

Little, Smiling Hooks

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Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound* weaves two traditional narratives of the fifties—domestic ideology and cold war militancy—into one compelling historical argument called domestic containment, and portrays the American Dream as a Victorian environment of great anxiety and desire for American women. This postwar fallacy built on nervous homeland security and assumed domestic fulfillment promised more than it delivered and impacted Sylvia Plath's life and work. The failure of domestic containment is portrayed in her poetry by a braiding narrative of selves: the private self and the social/political self, particularly in her break-through poem "Poem for a Birthday" and one of her last two poems, a mature-voiced poem or suicide note, "Edge." Plath wrote these poems at different threshold moments during her own domestic containment: "Poem for a Birthday" celebrates Plath's launch into domesticity while "Edge" marks her fatal departure from it.

Immediately after World War II, stable family life seemed necessary for national security, civil defense, and the struggle for supremacy over the Soviet Union. A major goal of these civil defense strategies was to infuse the traditional role of women with new meaning and importance, which would help fortify the home as a place of security amid the cold war. For a generation of young adults who grew up amid economic depression and war, domestic containment was a logical response to specific historical circumstances and was implemented to calm the nation's atomic fears. It allowed them to pursue, in the midst of a tense and precarious world situation, the quest for a sexually-fulfilling, consumer-oriented personal life that was free from hardship. There would be single-family homes, dishwashers, gas stoves, washing machines and—by far the most powerful of postwar commodities—television sets for those who fit the mold of white middle class suburban homeowners. But circumstances were different for marginal people like Plath, who broke the consensus surrounding the cold war and domestic containment and forged a path for themselves. Plath consented to leave behind friends and family and live in England with her husband, poet Ted Hughes, where together they would pursue their poetry projects. Plath writes in her journal while at Yaddo Artists Colony:

November 11: Wednesday

To live in city or country? I am excited about England. When I think of living in America, I just can't imagine where: hate suburbs, country too lonely, city too expensive and full of dog turds. I can imagine living in London, in a quiet square, taking children to the fine Parks. (Unabridged Journals 527)

May says the message in the popular culture was clear: Motherhood was the ultimate fulfillment of female sexuality and primary source of a woman's identity and unfortunately for Plath, who fled the United States to escape the pre-women's libber environment of American domestic containment and seek poetic muse with her beloved poet husband, her life took an ironic turn. Children promised to fulfill both sides of the postwar domestic equation: security as well as fulfillment. Stories and films of the fifties and sixties and even *Better Homes and Gardens* wrote about the moralizing and harmonizing effects of children. Although the life Plath volunteered for removed her from postwar America it eventually led her deeper into an isolated domesticity, a singularity and loneliness where she faced a deeply disturbed interiority from which the only escape was death.

Robin Peel writes in *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* that Plath "identified with the nineteenth-century Romantic model of the poet as seer and transcendent magician whose wand is language" (20). Plath agreed to undergo mind "exercises," which led her to an explosive unfolding of her unconscious. These exercises included such practices as self-analysis, tarot readings and hypnosis. Both Plath and Hughes wanted to write from their unconscious minds and would go to any means to unveil poems deeply hidden in their unconscious.

Diane Middlebrook says in *Her Husband* that as usual Plath was stimulated by whatever interested Hughes. At Yaddo, before embarking to England, they continued to practice hypnotizing each other—Hughes had taught Plath how early in their relationship—and also developed a number of meditative exercises derived from Hughes's studies of magic, in order to reach levels of symbolism unavailable to rational consciousness. About this process Plath said, "I have experienced love, sorrow, madness, and if I cannot make these experiences meaningful, no new experience will help me." And in her Journal she wrote:

October 19, 1959: Monday

Most of my trouble is a recession of my old audacity, unselfconscious brazenness. A self-hypnotic state of boldness and vigor annihilated my lugubrious ooings of top-of-the head matter. I tried Ted's "exercise": deepbreathing, concentration on stream-of

conscious objects, these last days, and wrote two poems that pleased me. (*Unabridged Journals* 518)

The result of this experiment with hypnosis was "Poem for a Birthday," a poem of seven sections culminating in 'The Stones,' which was an exploration of her mental break-down and subsequent shock therapy, and which has been named the break-through poem that led to her mature voice, away from an earlier shallow and perhaps imitative style of a young poet, and to the ability to build through her craft and braid in her poems both the narrative of her private self and that of her social/political self—the poet in the poet and the person in the poet— that made the "Ariel" poems possible. Although 'Poem for a Birthday' is still of the earlier imitative style, it is the first time Plath poetically experimented with subjective images for the experience of shock therapy and was able to write about the electroconvulsive shock treatment she had undergone in 1953 as treatment for suicidal depression. Middlebrook says Plath was apparently able to employ in a practical way the meditative exercises she and Hughes were performing at Yaddo, permitting herself to pursue a rapid associational method of making images—in Hughes' words, "she found herself free to let herself drop, rather than inch over bridges of concepts" (111)

Poem for a Birthday

7. The Stones

This is the city where men are mended.
I lie on a great anvil.
The flat blue sky-circle

Flew off like the hat of a doll
When I fell out of the light. I entered
The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard. (*Collected Poems* 136)

Plath writes about the genesis of "Poem for a Birthday" in her Journal:

October 22: Thursday

Ambitious seeds of a long poem made up of separate sections: Poem on her Birthday. To be a dwelling on madhouse, nature: meanings of tools, greenhouses, florist shops, tunnels, vivid and disjointed. An adventure. Never over. Developing. Rebirth. Despair. Old women. Block it out. (*Unabridged Journals* 520)

She spent her days at Yaddo reading Theodore Roethke and here in this Roethke-esque "Poem for a Birthday," in which the controversial "I" of Plath's poetry is regressed to the primeval place of origin, dissolved in section one, battered and heart-wrenched in sections two through five, and reassembled again in section seven "The Stones," the Plathian psychodrama of death and transfiguration is revealed. The *stone* always represents a reduction to a core, stripped of all pretence and association, the low point from which a gradual ascent is eventually possible; its first important use is in the last section of "Poem for a Birthday," 'The Stones,' where the experience of the suicidal coma and the light of electro-locution is a complete undoing of her self and then a neat resurrection: "The mother of pestles diminished me. / I became a still pebble" (*Collected Poems* 136).

According to Eileen Aird, in her essay "'Poem for a Birthday' to 'Three Women': Development in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath," it is in "Poem for a Birthday," though heavily reliant on Roethke's structure and imagery, where Plath first identifies both her mature subject matter and her voice. Roethke was such a fertile influence at this point in her development because she learnt from him that objective reality can serve as a medium to release the inner drama. This notion, when conflated with the hypnosis practiced at Yaddo, led to Plath's new-found ability to access her interiority and memory and "Poem for a Birthday" acknowledges for the first time the supremacy of an inner world at which earlier poems have only hinted. The poems which Roethke collected in *Praise to the End* are the most direct influence on Sylvia Plath's poem which has the same structure of short sections connected by theme and imagery. More importantly Plath's subjects—madness, loneliness, sexual identity, family relationships, growth and searching—are very close to Roethke's in poems such as "Dark House." Sylvia Plath acknowledges Roethke as a major influence in a letter to her mother on February 2, 1961: "Ted and I went to a little party the other night to meet the American poet I admire most next to Robert Lowell—Ted [for Theodore Roethke]. I've always wanted to meet him as I find he is my influence" (*Letters Home* 407).

The purely literary influence of Roethke initiates the development towards poetic maturity but the biographical factors are also important. The whole of Sylvia Plath's life up to 1959 was one of academic distinction and ambition, she won prizes, gained A grades, conquered one goal after another, but after the year's successful but demanding teaching at Smith, with two degrees behind her and thoughts of graduate work on her mind she relinquished academic life in favor of full-time writing.

The decision was obviously made under Ted Hughes's influence—he had given up the academic world much earlier—and it was an immensely courageous step for her to take, involving as it did the rejection of one of her most deep-seated values—any one reading her *Letters Home* of the mid-fifties cannot help but be impressed by her sheer tenacity and desire for success. Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath had decided that they would settle permanently in Europe, so she was also turning her back on her family and social heritage as well as on the obvious career towards which all her efforts were previously directed.

At this point in the autumn of 1959, she was pregnant for the first time and these lines in section 2, "Dark House," of "Poem for a Birthday" also indicates some of the ambivalence of fear and excitement which this generated in her; its final, very satisfying image is a brilliant rendering of this ambivalence: "Any day I may litter puppies / Or mother a horse. My belly moves" (*Collected Poems* 132).

The period at Yaddo with its time for concentration and writing is a further factor in Plath's development: to be invited to Yaddo represented society's recognition of artistic merit and for Sylvia Plath such recognition always seemed to have been more important than it was to Ted Hughes. "Poem for a Birthday" was completed during the time at Yaddo when Plath was coming into her own as a poet *and* a woman, and leaving her childhood and the naive and imitative voice of her poetry behind. The title is richly significant reminding us of her own October birthday, the coming birth of her child and the metaphorical deaths and births which modulate into the final recovery of "The Stones." According to Jeannine Dobbs in her essay "Viciousness in the Kitchen," for the first time in this poem Plath directly faced the task of relating individual to general experience. That individual experience is female, defined both biologically and experientially and the poem is a dialogue between the dislocated girl who is Maenad and Witch and "the mother of otherness" (132). To be female in "Poem for a Birthday" is to be protective and procreative: "The month of flowering's finished. The fruit's in," "Here's a cuddly mother" but it is also to be demanding and possessive: "Mother of beetles only unclench your hand: / I'll fly through the candle's mouth like a singeless moth" (131, 135). This counterpoints the major theme of the poem which is the need to rationalize the disparity of childhood and adulthood. The tensions are resolved finally in a rebirth after suffering: "We grow. / It hurts at first. The red tongues will teach the truth" (135).

"Poem for a Birthday" marked Plath's growth in poetic voice and initiated the braiding of

her private and public self in her craft. In an interview with the British Council which aired on BBC Sylvia Plath said of her artistic method: "I think that personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be generally relevant to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on" (169-170). The relevance of this to the later poetry is abundantly clear but the process begins with "Poem for a Birthday" where private experience—a breakdown and the reasons for it, clinical treatment, pregnancy—is extended through the images which accumulate layer upon layer until it becomes a metaphor for suffering throughout the natural and the human world.

Dobbs says that Sylvia Plath's method, rather than delineating the individual in a recognizable social context, uses the private to gain access to the universal by ruthlessly mythologizing her own experience and in doing this moves a long way from autobiography and the narcissistic "I,"—"Lady Lazarus" is not Sylvia Plath but a mythical character of suffering and rebirth, ultimately a type of the tragic poet of Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli."

If both the themes and the images of Sylvia Plath's "Poem for a Birthday" are closely influenced by Roethke's, the ending is markedly different. Typically Roethke's poems end in a moment of revelation even if it quickly falls back into the old state of waiting: the end of the quest is an organic awareness of wholeness, of the full recovery of identity. Although the image of the vase reconstructed at the end of "Poem for a Birthday" recalls Roethke the mood is far from elated or affirmative: "Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows. / My mendings itch. There is nothing to do. / I shall be as good as new" (137).

To be "as good as new" is to have lost the tragic intensity which characterized the earlier sections of the poem and seems a shallow or expected turn or cliché, but "as good as new" also reveals that Plath's mindset at this time is one filled with hope: hope for her new life, and the new life within her. The false satisfaction and security of domesticity and her husband's unrestrained ego has not yet overwhelmed her.

"Poem for a Birthday" explores the metaphoric complexities of a series of balanced opposites—fertility/sterility, child/adult, day/night, death/life, animal/human, illness/recovery—Sylvia Plath's own analysis of her work during this time is penetrating as she indicates the gulf between poetry as craft, the period of *The Colossus* and her later poems. The early poems, she said, are like those pickled fetuses of *The Bell Jar*, specimens for learning, not the real living being. The first four of the seven separate poems that make up "Poem for a Birthday" center

around domestic situations. The speaker's pregnancy is the subject of the first two poems ("Who" and "Dark House") and is alluded to in the third ("Maenad"). In the fourth ("The Beast"), the marital situation is described and the speaker's disillusionment with it: "I've married a cupboard of rubbish ... I housekeep in Time's gut-end" (134).

In the sections of "Poem for a Birthday" that deal with pregnancy, there is the unlikely linking of birth not with death but with madness, as though Plath was seeing her future. A loss of identity, a sense of insignificance and smallness, are portrayed as common to both experiences. In "Who," the speaker begs, "Let me sit in the flowerpot / The spiders won't notice" (131). She is "a root, a stone, an owl pellet," all things mindless and empty, with the pellet signifying a dried vessel of bones (132). She reveals that "for weeks I can remember nothing at all" (132). In "Maenad," she begs "Tell me my name" (133). In "The Stones," she is "a still pebble"; and through the extensive use of domestic imagery, she becomes one with the fetus: "I entered / The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard" and "Drunk as a foetus / I suck at the paps of darkness" (136).

Up until the last decade, Plath was not seriously considered as a political poet. Because she was an attractive woman, because she was forever over-shadowed or reduced by men, because of the over-publicized and interesting details of her life and death as well as the sometimes difficult or veiled language of her poems as well as the womanly themes and domestic details—because of the perception of women due to domestic containment, then and now—the main focus of critical writing and attention had centered on dissection or exploitation of her psychotic disorder, or on her husband. In the interview with the British Council which aired on the BBC, Plath claimed to be deeply concerned with "world politics;" albeit a *re-casting* of the term "world politics," to embrace a domestic/female sense as opposed to a patriarchic, men-at-war sense. Sylvia Plath was a woman; her view of the world as seen from the lens of her poetry was clearly *not* male-centric.

The London she lived in, whose streets she walked daily, was a London still recovering from the war. She would have seen piles of rubble and ash, ruptured walls and the remains of many neighborhoods, flattened piles of bricks, and bon fires to help do away with the waste. The concentration camps were being "cleaned out," the news reporting daily on each new terrible thing found. Lamp shades of human skin. Preserved genitals in glass jars. Boxes of dried ears. This genocidal horror braided along with her private domestic narrative; it would have been

impossible for someone like Plath, with a poet's near-clairvoyant sensibility, to omit it from her work and "Poem for a Birthday" shows a leap in the poet's craft towards a rich complex braiding of narratives— Plath's unconscious unfoldings of her descent into madness and her path to recovery as well as her first pregnancy. The poem reveals degrees of mental stress about the terms of her own domestic containment and her maternal condition, themes which dominated both of her selves, the poet and the person, for the rest of her life and came to a terrifying conclusion in this famous poem, "Edge."

Edge

The woman is perfected
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga... (272)

"Edge" was written on February 5, 1963, and was one of two final poems she wrote before committing suicide on the morning of February 11. Was it her suicide note? If so, then the speaker of the poem tells of a woman who has done as much as she could in her life, but would do no more. There is no apology. The form is of ten, two line stanzas, the second line of each appears to be half of the first, in meaning and construction, of the first line of the following stanza—clearly showing a speaker on "edge." The "I" is missing. The poem is narrated by an anonymous specter or speaker who describes the corpses of a woman and her two dead children. In juxtaposition with this horrifying image of death is the rather tranquil and rhythmic tone of the poem. The poem seems to float, as though metaphors are slowly falling over an edge, until the last, two couplets, which brings the dead woman, the poem and the reader to a halt, to a threshold of finality, as if to say "the end." Plath's usual rhetoric or explosive personality is unseen, unheard in "Edge," until these couplets. Here the poem turns away from the image of the woman and her children and we look up at the moon, who stares back at us, and also at the woman and her children. And with the absence of the famous "I," the reader is allowed to feel their own empathy of the dead woman. The missing lyrical "I" indicates the speaker is bidding farewell to the woman's poetic self, or by way of the image of the dead mother and children, "killing" off her domestic self. Either way, the speaker seems confident and certain that what

awaits her on the other side of this threshold will be peaceful.

When writing this poem Plath had reached a crossroads of sorts: she had lost the connection between the poet in the poet and person in the poet. While she had managed to sustain both during her marriage—perhaps Hughes provided that necessary connector between Plath's day-to-day reality and her poet self, as well as an extra pair of hands to help with the work—and now that she was alone, her two selves were torn asunder to drive their "vessel" into madness. Plath knew that to survive, one of these selves had to be quieted.

In "Edge," the two selves are represented by the dead woman and the speaker who describes the scene. In a sense, one of Plath's selves is viewing the death of the other self. The dead woman and her creative manifestations are finally perfected by Death. The woman wears a smile, her feet may now rest. The dead children are like Cleopatra's asps and have sucked the mother dry and killed her—or she them, as did Medea, in an act of revenge against a cheating husband—and the mother gently takes them back into the folds of her robe, holds them to her breasts. The intense vowels of *folded, rose, close; bleed, sweet, deep* seem an elegy for the children's deaths.

At the turn of the poem, the tone then changes here, quite abruptly. The indifferent moon, referring to the indifference of the natural world to human pain and suffering, looks on and this could be a crack into the poet's own voice, revealing self-pity, a slightly cynical, smug jab at mistress Assia Wevill, (who often wore black clothing) and Hughes or the proverbial cry for help found in suicide notes. The final "she" and "her" seem to indicate the moon, but also perhaps the dead woman, with Plath referring to her own art of dying: the "blacks" meaning the woman's final raspy breaths, filled with noxious gas, or even the last firing of the mind's synapses. In the end, the reader believes the woman has had enough and understands how she allows herself and her serpent children to be wrapped in the black crackling shroud of Death, to be hooked and dragged away to eternity.

"Edge" also shows a switch from Plath's father/daughter theme in her earlier work to that of mother/child. But the wounds and suffering remain. Dobbs points out that the lives of mothers truly are devoured by their children, but Plath could not have known exactly the profound effect this would have on her before she became victim to this. She writes in her Journal while newly pregnant with her first child and as yet unchanged by the coming domesticity.

October 19, 1959: Monday

Children might humanize me. But I must rely on them for nothing. Fable of children changing existence and character as absurd as fable of marriage doing it. Here I am, the same old sour-dough. (*Unabridged Journals* 519)

What Plath found in her marriage and in motherhood was a similar ill fate of women world-wide when subjected to domestic containment: that women are subjugated by men, imprisoned, mutilated, put on pedestals or left in the mud, belittled, made into puppets or toys, hollow or blank with no identities and no wills, and in the end, sucked dry. Plath's ambivalence toward men, marriage, and motherhood, and in her last poems, abandonment by her husband added other dimensions as well, and the guilt and pain she surely felt help explain the degree to which her domestic poems are associated with worldly suffering. They are not exaggerations of pain but accumulations and recordings of it. They reflect not only her perception of outer reality, but they project her inner reality as well. Plath's path led her deep into her unconscious where her poems waited to unfold but also led her deeper and deeper into an insufferable state of domestic containment because she needed those subjects and those experiences and the emotions of the female politic they stimulated in order to create her best work.

Elaine Tyler May represents the essence of domestic containment in *Homeward Bound* as a home that contained not only sex, consumer goods, children and intimacy, but also enormous discontent, especially for women. There was no place else for this discontent to go, so it remained contained in the home. Women adjusted and worked hard. They poured themselves into their marriages. When Ted Hughes left, this symbiosis was knocked out of whack. Plath's letters reveal, however, that in the final weeks of her life, separated from her husband and free of the stifling restraint of marriage, she finally was free to be herself, to be in control of her own poetic voice. She wrote the final stunning poems as though she felt poetically released, and remarked that before this period of freedom and manic creativity she felt "as if domesticity had choked me" (*Letters Home* 466)

But in the end, this celebrated sense of freedom only served as a means to her death, as if her beloved poet-husband and her two children embodied the metaphorical "little, smiling hooks" of "Tulips" that dragged her to her death (*Collected Poems* 160). In the end Plath's mind was governed by her body and the act of choosing to die or not to die was no longer within her mental capabilities. She was unable to braid the poet and the person back together in her mind

and it shall never be known which self—the poet or the domestic—she murdered by resting her cheek on a folded tea cloth inside the gas oven while her children slept and snow silenced the city streets, though somehow it seems a fitting symbol for and final statement about the malaise caused by domestic containment.

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