

Anne Stevenson: On "Ariel"

The title "Ariel," like "Medusa," carries multiple meanings; it refers to the ethereal spirit of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, but also significantly, Ariel happened to be the name of the (rather elderly, ponderous) horse on which Sylvia was learning to ride. Most potent of all, Ariel is the spirit of poetry, the romantic embodiment of inspiration or genius. In the canon of Sylvia's work, "Ariel" is supreme, a quintessential statement of all that had meaning for her. In it she rehearses the whole spectrum of her color imagery, moving from "Stasis in darkness" into the "substanceless blue" of sky and distance as horse and rider, "God's lioness," rush as one through clutching hostilities:

Nigger-eye

Berries cast dark

Hooks----

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,

Shadows.

"Something else," too, "Hauls me through air": the speaker, increasingly ethereal, unpeels, like the speaker in "Fever 103°," shedding "Dead hands, dead stringencies" as woman-horse becomes woman-arrow-dew, destroying herself in her unremitting drive toward resurrection. At the end, the "child's cry" that "Melts in the wall" is that of a real child, just as the "the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning" is the real sun rising as she writes. As always - and this is one of the sources of Plath's extraordinary power - every image is grounded in some thing, depicted as if with verbal paint.

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