

Deborah Ritchie

Sylvia and Me

At a dinner party in the seventies,
I sat in a lecturer's plush maroon dining room,
amongst poets in olive turtle-necks and rusty cabled knits.
Perched on a velvet-cushioned chair
I drank Portuguese wine from a jewelled goblet,
under a mentholated smoke haze,
feeling stupid with my brown ponytail,
my floral dress, my sensible student sandals.

Things got worse after the duck terrine,
after the apricot chicken,
during the chocolate mousse
(or maybe the port and stilton),
when talk turned to some poet
who'd stuck her head in a gas oven, but
left a nursery snack of milk and bread
for her two young children.
I sat mute, embarrassed,

longing to know what these writers knew,
roll words around my mouth,
string them as pearls across paper,
lean forward, speak about dead poets
instead of educational theory.

The next day I marched to the library,
snatched up a dog-eared paperback about a bell jar,
poems about a father like mine (and other stuff)
and a bright photograph in a fat book —
a big-boned, jaw-heavy, almost pretty pageboy blonde
with a broad red smile and a dark heart.

I read her, read her, read her bleeding
interior world, her cold dark eye
magnifying tulips,
mirrors and motherhood,
hospitals and dead daddies.

Alone,

hunched in the warm library
as an icy wind circled,
as rain hurled onto the college lawn,
cried down the glass,
I read her, read her,
muttered her rhythms,
felt her breath on the page,
swallowed her black confessions, until she
grabbed me by the throat, told me,
'Write!'

On my shelves now,
she's a Magritte head wrapped in linen,
a ghost floating from yellowed poems,
smiling out of photographs,
drifting from bell jars, letters, diaries,
other people's musings.
She still whispers to me,
'Write, write, write,'
forty years after that uncomfortable night
in a maroon dining room,
when someone spoke her name.