

## The **Bar** Fly Ought to Sing

I can add, for Sylvia, only a small sketch and two poems—one poem written for her at the news of her death and the other, written a year later, written directly for both of us and for that place where we met. . . . “balanced there, suicides sometimes meet. . . .”

I knew her for a while in Boston. We did grow **up** in the same suburban town, Wellesley, Massachusetts, but she was about four years behind me and we never met. Even if we had, I wonder if we would have become close friends, back then—she was so bright, **so** precocious and determined to be special while I was only a pimply boy-crazy thing, flunking most subjects, thinking I was never special. We didn’t meet, at any rate, until she was married to Ted Hughes and living in Boston. We met because we were poets. Met, not for protocol, but for truth. She heard, and George Starbuck heard, that I was auditing a class at Boston University given by Robert Lowell. They kind of followed me in, joined me there and **so** we orbited around the class silently. If we talked at all then we were fools. We knew too much about it to talk. Silence was wiser, when we could command it. We tried, each one in his own manner; sometimes letting our own poems come up, as for a butcher, as for a lover. Both went on. We kept as quiet as possible in view of the father.

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Then, after the class, we would pile into the front seat of my old Ford and I would drive quickly through the traffic to, or near, the Ritz. I would always park illegally in a **LOADING ONLY ZONE**, telling them gaily, “It’s okay, because we are only going to get loaded!” Off we’d go, each on George’s arm, into the Ritz and drink three or four or two martinis. George even has a line about this in his first book of poems, *Bone Thoughts*. He wrote, “*I weave with two sweet ladies out of The Ritz.*” Sylvia and I, such sleep mongers, such death mongers, were those two sweet ladies.

In the lounge-bar of the Ritz, not a typical bar at all, but very plush, deep dark red carpeting, red leather chairs around polite little tables and with waiters, white coated and awfully hushed where one knew upon stepping down the five velvet red steps that he was entering *something*, we entered. The waiters knew their job. They waited on the best of Boston, or at least, celebrities. We always hoped they’d make *a* mistake in our case and think us some strange Hollywood types. There had to be something to explain all our books, our snowboots, our clutter of poems, our oddness, our quick and fiery conversations—and always the weekly threesome hunched around their small hut fashionable table.

Often, very often, Sylvia and I would talk at length about our first suicides; at length, in detail and in depth between the free potato chips. Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem. Sylvia and I often talked opposites. We talked death with burned-up intensity, both of **us** drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb. Sucking on it! She told the story of her first suicide in sweet and loving detail and her description in *The Bell Jar* is just the same story. It is a wonder that we didn’t depress George with our egocentricity. Instead, I think, we three were stimulated by it, even George, as if death made each of us a little more real at the moment. Thus we went on, in our fashion, ignoring Lowell and the poems left behind. Poems left behind were technique—lasting but, actually, over. **We** talked death and this **was life** for us, lasting in spite of us, or better, because of **us**, our intent eyes, our fingers clutching the glass, three pairs of eyes fixed on someone’s—

each one's gossip. I know that such fascination with death sounds strange (one does not argue that it isn't sick—one knows it is—there's no excuse), and that people cannot understand. They keep, every year, each year, asking me "why, why?" So here is the Why-poem, for both of us, those sweet ladies at the Ritz. I do feel somehow that it's the same answer that Sylvia would have given. She's since said it for me in so many poems—so I try to say it for **us** in one of mine. . . .

*Wanting to Die*

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.  
I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage.  
Then the almost unnameable lust returns.

Even then I have nothing against life.  
I know well the grass blades you mention,  
the furniture you have placed under the sun.

But suicides have a special language.  
Like carpenters they want to know *which* took.  
They never ask *why* build.

Twice I have so simply declared myself,  
have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy,  
have taken on his craft, his magic.

In this way, heavy and thoughtful,  
warmer than oil or water,  
I have rested, drooling at the mouth-hole.

I did not think of my body at needle point.  
Even the cornea and the leftover urine were gone.  
Suicides have already betrayed the body.

Still-horn, they don't always die,  
hut dazzled, they can't forget a drug so sweet  
that even children would look on and smile.

To thrust all that life under your tongue!—  
that, all by itself, becomes a passion.  
Death's a sad bone; bruised, you'd say,  
and yet she waits for me, year after year,  
to so delicately undo an old wound,  
to empty my breath from its had prison.

Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet,  
raging at the fruit, a pumped-up moon,  
leaving the bread they mistook for a kiss,

leaving the page of the book carelessly open,  
something unsaid, the phone off the hook  
and the love, whatever it was, an infection.

And balanced there we did meet and never asking why build—only asking which tools. This was our fascination. I neither could nor would give you reasons why either of us wanted *to* build. It is not my place to tell you Sylvia's why nor my desire to tell you mine. But I do say, come picture us exactly at our fragmented meetings, consumed at our passions and at our infections, as we ate five free bowls of potato chips and consumed lots of martinis.

After this we would weave out of the Ritz to spend our last pennies at the Waldorf Cafeteria—a dinner for seventy cents. George was in no hurry. He was separating from his wife. Sylvia's Ted was either able to wait or was busy enough with his own work and I had to stay in the city (I live outside of it) for a seven P.M. appointment with my psychiatrist. A funny three.

I have heard since that Sylvia was determined from childhood to be great, a great writer at the least of it. I tell you, at the time I did not notice this in her. Something told me to bet on her but I never asked it why. I was too determined to bet on myself to actually notice where she was headed in her work. Lowell said, at the time, that he liked her work and that he felt her poems got right to the point. I didn't agree. I felt they really missed the whole point. (These were early poems of hers—poems on the way, on the working toward way.) I told Mr. Lowell that I felt she dodged the point and did so perhaps because of her preoccupation with form. Form was important for Sylvia and each really good poet has one of his own. No matter what he calls it—free verse or what. Still, it belongs to you or it doesn't. Sylvia hadn't then found a form that belonged to her. Those early poems were all in a cage (and not even her own cage at that). I felt she hadn't found a

voice of her own, wasn't, in truth, free to be herself. Yet, of course, I knew she was skilled—intense, skilled, perceptive, strange, blonde, lovely, Sylvia.

From England to America we exchanged a few letters. I have them now, of course. She mentions my poems and perhaps I sent her new ones as I wrote—I'm not sure. The time of the **LOADING ONLY ZONE** was gone as now we sent aerograms back and forth, now and then. George was in Rome. He never wrote. He divorced and remarried over there. Sylvia wrote of one child, keeping bees, another child, my poems—happy, gossip-letters, and then, with silence between us, she died.

After her death, with the printing of her last poems, I read that she gave me credit on a BBC program, credit as an influence upon her work. Certainly she never told me anything about it. But then, maybe she wouldn't have—nothing that ordinary, nothing that direct. She gave me and Robert Lowell (both in a rather casual lump, Sylvia!) credit for our breakthrough into the personal in poetry. I suppose we might have shown her something about daring—daring to tell it true. W. D. Snodgrass showed me in the first place. Perhaps he influenced Robert Lowell too—I can't speak for him. But let's get down to facts. I'm sure Sylvia's influences are hidden, as with most of us, and if one feels compelled to name an influence then let us begin with Theodore Roethke. I remember writing to Sylvia in England after *The Colossus* came out and saying something like: "if you're not careful, Sylvia, you will out-Roethke Roethke," and she replied that I had guessed accurately and that he had been a strong influence on her work. Believe me, no one ever tells one's real influences—and certainly not on the radio or the TV or in interviews, if he can help it. As a matter of fact, I probably guessed wrong and she was lying to me. She ought to. I'd never tell anyone and she was smarter than I am about such hidden things. Poets will not only hide influences. They will bury them! And not that her lines reminded me of Roethke—but the openness to metaphor, the way they both have (and Sylvia even more so in her

last work) of jumping straight into their own image and then believing it. No doubt of it—at the end, Sylvia burst from her cage and came riding straight out with the image-ridden-darer, Roethke. But maybe she buried her so-called influence deeper than that, deeper than any one of us would think to look, and if she did I say good luck to her. Her poems do their own work. I don't need to sniff them for distant relatives of some sort. I'm against it. Maybe I did give her *a* sort of daring, but that's all she should have said. That's all chat's similar about our work. Except for death—yes, we have that in common (and there must be enough other poets with that theme to fill an entire library). Never mind last diggings. They don't matter. What matters is her poems. These **last** poems stun me. They eat time. **As** for death—

*Sylvia's Death*  
for Sylvia Plath

O Sylvia, Sylvia,  
with a dead **box of** stones and spoons,  
with two children, two meteors  
wandering loose in the tiny playroom,  
with your mouth into the sheet,  
into the roofbeam, into the dumb prayer,  
(Sylvia, Sylvia,  
where did you go  
after you wrote me  
from Devonshire  
about raising potatoes  
and keeping hees?)  
what did you stand **by**,  
just how did you lie down into?  
Thief!—  
how did you crawl into,  
crawl down alone  
into the death I wanted so badly and for **so** long,

the death we said we both outgrew,  
the one we wore on our skinny breasts,  
the one we talked of so often each time  
we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston,  
the death that talked of analysts and cures,  
the death that talked like brides with plots,  
the death we drank to,  
the motives and then the quiet deed?

(In Boston  
the dying  
ride in cabs,  
yes death again,  
that ride home  
with our boy.)

O Sylvia, I remember the sleepy drummer  
who beat on our eyes with an old story,  
how we wanted to let him come  
like a sadist or a New York fairy  
to do his job,  
a necessity, a window in a wall or a crib,  
and since that time he waited  
under our heart, our cupboard,  
and I see now that we store him up  
year after year, old suicides  
and I know at the news of your death,  
a terrible taste for it, like salt.

(And me,  
me too.  
And now, Sylvia,  
you again  
with death again,  
that ride home  
with our boy.)

And I say only  
with my arms stretched out into that stone place,

what is your death  
but an old belonging,  
a mole that fell out  
of one of your poems?

(O friend,  
while the moon's bad,  
and the king's gone,  
and the queen's at her wit's end  
the bar fly ought to sing!)

● tiny mother,  
you too!  
● funny duchess!  
● blonde thing!