

Sandra Gilbert: On "About the Bee Poems"

. . . . if having babies (and writing poems) was a way of escaping from the dark house of daddy's shoe, it was also, paradoxically, a frightening re-encounter with daddy: daddy alive, and daddy dead.

Nowhere is that re-vision of daddy more strikingly expressed than in the bee-keeping sequence in *Ariel*. Otto Plath was a distinguished entomologist, author of many papers on insect life, including (significantly) one on "A Muscid Larva of the San Francisco Bay Region Which Sucks the Blood of Nestling Birds." But his most important work was a book called *Bumblebees and Their Ways*, an extraordinarily genial account of the lives of bee colonies, which describes in passing the meadows, the nest-boxes, the abandoned cellars inhabited by bumblebees, and the "delicious honey" they make, but concentrates mostly on the sometimes sinister but always charismatic power and fertility of the queens. The induction of the colony into the bee box, stings, wintering, "the upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her"--all these are described at length by Otto Plath, and his daughter must have read his descriptions with intense attention. Her father's red-leather thesaurus, we're told, was always with her. Why not also *Bumblebees and Their Ways*? Considering all this, and considering also the points made by De Beauvoir, it's almost too fictionally neat to be true that Plath told an interviewer after the birth of her son, Nicholas, that "our local midwife has taught me to keep bees." Yet it is true.

Plath's bee-keeping, at least as it is re-presented in the *Ariel* sequence, appears to have been a way of coming to terms with her own female position in the cycle of the species. When the colony is put into the box by "the villagers," she is put into "a fashionable white straw Italian hat" (the sort of hat the fifty-ninth bear tears up, the sort of hat they would have given us at *Mademoiselle*) and led "to the shorn grove, the circle of hives." Here she can only imagine the "upflight" of the deadly queen--for she (both the queen and the poet), the poem implies, has been put into a box along with the rest of the colony. "Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished, why am I cold," she asks. But the question is merely rhetorical, for the box is hers, hers and (we learn in the next poem) perhaps her baby's. "I would say it was the coffin of a midget," she decides there, "or a square baby / Were there not such a din in it." And the rest of the piece expresses the double, interrelated anxieties of poetry and pregnancy: "The box is locked, it is dangerous ... I have to live with it . . . I can't keep away from it . . . I have simply ordered a box of maniacs ... They can be sent back./ They can die, I need feed them nothing. I am the owner . . ." culminating in a hopeful resolution: "The box is only temporary."

But when the box is opened, in the third poem, the bees escape like furious wishes, attacking "the great scapegoat," the father whose "efforts" were "a rain/ Tugging the world to fruit." And here, most hopefully, the poet, mother of bees and babies, tries to dissociate herself from the self-annihilating stings her box has produced. "They thought death was worth it, but I / Have a self to recover, a queen." And "Now she is flying / More terrible than she ever was, red / Scar in the sky, red comet / Over the engine that killed her-- / The mausoleum, the waxhouse."

Alas, her flight is terrible because it is not only an escape, it is a death trip. Released from

confinement, the fertile and queenly poet must nevertheless catapult back into her dead past, forward into her dead future. . . .

[T]he great poems of Ariel often catapult their protagonist or their speaker out of a stultifying enclosure into the violent freedom of the sky. "Now she is flying," Plath writes in "Stings," perhaps the best of the bee-keeping poems

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