

# Drawing Pictures With Words

POETS ARE MASTERS OF IMAGE, DRAWING VIVID SCENES IN AS LITTLE AS TWO WORDS. LET ONE OF THE MOST INVENTIVE POETS OF ALL TIME, **SYLVIA PLATH**, SHOW YOU HOW TO CREATE A GREAT POEM OF YOUR OWN.



## Who was Sylvia Plath?

Sylvia Plath published her first poem at age 8, and even her earliest poems demonstrate her clear, unique voice and mastery of language. An unusual use of syntax, a muscular consonance of verse, and an exquisite agony of tone are the hallmarks of Plath's work. As she matured, the poet honed her craft to technical perfection and took on more daring personal subjects.

Plath, born outside Boston, Massachusetts, on October 27, 1932, went to Smith College and then Cambridge University, where she was a Fulbright scholar. There, she met her husband, the English poet Ted Hughes, with whom she had two children. During her short lifetime, Plath produced one novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), and three volumes of poetry. Both her life and her work were characterized by a sense of exquisitely tormented, but ominous, passion; she committed suicide at the age of 30, in 1963.

## How to write a poem with a master.

>>Read the excerpt once through without reading the notes.

>>Read it a second time, with the notes.

>>Think about how you would write a similar passage.

>>Use the notes and writing prompts at the end to get started.

1. Right away, Plath grabs her reader with an unusual image. She takes the familiar, sentimental idea of love and places it in a surprising mechanical context.

### Morning Song

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.

The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry  
Took its place among the elements.

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.

In a drafty museum, your nakedness

Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

I'm no more your mother

Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow  
Effacement of the wind's hand.

All night your moth-breath

Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:  
A far sea moves in my ear.

2. The comparison of the baby to a statue is both unexpected and slightly foreboding. And placing a baby in a museum, instead of a nursery, for example, amplifies the wish for a baby to not grow and change, but to remain fixed in time.

3. The phrase "moth-breath" describes an infant's breathing vividly in just two words. The verb "flickers" adds depth to the image.

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4. "Stumble" is a lively verb, which takes on even greater specificity when followed by the adjectives "cow-heavy and floral."

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral  
In my Victorian nightgown.

Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try  
Your handful of notes;

The clear vowels rise like balloons.

Sylvia Plath, 1961

5. This simile works because Plath reinforces it with the verb "opens" and the adjective "clean."

6. The final image describes sound in visual terms. Plath ends the poem leaving the reader with a sense of motion.

## WRITE A POEM IN 6 EASY STEPS

**Note #1:** Think of your first stanza as the opening scene of a play. Where does it take place? What's happening? Who's there? Set the scene for action to unfold. Plan on following Plath's structure of six stanzas of three lines each.

**Note #2.** Your second stanza should use new images to describe the scene already presented.

**Note #3.** Your third stanza should move to a new action. What else is happening?

**Notes #4 & 5.** To create a simile or metaphor, all you have to do is make a comparison.

**Note #6.** Notice how the poem moves from the first line to the last, flowing toward a conclusion. Write a final three-line stanza that brings your scene to a close.

**Congratulations!** You have a poem.

**>>Your Turn!** Write another poem on the same topic. This time write it in "free verse,"—creating line breaks and stanzas without any formal structure. Compare the two poems.