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 seen 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 ‘Ilas 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](http://www.sharonolds.net)