

The Speciality of the Photograph:

Caught in Time - Sylvia's Court Green

by Dr. Gail Crowther

*'One day quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realised then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: "I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor."'*¹



Court Green, Devon, April 1963. Copyright Estate of Elizabeth Sigmund

One of my favourite tasks when writing a book

¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 3.

is choosing photographs. There is something so solid and singular about an image. This fleeting slice of history (for surely as soon as the photograph is taken it is already history) evokes and informs. While I was writing my latest book, *Three-Martini Afternoons at the Ritz: The Rebellion of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton*, it felt as important to me to depict places as much as people. One problem with places, however, is that they have a tendency to change. Houses are knocked down or extended. Towns are re-designed and re-planned. Whole streets can disappear. Often it is difficult to see a place through the eyes of the time you are writing about. As Roland Barthes claimed in the epitaph above, incredulously, an image can make you realise that a gaze can be frozen in history. You, as a viewer may be locked out of that time forever, and the closest you can get will be meeting the visual *has-beenness* of a secondary image.

Sylvia Plath's Devon home, Court Green, has changed in many ways over the years. It is much smarter. The garden is managed and manicured. The inside corridor running from front to back door that was paved with cobbles from Napoleonic days, has been altered to contain a ninety-degree angle. Plath's famously

photographed sitting room where she was pictured in front of red fireplace on a red rug, is now a kitchen. The thatch which Plath described as a spider-dropping mess, is now tidy and intact. Some things, however, have stayed the same. The “wall of old corpses” that separate the garden from the adjoining churchyard are still there.² Plath’s daffodils bloom every spring covering Court Green’s lawns in a primrose-yellow loveliness. Her cobbled courtyard, that once contained the tail-trail of a pheasant in the snow, is surrounded by the house on one side and a collection of outbuildings on the other.

Photographs taken in Plath’s day show fragmented glimpses inside and outside of her home. Her red, sitting room window-seat, her bookshelves, her black, horse-hair, Victorian chair, a beaming, heavily pregnant Plath in 1961 holding Frieda at a yellow-painted front door. Until recently the oldest picture I had seen of Court Green’s entire exterior dated from 1972. These images taken on a visit by Plath’s previous American editor Frances McCullough show a rather battered house and garden.³ More excitingly, the elms are visible, rising from the shoulder of the Roman mound with their “strangle of branches”⁴ and Plath’s black, Morris station wagon is parked up in the court. These photographs are evocative not only because they capture certain things that Plath owned or wrote about, but because they take us further back in time, further away from the present and closer to the *thenness* of Plath. They still, however, were taken nearly a decade after her death.

In 2019 sitting in a London kitchen with William Sigmund and two large folders of material in front of us, I was about to see an image of Court Green that would become one of the favourite

2 See Plath’s poem “Letter in November”, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 253.

3 These images can be viewed in my co-authored book *These Ghostly Archives: The Unearthing of Sylvia Plath* (Stroud: Fonthill, 2017).

4 See Plath’s poem “Elm”, *Collected Poems*, 193.

pictures I chose for my book. Taken in April 1963 by Elizabeth Sigmund, the back of Court Green is photographed just weeks after Plath’s death. There are so many Barthian *punctums* popping out of this image that I struggle to describe them all.⁵ The first feature that I noticed was the terrible state of the thatch. Much more in keeping with Plath’s description, and this is especially evident beneath the chimney in the far right of the frame. It was while I was looking at this, that my eyes wandered slightly lower, hitting the very edge of the shot, and I realised that for the first time, I was seeing the window to Ted Hughes’s attic study under the eaves of the thatch. How an image makes ghosts flare into being! Suddenly I recalled Plath’s letter to Ruth Beuscher about her discovery of love poems written by Hughes to Assia Wevill on his desk in this room. Olwyn Hughes described a passage from Plath’s “missing” journal in which she writes about reading these love poems, standing at this window, looking into the courtyard, crying, and realising that her marriage is over. Here in this photograph we are standing on the outside of the room looking up, looking in. I felt my misplaced-by-time gaze bump up against Plath’s figure, still there, looking out, in some weird sort of time-shift, all mediated by a photographic piece of paper. This temporal shock, the piercing fractured chronology, is perfectly described by Barthes who says that as well as details, photographs can also contain “[t]his new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (“that-has-been”), its pure representation.”⁶ Plath’s *has-been* is immortalized, or as she might say “pinned and anesthetized”.⁷

5 Barthes defined a *punctum* as a detail in a photograph that leaps out at us unexpectedly and pierces the soul.

6 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.

7 See Plath’s poem “Kindness”, *Collected Poems*, 269.

We also see, in shadow, the ancient back door into the house, the same door that the postman would knock upon, open, and casually throw mail onto the cobbled corridor floor. Above this door we see the multiple-paned window of the spare bedroom where Nicholas Farrar Hughes was born and which looked across the court yard to the elms. The window to the left of the back door is the second kitchen where Plath kept her washing machine and sink. Further to the left the adjoining building contained the long room above the garage that Plath intended to renovate into living quarters for a permanent nanny for the children.

The reason that I love this photograph is because it allows us see Court Green as Plath would have seen it, as she wrote about it, as it appears in her poems, prose, and letters. Time is immobilized and our gaze can travel back to meet hers for one untenable, seemingly impossible, moment.

WORKS CITED

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