

VISITATIONS

I.

I saw Sylvia Plath playing
on the front porch of her mother's house in the suburbs
she saw me first as I passed by on the sidewalk
I glimpsed some startled peripheral movement &
turned as she raised her head in a jerk to stare at me
she was wearing a cardigan & a printed jumper
her hair was dusty-colored & long down her back
she was playing with paper dolls & a cardboard shoebox
she was about twelve years old
there was something unexpected & blurred about her
Aurelia called her inside to do her chemistry homework
she shut the screen door carefully, tightly behind her, no slam
the clapboard of the house was dead white & glowed
rose under the eaves with unsettling October fire
the colors burned on my face & hands
I looked away chastened
something nascent in
her eyes

II.

I went home for Christmas one year with my college girlfriend
she lived in Maine with an Irish setter & a short mother
& a father who was
John Berryman, I recognized him right away even before
it started to snow & we couldn't leave the grey Victorian
house for a week
first of all were the unreasonable beard & the British tics
then he drank volubly, beautifully, from cut-glass decanters
he read whole freakish cantos of his newest songs aloud to us faking
enthralment (them automatic, me disbelieving)
after all these years he still couldn't hold down
a job but he had an amazing library even for an unemployed
university professor with permanent writer's
block
we ate the clove-studded
ham in the study with the books slowly turning soft &
green & the boxes stacked
teetering up to the high moulding filled with drafts of his own
unfinished book

his hands were excited & shaking, his wife had to use his silverware for him
after dinner he wanted to show me
photographs from his days at Cambridge &
to discuss *As You Like It* & *What You Will* but when
he wanted to touch on other matters I excused myself & went upstairs to bed
in the attic Beryl was already asleep under a feather bed covered in moonlight
outside Berryman was walking the setter in the snow
it barked once, a short yelp-almost-croon
under the covers Beryl's feet were like ice

III.

I have never met
Elizabeth Bishop
but my friend Nicola
gets a postcard
from her sometimes
Bish says to tell
everybody that
she & Lota are back
together again
they are living
in Portugal now
& they like it
there just fine

IV.

Walking along the south bank of the Charles River at night I
spotted Anne Sexton, she didn't see
me & wouldn't have known who I was anyway, she
was walking the other way of course. Her
hands were jammed deep in her
trouser pockets, she smelled of cigarettes
& something I couldn't identify--a wet, lucid, chemical smell,
it was bitterly dark. I couldn't see
her face but even thinned
her beauty staggered
me, even in the darkness her eyes were
green. She wasn't talking
to herself or thinking aloud, in fact she walked right

past me before I even really noticed or
knew who she was & I suddenly wanted to tell
her something but
she seemed quieter than I'd remembered
her heart was beating less shallowly, a little less ravenously
I realized it was I who wanted so badly to confess to her
& by then she had gone quite far
already in the distance

V.

Finally I sat one afternoon in the TV room
of the psych unit, writing in my journal.
It had gotten late, people came & left, an incessant
fishing show went unwatched on the tube. The light changed
to near dark. I heard a soft slapping sound & looked up. Robert Lowell
sat in an armchair, playing cards on the coffee table. The thick lenses of his glasses flashed
as he deliberated, took up the suits one by one
slowly. His hair was cut close
to the skull & the muscles in his face worked as he studied
the situation. Everything about him was calm & infinitely civilised, even
his cotton hospital gown, the naugahyde chair in which he sat.
No longer slumped upright in a taxi, the framed picture wrapped in brown paper.
I was dazzled surreptitiously from behind my notebook, as he
lost another methodic game or two & then with the same ease
& mindfulness he neatened up the pile of cards, stretched,
leaned back in his carpet slippers, and
slept. A sleep, perhaps, of peace.