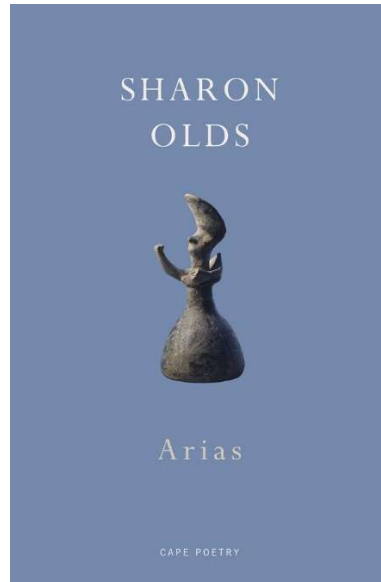


Arias

by Sharon Olds



Sharon Olds was born in San Francisco, educated at Stanford and Columbia universities, and has lived for many years in New York City. Her thirteen poetry collections include *Satan Says* (1980), *The Dead & the Living* (1984), which received the [Lamont Poetry Selection](#) and the National Book Critics Circle Award and *One Secret Thing* (2008). Her books have won many awards over the years. Her collection *Stag's Leap* (Cape 2013) won the T. S. Eliot Prize and the 2013 Pulitzer Prize. In 2016 she won the Wallace Stevens award for her 'outstanding and proven mastery in the art of poetry'.

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Reviews

... in her newest book, Olds puts her honest, clear verse to work mostly outside of the body, and looks instead at the body politic, at the social body we have created or destroyed together. Here, by looking at the miseries that sometimes threaten to overwhelm, Olds has turned confession into powerful denunciation ... she engages with more joy, more strength, more faith, perhaps, than in earlier collections. There is a sense of lightness here, of play, of being carefree in the world that is being declared, or rather shared ... Sure, Olds screams sometimes, but she does it without forgetting she's a poet and, in the end, won't we admit the things she has been screaming about feel more like truth every day? Her verse a Cassiopeia of early horoscopes and long sight, catching us, foreshadowing us (our mistakes, our dumb moves, she is looking at women, but in the context of their broader, changing, society) in, perhaps, the way that only the wisest among our literary mothers always have. (*New York Journal of Books*)

If a book of poetry can unsimplify—can add tangles, grit, and tangents to the way we think and feel—*Arias* is that book ... children, including Trayvon Martin, Etan Patz, Olds' own firstborn, are introduced in the book to bring the immensity of the world's hurt to an intimate human level, not only to personalize it but also to concentrate it and to find its odd joys. *Arias* offers hard-earned comfort well worth the effort. (*Booklist*)

'My Father's Whiteness'

It takes me a lifetime to see my father
as a white man – to see his whiteness
(named by white men after gleaming and brightness).
I saw the muck sweat of his pallor, he'd be
faceup on the couch like a mushroom in a mushroom-forcer,
and I didn't even wonder what it would feel like
for a person to be proud of their father.
I knew that at the interfraternity council
he'd been the handsome, wisecracking one, the
president, proud he could not read,
he could always get someone to do that for him –
he liked to say the two people allowed
to graduate from his college without knowing how to
read or write were him and Herbert Hoover.
Nor did any frat house there
house a brother.
Nor did I see my father – that in order to pass
out every night on the couch, snore
and snort and gargle-sing from his chintz
sty, he had to overcome
every privilege known to a man
tall, dark, handsome, white,
straight, middle class. He had to put his
every advantage down on the street and drive
over it with that thump a tire
and a body make. O say can you see him as I
see him now, as if he had no one
to answer to, so he prepared
to devour and excrete the hopes he'd been handed
on a platter, the spoon in his mouth, he could eat
what he had not earned, he could do it in his sleep.

'Nemo me impune lacessit'

When I learned of my mother's family's slogan,
I did not know that there were doctors who sat
on the floor, with a child, and a dollhouse, and played.

My outdoors dolls were a stick and a stone,
or a snapdragon and a dead bee –
one in each hand, they would shout at each other, in small
shouts deep in my throat. And sometimes
they shrieked, like the Medeas on the classical station.
There was nothing better, those hours with the under-my-
breath operas of anguish and death
and revenge, and the long solos when a piece of
dirt, or the corpse of a dragonfly
would pour out its story. And when I turned
to pencil and notebook, to lead and the pulp
of trees, I didn't yet know the motto – though she'd
had it punished into her, as she'd
punished it into me: *No one harms me
with impunity.*

'Aria conceived in Mexico'

Our first child was my first contact
with the other world – which had been, all along,
this world,
inside myself.
Our child used to not exist,
ever, and then, over sand, under coastal
trees, near breakers, she came into being, came
out of the world of nothing, the world
before time, before death,
into the world of time and death
and love, in a country of poetry
and courage, of guarded riches and unguarded
poverty, on a beach in the Republic
of Mexico, she entered this
dimension there. We did not know
who she was – but, slowly, I learned
motherhood – it was her life now,
not mine. I'd been an envelope,
and now was a living basket, for the civil
holy, the new life. And the milk
Arrived, hard, in what had been
my breasts, and now were for her, and the other
world sent out, through them, food
of this world for her. And she slept, and the smallest
motion of eyelash or hand was the meaning
of my life. I would kneel at the bars of the old
cradle and listen for spider sight
and warbler plant, and lobos moan.
And the other world had sent in, with her,

her means of continuance, the tiny
fresh eggs in her first-breath side.
Through her children, her life would continue,
and maybe, if we do not destroy
the earth, it too might continue, the whole
life of the human, in Bahia Sur,
and Mérida, and Islas del Mujeres.

Discussion Ideas

- At the time of writing (2019), Sharon Olds is 76. What do you understand by 'lifetime' in the context of 'My Father's Whiteness'? Why now does she see her father 'as a white man'? What might she see him as before?
- 'O say can you see' – are there any other fathers implicated in this poem, other than the poet's?
- Who is Medea, what's she doing in 'Nemo me impune lacessit'? Is the poem itself an 'under-my-breath opera of ... revenge'? Or maybe it's one of forgiveness?
- What does 'Islas del Mujeres' translate to? What do you make of the phrase 'Through her children, her life would continue'?
- A father poem, a mother poem, a motherhood poem. Someone once said that the only subjects for poetry are sex, death and power. Would these three poems of Sharon Olds' fit into that categorisation? Do you find the categorising interesting or reductive?

Other books by Sharon Olds

Stag's Leap (Cape, 2012)

Odes (Cape, 2016)

If you liked Sharon Olds, try ...

- Hannah Sullivan
- Jacqueline Saphra
- A K Blakemore

Sharon Olds online

www.sharonolds.net