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Sylvia Plath

Complete Works

DELPHI POETS SERIES

D E L P H I   P O E T S   S E R I E S

**Sylvia Plath**

(1932-1963)



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*The Delphi Classics Catalogue*

# Sylvia Plath

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Version 1

DELPHI POETS SERIES

**Sylvia Plath**



*By Delphi Classics, 2023*

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## NOTE



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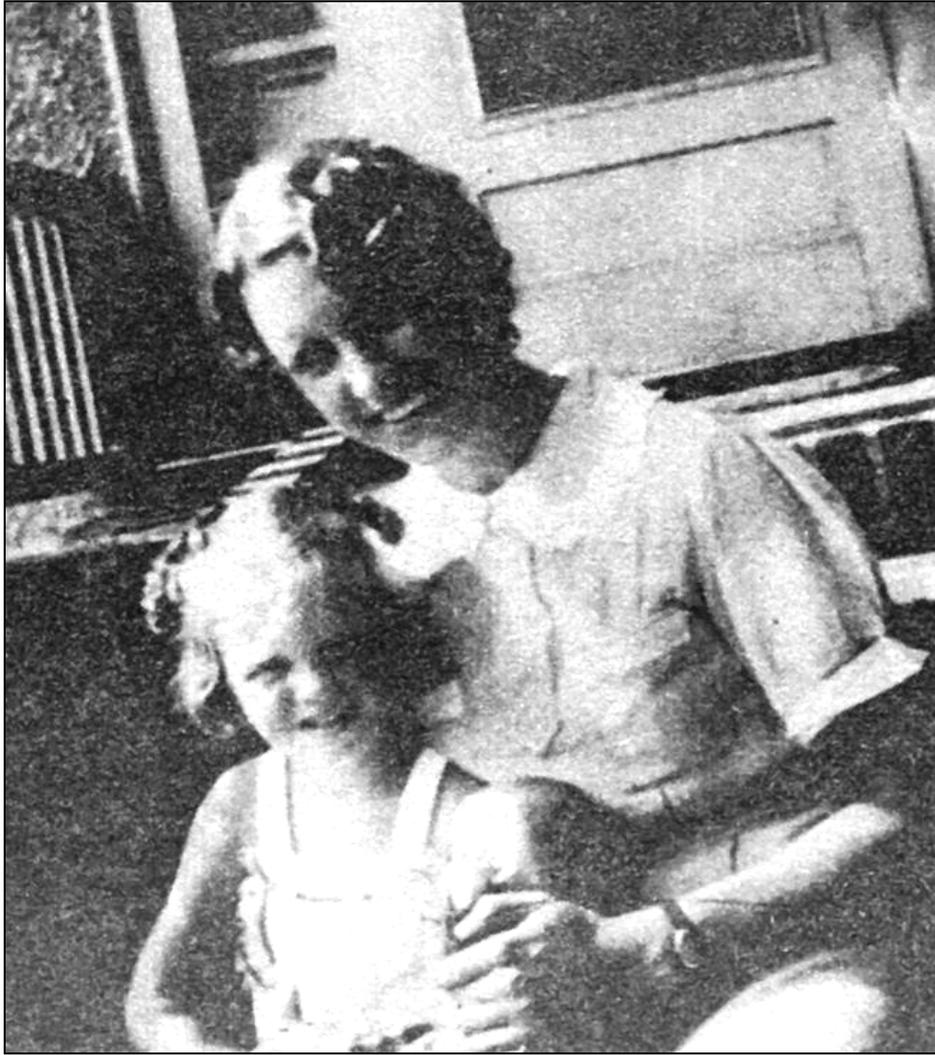
## The Life and Poetry of Sylvia Plath



*Downtown Boston, Massachusetts, 1932 — the year Sylvia Plath was born in the city.*



*The poet's father, Otto Emil Plath (1885-1940) was a German-American writer, academic and biologist. He worked as a professor of biology and German language at Boston University and as an entomologist, with a specific knowledge of bumblebees.*



*Sylvia and her mother, 1937. Aurelia Schober Plath (1906-1994) was a second-generation American of Austrian descent.*

## Brief Introduction: Sylvia Plath



Sylvia Plath was born on 27 October 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts. Her mother, Aurelia Schober Plath was a second-generation American of Austrian descent. Her father, Otto Plath (1885–1940), was an entomologist and professor of biology at Boston University, who was from Grabow, Germany. In her early years she lived in Winthrop, Massachusetts. Her first published poem appeared in the Boston Herald's children's section when she was eight years old. She then published multiple poems in regional magazines and newspapers. In addition to writing, she showed early promise as an artist, winning an award for her paintings from the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards in 1947.

Her father died in November 1940 of complications following the amputation of a foot due to untreated diabetes. Plath experienced a loss of faith after her father's death and remained ambivalent about religion throughout her life. A little later, her mother moved the children to Wellesley, Massachusetts. Plath attended Bradford Senior High School (now Wellesley High School), graduating in 1950, when she had her first national publication in the *Christian Science Monitor*.

Next, Plath attended Smith College, a private women's liberal arts college in Massachusetts, where she excelled academically. After her third year, she was awarded a coveted position as a guest editor at *Mademoiselle* magazine, when she spent a month in New York City. The experience was not what she had hoped for and many of the events that took place during that summer were later used as inspiration for *The Bell Jar*.

Plath was furious at not being at a meeting the editor had arranged with the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, whom she greatly admired. She waited around a few bars for two days, hoping to meet Thomas, but he was already on his way home. A few weeks later, she slashed her legs to see if she had enough 'courage' to kill herself. She had not been accepted into a Harvard writing seminar, leading to bouts of depression that was treated with ECT (Electroconvulsive therapy) — a treatment that involves sending an electric current through the brain. She made her first medically documented suicide attempt on 24 August 1953, when she crawled under the front porch of the family home and took a large dose of her mother's sleeping pills.

Plath spent the next six months in psychiatric care, receiving more electric and insulin shock treatment under the care of Ruth Beuscher. Her stay at McLean Hospital and her Smith Scholarship were paid for by the noted author Olive Higgins Prouty, who was also recovering from a mental breakdown. Plath appeared to make a good recovery and returned to college. In June 1955 she graduated from Smith with an A.B., *summa cum laude*. She obtained a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Newnham College, one of the two women-only colleges of the University of Cambridge in England, where she continued actively writing poetry and publishing her work in the student newspaper *Varsity*. At Newnham, she studied with Dorothea Krook, whom she held in high regard.

After reading some of his verses and being impressed, Plath met Ted Hughes, a rugged Yorkshire poet, at a Cambridge party in February 1956. They then saw a great deal of each other and Ted moved back to Cambridge. They were married a few months later. The relationship had developed from both poets writing poems to each other. Plath described her husband as "a singer, story-teller, lion and world-wanderer

with a voice like the thunder of God". They spent their honeymoon in Paris and Benidorm and Plath returned to Newnham in October to begin her second year. During this time, they both became interested in astrology and the supernatural, occupying their time with Ouija boards and other mystic activities.

The following year the couple moved to America and Plath taught at Smith College, her alma mater. She found it difficult to teach and have enough time and energy to write, and in the middle of 1958, they decided to move on to Boston. Plath took a job as a receptionist in the psychiatric unit of Massachusetts General Hospital and in the evening she attended creative writing seminars given by poet Robert Lowell, who encouraged her to write "from her experience". From this time on, Plath began to consider herself as a more serious, focused poet and short story writer. She resumed psychoanalytic treatment in December, working again with Ruth Beuscher.

In late 1959 Plath and Hughes travelled across Canada and the United States, staying at the Yaddo artist colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, before the couple decided to move back to England. In December 1959 they lived in a London flat at Chalcot Square, near the Primrose Hill area of Regent's Park. A daughter, Frieda, was born on 1 April 1960, and in October, Plath published her first collection of poetry *The Colossus and Other Poems*. It was to be the only volume of her poetry to be printed in her lifetime. It received largely positive UK reviews, highlighting Plath's voice as new and strong, individual and American in tone. Al Alvarez, the prominent journalist, poet and literary critic for *The Observer*, called the posthumous re-release of the collection, following the success of *Ariel*, a "major literary event", likening her work as having "an admirable no-nonsense air...the language is bare but vivid and precise." Seamus Heaney later wrote of *The Colossus*: "On every page, a poet is serving notice that she has earned her credentials and knows her trade."

In February 1961, Plath's second pregnancy ended in miscarriage and several of her poems, including *Parliament Hill Fields*, concern this tragic event. In a letter to her therapist, Plath wrote that Hughes had beat her two days before the miscarriage. In August she finished her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, which appeared under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas". Now regarded as a classic of twentieth century literature, at the time of its first publication, it was met with critical indifference. A semi-autobiographical work, with the names of places and people changed, it is often regarded as a roman à clef, as the protagonist's descent into mental illness echoes Plath's own experiences.

Immediately after the publication of her first and only novel, Plath and her family moved to Court Green in the small market town of North Tawton. A second child, Nicholas, was born in January 1962. During this time, Plath and Hughes began to keep bees, which would become the subject of many of Plath's poems. In August 1961, they rented their flat at Chalcot Square to Assia (née Gutmann) Wevill and David Wevill. Hughes was immediately struck with the beautiful Assia, as she was with him. Assia was a German Jewish woman, who had escaped the Nazis at the beginning of World War II and emigrated to Palestine, via Italy, before coming to England. In June 1962, Plath had a car accident which she described as one of many suicide attempts. The following month, Plath discovered Hughes had been having an affair with Assia and the couple separated.

Plath experienced a great burst of creativity in the autumn of 1962, writing most of the poems on which her reputation now rests, including at least 26 of the poems of her celebrated posthumous collection *Ariel*. In December, she returned alone to London with the children and rented on a five-year lease a flat at 23 Fitzroy Road, only a few

streets from the Chalcot Square flat. She had been drawn to the fact that the Irish poet W. B. Yeats had formerly lived in the house, which she regarded as a good omen.

The winter of 1962-1963 was one of the coldest in a hundred years, as the pipes froze, the children — now two years old and nine months — were often sick, and the house had no telephone. Plath's depression returned, but she managed to complete the manuscript of her second poetry collection. Before her death, Plath tried several times to take her own life. In January 1963, she spoke with John Horder, her general practitioner and a close friend, who lived nearby. She described the current depressive episode she was experiencing, which had been ongoing for six months. While for most of the time she had been able to continue working, her depression worsened and was marked by constant agitation, suicidal thoughts and inability to cope with daily life. She struggled with insomnia, taking medication at night to induce sleep, and frequently waking up early. She ate little and lost 9kg in weight. However, she continued to take care of her physical appearance and did not outwardly speak of feeling guilty or unworthy. Horder prescribed her an anti-depressant a few days before her suicide. Knowing she was at risk with two young children, he says he visited her daily and made strenuous efforts to have her admitted to a hospital; when that failed, he arranged for a live-in nurse.

The nurse was due to arrive at nine on the morning of 11 February 1963 to help Plath with the care of her children. Upon arrival at the flat, she eventually gained access with the help of a workman. They discovered Plath dead with her head in the oven, having sealed the rooms between the kitchen and her sleeping children with tape, towels and cloths. She was 30 years old. An inquest was held on February 15 and gave a ruling of suicide as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning. Hughes was devastated and in a letter to an old friend, he wrote, "That's the end of my life. The rest is posthumous." His lover Assia Wevill also committed suicide, using a gas stove, six years later. Plath's gravestone bears the inscription that Hughes chose for her: "Even amidst fierce flames the golden lotus can be planted."

The posthumous 1965 publication of *Ariel* led to Plath's rise to fame. The poems mark a departure from her earlier work into a more personal arena. Many of Plath's later poems deal with the "domestic surreal" in which she takes everyday elements of life and twists the images, giving them an almost nightmarish quality. Many of her best verses starkly express a sense of alienation and self-destruction closely tied to her personal experiences and, by extension, the situation of women in mid-twentieth-century America. Robert Lowell's poetry may have played a part in this shift, as she cited Lowell's 1959 book *Life Studies* as a significant influence in an interview prior to her death. The impact of *Ariel* was dramatic in literary circles, with its dark and autobiographical descriptions of mental illness in poems such as *Tulips*, *Daddy* and *Lady Lazarus*. *Morning Song* is regarded as one of her finest poems on freedom of expression of an artist. Plath's work is often held within the genre of confessional poetry and its style compared to other contemporaries, such as Lowell and W.D. Snodgrass. Plath's close friend Al Alvarez, who wrote about her extensively, said of her later work:

"Plath's case is complicated by the fact that, in her mature work, she deliberately used the details of her everyday life as raw material for her art. A casual visitor or unexpected telephone call, a cut, a bruise, a kitchen bowl, a candlestick — everything became usable, charged with meaning, transformed. Her poems are full of references and images that seem impenetrable at this distance, but which could mostly be explained in footnotes by a scholar with full access to the details of her life."

*Ariel* received a review in *The New York Times* that praised its “relentless honesty,” “sophistication of the use of rhyme,” and “bitter force,” and *Poetry* magazine described, “a pervasive impatience, a positive urgency to the poems.” Plath quickly became one of the most popular American poets and the appearance of small collections of previously unpublished poems, including *Crossing the Water* (1971) and *Winter Trees* (1971), was welcomed by critics and the public alike. *The Collected Poems* appeared in 1981 and received the 1982 Pulitzer Prize for poetry, making Plath the first to receive the honour posthumously.



*Plath's high school graduation photo, 1950*



*Olive Higgins Prouty (1882-1974) was an American novelist and poet, best known for her 1923 novel 'Stella Dallas' and her pioneering consideration of psychotherapy in her 1941 novel 'Now, Voyager'. She supported Plath financially in the wake of her unsuccessful 1953 suicide attempt.*



*Plath typing in her backyard, Wellesley, 1954*



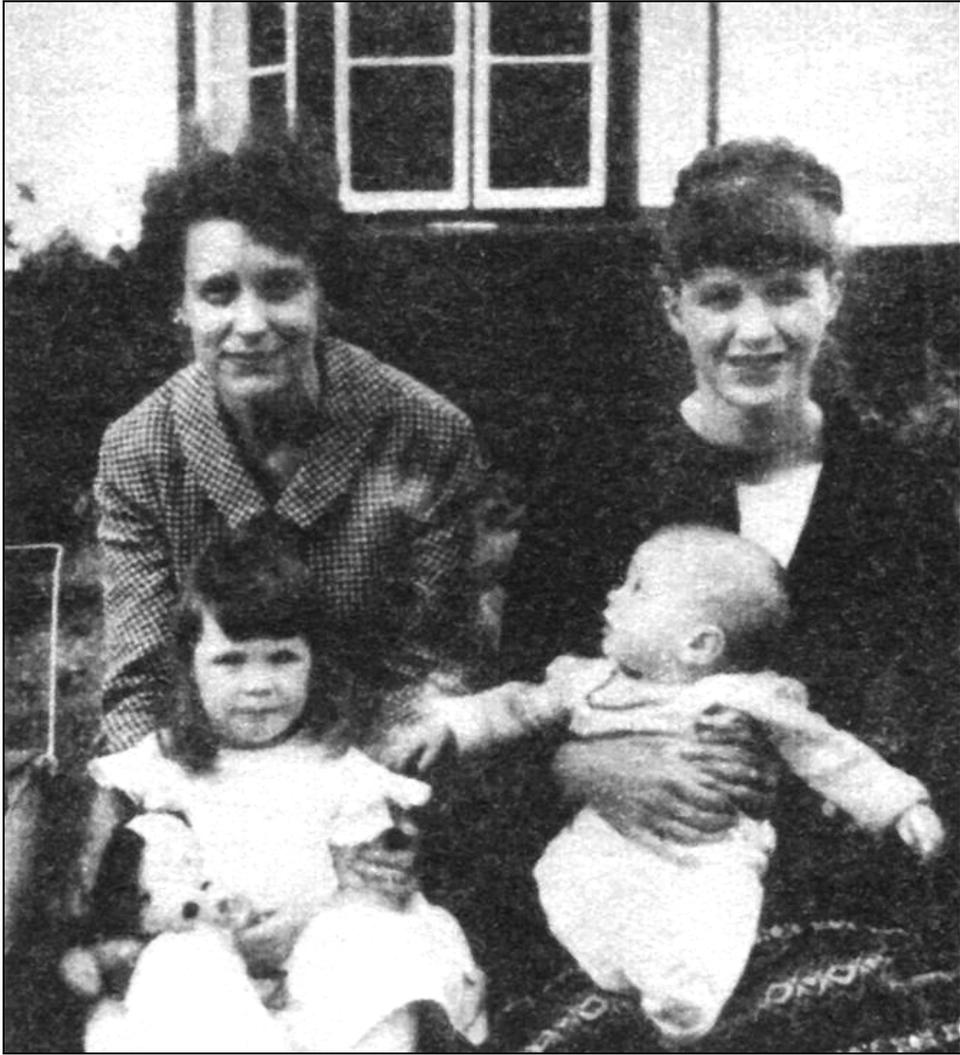
*Plath and her husband Ted Hughes on their honeymoon, Paris, 1956*



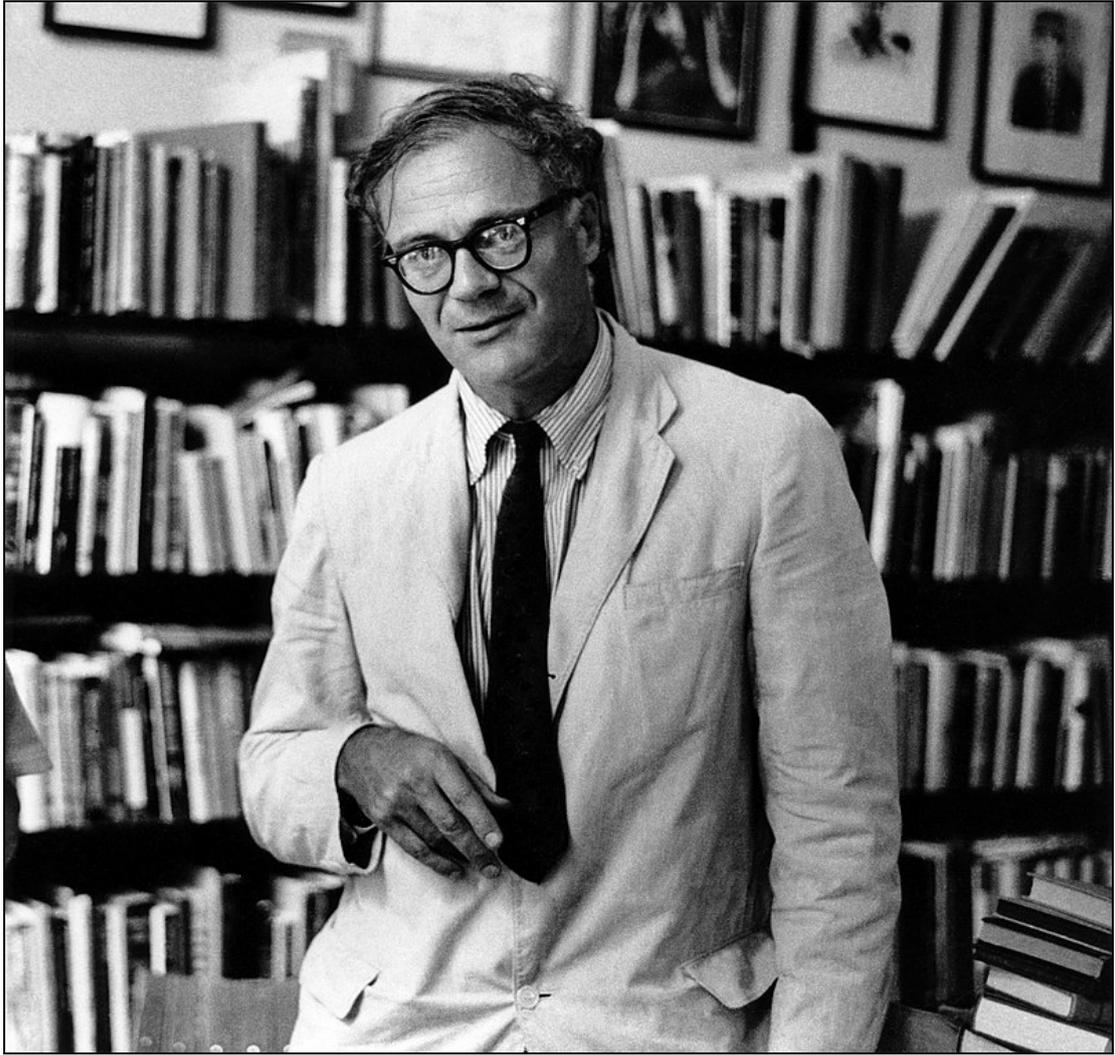
*Plath and Hughes later in their marriage*



*Assia Wevill*



*Plath, her two children and her mother in Devon, 1962*



*Robert Lowell (1917-1977) was a noted American poet that inspired Plath*



*Plath, close to the time of her suicide*



*John Horder, an English physician that worked as a general practitioner. He was involved in the treatment of Plath's depression in the last three months of her life. Much later, he was deeply involved in the Defeat Depression campaign, organised by the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the RCGP.*

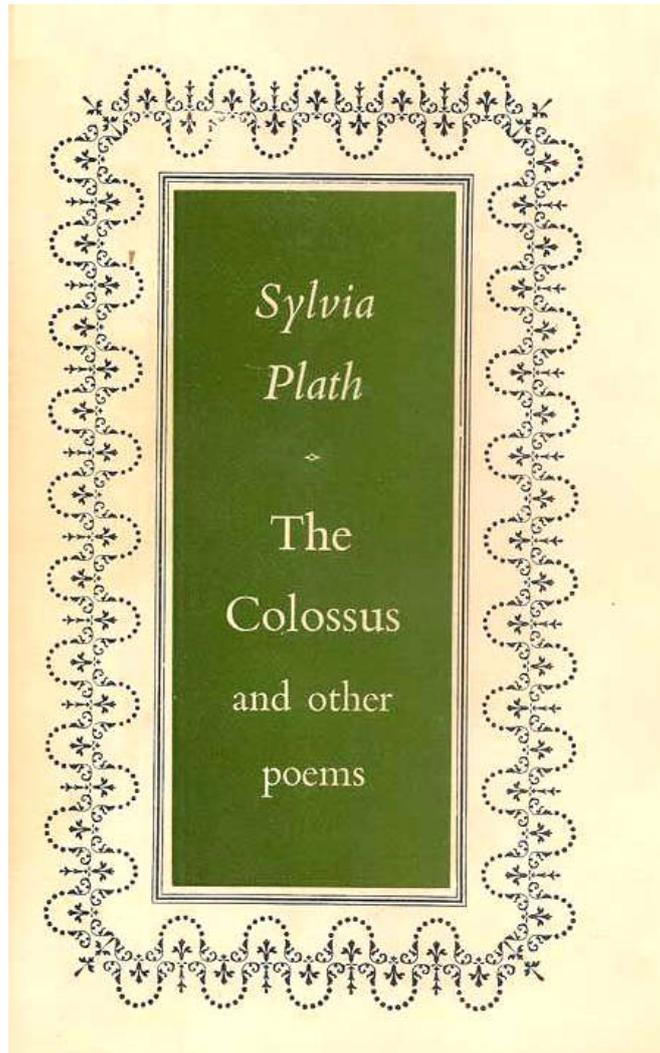
## The Colossus and Other Poems (1960)



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SCULPTOR

## POEM FOR A BIRTHDAY



*The first edition*



*Ted Hughes as a young man*

FOR  
TED

## THE MANOR GARDEN



The fountains are dry and the roses over.  
License of death. Your day approaches.  
The pears fatten like little buddhas.  
A blue mist is dragging the lake.

You move through the era of fishes,  
The smug centuries of the pig —  
Head, toe and finger  
Come clear of the shadow. History

Nourishes these broken flutings,  
These crowns of acanthus,  
And the crow settles her garments.  
You inherit white heather, a bee's wing,

Two suicides, the family wolves,  
Hours of blankness. Some hard stars  
Already yellow the heavens.  
The spider on its own string

Crosses the lake. The worms  
Quit their usual habitations.  
The small birds converge, converge  
With their gifts to a difficult borning.

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*End of Sample*