

# Inject me, infect me:

## *origins of the Sivvy and Ted COVID*

### *poems*

by Crystal Hurdle

Plath was of little use to me at the beginning of the pandemic. March 2020 brought unknowing. Under lockdown, I wondered if I would return to the university classroom to teach. Would my book be published later spring as planned? Writing allowed me some solace through naming, putting a shape to my dread. On Easter Sunday, hit with a series of images, I began work on 'covidpoems,' so titled for two weeks before separating them into discrete pieces. Many featured a narrator close to me or, worse, the person I feared COVID and its restrictions might turn me into. I was home fulltime, teaching online (dreaded more than infection), the main pleasure of forty years of teaching the face-to-face contact. My husband, after a few days of working from home, decided that his all-but empty office building was as safe as anywhere (especially with an edgy wife at home).

As many did, I spent time decluttering, still hopeful that our kitchen reno would go ahead in May 2020 (still waiting). My "Sparking" puts a violent spin on it:

Marie advises us to declutter  
I think of the chopsticks, the stiletto heels  
already discarded on her say-so  
If I'm not too sentimental  
  
I'd love to bring those bayonets back  
how penetrating in skin so soft

desperate times call for desperate measures  
war measures, so tidy

life-changing  
sparking joy

A recovering quilter, I experimented with mask-making, following an on-line *Good Housekeeping* video, regretting anew that *Ladies Home Journal* (a Plath fave, as mine) had bitten the dust. I soon gave up, completing only four of the fiddly things. The resultant poem, "Mask with Blades," features a pivoting seamstress crafting home-made non-medical masks, next to the body of her dead-for-days husband:

and I think of my scissors  
the pretty pearl-handled ones you gave me  
  
on our thirtieth wedding anniversary  
dulled from hacking at my incorrigible hair  
  
and rust-bloodied from having stabbed you a  
day ago

The wedding scissors are reminiscent of Plath's.

Some humour had to come in, too, to relieve the tension. When coffee shops reopened, their washrooms did not. Result, other than a strained bladder, was "Peeing in the Park with Brian: a Post-COVID-Isolation Outing Poem incorporating Brian's requests with some magical realism thrown

in for good measure." I wanted to lighten things up for my friend, a recent widower, though little was funny:

We're peeing while social distancing  
 still talking, communing with nature  
 An ant struggles to right itself in the new  
 freshets  
 but he is borne away by the rising yellow tide  
 COVID collateral damage  
 and then Brian's thin trickle becomes a rivulet  
 then a ravaging river  
 our piddle refuses to socially distance

I kept thinking of coupledness and the intensity of being together. Friends working from home with their spouses bemoaned how loud the other's voice was and how difficult to Zoom teach in the same house. I envied those under the house arrest of big families. One friend was "bubbling" not only with her husband, but also their adult son, his partner, and two tenants, alternating festive dinners cooked by each. A walk with my husband through a nature conservancy with its new, strange signage about staying apart the width of an eagle's span spawned "Distance":

You and I continue to walk  
 the imaginary eagle between us  
 a head like a revolving owl's  
 it directs its severe gaze between one of us  
 and then the other  
 its cowl as golden as today's unseasonable  
 sun  
 its feathers intricate shiny spikes, small bones

(Note the bird imagery, which comes later in "Riding.")

And then Sivvy proper came crashing in the COVID poem series. I recoil from sick friends who, unable to hear with plugged-up ears, lean in ever closer. I thought of Plath who, when she could feel the onset of sinusitis, used the narrow window she had in which to party hardy. I drafted

what was first called "Typhoid Sivvy."

Peter Steinberg's post about removal of hardened snot under the desks at Smith College, tested to identify any as Plath's (!), delighted me even when I (belatedly) realized it was an April Fool's joke. Clearly not the only one interested in the grotesque ;), I capitalized on the mucous of sinusitis in the poem, as I had the scatological in "Peeing in the Park." Thinking of mathematical doubling, vectors of transmission, I recalled a shampoo commercial from my youth that resembled a Zoom screen, which I was seeing too much of. How applicable it would be to Plath's wonderful hair.

The poem grew from a focus on her alone to her and Ted: "Isolating with COVID Sivvy." The gyres of Yeats' "The Second Coming" were on my mind as I edited my poem with the same title, completing proofs on *Sick Witch*, whose anticipated May first publication date had come and gone. An early draft of Yeats' poem had the subheadings 'Evidence' and 'Prediction,' so with "COVID Sivvy," I tried these and others ('prognosis,' 'projection,' and 'prophecy') but soon got rid of them, impossible to separate cause from effect in the *Groundhog Day* pandemic world when undulations have replaced linear forward movement.

An occasional newspaper column called "Staying in with ... [name of a local celebrity]" allowed me to think more about the effects of lockdown. The star of our cancelled summer Shakespeare festival mentioned complete and sudden loss of income. Other celebrities spoke of cooking and gardening more, with, of note, several writers admitting their day-to-day lives had not much changed. Questions included "Where are you spending most of your time? Who are you with? What is something that you are doing that you don't normally do? What are you doing for exercise? What worries you? If and when it ends, what will be different?"

Summer happened. The pandemic continued. I prebooked a lane for outdoor swimming and arrived in my bathing suit as change rooms were closed. Many of my COVID poems were published. Dreading further online teaching, I

finally decided to retire early. I drove through the dawn-quiet midday streets, devoid of customary Vancouver traffic (even the cyclists were not venturing out) to drop off final proofs. I submitted "Staying in with COVID Sivvy" to *Plath Profiles* the last day of July, coincidentally, the day I turned in my office keys and my beloved yoga studio shut forever, victim of the pandemic. So many closings! The poem was soon given a qualified rejection: "[W]e liked the premise of the poem, but felt that it needed some additional work... [W]e are currently in the moment of the poem, and it may not be applicable in 2021 ...."

Disappointing, but fortunately, I had other fish to fry. *Sick Witch* was published late August. Newly retired, I reveled in the expansiveness of writing time, working on two novels. About my draft mystery, a critiquing friend deplored my "fascination (fixation? obsession?) with Plath and Hughes." Similarly, of my novel, he said, "Plath seems intrusive, somehow doesn't feel integrated into / integral to [the protagonist] as a character." This was a wakeup call. As much as I loved Sivvy, I had to excise her from my fiction. (Not that she would go away. She's tenacious as fuck.)

With the October Zoom launch of *Sick Witch*, I introduced "Typhoid Mary Speaks aboard the Shanghaied Ship," by mentioning Plath's infectious actions as sickness descended. She was clearly still on my mind. Reading children's biographies of famous authors, I wondered if one about Plath was possible, so revisited her background and then Hughes' as well. "Caw Caw Caaaw! Crow in the Mirror: Notes towards a Picture-less Picture Book for Kiddies About the poets Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath that Probably Can Never be Written\*" is perhaps more parody for adults than bio for children.

Throughout her life, Sylvia had low points when she found it hard to smile, even if people told her to take that frown and turn it upside down. That comment doesn't always help when people have depression, which is when sadness is very deep and goes on for a long time. She was very driven and put lots of

pressure on herself, which is not a good thing to do. It is better to be kind to yourself, to treat yourself like your best friend. A young psychiatrist, Ruth Beuscher, helped by getting her to talk about her problems. Sylvia was able to write about her black moods, which was helpful. It is always good to use your words. So, use your words.

Plath's depression weighed on me. All her calibrations and calculation, her planning and discipline in arranging her time, in sending work to publishers, would be for naught in pandemic times.

Lockdown waves (gyres?) continued. More restrictions. In-person yoga classes disappeared. The grim statistics persisted: case counts, hospitalizations, deaths, mutant strains. As with many, there were no celebrations for my November birthday. South of the border, which had been closed for months, what was happening with Trump? The world, already crazy, had gone madder. An antidote was reading Heather Clark's brilliant biography of Plath, chased with a shooter of Rollyson.

I spent the first Christmas ever without my father and sister, in across-the-strait Victoria (though it might well have been on the moon), at home with my husband, in North Vancouver. No inessential travel was allowed between various BC health regions, so holidays were without usual traditions, family, friends. Our house reeked of bleach as much as chocolate gingerbread with eggnog icing. Abuse against women was on the rise, as was divorce. I wondered how those in unhappy marriages were able to cope, especially if their shared space was small. A news article polled what people liked (!) about the pandemic. Some said it provided a good excuse for not seeing people they disliked. I immediately thought that, with such reasoning, Plath would be able to keep Aurelia away from her on pandemic grounds, but tensions would be heightened in her and Ted's two-person bubble.

One very wet January weekend, I walked along the raging Capilano River, into which I've 'dipped' in the summer. A friend and I watched a heron

alight and depart, circling: visionary. Her entire family in Russia had been stricken by COVID. How different things were country to country. New variants were on the rise. International travel had been prohibited for months... Plath had been in different countries. Yes, there was more to say about Plath in a pandemic.

My mentor's widow said she was glad he had been spared the pandemic, having died just before, though I bemoaned his loss. My husband and I said the same about his mother. How awkward she would have been adjusting a mask smeared with her bright lipstick. I recalled friend Brian's wife having narrowly missed the pandemic because of her March death. Was dying better than going through the crisis? Why should Plath have missed it? I'd written before in "Blood Jet" about her having "escaped" menopause. Perhaps, she *deserved* to go through the pandemic?

As in the early 'covidpoems,' the raw material for the Riding sequence came in a flurry, thirteen pages of single-spaced handwritten text on a day that also saw me sewing an apron from a man's dress shirt and completing some collages. Domesticated and artsy/craftsy, did I channel Plath? Ambrose Bierce's definition of marriage is "The state or condition of a community consisting of a master, a mistress, and two slaves, making all, two." How heightened wedlock (a jail?) has become through COVID. The famously small places (cells?) in which Plath/Hughes had lived. And so it began.

In Spain, only one person was permitted out to shop. Plath and Hughes had honeymooned in Spain. Early in the pandemic, UKers were allowed out only to exercise. Plath and Hughes had lived in various cities in Britain. All over, sourdough baking was so popular that flour and eggs were often sold out. Plath was a great cook. I thought of the circling, cycling of the pandemic. Gyres of despair. Brief reprieve, and then on lockdown again. *Sliding Doors*. Something happening in another country brings a taste of the horror that will soon be ours. Impossibility of escape, the repetition, the monotony of 'Blursday.'

The poem would cover the duration of their coupledness, highlighting where they had lived. Boston (the longest section) struck me as where, without the tethers of teaching, Plath, already stuck, would have floundered in a pandemic. Such rich city life existed just beyond their building's doors, but a world away. I resisted including all of the places, such as Yaddo and Paris, they had visited. As Esther said in *The Bell Jar*, fearing her future, "wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok—I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air." Theirs now a bell jar for two, neither known for 'resiliency,' the pandemic adjective of the day. Though Plath had been able to 'pivot' from Europe to America, from poetry to fiction, from bride to new mother, change was never easy.

While I was sick of Zoom and was (crazily) repeating "Namaste" to my favourite YouTube yoga teacher, who had no idea of my existence, I wanted Ted and Sylvia, to be in their own time, without the distraction of technology, facing only themselves over and over and over. (And birds and animals, living creatures smaller than themselves, as a motif.)

Absconding Ted would have an epiphany, come back to his family, but be carrying COVID with him. No such thing as a happy ending or even an ending.... Sunday's cursive draft went to the computer on Monday Jan. 18<sup>th</sup>, where it went through all-day revisions, variously labelled 'pestilent poem,' then 'pandemic plath poem.' After a few more days of work, it was "Riding" by that Thursday.

The most extensive revising after the whirlwind writing week was of the North Yorkshire segment. A writing group member requested "more moors" and recommended Anne Carson's "The Glass Essay" (fabulous). I enjoyed the Brontë research, the peering at UK park websites, seeing the impact of the pandemic on the natural world so far away. Bird lover, I was delighted to find that Yorkshire grouse make a sound like "come back." How well that could fit with Plath and Hughes

and their open-air lovemaking. And another small creature could be victim. Something would have to die.

In April 2021, just over a year into the pandemic, I read the Yorkshire piece at Inverse, a poetry event put on by the BC Federation of Writers. *Plath Profiles* accepted the long poem in June: "we are obsessed. This latest long piece is truly incredible! The way you wove together the life histories of the poets, their psyches and aesthetics, and the current pandemic and our way of life these days is truly, unsettlingly perfect." Yay! Now there's a happy ending that resists immunity. Or is it another beginning?

Now sick of the pandemic (if not of Sivvy), as it winds down, I see how much more I could do! A sequel? There is much raw material in the subject of vaccination alone. I made sure my husband (from an antivax family) had all his shots (like a dog) before we married. What would Plath have done if Hughes refused to get vaccinated? So many possible topics: quarantines and mandatory stays (in Canada) at quarantine hotels; self-interested public health officials; restrictions being lifted dependent on a certain percentage of the country being vaccinated; Alberta even holding a lottery to encourage people to get shots. Would Sivvy take a chance on AstraZeneca (used widely in the UK) with its possible clotting? Coming out of the pandemic...if an activity is allowed, is it necessarily safe? Would Sylvia return to live theatre with or without social distancing or reduced capacity? How soon would she shed her mask so stained by her crimson lipstick? In an early poem from my collection *After Ted & Sylvia* (2003), Plath "struggle[d] to take off [her] face mask ... but it [was] welded on." Now, what would Sylvia do?

I've been long infected with Plath as doppelgänger muse. Disquieting, yes. My emissary into other worlds, my companion in understanding this one. Too late for inoculation.

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