

Translated that and taught it years ago 30
 And I see: Pound was an axe,
 Chen was an axe, I am an axe
 And my son a handle, soon
 To be shaping again, model
 And tool, craft of culture, 35
 How we go on.

1983

SYLVIA PLATH

(1932–1963)

Born in Boston, Sylvia Plath was the precocious child of parents who were both teachers. Her father, a German-speaking immigrant from Poland, taught German and zoology at Boston University. His death from diabetes when she was eight proved traumatic to her life and a source of power for her poetry. Raised in Wellesley, where her mother moved after Otto Plath's death, Sylvia wrote poetry as a teenager, attended Smith College on a scholarship and performed brilliantly, but ran into trouble in 1953, in the summer of her junior year, a time she later turned into fiction in *The Bell Jar* (1963). After winning a prestigious award from *Mademoiselle*, she worked for a month in Manhattan on that magazine's college board, but returned home to suffer an emotional collapse marked by a suicide attempt, hospitalization, and electroconvulsive and insulin shock treatments. Missing months of school, she nevertheless graduated *summa cum laude* in 1955 and left for England to study at Newnham College, Cambridge, on a Fulbright Fellowship.

In England she married the British poet Ted Hughes (now England's Poet Laureate), and after she received her M.A. in 1957, the couple came to the United States, where she taught for a year at Smith. They then moved to Boston, where Sylvia audited Robert Lowell's Boston University poetry class, becoming friends with a fellow student, Anne Sexton. Returning with her husband to England in

1959, Plath became a mother in 1960 and in the same year published her first book, *The Colossus and Other Poems*. In 1962 she gave birth to a second child, but although in many ways her life was going well, her marriage began to fail, she and her husband separated, and in December 1962 she moved into the flat in London, where, two months later, she committed suicide with sleeping pills and gas from a kitchen stove.

Her fame came posthumously. Toward the end of her life she had written many of her best poems. Writing in his foreword to *Ariel* (1965) of her "appalling and triumphant fulfillment," Robert Lowell encapsulated the reaction of many readers since to this and her later books. Two more volumes—*Crossing the Water* (1971) and *Winter Trees* (1971)—revealed yet more of her talent before *The Collected Poems* (1981), edited by Ted Hughes, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize nineteen years after her death.

Plath's mother, Aurelia Schöber Plath, edited *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963*, 1975. Prose is collected in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose and Diary Excerpts*, 1979. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* was edited by Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough, 1982.

Recent biographies include Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, 1987; Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*, 1989; Ronald Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, 1991; and Paul Alexander, *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath*, 1991. Other studies include Eileen Aird, *Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Work*, 1975;

David Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, 1976; Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology*, 1976; Edward Butscher, ed., *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work*, 1978; Margaret Dickie Uroff, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, 1979; Jon Rosenblatt, *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*,

1979; Mary Lynn Broe, *Protean Poetic: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, 1980; Lynda K. Buntzen, *Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process*, 1985; Steven G. Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*, 1990; and Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 1991.

Morning Song

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand.

All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
A far sea moves in my ear.

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes:
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

1961

1965

The Rival

If the moon smiled, she would resemble you.
You leave the same impression
Of something beautiful, but annihilating:
Both of you are great light borrowers.
Her O-mouth grieves at the world, yours is unaffected,

And your first gift is making stone out of everything.
I wake to a mausoleum; you are here,
Ticking your fingers on the marble table, looking for cigarettes,
Spiteful as a woman, but not so nervous,
And dying to say something unanswerable:

The moon, too, abases her subjects,
But in the daytime she is ridiculous.
Your dissatisfactions, on the other hand,
Arrive through the mailslot with loving regularity,
White and blank, expansive as carbon monoxide.

No day is safe from news of you,
Walking about in Africa maybe, but thinking of me.

1961

1965

The Arrival of the Bee Box

I ordered this, this clean wood box
Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift.
I would say it was the coffin of a midget
Or a square baby
Were there not such a din in it. 5

The box is locked, it is dangerous.
I have to live with it overnight
And I can't keep away from it.
There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there.
There is only a little grid, no exit. 10

I put my eye to the grid.
It is dark, dark,
With the swarmy feeling of African hands:
Minute and shrunk for export,
Black on black, angrily clambering. 15

How can I let them out?
It is the noise that appalls me most of all,
The unintelligible syllables.
It is like a Roman mob,
Small, taken one by one, but my god, together! 20

I lay my ear to furious Latin.
I am not a Caesar.
I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.
They can be sent back.
They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner. 25

I wonder how hungry they are.
I wonder if they would forget me
If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.
There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,
And the petticoats of the cherry. 30

They might ignore me immediately
In my moon suit and funeral veil.
I am no source of honey
So why should they turn on me?
Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free. 35

The box is only temporary.

1962

1965

The Applicant

First, are you our sort of a person?
Do you wear

A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or a hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

5

Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then
How can we give you a thing?

Stop crying.
Open your hand.
Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

10

To fill it and willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it.
Will you marry it?
It is guaranteed

15

To thumb shut your eyes at the end
And dissolve of sorrow.
We make new stock from the salt.

I notice you are stark naked.
How about this suit—

20

Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
Will you marry it?

It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
Against fire and bombs through the roof.
Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

25

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
I have the ticket for that.

Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
Well, what do you think of *that*?

Naked as paper to start

30

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.

A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,

It can talk, talk, talk.

35

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.

You have an eye, it's an image.
My boy, it's your last resort.

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

40

1962

1965

Daddy

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot