

## SYLVIA PLATH

### 1932-1963

"Death is the mother of beauty," declares Wallace Stevens, and this certainly holds true for Sylvia Plath. She follows a long and distinguished line of poets who make luminous art out of the final darkness, from John Keats and Emily Dickinson to W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Stevie Smith. Unavailable as a direct experience, death is for Plath a rich imaginative resource, an ultimate horizon for intensifying and defining poetic subjectivity. Her fascination with death is rooted in her father's, in 1940, when she was only eight. In her journals, Plath refers to her father as "the buried male muse and god-creator" and the "father-sea-god muse." She wrestles with this traumatic loss in poems such as "The Colossus" and "Daddy." Plath's father was a first-generation Prussian immigrant from Grabów, Poland. As an adult, he taught biology and German at Boston University and wrote a treatise on bees. A diabetic, he died after an infected toe became gangrenous and his leg had to be amputated. Through psychoanalysis, Plath became ever more aware that her feelings for her father were intensely ambivalent: "He was an autocrat," she told Nancy Hunter Steiner. "I adored and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I had killed him" (*A Closer Look at Ariel*). Plath's poems about her father are the first in English to explore such explosive, suicidal grief and rage toward a dead parent, shattering the boundaries of domestic poetry.

Like Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and other poets of the "confessional school," Plath centers much of her poetry on intensely personal and forbidden subjects, such as death, suicide, female rage, and ambivalent mourning. "I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*," Plath said in a 1962 interview, "this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo" (*The Poet Speaks*, 1966). Her poetry reaches into the recesses of unconscious feeling—hatred, desire, masochism, melancholia. Her work exemplifies the agonizing and yet creative relationship between pain and creativity. Courting emotional disaster, she discovered within herself areas of trauma, confusion, and heartbreak that she transmuted into some of the twentieth century's most distinguished works of art.

Yet Plath cautioned that her poetry isn't reducible to the personal experience that fueled it. Poets must refashion and remake private material, as she said in an interview (*The Poet Speaks*):

I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such things as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on.

Plath is well aware that in representing her dead father as a "Fascist," "devil," and "vampire" in the poem "Daddy," she is mythologizing him, connecting her feelings with those of other victims of human aggression, which, for Plath, reached its most extreme form in the Nazi Holocaust. In a picture, the professor "stands at the blackboard," and

Plath represents herself as transfiguring this harmless image into a cleft-chin "devil" in juxtapositions that are deliberately jarring, she boldly interweaves this Gothic imagery with language from nursery rhyme, light verse, elegy, and love poetry.

The father in "Daddy," like the overbearing male figure in "Fever 103°" and "Lady Lazarus," is German, and Plath was uneasily conscious that her background was German on both sides of her family, heightening her sense of connection with the horrific events of the Holocaust. Her mother, a second-generation Austrian immigrant, grew up speaking German at home. Plath's ambivalence toward her mother is at the center of one of her finest early poems, "The Disquieting Muses," an unnerving blend of the real and the fantastic, in which the mother floats off on a balloon of illusions while the daughter is tutored by grim, blank muses of death and oblivion.

Born on October 27, 1932, in Boston, and growing up in Winthrop, Massachusetts, Plath was already conscious at seventeen of the conflict between her powerful ambitions—"I want to be free—I want, I think, to be omniscient. . . . I think I would like to call myself 'The girl who wanted to be God'"—and the limiting expectations for postwar American women: "I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day—spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote" (*Letters Home*). In the semiautobiographical figure of Esther Greenwood in the novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), Plath presents a young woman paralyzed between seemingly irreconcilable social roles "a wonderful future beckoned and winked" as wife with "a happy home and children," or as "a famous poet," or as "a brilliant professor," or as "the amazing editor," and so forth.

Writing and publishing from an early age, Plath won a scholarship at Smith College and graduated *summa cum laude*. Among the poets she read most intently were Yeats, Dylan Thomas, and W. H. Auden. But after her junior year, having spent a month as guest college editor at *Mademoiselle*, Plath suffered a breakdown, attempted to kill herself, and was hospitalized at length—events fictionalized in *The Bell Jar*. Later, she spent two years on a Fulbright Scholarship at Cambridge University. In 1956, she married the English poet Ted Hughes. The couple lived in the United States for more than a year, and she taught at Smith, also enrolling in a poetry seminar given by Lowell at Boston University in which she befriended Sexton. But the reading of students' papers at Smith consumed all her energy, and after a short time in Boston, the couple returned to England, where Plath intended to spend the rest of her life. She published a volume of poems, *The Colossus*, in 1960. She and Hughes had two children, a girl in 1960 and a boy in 1962. In the summer of 1962, Plath learned that her husband was having an affair, and they separated a few months later, in October. By the end of 1962, Plath had moved back alone to London from the family home in Devon and brought the children with her.

Plath's final months were a period of extraordinary creativity, during which she wrote as many as three poems a day while contending with depression, small children, and the coldest winter in England in a century and a half. These poems were, she said in notes for a BBC program, "all written at about four in the morning—that still, blue, almost eternal hour before cockcrow, before the baby's cry, before the glass music of food and milk for her children, sealed the kitchen door, and put her head in the gas oven. This tragic life story is so affecting that it risks overshadowing the poetry. But the suicide the last poems seem to foretell was not inevitable. Plath seems to have wanted to be saved: she had tried to get herself committed to a psychiatric hospital (the bed were full), had arranged for an au pair to arrive the morning of the suicide (the door was locked), and had left a note with the doctor's name and telephone number.

Far from being mere symptoms in a personal pathology, Plath's poems are works of great aesthetic accomplishment and psychological insight. She transmutes experiences both everyday and extraordinary into a clear, bright, and

of accidentally cutting the tip of her thumb instead of an onion undergoes an astonishing series of metamorphoses. A household event becomes the occasion for an imaginative outpouring, the poem mimicking the intensified consciousness of the body in pain by leaping from one increasingly extravagant image to the next. In "The Applicant," a salesman's arrival at the door turns into a savage meditation on the objectification of women in traditional marriage. In "Fever 103°," Plath transforms a high temperature into a meditation on death, just, fire, and imaginative liberation of the female body from dependence on men. The movement of a horse in "Ariel" becomes the ecstatic drive of the poetic "I" to fuse with the sublime "eye" of Being.

Plath's final style represents a major achievement, especially compared with the overwrought, highly formal artifice of her early poems, written in the arch, New Critical style of the 1950s. Even so, a poem such as "The Colossus" begins to hint at the eruption of something less smooth and deliberate, especially in its juxtapositions of the formal with the colloquial, the mythic with the mundane ("A blue sky out of the Oresteia" but also "pails of Lyso! and the contemptuous remark 'It's worse than a barnyard'"). The poems written in Plath's last year are wildly heterogeneous, yoking together extremes of Gothicism and gaiety, rage and tenderness. They leap from one metaphor to the next without explicit connections, riding the relentless velocity of short, incantatory, free verse lines. She said they were written, unlike earlier ones, "to be read aloud" (BBC interview). The persona in these poems is volcanic in energy, mercurial in affect, by turns mournful, sardonic, aggressive, visionary, and ruthlessly self-mocking.

The emotional ambivalence of Plath's poetry widened the affective range of lyric poetry in English. Here, motherhood is not all sugar and sweetness, but includes the "stink of fat and baby crap" ("Lesbos"). A grieving daughter can adore her father, but also rage at him: "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through." A husband may be a "vampire." Nor does the poet spare herself the same tumultuous mix of emotions. Plath even scorns her own supposedly confessional hawking of her inner emotional life for money: "There is a charge," proclaims Lady Lazarus, "For the eyeing of my scars."

Plath's example was not lost on a poet such as John Berryman, one of whose *Dream Songs* has him splitting open his father's casket and tearing apart his grave clothes. But for a host of women poets, including the Americans Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Maxine Kumin, and Sharon Olds, as well as the Irish Eavan Boland, the British Carol Ann Duffy, and the Indian Eunice de Souza, Plath's example has been fundamental, as evidenced by their poems of fury against fathers and mothers, of suicidal longing and triumphant rebirth, of ferocious self-definition and self-assertion. Plath created a style equal to her keen awareness of her psychic life. Venting repressed feeling, examining it with an icy calm, Plath delivered to us our inner tumult, conflict, but also power.

## The Disquieting Muses<sup>1</sup>

Mother, mother, what illbred aunt  
Or what disfigured and unsightly  
Cousin did you so unwisely keep  
Unasked to my christening,<sup>2</sup> that she

1 In a BBC radio program, Plath commented on this poem: "It borrows its title from the painting by Giorgio de Chirico—*The Disquieting Muses*. All through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic figures, in this painting—three terrible faceless dreamer's dummies in classical gowns, seated and standing in a weird, clear light that casts the

early work. The dummies suggest a twentieth-century version of other sinister tríos of women—the Three Fates, the witches in *Macbeth*, [Thomas] De Quincey's sisters of madness."  
2 Cf. the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty: a fairy, angry over not being invited to the christening of the newborn princess, curses her to die on her fif-

Sent these ladies in her stead  
With heads like darning-eggs to nod  
And nod and nod at foot and head  
And at the left side of my crib?

Mother, who made to order stories  
Of Mixe Blackshort the heroic bear,  
Mother, whose witches always, always  
Got baked into gingerbread, I wonder  
Whether you saw them, whether you said  
Words to rid me of those three ladies  
Nodding by night around my bed,  
Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head.

In the hurricane, when father's twelve  
Study windows belled in  
Like bubbles about to break, you fed  
My brother and me cookies and Ovaltine  
And helped the two of us to choir:  
"Thor's angry: boom boom boom!  
Thor is angry: we don't care!"  
But those ladies broke the panes.

When on tiptoe the schoolgirls danced,  
Blinking flashlights like fireflies  
And singing the glowworm song, I could  
Not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress  
But, heavy-footed, stood aside  
In the shadow cast by my dismal-headed  
Godmothers, and you cried and cried:  
And the shadow stretched, the lights went out.

Mother, you sent me to piano lessons  
And praised my arabesques\* and trills  
Although each teacher found my touch  
Oddly wooden in spite of scales  
And the hours of practicing, my ear  
Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable.  
I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,  
From muses unhired by you, dear mother.

I woke one day to see you, mother,  
Floating above me in bluest air  
On a green balloon bright with a million  
Flowers and bluebirds that never were  
Never, never, found anywhere.  
But the little planet bobbed away  
Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!  
And I faced my traveling companions.

Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,  
They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,  
Faces blank as the day I was born,  
Their shadows long in the setting sun  
That never brightens or goes down.  
And this is the kingdom you bore me to,  
Mother, mother. But no frown of mine  
Will betray the company I keep.

### Metaphors

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,  
An elephant, a ponderous house,  
A melon strolling on two tendrils.  
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!  
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.  
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.  
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.  
I've eaten a bag of green apples,  
Boarded the train there's no getting off.

March 20, 1959

### 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 gluepots 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 tumult<sup>5</sup> of your eyes.

A blue sky out of the Oresteia<sup>6</sup>  
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself

3. Norse god of thunder.

4. Musical embellishments.

5. Burial mounds.

6. Trilogy by Greek playwright Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.E.), in which the murder of King Agamemnon by his wife, Clytemnestra, is avenged by their children, Elektra and Orestes.

You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.  
I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress.  
Your fluted bones and acanthine<sup>7</sup> hair are littered

20

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,

25

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.

30

1960

### 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.

20

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

5

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

25

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

10

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

15

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

February 19, 1961

1965

### In Plaster

I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:  
This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one,  
And the white person is certainly the superior one.  
She doesn't need food, she is one of the real saints.  
At the beginning I hated her, she had no personality—  
She lay in bed with me like a dead body  
And I was scared, because she was shaped just the way I was

5

Only much whiter and unbreakable and with no complaints.  
I couldn't sleep for a week, she was so cold.  
I blamed her for everything, but she didn't answer.  
I couldn't understand her stupid behavior!  
When I hit her she held still, like a true pacifist.  
Then I realized what she wanted was for me to love her:  
She began to warm up, and I saw her advantages.

10

Without me, she wouldn't exist, so of course she was grateful.  
I gave her a soul, I bloomed out of her as a rose  
Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain,  
And it was I who attracted everybody's attention.  
Not her whiteness and beauty, as I had at first supposed.  
I patronized her a little, and she lapped it up—  
You could tell almost at once she had a slave mentality.

15

I didn't mind her waiting on me, and she adored it.  
In the morning she woke me early, reflecting the sun  
From her amazingly white torso, and I couldn't help but notice  
Her tidiness and her calmness and her patience:  
She humored my weakness like the best of nurses,  
Holding my bones in place so they would mend properly.  
In time our relationship grew more intense.

25

She stopped fitting me so closely and seemed offish.  
I felt her criticizing me in spite of herself,  
As if my habits offended her in some way.  
She let in the drafts and became more and more absent-minded.  
And my skin itched and flaked away in soft pieces  
Simply because she looked after me so badly.  
Then I saw what the trouble was: she thought she was immortal.

35

She wanted to leave me, she thought she was superior,  
And I'd been keeping her in the dark, and she was resentful—  
Wasting her days waiting on a half-corpse!  
And secretly she began to hope I'd die.  
Then she could cover my mouth and eyes, cover me entirely,  
And wear my painted face the way a mummy-case  
Wears the face of a pharaoh, though it's made of mud and water.

40

7. Like the acanthus leaf used atop ornate, Corinthian columns.

I wasn't in any position to get rid of her.  
 She'd supported me for so long I was quite limp—  
 I had even forgotten how to walk or sit,  
 So I was careful not to upset her in any way  
 Or brag ahead of time how I'd avenge myself.  
 Lying with her was like living with my own coffin:  
 Yet I still depended on her, though I did it regretfully.

45

I used to think we might make a go of it together—  
 After all, it was a kind of marriage, being so close.  
 Now I see it must be one or the other of us.  
 She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,  
 But she'll soon find out that that doesn't matter a bit.  
 I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her,  
 And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me.

55

March 18, 1961

1962

## Tulips

The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.  
 Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in.  
 I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly  
 As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.  
 I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.  
 I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses.  
 And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.

5

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff  
 Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.  
 Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.  
 The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,  
 They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps,  
 Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another,  
 So it is impossible to tell how many there are.

10

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water  
 Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.  
 They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep.  
 Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage—  
 My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,  
 My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;  
 Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

15

20

I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat  
 Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.  
 They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.  
 Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley  
 I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books.

25

Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.  
 I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

30

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted  
 To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.  
 How free it is, you have no idea how free—  
 The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,  
 And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.  
 It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them  
 Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.

35

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.  
 Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe  
 Lightly, through their white swaddling, like an awful baby.  
 Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.  
 They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,  
 Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color,  
 A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.

40

Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.  
 The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me  
 Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,  
 And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow  
 Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,  
 And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.  
 The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.

45

Before they came the air was calm enough,  
 Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.  
 Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise.  
 Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river  
 Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.  
 They concentrate my attention, that was happy  
 Playing and resting without committing itself.

55

The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves.  
 The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;  
 They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,  
 And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes  
 Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.  
 The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,  
 And comes from a country far away as health.

60

March 18, 1961

1962

## Blackberrying

Nobody in the lane, and nothing, nothing but blackberries,  
Blackberries on either side, though on the right mainly,  
A blackberry alley, going down in hooks, and a sea  
Somewhere at the end of it, heaving. Blackberries  
Big as the ball of my thumb, and dumb as eyes  
Ebon<sup>8</sup> in the hedges, fat  
With blue-red juices. These they squander on my fingers.  
I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me.  
They accommodate themselves to my milkbottle, flattening their sides.

Overhead go the choughs<sup>9</sup> in black, cacophonous flocks—  
Bits of burnt paper wheeling in a blown sky.  
Theirs is the only voice, protesting, protesting.  
I do not think the sea will appear at all.  
The high, green meadows are glowing, as if lit from within.  
I come to one bush of berries so ripe it is a bush of flies,  
Hanging their bluegreen bellies and their wing panes in a Chinese screen.  
The honey-feast of the berries has stunned them; they believe in heaven.  
One more hook, and the berries and bushes end.

The only thing to come now is the sea.  
From between two hills a sudden wind funnels at me,  
Slapping its phantom laundry in my face.  
These hills are too green and sweet to have tasted salt.  
I follow the sheep path between them. A last hook brings me  
To the hills' northern face, and the face is orange rock  
That looks out on nothing, nothing but a great space  
Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths  
Beating and beating at an intractable metal.

September 23, 1961

1962, 1965

## Elm

For Ruth Fainlight<sup>1</sup>

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:<sup>2</sup>  
It is what you fear.  
I do not fear it: I have been there.

Is it the sea you hear in me,  
Its dissatisfactions?  
Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?

Love is a shadow.  
How you lie and cry after it  
Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,  
Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,  
Echoing, echoing.

Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?  
This is rain now, this big hush.  
And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic.

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.  
Scorched to the root  
My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.  
A wind of such violence  
Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.

The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me  
Cruelly, being barren.  
Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.

I let her go. I let her go  
Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.  
How your bad dreams possess and endow me.

I am inhabited by a cry.  
Nightly it flaps out  
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing  
That sleeps in me;  
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

Clouds pass and disperse.  
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?  
Is it for such I agitate my heart?

I am incapable of more knowledge.  
What is this, this face  
So murderous in its strangle of branches?—

Its snaky acids kiss.  
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults  
That kill, that kill, that kill.

April 19, 1962

1963, 1965

8. Black.  
9. Crows.  
1. American poet (b. 1931), who lives in England.

2. Primary root; hence, anything that has a central position in a line of development.

## 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.

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.

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

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!

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.

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,<sup>3</sup> its blond colonnades,  
 And the petticoats of the cherry.

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.

The box is only temporary.

October 4, 1962

1963

3. Type of tree.

## 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,

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

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

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——

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.

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

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.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.  
 You have a hole, it's a poultice.<sup>4</sup>  
 You have an eye, it's an image.

4. Cloth applied to wounds.

My boy, it's your last resort.  
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.  
October 11, 1962

1963

## Daddy

You do not do, you do not do  
Any more, black shoe  
In which I have lived like a foot  
For thirty years, poor and white,  
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

5

Daddy, I have had to kill you.  
You died before I had time—  
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,  
Ghastly statue with one grey toe  
Big as a Frisco seal

10

And a head in the freakish Atlantic  
Where it pours bean green over blue  
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.  
I used to pray to recover you.  
Ach, du.<sup>5</sup>

15

In the German tongue, in the Polish towns  
Scraped flat by the roller  
Of wars, wars, wars.  
But the name of the town is common.  
My Polack friend

20

Says there are a dozen or two.  
So I never could tell where you  
Put your foot, your root,  
I never could talk to you.  
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

25

It stuck in a barb wire snare.  
Ich, ich, ich, ich,<sup>7</sup>  
I could hardly speak.  
I thought every German was you.  
And the language obscene

30

An engine, an engine  
Chuffing me off like a Jew.  
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

I began to talk like a Jew.  
I think I may well be a Jew.

35

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna  
Are not very pure or true.  
With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck  
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack  
I may be a bit of a Jew.

40

I have always been scared of you,  
With your Luftwaffe,<sup>8</sup> your gobbledygoo.  
And your neat mustache  
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.  
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—

45

Not God but a swastika  
So black no sky could squeak through.  
Every woman adores a Fascist,  
The boot in the face, the brute  
Brute heart of a brute like you.

50

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,  
In the picture I have of you,  
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot  
But no less a devil for that, no not  
Any less the black man who

55

Bit my pretty red heart in two.  
I was ten when they buried you.  
At twenty I tried to die  
And get back, back, back to you.  
I thought even the bones would do.

60

But they pulled me out of the sack,  
And they stuck me together with glue.  
And then I knew what to do.  
I made a model of you,  
A man in black with a Mein Kampf<sup>9</sup> look

65

And a love of the rack and the screw.  
And I said I do, I do.  
So daddy, I'm finally through.  
The black telephone's off at the root,  
The voices just can't worm through.

70

If I've killed one man, I've killed two—  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year,

5. Ah, you (German).

6. Perhaps modeled on Grabów, birthplace of the poet's father, Otto Plath.

7. I, I, I, I (German).

8. Air force (German).

9. *Mein Kampf* (German for "my battle"), the political autobiography of Adolf Hitler (1889–1945).



Seven years, if you want to know.  
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart  
And the villagers never liked you.  
They are dancing and stamping on you.  
They always *knew* it was you.  
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

October 12, 1962

Fever 103°

Pure? What does it mean?  
The tongues of hell  
Are dull, dull as the triple  
Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus!  
Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable  
Of licking clean

The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin.  
The tinder cries.  
The indelible smell

Of a snuffed candle!  
Love, love, the low smokes roll  
From me like Isadora's scarves, I'm in a fright

One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel,<sup>2</sup>  
Such yellow sullen smokes  
Make their own element. They will not rise,

But trundle round the globe  
Choking the aged and the meek,  
The weak

Hothouse baby in its crib,  
The ghastly orchid  
Hanging its hanging garden in the air,

Devilish leopard!  
Radiation turned it white  
And killed it in an hour.

Greasing the bodies of adulterers  
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.  
The sin. The sin.

Darling, all night  
I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.  
The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss.

Three days. Three nights.  
Lemon water, chicken  
Water, water make me retch.

I am too pure for you or anyone.  
Your body  
Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern—

My head a moon  
Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin  
Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.

Does not my heat astound you. And my light.  
All by myself I am a huge canellia  
Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.

I think I am going up,  
I think I may rise—  
The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I

Am a pure acetylene  
Virgin  
Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim,  
By whatever these pink things mean.  
Not you, nor him

Not him, nor him  
(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)—  
To Paradise.

October 20, 1962

Cut

For Susan O'Neill Roe

What a thrill—  
My thumb instead of an onion.  
The top quite gone  
Except for a sort of a hinge

1. In Greek mythology, three-headed dog that guarded the gate of Hades.  
2. Isadora Duncan (1877–1927), American dancer, broke her neck and died when her scarf caught in the open-spoked wheel of her car.

Of skin,  
A flap like a hat,  
Dead white.  
Then that red plush.

Little pilgrim,  
The Indian's axed your scalp.  
Your turkey wattle  
Carpet rolls

Straight from the heart.  
I step on it,  
Clutching my bottle  
Of pink fizz.

A celebration, this is.  
Out of a gap  
A million soldiers run,  
Redcoats, every one.

Whose side are they on?  
O my  
Homunculus,<sup>3</sup> I am ill.  
I have taken a pill to kill

The thin  
Papery feeling.  
Saboteur,  
Kamikaze man——

The stain on your  
Gauze Ku Klux Klan  
Babushka<sup>4</sup>  
Darkens and tarnishes and when

The balled  
Pulp of your heart  
Confronts its small  
Mill of silence

How you jump——  
Trepanned<sup>5</sup> veteran,  
Dirty girl,  
Thumb stump.

October 24, 1962

1963, 1965

3. Miniature person said to exist in the mind or in the spermatozoon or egg.

4. Headkerchief.  
5. With the skull removed.

## Poppies in October

Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts.  
Nor the woman in the ambulance  
Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly——

A gift, a love gift  
Utterly unasked for  
By a sky

Palely and flammily  
Igniting its carbon monoxides, by eyes  
Dulled to a halt under bowlers.

O my God, what am I  
That these late mouths should cry open  
In a forest of frost, in dawn of cornflowers.

October 27, 1962

1963, 1965

## Ariel<sup>6</sup>

Stasis in darkness.  
Then the substanceless blue  
Pour of tor<sup>7</sup> and distances.

God's lioness,  
How one we grow,  
Pivot of heels and knees!——The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to  
The brown arc  
Of the neck I cannot catch,

Nigger-eye  
Berries cast dark  
Hooks——

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,  
Shadows.  
Something else

Hauls me through air——  
Thighs, hair;  
Flakes from my heels.

6. Lion of God (Hebrew); the airy spirit in Shakespeare's *Tempest*; also, the name of a horse Plath used to ride.  
7. High, rocky hill.

White  
Godiva, I unpeel——  
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I  
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.  
The child's cry

Melts in the wall.  
And I  
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies  
Suicidal, at one with the drive  
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

October 27, 1962

1963, 1965

### Lady Lazarus<sup>8</sup>

I have done it again.  
One year in every ten  
I manage it——

A sort of walking miracle, my skin  
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,<sup>9</sup>  
My right foot

A paperweight,  
My face a featureless, fine  
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin  
O my enemy.  
Do I terrify?——

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?  
The sour breath  
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh  
The grave cave ate will be  
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.  
I am only thirty.  
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.  
What a trash  
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.  
The peanut-crunching crowd  
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot——  
The big strip tease.  
Gentleman, ladies

These are my hands  
My knees.  
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.  
The first time it happened I was ten.  
It was an accident.

The second time I meant  
To last it out and not come back at all.  
I rocked shut

As a seashell.  
They had to call and call  
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.  
I do it so it feels real.  
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.  
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.  
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day  
To the same place, the same face, the same brute  
Amused shout:

'A miracle!'  
That knocks me out.  
There is a charge

8. Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus (John 11.44).

9. The skins of some Jewish victims of the Nazis were supposedly used to make lampshades. The Nazis also stole gold fillings (line 78) from their victims' remains.

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge  
For the hearing of my heart—  
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge  
For a word or a touch  
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.  
So, so, Herr Doktor.  
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,  
I am your valuable,  
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.  
I turn and burn.

Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—  
You poke and stir.  
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—

A cake of soap,  
A wedding ring,  
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer,  
Beware  
Beware.

Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air.

October 23–29, 1962

## Edge

The woman is perfected.  
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,  
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,  
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:  
We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,  
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.  
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals  
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed  
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,  
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.  
Her blacks crackle and drag.

February 5, 1963

## AUDRE LORDE 1934–1992

There was more than one Audre Lorde. "I am not one piece of myself," she wrote. "I cannot be simply a Black person, and not be a woman, too, nor can I be a woman without being a lesbian." Lorde contained multitudes, and these different voices survive and affirm themselves through her poetry. "When I say myself, I mean not only the Audre who inhabits my body but all those *jeisty, incorrigible Black women* who insist on standing up and saying *I am*, and you can't wipe me out, no matter how irritating I am" ("My Words Will Be There").

Lorde's "biomythography," *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, is a fictionalized memoir of her coming-of-age as a lesbian, but it is also about the formation of her racial identity. She describes her vexed effort to learn from the example of her mother—a black woman defensively identifying with white norms. In "Hanging Fire" and other poems, Lorde explores this ambivalent relation to her mother's racial splitting. "I bear two women upon my back"—one black, the other white—says the speaker of "From the House of Yemanjá." The passions articulated in Lorde's poetry are potent and varied. She credited African writers with teaching her how to transmute rage and pain into poetry (her second book was entitled *Cables to Rage*). Love is also, she said, "very important because it is a source of tremendous power," and yet women "have not been taught to respect the erotic urge, the place that is uniquely female" ("My Words"). Describing lesbian eros, the vivid language of "Love Poem" combines vast archetypal landscapes—mountains, valleys, forests—with the particulars of the female body. "Some words," Lorde writes in "Coal," "are open like a diamond / on glass windows." Her best poetry is diamonded with such words, as when she describes being taught to swim in "A Question of Climate" ("cannons of salt exploding / my nostrils' rage") or giving birth in "Now that I Am Forever with Child" ("My head rang like a fiery piston / My legs were towers between which / A new world was passing").

Lorde was born on February 18, 1934, to West Indian parents living in Harlem. She