

Sylvia Blake

Barbara Latham

A newspaper cutting came in the post today by which my sister informs me that Sylvia Blake died of drowning on a recent visit to a New Zealand beach. Despite all the life-saving drama she didn't give heroic status to anyone after all, so her family, presumably, had to come and take her, claimed as not even suitable for a good rescue. (Perhaps that is why I've been dreaming of her again recently.) Saving her was to have been my great gesture. With her life saved to justify my own I'd sit out my days in credit – a solid platform on which to rest those fathomless doubts. I would, of course, have preferred someone more glamorous than Sylvia Blake to risk myself for, like the fair curls of a painter's children who lived without a mother two blocks away, and with adolescence I began to place the pretty pair on the railway line that I might break all athletic records in the sprint to save them from the fast approaching train. The father I believed too wasted from pining the lost mother and misunderstood canvases to find strength to reach them in time, but he'd watch me outstrip him, throw his children to safety and leave only one leg of my own for the Wellington railcar. Without a leg I'd be sure to lose both suntan and vigour and he would notice pale suffering. It is as well to mock that melodrama – I tossed it off even at the time – for the Blake girl next door was as much as I could expect from life. The other was a brief spurt of high hope whereas Sylvia had stuck for years as a likely candidate since she was bound to fall on the railway line if ever she'd dare to go near it, and I despised her enough to thrust her into the pond from which I'd then make my rescue.

There was only a wooden fence between her swing and ours, and even that had a gate built into it, yet their garden was never an extension of our own. Their home was alien – its atmosphere alive

with formidable shapes and tangible dark movement and my nose would fill with the smell of their kitchen and the mother. That smell hung more solid and defining of boundary than the fence (and fifteen years since I've been near their house my nose can still fix on it to puzzle.) When we met in the street bubbles of invitation and pleasure might tumble out towards Sylvia's younger sister, Ruth, and even sometimes for silly half deaf Sylvia, but they soon came to a bursting halt against the protective thick smell of their home. However, we were often on the street, playing, or going the several miles to school and back, and there Sylvia and Ruth Blake belonged. Ruth, her face red and sweating, would still keep running and never plead for anyone to wait or stop, and although much younger she'd follow into every danger without hesitation, often laughing while I'd be taut with doubts, and struggling not to give that away. How she danced her dainty ballet on the tidiest grave stones and cart-wheeled along the rows between while I stood rigid with a jerky robot head the lookout for resenting ghosts. The big square tomb belonged we knew to the oldest man who'd ever lived; although we never agreed on our calculations from his dates no-one doubted that having lived too long he didn't know how to die and still came out to totter the streets, though over 200. And no-one doubted that I had seen him go by our house on a night I'd climbed out of bed to watch the stars. To pay him back for walking near our fence and her own, Ruth took her newly acquired tap shoes to give him a good earache, and tap tapped loudly on top of his grave as soon as the cemetery gates were shut at dusk. I was in no position to creep from the ranks of silent witnesses to the danced revenge, so I stood listening to every clink and tap though it went on nearly longer than I could bear and I wet myself. But Sylvia wouldn't even come at all. She never would cross the railway line. Ruth always made the excuse that Sylvia wouldn't hear a train if it came so she was better to wait at home. I'd always object that Sylvia didn't dare, and if she ever came anywhere with us I remember stamping my feet in furious protest that we must, must, just leave her if she wouldn't try. Quite ruthlessly I fought her corrosion and there are two fixed stories of my struggles. An ever recurring story contains my determined wish to drag her over that railway line where with ease she could turn back as bidden. I had to go on, and my story says I never managed to make her follow. How do you get anyone over when they refuse and when, however ingenious the furious frustration that hours of wild plotting couldn't appease, and turn back in her tidy clothes; her socks always white at the end of the day except for the time we flicked ink on them. If she weren't partly deaf would I be able to get through and ruffle her? Oh, how could I make her curious to follow when we went down the long hill that slipped silently away from the town, sliding from the compactness of a world held together by house after house, of homes not unlike our own, and by streets leading somewhere, to the periphery where neat

gates and familiar gardens blurred into a sprawling gulley, overgrown houseless sections and where the roads lead nowhere but out?

The railway line at the bottom of the hill was the final boundary – never to be crossed. To dare go on to what lay beyond was to risk being wiped out by a flash of train. We did cross it without being squashed to a messy pulp on the lines but I never believed ourselves safe from being struck down in the moments brazened out “over there”. Over there, beyond where one could be seen to go by daylight, although daydreams of heroic triumph as well as turgid nightmare took me there, was essentially one space but it encompassed three parts. There was the rubbish dump which stank too much for my contact (for in those years I couldn’t much enjoy mess) and then there was the cemetery where I did go with others. I entered as if into those odd aerial photographs of the town which hung on the public library walls, only to find that there was roll after roll of them – locked in with that slow roll of flat surfaces knowing, but never quite understanding how, there was more life than showed. And between the ever expanding slopes of graveyard and the big ditch for rubbish was a dank park that once the town had tried to reclaim. Money had been spent on it and neat pathways had been made through the bush but weed had silted the waterflow, strangled the goldfish and left a thickened black stagnation, while the several layers of damp undergrowth around the dark trunks of native trees threw such shadows as to overwhelm the carefree air of any path, much as corruption had done with the anaesthetic sex of factual education. And it was in the park where sexual curiosity and uncertainties surfaced to move out into exchanges in the half dark of overhanging native trees, not far from the water rats. For there was always the stagnant pond with slime on the rocks at its edge. There we placed all the lurid histories of the town and there, too, the second, somewhat opposing story, of an unfinished battle with Sylvia took place. She slipped on the slime, or did we bully her so much that she fell, and we had to haul her, still with the foul smell of weed about her, to a hidden place until her clothes had dried and our guilt had been quelled enough to face parents in innocence. But the parental version didn’t dissolve the gnawing questions which linger. Did we actually push her in? Had I made her come after all and she was too afraid? Despite the intensity of my memories of Sylvia I am left to wonder what really happened.

Now, many years later when, perhaps, I no longer run ahead of so much fear, Sylvia often comes into my dreams – reclaimed weakness I can weep I did not nurture. She no longer undermines a too shaky strength and when I hear that impatient stamped foot, echoes of urgent intolerance,

Sylvia Blake

tenderness can surge out on deep breath but like the outstretched arms it meets no object. I wake
and the time for mercy to Sylvia Blake is well passed.

And she is drowned they say.

'Sylvia Blake'

First appeared *Landfall* 140, 1981

Copyright © Barbara Latham, 1981–2011

www.barbaralatham.co.uk