

poetry

ARIEL
THE COLOSSUS
CROSSING THE WATER
WINTER TREES
COLLECTED POEMS
(edited by Ted Hughes)
SELECTED POEMS
(edited by Ted Hughes)
ARIEL: THE RESTORED EDITION
(foreword by Frieda Hughes)
POEMS
(chosen by Carol Ann Duffy)

fiction

JOHNNY PANIC AND THE BIBLE OF DREAMS
MARY VENTURA AND THE NINTH KINGDOM

non-fiction

THE LETTERS OF SYLVIA PLATH
Volume I: 1940–1956
(edited by Peter K. Steinberg & Karen V. Kukil)
THE LETTERS OF SYLVIA PLATH
Volume II: 1956–1963
(edited by Peter K. Steinberg & Karen V. Kukil)
LETTERS HOME: CORRESPONDENCE 1950–1963
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THE JOURNALS OF SYLVIA PLATH
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SYLVIA PLATH: DRAWINGS
(edited by Frieda Hughes)

for children

THE BED BOOK
(illustrated by Quentin Blake)
THE IT-DOESN'T-MATTER SUIT
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(illustrated by David Roberts)

SYLVIA PLATH

The Bell Jar



FABER & FABER

Chapter One

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers – goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.

I thought it must be the worst thing in the world.

New York was bad enough. By nine in the morning the fake, country-wet freshness that somehow seeped in overnight evaporated like the tail end of a sweet dream. Mirage-grey at the bottom of their granite canyons, the hot streets wavered in the sun, the car tops sizzled and glittered, and the dry, cindery dust blew into my eyes and down my throat.

I kept hearing about the Rosenbergs over the radio and at the office till I couldn't get them out of my mind. It was like the first time I saw a cadaver. For weeks afterwards, the cadaver's head – or what there was left of it – floated up behind my eggs and bacon at breakfast and behind the face of Buddy Willard, who was responsible for my seeing it in the first place, and pretty soon I felt as though I were carrying that cadaver's head

around with me on a string, like some black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar.

I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I'd been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet, and how all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue.

I was supposed to be having the time of my life.

I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size seven patent leather shoes I'd bought in Bloomingdale's one lunch hour with a black patent leather belt and black patent leather pocket-book to match. And when my picture came out in the magazine the twelve of us were working on – drinking martinis in a skimpy, imitation silver-lamé bodice stuck on to a big, fat cloud of white tulle, on some Starlight Roof, in the company of several anonymous young men with all-American bone structures hired or loaned for the occasion – everybody would think I must be having a real whirl.

Look what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car.

Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolley-bus. I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel,

moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo.

There were twelve of us at the hotel.

We had all won a fashion magazine contest, by writing essays and stories and poems and fashion blurbs, and as prizes they gave us jobs in New York for a month, expenses paid, and piles and piles of free bonuses, like ballet tickets and passes to fashion shows and hair stylings at a famous expensive salon and chances to meet successful people in the field of our desire and advice about what to do with our particular complexions.

I still have the make-up kit they gave me, fitted out for a person with brown eyes and brown hair: an oblong of brown mascara with a tiny brush, and a round basin of blue eye-shadow just big enough to dab the tip of your finger in, and three lipsticks ranging from red to pink, all cased in the same little gilt box with a mirror on one side. I also have a white plastic sun-glasses case with coloured shells and sequins and a green plastic starfish sewed on to it.

I realized we kept piling up these presents because it was as good as free advertising for the firms involved, but I couldn't be cynical. I got such a kick out of all those free gifts showering on to us. For a long time afterwards I hid them away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sun-glasses case for the baby to play with.

So there were twelve of us at the hotel, in the same wing on the same floor in single rooms, one after the other, and it reminded me of my dormitory at college. It wasn't a proper hotel – I mean a hotel where there are both men and women mixed about here and there on the same floor.

This hotel – the Amazon – was for women only, and they were mostly girls my age with wealthy parents who wanted to be sure their daughters would be living where men couldn't get at them and deceive them; and they were all going to posh secretarial schools like Katy Gibbs, where they had to wear hats and stockings and gloves to class, or they had just graduated from places like Katy Gibbs and were secretaries to executives and junior executives and simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other.

These girls looked awfully bored to me. I saw them on the sun-roof, yawning and painting their nails and trying to keep up their Bermuda tans, and they seemed bored as hell. I talked with one of them, and she was bored with yachts and bored with flying around in aeroplanes and bored with skiing in Switzerland at Christmas and bored with the men in Brazil.

Girls like that make me sick. I'm so jealous I can't speak. Nineteen years, and I hadn't been out of New England except for this trip to New York. It was my first big chance, but here I was, sitting back and letting it run through my fingers like so much water.

I guess one of my troubles was Doreen.

I'd never known a girl like Doreen before. Doreen came from a society girls' college down South and had bright white hair standing out in a cotton candy fluff round her head and blue eyes like transparent agate marbles, hard and polished and just about indestructible, and a mouth set in a sort of perpetual sneer. I don't mean a nasty sneer, but an amused, mysterious sneer, as if all the people around her were pretty silly and she could tell some good jokes on them if she wanted to.

Doreen singled me out right away. She made me feel I was that much sharper than the others, and she really was wonderfully funny. She used to sit next to me at the conference

table, and when the visiting celebrities were talking she'd whisper witty sarcastic remarks to me under her breath.

Her college was so fashion-conscious, she said, that all the girls had pocket-book covers made out of the same material as their dresses, so each time they changed their clothes they had a matching pocket-book. This kind of detail impressed me. It suggested a whole life of marvellous, elaborate decadence that attracted me like a magnet.

The only thing Doreen ever bawled me out about was bothering to get my assignments in by a deadline.

'What are you sweating over that for?' Doreen lounged on my bed in a peach silk dressing-gown, filing her long, nicotine-yellow nails with an emery board, while I typed up the draft of an interview with a best-selling novelist.

That was another thing – the rest of us had starched cotton summer nighties and quilted housecoats, or maybe terry-towel robes that doubled as beachcoats, but Doreen wore these full-length nylon and lace jobs you could half see through, and dressing-gowns the colour of sin, that stuck to her by some kind of electricity. She had an interesting, slightly sweaty smell that reminded me of those scallopy leaves of sweet fern you break off and crush between your fingers for the musk of them.

'You know old Jay Cee won't give a damn if that story's in tomorrow or Monday.' Doreen lit a cigarette and let the smoke flare slowly from her nostrils so her eyes were veiled. 'Jay Cee's ugly as sin,' Doreen went on coolly. 'I bet that old husband of hers turns out all the lights before he gets near her or he'd puke otherwise.'

Jay Cee was my boss, and I liked her a lot, in spite of what Doreen said. She wasn't one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewellery. Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn't seem to matter. She read a couple of languages and knew all the quality writers in the business.

I tried to imagine Jay Cee out of her strict office suit and luncheon-duty hat and in bed with her fat husband, but I just couldn't do it. I always had a terribly hard time trying to imagine people in bed together.

Jay Cee wanted to teach me something, all the old ladies I ever knew wanted to teach me something, but I suddenly didn't think they had anything to teach me. I fitted the lid on my typewriter and clicked it shut.

Doreen grinned. 'Smart girl.'

Somebody tapped at the door.

'Who is it?' I didn't bother to get up.

'It's me, Betsy. Are you coming to the party?'

'I guess so.' I still didn't go to the door.

They imported Betsy straight from Kansas with her bouncing blonde ponytail and Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi smile. I remember once the two of us were called over to the office of some blue-chinned TV producer in a pin-stripe suit to see if we had any angles he could build up for a programme, and Betsy started to tell about the male and female corn in Kansas. She got so excited about that damn corn even the producer had tears in his eyes, only he couldn't use any of it, unfortunately, he said.

Later on, the Beauty Editor persuaded Betsy to cut her hair and made a cover girl out of her, and I still see her face now and then, smiling out of those 'P.Q.'s wife wears B.H. Wragge' ads.

Betsy was always asking me to do things with her and the other girls as if she were trying to save me in some way. She never asked Doreen. In private, Doreen called her Pollyanna Cowgirl.

'Do you want to come in our cab?' Betsy said through the door.

Doreen shook her head.

'That's all right, Betsy,' I said. 'I'm going with Doreen.'

'Okay.' I could hear Betsy padding off down the hall.

'We'll just go till we get sick of it,' Doreen told me, stubbing out her cigarette in the base of my bedside reading-lamp, 'then we'll go out on the town. Those parties they stage here remind me of the old dances in the school gym. Why do they always round up Yalies? They're so *stoo-pit!*'

Buddy Willard went to Yale, but now I thought of it, what was wrong with him was that he was stupid. Oh, he'd managed to get good marks all right, and to have an affair with some awful waitress on the Cape by the name of Gladys, but he didn't have one speck of intuition. Doreen had intuition. Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones.

We were stuck in the theatre-hour rush. Our cab sat wedged in back of Betsy's cab and in front of a cab with four of the other girls, and nothing moved.

Doreen looked terrific. She was wearing a strapless white lace dress zipped up over a snug corset affair that curved her in at the middle and bulged her out again spectacularly above and below, and her skin had a bronzy polish under the pale dusting-powder. She smelled strong as a whole perfume store.

I wore a black shantung sheath that cost me forty dollars. It was part of a buying spree I had with some of my scholarship money when I heard I was one of the lucky ones going to New York. This dress was cut so queerly I couldn't wear any sort of a bra under it, but that didn't matter much as I was skinny as a boy and barely rippled, and I liked feeling almost naked on the hot summer nights.

The city had faded my tan, though. I looked yellow as a Chinaman. Ordinarily, I would have been nervous about my dress and my odd colour, but being with Doreen made me forget my worries. I felt wise and cynical as all hell.

When the man in the blue lumber shirt and black chinos and tooled leather cowboy boots started to stroll over to us from under the striped awning of the bar where he'd been eyeing our cab, I didn't have any illusions. I knew perfectly well he'd come for Doreen. He threaded his way out between the stopped cars and leaned engagingly on the sill of our open window.

'And what, may I ask, are two nice girls like you doing all alone in a cab on a nice night like this?'

He had a big, wide, white tooth-paste-ad smile.

'We're on our way to a party,' I blurted, since Doreen had gone suddenly dumb as a post and was fiddling in a blasé way with her white lace pocket-book cover.

'That sounds boring,' the man said. 'Whyn't you both join me for a couple of drinks in that bar over there? I've some friends waiting as well.'

He nodded in the direction of several informally dressed men slouching around under the awning. They had been following him with their eyes, and when he glanced back at them, they burst out laughing.

The laughter should have warned me. It was a kind of low, know-it-all snicker, but the traffic showed signs of moving again, and I knew that if I sat tight, in two seconds I'd be wishing I'd taken this gift of a chance to see something of New York besides what the people on the magazine had planned out for us so carefully.

'How about it, Doreen?' I said.

'How about it, Doreen?' the man said, smiling his big smile. To this day I can't remember what he looked like when he wasn't smiling. I think he must have been smiling the whole time. It must have been natural for him, smiling like that.

'Well, all right,' Doreen said to me. I opened the door, and we stepped out of the cab just as it was edging ahead again and started to walk over to the bar.

There was a terrible shriek of brakes followed by a dull thump-thump.

'Hey you!' Our cabby was craning out of his window with a furious, purple expression. 'Waddaya think you're doin'?'

He had stopped the cab so abruptly that the cab behind bumped smack into him, and we could see the four girls inside waving and struggling and scrambling up off the floor.

The man laughed and left us on the kerb and went back and handed a bill to the driver in the middle of a great honking and some yelling, and then we saw the girls from the magazine moving off in a row, one cab after another, like a wedding party with nothing but bridesmaids.

'Come on, Frankie,' the man said to one of his friends in the group, and a short, scrunty fellow detached himself and came into the bar with us.

He was the type of fellow I can't stand. I'm five feet ten in my stocking feet, and when I am with little men I stoop over a bit and slouch my hips, one up and one down, so I'll look shorter, and I feel gawky and morbid as somebody in a side-show.

For a minute I had a wild hope we might pair off according to size, which would line me up with the man who had spoken to us in the first place, and he cleared a good six feet, but he went ahead with Doreen and didn't give me a second look. I tried to pretend I didn't see Frankie dogging along at my elbow and sat close by Doreen at the table.

It was so dark in the bar I could hardly make out anything except Doreen. With her white hair and white dress she was so white she looked silver. I think she must have reflected the neons over the bar. I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life.

'Well, what'll we have?' the man asked with a large smile.

'I think I'll have an Old-Fashioned,' Doreen said to me.

Ordering drinks always floored me. I didn't know whisky

from gin and never managed to get anything I really liked the taste of. Buddy Willard and the other college boys I knew were usually too poor to buy hard liquor or they scorned drinking altogether. It's amazing how many college boys don't drink or smoke. I seemed to know them all. The farthest Buddy Willard ever went was buying us a bottle of Dubonnet, which he only did because he was trying to prove he could be aesthetic in spite of being a medical student.

'I'll have a vodka,' I said.

The man looked at me more closely. 'With anything?'

'Just plain,' I said. 'I always have it plain.'

I thought I might make a fool of myself by saying I'd have it with ice or soda or gin or anything. I'd seen a vodka ad once, just a glass full of vodka standing in the middle of a snowdrift in a blue light, and the vodka looked clear and pure as water, so I thought having vodka plain must be all right. My dream was some day ordering a drink and finding out it tasted wonderful.

The waiter came up then, and the man ordered drinks for the four of us. He looked so at home in that citified bar in his ranch outfit I thought he might well be somebody famous.

Doreen wasn't saying a word, she only toyed with her cork place-mat and eventually lit a cigarette, but the man didn't seem to mind. He kept staring at her the way people stare at the great white macaw in the zoo, waiting for it to say something human.

The drinks arrived, and mine looked clear and pure, just like the vodka ad.

'What do you do?' I asked the man, to break the silence shooting up around me on all sides, thick as jungle grass. 'I mean what do you do here in New York?'

Slowly and with what seemed a great effort, the man dragged his eyes away from Doreen's shoulder. 'I'm a disc

jockey,' he said. 'You prob'ly must have heard of me. The name's Lenny Shepherd.'

'I know you,' Doreen said suddenly.

'I'm glad about that, honey,' the man said, and burst out laughing. 'That'll come in handy. I'm famous as hell.'

Then Lenny Shepherd gave Frankie a long look.

'Say, where do you come from?' Frankie asked, sitting up with a jerk. 'What's your name?'

'This here's Doreen.' Lenny slid his hand around Doreen's bare arm and gave her a squeeze.

What surprised me was that Doreen didn't let on she noticed what he was doing. She just sat there, dusky as a bleached blonde negress in her white dress and sipped daintily at her drink.

'My name's Elly Higginbottom,' I said. 'I come from Chicago.' After that I felt safer. I didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston.

'Well, Elly, what do you say we dance some?'

The thought of dancing with that little runt in his orange suede elevator shoes and mingy T-shirt and droopy blue sports coat made me laugh. If there's anything I look down on, it's a man in a blue outfit. Black or grey, or brown, even. Blue just makes me laugh.

'I'm not in the mood,' I said coldly, turning my back on him and hitching my chair over nearer to Doreen and Lenny.

Those two looked as if they'd known each other for years by now. Doreen was spooning up the hunks of fruit at the bottom of her glass with a spindly silver spoon, and Lenny was grunting each time she lifted the spoon to her mouth, and snapping and pretending to be a dog or something, and trying to get the fruit off the spoon. Doreen giggled and kept spooning up the fruit.

I began to think vodka was my drink at last. It didn't taste like anything, but it went straight down into my stomach like a sword-swallower's sword and made me feel powerful and god-like.

'I better go now,' Frankie said, standing up.

I couldn't see him very clearly, the place was so dim, but for the first time I heard what a high, silly voice he had. Nobody paid him any notice.

'Hey, Lenny, you owe me something. Remember, Lenny, you owe me something, don't you, Lenny?'

I thought it odd Frankie should be reminding Lenny he owed him something in front of us, and we being perfect strangers, but Frankie stood there saying the same thing over and over until Lenny dug into his pocket and pulled out a big roll of green bills and peeled one off and handed it to Frankie. I think it was ten dollars.

'Shut up and scram.'

For a minute I thought Lenny was talking to me as well, but then I heard Doreen say 'I won't come unless Elly comes'. I had to hand it to her the way she picked up my fake name.

'Oh, Elly'll come, won't you, Elly?' Lenny said, giving me a wink.

'Sure I'll come,' I said. Frankie had wilted away into the night, so I thought I'd string along with Doreen. I wanted to see as much as I could.

I liked looking on at other people in crucial situations. If there was a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar for me to look at, I'd stop and look so hard I never forgot it.

I certainly learned a lot of things I never would have learned otherwise this way, and even when they surprised me or made me sick I never let on, but pretended that's the way I knew things were all the time.

Chapter Two

I wouldn't have missed Lenny's place for anything.

It was built exactly like the inside of a ranch, only in the middle of a New York apartment house. He'd had a few partitions knocked down to make the place broaden out, he said, and then had them pine-panel the walls and fit up a special pine-panelled bar in the shape of a horseshoe. I think the floor was pine-panelled, too.

Great white bearskins lay about underfoot, and the only furniture was a lot of low beds covered with Indian rugs. Instead of pictures hung up on the walls, he had antlers and buffalo horns and a stuffed rabbit head. Lenny jutted a thumb at the meek little grey muzzle and stiff jackrabbit ears.

'Ran over that in Las Vegas.'

He walked away across the room, his cowboy boots echoing like pistol shots. 'Acoustics,' he said, and grew smaller and smaller until he vanished through a door in the distance.

All at once music started to come out of the air on every side. Then it stopped, and we heard Lenny's voice say 'This is your twelve o'clock disc jock, Lenny Shepherd, with a round-up of the tops in pops. Number Ten in the wagon train this week is none other than that little yaller-haired gal you been hearin' so much about lately . . . the one an' only *Sunflower!*'

*I was born in Kansas, I was bred in Kansas,
And when I marry I'll wed in Kansas . . .*

'What a card!' Doreen said. 'Isn't he a card?'

'You bet,' I said.

'Listen, Elly, do me a favour.' She seemed to think Elly was who I really was by now.

'Sure,' I said.

'Stick around, will you? I wouldn't have a chance if he tried anything funny. Did you see that muscle?' Doreen giggled.

Lenny popped out of the back room. 'I got twenty grand's worth of recording equipment in there.' He ambled over to the bar and set out three glasses and a silver ice-bucket and a big pitcher and began to mix drinks from several different bottles.

*. . . to a true-blue gal who promised she would wait –
She's the sunflower of the Sunflower State.*

'Terrific, huh?' Lenny came over, balancing three glasses. Big drops stood out on them like sweat, and the ice-cubes jingled as he passed them round. Then the music twanged to a stop, and we heard Lenny's voice announcing the next number.

'Nothing like listening to yourself talk. Say,' Lenny's eye lingered on me, 'Frankie vamoosed, you ought to have somebody, I'll call up one of the fellers.'

'That's okay,' I said. 'You don't have to do that.' I didn't want to come straight out and ask for somebody several sizes larger than Frankie.

Lenny looked relieved. 'Just so's you don't mind. I wouldn't want to do wrong by a friend of Doreen's.' He gave Doreen a big white smile. 'Would I, honeybun?'

He held out a hand to Doreen, and without a word they both started to jitterbug, still hanging on to their glasses.

I sat cross-legged on one of the beds and tried to look devout and impassive like some businessmen I once saw watching an Algerian belly-dancer, but as soon as I leaned back against the wall under the stuffed rabbit, the bed started to roll out into the room, so I sat down on a bearskin on the floor and leaned back against the bed instead.

My drink was wet and depressing. Each time I took another sip it tasted more and more like dead water. Around the middle of the glass there was painted a pink lasso with yellow polka dots. I drank to about an inch below the lasso and waited a bit, and when I went to take another sip, the drink was up to lasso-level again.

Out of the air Lenny's ghost voice boomed, '*Wye oh wye did I ever leave Wyoming?*'

The two of them didn't even stop jitterbugging during the intervals. I felt myself shrinking to a small black dot against all those red and white rugs and that pine-panelling. I felt like a hole in the ground.

There is something demoralizing about watching two people get more and more crazy about each other, especially when you are the only extra person in the room.

It's like watching Paris from an express caboose heading in the opposite direction – every second the city gets smaller and smaller, only you feel it's really you getting smaller and smaller and lonelier and lonelier, rushing away from all those lights and that excitement at about a million miles an hour.

Every so often Lenny and Doreen would bang into each other and kiss and then swing back to take a long drink and close in on each other again. I thought I might just lie down on the bearskin and go to sleep until Doreen felt ready to go back to the hotel.

Then Lenny gave a terrible roar. I sat up. Doreen was hanging on to Lenny's left earlobe with her teeth.