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Some Thoughts on Sylvia Plath

O vase of acid,
It is love you are full of . . .

Walking into class at Boston University one February in 1959, I sat down next to a young woman who, like myself, had gotten there early. The chairs were in disarray around the seminar table, and the windows looked out on busy Commonwealth Avenue below. Robert Lowell was, as usual, a bit late, and most of the class on time, so there was always an awkward wait. There was little talk, a low murmur to the person most immediately proximate, but students did not interact easily. It was rather like going to church, edging into a pew, trying not to call attention to one's self, and waiting for the service to start. People said hello self-consciously but mostly sat and prepared themselves for what was to come.

The woman next to me was astonishing in her stillness. She appeared perfectly composed, quiet, almost fixed in her concentration. She was softly pretty, her camel's hair coat slung over the back of her chair and a pile of books in front of her. Her notebook was open, her pencil poised. Everything seemed neat. This was Sylvia Plath.

I had read her poem "Doomsday" when I was in high school. The poem had appeared in *Harper's*. I loved the music of it, the reckless nihilism. I had memorized the poem but had forgotten the author's name. The author's note had stated that Sylvia was a student at Smith. It had been inspiring to me that a young college girl had been able to write and publish this poem. The poem had stayed with me through college. I had always wanted to meet the

author, a young woman who seemed to be living the literary life I craved. I had solaced myself on many a gray day by reciting grandly as I walked to and from school her lines: "The idiot bird leaps out and drunken leans / Atop the broken universal clock . . ." The poem ranked in importance to me with Frost's "Acquainted with the Night," a poem I still treasure, for I too had walked "out in rain—and back in rain."

After we had introduced ourselves, I somehow put the poem and the person together. Faltering beneath her intent stare, I said something about how much that poem had meant to me. But Sylvia was not interested in her "juvenilia." Nor in the juvenilia in Lowell's class. Focused on her own goals, she was pleasant but noncommittal.

We talked a bit before class from time to time, as we both got there early. Sometimes she seemed restless, agitated beneath that extraordinary stillness. She hardly interacted with the other students, her head bent in a book, pretending to ignore the comings and goings, the chair scrapings, nervous throat clearings, and so forth that accompanied the beginning of class. It was not that she wasn't polite: she was; but she seemed nervously preoccupied. I thought she might be worried about Lowell's opinion of her poetry, for a greater tension overcame her when he entered the room. She seemed inordinately serious, her head bent over her notebook. "Was she taking notes?" I wondered. Sitting next to her, I saw that she was scribbling, over and over, the ink marks digging at the page. Maybe she was doodling.

Her *Journals* from that time record how distant she felt from the class, but I think volcanic emotions lay beneath even the feelings of boredom. Outside of class she was already beginning to write *The Colossus* and other poems.

Sylvia had a neat, coed prettiness. She wore pleated skirts and buttoned-down pink long-sleeved shirts and a little pin; a kind of frozen woman student's uniform. Sometimes she would fold her camel's hair coat about her shoulders. She carefully positioned herself at the long table in Lowell's classes, often at the foot of the table directly opposite Robert Lowell. Her voice had a kind of rasped, held-in drawl to it, with the syllables clipped at the same time. Although she spoke softly, she seemed definite in her opinions. She had read almost everything, it seemed. Lowell's obscure references were not obscure to Sylvia; she was the best educated of the group.

She had absolutely no sense of humor. Ever! Lowell's offhand jokey manner did not evoke a smile from Sylvia, as it did often from others. She was serious, focused on the matter at hand, almost pained. Lowell was intense about poetry, totally one-track, but after a long exploration of a poem, or of the work of a "famous" poet, he might turn with a deferential smile and make a little funny, light comment. To Sylvia, these were annoying distractions. She could not deflect her attention.

The person in class and the person revealed in Sylvia Plath's letters, journals, and eventual poems were entirely different. Longing, anger, ambition, and despair appear to have been motivating factors for that gifted poet. These Furies expressed themselves outward frequently, as they did even more totally inward, toward herself and her achievements. As in a Greek tragedy, in which the elements of destruction reside within the character of the protagonist, the elements that led to her suicide had been apparent even in the early stages of her adolescence. Her desperation, so tightly reined in, increased throughout her life.

Sylvia visited Robert Lowell's class and recorded her first impression on February 25, 1959:

> Lowell's class yesterday a great disappointment: I said a few mealy-mouthed things, a few B.U. students yattered nothings I wouldn't let my Smith freshmen say without challenge. Lowell good in his mildly feminine ineffectual fashion. Felt a regression. The main thing is hearing the other students' poems & his reaction to mine. I feel an outsider: feel like the recluse who comes out into the world with a life-saving gospel to find everybody has learned a new language in the meantime and can't understand a word he's saying.

She had told the class, the first meeting, when we went round and introduced ourselves, that Wallace Stevens was her favorite poet. She sat very straight as she said this, seeming quite sure of herself. Lowell seemed to approve. Sylvia was erudite and classical, unlike the flamboyance of Anne Sexton. The achievement of her poetry at that time seemed to lag behind the scholarly achievements of her mind and her critical ability.

Sylvia might occasionally venture a comment on a student poem, although Lowell did not invite this very often. When she analyzed a student poem, she was critical, brilliant, and a "good student." She knew about such things as scanning and rhythm and structure. She was quiet most of the time, and only when she spoke of someone else's poems did that hard edge surface. She was precise and analytical and could be quietly devastating to another student poet. I would never have guessed that she taught her own classes at Smith College, since she did not have the encouraging warmth that might have prefaced her critical comments. Her remarks were distanced.

Her own poems were very tightly controlled, formal, impenetrable, but without the feeling that was later to enter them. They were good; they were like perfect exercises. They did not have the wild passion of some of the poetry from her "juvenilia": that passion had been replaced by duty and structure.

Lowell did not particularly praise Sylvia, for although her poems were perfect, they had a virginal, unborn feeling to them. As Sylvia herself did at that period. It was hard to imagine her married, passionate, or caring about

anything really: of course she cared intensely about her life but hid behind a perfect mask.

Lowell tried to push her on her poems a bit, trying to get at the feeling underlying them. He did this gently; he also sensed how brittle she was. Anne Sexton, on the other hand, was writing warm poems. Her poems seared, hot with feeling, and Lowell's critiques attempted to rein them in a bit, to get Anne to make her imagery consistent and to work more with form.

Lowell, that year, was always on the verge of a breakdown. The class was generally awestruck and trembled with a resonance to the fragility of his mental state. The experience of being there was nerve-racking. Lowell's idiosyncratic brilliance took turns with the more obscure parts of incoherent soliloquies. As each class extended longer than scheduled and the afternoon got colder and darker, we hunched in a kind of numb terror of frozen concentration over the student poems presented and over the other, more famous, poems that Lowell would read aloud and dissect.

Like the rest of us, Sylvia Plath was probably scared to death whenever she had to present a poem in the workshop. She withdrew behind dry defenses. Lowell admired her work, as we all did. He respected her but assumed a hands-off position on her poetry, brief in his comments with Sylvia, unlike the more relaxed, casual, jokey manner he might sometimes choose, a more rambling, discursive, comfortable approach.

On a particularly lucid day, Lowell passed out copies of Sylvia's poem "Sow."

I can still recall his somewhat nasal Southern/Virginian/New England voice, oddly pitched, as if starting to ask a question, saying to Sylvia and to the class, "This poem is perfect, almost." A slight breath-gasp, nasal, outward, as if clearing his sinuses silently. "There really is not much to say." A kindly but bewildered look. Long, struggling silence. Lowell looks down at the poem, brow furrowed. The class waits. Sylvia, in a cardigan, does not move. She listens. No one else moves either. "It appears finished." Long silence. Lowell looks agonized, but then he always does. Anne fidgets. Realizing that her arms draped with charm bracelets are making noise, she stops. Sylvia leans forward, dutiful, expressionless, intense, intelligent.

"But. I don't know. There's something about it. . . ." Lowell's nasal voice trails off, helplessly. "Does anyone else want to say anything about this poem?" No one apparently wants to say anything. We are all too intimidated. Anyhow, we have learned that Lowell will bite our heads off if we "say" the wrong thing. We're all afraid. If he is entering another breakdown period, he might turn and lash out at anyone who accidentally irritates him. Who knows what is going on in that tortured New England mind? Lowell frowns with effort. Another long, unsatisfying silence. There is the almost inaudible sound of Lowell's nasal breathing. He is thinking. Everyone tries to refrain from saying something

stupid. The room gets darker. Sylvia does not move, watching. "I'm sure this will be published," Lowell comments to her offhandedly, with a sly, kind, near-sighted glance. But perhaps the poem already has been published.

There is a feeling of unsatisfied poetic process in the room. The poem is formal and beautifully presented, as is Sylvia herself. Everyone senses Lowell has "damned with faint praise" and has managed to sidestep real engagement with the poem. One can't get beneath the surface of the poems Sylvia brings to class. And yet one can't define that, or change it either. There is an air of disappointment, an accepted frustration.

And then Lowell launches for some reason into a reading of Randall Jarrell's poem "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," another "perfect" poem. "Now that's the genuine article," he says, looking up and smiling gently, as if surprised anew by the perception. Lowell looks exactly like Little Jack Horner, I think. *("He reached in his thumb and pulled out a plum. . . . What a good boy am I!")* He regards us all triumphantly, about to crow. We all know how much he loves the work of Randall Jarrell. We have already gone over "The Woman at the Washington Zoo" in a previous class. The tension is broken, at least for the moment. Lowell, cocking his head, squints toward Sylvia encouragingly. Sylvia slightly relaxes her dutiful straight posture, and I catch her eye. Anne shifts, smiles at Sylvia across the table. The bracelets dangle, the skirt slithers as she recrosses her legs.

Neither the poetry nor Sylvia herself really got due recognition from Robert Lowell, who was more dazzled by Anne, his other female visitors, and most of all, by his own poetic process. He was deep in *Life Studies*, and W. D. Snodgrass as a current favorite poetic role model interested him more. Sylvia's formal poetry at the time seemed confining, a path Lowell had already traveled in his earlier work. Lowell wrote later of his surprise when Sylvia burst out of that tight poetry into the passionate statement of her later work.

Lowell and Elizabeth Hardwick visited Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes in their small Boston apartment, according to Sylvia, but it appeared a duty visit and did not develop into a warm social friendship. Elizabeth Hardwick instead, in private conversation, remembers having the couple to dinner and says that "Sylvia was very quiet."

Plath probably felt most comfortable with Anne Sexton and George Starbuck, both poets near her age. She wrote briefly of their famous after-class meetings at the Ritz. Anne Sexton has written more about these times as well. It is interesting to note the sense of competition in Plath's brief journal entries concerning these two poets.

> Retyped pages, a messy job, on the volume of poems I should be turning in to Houghton Mifflin this week. But A.S. is there ahead of me, with her lover G.S.

> writing New Yorker odes to her and both of them together: felt our triple-martini afternoons at the Ritz breaking up. . . .

She also wrote:

> All I need now is to hear that G.S. or M.K. [Maxine Kumin] has won the Yale and get a rejection of my children's book. A.S. has her book accepted at Houghton Mifflin and this afternoon will be drinking champagne. . . .

Sylvia did not win the Yale Younger Poets prize that year, but George Starbuck's collection, *Bone Thoughts,* did.

I followed Sylvia's work throughout as it appeared. Anne Sexton kept in touch with Sylvia directly, as the two of them had shared a special bond, an obsession with suicide. "She's the only one who understands," Anne expressed to me and to Lois Ames. Anne was totally open about her own obsessions.

Coincidentally, while writing this essay, I went to Oberlin College to visit a son who was then a student. I stayed at a bed-and-breakfast. My hostess told me of a young woman poet she once knew. Had I heard of her?

Before retiring to Oberlin, Mrs. Melvina Keeler had lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she was a music teacher. Her husband worked for Sylvia Plath's father and illustrated Dr. Plath's book on bees. Mrs. Keeler became the lifetime friend of Sylvia's mother. The two women had baby daughters at the same time, and they had wheeled the two children around Harvard together in baby carriages. Then the daughters grew up, led different lives. "She was a difficult child," Mrs. Keeler said of Sylvia. She had just returned from visiting Mrs. Plath in a nursing home in Massachusetts when I met her.

Earlier, I had been doing preliminary research for this essay at Yaddo, an artist's colony in New York State. I read everything Sylvia had written that I could get my hands on. I knew I would write about Sylvia Plath in those first years in Robert Lowell's class but wondered what shape this essay would take. Plath was already a cult figure: she had emerged transformed, in her work, from the seemingly docile young woman I had known.

While her *Letters* home to her mother are dutiful and saccharine, a parody of a happy girl of the 1950s, her *Journals* are full of contempt and hatred and self-aggrandizement. It was interesting to read Sylvia's versions of the same event: the public face, the private one.

Suddenly I came upon her description in a *Letters* entry of "my" studio at Yaddo, where I was sitting and reading. It was the same room that Sylvia had worked in when she wrote *The Bell Jar.* I decided to concentrate on what was her true art—her poetry—and poetic development and to write only about the young woman who had been visible to me.

Sylvia Plath's later poems, with their honesty and daring and imagery, at their best are incomparable. "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," "Tulips," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "Death & Co."—the list is endless. These poems are classics, triumphs of both form and feeling. The promise I had witnessed in her earlier poems was more than fulfilled.

Sylvia, Anne Sexton told me, was paid $50 by her publishers as an advance for *The Colossus*. But following her death, several publishers advanced prospective biographers more than $20,000 each, which was an unheard-of sum of money in those days. So suicide increased Sylvia's worth, much as she could have used the money in her lifetime.

Sylvia Plath has been celebrated, since her death, for giving voice to women's rage. She had the courage to express anger and hatred in her poems, not only victimization. But she did not live long enough to express a more complete vision. Death had always seemed an attractive option to Sylvia Plath. She turned to death as a way out of disappointment and exhaustion. But she thought of death, had thought of death before, as a solution, where another woman might have chosen a less terminal way of collapse.

What is most touching about the life of Sylvia Plath survives in the poems, but also in the photographs of her. The girl in the bathing suit, the newly married couple, the radiant young mother with her children, the lovely picture of Plath and Hughes bending with joy over their firstborn, the picture of the smiling person with her husband—all look not so very different from the photographs we all have of our young, happy, smiling, forward-looking times. Looking at the photographs, one feels we were all that hopeful young woman, literary, educated, full of illusions and talent and optimism and fierce, possessive love. That talented young man, Ted Hughes, how could he have become "the enemy" so quickly?

My mind sifts through its own internal photographs of Sylvia Plath: that soft, extremely quiet, talented young woman sitting next to me in class, filled with a passionate ambition. There is a barely perceptible change in atmosphere: the class has ended abruptly, loosening its knot of concentration. Like an exhalation in unison, a scraping of chairs lightens the room, signaling to us all that the moment we have shared is over. Anne and George walk out together.

Sylvia remains in thought for a moment. Lowell hunches over his papers and books, stuffing them into a huge, cracked leather briefcase. A few deferential students murmur round him, but the rest leave. Outside the classroom door today, Ted Hughes silently waits for Sylvia to get her things together. He helps her with her coat, her books. I can see her shy smile as she looks up at him; watch them walk down the hall together; know she will be telling him all about what happened that afternoon, what poems were talked about, what Lowell said: what she really thought of it all. . . .