

*Plath Profiles*

# Memoir

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# Unresolute, Unsimple, Unstill:

## The Runaway Legacy of Sylvia Plath

by Julia Smith

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### Whiteness I Remember (1958)

*Whiteness being what I remember  
About Sam: whiteness and the great run  
He gave me. I've gone nowhere since but  
Going's been tame deviation. White,  
Not of heraldic stallions: off-white  
Of the stable horse whose history's  
Humdrum, unexceptionable, his  
Tried sobriety hiring him out  
To novices and to the timid.  
Yet the dapple toning his white down  
To safe gray never grayed his temper.*

I remember myself at 15 years old: Kristen and I sit in front of our mostly filled plates and joke about suffragettes.

"You know," I point out, "the nurses glare at us, but there's nothing to be ashamed of just because you have a tube stuck up your nose. Didn't that lady Susan B. Anthony get one of them too? And women can vote because of her."

Kristen giggles, the corners of her mouth tugging at the spaghetti yellow catheter that streams from her

nose. My tube is bigger, and if it were not for the fact that I am shorter and thus permitted to weigh less than her, I would be jealous that hers was thinner. At this point, we have not gone to school for months, and our strong suits have dwindled to cutting apples into fingernail-sized pieces and doing leg lifts behind the couches in the day room when the nurses aren't looking.

A year later, we meet up in New York City. Each of us has gained some weight, has a little more cheek in our

smiles, has gone back to school again. I tell her about a book I read over the summer, and how its author was also a poet whose work she needed to read right away.

"What's her name?" Kristen asks.

"Sylvia Plath. Have you heard of her?" I ask.

"Oh, of course—I love her!" she exclaims.

In "Good Readers and Good Writers," Vladimir Nabokov singles out the "comparatively lowly kind" of imagination a reader exercises when "a situation in a book is intensely felt because it reminds us of something that happened to us or to someone we know or knew." The greatest sin of all is for a reader to appreciate a book because "he identifies himself with a character." A supreme reader, on the other hand, will use "impersonal imagination" and revel in "artistic delight," "passionately enjoy, enjoy with tears and shivers, the inner weave of a given masterpiece" (4).

When I think of the "lowly kind" of reader, I think of Kristen and myself. Part of why we had felt Sylvia Plath's work so "intensely" was because the rawness and conflict she conveyed through her words reminded us of something that happened to us. We still feel, and Plath's work still reminds us of our personal pain. But I do not think that this subordinates us to those who

read Plath, as Nabokov advises, on a purely abstract level. It is precisely because she knows "the bottom," as Plath writes in "Elm," that she does not "fear it." Nabokov forgets that one can experience a work of literature on an emotional, personal level and at the same time appreciate its "inner weave."

Perhaps Nabokov wasn't even referring to us in the first place – he speaks of his proverbial reader with "he" pronouns, and we were young women. Or, maybe, we simply embodied both kinds of readers: though the recognition of Plath's artistic method and genius did not strike us upon the first read, it did the second time around, and, as Nabokov himself declared in that very lecture, all good readers are re-readers.

I am 15, going on 16, years old: I read Plath over and over again, fill myself with a stanza every night as regularly as I take my newfangled antidepressant pills. No longer surrounded by people like Kristen, and enveloped in the raw loneliness of trying to reclaim a self I am unconvinced existed to begin with, I arm myself with a cache of facts and metaphors: that her favorite lipstick was Revlon's "Cherries in the Snow," that she was self-conscious of her 5'9" height and always wore "flat heels", that she was an amateur apiarist. That in the riddle-like poem fittingly titled "Metaphors," a pregnant Plath imagines herself as a "melon on two tendrils," which is

sometimes how I feel even though I am not pregnant. That, in "Cut," she describes the pain of slicing her thumb instead of an onion as a "thrill." I ricochet from *The Bell Jar* to *Ariel* and *The Colossus* at the same velocity I fell into my previous pattern of restriction, in an effort to reconstruct the most palpable identity I can see. I learn to dance by standing on somebody else's feet, memorizing each step and movement. To build Sylvia Plath from the mental archive I've amassed on her is to have something, someone, that no one – no hospital, no nurse, no plateful of food – can take away from me.

Is there a more accurate blueprint of the artist than the artist's own work?

**When I meet Judy Richter** for the first time, she offers me tea and madeleines. "I thought we could indulge in something a little Proustian, us English majors."

I stumbled upon Judy after my mom, who was catching up with a neighbor at a block party, happened to mention that I go to Smith, and the neighbor said, "Your daughter's probably too young to appreciate this, but I know a Smithie who was a student of Sylvia Plath's." My mom told him he was mistaken, and texted me her contact information from the party. I immediately reached out to her and we talked on the phone and set up a time to meet in person. During our phone

conversation, she told me about her involvement with the Smith Equestrian Team as a student, and that her favorite pastime at Smith became a lifelong career.

Judy and I sit down in her living room, encircled by bookcases teeming with volumes on poetry, horsemanship, and politics, at a small table with a copy of Sylvia Plath's *Unabridged Journals* in the corner like a fixture. Judy lives in Bedford, New York, the heart of Westchester County horse country, and runs a horse farm herself. Although she lives five minutes from one of Martha Stewart's seasonal houses, her home is modest, enough to hold her prolific book collection and five dogs. It is filled with horse memorabilia, all leather and metal bits from bridle and framed photos of show horses. Outside the window is the barn where the horses live, and beside that, the field hemmed in white fence that glows even whiter when the grass cushions it in the summer.

As I stir some honey into my blackcurrant tea, I learn that in addition to managing an equestrian center, Judy harvests honey. Like the farm, the honey bears the name "Coker," the name of her first horse, the one she rode at Smith. "So you have bees, like Sylvia Plath did!" I point out, and she nods, her eyes sparkling through the steam of her tea.

I remind Judy of the conversation we had on the phone, during which she described how her freshman year

English professor, Sylvia Plath, and Plath's husband, Ted Hughes, used to dine at her dorm every Thursday night. I'm eager to see if any new details come to mind.

"We'd always secretly believed they came because they enjoyed our company – we were intelligent and interesting to talk to." Two other students in her dorm were also in her literature course, and both adored their professor as much as Judy did. She symbolized all they were capable of: graduating Smith, studying at Cambridge, and maybe even finding a brilliant, like-minded British husband.

"And they were the most admirable couple – after they left, we'd all huddle around the kitchen window to watch them walk, hand-in-hand, back to their apartment on Elm Street. They were the smartest couple we'd ever known."

"It wasn't until years later, when the Unabridged Journals came out, that we learned they simply wanted a free meal." By then, Judy's unforgettable professor, whose class had convinced her to become an English major, had died, and her husband had settled down with another woman.

It was also then that she discovered her professor had struggled with depression. "It was a total shock to me when I heard that Sylvia had killed herself." Neither she nor her friends, however, were shocked to learn of Hughes's infidelity. "We'd always known he was a philanderer."

Elizabeth, another Plath fan I talk to, is not much younger than Judy, but she is young enough that when she arrived at Smith for her freshman year in 1964, the famed alumna was already gone. Though her first year English professor was not Sylvia Plath, he did mention her name in passing. None of Plath's writing made it on to the syllabus, but Elizabeth was beguiled. Once she heard that a fellow "Smith girl" – to quote Plath's terminology from a 1950 letter to her mother – (and in theory not much older than herself) had become a writer and married an English poet, Elizabeth was forever "attracted to the flame."

"I was 17 years old and away from home for the first time. As far as I knew, I was going to live in Greenwich Village and write poetry and wear black all the time." Perhaps Elizabeth was destined to fall in love with Plath at that moment in history. Much like Esther Greenwood, Sylvia Plath's largely autobiographical protagonist in *The Bell Jar*, she was disgusted by the events unfolding in the world around her – Esther by the state-sanctioned electrocution of the Rosenbergs, and Elizabeth by the assassination of JFK, black voter suppression, and the Vietnam war. "What was going on in the world, in the country, pervaded every bit of my consciousness."

I think of Karen Kukil, the Associate Curator of the Special Collections and editor of Plath's

unabridged journals, because her Plath craze began in college, too. She took a literature seminar in which she learned to read her work psychoanalytically, “as if the writing were a dream,” and was instantly riveted. But, unlike Elizabeth, a casual Plath fan who reads and admires her poetry in her spare time, Karen has since spent her professional (and, partly, personal) life researching Plath’s biography and making her work accessible to all. Although Karen never actually met Plath, I would argue that she is one of the closest people alive to “knowing” her. Along with fellow Plath scholar Peter Steinberg, she organized, read and transcribed thousands of letters written by Plath from age seven until a week before her death. They comprise two volumes, the second of which was published in November, and each are over 1,000 pages. She and Steinberg estimate there are about 700 letters “unaccounted for,” likely destroyed by recipients who could never have predicted the future value of a simple thank-you note or birthday card.

Karen always makes sure to discuss the paradox of Plath’s legacy – how, despite her reputation for her dark tone and subject matter, she was an effervescent person who delighted in simple pleasures like a flouncy skirt and the color red. She had an insatiable appetite, in both the literal and abstract sense of the word: she loved food, excelled at baking orange chiffon pies and eating caviar, and she loved to

travel and acquire new experiences, exploring France and Spain during her Fulbright fellowship. She also hated feeling isolated, as Karen emphasizes when she talks about Plath’s loathing of the barren English countryside after she and Ted moved there from London.

Judy has written several books, from riding manuals to memoirs. In one of them, there is a chapter on the “pulley rein,” a maneuver used in order to force the horse to stop if the rider loses control. She mentions “the most famous person” whom she has taught the technique: Sylvia Plath, when she was her literature professor in the late fifties. During office hours one day, Plath tried to assuage Judy’s anxiety by sharing the draft of a poem she had been working on:

*I see him one-tracked, stubborn, white  
horse,  
First horse under me, high as the roofs,  
His near trot pitching my tense poise  
up,  
Unsteady the steady-rooted green  
Of country hedgerows and cow  
pastures  
To a giddy jog. Then for ill will  
Or to try me he suddenly set  
Green grass streaming, houses a river  
Of pale fronts, straw thatchings, the  
hard road  
An anvil, hooves four hammers to jolt  
Me off into their space of beating,*

*Stirrups undone, and decorum. And*

Wouldn't slow for the hauled reins, his name,  
 Or shouts of walkers: crossed traffic  
 Stalling curbside at his oncoming,  
 The world subdued to his run of it.

"I read the poem and said, 'your problem is that you don't know the pulley rein. Once you learn that, you won't ever get run away with again.'"

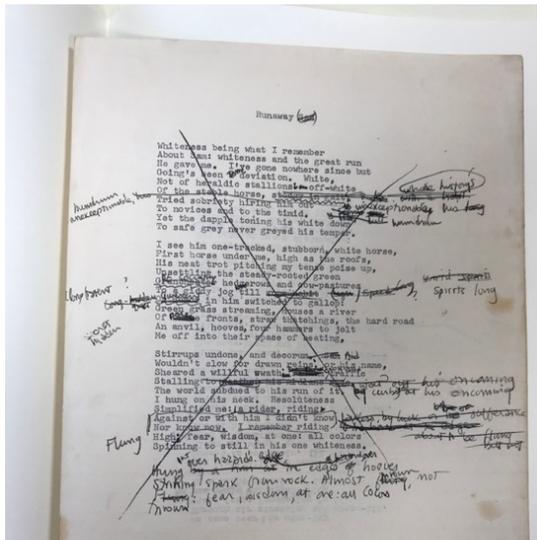


Fig. 1. The first draft of Plath's poem, "Whiteness I Remember," originally titled "Runaway Sam." Despite her handwritten notes and edits, the poem remained mostly the same in its final version. Courtesy of the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College

So, early one spring morning, the two met up at the stables. Plath wore jeans and a ponytail. "We didn't wear hard hats back then," Judy says, referring to riding helmets.

Though not yet a well-known poet, Plath was still "intimidating": she wore her hair in a "schoolmarmish" bun every day, went by "Mrs. Hughes," and assigned her first-year students both Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young*

Man and Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in the same semester. Only to learn a riding trick from a student did she demote her customary bun to a more casual ponytail.



Fig. 2. The Smith College English Department in 1958, with Plath at the center of the back row. At that time, she was called "Mrs. Hughes." Courtesy of the Sophia Smith Collection

Judy demonstrated first. Then Plath mounted, and Judy never forgot what her professor said next: "If we cannot even control our horses, how can we control our lives." Though phrased like a question, it was more of a declaration. She did not get off the horse until she had mastered the skill, when she felt sure that she would never get run off with again. Or, at least, that she would know what to do if she were run off with.

A rigid, rule-abiding professor, Plath admired the simplicity one could glean from horseback riding and apply to the broader world: control your horse with "calm assertiveness," as Judy calls it, and you'll be able to get the better of life. It reads like an equestrian self-help manual. Surely, Plath was not somebody who liked her "world" – the

reality she meticulously sought to encapsulate in her poetry and in letters to her mother and friends – “subdued to his run of it.” Whether the “run of” that world belonged to her horse, her husband, her critics, or the depression she succumbed to at 30, she preferred to hold the reins, with composure and control.



Fig. 3. Judy riding her horse, Coker.  
*Courtesy of Judy Richter*

My minimal knowledge of horses comes in handy during my conversations with Judy. A year before I met Kristen, I gave up horseback riding after five years of lessons to join my school’s cross-country team, because I’d reasoned that running would burn more calories than riding. Even though I’d learned to trot, jump, and canter, I had never gotten the hang of leading a horse by its bridle without getting my feet stepped on, or convincing it to stop completely no matter how hard I pulled on the reins. Originally suggested by my mother to relieve my anxiety, riding terrified me, because I knew not even my straightest posture or firm handling could convince a horse I was in

command. “Be the Queen of Sheba!” she would shout from the bench outside the ring, and I would feign poise and sit up in the saddle, praying the horse would not suddenly bolt off. I doubt the words “calm” or “assertive” were even in my vocabulary at the time.

A couple of weeks after cracking historically inaccurate jokes about Susan B. Anthony, whom I would later learn was not in fact a hunger-striking suffragist, I ran into Kristen by coincidence at a different, inpatient hospital in New York. It was a collegiate-looking Kirkbride building, with a “children’s cottage,” a pool, a tennis court, male nurses, and a ward for wealthy patients who wanted to pay extra to sit in the Berkshire chairs out front. We stayed in the adolescent eating disorders ward, where the thermostat was set to a perpetual 76 degrees Fahrenheit and where dental floss and spiral notebooks were not allowed.

We laughed at the women in the adjacent adult ward who said they were 50 but who looked 80, and at Kate, the twenty-something who, apparently, had once been a thriving law student at NYU. She would pace the hallway for hours on end, wearing a pink NYU sweatshirt over her hospital gown, mouth moving soundlessly with each step. I later learned that she had not been sedated at all, as Kristen and I had assumed – her brain had simply deteriorated to the point where she

could no longer make eye contact or speak in full sentences. I wondered if her parents ever came to visit her, if she could sit down for more than two minutes, if her periwinkle-socked feet had to beat the waxed wood floor as long as her heart beat in her ribcage.

As I read *The Bell Jar* a few months later, I thought of Kate. Did she ever hate the “old brag” of her heart, as Esther describes it before her interview to leave the hospital? Despite her attempts to silence it, Esther’s heart persisted when she least wanted. It was surprising that after everything Kate had put the little organ through, after years spent starving it of nutrients and oxygen, her heart still beat on, like Esther’s.

“Did I tell you about my appearance in the journals?” Judy asks.

“Yes,” I say, thinking back to our first phone conversation, when she told me about her “four lines of fame.”

She’d said she was on page 312: “See here,” she began, and I could hear her fumbling for the 700-page volume she seemed to keep on hand at all times. “‘Judy Hofmann’ – that was my name as a student – ‘in jodpuhrs [sic], heavy-boned, pale-blue-ringed eyes, white or plaid wool shirts, wiry brown hair.’” She took a breath. I held mine. “‘Her writing careful, big. Not enough.’” “Were you offended?” I’d asked. “Not really, because it was true.” she’d replied.

I’d wondered if she’d had the number “312” engraved on a golden amulet, or moved into a house with the number in its address, or calculated the cost of her groceries to add up to a factor of 312. Or if the fact that she made it into Plath’s journals was what she shared about herself at cocktail parties.

I know for sure that if I’d had Plath, or “Mrs. Hughes,” as a professor, I would have been paralyzed by her sheer intellectual radiance and expectation. Judy shows me her notebook from Plath’s literature class, and it is filled with notes in neat, bubbly

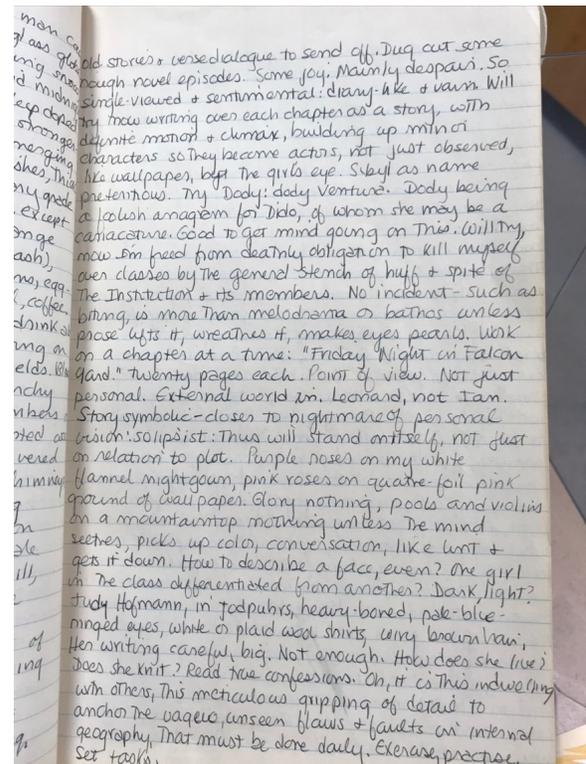


Fig. 4. The page in Plath’s journal on which Judy is mentioned. Plath’s description of Judy becomes an exercise in what she calls, towards the bottom of the page, “this meticulous gripping of detail to anchor the vague, unseen flaws + faults in internal geography.”  
*Courtesy of the Sophia Smith Collection*

cursive – “careful, big” – on William James’s religious theory of Good and Evil and Irish nationalism. It seems that missing one class would be equivalent to missing six pages of notes.

At times, I try to pinpoint at what moment in my life I discovered Sylvia Plath, as if it were a pick-up stick, and pulling that one out would cause the whole contraption to collapse. I think of the day I read the summer reading list for my tenth grade English class, and had to choose one book out of eight to read. At first I leaned towards *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, by Junot Díaz. But then, as I read the rest of the options, I was drawn to the image of a blue book cover with Mary Janes on it. The back cover described a young woman who struggles with depression and ends up in a psych ward. Looking back, the blurb makes the book sound dull and plotless, but it felt undeniably relevant. Relatable. A situation that, in the words of Nabokov, I could “feel intensely,” that would end the numbness of grieving something irrevocable lost, because it would “remind me of something that happened to myself.”

When I checked out the book at the local library, the librarian said, “This book ruined my beach vacation when I first read it in high school.” The other librarians sighed, collectively remembering their first times. I shrugged and left, wondering how a

book could ever “ruin” anything. Nevertheless, their testimonies did not deter me. I still wonder how a book could be anything but an apparent waste of time, and I still have not gotten around to reading Junot Díaz.

*I hung on his neck. Resoluteness  
Simplified me: a rider, riding  
Hung out over the hazard, over hooves  
Loud on earth's bedrock. Almost  
thrown, not  
Thrown: fear, wisdom, at one: all colors  
Spinning to still in his one whiteness.*

When I tell people about my obsession with Sylvia Plath – somehow or another she always finds her way into the conversation, so I must introduce her – I receive skeptical, and sometimes concerned, looks. They see my aspiration to walk beside her footsteps as an attempt to walk in them, as an automatic endorsement of her life, and, inevitably, her death. “Just don’t go down the same path!” they say, in ambiguous, slightly condescending, slightly mocking tones.

I always point out how she siphoned the most from life, rode horses through the moors even though she preferred London to the countryside, got up early to write so she wouldn’t be distracted when the kids woke up. Now, I can add that she even asked one of her students to teach her a riding technique. I am still prepared for the blank stares I usually receive, but, ultimately, what could be more “calm

and assertive" than to methodically seal every doorframe with wet washcloths and leave out food for the children? What could be more ingenious than to anticipate the most instantaneous repercussions of a tragedy?

The question of whether there is a better blueprint of the artist than the artist's own work stumps me nonetheless. In Plath's case, I believe the artist's work is just one layer of that blueprint; the rest lies within her journals, her letters, the poems she scrawled on the backs of manuscripts, the shading in her sketches of Ted, the thoughtfulness with which she baked cookies for her children. Multifaceted, a pastiche of myths and lived experiences, a horse impossible to handle. Perhaps we will never have a blueprint – after all, at least 700 letters remain missing. Perhaps we were bound to be abandoned in the dust of her gallop from the moment Plath wrote her first poem. Perhaps she is the flame that draws us in, but whose light will never completely illuminate what we want to see.

Sylvia Plath left this world the same way she spent her time on it: conscientiously, compassionately, selflessly, unyieldingly. Hanging on its neck, but holding up her own. Now, she's left us to hang on the neck, sturdy yet slippery, of her legacy, to sort the flesh-and-blood horse from its whiteness. Subduing our world to her run of it. She: un-simplified, un-still. She and us both: a rider, runaway.

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