the longing for a homeland you can't return to—no word
my Midlands-born mother knew. Cross-legged on a field wall backed by fog,
Sylvia tapped out notes on a battered Smith-Corona, a totem

from home that foretold success, Yorkshire's totemic
sheep grazing the heather. Love made the world look kindly
though wind sheared the dales at night, a coal fire fogging
up glazed windows. Sometimes I think it's childish

to mourn the places of our past; other days, I'm wordless,
trawling images that barely capture the mystique

of rock-ridden landscapes I walked in the Peaks, mystified
when asked for directions, the tickets I saved like totems
withholding their answers. *Weird's* not the same as *wyrd*,
that web of fate. What comes to pass isn't always a kindness
though we nurture it like our own child,
an unfolding that leads us back home through fog:

What's mystical in a home that never was? An unkindness
of ravens becomes a totem to a child
who listens for words through a landscape's fog.