



Plath Poetry

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Departure

The figs on the fig tree in the yard are green;
Green, also, the grapes on the green vine
Shading the brickred porch tiles.
The money's run out.

How nature, sensing this, compounds her bitters.
Ungifted, ungrieved, our leavetaking.
The sun shines on unripe corn.
Cats play in the stalks.

Retrospect shall not often such penury-
Sun's brass, the moon's steely patinas,
The leaden slag of the world-
But always expose

The scraggy rock spit shielding the town's blue bay
Against which the brunt of outer sea
Beats, is brutal endlessly.
Gull-fouled, a stone hut

Bares its low lintel to corroding weathers:
Across the jut of ochreous rock
Goats shamble, morose, rank-haired,
To lick the sea-salt.

The Colossus (1960)

Ode for Ted

From under the crunch of my man's boot
green oat-sprouts jut;
he names a lapwing, starts rabbits in a rout
legging it most nimble
to sprigged hedge of bramble,
stalks red fox, shrewd stoat.

Loam-humps, he says, moles shunt
up from delved worm-haunt;
blue fur, moles have; hefting chalk-hulled flint
he with rock splits open
knobbed quartz; flayed colors ripen
rich, brown, sudden in sunlight.

For his least look, scant acres yield:
each finger-furrowed field
heaves forth stalk, leaf, fruit-nubbed emerald;
bright grain sprung so rarely
he hauls to his will early;
at his hand's staunch hest, birds build.

Ringdoves roost well within his wood,
shirr songs to suit which mood
he saunters in; how but most glad
could be this adam's woman
when all earth his words do summon
leaps to laud such man's blood!

Man in Black

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Colossus (1960)

Mushrooms

Overnight, very
Whitely, discreetly,
Very quietly

Our toes, our noses
Take hold on the loam,
Acquire the air.

Nobody sees us,
Stops us, betrays us;
The small grains make room.

Soft fists insist on
Heaving the needles,
The leafy bedding,

Even the paving.
Our hammers, our rams,
Earless and eyeless,

Perfectly voiceless,
Widen the crannies,
Shoulder through holes. We

Diet on water,
On crumbs of shadow,
Bland-mannered, asking

Little or nothing.
So many of us!
So many of us!

We are shelves, we are
Tables, we are meek,
We are edible,

Nudgers and shovers
In spite of ourselves.
Our kind multiplies:

We shall by morning
Inherit the earth.
Our foot's in the door.

The Colossus (1960)

You're

Clownlike, happiest on your hands,
Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled,
Gilled like a fish. A common-sense
Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode.
Wrapped up in yourself like a spool,
Trawling your dark as owls do.
Mute as a turnip from the Fourth
Of July to All Fools' Day,
O high-riser, my little loaf.

Vague as fog and looked for like mail.
Farther off than Australia.
Bent-backed Atlas, our traveled prawn.
Snug as a bud and at home
Like a sprat in a pickle jug.
A creel of eels, all ripples.
Jumpy as a Mexican bean.
Right, like a well-done sum.
A clean slate, with your own face on.

Ariel (1965)

Stillborn

These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis.
They grew their toes and fingers well enough,
Their little foreheads bulged with concentration.
If they missed out on walking about like people
It wasn't for any lack of mother-love.

O I cannot explain what happened to them!
They are proper in shape and number and every part.
They sit so nicely in the pickling fluid!
They smile and smile and smile at me.
And still the lungs won't fill and the heart won't start.

They are not pigs, they are not even fish,
Though they have a piggy and a fishy air --
It would be better if they were alive, and that's what they were.
But they are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction,
And they stupidly stare and do not speak of her.

Crossing the Water (1971)

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.

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.

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.

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

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.

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 swaddlings, 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.

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.

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.

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.

Ariel (1965)

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 all be 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.

Ariel (1965)

The Arrival of the Bee Box

I ordered 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 swarmy 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, 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.

Ariel (1965)

Crossing the Water

Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people.
Where do the black trees go that drink here?
Their shadows must cover Canada.

A little light is filtering from the water flowers.
Their leaves do not wish us to hurry:
They are round and flat and full of dark advice.

Cold worlds shake from the oar.
The spirit of blackness is in us, it is in the fishes.
A snag is lifting a valedictory, pale hand;

Stars open among the lilies.
Are you not blinded by such expressionless sirens?
This is the silence of astounded souls.

Crossing the Water (1971)

Elm

For Ruth Fainlight

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
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 hiss.
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
That kill, that kill, that kill.

Ariel (1965)

Poppies in July

Little poppies, little hell flames,
Do you do no harm?

You flicker. I cannot touch you.
I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns

And it exhausts me to watch you
Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth.

A mouth just bloodied.
Little bloody skirts!

There are fumes I cannot touch.
Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules?

If I could bleed, or sleep! –
If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!

Or your liquors seep to me, in this glass capsule,
Dulling and stilling.

But colorless. Colorless.

Ariel (1965)

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.
You have an eye, it's an image.
My boy, it's your last resort.
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

Ariel (1965)

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.

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

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.

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

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.

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

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.

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

I have always been scared of you,
 With your Luftwaffe, your 20obbledygook.
 And your neat mustache
 And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
 Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You — —

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.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

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.

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

Ariel (1965)

Cut

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

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, 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
Darkens and tarnishes and when
The balled
Pulp of your heart
Confronts its small
Mill of silence

How you jump –
Trepanned veteran,
Dirty girl,
Thumb stump.
Ariel

Ariel (1965)

Lady Lazarus

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,
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.
Gentlemen, 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

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.

Ariel (1965)

The Munich Mannequins

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb

Where the yew trees blow like hydras,
The tree of life and the tree of life

Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.
The blood flood is the flood of love,

The absolute sacrifice.
It means: no more idols but me,

Me and you.
So, in their sulfur loveliness, in their smiles

These mannequins lean tonight
In Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome,

Naked and bald in their furs,
Orange lollies on silver sticks,

Intolerable, without mind.
The snow drops its pieces of darkness,

Nobody's about. In the hotels
Hands will be opening doors and setting

Down shoes for a polish of carbon
Into which broad toes will go tomorrow.

O the domesticity of these windows,
The baby lace, the green-leaved confectionery,

The thick Germans slumbering in their bottomless Stolz.
And the black phones on hooks

Glittering
Glittering and digesting

Voicelessness. The snow has no voice.

Ariel (1965)

Balloons

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

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

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

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

Brother is making
 His balloon squeak like a cat.
 Seeming to see
 A funny pink world he might eat on the other side of it,
 He bites,

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

Ariel (1965)

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.

Ariel (1965)

Child

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.
I want to fill it with color and ducks,
The zoo of the new
Whose name you meditate —
April snowdrop, Indian pipe,
Little

Stalk without wrinkle,
Pool in which images
Should be grand and classical

Not this troublous
Wringing of hands, this dark
Ceiling without a star.

Winter Trees (1971)

Morning Song

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.

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

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

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

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square

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

Ariel (1965)

Sheep in Fog

The hills step off into whiteness.
People or stars
Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.

The train leaves a line of breath.
O slow
Horse the colour of rust,

Hooves, dolorous bells -
All morning the
Morning has been blackening,

A flower left out.
My bones hold a stillness, the far
Fields melt my heart.

They threaten
To let me through to a heaven
Starless and fatherless, a dark water.

Ariel (1965)

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 flamily
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 a dawn of cornflowers.

Ariel (1965)

Waking In Winter

I can taste the tin of the sky -- the real tin thing.
Winter dawn is the color of metal,
The trees stiffen into place like burnt nerves.
All night I have dreamed of destruction, annihilations --
An assembly-line of cut throats, and you and I
Inching off in the gray Chevrolet, drinking the green
Poison of stilled lawns, the little clapboard gravestones,
Noiseless, on rubber wheels, on the way to the sea resort.

How the balconies echoed! How the sun lit up
The skulls, the unbuckled bones facing the view!
Space! Space! The bed linen was giving out entirely.
Cot legs melted in terrible attitudes, and the nurses --
Each nurse patched her soul to a wound and disappeared.
The deathly guests had not been satisfied
With the rooms, or the smiles, or the beautiful rubber plants,
Or the sea, Hushing their peeled sense like Old Mother Morphia.

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

Ariel (1965).