



VINTAGE

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**SELECTED POEMS**  
SHARON OLDS

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## About the Book

Michael Ondaatje has called Sharon Olds's poetry 'pure fire in the hands' and cheered the 'roughness and humour and brag and tenderness and completion in her work as she carries the reader through rooms of passion and loss'. This rich selection – made by the author – exhibits those qualities in poem after poem, reflecting, moreover, an exciting experimentation with rhythm and language and a movement towards an embrace beyond the personal. Subjects are revisited – the pain of childhood, adolescent sexual stirrings, the fulfilment of marriage, the wonder of children – but each re-casting penetrates ever more deeply, enriched by new perceptions and conceits.

A powerful distillation of the best work from one of America's most gifted and widely read poets, drawn from her seven published volumes, this is a testament to a remarkable writer's depth, range and continuing development.

## About the Author

Sharon Olds was born in San Francisco. She was the New York State Poet Laureate from 1998 to 2000 and she currently teaches in the Graduate Creative Writing Program at New York University. Her work has received the Harriet Monroe Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Lamont Selection of the Academy of American Poets and the San Francisco Poetry Center Award. She lives in New York City.



ALSO BY SHARON OLDS

*Satan Says*

*The Dead and the Living*

*The Gold Cell*

*The Sign of Saturn: Poems 1980-1987*

*The Father*

*The Wellspring*

*Blood, Tin, Straw*

*The Unswept Room*

***for Phil and Franny***

# SELECTED POEMS

Sharon Olds

CAPE POETRY

I  
take them up like the male and female  
paper dolls and bang them together  
at the hips, like chips of flint, as if to  
strike sparks from them, I say  
Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about  
it.

# INDICTMENT OF SENIOR OFFICERS

In the hallway above the pit of the stairwell  
my sister and I would meet, at night,  
eyes and hair dark, bodies  
like twins in the dark. We did not talk of  
the two who had brought us there, like generals,  
for their own reasons. We sat, buddies in cold  
war, her living body the proof of  
my living body, our backs to the mild  
shell hole of the stairs, down which  
we would have to go, knowing nothing  
but what we had learned there,

so that now  
when I think of my sister, the holes of the needles  
in her hips and in the creases of her elbows,  
and the marks from the doctor husband's  
beatings,  
and the scars of the operations, I feel the  
rage of a soldier standing over the body of  
someone sent to the front lines  
without training  
or a weapon.

# THE SISTERS OF SEXUAL TREASURE

As soon as my sister and I got out of our  
mother's house, all we wanted to  
do was fuck, obliterate  
her tiny sparrow body and narrow  
grasshopper legs. The men's bodies  
were like our father's body! The massive  
hocks, flanks, thighs, male  
structure of the hips, knees, calves –  
we could have him there, the steep forbidden  
buttocks, backs of the knees, the cock  
in our mouth, ah the cock in our mouth.

Like explorers who  
discover a lost city, we went  
nuts with joy, undressed the men  
slowly and carefully, as if  
uncovering buried artifacts that  
proved our theory of the lost culture:  
that if Mother said it wasn't there,  
it was there.

# STATION

Coming in off the dock after writing,  
I approached the house,  
and saw your fine grandee face  
lit by a lamp with a parchment shade  
the color of flame.

An elegant hand on your beard. Your tapered  
eyes found me on the lawn. You looked  
as the lord looks down from a narrow window  
and you are descended from lords. Calmly, with no  
hint of shyness, you examined me,  
the wife who runs out on the dock to write  
as soon as one of the children is in bed,  
leaving the other to you.

Your thin  
mouth, flexible as an archer's bow,  
did not curve. We spent a long moment  
in the truth of our situation, the poems  
heavy as poached game hanging from my hands.

# MONARCHS

*for P. W.*

All morning, as I sit, thinking of you,  
the Monarchs are passing. Seven stories up,  
to the left of the river, they are making their way  
south, their wings the dry red of  
your hands like butchers' hands, the raised  
veins of their wings like your scars.  
I could scarcely feel your massive rough  
palms on me, your touch was so light,  
the chapped scrape of an insect's leg  
across my breast. No one had ever  
touched me before. I didn't know enough to  
open my legs, but felt your thighs,  
feathered with red, gold hairs,  
    opening  
between my legs  
like a pair of wings.  
The hinged print of my blood on your thighs –  
a winged creature, pinned there –  
and then you left, as you were to leave  
over and over, the butterflies moving  
in masses past my window, floating  
south to their transformation, crossing over  
borders in the night, the diffuse blood-red  
cloud of them, my body under yours,  
the beauty and silence of the great migrations.



# INFINITE BLISS

When I first saw snow cover the air  
with its delicate hoofprints, I said I 'would never  
live where it did not snow, and when  
the first man tore his way into me,  
and tore up the passageway,  
and came to the small room, and pulled the  
curtain aside that I might enter, I knew I could  
never live apart from them  
again, the strange race with their massive  
bloodied hooves. Today we lay in our  
small bedroom, dark gold with  
reflected snow, and while the flakes climbed  
delicately down the sky, you  
came into me, pressing aside  
the curtain, revealing the small room,  
dark gold with reflected snow,  
where we lay, and where you entered me and  
pressed the curtain aside, revealing  
the small room, dark gold with  
reflected snow, where we lay.

# THE LANGUAGE OF THE BRAG

I have wanted excellence in the knife-throw,  
I have wanted to use my exceptionally strong and  
accurate arms  
and my straight posture and quick electric  
muscles  
to achieve something at the center of a crowd,  
the blade piercing the bark deep,  
the haft slowly and heavily vibrating like the cock.

I have wanted some epic use for my excellent  
body,  
some heroism, some American achievement  
beyond the ordinary for my extraordinary self,  
magnetic and tensile, I have stood by the sandlot  
and watched the boys play.

I have wanted courage, I have thought about fire  
and the crossing of waterfalls, I have dragged  
around

my belly big with cowardice and safety,  
stool charcoal from the iron pills,  
huge breasts leaking colostrum,  
legs swelling, hands swelling,  
face swelling and reddening, hair  
falling out, inner sex  
stabbed again and again with pain like a knife.  
I have lain down.

I have lain down and sweated and shaken  
and passed blood and shit and water and  
slowly alone in the center of a circle I have  
passed the new person out  
and they have lifted the new person free of the act  
and wiped the new person free of that  
language of blood like praise all over the body.

I have done what you wanted to do, Walt Whitman,  
Allen Ginsberg, I have done this thing,  
I and the other women this exceptional  
act with the exceptional heroic body,  
this giving birth, this glistening verb,  
and I am putting my proud American boast  
right here with the others.

# THE TALK

In the sunless wooden room at noon  
the mother had a talk with her daughter.  
The rudeness could not go on, the meanness  
to her little brother, the selfishness.  
The eight-year-old sat on the bed  
in the corner of the room, her irises distilled like  
the last drops of something, her firm  
face melting, reddening,  
silver flashes in her eyes like distant  
bodies of water glimpsed through woods.  
She took it and took it and broke, crying out  
*I hate being a person!* diving  
into the mother  
as if  
into  
a deep pond – and she cannot swim,  
the child cannot swim.

# I COULD NOT TELL

I could not tell I had jumped off that bus,  
that bus in motion, with my child in my arms,  
because I did not know it. I believed my own story:  
I had fallen, or the bus had started up  
when I had one foot in the air.

I would not remember the tightening of my jaw,  
the irk that I'd missed my stop, the step out  
into the air, the clear child  
gazing about her in the air as I plunged  
to one knee on the street, scraped it, twisted it,  
the bus skidding to a stop, the driver  
jumping out, my daughter laughing  
*Do it again.*

I have never done it  
again. I have been very careful.  
I have kept an eye on that nice young mother  
who lightly leapt  
off the moving vehicle  
onto the stopped street, her life  
in her hands, her life's life in her hands.

# IDEOGRAPHS

*(a photograph of China, 1905)*

The handmade scaffolds, boards in the form of  
ideographs the size of a person  
lean against a steep wall  
of dressed stone. One is the simple  
shape of a man. The man on it  
is asleep, his arms nailed to the wood.  
No timber is wasted; his fingertips  
curl in at the very end of the plank  
as a child's hand opens in sleep.  
The other man is awake – he looks  
directly at us. He is fixed to a more  
complex scaffold, a diagonal crosspiece  
pointing one arm up, one down,  
and his legs are bent, the spikes through his  
ankles  
holding them up, off the ground,  
his knees cocked, the folds of his robe flowing  
sideways as if he were suspended in the air  
in flight, his naked legs bared.  
They await execution, tilted to the wall  
as you'd prop up a tool until you needed it.  
They'll be shouldered up over the crowd and  
carried through the screaming. The sleeper will  
wake.  
The twisted one will fly above the faces, his  
garment rippling.  
Here there is still the backstage quiet,  
the shadow at the bottom of the wall, the props  
leaning in the grainy half-dusk.  
He looks at us in the silence. He says  
*Save me, there is still time.*