

Anushka Joshi

The Two Kinds of Women in The World *On Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, and Assia Wevill.*

They both died domestic deaths,
The homewrecker and the housewife.
Both with their heads on the cool
Grate of an oven.
A fuck you to the fifties,
That era of aprons like straitjackets,
Aprons that gleamed white
Like carnivorous teeth, that swallowed up
The lives of women,
Ate them as they cooked.
The mistress worked as an ad-writer, came up
With the slogan “Mr. Kipling’s
Exceedingly good cakes,”
The wife made lemon meringue pies,
Would they have killed themselves
If they didn’t know how to turn
On an oven in the first place?

There are two kinds of mothers in the world,
The Sylvias who switch on the gas
But fold a thin blanket under
The kitchen doorsill
So that it won’t poison their children in the next room.
And the Assias, who do not put a blanket under the doorsill,

Who take their children along with them,
Like stray punctuations on their epitaphs.
In their own ways both protected
Their children,
The first from death,
The second from life.
The man with whom
They had lain under that blanket
Or under the absence of that blanket,
Was the poet who broke down women
Like he broke lines,
Who turned to poetry
When he gave up hunting but never
Quite lost the habit of slaughter.
The kind who leaves a woman
With the tumorous instinct for death
Growing in her gut,
Faster than a fetus.
The kind who, even if
He considered suicide, would
Abandon the thought,
Abandon the house,
Abandon the children there,
Go instead for a walk
Or to make a call,
Forgetting to switch off
The gas at all.

The Marriage

Scott and Zelda once spent an hour
In the revolving door of a hotel-
Just another jazz age prank.
Like jumping into the fountain at Union Square.
Later the accusations
The sanatoriums
The burning to death
And the death by drowning
In endless glasses
That reflected too well.
For now the mouth of misery
Was still muzzled.
Can you imagine them
Turning and turning
Echoing the earth in its orbit
Unable to learn but always returning
To where they had been a second ago,
As if retracing their own steps,
Two detectives investigating their own footprints
As if in rehearsal for regret.

The Stare

Yes we all know the story
Of the hero Perseus who
Decapitated the monster Medusa,
She of the hair like snakes, she
Whose one look turned people into
Stone, that one.

But did you know the preface
To that story?
How Medusa was raped
By the sea king in the temple
Of Athena, the goddess of wisdom.
And how the goddess of wisdom
In all her wisdom
Punished Medusa, not Poseidon,
Replacing skin with scales,
Replacing hair with serpents
And replacing her gaze
Which had once melted
Men to lust and love,
To a stare that turned them to stone.
She lived alone on the island
And when she looked at people
They became calcified in their
Callousness, stone
Monuments
To apathy, unable
To feel or care
For this woman,
This monster.

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Perseus killed her by
Holding up a mirror to her,
So that she saw herself,
After years of suspecting it,
As others saw her:
Filthy, evil, terrifying.
And she turned herself into stone.
He cut off her head
When she had resigned herself to rock,
Surrendered herself to stillness,
A cement scream, a marble ache,
A slab of pain waiting to be carved
Into oblivion.
He placed the sword on her neck, which had been
Bowed in shame all these years.
The waves that she looked upon in her last glance
Became cliffs in mid-air,
Drops of her blood left pebbles on the beach.
She died, but her stare lived on,
Sowing seeds of stone,
Passing on
The inheritance of indifference.
Tell me, who is the monster
In this?