Riddle, Two Years Later

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I am a riddle in nine syllables—Sylvia Plath, "Metaphors"

O, it was a riddle, but I lost
syllable count.
That calendar was thrown away.
I went to have a picture made
of echoes, expecting
a pearl necklace!
a happy dingy, tethered!

But the rope
snapped, crossed
to the other side. Unmoored,
this riddle.
I was a garden
blighted in April,
a poisoned well.
I came back from vacation to a burgled house.
No, worse than burgled.
What's the word in English
for *worse than burgled*?
The technician's cursor flitted across the screen.
I was an empty stage, curtain drawn back,
X
of fluorescent tape to show
where the star should have stood. But the star
didn't show.

The show,
no,
it didn't go on.
I was all about blocking. Bad blocking.
House lights, please.
At the end of this riddle
there was no punch line.
Or there was a sucker-punch line.
Rising from the toilet

the day after the riddle
was sliced and sucked out,
(the doctor used the French name
but the French, it didn't help)
a piece of this riddle,
elephantine, rubbery, fell
on the toe of my pump.
And there were three months
before I could even *try*
to make a new riddle.
One out of five women will get this riddle,
and they are the sorry ones.
The echo made from a picture
made of an echo: o o o

A Note:

Plath's poem "Metaphors" begins, "I am a riddle in nine syllables," and borrows the "Who am I" structure of the child's riddle, presenting a list of metaphors designed to help the reader guess the identity of the speaker. Each clue brings us closer; the speaker is "an elephant, a ponderous house, / A melon strolling on two tendrils." The nine-letter title begins a poem of nine lines, each with nine syllables, foregrounding a careful measurement, but the metaphors are piled on top of each other, some delightful, some disturbing, and the careful measurement sets up a tension with the feeling of egress, overflow. All of which is wonderfully fitting as the reader comes to understand that the speaker is a pregnant woman.

I thought about Plath's poetry so much during my first pregnancy—her work became a kind of blue print for the intense emotions I was experiencing. "Metaphors" was a constant delight to me as I waded further into my pregnancy. But my first pregnancy ended in a blighted ovum, a miscarriage that required a D and C. Suddenly the kinship I'd felt with the poem, with all pregnant mothers, took a terrible reverse, an unraveling and a distortion. I used Plath's "Metaphors" as a jumping off place to try to understand the new emotions I was experiencing—emotions for which, suddenly, there was no blue print, nothing marching with a syllabic progression to a happy conclusion but instead a terribly fractured line , an absence of plot. My poem, "Riddle, Two Years Later," is the result.