



The T S Eliot Prize 2009

Reading Groups:

One Secret Thing

Sharon Olds was born in 1942 in San Francisco. After graduating from Stanford University she moved east to earn a PhD in English from Columbia University. Her first collection of poems, *Satan Says* (1980), received the inaugural San Francisco Poetry Center Award. Her following collection, *The Dead & the Living* (1983), received the Lamont Poetry Selection in 1983 and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her other collections include *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems* (2004), *The Unswept Room* (2002), *Blood, Tin, Straw* (1999), *The Gold Cell* (1997), *The Wellspring* (1995), and *The Father* (1992), which was shortlisted for the T S Eliot Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She currently teaches creative writing at New York University. *One Secret Thing* (Jonathan Cape), which was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation, explores the themes of war, family relationships and the death of her mother.



6. The Signal

When they brought his body back, they told
his wife how he'd died:
the general thought they had taken the beach,
and sent in his last reserves. In the smokescreen,
the boats moved toward shore. Her husband
was the first man in the first boat
to move through the smoke and see the sand
dark with bodies, the tanks burning,
the guns thrown down, the landing craft
wrecked and floored with blood. In the path of the
bullets and shells from the shore, her husband had
put on a pair of white gloves
and turned his back on the enemy,
motioning to the boats behind him
to turn back. After everyone else
on his boat was dead
he continued to signal, then he, too,
was killed, but the other boats had seen him
and turned back. They gave his wife the medal,
and she buried him, and at night floated through
a wall of smoke, and saw him at a distance
standing in a boat, facing her,
the gloves blazing on his hands as he motioned her back.

Paterfamilias

In the evenings, during the cocktail hour,
my mother's new husband would sometimes inspect
the troops. Your mother has the best damn fanny
in the house, he would say to my sister and me – in our
teens, then twenties, thirties, forties. Turn
around! he'd cry out, Turn around! We wouldn't
turn around, and he'd say, Your mother has the nicest little
ass in the house. And let's look at those legs,
he'd shout, and she'd flash her gams. Your mother
has the only decent legs in the house,
he'd growl. And when I'd pass him next,
he'd bear-hug me, as if to say
No hard feelings, and hit me hard
on the rear, and laugh very loud, and his eyes seemed to
shine as I otherwise never saw them shine,
like eyes of devils and fascists in horror
comic books. Then he'd freshen his Scotch, and just
top hers up, a little, and then
he'd show us his backwards-curved, decurved
Hohenzollern thumb – Go on,
touch it! Touch it! They were people who almost
did not know any better, who, once
they found each other, were happy, and felt,
for the first time, as if they belonged
on earth – maybe owned it, and every creature on it.

Satin Maroon *

In the narrow office on Shattuck and Ashby,
the woman pulled open a file drawer,
low tumble of wheels on rails,
and took out the ashes, in a satin maroon
plastic box, and set them on the desk.
Next of kin, I signed, and lifted them
up, and in the car I clasped her
tight, my arms seemed encircled around
the container twice, three times. Then I held her
up to my ear, and tilted her,
to hear whatever I could hear of her,
shirr of wisdom-teeth, of kiln bed
grit, dry mince like the crab-claws that she would
shuck to give us the brine-meat – gravel
rustle. The minister opened the chapel,
we set her where she'd always sat,
we put a rose beside her like
a petticoat. Then there she was,
on the sequoia pew, a magenta carton of
mortar-and-pestled bones. That it should
come to this. I kissed the smooth
surface, under which her silver
constellations turned, and then it was
time to leave her, overnight,
as we had planned, but it was hard to leave her
by herself, but suddenly, I saw
she had always been alone – fatherless,
mismothered – and not without her own
valiant spirit. And I wished she could descant
all night, as if this were she, this rattle of
salty campfire rubble from inside her,
and I left her there, I relinquished her
to the strangeness, the still home, of matter.

* The ashes in the poem are the poet's mother.

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