

Memories of Sylvia Plath

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Birthday Letters by Ted Hughes, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1998, 198 pages, \$20.00

Birthday Letters --the book of poems recently released by Ted Hughes--returns to the field of a long standing literary controversy and with the assurance of emotion-laden memory, demonstrates that poetry has still untapped potential to find a broad audience.

The poems treat the six-year marriage between Hughes and American poet Sylvia Plath before her suicide in 1963, when she left bread and milk for her two sleeping children and then gassed herself. For years, Hughes has remained silent in the face of those who judged and found him wanting for having walked out on Plath and their children a few months before her death.

While he and Plath were both poets, they emerged from different traditions, his English and hers American. Having shaken the dust of America from her feet, and living an uneasy existence as an expatriate writer in England, Plath developed a dazzling literary momentum. Central to her reputation are the *Ariel* poems written prior to her death, in which she plunged into a horrific psychic abyss.

Now Hughes answers some of her poetry, measure for measure--and there is an element of rivalry with her stature as a poet, as though it has haunted him a long time. Fellow poet Seamus Heaney wrote in his recent review that Hughes until now "was impaled on the horns of a creative dilemma: to write directly about that which most desperately craved expression could seem like an exploitation of something sacrosanct, but not to write about it must have felt like an abdication of spiritual and imaginative responsibility."

Birthday Letters has the feel of cauterizing a long festering wound, a release of tension, of breaking free. The poems harbor many strong emotions--regret, anger, pain and self-pity. Hughes recounts episodes from their life together in bitter, jarring and sometimes crude images. The recurring theme throughout the book is Plath in her coffin. In all but two of the poems, he is addressing her directly, and by following the chronology of their marriage, builds up dramatic intensity as Plath nears her suicide.

The couple first met at Cambridge when she was a Fulbright scholar in 1956. Although his memories of their early love affair are overlaid with portents of disaster, he recaptures the

exhilaration she evoked for him in *18 Rugby St*:

You were a new world. My new world.

So this is America, I marvelled.

Beautiful, beautiful America!

There is also the nostalgia of an old man with a shade of resentment towards a young woman, or perhaps it is a hint of envy about the world she came from, compared with an exhausted old world. In *Your Paris, I thought was American*, Hughes recalls that her Paris was nothing like his, although they went there together on their honeymoon. He accuses her of literary tourism, while

My perspectives were veiled by what rose

Like methane from the reopened

Mass grave of Verdun.

In many poems Hughes intimates that it was conventional expectations of herself that trapped Plath and destroyed her. Their marriage and his poetic influence gave her a new direction and purpose in her fight to become a writer. When they both travelled to the US, he acted as a counterweight to her fear of breaking away from conventional expectations of success. He had a strong distrust of university respectability and was convinced that any tenured academic job would suffocate them. Plath later wrote to her brother: "I see too well the security and prestige of academic life, but it is Death to writing."

In a poem entitled *The Blue Flannel Suit*, he satirizes Plath as she prepared to go back and work as a lecturer in English at her alma mater--Smith College for women--sitting nervously at breakfast on the first day in an ugly tailored suit she had specially made, in keeping with the idea she had of what was expected of her.

He abruptly pulls himself short, and remembers the fate that awaited her. His image, "That blue suit, A mad, execution uniform, Survived your sentence" is reminiscent of Plath's *Daddy* poem in which she imagined herself as a Holocaust victim.

Ugly reality showed him what to shun, but could not show him where to go. Plath agreed to return to England with him: "The speed and expense of America is just about 50 years ahead of me," she wrote. When she was pregnant with their first child, the couple moved to London.

In the poem *Epiphany* about the birth of their daughter, Hughes recounts his own pride as he went for a walk afterwards

in the London streets, and met a man trying to sell a fox cub. His decision not to buy it, he ascribes to his fear of a challenge and desire for respectability. With this decision, he announces he knew their marriage had failed.

Hughes has the sea as a constant metaphor for Plath's unhappiness, her loss, her homesickness, her search for freedom. In *The Beach* he writes:

*You craved like oxygen
American early summers, yourself burnt dark
Some prophecy mislaid, somehow. England
was so poor!*

In answering one of her poems, in which she identified with a hunted animal, he writes more prosaically in *The Rabbit Catcher* about her anger that prompted the identification:

*You raged against our English private greed
Of fencing off all coastal approaches
Hiding the sea from roads, from all inland.
You despised England's grubby edges when you got there.*

When he left her, an event mentioned only obliquely, she was trapped, alone with two small children, and unable to retrace her steps to the United States.

The *Birthday Letters* have provoked a great deal of interest, serving as they do as an answer to the controversy that has surrounded Hughes, while he continued to edit and release Plath's writings and pursued his own literary career.

Particularly after the re-release of her novel *The Bell Jar* in 1971, feminists claimed Plath as an icon and the more extreme hounded Hughes as morally responsible for her death. Their grotesque actions included repeatedly defacing her grave and protest chants at Hughes' poetry readings overseas.

The refreshing quality about his book is the complete absence of any sense of remorse or guilt.

In much of Hughes' earlier writing, when his themes are mystical, steeped in fatalism and superstition, paying court to the conception that mankind is completely subordinate to the forces of nature, the effect is almost tongue in cheek and although the imagery is often blood-drenched, as in the *Crow* anthology, curiously bloodless.

In a 1960s introduction to *The New Poetry* A. Alvarez described the disease that bedeviled English culture as the urge to "gentility", and hoped that the new poets he included would be able to avoid this danger.

In a similar vein W.H. Auden wrote: "One comes across passages, even in very fine English poets, which make one think: 'Yes, very effective, but does he believe what he is saying?': in American poetry such passages are extremely rare."

Whether Plath wrote about nature, or about the social restrictions on individuals, she stripped away the polite veneer. She let her writing express elemental forces and primeval fears. In doing so she laid bare the contradictions that tore apart appearance and hinted at some of the tensions hovering just beneath the surface of the American way of life in the post war period.

Hughes wrote in an introduction to her short stories: "All are circling the flames which the poetry, encouraged by 'Johnny Panic' and 'The Bell Jar', eventually jumped into."

In her *Ariel* poems she approached death from every possible angle: longing for oblivion in *Tulips*; suicide as an art form to be perfected in *Lady Lazarus*; as a nameless, formless, murderous intent in *Elm*; personified as the corpse of her next door Devon neighbour in *Berck Plage*; herself as the prey in *Death and Co* and her offer to be a willing sacrificial victim in *Birthday Present*. In one of her last poems, *Edge*, she calmly observes the form of a dead woman:

*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.*

Her letters home, written at the same time, struggling to maintain an identity of common sense optimism, serve as a bizarre counterpoint to the searing brutality of the poems, where she precisely surveyed her own growing fascination with death and recorded her own self-immolation.

Ironically, in the midst of the torment, she was aware that her artistic name was assured. This conviction is the unifying element between the letters affirming her great love of her children and describing her efforts to find a future with them and the terrifying journey into darkness that was charted in her poetry.

In a 1962 essay she had written: "I am not worried that poems reach relatively few people. As it is, they go surprisingly far--among strangers, around the world, even. Farther than the words of a classroom teacher or the prescriptions of a doctor; if they are very lucky, farther than a lifetime."

That she was unselfconscious about her aspiration to be a poet was an expression of her vitality. On her grave there is the inscription: "Even amid fierce flames the golden lotus can be planted." That Plath's life ended when she was only thirty years old says something about the stifling, claustrophobic existence she faced as an artist and the uncondusive atmosphere for the disturbing insights of a poet.

Now Hughes has taken the threads of their life together and rewoven his deep seated memories and obsessions in a work that carries a marked assurance of the weight and bearing of what he has to say.

In this dialogue with his dead wife, he may owe a poetic debt to her vigor. *Birthday Letters* is a work that will create fresh interest in the writings of both Hughes and Plath.



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