

## Sylvia in Belfast<sup>1</sup>

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### I

In 1970 I was a student at the College of Business Studies in Brunswick Street, Belfast. The College was part of a network of Colleges of Technology and Further Education which acted as a kind of safety net for young and second-chance students to enhance their academic and/or professional qualifications for trade, legal and commercial positions in Belfast's industrial and manufacturing world. It was a world that was by then heading towards decline. The shipbuilding, rope making, tobacco, linen mills – all of which had prospered during the past hundred years and more and produced substantial wealth for the northern middle and upper classes, were changing under the tectonic shifts of post-industrialism. Belfast, once one of the very hubs of British imperial capital, was beginning to experience the first tremors of historical economic movement away from heavy industry and its manufacturing and fabrication bases, but no one was letting on, lest of all the provincial government in Northern Ireland which had other concerns urgently pressing upon its collective mind. For by 1970 what would become in effect a thirty years conflict, was barely two years old, as the civil rights movement – initially a middle class movement of students and professional Catholics with some limited Protestant liberal support – sought to democratise the Northern Irish state, allow for proper and adequate representation of Catholic and nationalist opinion, decent housing and the stripping away of the worst features of sectarianism which had blighted life in the north for many generations. That wholly justified and necessary agenda would in a few years turn into a different kind of struggle between various sections of the population and the state – the British state – locked into an appalling spiral of violence and destruction: "The Troubles." To the eighteen year I was then, The Troubles was a shadow on the future. I had come from a lower middle class family on the upper north side of Belfast's Antrim Road. The district had been home to our family since the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth. My great grandfather had lived there, married, prospered and brought up with his wife, two girls, one of whom, my grandmother, had

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<sup>1</sup> "Sylvia in Belfast" is an extract from *Under the Table*, a literary memoir. The editors of *Plath Profiles* have my modest, stylistic revisions for publication in this issue.



also settled there, married into a middle class business family, with Scottish and Fermanagh roots in the west of the province, and who had in turn reared a girl (whose son I am) and boy after a period of time living in Canada between the wars. The marriages of both grandmother and mother had not gone well and the two women, separated from the men they had married, established a matriarchy in the house they shared in the same neighbourhood of their own childhoods. At one time great grandmother, grandmother, mother and daughter lived briefly in that house before I was born in 1952.

My grandmother died in 1960, the same age as the century, from then on my mother, sister and I lived in her house until the end of the decade.

I had attended a relatively new school on the other side of Belfast – Orangefield, a progressive liberal public school administered by John Malone, a robust Protestant who had taken on the intellectual leadership of a group of like-minded teachers, challenging the somewhat complacent and stodgy educational establishment to adjust to the new times that were breaking ground elsewhere in Britain. Malone's alert intelligence had also issued clear warnings of what *might* happen should the governing elites in Northern Ireland, particularly those involved in the state education of the upcoming generation, not provide sufficient resources both economically and culturally, to prepare for the fundamental changes taking place in the economic bases of northern Irish society. Malone's vision was ahead of its time but a generation who attended the heyday of the school benefitted greatly from his and his teachers' prescience. Many of the students went on to achieve success in the world of the arts, in the theatre, in education and in public service.

Having sat and narrowly failed as an eleven year old the qualifying examination to attend the same grammar school as my grandfather, my mother was not quite sure what I should do next. The Belfast of that time could be "officially" quite an inhospitable place for women who had "separated" from their husbands; Puritanism and snobbishness mixed with provincial anxiety produced an unpleasant toxin. Turning to one of her father's relatives for advice, a teacher in one of the city's best known grammar (or private) schools, the name of Orangefield was mentioned as an option. I can almost hear the relief in that woman as I was sent across the other side of town, out of sight of her school: son of divorcee, grandson of divorce and grandson of the self-same teacher's closest relatives, no less. The whiff of such



impropriety in the Belfast of the late fifties and early sixties is hard to credit today but in the Belfast novels of Brian Moore one catches the odour of sanctity plainly enough. So off I went in the autumn on 1963, catching two buses, one from the north side into the city centre and another from Royal Avenue to the east side of the town – to Castlereagh and Orangefield in the industrial heartland of Belfast. It was the best thing that happened to me, although that first year was difficult adjusting and feeling the pangs of separation from the all too cosy home life and of the primary school, Seaview, which I had attended (and before me, my uncle) literally just around the corner from where we lived. The plan was simple. I would attend Orangefield for half the year and then, all being equal, and my health held up (asthma a constant bother from early age) I would sit what was then known as The Review and hopefully make up the short distance I needed to pass the "Qually" – the qualification examination. As it turned out I never bothered sitting the exam.

Orangefield proved an ideal ground in every way and I formed lasting friendships there and discovered literature through the passionate advocacy of teachers such as Dai Francis and Sam McCready and the idealism of civic responsibility and the wider vision of John Malone and others such as Henry Sinnerton and the practice of art with David Craig. The benefits of such young dynamic and gifted teachers also drew in others, in particular, practising writers, who addressed classes in Orangefield in the mid sixties; a bold artistic initiative in a culture which privileged practical work-orientated experience about much else. It was in one of these classes, as we were preparing to sit "A" (Advanced) level state examinations, that Stewart Parker, who would become one of Ireland's leading playwrights, read Sylvia Plath's poems to the transfixed class. Plath was "on" the "A" level course in English literature, included in the set text, the wonderful *Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1965) originally edited by Michael Roberts with a further supplement by the American poet and critic, Donald Hall. Plath was represented by several poems which Parker read and discussed along with other Plath poems which clearly had fired his own imagination, including "Fever 103°" and "Daddy." Nothing seemed quite the same after that. His Belfast accent was faintly inflected with an American tone drawn from his years living in New York where he had taught at Hamilton College and Cornell in the mid sixties before returning home in 1969, the year he visited that class in Orangefield in east Belfast where Parker himself had come from and had his cultural roots, explored in his masterpiece, "Pentecost." Parker



spoke softly but confidently and it probably did not pass us by that he had the look and demeanour of someone who was close in age and manner to his audience. The following year Parker would begin his innovative stint as "rock" columnist with *The Irish Times* newspaper, producing in "High Pop" a fabulous record of the musical culture of the time.<sup>2</sup>

There was something about the language of Plath's poems which Parker read that afternoon that sounded familiar and strange at the same time – the interrogative, unexpected, staccato syntax; the vulnerability of the solo voice that broaches such trippy heights as "The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I", came close to the music that we all listened to obsessively while chiming also with the anti-rhetoric of the peace movement and CND, "Greasing the bodies of adulterers/Like Hiroshima ash and eating in./The sin. The sin" (59, 58).

*Ariel*, published in the UK in 1965, was reissued in a paperback edition in 1968 and reprinted again in 1970. That edition I bought in July that year having, clearly, become completely transfixed by Stewart Parker's reading and having completed my English literature examination, answering questions on, among others, W. B. Yeats. But Plath was the sound of the time: questioning, self-absorbed, casting her imagined mind in her poems across shifting landscapes of England, New England and the terrible recent history of post WW2 Europe.

The English she wrote her poems in – in *Ariel* but also in *The Colossus*, (a hardback copy of which I was given by a friend in February 1971, though bought the previous year in May) quite simply sounded real, intimate and part of what felt like an inner group or following.<sup>3</sup>

The English literature examination went very well with a top "A" but the other subjects – Economics and History – were not up to scratch, a miserable "D" and "C" respectively, but with a decent clutch of "O" levels university beckoned. I took time off, went to London, thought about Drama School, an offer of being articled to an in-law's legal firm, returning to Belfast and joining up with my great grandfather's newspaper, *The Belfast Telegraph*, where he had worked as a sports journalist for much of his life. Instead I took the advice of a much respected teacher and after the

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<sup>2</sup> See *Stewart Parker: High Pop The Irish Times column 1970-1976*, edited and introduced by Gerald Dawe and Maria Johnston (Belfast: Lagan Press 2008)

<sup>3</sup> *The Colossus* Poems by Sylvia Plath (London: Heinemann 1960/Faber and Faber 1967)



London sojourn and hanging out in Belfast, went back to get the additional grades that would ensure entry into college.

## II

Between Parker's reading in 1969, the purchase of *Ariel* the following year and the gift of *The Colossus* soon thereafter, it looks like Plath was on my mind a lot in that final year and a half of the sixties. Just as things in my own life were about to take a definitive turn and as the good times were starting to turn not so good for Belfast, I read everything I could of Plath's and about her. Not the sensationalist stuff but the poetry and the prose and the occasional essay. The year at the college flashed by with romance, dance and nights and weekends spent in the famous Crown Bar, a few steps away from the college's front door.

My mother sold the unwieldy old house in north Belfast and moved to an apartment on the east side. My own connections with the city were straining and loosening as friends from my boyhood were themselves becoming impatient or anxious about their futures (never mind a married life) as Belfast succumbed more and more to sectarian violence and the social freedom of movement we had known growing up became dangerous.

Some left and moved elsewhere – the gift of *The Colossus* in February 1971 had been a farewell gift. In the May of that year, the brash intense somewhat dislocated soul that I was, sat in class with the great historian of Ulster, Jonathan Bardon, as a bomb exploded nearby. It must have been one of the first such bombings which would become a feature of life in the northern province for the next three decades. Riots had been one thing; shootings, arson attacks, vigilante groups, fights, shouts, sectarian taunting. All that seemed run of the mill. But bombs left in public bars, shops and factories, quite another. It was obvious, although no one that I knew was actually saying this, that things were getting out of hand.

In May I was invited to a dress dance at Queen's University. A friend's girl friend wanted me to go on a blind date with *her* friend. So off the four of us went – me the younger in dress suit, swallowing Bushmill's whiskey; and a friendship bloomed. I would meet the girl, who was a young woman of sporting accomplishment, and we would attend classical recitals in the Ulster Hall – no Jazz Club this time, my usual haunt – and in that brief time we spent together, barely a summer, she quoted Robert Lowell and from the house she shared with her family in



Bangor, a very popular, small coastal resort, she produced his books, such as the hardback of *Near the Ocean*.

I heard more of that contemporary ironic voice which seemed so close to nuances and inflections of what I known but did not really *hear* in the Belfast out of which I was growing increasingly more impatient to be gone.

I applied for university. To Sussex in England (History of Art), Bangor in Wales (English and philosophy), and without giving it much thought, Magee College in Derry, Northern Ireland, a satellite of Trinity College Dublin, which had been in the throes of relocation (controversially) to Coleraine, also in County Derry, nearby Portrush, a resort where I had spent many summers as a young boy in the fifties and sixties.

Sussex and Bangor offered places but with the way things were in Belfast my unvoiced concern of staying was offset by family worries about my mother, now living alone. Queen's probably made geographical sense. As it turned out no place was available from the local university since we had not prioritised it as first or even second choice. Bewildered three of us visited the registrar's rooms and met with a representative who basically left us in no doubt that, in spite of our good grades, nothing could be done.

I sat on the low wall outside the university pondering the options before a friend, who had on the instant made his own mind up, and pointed the way. The following week in a black Morris Minor car we jockeyed towards the north east coast of Ulster and signed on at the fledgling University of Ulster at Coleraine to the School of English, under the chair of the well known leftwing English critic and writer, Walter Allen. Along with a host of bright young things and not so bright, that fate and opportunity and lost opportunity and hope and devilment had brought together in this corner of the last province of the British Empire, the university looked east to the Mull of Kintyre and westwards towards the Irish Republic and the imposing rocky coastlines of Donegal. It is for another time to recount those years between 1971 and 1974 but for now suffice to note that my first "real" poem was published that first year. It had been written in Belfast in the apartment to which my mother and sister had moved. Heavily indebted to Sylvia Plath not just in its original title, "I'm through" the poem appeared in "New Irish Writing", edited by the legendary David Marcus and published in Dublin's *The Irish Press*.



### It Always Happens

It always happens like this  
I was told.  
First a pain, then a dagger,  
And then the room closes in.

I can only see a cross  
And a knife—  
A candle,  
A spade.

There are women in bronze,  
Painted gold, swaying and  
Smiling to me.

And men in steel and iron  
Looking like the moon,  
And a priest sitting cross-  
Legged like a garden Buddha.

It always happens like this,  
In a closed room, like a mouse  
Skittering about the floor.  
It always happens like this,  
So I was told.

The poem, included in the first pamphlet I published, *Heritages* (1976) and re-titled "It always happens" for my first collection, *Sheltering Places* (1978), was one of several early poems which grappled with the influence of Plath and Lowell and which, of course, lost out. Plath's sheer unrepeatable energy "turned my head." Throughout those early years of trying to write poems that matched or conveyed something of the madness engulfing the places of my upbringing, Plath constantly came to mind as a source of possibility. I was wrong but it was understandable in one so young and imaginatively vulnerable. When, thirty years later, *Sheltering Places* was revised and republished, I used as an epigraph to the new edition lines from Plath which had stayed with me from the haunting opening poem of *The Colossus*, "The Manor Garden":



## History

Nourishes these broken flutings,  
These crowns of acanthus,  
And the crow settles her garments. (9)

In one of those quirks of fate that leave only the faintest of traces behind, in the new university we drove towards in that autumn of 1971, one of the lecturers would recount how he had stayed in the same house in which Sylvia Plath had lived her last year, while another lecturer, who would become a dear friend, read Plath's poems in tutorial class with the same telling degree of fidelity and caution that I now realise only poetry of the highest order deserves.



Works Cited

Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. London: Faber and Faber, 1965. Print.

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