Some Failed Nocturnes for Sylvia Plath **[1]**

September 12, 2016 Authors [2]
Prose Poetry [3]
Fame [4]

Hybrid Poetry by Marie Chambers

(seventh attempt)

She loved the night.

When the children had given up the ghost and the husband had fled the home fort for the beehive of other queens, her song became the most white-hot-not-sweet tune ever. There and then. When beaten to death on a simple piano—aka typewriter—with monumental presumption and terrifying skill, her song broke the sound barrier and, to this day, plays on a continuous loop at all the major universities, where men and women with dark unrequited eyes “tell o’er the sad account of fore-bemoaned moan” as if it were news.

Sorrow is not news. Language is.

So let’s play Name that Effigy! Four bars, two children, key of A flat, think elegy but cold in winter, and remember it was 1963. Nobody was bipolar. They were just too white-hot to handle. Now sing something that matters.

(fourth attempt)

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Howl howl howl and bow-wow-wow, “brute hearts” like—who else? “Fuck *Daddy*,” I bellow in my mind. What about Mommy, nerves sour as old milk, noisy shadows pecking at every pipeline in her head? I read *Ariel*. I reread *Ariel*. My tits ache. Really.

So what if it's October—or February, for that matter. Who wants to go to a gas-oven jubilee in the anniversary year of Sylvia's death?

(fifteenth attempt)

Though it is winter, roses are radiant with bees oozing honey. Sylvia’s wearing sky-blue diamonds and a matching cardigan. She approaches the blossoms in slow motion. Strauss waltzes play in the background. The shrubbery sways in three-quarter time; rose petals tremble, swoon, then glide toward the ground. But the shadow of her husband speeds up. Her children sip tea in rose-colored demitasses and watch their mother from the drawing room window. Only the daughter wears a crown.

The bees are too heavy to fly far or fast. Sylvia catches them with her lips, licks the sweet from their tiny striped vests. Verbs begin to spiral from her mouth and coil outward into the sky, a mackerel sky so pockmarked with language that all the angry vestless bees rise up from the garden to become stars. These stars are red as fire ants and cannot implode.

I never want this song to end. But it does. A radio announcer, whose accent has gone all Deutschland on me, tells the bloody tale of Chopin’s heart: how once it died, it was cut from his body and shipped back to Poland, its true home. As if it knew.

(second, twenty-second, and thirtieth attempt)

How is the oven a pillow?

(twenty-ninth attempt)

Heady days, those last happy husbanded times in Devonshire! Stones sang with moss, and time watered all the shrubbery. She bought new typewriter ribbon, aproned herself, and ironed while her children grew. Papers whispered with the weight of nouns well sequenced. Music swam in all directions. Everything hummable. Everything publishable. “The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.” Genius! “My hours are married to shadow.” Tragic genius!

Clink clink! Glasses sounded like bells in winter, and everybody knew the words. Her master-pollinator husband worked hard. He sang well, despite a pitch problem. “All you need is love.” (Tra-la-lalala!) “Blue sky out of the Oresteia,” bye bye!

Feathered songs without words might have made kinder bedfellows for our girl. Surely, she knew that dear old verse.

(first attempt)

I heard what follows, gasped, and turned up the volume on my car radio:

Sylvia Plath, who died in 1980, is best known as an organist.

Speaking with a pronounced Czechoslovakian accent, the radio announcer continued:

A feisty and individualistic voice, she studied with Segovia, who advised, “without a beautiful sound, the charm of the guitar disappears.”

I knew this was mad and also incorrect. Chopin mazurkas began to play. I rolled down the windows and stepped on the gas—driving away from Melrose Avenue, dreaming in English, of a voice I once knew by heart.

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Publishing Information

- “Tell o’er the sad account of fore-bemoaned moan” is from William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 30: "When to the Sessions of Sweet Thought." [5]
- "Brute hearts" is from Sylvia Plath’s "Daddy" [6] (*Ariel*, 1965).
- "The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue," "My hours are married to shadow," and "Blue sky out of the Oresteia" are from Sylvia Plath’s "The Colossus" [7] (*The Colossus and Other Poems*, 1960).
- "Feathered songs without words" is a reference to Emily Dickinson’s poem "'Hope' Is the Thing with Feathers" [8].
- The radio quotes are based on notes taken by the author, who heard the program on KCRW in Los Angeles, but is unable to recall the date and program title.

Art Information

- "Bike Path, Chappaquiddick" (paper and glue on window glass) © Kim Triedman; used by permission.

Marie Chambers received an MFA from the Professional Writing Seminars at Bennington College. Her work has appeared in numerous journals, including the *LA Review of Books*; *Atlanta Review*; *Ironhorse Literary Review*; *California Poetry Society*; *Sentinel Literary Quarterly* (highest commendation, short prose); and *Bookwoman*, a publication of the Women’s National Book Association (third-place memoir/creative nonfiction).

She's the 2014 winner of the Tallahassee Writers Association annual prize for creative nonfiction and a winner of the 2015 *ARTlines2* Ekphrastic Poetry Contest for work inspired by a piece of art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (judged by Robert Pinsky). Most recently, her collaboration with Paris-based visual artist Daniela Bershon was featured in the online *7 x 7 Magazine*.

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