

## Page from a Diary: July 30, 1997

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I've just got back from Lumb Bank, Heptonstall, after having made the compulsory pilgrimage to Sylvia Plath's grave in the new graveyard of St. Thomas' Church. What *did* I expect of an ordinary gravestone at the head of an unadorned grave?

As I stood on the wet grass reading the epitaph, I did not break out into goose pimples; I felt no rush of emotion; I noticed fat cats – black, brown, brindled – licking their paws behind the graves or just strolling past Jay and me, insouciantly. As I walked through the cemetery, Yorkshire names like Pickles and Uttley, read off headstones, stuck in memory.

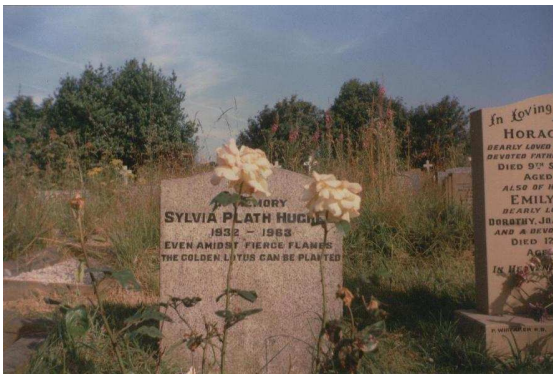


“It is comfortable, for a change, to mean so little.” wrote Plath in ‘Two Campers in Cloud Country’. Staring at her grave I was struck by the ordinariness of an extraordinary life; the biological drabness of death giving no indication of a talented, lived life; the biographical smut of Plath's life drowning the drummed up rhythms of a powerful poet wrestling with the bones and sinews of language.

At seventeen, as yet unaware of Plath, I'd published my first couple of poems in English under the pseudonym of *Mandy*, in an Indian magazine in English called Imprint. At nineteen, I heard someone my age recite ‘Mirror’ in an inter-collegiate elocution competition.

The poem sucked me in; trapped me in its cage of glass. Then, my uncle gifted me Crossing the Water. I read up ‘Daddy’ and ‘Lady Lazarus’. Plath's strong, sure voice kept ringing in my ear. In 1982, I went on to do a PhD on Plath. I took the poems apart, put them back again, and began to see, somewhat hazily, how she'd constructed them – the building blocks of her poetic Lego set being, images, metaphors, assonance and internal rhyme.

One of the first poems to catch my attention was the early poem ‘Metaphors’ (20<sup>th</sup> March 1959). For the student of poetry this is essential reading. Just as the pregnant woman exercises her imagination to compare herself with other large things, the novice poet may set herself tasks of inventing metaphors as mental exercises. Yet, Plath’s deceptively simple exercise is invested with an emotional force and power that all pregnant women know. “I’m a riddle ... “; I’m mysterious; I’m special ... And see, how in just nine lines, Plath is able to dramatize both the euphoria and the dread that every pregnant woman feels, when she cautions, [I’ve] “Boarded the train there’s no getting off.” This, then, is technique – the ability to use language to walk the tightrope over the chasm of feeling.



Of course, she’s been an influence ... but not the only one. Poetry in India has an over 3000 year old tradition. But, my education in English, helped me relate to Plath. She taught me how to dive into the trembling imaginative pool ... From her I have learnt how to mythologize and dramatize to create that artifice called “the poem”. What good poetry achieves is that poise between fact and fiction which is the essence of poetic language. Like Yeats’ “Things fall apart/ The centre cannot hold”, Sylvia Plath’s “Dying is an art like everything else” and “ ... the blood jet is poetry” are lines of immortal poetry. However, the bits of deadwood of Plath’s life, floating around in the murky underwater of her world, caution me - on how to avoid weeds that snag, to be able to break water for air ... Memory, hurt, pain, disappointment, are a limitless source of material for poetry; the joy of it all is in endeavouring to use this to create in language that “pure gold baby” that heals and transforms ...