

"I Am Vertical"

by Ann Bogle

As an experiment I have opened to a random page in Sylvia Plath's *The Collected Poems* (New York: Harper's and Row, 1981) to see whether every poem she wrote is equally great. The volume encompasses four collections of poetry: *The Colossus*, *Ariel*, *Crossing the Water*, and *Winter Trees* (all copyright dates 1960, 1965, 1971, 1981). Plath died in 1963 at the age of 30. Four of the poems in the collection originally appeared in *The American Poetry Review* and four in *The New York Times Book Review*. I opened randomly to page 162, poem numbered 143: "I Am Vertical" (28 March 1961).

I Am Vertical

But I would rather be horizontal.

I am not a tree with my root in the soil

Sucking up minerals and motherly love

So that each March I may gleam a new leaf,

Nor am I the beauty of a garden bed

Attracting my share of Ahs and spectacularly painted,

Unknowing I must soon unpetal.

Compared with me, a tree is immortal

And a flower-head not tall, but more startling,

And I want the one's longevity and the other's daring.

Tonight, in the infinitesimal light of the stars,

The trees and flowers have been strewing their cool odors.

I walk among them, but none of them are noticing.

Sometimes I think that when I am sleeping

I must most perfectly resemble them —

Thoughts gone dim.

It is more natural to me, lying down.

Then the sky and I are in open conversation,

And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:

Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have time for me.

Two ten-line stanzas, pentameter couplets in the first stanza, mostly longer couplet lines in the second. (If someone knows how to describe this metrically, or Plath's formalism, please do.)

(Tiel Aisha Ansari writes, "If I had to describe this poem in formal terms, I think I'd say it's made up of two ten-line stanzas of unmetered slant-rhyme (very slant) couplets. There's a distinctive rhythm there but it doesn't answer to any metrical description.")

I wanted to see by way of this experiment what I would find in a randomly chosen poem. I had written a linguistic analysis of Plath's poem, "Mushrooms," and found that it is a syllabic poem with eleven triplet stanzas. Each line contains five syllables. I write, "Since there is a strong, yet varied, stress pattern in the poem, it is more formal than syllabic poems generally are. 'Mushrooms' does not correspond exactly to any particular poetic form, yet it seems to be a unique variation of the Sapphic form."

Literary history has taught us to see Plath as "confessional" and to think of her suicidality as the subject of her poems, perhaps even the form of her poems, yet in "I Am Vertical" (and in "Mushrooms") we read about the coming of nature, of night and time. In "I Am Vertical," "strewing" is the precise verb in a stirring but quiet nature poem that premeditates a passing—or (past-) blooming—death.

Here is a poem I wrote while consciously studying Plath in 1984 or 1985. I was 22 or 23 and working at a veterinary clinic after college. I remember working very hard on the poem while not approving of myself for cutting after her pattern.

Portrait of a House Guest

They stuck her there in the spare
dank corner, sheets like hers
spread out: folding roses,
winter daisies, yellow red

learned flower forms. Her

pale hair has wings,
independent movement, she has
Saturn eyes, Italian.

Reading under leafless trees
after a day grown fatter
they find her red, grazing
wool scarf. Like ashes

she catches them, stutters,
(it's part of her art),
“Let's cook when we're ready.”
They never leave her,

the pale trusted nose,
but she's turning
like hookworm or maple leaf
wrinkled, trammeled, gold.

If something were suddenly to happen to end my life, and if someone going through my papers were to put her or his hand randomly on this poem, I would feel (in my absence) reasonably at ease. The poem doesn't represent my writing twenty-five years later, but it represents my poetry then. There is no note to explain that I was studying Plath in the poem. What I have are letters—sent and unsent—not a diary. That I was studying Plath in order to understand enjambment, is not something I would have written to anyone then, but something my manfriend could see me doing at the (horizontal) door we used for a table. He might not recall the specifics of my Plath study, but like most readers, recall her biography.

I avoided her biography in the sense that I was afraid to marry and have children, though I wanted to. I deliberately set out to have a career in teaching creative writing, based on my familiarity with

another famous younger writer (not suicidal, socially or actually) who had become a star and role model in that.

That I felt uncomfortable patterning my work after Sylvia Plath's or other women writers' work as I later felt and continued to feel and to dodge them while reserving affection for their writing, suggests their influence in a wider way. Is it a sign that a writer is "major" to wish to stay out of her path—as if being influenced by her were a proof of her magnitude or in some way a show of the one's originality or the other one's lack? There may be, even then, a depth to the reading that perceives originality.

Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* and her *Journals* further extend her body of work—the journals alone seem "major."

