

*Plath Profiles*

# Special Feature

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# The Abiding Relatability of Sylvia Plath:

## Reviewing the “One Life” Exhibit at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery

by Jaclyn DeVore

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Fig. 1 The entrance to the "One Life: Sylvia Plath" exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.

The Sylvia Plath exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, on display from June 30, 2017 to May 20, 2018, is easy to miss — except perhaps for the installation of eight interactive lighted bell jars visible from the main hallway. The small gallery that housed “One Life: Sylvia Plath,” is not

intuitive or easy to find. The exhibit itself is simply labeled “One Life” on the museum map, with no other indication of Sylvia Plath. In the hall of Revolutionary War portraits, across from Paul Revere, John Jay, and the Founding Fathers, two large but muted-color indicators of the items inside flank

the exhibit's entrance. To the left is a pale beige canvas with Sylvia Plath's enlarged autograph and a curatorial statement. A larger-than-life black-and-white photo canvas of Sylvia with her bicycle (and an oversized sketchpad in its front basket) is positioned to the right (see fig. 1). Despite the size of these pieces, and the curious blue, red, and green lights flashing beneath the bell jars, most museumgoers overlooked Plath altogether. "Overlooked," aptly, was also the name of the recent series of obituaries published in honor of Women's History Month, "about

women who deserved an obituary in The New York Times at the time of their death but did not get one." Plath was included in this series under the heading "A postwar poet unafraid to confront her own despair" (Hartocollis).

A few museum patrons did register Plath's photo. "Who is that?" they asked their companions. One matter-of-fact answer: "Sylvia Plath, the one who asphyxiated herself." This question and its answer remind us of how most encounter Plath, regarding her "as if the suicide were a textual byproduct...that becomes the whole point of the story."<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 2. Top, center: Sylvia Plath's writing desk, which her brother fashioned from a piece of elm wood originally intended to be used as a coffin lid. Counterclockwise from left: a photo taken of Plath in Cambridge, 1956; holograph of "Lady Lazarus," 1962; typewritten "Morning Song," 1961, with small photo of Plath with baby Frieda, 1961; an "anti-military, anti-patriarchy" collage Plath created after attending an anti-nuclear protest in 1960; holograph (pink) and typescript of "Elm," published in *The New Yorker* in 1962; letter from Dr. Ruth Beuscher to Plath from 1962; Plath with Frieda and Nicolas at Court Green, 1962.



Those who did wander into the small room, which smelled faintly of sawdust and mint toothpaste, saw relics of Plath's life — carefully curated by Smith alumnae Dorothy Moss and Karen Kukil with the help of members of Plath's graduating class — set against the cinder gray of the gallery walls. Most people spent their brief visits rapping knuckles or fingers on the multimedia bell jar installment, which was originally commissioned by the Davis Museum at Wellesley College in Plath's hometown of Wellesley, Massachusetts. The plinth for the bell jars matched the color of the walls and bore a note, in both English and Spanish, encouraging its admirers to "gently tap the glass;" tapping the glass caused the encased string lights within to flicker in response. "It's like *Stranger Things*!" more than one person noticed, referencing the popular Netflix show. According to Plath scholar Susan Van Dyne, some viewers made a connection between the bell jar installation and Sylvia's electroconvulsive therapy. "That's the electric shock, right?" Some taps even triggered the start of a chilling musical composition, called "Glass Heart (Bells for Sylvia Plath)" by Jenny Olivia Johnson. High-pitched, haunting, and distorted vocals, piano, and cello emitted from a speaker placed so that the music appeared to play from the pages of Plath's open journal, on display nearby. According to Johnson, her composition includes "a processed

version of Plath's voice reading her poem 'Ariel,'" quotes from the poems "I Thought I Could Not Be Hurt" ("how frail the human heart must be") and "Poppies in July" ("liquors seep to me in this glass capsule"), and "a fragmented quote" from Ted Hughes's "Last Letter" ("what happened that night, inside your hours, is as unknown as if it never happened") ("Glass Heart (Bells for Sylvia Plath)"). Johnson also makes a connection between the bell jars and the shape of a human torso, seeing the lights as representations of veins and arteries.

One man with a bald head, a knit sweater, and large hands created a syncopation as he pawed at a bell jar, cupping one between both of his hands and striking the sides as if passing a basketball back and forth between his palms. He chuckled and then moved quickly through the exhibit. A few people who finished interacting with the bell jars audibly declared their lack of



Fig 3 The bell jar installation at the center of the "One Life" gallery (right). The first two pages of Sylvia Plath's senior honors thesis, "The Magic Mirror: The Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels," sits in the case to the left.



interest in the rest of the exhibit and left immediately. Others stayed, trying to figure out who Sylvia Plath was. The two common refrains were “I’ve never heard of her” and “her name sounds familiar.” One college-aged woman looked up Sylvia Plath on her iPhone. “Ok, she’s a poet,” she said to her friend. Her friend responded, “Oh, yeah, I think she’s the one who wrote a poem about the birds she saw from her window.” Another pair, a young couple, registered a hint of recognition upon seeing the display of her book covers: “Oh, she wrote *The Bell Jar*!”

Those casually walking through the exhibit tended to follow a certain pattern: tap the bell jars, investigate Plath’s manual Royal typewriter (see fig. 5), and then gawk at the clipping of her hair (see fig. 6), neatly arranged in something like a ponytail and encased in a wall-mounted acrylic box. Van Dyne, in her lecture “Self-Portrait of the Artist: What’s in the Frame?” given in the exhibit room on the evening of March 15, 2018, called this Plath’s “hank of hair” (see fig. 6). This hank of hair was kept by Aurelia Schober Plath, the poet’s mother, when Sylvia’s “braids were cut”<sup>2</sup> around age 13. Most visitors took note of the hair, commonly using words that spoke to Plath’s abnormal sensibilities: “weird,” “odd,” “That’s sort of weird, isn’t it?,” and “How strange!”

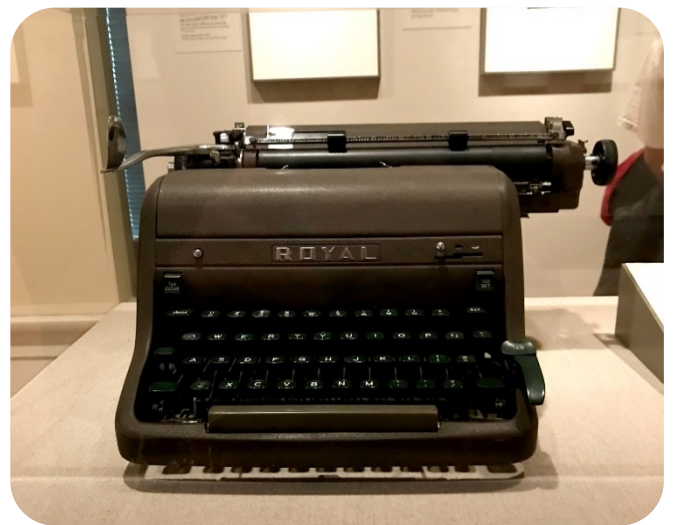


Fig. 4-6, top to bottom: The left wall of the gallery displaying Plath’s self-portraits; Plath’s manual Royal typewriter, which she used at Smith College; Plath’s “hank of hair” from about age 13.

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One group of children, however, did not attempt to mask their fascination with her golden-brown, disembodied locks. "Do you think this is like 100 years old?" one little boy asked his friends (the exhibit dates the hair as from 1945). The curious case of Plath's hair, on loan from the Lilly Library collection at Indiana University, was evoked again later when a young woman called Sylvia "strange" for ascribing different personalities to her blonde and brunette selves. After a moment of studying a triplet series of photos — displayed prominently on the middle of the back wall — that explore the differences between the traits of Sylvia's different hair colors, however, the woman reconsidered: "You know, I am really attached to being blonde."

It may be true "it was in death that Plath found her literary due" (Hartcollis) and that "it's almost impossible not to read her work backwards, through the fact of her death."<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the items in the exhibit can be viewed chronologically from her birth if traveling the room clockwise from the entrance, or in a reverse chronology if moving in the opposite direction. Clockwise, the first item on display is a photo of the Plath family when Sylvia was an infant, before the birth of her younger brother Warren. Plath and her parents, Aurelia and Otto

Plath, are pictured at the Arnold Arboretum near their home in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston. The photo is a small, framed, sepia-toned image taken by Aurelia Greenwood Schober, Plath's maternal grandmother (from whom Sylvia borrowed the surname for her protagonist in *The Bell Jar*). The last item is a framed front and back of the 2012 U.S. Postal Service commemorative stamp set of twentieth-century poets, in which Plath is featured in the upper right corner. There is an excerpt (i.e., the opening five lines) from her poem, "Daddy," printed on the back of the stamp sheet, in the lower left corner: "You do not do, you do not do/Anymore, black shoe/ In which I have lived like a foot/For thirty years, poor and white/Barely daring to breathe or Achoo."

## Reviewing a Legacy: Sylvia Plath's Curated "*One Life*"

The exhibit is titled "One Life" (and not "One Death") and starts with items in chronological order from the entrance. After the pre-Warren family photo in Jamaica Plain, the second item is a frame containing two black-and-white photos from Winthrop, MA, in 1940: a picture of 8-year-old Sylvia on a sailboat with Warren, and one of Plath wearing a white nurse's outfit and double braids. Below these is a case with her hair, one

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<sup>3</sup> Van Dyne noted this in her March 28 gallery lecture

of the few items not organized in chronological order.

In the frame after the childhood photos is a letter Plath wrote to her mother in 1940. The correspondence is rendered in looping, slanted cursive and includes "the first of many," as the object label reads, of Plath's self-portraits. Here she drew herself smelling a flower, accompanied by a fairy godmother with wings, a magic wand, and long blonde hair. Next to the letter is her illustrated poem written to the tune of "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," also from 1940, which depicts domestic scenes of her mother and grandmother baking and her brother playing the French horn.

On the left wall, we see Plath's adolescent phase represented. The first item on this wall is a double frame displaying two paper dolls Plath made by hand: a brunette one on the left and a blonde one on the right. The brunette doll's posture and clothing are more modest, while the blonde's is more provocative, with a cleavage line and a more suggestive stance of arms opening downwards in an inverted V. In the clear case beside the framed paper dolls lies Plath's neatly folded denim blue Girl Scouts uniform, with its yellow tie and her 20 earned badges sewn on to one arm; of these badges, "at least five...related to reading and writing," according to the label. Van Dyne sees the uniform as a symbol of Plath's "good girl role," while the paper dolls reflect Sylvia's understanding, even at a

young age, of the "sexualized adult female" — perhaps, she says, derived from Archie comics.

Plath's teenage self-portrait series follows the Girl Scouts uniform. The first of the three images is "A War to End Wars," from 1946, created when she was 13 or 14 years old. "A War to End Wars" depicts a young Plath, with blonde pageboy hair and looking like a young Nancy Drew, sitting at her desk reading and weeping over an image of the death and violence of war portrayed in a thought bubble over her head. The next two self-portraits continue to explore Plath's light and dark selves we first glimpse in her paper dolls — "a sense of duality she seemed to be playing with," according to Moss (qtd. in Felsenthal). "Triple-face Portrait," painted in 1950 or 1951, is an angular, vivid piece (one patron referred to it as "kind of scary"), followed by "Self-Portrait in Semi-Abstract Style," dated circa 1946-1952. In a review of the exhibit for The Washington Post, Mark Jenkins writes of "Triple-face Portrait" that the "planes of the face suggest that she saw herself as a fragmented person" (qtd. in Jenkins). The visual biography curated by Moss and Kukil, however, helps us understand Plath not as a fragmented being but rather as a complex person: "What I was most concerned about was showing all sides of her," said Moss (qtd. in Felsenthal). These two self-portraits elicited praise from some patrons, with refrains such as "That's so cool!" and "She's actually a



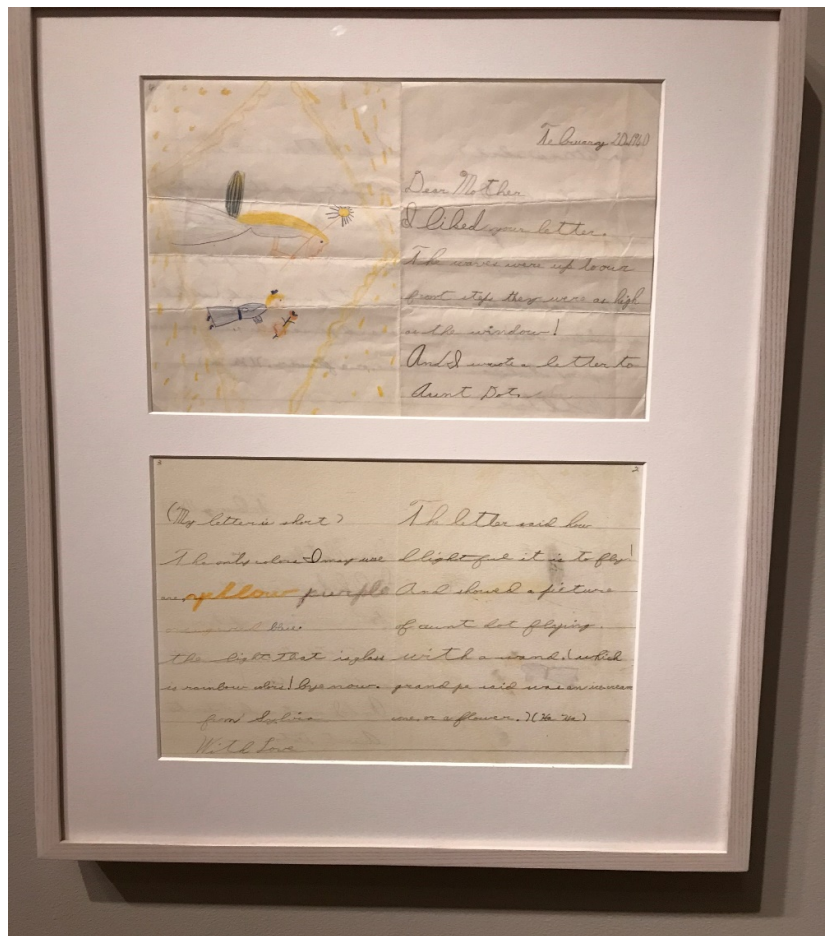
good artist!" Plath "just had this impulse to draw on whatever surface she could find throughout her life," Moss believes. "She always felt conflicted about whether she wanted to develop that talent [for painting] or whether she wanted to throw herself in to the writing" (qtd. in Felsenthal). "

"Self-Portrait in Semi-Abstract Style" is a swirling, expressive painting that comes from the estate of Robert Hittel. In this portrait, Plath's hair is buoyant and golden on her right, but darker and flatter on her left. The portrait's label supposes that her hands are held up "like the hands of a magician," though they seem poised in a posture that is paradoxically one of both defense and surrender, or as if she is prepared to catch something being thrown her direction. The pastel pink and yellow gouache paints — set against a dark, foggy, inky, forest-like background — are the same colors as the Smith College letterhead Plath was fond of using; these two colors can be found elsewhere throughout the

exhibit. In fact, the very next item after "Self-Portrait in Semi-Abstract Style" is a typed journal entry on yellow paper, framed alongside a contact sheet of 12 black-and-white photos from Plath's interview with author Elizabeth Bowen in 1953. Both items are from her time as a summer intern at *Mademoiselle*, which served as the primary fodder for the plot of *The Bell Jar*. The next frame encases correspondence, typed on yellow Smith letterhead, in which Plath tactfully explains to her neighbor and suitor, Philip E. McCurdy, that their recent foray into a physical, sexual relationship must return to one of platonic companionship.

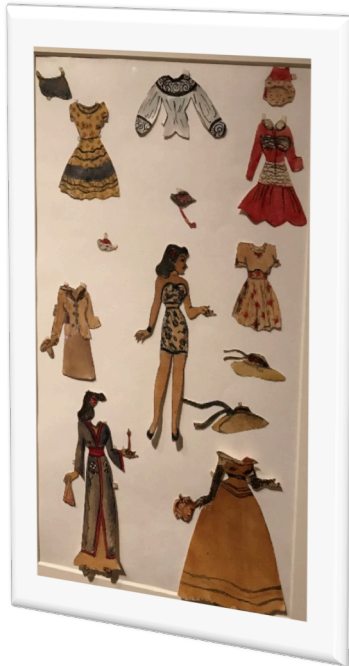


Fig. 7. "Semi-Abstract Self-Portrait" by Sylvia Plath, circa 1946-1952.



Figs. 8-11, clockwise from top left: The title photo used around the Portrait Gallery for the "One Life" exhibit; a picture of Plath with her younger brother Warren on a sailboat and Plath dressed as a nurse, both 1940; a letter Plath wrote to her mother Aurelia on February 20, 1940; the Plath family in 1933 at the Arnold Arboretum in Jamaica Plain, Boston.





Right to left, top to bottom:

Figs. 12-13: The brunette and blonde paper dolls, and their respective clothing, that Plath made in 1945.

Fig. 14: Plath's Girl Scout uniform, circa 1943-1948, reflecting the twenty badges she earned, five of which were related to reading and writing.

Fig. 15: Plath at the Smith College Quadigras Dance in 1954 with her brother Warren (right) and Sunny Sturtevant (left). A version of this photo serves as the cover of Plath's *Unabridged Journals*.

Fig. 16: One of the contact sheet photos from Plath's interview, during her internship with *Mademoiselle*, with author Elizabeth Bowen, 1953.

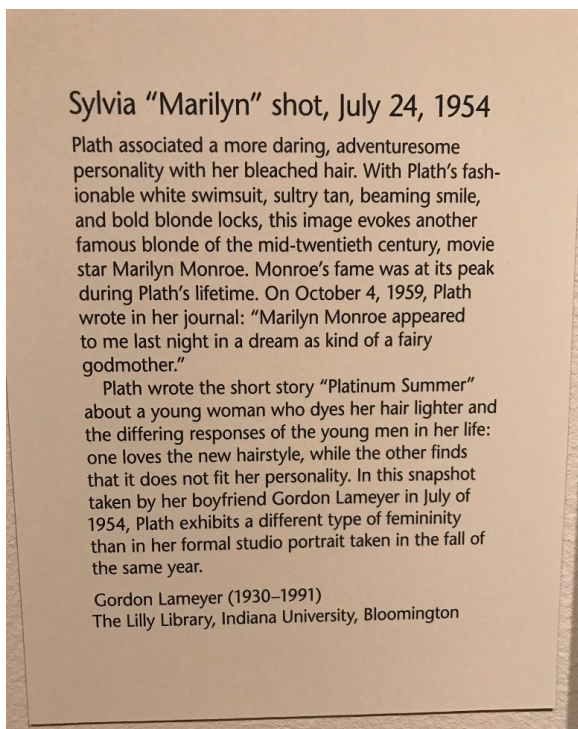


Crowning the left side wall are enlarged reproductions of the covers of the first editions of six of Plath's published books. Spanning from above her Girl Scouts uniform to the mementos from her Mademoiselle internship are the covers of *The Colossus and Other Poems*, *Ariel*, *The Bell Jar* (published in England under Plath's nom de plume, Victoria Lucas), *The Bell Jar* (published in the United States under her given name), an illustrated book of children's bedtime stories called *The Bed Book*, and *The Collected Poems*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1982 — making Plath the first poet to be posthumously presented with the prize.

The back wall of the gallery is neatly divided into uneven thirds by two windows obscured by large pillars. Those familiar with *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* will recognize the next photo as the one from which her face has been borrowed and enlarged for the book's cover. The *Unabridged Journals* portrays a zoomed and cropped version of the black-and-white image, in which we see only Plath, looking off to her left and touching her scarf with her right hand. Now we can see her in context: she's looking at her brother, Warren. She's at the 1954 spring dance, not long after her improperly administered electroconvulsive therapy at McLean Hospital. She's standing with a female companion (identified as Sunny Sturtevant in the object label). Directly

below this photograph, in a separate frame, is a Fulbright Scholarship recommendation letter, typed on plain, white paper, by Plath's psychiatrist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher. The letter is titled simply "Sylvia Plath" and there are staple holes visible in the upper left-hand corner. Beuscher writes of Plath's "great sense of responsibility" and describes her as "naturally friendly and optimistic." Another letter from Beuscher — with whom Plath had an "important relationship," according to Van Dyne — appears later in the exhibit, addressed to Plath while she lived in England.

Past the first window pillar is arguably the triplet centerpiece of the exhibit (if one does not count the show-stealing interactive bell jars, which Moss describes as "activating" the gallery [qtd. in Moss]): Plath's "Marilyn" photo, in which her hair is dyed bright blond; a portrait of a darker-haired Plath, pregnant with her first-born; and a studio photograph of Plath, also with brown hair, taken her senior year at Smith College. The first and third photographs of this series were taken in 1954; the middle one was captured by Rollie McKenna in 1959. These three photos of the poet continue the visual discussion of light, dark, and constructed identity as seen earlier in her paper dolls and self-portraits. The first photo, one of only two in full-color in the exhibit, shows a blonde and beaming Plath, lying on her side on the beach in a white bathing suit. The label cites Plath's journal: "Marilyn Monroe



Figs. 17-18, Plath's "Marilyn" photo, 1954.

appeared to me last night in a dream as kind of a fairy godmother." This photo was part of the same series as the one used on the controversial cover of the U.K. version of the recently published *Letters of Sylvia Plath, Volume 1*. According to Van Dyne, "[Plath] was always Marilyn someplace inside." The second photo, by McKenna, would go on to be used for the image on Plath's

commemorative stamp and by the National Portrait Gallery for the pamphlet and lobby signage of the "One Life: Sylvia Plath" exhibit.

It is the third photo of the series, however, that elicited more emotional responses from patrons. This photo, where Plath is oriented to the left and gazing off her left shoulder, sparked a comment from a young woman who eventually conceded personal understanding of Plath's association between hair color and different personalities. Over the three days of observing the exhibit, the most moving interaction between Plath's personal effects and her contemporary audience occurred between this formal photograph of a brunette Plath and an 8-year-old young blonde boy, who appeared to be visiting the museum on a class trip. The boy noticed the photo, ran up to it, and stared for a while. After a few moments, he found his chaperone and reported to her: "She looks just like my mommy!" The boy's peers gathered around the case with Plath's typewriter ("What's that thing?") and open journal ("That's a girl's diary!"), while he continued to study the photo of Plath that resembled his mother. The boy lingered so long that he had to run to catch up with his classmates as they exited the gallery. Moss said of Plath that "a lot of her writing draws on images of mirrors and eyes that look outward and inward." It seems fitting, even poetic, that this young boy, the woman who was attached to being

blonde, and the young woman who loved paper dolls saw themselves or someone they love reflected in Plath.



Fig. 19, Plath with baby Frieda, 1961.

In the third and last section on the back wall, right of center, hangs two frames. As with the section containing Plath's three portrait photos, there is a framed black-and-white photograph situated above a framed typed document. The photo is the first appearance of Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath's husband, in the exhibit. Plath wears a white blouse, rendered radiant from the overexposed film; Hughes dons his signature dark corduroy jacket. The image was taken by Plath's brother in Paris, just after Sylvia and Ted's honeymoon in Benidorm, Spain, in 1956. Van Dyne noted in her lecture how the pair looks a bit stiff and uncomfortable, with Hughes's right arm draped around Plath and his hand clasped over her left shoulder. Below

this photo is a typed, creased, and wrinkled copy of "Pursuit," which Plath wrote about Hughes. As documented by her quick, round handwriting at the upper left corner of the page, Plath sold "Pursuit" to the Atlantic Monthly for \$50 in August 1956. As if reflecting Plath's brilliant white blouse in opposition to Hughes's darker clothing in the photo, the end of "Pursuit" reads: "...I rush from such assault of radiance."

The right-side wall of the gallery room is also divided into three distinct sections. The first and third sections form alcoves, while the wider middle third can appropriately be seen as a pregnant protrusion (see fig. 2). In the first alcove, on the far left, are four framed items. The first, clockwise from the left, is a black-and-white photo of Plath and Hughes in Yorkshire in 1956, in which both of them appear more comfortable and affectionate than in the photo before. They're both looking off to the right and dressed in white. Hughes's right arm is wrapped around Plath's waist and she's holding to his right hand with both of hers. It is the photo Erica Wagner used for the cover of her book, *Ariel's Gift*, and perhaps the antithesis of the photo Diane Middlebrook used for the cover of *Her Husband*, in which Hughes and Plath appear moody and are facing opposite directions.

Below the second image of a happy Plath and Hughes are the framed front sides of two pieces of paper, on which Plath typed the summary of her



notorious first encounter with Hughes — when she bit his cheek hard enough to draw blood. She opened this journal entry with: “A small note after a large orgy.” Two college-aged women huddled around this piece for several minutes, confiding in each other how “amazing” the story was: “She was so funny!” They took a moment to consider Hughes’s resemblance to American politician and former presidential candidate John Kerry. Next to these two frames are two more: a black-and-white picture of Plath in front of a bookcase in Cambridge, England, situated over a scrawled holograph of “Lady Lazarus,” written on pink paper in 1962.

The next section — the seemingly pregnant portion of the right wall — displays the first signs of Plath’s motherhood, starting with a typewritten “Morning Song,” dated February 19, 1961, by hand in the upper left corner. In the right corner is her typed name and address, which was then 3 Chalcot Square, London. Below the poem but in the same frame is a small black-and-white photo, offset to the left, of Plath wearing a braid around the crown of her head and holding her baby Frieda. Both are smiling. Beside this frame is an image of President Dwight “Ike” Eisenhower that Plath created, decoupage style, from magazine clippings. Beside Ike is a double frame with two versions of the same poem. The first version, typed on pink paper with many handwritten edits and

additions, is called “Elm.” To the right of the original is the copyedited version (with graphite strikes and notes, including “#4638” in red pencil at the bottom left), as it was accepted by *The New Yorker* and then renamed “The Elm Speaks.”

Above the three frames on the pregnant wall is the top of Plath’s writing desk from Court Green. The hulk of planed wood, complete with knotholes and stains and other signs of well-use, was originally cut by her brother to serve as a coffin lid. Van Dyne said, however, we should view Plath’s use of it as a “repurposing” rather than something ominous or “predictive.” In the front alcove — the last third of the left wall — just to the right of the gallery entrance, is a corner that contained Plath’s correspondence to friends after separating from Hughes. Snippets overheard in this nook include statements by two men: “She was only 30. Wow,” and “Her husband was dumping her.” As for the latter comment, we are reminded that, despite the strength and complexity of her enduring voice, Plath “still encounters misogyny,” as Van Dyne said. Plath — a woman whose husband rearranged the manuscript of *Ariel* she left behind, redacted large portions of her journals for publication, and claimed to have destroyed her final journal — still contends with the revisionist history of male dominance. The fact is that Plath was not “dumped;” she is the one who left Hughes upon discovering his

ongoing affair with their mutual friend, Assia Wevill, who was also married. The first letter in the series of Plath's correspondence is one from Dr. Beuscher (Plath's psychiatrist who wrote her Fulbright Scholarship recommendation letter), in which she encourages Plath to get a divorce, a good nanny, and a copy of Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*. Van Dyne shared in her lecture that Plath's annotated copy of *The Art of Loving* was later also annotated by Assia Wevill, Hughes's mistress-turned-mother-of-his-child after Plath's death. The frame to the right displays the front sides of letters Plath wrote to two of her Smith classmates. In one, addressed to Clarissa Roche on October 19, 1962, Plath describes her struggle with a "ghastly snoop scabby senile agency nanny" she hired for her children Frieda and Nicholas. Above these letters hangs the only color photograph in the exhibit, aside from the picture of Plath on the beach. The bright photo features Plath with Frieda and Nicolas at Court Green, where Plath and Hughes lived when they moved to Devon, England, in 1961. The three are surrounded by sunshine, blue skies, green grass, and still-bare trees. Plath is cradling baby Nicholas in her left arm while looking down at Frieda, who is sitting to her right. Frieda grasps a fat handful of butter-colored daffodils. In this image, Plath's "braids are back," noted Van Dyne. It is the picture of motherly love in the springtime. We can see in this

photo why Sylvia was inspired to use "love" and "spring," respectively, as the first and last words of *Ariel*.

Next, on the left-hand side of the front wall, rest the last relics of Sylvia's abbreviated life. Two hand-written poems, "Kindness" and "Balloons" (which Van Dyne called "the perfect pair") are followed by a brown-yellowed clipping of Plath's obituary, titled "A Poet's Epitaph." Plath's friend and poetry critic, Al Alvarez, printed this brief obituary in *The Observer* on February 17, 1963. Alvarez's short note about her death closes with the assertion that "the loss to literature is inestimable." Four of her poems ("Edge," "The Fearful," "Kindness," and "Contusion") ran as part of the obituary. The last frame on the walls of the gallery displays both the front and backsides of the commemorative stamp sheet that features Plath. The black-and-white headshots of twentieth-century poets (from left to right: Brodsky, Brooks, Williams, Hayden, Plath, Bishop, Stevens, Levertov, Cummings, and Roethke) are lined in white against an indigo background.

Moving away from the gallery walls, three cases in the center of the room surround the bell jar exhibit on all sides, except the one closest to the exhibit entryway. Two smaller cases sit to the left and right of the interactive display and another, wider one is positioned behind them, parallel to the back wall and perpendicular with the bell jars. In this large case, from left to

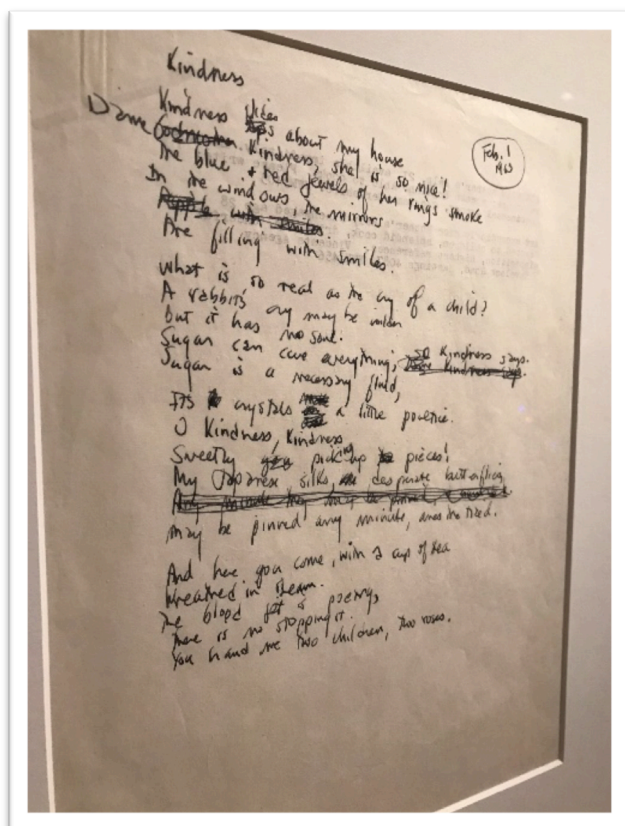


Fig. 20, (left). A holograph of "Kindness," dated February 1, 1963.

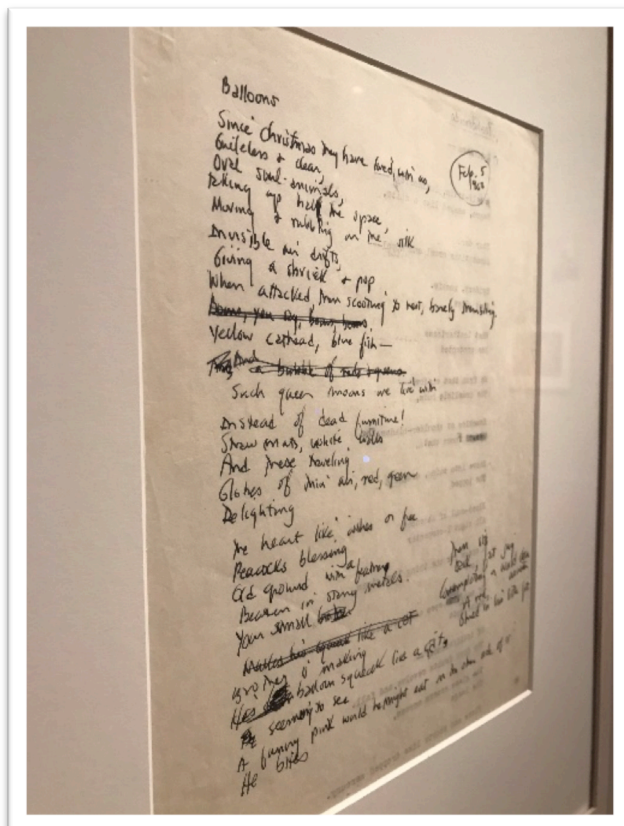


Fig. 21, (right). A holograph of "Balloons," dated February 5, 1963.

right, sat her Royal typewriter and a copy of "Dirge" (which was written using the typewriter). Her typewriter, looking rather militant with its umber-colored body and rifle green keys and white letters, served on more than one occasion as a technology lesson for children visiting the exhibit. "It's like a computer but it's just for writing," one woman said to the inquiring kids around her. "But where's the screen?" they wondered. "You put a piece of paper in it," she tried to explain, but the children had already lost interest and moved on to gawk at Sylvia's hair.

Plath's large, thick, handwritten journal is propped open in the same case, to the right of "Dirge." A dirge is

a like an elegy or a lament and is defined as a mournful song, making it an ideal poem selection to accompany the "Glass Heart (Bells for Sylvia Plath)" composition playing nearby. Inside her journal, we can see only the pages which contain a harsh, almost invective entry from January 10, 1953, that refers to a headshot she pasted in. Plath writes in no uncertain terms about how she felt dead inside when the photo was taken: "Look at that ugly dead mask here and do not forget it." To clarify, the entry does not read like a death wish; rather, it is a clear and urgent reminder of how she never wants to feel such numb despair ever again. Masks, and their relationship to identity,



are a recurring theme in her Unabridged Journals, in which she uses the word 28 times.

In the smaller leftmost case are the first two pages of the first chapter of her senior honors thesis, "The Magic Mirror: The Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels," written at Smith College (see fig. 3). In the case on the right is a copy of Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, open to a page on which Plath sketched a scene from a French café, which was likely drawn in either Paris or Nice. Both items serve as mirrors for Plath. In her thesis she academically explored her own psychological duality. In her sketch she included a picture of her own hand, "gripping a Sheaffer Lifetime fountain pen — the same kind of instrument she would use to boldly compose her subsequent poems," according to the exhibit's description.

Through "One Life: Sylvia Plath," not only are museumgoers offered the chance to reflect on their own cultures and reconsider the dominant narrative ascribed to Plath — the one in which the vibrancy of her life is overshadowed by the facts of her death — but they were also shown Plath's undeniable humanity and relatability. Plath, just like the rest of us, worked within the confines of her culture. "We are never outside of culture," said Van Dyne, of both Sylvia and her contemporary audience. She struggled to balance her darkness with her light. She questioned her identity ("Identity work is always

relational, embedded in families but informed by dominant cultural values," Van Dyne reminds us).

At her lecture, Van Dyne posed a question to her small audience (composed mostly of Smith alumnae, from a show of hands) for adjectives they believed describe Sylvia Plath. The responses were: passionate, conflicted, precise, solemn, and sensitive. One woman even shared how her view of Plath transformed after seeing the exhibit: "I see a sweetness now." Van Dyne seemed surprised by these answers because "no one said dark." Such an observation leaves us with the hope that, rather than her death having the last word, the public may still be willing to view Plath primarily through a lens that reflects her relatable and still-relevant life.

Moving away from the gallery walls, three cases in the center of the room surround the bell jar exhibit on all sides, except the one closest to the exhibit entryway. Two smaller cases sit to the left and right of the interactive display and another, wider one is positioned behind them, parallel to the back wall and perpendicular with the bell jars. In this large case, from left to right, sat her Royal typewriter and a copy of "Dirge" (which was written using the typewriter). Her typewriter, looking rather militant with its umber-colored body and rifle green keys and white letters, served on more than one occasion as a technology lesson for children visiting the exhibit. "It's like a computer but it's

just for writing," one woman said to the inquiring kids around her. "But where's the screen?" they wondered. "You put a piece of paper in it," she tried to explain, but the children had already lost interest and moved on to gawk at Sylvia's hair.

Plath's large, thick, handwritten journal is propped open in the same case, to the right of "Dirge." A dirge is a like an elegy or a lament and is defined as a mournful song, making it an ideal poem selection to accompany the "Glass Heart (Bells for Sylvia Plath)" composition playing nearby. Inside her journal, we can see only the pages which contain a harsh, almost invective entry from January 10, 1953, that refers to a headshot she pasted in. Plath writes in no uncertain terms about how she felt dead inside when the photo was taken: "Look at that ugly dead mask here and do not forget it." To clarify, the entry does not read like a death wish; rather, it is a clear and urgent reminder of how she never wants to feel such numb despair ever again. Masks, and their relationship to identity, are a recurring theme in her Unabridged Journals, in which she uses the word 28 times.

In the smaller leftmost case are the first two pages of the first chapter of her senior honors thesis, "The Magic Mirror: The Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels," written at Smith College (see fig. 3). In the case on the right is a copy of Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*,

open to a page on which Plath sketched a scene from a French café, which was likely drawn in either Paris or Nice. Both items serve as mirrors for Plath. In her thesis she academically explored her own psychological duality. In her sketch she included a picture of her own hand, "gripping a Sheaffer Lifetime fountain pen — the same kind of instrument she would use to boldly compose her subsequent poems," according to the exhibit's description.

Through "One Life: Sylvia Plath," not only are museumgoers offered the chance to reflect on their own cultures and reconsider the dominant narrative ascribed to Plath — the one in which the vibrancy of her life is overshadowed by the facts of her death — but they were also shown Plath's undeniable humanity and relatability. Plath, just like the rest of us, worked within the confines of her culture. "We are never outside of culture," said Van Dyne, of both Sylvia and her contemporary audience. She struggled to balance her darkness with her light. She questioned her identity ("Identity work is always relational, embedded in families but informed by dominant cultural values," Van Dyne reminds us).

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*The photos that accompany this article were taken by Jaclyn DeVore and Jose Lopez Jr. and have been used with permission.*

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