

**Landscape and Lament:  
Anti-consolation in the Poetry of Vivienne Plumb**

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The traditional elegist often turned to landscape as a form of consolation. However, Vivienne Plumb makes use of landscape as an anti-consolatory gesture, one that also permits her to avoid sentimentality and cliché. Her poetry acknowledges her awareness of the traditions of the pastoral form as she writes about the loss of her son in poems that pierce without self-pity.

The tradition of the elegy begins with the ancient pastoral poems of the Greek poet Theocritus (born 310 B.C.), and his successors Moschus, Bion and Virgil. These poets set their laments in idealized rural scenes, placing loss within the regenerative cycle of nature and using, as Peter Sacks notes, “pastoral contextualization...the myth of the vegetation deity...movement from grief to consolation, and traditional images of resurrection”<sup>1</sup>. Images of the sun, of flowers, birds, trees and meadows, and the cattle and sheep the shepherds cared for, placed the speaker in a landscape of the natural world where birth and death fall into an eternal cycle. Images of the landscape could provide consolation by showing either that life regenerates after death or that the natural world shows sympathetic mourning, by the fading of plants and the lowing of the animals.

But poets in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries began to avoid these traditional consolatory tropes and, in fact, to refuse consolation in favour of lament. For example, writing in the genre of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century child elegists, or the “poetics of maternal bereavement”<sup>2</sup>, women poets such as Emily Dickinson and Sarah Piatt began to make inroads into deconstructing the pastoral elegies and refusing consolation as something that could be obtained or expressed by landscape. They did not move in their elegies to any form of resurrection and hope. Instead “this consolation is withheld by the speakers’ determination to acknowledge the absolute severing that death accomplishes”<sup>3</sup>.

It was the horror of World War One, though, that finally put paid to the innocent use of an idyllic scene as consolation for mourning. In the poem “1914”, Wilfred Owen wrote “now the Winter of the world/ with perishing great darkness closes in”<sup>4</sup> and by the end of the Great War in 1918, as critic Sandra M. Gilbert says in her book on modern grieving, the “death knell of the consoling and cathartic elegy” had sounded<sup>5</sup>. “The torn-up terrain of No Man’s Land,” says Gilbert, “came to represent the fragmentation, if not the outright destruction, of the inspiring ceremonies of mourning epitomized by the pastoral elegy”<sup>6</sup>.

Plumb, whose elegies I am examining in this essay, writes in both anti-consolatory traditions. Like the poets of “maternal bereavement”, she refuses consolation in the poems she writes about her son Willie Plumb in the collections *Nefarious – poems and parables* (Wellington: Headworx Publishers, 2004), *Salamanca* (Wellington: Headworx Publishers, 2004), and *Scarab- a poetic documentary* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2005); a record and reflection on the ten year journey she and her son experienced, from his diagnosis of cancer as a teenager to his death at 27. Plumb describes her grief and records the landscape around her in a way that echoes the strategies of the World War One (WW1) poets, such as Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who turned the traditional pastoral consolatory images of nature—sunlight, flowers, grazing herds, rural scenes—to non-consolatory ends.

Plumb’s elegies for her son also recall the refusal of consolation that emerged from the child elegists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who, when faced with the loss of their own or their family’s children, rebelled against the constraints society placed on the ways in which they could express their grief. Poets such as Elizabeth Drew Stoddard, Dickinson and Piatt effected “a conscious and deliberately wrought rupture with the tradition high sentimentalism represented”<sup>7</sup>. In her poem “Her Blindness in Grief”, Piatt suggests death overshadows any consoling hope of traditional natural tropes:

Poor grave of mine, so strange, so small,  
You cover all, you cover all!  
The flush of every flower, the dew,  
The bird’s old song, the heart’s old trust,  
The star’s fair light, the darkness, too,  
Are hidden in your heavy dust.<sup>8</sup>

In this poem the pastoral tropes of a peaceful landscape—flowers, birds, starlight—are of no consolation, as they are “covered” by the child’s grave.

The domestic ideology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century idealized womanhood and marriage, and when their children died, women were encouraged to believe this was God's will. Their child had escaped a harsh life on earth for heaven, where they now acted as a spiritual guide for their mothers, "an infant-prophet whose closeness to death makes him peculiarly able to preach to adults".<sup>9</sup> Early 19<sup>th</sup> century sentimental poet Lydia Huntley Sigourney's "To a Dying Infant" is a poem typical of this genre. In this poem Sigourney portrays, as Elizabeth Petrino says, "a speaker who encourages her child to ascend to heaven so that he can avoid earthly pain and temptation".<sup>10</sup> The child in the poem ascends in a peaceful and reassuring scene with images of the pastoral elegy – "Go to thy dreamless bed,/ Gentle and undefiled...Fresh roses in thy hand,/Buds on thy pillow laid".<sup>11</sup> Here the freshness of the flowers and the newness of the unopened buds lend a purity to the description of the dying child to help the mother accept that death is a better option for the child than life on earth.

It is exactly this pious acceptance of death that poets such as Piatt began to rebel against. In her Introduction to *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*, the critic Paula Bennett discusses the importance of Piatt's poetry in the evolution of American poetry. "Piatt's absolute refusal to shed her grief and accept God's will radically differentiates her child elegies from those of her peers".<sup>12</sup> The child elegists began to turn from the traditional consolatory sentiments and imagery that supported acquiescence in a patriarchal society and subservience to God. "In protest (...) she makes her art the image of emptiness and darkness, the nothingness, that actually define her life" says Bennett.<sup>13</sup> Piatt's poem about one of her children, "Her Blindness in Grief", is an example.

The grief is bitter, Let me be.  
He lies beneath that lonesome tree.  
I've heard the fierce rain beating there.  
Night covers it with cold moonshine.  
Despair can only be despair.  
God has his will. I have not mine.<sup>14</sup>

The poem ends here with a dark that cannot be comforted by moonlight--it is a "cold" comfort. The "lonesome" tree offers no consolation either and the rain that beats on the earth where the child is buried is a violent image, relating more to the violence of unassuaged grief than peaceful acceptance of the death.

Several years after Piatt's last poems were published, the Great War broke out. Like the child elegists, the war poets began to use anti-consolatory imagery, in their case to describe the effects of war and to protest against the ideology that supported war. The soldier poets writing about their time at the front in WW1 articulated "a new historical reality of untold psychic trauma"<sup>15</sup> and the loss of belief in a consoling landscape can be traced through their poems as the war developed.

In his Introduction to *Wilfred Owen: War Poems and Others* Dominic Hibberd outlines how the war poets at first wrote in the tradition of the early pastoral elegists. The poems written at the beginning of the war, he said, conveyed a "romantic image of war and the glory of dying for England".<sup>16</sup> But once soldiers had fought in the trenches and experienced the devastation of slaughter in 'no-man's land,' the terrain that lay between the opposing front lines, they discarded a romanticised version of the landscape in favour of conveying the realities the soldiers experienced. As a result, the effect of landscape images shifted from consolatory to anti-consolatory. Examples from three poets, Rupert Brooke, Owen and Sassoon, show how this movement to anti-consolation of landscape developed.

Brooke died on his way to Gallipoli and so didn't get to experience the horrors of trench warfare. His poems written before he left London still had a romantic cast to them, as shown by the patriotic mood of the "The Soldier" and the well-known lines:

If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is forever England. There shall be  
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;<sup>17</sup>

Though Brooke was not to know it, those "foreign fields" of "rich earth" in his poem did not become a place of restful graves but a torn up earth full of corpses, a "charnel house" of mud.<sup>18</sup> The landscape in his poems reflected that idyllic scenery of the traditional pastoral elegies. In his poem "IV: The Dead" – he writes:

...Frost... leaves a white  
Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,  
A width, a shining peace, under the night.<sup>19</sup>

In this poem, frost is linked with feelings of peace, and the words “glory” and “radiance” offer consolation for the sacrifice of young soldiers. Owen, though, in his poem “Exposure”, finds no consolation in the “shining peace” of the frost. Instead of a “white unbroken glory” the landscape becomes a frightening place where burying parties come across frozen corpses:

To-night, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,  
Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.  
The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,  
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,  
But nothing happens.<sup>20</sup>

Here, the frozen eyes of the soldiers’ comrades become part of the landscape. Instead of consoling, this landscape reveals its threat of death. Indeed, earlier in the poem, Owen called bullets “Less deathly than the air that shudders black with snow”. Brooke’s “rich earth”, which should have been, as Sandra M Gilbert says, “a consoling home for the living and a regenerative grave for the dead”<sup>21</sup> instead became a life-sapping mud mixed with the rotting remains of former friends and soldiers. Sassoon describes this earth in “Counter-Attack”:

The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs  
High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps  
And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,  
Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;<sup>22</sup>

“Green” in this poem is the green of gangrene not of nature. “In such an antipastoral deathscape,” says Gilbert, “what might in traditional pastoral elegy have portended rebirth instead signals dissolution”.<sup>23</sup>

Plumb’s elegies recall the anti-consolatory strategies of both groups. In writing about the death of her own child, she, like Piatt and Dickinson, refuses the comforts of landscape and heaven. In addition, in often drawing comparisons between war and her son’s ten year battle with illness, her elegies recall the anti-consolatory use of landscape by Owen and other WW1 poets. War is the backdrop of her poem “Avalanche”, which places the speaker at first observing war victims in a deathly winter landscape on TV.

There was the war on TV,  
the snow, the people lying on plastic  
in the snow, death arriving  
with his suitcase full of tools,  
the delivery out of this world  
offers such a dazzling  
variety...<sup>24</sup>

The early pastoral elegies placed shepherds in a landscape of growth, such as Theocritus has in “The Dioscuri” with “plane-trees, leafy cypresses; and fragrant flowers, thick in the meadows”.<sup>25</sup> Landscapes like this offer plenty of what Sacks called the “traditional images of resurrection”.<sup>26</sup> In Plumb’s poem she records people “lying on plastic in the snow”. The landscape she records is one of threat, not consolation. The plastic stands for such a flimsy man-made barrier against the snow. This cold whiteness then becomes fused with the memory of her son in hospital. Not only are the people on TV dying of the cold, she remembers how the flesh of her hands, as she sat in the hospital room, was “as cold as sheet ice”.

Plumb’s use of the unforgiving cold of snow to suggest death echoes Owen in “Exposure”. The snow in the war on TV, “forever this white tableau” in Plumb’s poem, “becomes forged / with the recollections of your last / oncology visit”, bringing us to the heart of the poem: whatever war is being fought out there, in other continents and in smaller violent skirmishes, there is a war against cancer being waged within her child. Plumb brings the metaphor of cold and snow, which link to death, into the hospital room:

At the doctor’s I sat with  
my tiny hands held in my lap the way  
I’d been taught, *two lovebirds*,  
but the flesh was as cold as sheet ice  
I was up to my elbows  
in frostbite and snow. (13-18)

Despite Plumb sitting in “the way / I’d been taught”, as if acquiescence will help, the sense of powerlessness is there in the size of her “tiny” hands, the foreboding cold that forestalls action or rescue. There is nothing she can do to prevent impending death.

She proposes threat, rather than consolation, elsewhere in the landscape as well: “death can happen overnight, may / be (...)under the trees in a dark / wood, against a hedge”. As the poem progresses, the speaker’s situation becomes more dangerous. Not only are she and her son at the hospital metaphorically out in the snow, they are now threatened by avalanche. As they sit in the hospital waiting room she imagines her son and herself reading instructions for how to survive:

...but you and I are crouched  
together in the snow reading the  
avalanche instructions;  
they are torn and dirty, tacked to  
the cobwebbed wall of some  
wild and woody mountain hut: (34-39)

A string of instructions “tacked to / the cobwebbed wall / of some wild and woody mountain hut” is no defence for the danger they face. That Plumb uses a pastoral reference here, “wild and woody”, echoing Theocritus’s “wild woods on the hill” in “The Dioscuri”, with the poetic technique of alliteration, underscores that not only does life not provide instructions on a way to survive this grief, poetry also, with its tropes of pastoral consolation, cannot provide relief.

We must read the instructions  
we must read the instructions  
but there are no instructions.  
I believe there are no instructions. (44-47)

The repetition of “We must read the instructions” builds tension and fear. But there is no relief. The poem ends with the sardonic resignation “I believe there are no instructions”. There is no language in this landscape that can help, Plumb implies, or in any way console.

In the midst of grief, in the early elegies, the sun was a sign of hope. After the darkness of night, the sun always rises, and so it stands as “the principal elegiac emblem of immortality”.<sup>27</sup> Theocritus, when comparing the loveliness of Helen’s face in “Helen’s Bridal Hymn” describes the rising dawn as “fine, as clear as spring when winter ends”.<sup>28</sup> Here’s John Milton in “Lycidas”:

So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed,  
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,

And tricks his beams, and with new-spangled ore,  
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky. <sup>29</sup>

Here the sun has sunk low, but like Lycidas, rises again in glory, its warmth and brightness “a familiar image of desired renewal in elegies.” <sup>30</sup> By contrast, there is no warmth to be found in the sun in Piatt’s poem “The Funeral of a Doll”: “The very sunshine seemed to wear / Some thought of death, caught in its gold / That made it waver wan and cold”. <sup>31</sup> Similarly, Owen, in “Mental Cases” turns this trope of the sun and dawn into an image of carnage. “Sunlight seems a blood-smear, night comes blood-black:/ Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh”. <sup>32</sup>As Ramazani says, ‘Owen turns an emblem of consolatory promise into an emblem of inconsolable grief’. <sup>33</sup>

Plumb echoes these anti-consolatory uses of the sun in “Cement,” in which “The sun sets, / a final crimson bloodstain”. <sup>34</sup> In “The Gold,” “the sky is tinged with that lonely / lurid yellow” <sup>35</sup>, in “Broken Wings,” “The sky / slashes open, a quick surgical cut” <sup>36</sup>, and in “Nefarious,” “The sun begins to set.../ a chill comes up off the cold hard earth” <sup>37</sup>. There is nothing in these lines that shines with any hope of regeneration. There is only the wound, and that cold, hard earth, more figurative of a grave than of a rising. Plumb’s metaphors and imagery—e.g. the words “blood-stain” and “slash”—are violent. Her use of the sun trope in this way acknowledges that she is in a battlefield.

Flowers, too, were a traditional component of ancient elegies. Not only did they furnish the idyllic pastoral scene with “beauty and transcendence but also mortality”.<sup>38</sup> A landscape could sympathetically mourn with the speaker and flowers were used to show this sympathetic mourning. Mosschus, in his “Lament for Bion” commands “now roses, deepen your red in mourning” <sup>39</sup> and nature obeys: “At your death/ trees threw down their fruit, flowers/all wasted away”.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century child elegies, a child was compared to withering or fading flowers, “alluding to its short life, its delicate health, and its smeared beauty”. <sup>40</sup> In Sigourney’s poem “To a Dying Infant” she urges the child with fresh roses to “Haste from this fearful land, / Where flowers so quickly fade”. <sup>41</sup>A consolatory scene awaits the child in Louisa May Alcott’s “Our Little Ghost” with “Endless fields of dandelions, / Brooks, and birds, and butterflies”. <sup>42</sup> In her rebellion against the ideology of motherhood in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, Dickinson rejected these formulaic expressions of grief and, as Petrino says, “uses in her child elegies the resources of a predominantly feminine genre in order to undercut a range of

popular pieties, not only about death, but also about materialism, women's roles, and the power and function of consolatory verse.”<sup>43</sup>

Dickinson focuses on the reality of the child's suffering, not on the peace waiting in an afterlife. In “Poems, 11,” she writes:

Far from Love the Heavenly Father  
Leads the Chosen Child,  
Oftener through Realm of Briar  
Than the meadow mild.<sup>44</sup>

The Realm of Briar metaphorically suggests a painful journey towards death rather than a pleasurable one suggested by the meadow.

In “The Send-Off”, Owen, too, uses flowers to suggest not life and consolation but pain and death. To farewell their men, women gave them flowers, and now, as the new soldiers line a train, “Their breasts were stuck all white with wreath and spray/ As men's are, dead”.<sup>45</sup> The use of the word ‘wreath,’ evoking the funeral parlour and formal arrangements of flowers for the dead, undercuts the innocence of the women's offerings of fresh flowers. This line brings to mind an image in Bion's “Lament for Adonis”, where the speaker orders “Strew him with garlands, with flowers,/then leave them to die”.<sup>46</sup> Adonis is already dead when he is strewn with flowers and this deathly use of flowers is eerily echoed in “The Send-Off”, foretelling the death of the soldiers, a use of nature in the poem that is in no way consolatory.

Plumb also sees no consoling acts of flowers mourning as her son battles cancer. In the poem “White Throat”, she walks out to the clothesline on a wintry day and sees the arum lily in her garden.

The air is saturated  
2.5 points of rain overnight.  
That icon of the funeral parlour,  
the arum, raises its chill white throat  
to guzzle more moisture.<sup>47</sup>

This is a menacing image; the verb “guzzle” intimates that this funeral parlour flower is greedy, that it will slake its thirst. The adjectives chill and white evoke coldness and emptiness. Yet by acknowledging the image of the flower she is using as “that icon of the funeral parlour”, Plumb forbids sentimentality. She states what the flower stands for. Instead of a consoling image, the flower becomes a threatening one. There is no death mentioned in the poem. It appears to be a description of a garden in winter.

The firmament is grey wool.  
No more ladybirds,  
no sun over the yardarm,  
wake late, sleep early,  
winter is upon us.  
The shadow is upon us. (10-15)

Winter is evoked in the details. Yet the last line “The shadow is upon us” holds the clue to the future. It echoes Owen’s line in “1914” about the approach of war and death -“now the Winter of the world / with perishing great darkness closes in”.<sup>48</sup> Her son’s illness is not alluded to in this poem but the “icon of the funeral parlour” is a warning of what is to come.

In “The Some Unusual Subfossil Bird Remains” Plumb subverts the trope of the fading flowers. In this poem the flowers do not suggest a sympathetic nature in mourning with the mother; rather, they are greedy for life.

We stare at some gross pink  
and yellow flowers, their stems  
are thick and tuberous,  
and each fleshy petal  
appears obscene and over-fed.<sup>49</sup>

Not only are these flowers not wasting away, to show mourning, or figures of beauty, to show transcendence, their colours and health are cruel reminders of a life that is thriving. In Gilbert’s discussions on the Great War and the (anti) pastoral elegy, she calls Owen “wilfully, even grotesquely anti-pastoral” in his “representations of landscapes”,<sup>50</sup> and these comments seem applicable to Plumb, with her descriptions of flowers as “obscene” and “gross”. The word gross at first seems a humorous colloquialism—a modern complaint about the colours pink and yellow--but by the last line it becomes

clear the flowers are repugnant to the speaker. These flowers are “fleshy and overfed”; they evoke a nature that does not care. Plumb must face a death amongst this rapacious life.

Theocritus’ early pastoral elegy “First idyll” was set between a shepherd and goatherd, and shepherds, flocks and herds were part of the rural idyllic scenery of this and following ancient elegies. In Moshcus’ “Lament for Bion,” the herds mourn along with the sorrowing poet. “Now he will be heard no more / he that tenderly cared for his stock”<sup>51</sup> he says of Bion, and nature mourns too: “And so the hills are silent; the cows / wandering among the bulls, low mournfully” . Ramazani argues that in “Anthem for Doomed Youth” Owen turns this trope of shepherd and herd into a “bleak joke on the genre”: “Whereas the death of an individual shepherd traditionally moves animals to mourn, many die here, and their deaths cannot be sorrowful to the animals since the dying soldiers are themselves the herd”.<sup>52</sup> In this poem Owen honours the dead without covering up that they had been killed like cattle. He asks what kind of service or memorial can they have? Only the sounds of war:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.”<sup>53</sup>

Instead of animals lowing in mourning, or a poet mourning a shepherd with an elegy, there are only the “stuttering rifles” to accompany these men into death. The rifles cannot mourn sympathetically; they are actually the cause of the men’s deaths.

Plumb, too, takes this trope of herds and flocks and turns it to non-consolatory ends. In “The Face of the Earth,” a poem about journeying across the countryside towards her dying son, she links the herds of cows and flocks of sheep she sees with the deathly outcome of the animals’ lives, recording a rural life that is not consolatory.

Sheep, sheepskin shop, butcher’s block, too early  
for lambs, the furrowed ewe tracks  
stay constant, every town has its own  
cabbage tree, and for king and country  
memorial, this is the farmland  
that ate the forests of te motu. (19-24)

Sheep's lives are "Sheep, sheepskin shop, butcher's block." Elsewhere, the "chestnut rumps" (10) of cows are followed by the mechanized factories of the milking sheds. Even the farmland for the animals only exists because it "ate the forests", and the land itself, instead of being covered in native trees, has the repetition of "a post,/ gate, post, fencing wire, a post, a gate" (15-16); barriers to freedom represented by constructions of restraint within the landscape. "We / are the animals grazing off the / face of the earth",<sup>54</sup> Plumb says. If we are animals, then the images of sheepskin shop and butcher's block lead not to any sense of victorious resurrection but an eternal cycle of killing, eating and dying. The war dead are part of this landscape too; "every town" has its own "king and country memorial". This reference suggests that just as sheep are raised and end on the butcher's block, so were the young men raised and killed. Though Plumb doesn't mention her son's illness directly other than to call him "brave", the references to the fatal outcomes for the animals and the soldiers imply this outcome also for her son.

The poem begins with "Your hands do not fit into my pockets / anymore" and ends when Plumb finally arrives to join her son and says—"I am here darling, where are your hands, / I will warm them put them in my in / my pockets, alas they don't fit" (43-45). She can no longer warm her son's hands in the way she once did, and now that he is dying she can no longer protect him. Just as she can no longer console her son with warmth in the old way as her ill son's hands "do not fit ... / anymore", neither do the herds or pastoral landscape recorded in this poem reassure the speaker: the poetry of consolation no longer fits.

Such refusal of traditional consolation and the turning of consolatory tropes to anti-consolatory ends raises the question of why. To what end refuse consolation or turn tropes to opposite ends? The anti-consolatory changes in the elegy in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were forms of political and cultural protest. The 19<sup>th</sup> century women poets who rebelled against the traditional pastoral elegy, with its hope of regeneration and conventional closure, were making a political stand, questioning "the fate to which women and children were condemned according to mid-nineteenth century mourning conventions".<sup>55</sup> "Safe?" expostulates Piatt in the poem "No Help", at the suggestion her dead child is better off in heaven. She refuses any kind of consolation in the landscape or in the ideology of the day:

Safe? But out of my world, out of my sight!  
My way to him through utter darkness lies.  
I am gone blind with weeping, and the light –  
If there be light – is shut inside the skies.<sup>56</sup>

Her grief is so powerful it has blinded her to any "light" that could possibly console her.

The war poets, too, in their abolition of consolation in the landscape, offered political arguments, questioning the patriotic, glory-seeking language that was used to encourage young men into the war. “If they could experience such death, they would not tell the old Horatian lie,” Ramazani says,<sup>57</sup> referring to Owen’s poem “Dulce et Decorum Est”: which echoes ironically and critically the words taken from an ode by Horace—“Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” (it is sweet and right to die for your country). In this poem Owen trudges with exhausted soldiers, and after a gas attack, a man dies in front of him. “In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.”<sup>58</sup> After having to watch a man die so hideously, Owen shows there is no glory in such death, only horror.

In her poems, Plumb uses anti-consolatory strategies to tell the personal story of her private grief. She does not appear to be challenging ideologies that constrained women or even to protest against, for example, the medical world she turned to for help. But if these poems do not have an explicit political message, her refusal to be consoled can, as R. Clifton Spargo says more generally about elegies, be read as a kind of protest. To mourn in a resistant way, he says, is to repudiate consolation, and poems of resistant mourning “amount to ethical protests against a dominant cultural pathology that trivializes death...and symbolic social structures that contain and reduce the meaning of the other.”<sup>59</sup> When Sandra Gilbert wrote about the experience of the loss of her husband, in the book *Death’s Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve*, she had to confront the shock of widowhood at a historical moment when death was in some sense unspeakable and grief—or the expression of grief—‘was at best an embarrassment, at worst a social solecism or scandal’.<sup>60</sup>

Plumb, in her poetry, echoes Gilbert’s description of how difficult it is in contemporary society to express your grief, to stand up for that ‘other’. In her poem “The Same Birthday as His Ambulance Driver”, she recalls her son lying in his coffin. All the dread, the portents in her earlier poems, has come to pass, and however awkward a mourning person is to society and whatever risk she takes of incurring scorn or criticism for acknowledging the depth of her mourning, Plumb stands in her grief and announces it:

He lies in the casket  
wearing his favourite leather belt,  
oh how much we love him.  
Call me silly,  
call me stupid,  
but I am sad now.  
How sad I am.<sup>61</sup>

Like Owen, Plumb brings her war to the public's attention and refuses to be consoled.

To not be consoled means to accept what has happened because you have to; there is no way to make events anything other than what they are. Plumb's poetry engages directly and non-apologetically with loss and she refuses to have it trivialized in any way by a prospect that something--such as landscape, or the cycles of nature--could make it better. Like the child elegists who broke from social conventions of grieving, Plumb will not be silenced. In her poem "Phantasmagoria", which takes place after her son's death, she dreams she has been chosen to travel to a new planet but her son must stay behind. Alone in a new country of grief, she is:

... that person standing by the water  
singing in the grotto in the night.  
And the dark lake ripped open its pounding heart  
and revealed its phantasmagoric secrets to me. <sup>62</sup>

By being the person left alone to sing "in the grotto", Plumb, as poet, becomes privy to a secret. What is that secret that grief reveals? The griever knows, and only the speaker who stands up to protest their loss can bring that secret to the reader.

## Notes

1. Peter Sacks qtd. in Sandra Gilbert "Rat's Alley": The Great War, Modernism, and the (Anti)Pastoral Elegy." *New Literary History* 30.1 (1999): 179-201. 182
2. Mary McCardi Wearn. "Subjection and Subversion in Sarah Piatt's Maternal Poetics." *Legacy* 23.2 (2006): 163-177. *Google Scholar*. Web 22 June 2010  
<http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/journals/legacy/v023/23.2wearn.html>
3. Claire Raymond. "Emily Dickinson as the Un-Named Buried Child." *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 12.1 (2003): 107-122. *Google Scholar*. Web 22 June 2010  
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