

## ARIEL

By Sylvia Plath

You've seen the head of a match when its struck. You've seen how it bursts suddenly into flame, then struggles for a life already claimed by death. So it was with this woman, this poetess.

She was born in Boston, Mass., in 1932. She attended Smith College, graduating *summa cum laude*. She won a Fulbright grant, and went to Newnham College, Cambridge University, England. In 1956 she married the English poet, Ted Hughes, They had two children. She died at the age of 31. Suicide.

There is a place where memory contains nothing. And she wanted to live there, but it was too late to move. It was always too late. When she was a child of the sea, it was too late---

*Where the sea snakes coil and twine  
Dry their maid and bash in the brine  
And when her father died, it was much too late---*

*Daddy, I have had to kill you.  
You died before I had time...*

Daddy was born in Germany, a Prussian. Her mother was Austrian, Jewish. They were both teachers. Sylvia, as a young woman is best described by A. Alvarez.

"She was a tall, spindly girl with waist-length sandy hair, which she usually wore in a bun, and that curious advertisement-trained, trans-atlantic air of anxious pleasantness. But this was merely a nervous social manner; under it, she was ruthless about her perceptions, wavy and very individual.

We all know persons to whom everything seems to come with ease. This was Sylvia. But poems don't give to competence; they come from the Mystery, where even the artist remains nascent.

During her Junior year at Smith College, amidst winning *Mademoiselle's* fiction contest "(\$500)!" she attempted suicide. Hospitalized, she underwent psychiatric treatment & electric shock therapy---

*A time of darkness, despair, disillusion---so black only as the inferno of the bunt  
mind can be---symbolic death, and numb shock---then the painful agony of slow  
rebirth and psychic regeneration...*

Sylvia returned to college, and graduated in 1955. Poetry prizes, grants, they all yielded to her talent. She went to England, to school; traveled thru Europe, and became Mrs. Edward J. Hughes.

The couple came to the United States in 1957. Sylvia taught English at Smith College, Though “one of the two or three finest instructors ever to appear in the English Department,” the Hughes decided to move to Boston where Sylvia attended Robert Lowell’s poetry seminar at Boston University. “She was willowy, long-waisted, sharp-elbowed, nervous, giggly, gracious---a brilliant tense presence embarrassed by restraint,” remembers Lowell.

1960 finds the young couple back in England, where, on April 1<sup>st</sup>, their first child, Frieda Rebecca, was born. The “horrid raw grey sleety rain” on London was not good for Sylvia’s sinuses, and affected her “taste, sense of smell, vision, and equilibrium.” But she liked the district...“except for a couple of auto collisions, housebreakings, deaths and babies, the jangle of rival ice cream wagons and the regular noise of glass breaking outside, our square is peaceful and idyllic.”

So the Hughes moved to a country house in Devon, and on January 17, 1962, Nicholas Farrar Hughes tasted the world. On a BBC broadcast, she spoke about her poem, “Nick and the Candlestick”---

*A mother nurses her baby son by candlelight and finds in him a beauty which, while it may not ward off the world’s ill, does redeem her share of it.*

Now back in London, and its coldest winter since 1813: pipes frozen, unreliable light & heat, no telephone---Sylvia would awaken before the children to work on poems for the book, *Ariel*. She had already published one book of poems, *The Colossus*, and a novel, *The Bell Jar*; but now, in the cold grey-streaked mornings of her 31<sup>st</sup> year, she felt “like a very efficient tool used and in demand from moment to moment,,,”

The match was struck, scintillated for a moment, then on the morning of February 11, 1963, quietly put itself out.

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*Ariel* is a painful book. One very human, sparkling with controlled nervous energy. Shy, proud, young, sagacious; giving while wishing to be taken. Thoughtfully feminine.

The poetess is comfortable in her imagery, like woolen underwear protecting her from the cold darkness. She slaps & kisses, line after line, then bursting out ironic laughter. There is a brilliance here, a mind is at work a mind afraid of itself, afraid of what it is capable of revealing to itself.

*The child---*

*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 bat,  
Dead white.*

-Joel Weislaus.

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