

## From Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" to Myself and Back Again

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In high school and in college, to a somewhat lesser degree, I was taught the T.S. Eliot "philosophies" of creative writing. One of them I recall or have simply invented for myself, was that a poet is not "mature" until he (or she) turns 50. I took that to mean, or perhaps Eliot himself elucidates, that a serious poet does not begin to publish full-length collections of poetry until he (I don't know why, but I hear Eliot in my head refusing to use "she or he") turns 50. Thus, I had a fledgling poetry career from college onward; yet, I waited until I was in my early 40s to begin to contemplate putting a full-length book of poetry together for possible publication. By then the market changed; I was "too old" to be a beginning poet; and, indeed, I turned 50 before my first full-length verse collection appeared (this year, 2008). Damn you Eliot-ophile teacher/thieves! Sylvia Plath certainly didn't wait to turn 50 to publish *The Colossus and Other Poems*. Wasn't she about two years shy of 30? Then after her early death came *Ariel* with Plath's best-known poem "Daddy." When a freshman in high school, I read that poem (mimeographed handout) and my world stopped. At that moment, I decided to become a writer. It was not Eliot's *The Waste Land*, though that work is not without merits, but at that time his poetic work did not speak directly to me. Plath's "Daddy" did, and I sought out *Ariel* immediately.

Growing up, my primary identity revolved around being an "asthmatic," and probably, to a lesser extent, being an asthmatic who happened to be a young gay boy. William Carlos Williams had a heart condition, I was taught, whose symptoms of breathlessness certainly mimicked a symptom of asthma. Unfortunately, in high school I had been taught "The Red Wheelbarrow" poem and little else by Williams. Although a fine little poem, it does not have the breadth (and breath) and vigor of, let's say, "The Desert Music," which I discovered years and years after college. In high school and in college, I had many teachers who preached the Eliot line. Alas, reading—or gasp, enjoying—*The Waste Land* was not for me in those early years. My rebellion against my teachers would just have to include Eliot himself. So the only true asthmatics I knew of—and this is way before the cartoon characters "Ren & Stimpy"—Ren is "a neurotic 'asthma-hound' Chihuahua"—(<http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/The>

\_Ren\_and\_Stimpy\_Show) and happens to be the first cartoon character I encountered (1991) to have asthma—were Truman Capote and Che Guevara. Since I had been encouraged in my creative writing early on, and *not* encouraged to overthrow Capitalism in favor of Communism (though that's not without its charms), Truman Capote remained my only “mentor,” a bit of a cartoon character himself come to think of it! But I preferred to be a Che, because he did things; Che, unlike Capote, did not wallow in his grandmother's room inhaling Vicks (though, admittedly, many of my asthma attacks were soothed by a good Vicks rub!). Perhaps becoming a writer was not for me! Still, there was Williams; his line-lengths matched my breaths. That is what attracted me to poetry. A line length the capacity of a breath under even the worst of circumstances.

But I wanted to do, not be! I wanted to become like a Che of poetry, not a trained poodle spreading celebrity gossip in a whiny tone on television talk shows (though that, too, now has its appeal to me). Then, somewhere in my freshman year of high school, an English teacher (whose name I have long forgotten) assigned Plath's “Daddy.” My world changed. In education, we talk about assimilation versus accommodation. The latter, we're told, is where learning takes place because we are confronted with information that challenges our world views (at least metaphorically). “Daddy” was not a poem of assimilation for me. It was a poem that showed me that words can have power, even anger. And I was angry! I was an asthmatic little gay boy, or by high school, an asthmatic little gay teen who grew up under the verbal and physical abuse of a mother who suffered from Munchausen-by-Proxy disease (before it had a name, mind you!). Don't get me wrong; I had two parents. I had both a mother and a father, but my father was a passive, over-worked, 1950s-style father who let his wife rule. He didn't see, or didn't want to see, what was going on under his own roof; actually, both my parents worked, so I guess it was technically “their” roof. I knew it wasn't my roof. I could barely trust the floors of my childhood house to hold up under me. And what was going on in that house, exactly?

Well, birthday celebrations for one, which brings me to the topic of “nuts.” Nuts, to me, are toxins. Every birthday, my mother would bake a cake filled with walnuts and spread frosting on top sprinkled with slivers of almonds. Then she'd light the candles and deliver “my cake,” gasping shortly after she placed it on the table: “Oh, Glennie, I

forgot. You're allergic to nuts, aren't you?" (Who can make a diminutive out of a name like "Glenn" except a mentally-ill mother, I ask you?!) Then, I wondered what a poem called "Mommy" written by Sylvia Plath would have revealed to me.

Anyway, at an early age, I learned not to eat my birthday cakes. But my mother, indeed, was a real sufferer of her disease. For years I was the victim of what I term the "Whitman" (not named after the poet, but the irony is rich and mine to spend) maneuver, arguably my mother's most clever "tactic" to feed her disease. During the summers, we'd drive down to a favorite uncle's and aunt's house; the Whitman maneuver was typically done there, in public, for the fullest effect. At some point after dinner, and after I'd made her a highball, and my brothers and I were all in the backyard avoiding one another, she'd pull out a Whitman's Sampler of chocolates. Now I know December 16 is "National Chocolate-Covered Anything Day," according to (<http://www.holidayinsights.com/moreholidays/December/chocolatecovered.htm>), but chocolate-covered anything days, for me, took place in the summer. In my earlier years, though I cannot identify exactly what years those were, I thought the Whitman Sampler was safe. After all, its cover was a sort of mock cross-stitch (wholesome) and under the top lid there was a guide to which "chocolate-covered anything" was which. One glitch: I didn't watch my mother take the box's shrink wrap off. Privately, she had mixed the candies to receive the optimal result. There was no 9-1-1 then, but some mix of telephone numbers which, more often than not, produced an ambulance. And, being working class, sometimes a ride to the E/R in the family Rambler heightened the pleasure for my "mommy" as my human-sized bronchial tubes withered to the size of a chicken's bronchial tubes (if chickens have bronchial tubes). Anyway, long diversion short: When I first read Plath's "Daddy" in high school, I was back in my youth anticipating exactly such a quasi-ambulatory ride; Sylvia Plath was Che Guevara as a poet! "Daddy" changed my life.

From the fifth line, I was hooked: "Barely daring to breathe or Achoo." How well I knew that feeling, for I never knew when my mother's verbal abuse would turn physical. Probably after a hard day at work. Probably after being yelled at over the telephone by a bill collector. Probably when memories of her own verbal, physical and possibly sexual abuse by her father began to surface. The working class, generally

speaking, do not have the benefit of a nervous breakdown; growing up, there were only sane days, less sane days and E/R days. I counted down the months until I would turn 18 and be able to flee. Other relatives saw the abuses but in working-class households in the 1960s, you didn't call anything like a Child Protective Services institution whether you were a relative or a neighbor. Your father and mother were supposed to be Child Protective Services, so that's what we all pretended they were. Internally, though, I was killing my parents years before they died—an inversion of Sylvia Plath's situation: "Daddy, I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time—"

Decades later, when I learned of my father's death, and a few years later, when I learned of my mother's death, I felt nothing. Plath's "Daddy" helped me kill them many, many years before. That was its power for me! When they actually died, there was nothing left to feel for the "black telephone's off at the hook / The voices just can't worm through." Unlike Plath, I didn't practice suicide until succeeding. Though in the severest bouts of asthma, or my mother's inducement of anaphylactic shock (through the Whitman maneuver), I understood the sensation of being "pulled out of the sack" and stuck back "together with glue." In my adolescence, I spent more time in an oxygen tent than on any playground. I still recall the sound of the thick plastic tenting me, and I still hear the zipper and the clean hands of a nurse reaching through to give me juice or maybe even just an ice cube to suck on. I don't recall visits from my parents though, and that gave me solace. A safe place to go to in my head. No birthday cakes. No yelling. No hitting. No assorted Whitman chocolates all mixed up.

At eighteen, on my own, I ate my first birthday cake. Of course I baked it myself, and it was from a box, but there was not a nut to be seen. (I happen to have no allergies to peanuts, as they are not tree nuts, and of course when my mother tempted me with cashews and I had no reaction, that was a major funk day for her! To this day, I believe cashews are the gods' gift to me, personally!) Anyway, when I blew out my candles, I probably thought: "You bastard, I'm through." That had to be my wish for my parents, but particularly for my mother. Now I can't say that the villagers "are dancing and stomping" on my mother's grave (but it is true many didn't like her), and I have no desire to do so myself for I know she went into her coffin with a stake in her "fat black heart." I cannot say for certain how she became the way she became, but I made peace with it

years ago, when I first read “Daddy” as a freshman in high school. If such stories need morals, then I think this story flies in the face of those who criticize teaching literary works that depict domestic violence, child abuse, incest, verbal abuse, mental illness, etc. Plath’s “Daddy” was my lifeline, and I doubt if I am alone in that.

Now I don’t go back and read Plath’s poem often, but when I do, the decades fly backwards, and I smell chocolate candy and the wax of thin birthday candles all around me. I don’t teach “Daddy” in my college creative writing classes, for I discourage beginning writers to utilize rhyme. But I have taught it as a text in a literature class. Inevitably, there is one student who has to ask, “Why is she so angry at her father?” And I want to provide the answer, my answer, but instead I can only ask back: “What might make someone so angry at a parent?”

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