

A Poem is a Mushroom

On Keeping the Strangeness in Your Work

SYLVIA PLATH

Tulips

The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.
Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in.
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.
I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff
Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.
Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.
The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,
They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps,
Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another,
So it is impossible to tell how many there are.

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.
They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep.
Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage——
My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
**My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.**

I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat
stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.
They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.
Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley
I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.
I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How free it is, you have no idea how free——
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.

**The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.**

Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
They are subtle : they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color,
A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.

Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.
The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me
Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,
And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.
The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.

Before they came the air was calm enough,
Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.
Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise.
Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river
Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.
They concentrate my attention, that was happy
Playing and resting without committing itself.

The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves.
**The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,**
And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country far away as health.

SHARON OLDS

The Connoisseuse of Slugs

When I was a connoisseuse of slugs
I would part the ivy leaves, and look for the
naked jelly of those greenish creatures,
translucent strangers glistening along
the stones, slowly, their gelatinous bodies
at my mercy. Made mostly of water, they would shrivel
to nothing if they were sprinkled with salt,
but I was not interested in that. What I liked
was to draw aside the ivy, breathe
the odor of the wall, and stand there in silence
until the slug forgot I was there
and sent its antennae up out of its
head, the glimmering umber horns
rising like telescopes, until finally the
sensitive knobs would pop out the ends,
unerring and intimate. Years later,
when I first saw a naked man,
I gasped with pleasure to see that quiet
mystery reenacted, the slow
elegant being coming out of hiding and
gleaming in the powdery air, eager and so
trusting you could weep.

LOUISE GLÜCK
Presque Isle

In every life, there's a moment or two.
In every life, a room somewhere, by the sea or in the mountains.

On the table, a dish of apricots. Pits in a white ashtray.

Like all images, these were the conditions of a pact:
on your cheek, tremor of sunlight,
my finger pressing your lips.
The walls blue-white; paint from the low bureau flaking a little.

That room must still exist, on the fourth floor,
with a small balcony overlooking the ocean.
A square white room, the top sheet pulled back over the edge of the bed.
It hasn't dissolved back into nothing, into reality.
Through the open window, sea air, smelling of iodine.

Early morning: a man calling a small boy back from the water.
That small boy—he would be twenty now.

Around your face, rushes of damp hair, streaked with auburn.
Muslin, flicker of silver. Heavy jar filled with white peonies.

DIANA KHOI NGUYEN

Reprise

A wild dog rose, unraveling the marvel of the field.
Most fragrant hum of all shed feathers.
Like some strange music: the world started up again around him.

What if he did not depart—but we who gathered around him? Echolocation, as in the still hour before
A world is drawn, the way the—rufous bird—may find the song of a plant—poke berry, sheep sorrel—
The brine maiden's silk cascade as she moves in the night toward milk or crickets. Within captivity
We make a space we can recognize, like a root displaced from its origin, growing elsewhere, growing
Rootless and what exactly does it mean to be free, to punish the living, and what is our crime—cognac,
Loneliness, unremarkable weather? Last night before you my features darkened from adrenaline, from that
Which darkens the flesh of prey. Never have I felt guilty about anything I eat. Unaccommodating—
As they say in restaurants and relationships—for the preference of others. We who gather shift to let
Each other pass to prevent the body from abrading further. His skin against the fabric where he died /
He tore himself free / the mist dusted oaks are fixed and unseeing until someone sees them—
And in the aftermath the brother simply—flourished. The tree simply—bloomed. The field dyed massicot,
Raw chrysanthemums hammering in mist until the mist turned snow with petals. For what purpose
Do I seek love? What is the end of the world like—are we pennants in a gale murmuring amongst ourselves—
Of mere being: cilia and sinew—tell me what we lost as collateral is also a gift.

ROSS GAY
Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude

Friends, will you bear with me today,
for I have awakened
from a dream in which a robin
made with its shabby wings a kind of veil
behind which it shimmied and stomped something from the south
of Spain, its breast aflare,
looking me dead in the eye
from the branch that grew into my window,
coochie-cooing my chin,
the bird shuffling its little talons left, then right,
while the leaves bristled
against the plaster wall, two of them drifting
onto my blanket while the bird
opened and closed its wings like a matador
giving up on murder,
jutting its beak, turning a circle,
and flashing, again,
the ruddy bombast of its breast
by which I knew upon waking
it was telling me
in no uncertain terms
to bellow forth the tubas and sousaphones,
the whole rusty brass band of gratitude
not quite dormant in my belly—
it said so in a human voice,
“Bellow forth”—
and who among us could ignore such odd
and precise counsel?

**Hear ye! hear ye! I am here
to holler that I have hauled tons—by which I
don't mean lots,**

I mean *tons* — of cowshit
and stood ankle deep in swales of maggots
swirling the spent beer grains
the brewery man was good enough to dump off
holding his nose, for they smell very bad,
but make the compost writhe giddy and lick its lips,
twirling dung with my pitchfork
again and again
with hundreds and hundreds of other people,
we dreamt an orchard this way,
frowning our brows,
and hauling our wheelbarrows,
and sweating through our shirts,
and two years later there was a party
at which trees were sunk into the well-fed earth,
one of which, a liberty apple, after being watered in
was tamped by a baby barefoot
with a bow hanging in her hair
biting her lip in her joyous work
and friends this is the realest place I know,
it makes me squirm like a worm I am so grateful,
you could ride your bike there
or roller skate or catch the bus
there is a fence and a gate twisted by hand,
there is a fig tree taller than you in Indiana,
it will make you gasp.
It might make you want to stay alive even, thank you;

and thank you
for not taking my pal when the engine
of his mind dragged him
to swig fistfuls of Xanax and a bottle or two of booze,
and thank you for taking my father
a few years after his own father went down thank you
mercy, mercy, thank you
for not smoking meth with your mother
oh thank you thank you
for leaving and for coming back,

and thank you for what inside my friends'
love bursts like a throng of roadside goldenrod
gleaming into the world,
likely hauling a shovel with her
like one named Aralee ought,
with hands big as a horse's,
and who, like one named Aralee ought,
will laugh time to time til the juice
runs from her nose; oh
thank you
for the way a small thing's wail makes
the milk or what once was milk
in us gather into horses
huckle-buckling across a field;

and thank you, friends, when last spring
the hyacinth bells rang
and the crocuses flaunted
their upturned skirts, and a quiet roved
the beehive which when I entered
were snugged two or three dead
fist-sized clutches of bees between the frames,
almost clinging to one another,
this one's tiny head pushed
into another's tiny wing,
one's forelegs resting on another's face,
the translucent paper of their wings fluttering
beneath my breath and when
a few dropped to the frames beneath:
honey; and after falling down to cry,
everything's glacial shine.

And thank *you*, too. And thanks
for the corduroy couch I have put you on.
Put your feet up. Here's a light blanket,
a pillow, dear one,
for I can feel this is going to be long.

I can't stop
my gratitude, which includes, dear reader,
you, for staying here with me,
for moving your lips just so as I speak.
Here is a cup of tea. I have spooned honey into it.

And thank you the tiny bee's shadow
perusing these words as I write them.
And the way my love talks quietly
when in the hive,
so quietly, in fact, you cannot hear her
but only notice barely her lips moving
in conversation. Thank you what does not scare her
in me, but makes her reach my way. Thank you the love
she is which hurts sometimes. And the time
she misremembered elephants
in one of my poems which, oh, here
they come, garlanded with morning glory and wisteria
blooms, trombones all the way down to the river.
Thank you the quiet
in which the river bends around the elephant's
solemn trunk, polishing stones, floating
on its gentle back
the flock of geese flying overhead.

And to the quick and gentle flocking
of men to the old lady falling down
on the corner of Fairmount and 18th, holding patiently
with the softest parts of their hands
her cane and purple hat,
gathering for her the contents of her purse
and touching her shoulder and elbow;
thank you the cockeyed court
on which in a half-court 3 vs. 3 we oldheads
made of some runny-nosed kids
a shambles, and the 61-year-old
after flipping a reverse lay-up off a back door cut
from my no-look pass to seal the game

ripped off his shirt and threw punches at the gods
and hollered at the kids to admire the pacemaker's scar
grinning across his chest; thank you
the glad accordion's wheeze
in the chest; thank you the bagpipes.

Thank you to the woman barefoot in a gaudy dress
for stopping her car in the middle of the road
and the tractor trailer behind her, and the van behind it,
whisking a turtle off the road.
Thank you god of gaudy.
Thank you paisley panties.
Thank you the organ up my dress.
Thank you the sheer dress you wore kneeling in my dream
at the creek's edge and the light
swimming through it. The koi kissing
halos into the glassy air.
The room in my mind with the blinds drawn
where we nearly injure each other
crawling into the shawl of the other's body.
Thank you for saying it plain:
fuck each other dumb.

And you, again, you, for the true kindness
it has been for you to remain awake
with me like this, nodding time to time
and making that noise which I take to mean
yes, or, I understand, or, please go on
but not too long, or, why are you spitting
so much, or, easy Tiger
hands to yourself. I am excitable.
I am sorry. I am grateful.
I just want us to be friends now, forever.
Take this bowl of blackberries from the garden.
The sun has made them warm.
I picked them just for you. I promise
I will try to stay on my side of the couch.

And thank you the baggie of dreadlocks I found in a drawer
while washing and folding the clothes of our murdered friend;
the photo in which his arm slung
around the sign to “the trail of silences”; thank you
the way before he died he held
his hands open to us; for coming back
in a waft of incense or in the shape of a boy
in another city looking
from between his mother’s legs,
or disappearing into the stacks after brushing by;
for moseying back in dreams where,
seeing us lost and scared
he put his hand on our shoulders
and pointed us to the temple across town;

and thank you to the man all night long
hosing a mist on his early-bloomed
peach tree so that the hard frost
not waste the crop, the ice
in his beard and the ghosts
lifting from him when the warming sun
told him *sleep now*; thank you
the ancestor who loved you
before she knew you
by smuggling seeds into her braid for the long
journey, who loved you
before he knew you by putting
a walnut tree in the ground, who loved you
before she knew you by not slaughtering
the land; thank you
who did not bulldoze the ancient grove
of dates and olives,
who sailed his keys into the ocean
and walked softly home; who did not fire, who did not
plunge the head into the toilet, who said *stop*,
don’t do that; who lifted some broken
someone up; who volunteered

the way a plant birthed of the reseeding plant
is called a *volunteer*, like the plum tree
that marched beside the raised bed
in my garden, like the arugula that marched
itself between the blueberries,
nary a bayonet, nary an army, nary a nation,
which usage of the word volunteer
familiar to gardeners the wide world
made my pal shout “Oh!” and dance
and plunge his knuckles
into the lush soil before gobbling two strawberries
and digging a song from his guitar
made of wood from a tree someone planted, thank you;

thank you zinnia, and gooseberry, rudbeckia
and pawpaw, Ashmead’s kernel, cockscomb
and scarlet runner, feverfew and lemonbalm;
thank you knitbone and sweetgrass and sunchoke
and false indigo whose petals stammered apart
by bumblebees good lord please give me a minute...
and moonglow and catkin and crookneck
and painted tongue and seedpod and johnny jump-up;
thank you what in us rackets glad
what gladrackets us;

and thank you, too, this knuckleheaded heart, this pelican heart,
this gap-toothed heart flinging open its gaudy maw
to the sky, oh clumsy, oh bumblefucked,
oh giddy, oh dumbstruck,
oh rickshaw, oh goat twisting
its head at me from my peach tree’s highest branch,
balanced impossibly gobbling the last fruit,
its tongue working like an engine,
a lone sweet drop tumbling by some miracle
into my mouth like the smell of someone I’ve loved;
heart like an elephant screaming
at the bones of its dead;
heart like the lady on the bus

dressed head to toe in gold, the sun
shivering her shiny boots, singing
Erykah Badu to herself
leaning her head against the window;

and thank you the way my father one time came back in a dream
by plucking the two cables beneath my chin
like a bass fiddle's strings
and played me until I woke singing,
no kidding, singing, smiling,
thank you, thank you,
stumbling into the garden where
the Juneberry's flowers had burst open
like the bells of French horns, the lily
my mother and I planted oozed into the air,
the bazillion ants labored in their earthen workshops
below, the collard greens waved in the wind
like the sails of ships, and the wasps
swam in the mint bloom's viscous swill;

and you, again you, for hanging tight, dear friend.
I know I can be long-winded sometimes.
I want so badly to rub the sponge of gratitude
over every last thing, including you, which, yes, awkward,
the suds in your ear and armpit, the little sparkling gems
slipping into your eye. Soon it will be over,

which is precisely what the child in my dream said,
holding my hand, pointing at the roiling sea and the sky
hurtling our way like so many buffalo,
who said *it's much worse than we think,*
and sooner; to whom I said
no duh child in my dreams, what do you think
this singing and shuddering is,
what this screaming and reaching and dancing
and crying is, other than loving
what every second goes away?
Goodbye, I mean to say.
And thank you. Every day.

QUOTES

Shklovsky argued that, ordinarily, our perception of the world is habitual, economical, automatic—too familiar, in fact. Habitualization casts a desensitizing pall over the world, depriving us of actual experience. 'And so life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war.' Art, according to Shklovsky, restores experience to us—by distorting and slowing down perception, by making the world strange again.

Daniel P. Gunn in *The Georgia Review*

There is an odd, stranger-at-the-funeral sensation in the face of art that is truthful but too familiar.

Charlie Baxter, "On Defamiliarization"

"Images became memorable when some crucial part of their meaning had been stripped from them... The burden of feeling is taken on by the objects... The objects, as a consequence, have a feeling of impatience and scale, as a fetish does."

Charlie Baxter, on Hopkins' idea of the widowed image

Moral self-education requires, as a preliminary step, the effacement of wrong imaginations, of assumptions taken for granted, of recognitions made dull and repetitive by our perceptual habits. In order to *see* things, we must first look at them as if they were meaningless—as seemingly meaningless as a riddle.

Carlo Ginzburg, "Making Things Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device"

I've read that when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, thousands of Siberians, suddenly deprived of state guarantees, ran to the woods to collect mushrooms. These are not the mushrooms I follow, but they make my point: the uncontrolled lives of mushrooms are a gift—and a guide—when the controlled world we thought we had fails... To live with precarity requires more than railing against those who put us here (although that seems useful too, and I'm not against it). We might look around to notice this strange new world, and we might stretch our imaginations to grasp its contours.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*

It is the story that makes the difference. It is the story that hid my humanity from me... The killer story.

The novel is a fundamentally unheroic kind of story. Of course the Hero has frequently taken it over, that being his imperial nature and uncontrollable impulse, to take everything over and run it while making stern decrees and laws to control his uncontrollable impulse to kill it. So the Hero has decreed through his mouthpieces the Lawgivers, first, that the proper shape of the narrative is that of an arrow or spear, starting *here* and going straight *there* and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead); second, that the central concern of narrative, including the novel, is conflict; and third, that the story isn't any good if he isn't in it.

I differ with all of this... That is why I like novels: instead of heroes they have people in them.

Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction"

Matsutake is loved as a marker of the autumn season. The smell evokes sadness in the loss of summer's easy riches, but it also calls up the sharp intensity and heightened sensibilities of autumn...

We are stuck with the problem of living despite economic and ecological ruination. Neither tales of progress nor of ruin tell us how to think about collaborative survival. It is time to pay attention to mushroom picking. Not that this will save us—but it might open our imaginations.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*

Being a famous poet is like being a famous mushroom.

Richard Howard