

Sylvia and I: My Love Affair with Sylvia Plath

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The time is 1965 and I am starting my M.F.A. My poet friend Stephen Dobyns, attending the Iowa Writers Workshop with me, shows me some unusual poems from *The Times Literary Supplement*, poems resembling nothing else I had ever seen before. He plans to send to Blackwell's for a copy of a book, *Ariel*, by this poet and asks me if I, too, would like a copy. This is the beginning of my love affair with Sylvia.

I was struck, riveted, by her voice and imagery. This was poetry which fulfilled the definition of poetry by Dickinson, my favorite poet: it made me feel as if the top of my head were coming off.

This is Number Three.

What a trash

To annihilate each decade (Plath 245)

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What a thrill—

My thumb instead of an onion.

The top quite gone

Except for a sort of hinge (Plath 235)

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Daddy, I have had to kill you.

You died before I had time—

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,

Ghastly statue with one gray toe

Big as a Frisco seal (Plath 222).

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Plath's poems made much poetry I was reading in the literary magazines or saw coming across my desk as just-appointed Poetry Editor of *North American Review* sound trivial and shallow. Soon the world of the 50's and 60's in which Plath and I grew up (she ten years older than I) began to explode: the war in Vietnam, the Women's Movement, the

Civil Rights Movement, the march on Birmingham, the deaths at Kent State, Stonewall in San Francisco.

I had been taught, first at University of Chicago with its Neo-Aristotelianism, then at Iowa with the last vestiges of the New Criticism, to read poems as artifacts, autotelic objects with no expression of the individual ego. I had been writing dutiful term papers with these approaches. (Memory: a long term paper on the speaker in *Leaves of Grass* which never considered Whitman's sexual orientation. Memory: being forbidden by Professor Kern (ancient at the time and, I am sure, no longer with us) in 1968 at University of Iowa to write a paper on Emily Dickinson because "women aren't poets." Memory: I write a paper for the poet Mark Strand on Anne Sexton as a "confessional poet," and he praises it, telling me little work has been done on "Mrs. Sexton.") I do not write on Plath. I am too much in awe of her to try.

My dissertation for the Ph.D. in English is a book of my own poetry with whisperings of Plath throughout which I do not have the courage to own up to. During my oral exam on the dissertation, I am quizzed on my relation to the "major" poets—all white males—Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Williams—even though my poems tried to sound like Sylvia.

When I go to submit my dissertation in May 1970, the National Guard is marching around Old Capital, site of the Graduate College at University of Iowa, and the Graduate School secretary tell me she will have to read my five-years work in ten minutes since the building is closing. I return in ten minutes; she has "read" my whole book (for margins and pagination) and signs the requisite form. The National Guard closed the campus until September as I left the building. But I still do not connect poetry with the culture surrounding me.

Maybe it was in teaching at a university with an ecological orientation, the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, that I first saw a connection between poetry and the world. Or maybe it was teaching a poetry workshop as a volunteer at a mental hospital. Whatever the cause, I am reading and teaching Plath.

I wrote to *The Hollins Critic*, asking if I can write an article on her. My essay "Autism, Autoeroticism, Auto-da-fe: the Tragic Poetry of Sylvia Plath" appears in the February 1973 edition of the magazine and clumsily tried to define a new "tragic poetry" parallel to

tragic drama and attempted a definition of an Aristotelian flaw (I am not yet done with Aristotle!), the speaker's formulation of God as a radical reflection of her own imperfection. The article contained this "conclusion" of sorts: "Plath's last poems...build a myth in their own right which is moving and enduring. Because life and art are not finally separate..." The article, later cited in the "Selected Bibliography" section of *Sylvia Plath* by Caroline King Barnard, is said to have given special attention to the personae in the author's work. At this point, I am still carrying my New Critical suitcase.

When my first book, *The Company of Strangers*, comes out in 1975 from University of Missouri Press, a review appears in *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* where Alan Williamson claims I cannot write about the moon without evoking Plath. Though intended as a negative comment, I am pleased with it.

Twenty-five years pass. I move to New Orleans and write and publish five more books: on the relation between a divided self and Southern landscape; on the death of a child; on Van Gogh; on the birth of a son; on literary characters.

It is only in the last years of the second millennium, when my sister and my parents are in declining health in the suburbs of Detroit, that I am ready to fully absorb Sylvia as an influence. I begin reading all her poems again. I find in the iconic code of *Ariel* the possibility for creating my own code involving shopping, the weather in the Midwest and the domestic machinery of the retirement center where my sister and my parents spend their last days and die. Now I can write about my sister and my family of origin. In the year 2000, everyone in my family dies at six month intervals, first my mother, then my sister, then my father. When everyone is gone, my mourning rite is the creation of *A Place Made of Starlight*. The signal feature of this book is my sister's abuse of me as a child: the speaker searches for ways to express this trauma and his sister's mental illness in poems which employ the hyperbolic and mythic language that is Sylvia's hallmark. Here is the title poem of the book, a sestina:

A PLACE MADE OF STARLIGHT

This is the woman I know to be my sister.
Wizened, apple-sallow, she likes her room dark
inside the nursing home's glare. She barely sees me,

black shades drawn against the radiant autumn day,
purple, hectic yellow streaming from the trees.
I stand and stare. One of us has to speak.

How are you? Fine. Why did I try to speak
as if I-we could talk, a brother and sister
perched on the same branch of the family tree?
We share our parents, but the forest, suddenly dark,
dwarfs me always. Now I'm here, where I see me,
fifty years back, ten years younger, even today.

She is a raven, I some tiny winged thing, me
she shouts down, the I-me longing to speak,
to tell my parents how she beats me every day,
dark wings claiming she will be my sister
no matter what I suffer in the darkening dark.
I scramble out farther on the family tree.

Where are my father, my mother on this tree?
I am growing smaller inside myself each day
while my body lengthens, climbing larger in the dark
toward a moment when I will finally speak
about the wounds inflicted, purpling, by my sister.
Who will believe someone small as me?

Sometimes I think the silence contains me
even today, knowing I leaped from the tree,
discovering I could fly away from my sister
to land in a clearing in the woods that day,
a place made of starlight I could finally speak.
Released by others, I can wear the violet dark

luminous around me now, standing in the dark,
staring at my sister who is staring back at me,
neither of us knowing how or what to speak.
Does she remember what happened with that tree?
I screamed, jumping, the branch snapped on the day
I showed my parents the bruises from my sister

and the secret toppled, falling with the tree.
And bruised truth came home to belong to me:
Never, never, speak up against your sister. (27-28)

Revelations are embedded in the comforting same-word repetitions of the form,
the semantics continuously decentered as the sestina fulfills its workings out of

predetermined patterns. This poem could never have been written without "Daddy" and its sixteen cinquain stanzas. Even the envoi's resignation to silent suffering obliquely echoes "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (Plath 224).

The term "confessional poet" is out of use in 2012, probably because some people confused the subject matter of certain poems with the happenings of the "Jerry Springer Show." In its original employment it carried the connotation of that pardon which a priest utters "Go and sin no more." The speaker's words promise expiation, the poem's form a rendition—however varied—of the confessions set down and practiced for centuries. We as readers function as priests: our reading-listening bestows forgiveness.

Another of my poems which fits the confessional rubric is "My Sister Closes the Closet Door." The sources might be any number of Plath poems: "Paralytic," "The Munich Mannequins," the triadic stanza of "Fever 103°" perhaps. And, of course, "Lady Lazarus."

MY SISTER CLOSES THE CLOSET DOOR

Self-imprisoned in your dark apartment at the home,
that sparrow on the window sill your only friend
if you would deign to raise your head,

your days of costume mistress to yourself
would be another life ago without my memory.
I bring you back: Once you were fat, then thin

through starvation dieting, emerging, nineteen
at ninety pounds. You were reborn: a shopaholic,
a goddess who could re-invent the world

by decking out your body with fineries
from Saks or Bonwit's: pongees and nubby twills,
jewelry to rival Cleopatra, pastel pumps and slings

in such profusion littering your closet floor
they might have been the drop pile at Goodwill.
You bought, you returned, you kept. Pregnant, your closet

swelled with dresses never worn or slipped on once,
then given clarity if you were bored, enraged.
Had I been a girl, I might have been jealous

of such abundant pillaging of Dad's reserves.
Ten years younger than you, I was terrified, curious. (37-38)

My sister was a shopaholic. She abused me physically, not sexually. After years of job "terminations" and suicide attempts which followed upon a brief career as teacher of the mentally retarded, she ended her days cared for by a woman-sitter in a room whose curtains she refused to open in hatred of the light. Born with a birthmark which covered half her face and seizures which occurred from time to time, my sister, ten years older than I, hated me from the time I was born. My sister was born the same year as Plath and ingested many of the cultural myths of beauty, as well as gender roles and social codes forbidding anger or aggression.

As the youngest member of an upper middle class suburban Detroit household which included my insurance executive father, my mother, my mad and senile grandmother, and disappointed, divorced aunt, I had a friend. His name was Silence. Silence and I could go wherever I wanted to recover from my sister's verbal or physical abuse. When I was eleven, I discovered Silence's best friend, and he became mine, too. His name was Poetry. As the health of my family members declined (my grandmother and aunt had died earlier), I entered psychotherapy and began to construct a literary persona for the child I would have been in the "tranquillized fifties" as Lowell called them. This persona is the speaking child who is no longer merely victim. He is the passive-aggressive voice I learned at Plath's knee.

How clearly one hears that voice in Sylvia through the performance modes which inscribe psychic space: the circus performer in "Lady Lazarus," the murderess in "Daddy" who conducts her own inquest, the job interviewer in "The Applicant" who seeks a want-to-be husband necessarily deficient, the voice positioned at the edge of death, one foot in, one foot out, in the morgue space of "Death & Co."

When I gave voice to my sister directly and allowed her to speak, her aggressive voice registered its own passivity and resignation—as in this poem.

REINCARNATION AS MY SISTER

Bitch! Scoop up these dead flies from the windowsill.

Black Bitch! Bring me my coffee, those flies and juice, chilled.
It's six a.m. I'm wide awake. Pineapple! It's my birthday.
I'm sixty-goddamn nine. I hate this nursing home.

I hate my parents, still alive at ninety-three,
my goddamn mother, my father, ninety-one
and still asleep upstairs. I hate my goddamn baby brother,
fifty-nine, his goddamn wife and goddamn kids, all three.

Bitch! Where are you. Bring me these flies.
Line them up on my tray: eenie...meenie...
I killed them last night. Meenie, that's my brother.
Take this crap away. I'm sick, let me sleep. Don't pray
in front of me, Bitch. I know there's no God—
God wouldn't let me live, he'd let me die. Goddamn

eighty-six pounds, my goddamn parents all I own. (39)

The passive-aggressive—and I speak both of myself and my sister—sees himself or herself as injured victim. Since the state is undesired, bearing it becomes a shame-ridden act which must be kept secret. Guilt follows. When speaking does happen, it is hyperbolic from being long pent-up. No doubt my earlier spectator fascination and identification with Plath's voice occurred when I was unable to face the direct identification I now could use to my advantage. But when I felt myself permitted to speak by the death of everyone in my family, I returned to Sylvia—sometimes not even to read her but simply to touch my copy of *Ariel*.

I consciously invoked Sylvia in this villanelle (a form she often employed in her earlier poems):

FOR MY SISTER ON GUY FAWKES DAY.

When Plath set out to kill herself she died,
the third time anyway. But that's not you.
You go on living, even though you tried.

First a college Freshman, you made Dad lie
to get you back in: "a bad case of the flu."
When Plath set out to kill herself she died.

Next, job after job, fired, you screamed *fried*.
Yes, you were always late, but they had it in for you.

You go on living, even though you tried.

Your third: some handsome boyfriend bought a different bride
and after you gave him all your trust fund, too.
When Plath set out to kill herself she died.

I married, had three kids, our mother cried:
at every birth you slit your wrists anew.
You go on living, even though you tried.

Now you're locked up: you'll never get outside
to kill me as you'd hoped. Or yourself. You're through.
When Plath set out to kill herself she died.
You go on living, even though you tried. (32)

As I wrote more poems, I saw that in becoming the child-victim and viewing my sister as huge physically, I was mythologizing her but diminishing her importance in my own psyche. Poetry was not therapy for me but was therapeutic. By creating my sister in the parallel universe of the poem, I was freed of her.

The poems in my book *A Place Made of Starlight* were not written at the rate at which Plath produced *Ariel* (sometimes she wrote several, we are told, between four and eight in the morning) but were, for me, spawned at a rapid rate. In those last few years of my parents' and my sister's lives when I traveled often to suburban Detroit, many of the poems were written on airplanes, in airports, between conversations with doctors, while waiting at bedsides with hospice nurses. Or waiting for morticians. Sometimes I wrote at dawn like Sylvia, exhausted, not with the care of the young but of the old and infirm. My practice of daily early morning writing begun in the late 1990's continues to this day. This is one of the gifts of my love affair with Sylvia.

Plath's *Ariel* enacts a myth of rebellion against the order of father and lover and a received universe in order to create a new order of life-as-death and life-in-death. I subverted the pattern in my sister-dominated world by a fantasized sorricide. In my poems, the speaker achieves identity and maturity as an adult male by imagining his sister's death in its various transformations.

I sought unconsciously for a model of assertion in the works of a female poet, probably to bury my true intentions—to unleash the anger and aggression I had felt my whole life. But poems are not psychoanalysis: they are art. For both Plath (my muse-

collaborator) and myself, imagination is the alchemical agent that can transform and transfigure.

In Sylvia I found not only my material but myself: I was aided at last by a surrogate anima sister soul, herself a poet, who listened to the boy as he talked to Silence. Then I stepped beyond Silence into a space of continuous articulation, that daily writing which continues even today. This is what I meant by "a place made of starlight," a boundless speaking room lit by imagination. Or as Sylvia would put it: "The blood jet is poetry/There is no stopping it" (Plath 270)

Works Cited

Cooley, Peter. *A Place Made of Starlight: Poems*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2003. Print.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper & Row, 1981. Print.