

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1930, Sylvia Plath grew up to become, in the course of what would prove to be a tragically short life, a poet like no other. Just as heavy metal, in the opinion of lethally serious musicians and critics, begins and ends with Led Zeppelin, modern poetry in English starts and stops with Sylvia Plath. Both her imitators and those readers and writers inclined to ignore her can quietly be left to their own devices. Yes, I'm going out on a limb here. But I, for one, feel that her reputation will continue to grow exponentially, that her light will shine even more brightly in a hundred years' time than it does at the moment. She is, I think, to poetry what Bach has been, still is, and always will be to music. Her almost mathematical yet emotionally supercharged precision, her Orphic lyricism, her mountainous grasp of the grind of reality never cease to astonish.

As a child and as a young woman, she was nothing if not precocious. She published her first poem in the children's section of the *Boston Herald* at the age of eight and went on to have many more poems featured in New England magazines and newspapers during her teenage years. In 1950, ten years after her father's death from untreated diabetes, she gained a place at Smith College, one of the most highly regarded 'liberal arts' schools in America, and proceeded to astonish her instructors despite the fact that by now she was struggling with the mental illness that would eventually result in her remarkable novel *The Bell Jar*. She survived her first suicide attempt — in 1953 — and spent six months in psychiatric care (undergoing, like Allen Ginsberg, electroconvulsive and insulin shock treatment) before returning to college, completing her thesis (on Dostoyevsky) and graduating with very high honours. In February 1956, while studying at Cambridge on a Fulbright Scholarship, she met Ted Hughes and married him four months later. In October 1960, she published her first collection, *The Colossus*. Her subsequent collections — *Ariel*, *Winter Trees*, and *Crossing the Water* — were published posthumously. In July 1962, she and Hughes separated when she discovered that he was having an affair. On 11 February 1963, she took her own life. Her *Collected Poems*, edited by Hughes, were published in 1981.

A last word of sorts can be left to Alfred Kazin, one of her teachers at Smith, who, in 1955, described her as follows to Peter Davison, later poetry editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, one of America's most highly regarded 'liberal' magazines: "The college's most brilliant literary graduate in years, winner of all its prizes, straight-A girl all the way... She was the last in line waiting to get admission to another asinine "creative writing" class. All the girls seemed to be blondes in camel's hair coats... The last girl in line looked like all the others. When she handed over some pages, I had grown so wary that I began to skim, and then became suspicious. The writing was so coolly professional that I scented plagiarism, and said with some bitterness, "These could be published in ----- and -----." "I know," said the girl. "They've already taken them." ... There was not a line, not a thought, not a word that the magazine business would have changed. Sometimes, when she seemed tremulous and on the brink of saying something unusual, I wondered again at the cool professional sheen to anything she wrote. She had tried suicide: she had been notoriously tried, tested, and honored,

over and over — their pet achievement — by the nervous English Department. But the words came to my desk any Tuesday at four as if she could write in her sleep.’

Kazin only knew her, professionally, as a writer of prose. But the professionalism (in the very best sense of the word), the precision, the almost icy self-assurance, are present throughout her poetry. None of it is anything less than highly considered.

SYLVIA PLATH

1932 - 1963

CHANNEL CROSSING

On storm-struck deck, wind sirens caterwaul;
With each tilt, shock and shudder, our blunt ship
Cleaves forward into fury; dark as anger,
Waves wallop, assaulting the stubborn hull.
Flayed by spray, we take the challenge up,
Grip the rail, squint ahead, and wonder how much longer

Such force can last; but beyond, the neutral view
Shows, rank on rank, the hungry seas advancing.
Below, rocked havoc-sick, voyagers lie
Retching in bright orange basins; a refugee
Sprawls, hunched in black, among baggage, wincing
Under the strict mask of his agony.

Far from the sweet stench of that perilous air
In which our comrades are betrayed, we freeze
And marvel at the smashing nonchalance
Of nature: what better way to test taut fiber
Than against this onslaught, these casual blasts of ice
That wrestle with us like angels; the mere chance

Of making harbor through this racketing flux
Taunts us to valor. Blue sailors sang that our journey
Would be full of sun, white gulls, and water drenched
With radiance, peacock-colored; instead, bleak rocks
Jutted early to mark our going, while sky
Curded over with clouds and chalk cliffs blanched

In sullen light of the inauspicious day.

Now, free, by hazard's quirk, from the common ill
Knocking our brothers down, we strike a stance
Most mock-heroic, to cloak our waking awe
At this rare rumpus which no man can control:
Meek and proud both fall; stark violence

Lays all walls waste; private estates are torn,
Ransacked in the public eye. We forsake
Our lone luck now, compelled by bond, by blood,
To keep some unsaid pact; perhaps concern
Is helpless here, quite extra, yet we must make
The gesture, bend and hold the prone man's head.

And so we sail toward cities, streets and homes
Of other men, where statues celebrate
Brave acts played out in peace, in war; all dangers
End: green shores appear; we assume our names,
Our luggage, as docks halt our brief epic; no debt
Survives arrival; we walk the plank with strangers.

PROSPECT

Among orange-tile rooftops
and chimney pots
fen fog slips,
gray as rats,

while on spotted branch
of the sycamore
two black rooks hunch
and darkly glare,

watching for night,
with absinthe eye
cocked on the lone, late,
passer-by.

WHITENESS I REMEMBER

Whiteness being what I remember
About Sam: whiteness and the great run
He gave me. I've gone nowhere since but
Going's been tame deviation. White,
Not of heraldic stallions: off-white
Of the stable horse whose history's
Humdrum, unexceptionable, his
Tried sobriety hiring him out
To novices and to the timid.
Yet the dapple toning his white down
To safe gray never grayed his temper.

I see him one-tracked, stubborn, white horse,
First horse under me, high as the roofs,
His near trot pitching my tense poise up,
Unsteady the steady-rooted green
Of country hedgerows and cow pastures
To a giddy jog. Then for ill will
Or to try me he suddenly set
Green grass streaming, houses a river
Of pale fronts, straw thatchings, the hard road
An anvil, hooves four hammers to jolt
Me off into their space of beating,

Stirrups undone, and decorum. And
Wouldn't slow for the hauled reins, his name,
Or shouts of walkers: crossed traffic
Stalling curbside at his oncoming,
The world subdued to his run of it.
I hung on his neck. Resoluteness
Simplified me: a rider, riding
Hung out over the hazard, over hooves
Loud on earth's bedrock. Almost thrown, not
Thrown: fear, wisdom, at one: all colors
Spinning to still in his one whiteness.

THE BULL OF BENDYLAW

The black bull bellowed before the sea.
The sea, till that day orderly,
Hove up against Bendylaw.

The queen in the mulberry arbor stared
Stiff as a queen on a playing card.
The king fingered his beard.

A blue sea, four horny bull-feet,
A bull-snouted sea that wouldn't stay put,
Bucked at the garden gate.

Along box-lined walks in the florid sun
Toward the rowdy bellow and back again
The lords and ladies ran.

The great bronze gate began to crack,
The sea broke in at every crack,
Pellmell, blueblack.

The bull surged up, the bull surged down,
Not to be stayed by a daisy chain
Nor by any learned man.

O the king's tidy acre is under the sea,
And the royal rose in the bull's belly,
And the bull on the king's highway.

THE EYE-MOTE

Blameless as daylight I stood looking
At a field of horses, necks bent, manes blown,
Tails streaming against the green
Backdrop of sycamores. Sun was striking
White chapel pinnacles over the roofs,
Holding the horses, the clouds, the leaves

Steadily rooted though they were all flowing
Away to the left like reeds in a sea
When the splinter flew in and stuck my eye,
Needling it dark. Then I was seeing
A melding of shapes in a hot rain:
Horses warped on the altering green,

Outlandish as double-humped camels or unicorns,
Grazing at the margins of a bad monochrome,
Beasts of oasis, a better time.
Abrading my lid, the small grain burns:
Red cinder around which I myself,
Horses, planets and spires revolve.

Neither tears nor the easing flush
Of eyebaths can unseat the speck:
It sticks, and it has stuck a week.
I wear the present itch for flesh,
Blind to what will be and what was.
I dream that I am Oedipus.

What I want back is what I was
Before the bed, before the knife,
Before the brooch-pin and the salve
Fixed me in this parenthesis;
Horses fluent in the wind,
A place, a time gone out of mind.

MAN IN BLACK

Where the three magenta
Breakwaters take the shove
And suck of the grey sea

To the left, and the wave
Unfists against the dun
Barb-wired headland of

The Deer Island prison
With its trim piggeries,
Hen huts and cattle green

To the right, and March ice
Glazes the rock pools yet,
Snuff-colored sand cliffs rise

Over a great stone spit
Bared by each falling tide,
And you, across those white

Stones, strode out in your dead
Black coat, black shoes, and your
Black hair till there you stood,

Fixed vortex on the far
Tip, riveting stones, air,
All of it, together.

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.

WUTHERING HEIGHTS

The horizons ring me like faggots,
Tilted and disparate, and always unstable.
Touched by a match, they might warm me,
And their fine lines singe
The air to orange
Before the distances they pin evaporate,
Weighting the pale sky with a solid color.
But they only dissolve and dissolve
Like a series of promises, as I step forward.

There is no life higher than the grasstops
Or the hearts of sheep, and the wind
Pours by like destiny, bending
Everything in one direction.
I can feel it trying
To funnel my heat away.
If I pay the roots of the heather
Too close attention, they will invite me
To whiten my bones among them.

The sheep know where they are,
Browsing in their dirty wool-clouds,
Grey as the weather.
The black slots of their pupils take me in.
It is like being mailed into space,
A thin, silly message.
They stand about in grandmotherly disguise,
All wig curls and yellow teeth
And hard, marbly baas.

I come to wheel ruts, and water
Limpid as the solitudes
That flee through my fingers.

Hollow doorsteps go from grass to grass;
Lintel and sill have unhinged themselves.
Of people the air only
Remembers a few odd syllables.
It rehearses them moaningly:
Black stone, black stone.

The sky leans on me, me, the one upright
Among the horizontals.
The grass is beating its head distractedly.
It is too delicate
For a life in such company;
Darkness terrifies it.
Now, in valleys narrow
And black as purses, the house lights
Gleam like small change.

BALLOONS

Since Christmas they have lived with us,
Guileless and clear,
Oval soul-animals,
Taking up half the space,
Moving and rubbing on the silk

Invisible air drifts,
Giving a shriek and pop
When attacked, then scooting to rest, barely trembling.
Yellow cathead, blue fish---
Such queer moons we live with

Instead of dead furniture!
Straw mats, white walls
And these traveling
Globes of thin air, red, green,
Delighting

The heart like wishes or free
Peacocks blessing
Old ground with a feather
Beaten in starry metals. Your small

Brother is making
His balloon squeak like a cat.

Seeming to see
A funny pink world he might eat on the other side of it,
He bites,

Then sits
Back, fat jug
Contemplating a world clear as water.
A red
Shred in his little fist.

THE COLOSSUS

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.
It's worse than a barnyard.

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
Thirty years now I have labored
To dredge the silt from your throat.
I am none the wiser.

Scaling little ladders with glue pots and pails of lysol
I crawl like an ant in mourning
Over the weedy acres of your brow
To mend the immense skull plates and clear
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

A blue sky out of the Oresteia
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.
I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress.
Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered

In their old anarchy to the horizon-line.
It would take more than a lightning-stroke
To create such a ruin.
Nights, I squat in the cornucopia
Of your left ear, out of the wind,

Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.
The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
My hours are married to shadow.
No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
On the blank stones of the landing.

