

## The Truth the Dead Know

For My Mother, Born March 1902, Died March 1959  
and My Father, Born February 1900, Died June 1959

Gone, I say and walk from church,  
refusing the stiff procession to the grave,  
letting the dead ride alone in the hearse.  
It is June. I am tired of being brave.

We drive to the Cape. I cultivate  
myself where the sun gutters from the sky,  
where the sea swings in like an iron gate  
and we touch. In another country people die.

My darling, the wind falls in like stones  
from the whitehearted water and when we touch  
we enter touch entirely. No one's alone.  
Men kill for this, or for as much.

And what of the dead? They lie without shoes  
in their stone boats. They are more like stone  
than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse  
to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone.

1962

## The Starry Night

That does not keep me from having a terrible  
need of—shall I say the word—religion.

Then I go out at night to paint the stars.

—Vincent Van Gogh<sup>1</sup>  
in a letter to his brother

The town does not exist  
except where one black-haired tree slips  
up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.  
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.  
Oh starry starry night! This is how  
I want to die.

It moves. They are all alive.  
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons  
to push children, like a god, from its eye.  
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.  
Oh starry starry night! This is how  
I want to die:

1. Dutch painter (1853–1890) who in his thirties committed suicide. This letter to his brother—his only confidant—was written in September 1888. At the time he was painting *Starry Night on the Rhône*.

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into that rushing beast of the night,  
 sucked up by that great dragon, to split  
 from my life with no flag, 15  
 no belly,  
 no cry.

1962

## Sylvia's Death

for Sylvia Plath<sup>1</sup>

Oh Sylvia, Sylvia,  
 with a dead box of stones and spoons,  
  
 with two children, two meteors  
 wandering loose in the tiny playroom,  
  
 with your mouth into the sheet, 5  
 into the roofbeam, into the dumb prayer,  
  
 (Sylvia, Sylvia,  
 where did you go  
 after you wrote me  
 from Devonshire 10  
 about raising potatoes  
 and keeping bees?)  
  
 what did you stand by,  
 just how did you lie down into?  
  
 Thief!— 15  
 how did you crawl into,  
  
 crawl down alone  
 into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,  
  
 the death we said we both outgrew,  
 the one we wore on our skinny breasts, 20  
  
 the one we talked of so often each time  
 we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston,  
  
 the death that talked of analysts and cures,  
 the death that talked like brides with plots,

1. American poet (1932–1963) and friend of Sexton's who committed suicide. Plath was living in England with her children, having separated from her husband, the poet Ted Hughes.