

# Cripples and Other Stories

## 1. Cripples and Other Stories

*Sylvia Plath (1932-1963)*

My doctor, the comedian  
I called you every time  
and made you laugh yourself  
when I wrote this silly rhyme...

*Each time I give lectures  
or gather in the grants  
you send me off to boarding school  
in training pants.*

God damn it, father-doctor,  
I'm really thirty-six.  
I see dead rats in the toilet.  
I'm one of the lunatics.

Disgusted, mother put me  
on the potty. She was good at this.  
My father was fat on scotch.  
It leaked from every orifice.

Oh the enemies of childhood,  
reeking of outhouses and shame!  
Yet you rock me in your arms  
and whisper my nickname.

Or else you hold my hand  
and teach me love too late.  
And that's the hand of the arm  
they tried to amputate.

Though I was almost seven  
I was an awful brat.

I put it in the Easy Wringer.  
It came out nice and flat.

I was an instant cripple  
from my finger to my shoulder.  
The laundress wept and swooned.  
My mother had to hold her.

I knew I was a cripple.  
Of course, I'd known it from the start.  
My father took the crowbar  
and broke the wringer's heart.

The surgeons shook their heads.  
They really didn't know--  
Would the cripple inside of me  
be a cripple that would show?

My father was a perfect man,  
clean and rich and fat.  
My mother was a brilliant thing.  
She was good at that.

You hold me in your arms.  
How strange that you're so tender!  
Child-woman that I am,  
you think that you can mend her.

As for the arm,  
unfortunately it grew.  
Though mother said a withered arm  
would put me in Who's Who.

For years she has described it.  
She sang it like a hymn.

By then she loved the shrunken thing,  
my little withered limb.

My father's cells clicked each night,  
intent on making money.  
And as for my cells, they brooded,  
little queens, on honey.

On boys too, as a matter of fact,  
and cigarettes and cars.  
Mother frowned at my wasted life.  
My father smoked cigars.

My cheeks blossomed with maggots.  
I picked at them like pearls.  
I covered them with pancake.  
I wound my hair in curls.

My father didn't know me  
but you kiss me in my fever.  
My mother knew me twice  
and then I had to leave her.

But those are just two stories  
and I have more to tell  
from the outhouse, the greenhouse  
where you draw me out of hell.

Father, I am thirty-six,  
yet I lie here in your crib.  
I'm getting born again, Adam,  
as you prod me with your rib.

*Voice: Mariano Iceta (Alan Lomax - World  
Library of Folk and Primitive Music)*

## 2. Send no Money

*Philip Larkin (1922-1985)*

Standing under the fobbed  
Impendent belly of Time  
Tell me the truth, I said,  
Teach me the way things go.  
All the other lads there  
Were itching to have a bash  
But I thought wanting unfair:  
It and finding out clash.

So he patted my head, booming Boy,  
There's no green in your eye:  
Sit here, and watch the hail  
Of occurrence clobber life out  
To a shape no one sees -  
Dare you look at that straight?  
Oh thank you, I said, Oh yes please,  
And sat down to wait.

Half life is over now,  
And I meet full face on dark mornings  
The bestial visor, bent in  
By the blows of what happened to happen.  
What does it prove? Sod all.  
In this way I spent youth,  
Tracing the trite untransferable  
Truss-advertisement, truth.

## Heads in the Women's Ward

*Philip Larkin*

On pillow after pillow lies  
The wild white hair and staring eyes;  
Jaws stand open; necks are stretched  
With every tendon sharply sketched;  
A bearded mouth talks silently  
To someone no one else can see.

Sixty years ago they smiled  
At lover, husband, first-born child.  
Smiles are for youth. For old age come  
Death's terror and delirium.

## 3. Chanson un Peu Naïve

*Louise Bogan (1897-1970)*

What body can be ploughed,  
Sown, and broken yearly?  
But she would not die, she vowed,  
But she has, nearly.

Sing, heart sing;  
Call and carol clearly.

And, since she could not die,  
Care would be a feather,  
A film over the eye  
Of two that lie together.

Fly, song, fly,  
Break your little tether.

So from strength concealed  
She makes her pretty boast:  
Plain is a furrow healed  
And she may love you most.  
Cry, song, cry,  
And hear your crying lost.

#### 4. The North Ship II

*Philip Larkin*

This was your place of birth, this daytime palace,  
This miracle of glass, whose every hall  
The light as music fills, and on your face  
Shines petal-soft; sunbeams are prodigal  
To show you pausing at a picture's edge  
To puzzle out the name, or with a hand  
Resting a second on a random page -

The clouds cast moving shadows on the land.

Are you prepared for what the night will bring?  
The stranger who will never show his face,  
But asks admittance; will you greet your doom  
As final; set him loaves and wine; knowing  
The game is finished when he plays his ace  
And overturn the table and go into the next room?

#### **Knowledge**

*Louise Bogan*

Now that I know  
How passion warms little  
Of flesh in the mould,  
And treasure is brittle,-

I'll lie here and learn  
How, over their ground  
Trees make a long shadow  
And a light sound.

*Clip: The Lark Ascending - Vaughan Williams*

#### 5. Ignorance

*Philip Larkin*

Strange to know nothing, never to be sure  
Of what is true or right or real,  
But forced to qualify or so I feel,  
Or Well, it does seem so:  
Someone must know.

Strange to be ignorant of the way things work:  
Their skill at finding what they need,  
Their sense of shape, and punctual spread of seed,  
And willingness to change;  
Yes, it is strange,

Even to wear such knowledge - for our flesh  
Surrounds us with its own decisions -  
And yet spend all our life on imprecisions,  
That when we start to die  
Have no idea why.

## 6. The Wifebeater

*Anne Sexton (1928-1974)*

There will be blood on the carpet tonight  
and blood in the gravy as well.  
The wifebeater is out,  
the childbeater is out  
eating soil and drinking bullets from a cup.  
He strides back and forth  
in front of my study window  
chewing little red pieces of my heart.  
His eyes flash like a birthday cake  
and he makes bread out of a rock.

Yesterday he was walking  
like a man in the world.  
He was upright and conservative  
But somehow evasive, somehow contagious.  
Yesterday he built me a country  
and laid out a shadow where I could sleep  
But today a coffin for the madonna and child,  
today two women in baby clothes will be hamburg.

With a tongue like a razor he will kiss,  
the mother, the child,  
and we three will color the stars black  
in memory of his mother  
who kept him chained to the food tree  
or turned him on and off like a water faucet  
and made women through all these hazy years  
the enemy with a heart of lies.

Tonight all the red dogs lie down in fear  
and the wife and daughter knit into each other  
until they are killed.

## 7. The Dead

*Sylvia Plath*

Revolving in oval loops of solar speed,  
Couched in cauls of clay as in holy robes,  
Dead men render love and war no heed,  
Lulled in the ample womb of the full-tilt globe.

No spiritual Caesars are these dead;  
They want no proud paternal kingdom come;  
And when at last they blunder into bed  
World-wrecked, they seek only oblivion.

Rolled round with goodly loam and cradled deep,  
These bone shanks will not wake immaculate  
To trumpet-topping dawn of doomstruck day :  
They loll forever in colossal sleep;  
Nor can God's stern, shocked angels cry them up  
From their fond, final, infamous decay.

## 8. To Be Sung on the Water

*Louise Bogan*

Beautiful, my delight,  
Pass, as we pass the wave,  
Pass, as the mottled night  
Leaves what it cannot save,  
Scattering dark and bright.

Beautiful, pass and be  
Less than the guiltless shade  
To which our vows were said;  
Less than the sound of the oar  
To which our vows were made, -  
Less than the sound of its blade  
Dipping the stream once more.

## 9. Daddy

*Sylvia Plath*

You do not do, you do not do  
Any more, black shoe  
In which I have lived like a foot  
For thirty years, poor and white,  
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.  
You died before I had time--  
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,  
Ghastly statue with one gray toe  
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic  
Where it pours bean green over blue  
In the waters off the beautiful Nauset.  
I used to pray to recover you.  
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town  
Scraped flat by the roller  
Of wars, wars, wars.  
But the name of the town is common.  
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.  
So I never could tell where you  
Put your foot, your root,  
I never could talk to you.  
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.  
*Ich, ich, ich, ich,*  
I could hardly speak.  
I thought every German was you.  
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine,  
Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.  
I began to talk like a Jew.  
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna  
Are not very pure or true.  
With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck  
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack  
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of *you*,  
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.  
And your neat mustache  
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.  
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You -

Not God but a swastika  
So black no sky could squeak through.  
Every woman adores a Fascist,  
The boot in the face, the brute  
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,  
In the picture I have of you,  
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot  
But no less a devil for that, no not  
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.  
I was ten when they buried you.  
At twenty I tried to die  
And get back, back, back to you.  
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,  
And they stuck me together with glue.  
And then I knew what to do.  
I made a model of you,  
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.  
And I said I do, I do.  
So daddy, I'm finally through.  
The black telephone's off at the root,  
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two--  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year,  
Seven years, if you want to know.  
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart  
And the villagers never liked you.  
They are dancing and stamping on you.  
They always *knew* it was you.  
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

*Voice: Sylvia Plath*

#### 10. The Wise

*Countee Cullen (1903-1946)*

Dead men are wisest, for they know  
How far the roots of flowers go,  
How long a seed must rot to grow.

Dead men alone bear frost and rain  
On throbless heart and heatless brain,  
And feel no stir of joy or pain.

Dead men alone are satiate;  
They sleep and dream and have no weight,  
To curb their rest, of love or hate.

Strange, men should flee their company,  
Or think me strange who long to be  
Wrapped in their cool immunity.

*Clip: Leadbelly*



Thilde Meer

#### 11. Death & Co.

*Sylvia Plath*

Two, of course there are two.  
It seems perfectly natural now--  
The one who never looks up, whose eyes are lidded  
And balled, like Blake's.  
Who exhibits

The birthmarks that are his trademark--  
The scald scar of water,  
The nude  
Verdigris of the condor.  
I am red meat. His beak

Claps sidewise: I am not his yet.  
He tells me how badly I photograph.  
He tells me how sweet



Liez G

The babies look in their hospital  
Icebox, a simple  
Fringe at the neck  
Then the flutings of their Ionian  
Death-gowns.  
Then two little feet.  
He does not smile or smoke.

The other does that  
His hair long and plausible  
Bastard  
Masturbating a glitter  
He wants to be loved.

I do not stir.  
The frost makes a flower,  
The dew makes a star,  
The dead bell,  
The dead bell.

Somebody's done for.

### **Child**

*Sylvia Plath*

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.  
I want to fill it with color and ducks,  
The zoo of the new

Whose name you meditate --  
April snowdrop, Indian pipe,  
Little

Stalk without wrinkle,  
Pool in which images  
Should be grand and classical

Not this troublous  
Wringing of hands, this dark  
Ceiling without a star.

All music, instruments and programming: Desprez  
Vocals: Desprez, Thilde Meer, Liez G  
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