

PLATH TRANSCRIPT .

PETER ORR:

Sylvia, what about your childhood? Did you live in your imagination a great deal?

SYLVIA:

I certainly didn't have a happy adolescence and perhaps that's partly why I turned especially to writing. I wrote diaries, stories and so forth and was quite introverted during those early years.

A. ALVAREZ:

You are about to hear a program on Sylvia Plath. Last Monday the American poetess and wife of Ted Hughes died suddenly in London. She was 30. She published her first and highly accomplished book The Colossus in 1960, but it was only recently that the peculiar intensity of her genius found its perfect expression.

Sylvia Plath arrived in London around the fall of 1962. She was what, 30 years old? By this time she had absolutely irrefutable proof that she was a kind of a real poet. I think a major poet, in that the poems had become unstoppable. She'd kind of hit that mother lode, you know; it was like burnt oil or something. She'd gone through and found the reservoir. She was writing poems of an order which seemed to me quite extraordinary for this century. Not just one a month or one every two months, which was what she'd done before. She was writing two or three a day, as though she'd tapped a mother lode to end all mother lodes of her creativity.

READ BY SYLVIA:

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.
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,

ALVAREZ:

She used to get up before dawn, rather like John Donne did the same thing. She was up before, you know, the first grey light, before -- what was the lovely phrase she used -- "the glassy music of the milkman settling his bottles." And she tried to get in as much as she could before the kids actually stirred. And after that it was -- she was a mom, and then by the time evening came she was probably too exhausted to do anything else. The complication about that is that she was writing an unbelievable amount and with an unbelievable intensity. In terms simply of creative effort, it seems to me there is nothing in English poetry comparable with it, except Keats's great year, you know, when he was also writing against the clock. The stuff was pouring out of her, but it wasn't pouring in some unformed lava-like way. It was highly, highly disciplined and skillful.

PETER ORR:

Can you say, are there themes which particularly attract you now as a poet?

SYLVIA:

I think my poems come immediately 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, you know, a needle or a knife or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control, to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind.

ALVAREZ:

She was taking the everyday material of her life, looking after kids, chopping onions, pushing the pram, taking telephone calls, and turning anything that came to hand into poetry.

SYLVIA:

I had always idolized England because if you're an English major, especially, you think that here it all began, and you want to walk under Milton's mulberry tree at Cambridge, and you remember all the Dickens you read when you were little and suddenly you go to London and you recognize scenes that you have somehow seen before, and this is simply, I think, a sort of literary influence.

SYLVIA:

I remember being appalled when someone criticized me for beginning just like John Donne, but not quite managing to finish like John Donne, and I felt the weight of English literature on me at that point.

As far as language goes, I'm an American, I'm afraid. I'm an American, my accent's American, my way of talk is an American way of talk. The poets that excite me most are the Americans. In particular my background is, may I say, German and Austrian. On one side I'm a first-generation American, on one side I'm a second-generation American.

I was brought up on the northern coast of Massachusetts and my whole childhood was spent on the ocean and I remember the very spectacular hurricanes we used to have where my grandmother's

cellar would be flooded and there'd be sharks washed up in the garden and so forth; and the image of the sea has been with me ever since, even though I've been inland for a few years. And I think one always goes back to something as vivid and colorful as this sort of experience, and I know that the sea comes into a great many of my poems, sometimes it's just a subconscious sea, a sort of flow of thoughts and so on; other times it's the real sea itself.

AURELIA PLATH:

We moved from Jamaica Plains to Winthrop in 1937. We had been down there visiting Grandma and Grandpa who were living at Point Shirley, and the children were so happy on the beach. My husband was failing in health, and that was the real main reason I wanted to be near my parents. We loved the shore; we loved the house. I hoped, of course, that he'd recover and that we would live there. And when he was ill the nurse cut down a uniform and put it on her and she was her assistant, and she'd bring a cool drink up to her father. She felt very useful. Then, of course, he was sent to the hospital and he had his leg amputated. The first thing she said, "pair of shoes?" And then of course when he died, I had to tell the children in the morning that her father had died; that he wasn't suffering anymore, and while Warren rejoiced that I was young and healthy and clung to me, Sylvia just slipped underneath the covers of her bed and said, "I'll never speak to God again," because she had been praying every night that her father would be well and would come home.

She loved his praise. At that time she was beginning piano lessons and she would play for him. He would pat her on the head and praise her. Of course the children had much more freedom in the house after my husband died, and now they could play anything they wanted, anywhere they wanted, all things that would be quiet play.

PETER ORR:

Were you a happy child?

SYLVIA:

Well I think I was happy up to the age of about 9, very carefree, and I believed in magic, which influenced me a good bit, and then at 9 I was rather disillusioned. I stopped believing in elves and Santa Claus and all these little beneficent powers and became more realistic and depressed, I think, and then, gradually, became more adjusted about the age of 16 or 17.

AURELIA PLATH:

When she was 8 I knew that as soon as it got dark that there would be the emergence of a new moon and I took both children down to the beach. I carried my son and she stood by my side, and she more or less drew away; stood apart and gazed at the moon and then quietly I heard her start to say, very slowly, "The moon is a lock of witches hair. Tawny and golden and red. And the night winds pause and stare at that strand from a witch's head."

She learned to type very, very competently from the age of 13 on. I once for the fun of it timed her. On a standard typewriter she was going 80 words a minute. She said, "The typewriter is an extension of my body."

From the age of 10 I put a diary in her Christmas stocking, both for Warren and for Sylvia. Sylvia's I saw that she had a diary where she had a whole page for a day. When she went to junior high, she wanted an unpaginated journal because when the big moments come, one page is not enough.

READ BY ELLEN TOBIE:

OCEAN 1212-W

When I was learning to creep, my mother set me down on the beach to see what I thought of it. I crawled straight for the coming wave and was just through the wall of green when she caught my heels.

I often wondered what would have happened if I had managed to pierce that looking-glass. Would my infant gills have taken over, the salt in my blood? For a time I believed not in God nor Santa Claus, but in mermaids. The road I knew curved into

the waves with the ocean on one side...and my grandmother's house...

To this day I remember her phone number: OCEAN 1212-W. I would repeat it to the operator...an incantation, a fine rhyme, half expecting the black earpiece to give me back, like a conch, the susurrous of the sea out there as well as my grandmother's Hello.

My final memory of the sea is of violence -- a still, unhealthily yellow day in 1939, the sea molten, steely-slick, heaving at its leash like a broody animal...

SANDRA GILBERT:

"When my father died, we moved inland," she says in OCEAN 1212-W. That's the real, sort of historical source of the problem. Also the father died by the way in just about the year when World War II broke out -- and that was -- so there's a kind of connection between public and private that occurs at the time of the death of her father. But then I think it's very important to see the ways in which throughout her career she mythologizes the figure of the father. The father metamorphoses into a kind of figure with tremendous mythological resonance. "All by yourself, Father, you are pithy and historical as the Roman forum." The father is a vehicle for her through which she can also think about history and think about the world. So Plath wrote a poem called, "The Disquieting Muses," which appears in The Colossus. It's a comparatively early poem, and I think it's a very interesting poem about the ways in which she's torn between being a decorous, a good girl who would please her mother and being a person who is committed to this sort of disquieting forces represented by the muse figures in de Chirico's painting The Disquieting Muses.

The mother figure, though she's based on the real live mother, is really a kind of metaphor for terrifying female power.

AURELIA PLATH:

I think it's a remarkable poem, but I was hurt by it, because she manipulated the reality of the story I told about my own delight in ballet dancing and music at the end. The first is based pretty factually. But, as a poem, I think it's excellent.

READ BY SYLVIA:

THE DISQUIETING MUSES

Mother, mother, what illbred aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep
Unasked to my christening, that she
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 Mixie 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 stiched bald head.

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.

SANDRA GILBERT:

In the early poems, in The Colossus, you can see that she's really trying to work within very strict forms. She's counting syllables, she's read Marianne Moore, she's, as I said, she's read Thomas, she 's writing villanelles and sonnets, I mean reams of them. Very often in The Colossus the forms seem inert, almost as if they were like the kind of black shoe that the poet inhabits as a poor white foot in Daddy later on. She seems to be confined or constrained by them, but nevertheless, obviously all of that work with strict forms made possible the later kind of explosion of language that you get in Ariel.

Her early poetry goes through a lot of sort of imitative phases. She's influenced by W.H. Auden, she was always passionate about Yeats, certainly from the time she was at Smith.

SYLVIA:

When I was at college, I was stunned and astounded by the moderns. By Dylan Thomas, by Yeats, by Auden even. At one point I was absolutely wild for Auden. Everything I wrote was desperately Audenesque.

SANDRA GILBERT:

Sylvia Plath went to Smith in 1950. I think that the impact of Smith was enormous. She was a ferociously ambitious and gifted student. She did a tremendous amount of reading. I think we have to remember that she was a highly sophisticated sort of graduate student in the end, and a literary critic, and that Smith was very important in fostering that part of her. But again, even throughout the Smith years, there's the kind of tension that I was talking about in The Disquieting Muses, that is, a tension between her commitment to academic, intellectual activity on one hand and on the other hand, her desire to be a sort of popular, red-blooded, all-American girl.

AURELIA PLATH:

She was a little bit afraid, because she felt that most of the girls at Smith would come from private schools and she didn't know if she could stand up to them scholastically, especially in French, but I had her tutored that summer in French so she would be at ease. After the first marking period, she wrote home. She said, "I think I'm going to make it." She loved going to a girls' school because there was no competition with boys. And she always had felt with a boy that she should pull back and not exert all that she had.

WILBURY CROCKETT:

The transition academically was a very easy one for her because she had been an omnivorous reader, and we had of course talked about many of the materials that she came across in college. But I think the freedom that she experienced there perhaps was difficult for her. I think she, in a sense, felt a liberation that she did not feel while I had her as a student.

MARGARET SHOOK:

There was the academic atmosphere, which was one thing, and then there was the social atmosphere, the way that we lived. Well, the social atmosphere...it's very amusing to describe it to students nowadays. There was -- there was some effort to make the Smith girls into -- into ladies. The various dormitories, which are always at Smith called "houses," each had a housemother. It was the housemother's duty to enforce certain rules and regulations, also to keep up certain standards of gentility. There were dress codes; you had to wear skirts or dresses for dinner, and then coffee served in the livingroom after dinner in demitasses. There were also lots of protocol about receiving male guests; no man, not your brother or father, was ordinarily allowed above the first floor.

SANDRA GILBERT:

When Sylvia Plath was at Smith College, she won a guest editorship at Mademoiselle. The magazine brought her and a number of other girls to New York in the summer of 1953.

You can see why Mademoiselle precipitated the kind of break-down that it did. All of the kinds of tensions in the culture that were in the back of her life as an American girl at that time must surely have come to a head and been almost dramatized, theatricalized, during the Mademoiselle experience.

WILBURY CROCKETT:

Now I had a letter from Sylvia from New York -- this was just before she came home. And she said, "You'll never want to see me again, Mr. Crockett. I have let you down." And I puzzled over the letter. I didn't realize that she was at her rope's end.

And I was vacationing in New Hampshire when news of her disappearance came. There was a great deal of attention at the time. The New York Times had a long account of Smith -- well-known Smith girl, you know, disappearing. Finally, of course, she was found in her home after a period of 2-3 days.

AURELIA PLATH:

She came home and that was when she had her breakdown. She couldn't, she couldn't concentrate, she couldn't read, she just wasn't the same girl that went. And that's when she started, well she -- the only thing she read was Freud's Abnormal Psychology and found all sorts of symptoms that she was sure applied to her, and felt that she'd be a burden to the family the rest of her life, and couldn't go back and take up her studies at Smith. She just felt that she couldn't read or do anything. And when she came to consciousness after her first attempt, the first thing she said, "That was my last act of love."

There were two words that she used a great deal -- one was "always" and the other was "never." A thing was either always or it was never. Everything was magnified. I never knew anyone to reach the heights of joy that she reached at times, nor the depths of absolute despair. She ricocheted.

A. ALVAREZ:

The suicide attempt was hugely important. She had periods of chronic, more or less psychotic, depression. But she also had huge energy and immense kind of fight, drive and energy. The suicide, to some extent, was linked with a kind of arrogance. Lady Lazarus is about "I can get through this too. You think, you think you've got me -- you haven't got me. Rising from the dead and I eat men like air." It's a kind of angry poem. It's a, it's a declaration of war. She wasn't a kind of passive victim in any conceivable way. She was one tough cookie.

READ BY SYLVIA:

LADY LAZARUS

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

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

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

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.

CLARISSA ROCHE:

She talked about suicide as something that she had once had a go at. And it was as if she had once played tournament tennis or something like that. Something that Sylvia had done. And she loved to show her scars, and tell the story of her smashing on the basement floor, whatever it was. And how "the life force in her," she said, the life force in her was so strong that it counteracted all those pills she had eaten. And up Sylvia popped.

A. ALVAREZ:

Sylvia won a Fulbright scholarship to study English at Newnham College at Cambridge, England, in 1955. That, as much as anything, probably helped her recover from the nervous breakdown. She threw herself into student life, and among things, she was active in "Footlights," the Cambridge amateur dramatic society.

CLARISSA ROCHE:

She must have been rather lost at Cambridge. I should think Sylvia was astonished to discover the difference a women's college in the States, and a women's college at Cambridge University. Utterly astonished. Whoever she was, how often she was published, got herself done up as a model for some magazine, it wouldn't have meant anything. They don't have stars at Oxford or Cambridge.

SYLVIA:

One of the things that I think I like most about the English is their ability to be eccentric, to be themselves to such an extent that they're strikingly different from anybody else.

SANDRA GILBERT:

The most important thing at Cambridge was her further study in Modernism and her readings of, particularly, Woolf and Yeats. She says in her journal when she's at Cambridge that "Virginia Woolf makes my work possible." Then she's also of course rather rivalous and says, "but I will do better than she did." Even during the Cambridge experience she continued to be divided between a kind of deep commitment to intellectual, academic, aesthetic activity, and on the other hand, an urge towards being the popular, all-American Fulbright scholar abroad. A story that was published in the Cambridge newspaper with the headline, "Sylvia Plath Tours the Stores and Models New Spring Fashions." There are amazing pictures of Plath modeling a bathing suit on the front cover of this Cambridge newspaper. And she sent a copy of the newspaper to her mother with the inscription, "With love from Betty Grable." So it's the same tension. Does she want to be Virginia Woolf? Does she want to be a female reincarnation of William Butler Yeats? Or does she want to be Betty Grable?

CLARISSA ROCHE:

In February of 1956 she met Ted Hughes. The tales that she tells in her journal are quite splendid, about meeting, and biting, the great English genius, and then fell in love with

the man. But one knows perfectly well, if Ted Hughes had been Ted Hughes and not written poetry, I don't think it would have been the same story at all. He had to be important.

A. ALVAREZ:

Ted Hughes had enormous influence on her work because he also was, in a very Lawrentian way, looking at the underside of life. He was dealing with the big, dark feelings.

SYLVIA:

I'd never be writing as I am, and as much as I am, without Ted's understanding and cooperation really. All the poems that we wrote to each other and about each other were really before our marriage and then something happened. I don't know what it was. I hope it was all to the good, but we began to be able to, well, somehow free ourselves for other subjects.

A. ALVAREZ:

He taught her, he helped her find her own voice. I think that's very important. And I'm sure that were she alive today, and even if they were not still together, she would be the first to admit that.

SYLVIA:

Ted's interest in animals made me look back into my own life, and my father, among other things, was a biologist, and happened to keep bees. And I, oh, I didn't think much about this at the time, but I've become very interested in beekeeping, and the image of beekeeping has become part of my poems and I think this is a direct result of knowing Ted. I somehow know more about my own past through him than I would otherwise.

SANDRA GILBERT:

The bee poems are a mythologized way of dealing with the relationship with the father, who was an expert on bees, the author of a book called, "Bumblebees and Their Ways." Also a way of coming to terms with issues having to do with fertility and creativity. Plath began to learn to keep bees after the

birth of her son, and it was the local midwife who inducted her into this strange, ceremonial world of beekeeping. There's a great deal in the beekeeping poems that has to do with -- with childbirth, again the tension, this time between the self that's sexually fertile and the self that's aesthetically fertile.

READ BY ELLEN TOBIE:

THE BEEKEEPER'S DAUGHTER

A garden of mouthings. Purple, scarlet-speckled, black
The great corollas dilate, peeling back their silks.
Their musk encroaches, circle after circle,
A well of scents almost too dense to breathe in.
Hieratical in your frock coat, maestro of the bees,
You move among the many-breasted hives.

My heart under your foot, sister of a stone.

In burrows narrow as a finger, solitary bees
Keep house among the grasses. Kneeling down
I set my eye to a hole-mouth and meet an eye
Round, green, disconsolate as a tear.
Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg
Under the coronal of sugar roses

The queen bee marries the winter of your year.

AURELIA PLATH:

He had told her that he could catch bees, they wouldn't sting him. They were the male bees, and he caught a bee. This must have been at the end of the summer when the males emerge, and he held it to her ear. And she heard the buzzing of the bee. And then he let it go. And she thought it was very wonderful, her father was very masterful. He could catch bees, and they wouldn't dare to sting him.

CLARISSA ROCHE:

Great love of her father. Great love. Sylvia seems to have fabricated him. Sylvia was a product, really. A product of immigrant family; intense ambition of her mother's. That was Sylvia's love of her father. That he himself may have been quite an ordinary man, but he had been Sylvia's bastion against her mother. That when he died, then Aurelia could let it all

rip and just took Sylvia over. And to become this model little girl. Almost the way it must have happened with the child film stars.

A. ALVAREZ:

Towards the end of The Colossus she discovered Theodore Roethke, who also wrote, in his best period, poems about a very overpowering father. It's a question of her finding her own voice. This is what every writer in every medium does. When you're young, you shop around, don't you? What did Eliot say? Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal. And what he meant by that is you shop around for styles when you're young, when you're working it out, finding out who you are. You try on various suits. Then later you finally discover your own voice.

SANDRA GILBERT:

In The Colossus she is enclosed in the kind of patriarchal history that the father comes to represent. She's enclosed in this figure of this sort of gigantic God/Father figure. The dead father. She is inhabiting him. She squats in his left ear, she tries to put him together. She isn't really sure whether she wants to escape from him or whether she wants to reconstruct him.

READ BY ELLEN TOBIE:

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.

A blue sky out of the Oresteia
 Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
 You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.

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.

DIDO MERWIN:

I have one photograph that I took myself of Ted with Frieda in our flat. Please note the very large wedding ring, which is not usual among Englishmen at all. It was a kind of symbol of how seriously he took the marriage, and in a strange, ironic way, what a wonderful husband he was. The first stage he was, obviously, in love with her; the second, possibly was that he felt that she would be better and happier and that he could save the marriage if there were children.

CLARISSA ROCHE:

She became, or began to become, a real person. And the artifices were peeling away, which obviously they do when you have children. And it meant an enormous amount to Sylvia that she just "had" Frieda. Frieda was just plain born, without being dragged from her in some sterilized hospital. She loved the word "midwife." She was always using that. Thought that was rather splendid. "My midwife," she'd say.

PETER ORR:

Has the baby made a big difference to the running of the house?

SYLVIA:

Well, actually, I was amazed when I found how easy she was. I had wondered if I would be swallowed up in motherhood and never feel any time to myself. But somehow she's fitted in beautifully and is amazingly little trouble. I mean she doesn't yell and cry and she plays by herself and is very amusing. And I think both of us have written a good many poems to her and find her more entertaining than anything. I think we're both very much family-oriented. I mean, I envision a large house sort of stocked with small children and small animals.

PETER ORR:

Where do you live?

SYLVIA:

Really up by Primrose Hill and the zoo. That's one of the reasons we like it so much. We're always going to the zoo with the baby and so forth. We can hear the seals barking in the summertime.

DIDO MERWIN:

They absolutely fell in love with our district, which was on and around Primrose Hill. They adored it. Everybody does. It's very beautiful. Because there's not only lots of trees and lots of grass but it's -- it undulates. It looks like the country.

A. ALVAREZ:

Sylvia and Ted went back to America in 1957, where she taught for a year at her old college, Smith. Then they decided that the academic life wasn't for them so they returned to England, spent about a year in London, in a cramped little apartment near Primrose Hill, and then they found themselves a lovely old house in a rather run-down village in Devon.

As usual Sylvia got herself involved in village life. She took up beekeeping and learned to ride on a rather stolid, old horse called Ariel. It was in Devon that she finally discovered her own powerful, authentic voice, and wrote many of the poems that were later collected in Ariel. And it was in Devon that her marriage began to go wrong.

The Moon and the Yew Tree is one of those kind of crucial poems where you can see everything happening. That you can see the old Sylvia and the new Sylvia coming together.

The inspiration for the poem was in fact an exercise that Ted gave her. He said, "Why don't you write about the tree in the churchyard near the house?" So she got up at 4 in the morning and wrote a poem about that. Although the result was a long way from what Ted had expected.

"The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God, pricklin my ankles and murmuring of their humility. Fumy, spiritous mists inhabit this place, separated from my house by a row of headstones. I simply cannot see where there is to get to."

Now the point about that is the opening lines, "Fumy, spiritous mists" and "prickling my ankles and murmuring of their humility." That's old style. That's elegant, elegiac, very carefully cadenced, very beautiful, very cadenced, yeah? And then suddenly there's this voice comes out, "I simply cannot see where there is to get to."

READ BY ELLEN TOBIE:

THE MOON AND THE YEW TREE

This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary.
The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue.
The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God,
Prickling my ankles and murmuring of their humility.
Fumy, spiritous mists inhabit this place

Separated from my house by a row of headstones.
I simply cannot see where there is to get to.

The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,
White as a knuckle and terribly upset.
It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet
With the O-gape of complete despair. I live here.
Twice on Sunday, the bells startle the sky --
Eight great tongues affirming the Resurrection.
At the end, they soberly bong out their names.

The yew tree points up. It has a Gothic shape.
The eyes lift after it and find the moon.
The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary,
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.
How I would like to believe in tenderness --
The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,
Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes.

I have fallen a long way. Clouds are flowering
Blue and mystical over the face of the stars.
Inside the church, the saints will be all blue,
Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,
Their hands and faces stiff with holiness.
The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild.
And the message of the yew tree is blackness -- blackness and silence.

A. ALVAREZ: It's a kind of perfect changeover poem, where she's speaking. All the stuff is being cast away which is what she's talking about in the Ariel poems as well. Casting away shells so that the naked person is there.

SANDRA GILBERT: With a poem like Ariel there's a kind of ghost text behind the real text which is the poem as it would be if you rewrote it in blank verse.

A. ALVAREZ: The poem itself seems to me the most extraordinarily beautiful thing because it's got the two elements that were in her. That is, it's immensely disciplined; it's got all that fifties apprenticeship in and at the same time, it's totally free. The rhymes have become subtle and internal, the actual scheme of the thing is very intricate, very ingenious. There isn't a spare fragment of word in it. Everything matters. It's about getting on this horse and being released from all troubles. It's just -- go!

READ BY SYLVIA:

ARIEL

Stasis in darkness.
Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor 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.

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.

SANDRA GILBERT:

In the Ariel poems she's let herself go. She stopped being what she called, "Roget's trollop." She stopped using her Thesaurus as she had done in her earlier poems, and she just surrendered to whatever the dark forces in her were that were represented by the Disquieting Muses.

CLARISSA ROCHE:

She had peeled herself to such a slim core getting rid of these artificial selves; these delusions. And at the same time she was utterly lost without her old self -- without the Sylvia Aurelia, the Sylvia at Smith, the Sylvia with Ted. All that was gone. She didn't want any of it anymore, she wanted to be herself. Probably Sylvia saw all women as rivals. Thinking about it, she obviously felt insecure with Ted from the beginning, but nobody would have known it. Assia went to Devon to visit, but Assia fancied poets. I think she'd had three or four, and her latest poet husband was no great interest to her. Nothing compared to Ted Hughes, who by this time was really very famous. Sylvia must have been full of jealousy. Her great marriage to her prince was always a gift she was going to give Aurelia --

this tremendously happy marriage. Of course it was all in her head really, and of course it had all fallen apart.

DIDO MERWIN:

The implication that he went off with Assia is absolutely false. He left for a whole lot of reasons. Sylvia had been steadily punishing; making scenes, carrying on as no one who can see it can imagine. He said the worst thing that happened was when she burnt my work. She was pathologically jealous. She was brilliant. She was dazzlingly intelligent, she was unbelievably talented in every way, but it was a sort of un-wisdom, a sort of lack of self-criticism, and a sort of self-justification, which gave her an absolute blind spot about cause and effect. If you continually punish someone when there's no reason to punish them, something is going to go eventually.

A. ALVAREZ:

She was full of anger. I mean, anger, after all, is part of grief. Part of the process of mourning as they say. That if somebody dies, and they die very suddenly, you may feel stricken with grief because they're not there, but you also feel very angry. You feel you've been abandoned. So you feel kind of storming anger. Very difficult to express. I mean because you see it's not appropriate when there's a death in the family. It is totally appropriate when a marriage breaks up. Suddenly she had her occasion. The devil took her by the throat and shook her. But she was already at that point. She was prepared. She had done her apprenticeship.

DIDO MERWIN:

That she was creating the situation in which she could write Ariel, I'm absolutely convinced of. She needed to be that amount destructive about herself and everything that mattered to her in order to get to the raw material of Ariel.

MARGARET SHOOK:

Many of the things the women's movement was concerned with, particularly in its earlier years, she was concerned with, and she is really kind of a pioneer that way. Now I know that lots of people object to her using, sort of, images of the concentration camp in this, what seems to them, sort of self-serving way. You know, I, Sylvia Plath, tried to kill myself, and look at me, I'm like a Jew, and so forth. But I never saw it that way. I really saw her as trying, in some of her Ariel poems, to make -- to make a new mythology of women. Which is a kind of a task that women poets now are very well aware of.

SANDRA GILBERT:

I don't want to see Ariel as a long suicide note, on the one hand. On the other hand, I do think that it is the case that whether or not she had died in the way she did, Sylvia Plath would have had to suffer in her own body some of the stresses that women have been suffering since the end of the modernist period.

A. ALVAREZ:

Those last poems are about facing your demon. They're about facing what you really feel, rather than what you think you should feel. In order to write those last poems, she shed all the earlier poetic formulae that she had acquired during her long apprenticeship.

CLARISSA ROCHE:

Otto E. Plath was absolutely chucked inside Sylvia Plath, there, everywhere, with her. As if he were sort of turning the key that made her move. And in order for her to be a real person, Sylvia had to move her father outside of herself. It was hatred of that slavish bit in herself that had got stuck. Got stuck to, probably, this imaginary father. Daddy was the only poem she ever read to me. And for years afterwards, when word came about, after Sylvia was dead of course, and she became rather famous, and word was spread around about the hate in that poem.

How could anybody be so vicious and revengeful and full of hate towards their father! Of course I knew it wasn't that at all. I howled laughingly; I still laugh. Very, very funny. Wonderful nursery rhyme stuff. Boot him out the door, "Out, out!" Wonderful. I knew Sylvia didn't hate her father. Ten minutes before, next day, talking about how wonderful he was, how she loved him, loved him. And the Daddy that's she's shouting at, "Out, out, out daddy," is the daddy inside of her, not her beloved father.

READ BY SYLVIA:

DADDY

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

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

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.

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

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.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.

So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

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.

CLARISSA ROCHE:

Courageously, really rather audaciously, Sylvia had been throwing everything out the window. And inside Sylvia was exceedingly frail. And these mysterious fevers. Mysterious. No explanation. Why wouldn't they go away? Fevers in Devon, and then in London, fevers again. Fevers, fevers, Fevers. Boiling, boiling hot, Being burned up.

The last time I saw Sylvia was in early January 1963. And she had come to London with two little children, aged almost 3 and almost 1. Bravely had come, found this flat -- Yeats's house, which meant an enormous amount to her. And there she was, quite well known by now, Sylvia Plath's name was big in the world of poetry, at least for people who read poetry. When I saw her in January, in Fitzroy Street, I just felt strongly, strongly, strongly that loneliness, of the house, of her, of the situation. And when everybody was as young as we were, it was almost impossible to imagine living alone. Divorced women in those days were considered prey, or fools, or hags. Unwanted. The feeling of loneliness was very strong.

A. ALVAREZ:

It was the worst winter in living memory. It was just unspeakable -- the whole of London froze. The whole of England froze. She had flu, sinus, whatever it was, she was chronically depressed. And effectively, her friends, me included, abandoned her. She was very difficult. She was almost psychotically depressed and couldn't see any way out. You get yourself locked into a kind of closed world and there was no way out.

AURELIA PLATH:

I think it was an inbred fear that what she loved would leave her sometime. And I think it haunted her all her life without her making it known in words. I never was aware of it until I gathered poems together and found this pattern running straight through.

A. ALVAREZ:

If you are handling, as it were, material as volatile as that, then you - you know, it's like terrorism, poetic terrorism. You risk it blowing up in your face. If you're pushing on the friable edge, it can break.

AURELIA PLATH:

I knew that young poets always conjecture about the mystery of death and after-life, but I felt that she should go away from it and live more in the present, write of the present rather than always referring to the past that had hurt her so.

READ BY ELLEN TOBIE:

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.