

Plath's Legacy for a Male Poet

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This paper was sparked by my attending the Plath-Hughes seminar at the Associated Writing Programs convention a few years ago. I was dismayed to find that some women felt, not that they could claim Plath as a female mentor(that I found understandable) but that they as women and women writers had exclusive rights to her. "You couldn't understand her, you're a man, one woman told me. Her friend agreed: "Why are you even here?" she asked.

Plath has been a significant part of my own writing since I first discovered *Ariel* in 1965. But let me begin by quoting part of the title poem from my book, *A Place Made of Starlight*.

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.

This poem, an experimental sestina which incorporates a number of thematic and formal concerns of the whole volume *A Place Made of Starlight*, particularly the speaker's abuse at the hands of his older sister, would not have been possible without my reading of Plath's *Ariel*. The speaker comes to reveal the secrets of his sister's hatred and abuse of him and his recovery with the help of others by means of the sestina's obsessive doublings-back: revelations are embedded in the comforting same-word repetitions, their semantics continuously decentered as the sestina fulfills its requisite workings out of predetermined patterns. The envoi's resignation to silent suffering came to me as a revelation in the writing of the poem: form led me to say what would have gone unsaid-- that no matter what suffering the speaker would endure, he would be disbelieved by his parents.

Our poems choose us when they are ready to be written. But without knowing "Daddy" well, my poem would never have emerged. I do not claim equal status with Plath, yet my poem leans heavily on the subject of family relationships evoked through regularized stanza patterns, a fragmented mythological reality, and a resignation to the speaker's final emotional truth.

Let me go back thirty years to my first reading of *Ariel*.

The time is Winter 1965, the place Iowa City, Iowa. I am a twenty-four-year-old graduate student in the Writers' Workshop. My friend, Stephen Dobyns, who like other graduate students at the prompting of professors in academic courses, subscribes to The Times Literary Supplement, shows me some astonishing poems. I still recall trembling in reading them, standing on a sidewalk

near Old Capital on a hill which looked down on the Quonset huts that comprised the workshop. I had never read poetry quite like this. Plath's voices were so visceral, dramatic, raw; I could only compare it to voices in Greek drama: Medea announcing her murder of her children, Antigone's defiant speeches to Creon, Cassandra's prophecies. Plath's poems sounded like lyrics which imitate the greater magnitude of the dramatic within a self-contained frame. I think of "Oh Western Wind," "I Heard A Fly Buzz When I Died," "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." Her tone was tragic: it begged for catharsis. I was a pretentious young pseudo-Neo-Aristotelian from Shimer College and The University of Chicago. Aristotle's formulas buzzed in my head, though Plath's poems had their own appeal to me based on my childhood and the traumas I had repressed.

Stephen, who had a charge account at Blackwells in England, offered to send for a copy of Ariel for me as well as himself. This was my introduction to a poet who now emerged as my mentor for thirty-five years. But I was young. I did not dare to imitate her. Even when I chose to do a paper on a "confessional poet" that spring for a course with Mark Strand at the Workshop, I chose Anne Sexton. All I could have said of Plath was that she fulfilled Dickinson's dictum, "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that it is poetry."

Let me offer another poem from *A Place Made of Starlight*.

MY SISTER CLOSES THE CLOSET DOOR

Self-imprisoned in your dark apartment at the home,
that sparrow on the window ledge 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 re-born: a shopaholic,
a goddess who could re-invent the world

by decking out your body with fineries
from Saks or Bonwits: 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 charity 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.

My sister was a shopaholic; she did abuse me physically, not sexually, as a child; she did end her days cared for by a woman-sitter in a room whose curtains she refused to open in hatred of the light. She came to this strange ending of her life after years of job "terminations" and suicide attempts which follow upon a brief career as teacher of the mentally retarded. Born with a birthmark that 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. She was allowed by my parents to hate me and to express her feelings toward me verbally. I was expected not to retaliate. Her physical abuse of me was a secret only she and I shared. Stigmatized by my parents for being different, a product of the "normalizing" 1950s, my sister was born two years before Plath and ingested and digested many of the cultural myths of beauty, as well as the gender roles and social codes forbidding anger or aggression.

As the youngest member of this household, which also included my mad grandmother and disappointed, divorced aunt, I had a friend. His name was "Silence." Silence I could go to whenever I wanted to recover from my sister's verbal or physical abuse, from the normalcy my parents created. When I was eleven I discovered Silence's best friend and he became mine, too. His name was "Poetry." Through therapy, which I received in the mid-nineties as the health of my family members declined while they all lived together in a retirement home in suburban Detroit, I began to construct a literary persona for the child I would like to have been in the "tranquilized fifties." He would have been the speaking child who is no longer a passive victim. What emerged was a passive-aggressive voice I had learned at Plath's knee.

The passive-aggressive. How clearly one sees it in the performance modes which inscribe psychic space in Plath: 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 it, one without, in the morgue space of "Death and 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 those dead flies from the windowsill.
Black Bitch! Bring me my coffee, those flies and juice, chilled.
It's six am. 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 were 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.

The passive-aggressive--and I speak both of myself and my sister-- sees himself or herself as an injured victim, in a state of being unchosen, unfitting. Since the state is undesired, bearing it becomes a forbidden act whose identity must be secret. Shame and guilt follow the prohibition to remain silent. When speaking does happen, it is hyperbolic. No doubt my earlier fascination and identification with Plath's voice occurred when I was young and needed a poetic mentor during a time of pseudo-innocence in my life. This provided a foundation for my identification with her voice when I needed a mentor. I found myself returning to Sylvia-- sometimes not even to read her but simply to touch the book physically as I began writing these poems about my sister and childhood.

Lines from her poem of in-bed suffering, "Tulips," often came to mind when I visited my sister who rarely left her bed the last three years of her life. You remember how it ends:



The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves,
The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,
And I am aware of my heart; it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is wry and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country far away as health. (Plath 162)

I consciously referenced Sylvia in my villanelle "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 and go on living, even though you tried.

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 reducing her size in my own psyche. Poetry was not therapy for me but was therapeutic, a distinction I made recently to one of my students in my advanced workshop. By creating my sister in a parallel universe of the poem, I was being freed of her.

The poems in *A Place Made of Starlight* were not written at the rate at which Plath produced *Ariel* (sometimes she wrote several, I believe, during her all-nighters) but were, for me, spawned at a rapid rate. In the last few years of my father's, mother's and sister's lives, I traveled often to

Detroit; many of the poems were written on airplanes, in airports, between conversations with doctors, while waiting at bedsides with hospice nurses. Sometimes I wrote one at dawn, like Plath, in the motels I stayed in, exhausted not with the care of young children like Plath, but with the old and infirm. Care of the old can be as taxing as that of the young. Changing my father's diapers and applying medicine to his private parts involved me in role reversals of parent and child.

When Plath died, *Ariel* was "completed"--or Hughes "completed" it. When all my family of origin died, my poems about my sister and my childhood stopped, too. If "dying is an art" as Sylvia said, dying, too, is anti-art and may bring to an end a death-sequence.

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 of my sister-dominated world in childhood by a fantasized sororicide. I achieve identity and maturity as an adult male by imagining my sister's death in its various transformations.

Susan Van Dyne has argued in her brilliant book *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*, that Plath critiques gendered logic in superimposing her narrative on a fairy tale. So, too, my boy speaker in this poem, "Nocturne with Witch, Oven and Two Little Figures" assumes a role of phallic assertion for Hansel as he pushes his sister Gretel-the- witch --in my rewriting of the myth-- into the oven, traditionally a symbol of the witch's power and destruction.

Haphazardly a blizzard collects over our window
as if the moon, weaving between clouds, were breathing it.

In the same window seat, stitched with lilies, each minute prickly,
in which she read me fifty-five years back

her favorite, "Hansel and Gretel,"
I am reading to my sister the same tale tonight.

She is sixty-eight, I am fifty-eight.
Now when she fidgets, as if from inattention,

I slam *THE BROTHERS GRIMM* down on her head
just as she slammed me at three, spitting a word

like a black worm I spit back at her. I shake her, screaming
if she dares to cry or tell our mother or father

I will come into her room at midnight
as I did last night dressed as The Boogie Man,



a pair of scissors in my hand to cut her weenie off.
But I don't have one, stupid, she laughs, shrilly

and it is her voice from age thirteen, a voice-over
of her voice now, post-menopausal, grating over it.

Here the book cracks open, we step into it,
the wood stretches before us, gnarled, primeval

and we are hand in hand as our real parents planned
we should be in their version of the tale

where brother and sister adventure with a good witch,
something like the old maid fifth grade teacher

my sister and I shared, dwarfed, hunchbacked,
always in black and chalk-enshrouded

because she crashed erasers together like cymbals, grinning
while she crashed unceasingly, beaming, scolding a class,

or if there were a bad witch for them she was a teacher
of moral precept stiff and upright as the paddling sticks

I suffered, just like my sister, a stiff dose of weekly
at Bushnell Congregational Sunday School.

Now as the dream continues, I shrink, sprout wings
until I am a tiny raven, I fly atop a tree.

My sister trundles on, happy without me, toward the witch's house,
little aware that what awaits her, ravenous, magical

is a shadow of herself, spectral in the doorway
and after she sates herself with delicious architecture

she will enter in to be devoured by herself,
witch and sister one in the pot brought to a boil

in this, the other life, where I am author.

I sought unconsciously for a model of assertion in the works of a female poet, perhaps to be less conscious of my real intentions as I wrote these poems which demanded to be written. For both Plath, my muse-sister-collaborator, and myself, imagination is the alchemical agent that can

transform and transfigure. By following Plath, I found not only my material, but myself, aided at last by an anima sister-soul who could help rather than hinder my poetic maturation. I found the older sister who could be my muse.

"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.

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