

## Medicine in Sylvia Plath's October Poems

Tracy Brain, Bath Spa University

Despite my title, Sylvia Plath's interest in medicine began long before October of 1962, that famous month of poems, so many of which went into *Ariel*. There are of course poems that are substantively about medicine which come before and after the October poems.<sup>1</sup> Among these are "Face Lift," "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.," and "Thalidomide;" their very titles make clear their medical contexts. A fascination with medicine developed over Plath's entire writing life. We see this from Plath's childhood. We see this also in the very last poems she wrote, in February of 1963. There is the elusive "remedy" in "Mystic" (*Collected Poems*, 268). There is the uselessness of sweet sugar as a cure in "Kindness," and the poem's famous concluding metaphor of a vein opening so that the "blood jet" of "poetry" can pour out (270). There is the bruise that is much more than a physical injury in "Contusion;" and like "Kindness," "Contusion" evokes the body's circulatory system. Yet while the latter is interested in describing the effect and sensation of a material bruise, the contusion is also a direct line to – and reflection of – the speaker's central wound of a broken heart.<sup>2</sup> Numerous other Plath poems also touch on medicine or use medical imagery, as Ralph Didlake has effectively demonstrated.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, there is much to be said for concentrating on the October poems when embarking on an exploration such as this. It is the right time for such a reckoning, an important anniversary: the October poems were written some fifty years before the publication of this essay. Moreover, October of 1962 is not an arbitrary parameter. Few readers will need to be persuaded as to the extraordinary concentration and close connectedness of the poems Plath wrote during that intensely productive month. Here, I will concentrate on what was happening in Plath's writing during this particular period, though with three provisos. First, for contextual reasons, I will of course at times need to draw on materials before and after October, 1962. Second, this essay should be read as an initial exploration of material that will ultimately be part of a book-length project, where I will consider the full range of Plath's writing in terms of her engagement with medicine. Third,

---

<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Kalfopoulou establishes the "confluence of self and environment" in her study of three of the earlier poems. See "Endangered Subjects: The First-person Narrator in Sylvia Plath's Hospital Poems 'Waking in Winter,' 'Tulips,' and 'Three Women,'" 362.

<sup>2</sup> Ted Hughes reminds us of the medical context for Plath's "Berck-Plage," written in the summer of 1962. He tells us, "Overlooking the sea there was a large hospital for mutilated war veterans and accident victims—who took their exercise along the sands" (*Notes to Plath, Collected Poems*, 293).

<sup>3</sup> See Didlake, "Medical Imagery in Sylvia Plath's Poems."

because the subject of Plath and psychiatric medicine has been covered comprehensively elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> my focus is on what Plath has to say about physical medicine.

We glimpse an early moment of Plath's medical trajectory in the well-known photograph of her dressed as a nurse just before her eighth birthday. Anita Helle's important work on Plath family photographs has taught us to look at such images with a special kind of critical eye. This particular photograph raises a fascinating question about whether we are in danger of over-determining the child Plath's intentions in donning this costume.

Helle explains that these Plath "paratexts" are: "prefaces and forewords, indexes and notes, illustrations, dust jacket materials and cover blurbs that mediate between the world of publishing and the world of the reader" (5). The nurse photograph appears twice in Aurelia Plath's "Introduction" to *Letters Home*, reproduced from two different prints of the same snapshot. The first time it appears [LH1], it takes up an entire page, duplicated from an isolated print, and surrounded by Aurelia Plath's words. Mrs Plath's paratextual note says this: "*September, 1940: Sylvia dressed to help the nurse who was caring for her father, who died shortly after this picture was taken*" (*Letters Home* 21). The words might at first seem fairly neutral, but paratexts are rarely, if ever, so.

Aurelia Plath tells us that her daughter wanted "to help." She implies in her "Introduction" that the impetus for this was Otto Plath's "friendly nurse," who "cut down an old uniform for her and called Sylvia her 'assistant'" (23). In terms of Plath's own agency, the phrasing is interesting: "*Sylvia dressed to help*" (21). We can infer that Plath actively donned the costume with that purpose in mind; that this was what she wanted and asked for. Or we can infer that Plath was put into the costume by adults, and it was all their idea: a kind of modelled scene. Historical truth – indeterminable in this case – probably rests somewhere between the two possibilities. Whatever the lost "facts" may be, the story told by the photo and its paratexts is a poignant one – showing us that all of the nursing in the world, and daughterly devotion, could not save Otto Plath. Is a myth of daughterly adoration, a tale of Plath's selfless and properly feminine wish to care, being born? If so, another component of the narrative is of the tragic loss of innocence that will soon come; and, we might add, Plath's life-long scepticism about the power of medicine.

A few pages later, the photograph makes its second appearance in the "Introduction" to *Letters Home* [LH2], this time as part of a scrapbook which is reproduced as a double-page

---

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Moraski, "The Missing Sequel: Sylvia Plath and Psychiatry," 78-102.

spread. The scrapbook layout includes the nurse photograph, seven additional photos, and Sylvia Plath's own handwritten text. Plath's childhood gloss of the nurse photo begins:

This picture was taken by mother in our back yard. It is about July, and the flowers are beginning to appear in their full glory. They are the ones that daddy planted, and many artists come to paint them. My hair has turned brown, and I wear it in long braids. I am dressed in the uniform that daddy's nurse gave me after he died. Just as I began the sixth grade in Winthrop, Mother took a better job –training medical secretarys [sic] in Boston University... (26)

The scrapbook spread is given another paratext from Aurelia Plath: "*Excerpts from a scrapbook autobiography Sylvia made in High School*" (26). Mrs Plath also corrects her daughter's date of "about July," indicating in a handwritten annotation that the photo was taken in August of 1940.

There are small contradictions between the two versions of the photos [LH1 and LH2] and their paratexts. Within the "Introduction" to *Letters Home* we have possible dates of July, August and September for the taking of the photo. In Mrs Plath's paratext of the photo in isolation [LH1], the nurse costume is worn while Mr Plath is still alive. In Plath's High School assignment for the scrapbook [LH2], the nurse uniform is worn "after" Mr. Plath "died"; or given to Plath then. There is some syntactical ambiguity in the scrapbook story [LH2] as to whether Plath is speaking of the act of wearing the uniform for the photograph; or the act of the nurse giving her the uniform; or both. There is also a possibility that it is a deliberate mistake on Plath's part: she is already turning life into fiction, rearranging small details as novelists do; she is already experimenting with voice, speaking with the simplicity of a younger child rather than as the older high school girl who wrote it; and she is already playing with words to complicate meanings, as poets do.

The annotation on the bottom border of the photograph's first, individual appearance in *Letters Home* [LH1] is made in Sylvia Plath's hand but does not appear in the scrapbook print [LH2]. It reads: "Sylvia's latest ambition – Sept. 1940" (21). Even outside of the scrapbook, Plath writes as if she is telling a story.<sup>5</sup> She speaks of herself in the third person, telling an economic tale of her child self. How are we to read it? One way would be as self irony, as if knowingly poking fun at her large accumulation of ambitions, with her use of the word "latest" suggesting most recent. This could imply that the previous ambitions have been

---

<sup>5</sup> The Lilly Library holds yet another variant of the photograph of Plath in the nurse's uniform. This one is contextualised differently. It is mounted on black card and slightly scalloped around the edges. The Lilly photo is annotated more simply in Aurelia Plath's hand as having been taken in September 1940. Lilly. Plath MSS II, Box 14, Folder 7.

abandoned, or that she has simply added another to compete with them, or that she wants to be many things all at once.

On April 5, 1962, Sylvia Plath wrote Draft 2 of "Among the Narcissi" on the back of a typescript page of *The Bell Jar*. The typescript contains a full paragraph that Plath omits from the novel. For dramatic effect, it is difficult to resist setting the excised passage alongside the famous nurse photograph of the sweet little girl. Because of restrictions against citing unpublished materials, I will do my best to describe the passage. In it, the heroine of *The Bell Jar* declares her repugnance at the idea of nursing, using terms that many readers may find ugly and shocking. She explains that while the admirable goodness of nurses makes nursing attractive as a career, ill people are repulsive to her; she has murderous impulses towards them, and regards them as pests or animals. What makes the injured and disabled and ill so fearsome to *The Bell Jar's* heroine is the fact that she sees herself in them.<sup>6</sup>

It seems very likely that Plath reread this excised passage before composing "Among the Narcissi" on April 5, 1962. The poem gives an alternative view of sickness, and the effect of looking upon it. Unlike the heroine of Plath's novel, the poem's speaker never uses the first person "I." The poem's focus is on the old man. The narrator studies him with a complicated mixture of fascination, sympathy and amusement. It is a very different voice, and level of empathy, from Esther Greenwood's, though Esther is of course caught in her own desperate "sickness" when she makes these repellent comments. And perhaps Plath's reason for cutting them was their cruel excessiveness: the risk that the reader would become too alienated from Esther, and lose sympathy for her. The poem's narrator appears to adopt a pose of casual off-handedness and imprecision: "He is recuperating from something on the lung" (*Collected Poems* 190). Can he or she not be bothered to learn exactly what ails the man? Is he or she too remote to be in the know? Is naming the thing too frightening? The ill and wounded elicit fear and repugnance in *The Bell Jar's* expunged passage. They leave Esther terrified that she will somehow be infected by them. This repulsion is present in the poem too, but modulated and restrained.

On October 30, 1962, the day after she finishes her last three October poems, Plath conducts her famous interview with Peter Orr. One of the things she says is this:

I think if I'd done anything else I would have liked to be a doctor. This is the sort of polar opposition to being a writer, I suppose. ... I used to dress up in a white gauze helmet and go round and see babies born and cadavers cut open.

---

<sup>6</sup> Smith College. Mortimer Rare Book Room. Ariel Poems, "Among the Narcissi," Draft 2. The excised paragraph follows the words, "on invisible wire," and precedes "The last thing I expected was for Buddy to be fat" in Chapter Eight of the published version (94).

... perhaps I'm happier writing about doctors than I would have been being one. (172)

What I want to say about this passage is, first, how conscious Plath remains about an alternative identity, an alternative vocation, the road she did not take but never ceased to imagine; it is as if "Sylvia's latest ambitions" persist from late childhood into adulthood. What I also want to point out is how close this was to her thinking just after completing the October poems. One of their primary preoccupations – medicine – was still circulating in her thoughts. Plath's use of the word "Perhaps" is important. She writes to her mother on October 16, 1962, half way through her frenzy of October poems, "I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name" (*Letters Home* 468). That "Perhaps" suggests that even as an entirely committed poet who knows she is writing at the height of her powers, Plath continues to wonder what a career as a doctor would have been like.

This is not a preoccupation that goes away in the short amount of life Plath has left. A few weeks later, on November 19, 1962, Plath tells her mother that an "Australian gynaecologist" who has "done a life-long study of miscarriages" has written her a "fan letter" and requested a copy of *Three Women* (479-80). "I am thrilled. The medical profession has always intrigued me most of all, and the hospital and doctors and nurses are central in all my work" (480). I do not invariably assume that writers are necessarily the best people to tell us what is happening in their own texts. But I am pretty convinced by this one. Peter K. Steinberg has done some immensely careful archival work on Plath's unpublished correspondence with the *New Yorker*.<sup>7</sup> These letters – all about her poetic intentions – reveal how clear and astute she was about her own writing. In both the Orr interview and the late 1962 letter Plath provides an important cue to her readers, commenting on her own fascination with medicine.

Still though, that "Perhaps" is not easily settled. A kind of wrestling match between poetry and medicine plays out in Plath's non-fiction. She writes in "Context," "I am not worried that poems reach relatively few people. As it is, they go surprisingly far ... Farther than the words of a classroom teacher or the prescriptions of a doctor; if they are very lucky, farther than a lifetime" (*Johnny Panic* 93). It is a powerful statement, and a poignant one, when we think of how much "further" Plath's poems have gone than her own "lifetime." This is not to suggest that Plath yearned until the end of her too-few days for a life she did not live:

---

<sup>7</sup> Peter K. Steinberg. "Sincerely Yours: Sylvia Plath and *The New Yorker*." Paper given on October 26<sup>th</sup> 2012 at The Sylvia Plath Symposium 2012, held at Indiana University, Bloomington.

a life as a medical professional. Plath's view of conventional physical medicine was by no means idealised. What my examination of medicine in the October poems reveals is that her attitude towards medicine grew increasingly cynical.

In her late writing, Plath seems to be relinquishing more interventionist medicine, and confronting its failures. We see this in her *Journal* entries about Percy Key's illness, made in the first half of 1962. From the initial "Xray" to Percy's fortnight in hospital (664). From the request for "permission to operate" to the dooming question "What is this 'shadow' or 'spot'" (667)? The end result is only suffering ("his eyes twitching askew, and shaking as if pierced by weak electric shocks") and slow, painful death ("He is a bag of bones ... shuddering and blinking in a fearful way") (668, 670-71). Medicine is ineffectual: even "The sleeping pills the doctor gives him don't work, says Rose" (671).<sup>8</sup> (We will see that the failure of sleeping pills emerges in "The Jailer" too.)

Often in Plath's late writing, her personae invoke and rely upon the more domestic and do-it-yourself varieties of medicine, though with humorously low expectations of its efficacy. This is the case in Plath's 1963 sketch "Slow Blitz."

I don't suppose you *have* snow plows in England, heh, heh! I joked, loading up with Kleenex paddipads, black-currant juice, rose-hip syrup and bottles of nose drops and cough medicine (labeled The Linctus in Gothic script)—those sops and aids to babies with winter colds. ....

The chemist lifted, shyly and proudly, a rough six-foot plank from behind a counter of Trufoods and cough pastilles. ...

'With this board I simply *push* the snow aside.' (*Johnny Panic* 125-26)<sup>9</sup>

Plath writes with amused cynicism about medicine and its power. Here, she satirically questions the usefulness of medical professionals, in this case in the character of the "chemist." All he can do is advise her on how to move snow, suggesting a method that she regards as ridiculous and impracticable. Surely everyone has giant-sized planks lying around, and can wield them single-handedly! What the narrator reaches for in the face of family illness is not a doctor's prescription, but ordinary consumer goods anyone can purchase. Juices and syrups rich in vitamin C. Nose drops and absurdly named cough medicines. She herself recognises their limitations, calling them "sops."

---

<sup>8</sup> Percy dies three weeks later, on July 2, 1962. Plath remarks upon the ineffectiveness of sleeping pills one year earlier, in "Insomniac":

He is immune to pills: red, purple, blue —  
How they lit the tedium of the protracted evening!  
Those sugary planets whose influence won for him  
A life baptized in no-life for a while,

And the sweet, drugged waking of a forgetful baby. (*Collected Poems* 163)

<sup>9</sup> "Paddipads" were a brand of disposable nappies or diapers. "Trufoods" was a widely selling baby milk formula.

The "twelve sentences" that appear in the English edition of Plath's *Journals* but not the American edition all share the same subject matter, invoking a different order of uselessness. They concern Plath's speculations about the possible infertility or impotence of male acquaintances. In other words, Plath is speculating about a man's medical and/or sexual problems; and, in the way she frames these sentences, the very core of his masculinity too. The proscribed sentences call to mind that phrase Plath uses about her mother in her psychotherapy notes, made on December 12, 1958: "murderess of maleness" (433).

My point about the sentences is not that I disagree with their omission: I can see the legal necessity for that (though there is perhaps a degree of absurdity and counter-productiveness in the fact that they are published in England but not America). Rather, it is in my interest in what they say; and in the fact that what is unprintable in Plath entirely concerns male reproduction and sexuality. The first cluster of omitted sentences were written on March 29, 1958. I will indicate the position of their absence with bold ellipses, and note that the pagination is the same in both editions of the *Journals* so that they can easily be located by readers who wish to pursue this topic further:

Marty, of all, who should have her own baby: they tried & tried & she says they would be the scientific miracle of the century if they had a child.

[...]

A judgement, unspoken but perpetually present. The only worse, worst: to have an idiot or crippled child of one's own. (358)

Plath's words may be shocking, today, steeped as they are in a vocabulary that many people would shrink from using, especially in the cruel phrase "idiot or crippled child." She provides her own diagnosis of why it is that these words cannot be printed in America, foreseeing the issues over invasion of privacy and libel they may raise. The diagnosis is in the "judgement, unspoken but perpetually present," that she herself makes about the husband's virility and fertility; and in her sense that for him to be "impotent" or "sterile" is to "permanently cripple a man;" and in her acknowledgement that to wonder about this at all is "obscene" (358).

The second cluster of six omitted sentences were written on December 17, 1958:

Marcia and Mike: Unpleasant: the hidden corpse of Amedee<sup>10</sup> grows with meaning.

[...]

Both of us must feel partly that the other isn't filling a conventional role: he isn't "earning bread and butter" in any reliable way, I'm not "sewing on buttons and darning socks" by the hearthside. (444)

In the two clusters of excised sentences, Plath manages to use the word "impotent" five times. The second cluster comes just a few days after the aforementioned description of her mother

---

<sup>10</sup> Plath is alluding to the 1954 play *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It*, by Eugène Ionesco.

as a "murderess of maleness." Plath's diagnoses of social and sexual politics, and what can lead a marriage to implode, are so exact. The other couple's seemingly inexpressible problem concerns infertility and childlessness. Plath jumps from this to an evaluation of her own relationship with her husband; their problem also concerns the husband's and wife's disappointments in each other for not fulfilling their conventional gendered roles, though in this instance Plath is not directly alluding to fertility. The dynamics of blame, its rootedness in sex, and the way that what is unspeakable can eat away at a marriage are what sit at the core of the October poems, which is where I will now turn.

The bee poems are full of medical imagery. Clarissa Roche says of Plath:

She talked a lot about midwives. I think she liked the sound of the word and the connotations of primordial efficiency, deftness, simple deliverance. ... I thought it odd at the time that Sylvia should refer to the good woman sent round by the National Health as 'my midwife.' Doctors, nurses, midwives, these words peppered her conversation and letters. My doctor, my nurse, my midwife; intimate yet impersonal; recruited from the newspapers, nanny finding agencies, National Health clinics; they took the place of nonexistent family and friends. (89)

The "midwife" who appears in "The Bee Meeting" is unrecognisable. She is "gloved and covered" like the rest of the village community (*Collected Poems* 211). Her white garb resembles a surgeon's. It makes the midwife part of the sinister-seeming anonymous crowd that is at once "intimate yet impersonal," to use Roche's phrase.

In "Stings" the echoes between the bee keepers and the medical profession are also established by their similar costumes: "The man in white smiles, bare-handed" (214). It is worth recalling Plath's confession to Peter Orr that she "used to dress up in a white gauze helmet." It is no accident that the speaker of "Wintering" gets her honey by borrowing the "midwife's extractor" (217).<sup>11</sup> This sounds like a gynaecological instrument but is of course a specialist beekeeper's tool. Repeatedly in these poems there is an exchange between the language of bee keeping and the language of medicine. The personae's roles circulate too, so that in this instance the speaker becomes the midwife to her bees, delivering their honey. The speaker also shares the sinister medical appearance of her fellow beekeepers: they may look frightening in their sterile protective garments, but she is dressed like this too. Often in the October poems, identities travel. By the time we get to "Lesbos," we will see that the speaker and her enemy can at times merge into one.

---

<sup>11</sup> Plath tells her mother that she borrowed Winifred Davies' honey extractor in the summer of 1962. Lilly. Plath MSS. II. Box 6a. Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath. August 27, 1962.



The appropriation of medical idiom continues in the first poem Plath writes after the bee sequence, "A Secret." Christina Britzolakis reads "A Secret" and "The Tour" as critiques of "the sanitized 'normality' of the suburban ideal home" (115). "A Secret" is a poem laden with dialogue, with the kind of gossip that surrounds a secret, just as gossip surrounds bad medical news. "'It won't hurt'" is the fake reassurance of a doctor or nurse, but the secret causes pain nonetheless (*Collected Poems* 220). The secret is "The knife in your back" that symbolises deception or betrayal, and comes as a shock (220). It is spoken in the language of a surgical procedure gone wrong. The speaker alludes to this knife with the recognition and understanding of one who has felt it herself. She confides to a narratee/reader who she assumes shares this intimate knowledge. She is talking to herself and to us at once, here.

The move echoes "A Birthday Present," the poem that Plath wrote on the last day of September, 1962, just before launching into the October poems. Different months, but separated only by a day and deeply linked: I would go so far as to describe "A Birthday Present" as an honorary October poem. In it, the present that the speaker yearns for is truth, though she knows it will not be a pretty truth. And she wants this truth all at once rather than bit by bit: "And the knife not carve, but enter / Pure and clean as the cry of a baby" (208). The knife here anticipates the revelatory "knife in your back" in "A Secret." The effect of the truth is akin to that of murder, as is the impact of a "secret," once released. No medicine can ease the pain of either, let alone cure them. The speaker of "Stings" recognises the inbuilt failure of any panacea or ritual, despite trying to call forth "excessive love" in the "pink flowers" she paints on her hive (214). She thinks, "'Sweetness, sweetness,'" as if working an incantation (214).<sup>12</sup>

"The Applicant" begins with a horrifying series of references to the walking wounded. The personae do not literally possess multiple artificial body parts, of course. But the opening stanza is couched in the crudest of medical practices for treating some of the most extreme physical injuries and losses.

Do you wear  
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,  
A brace or a hook,  
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch. (221)

These allusions work in the service of a false notion that even if medicine cannot fix such problems, marriage can. The poem's ironic conceit is that deficiencies and injuries are

---

<sup>12</sup> When Plath comes to write "Kindness" four months later, the speaker sardonically mimics those who subscribe to such false social potions, spewing fake kindness as if it were medicine. She is justly scornful of the clichéd idea that "Sugar can cure everything ... Its crystals a little poultice ... Sweetly picking up pieces" (*Collected Poems* 269).

necessary qualities in any prospective groom. Their reparation is exactly what marriage promises. Invariably, marriage fails to deliver this reparation. The analogy is that medicine, like marriage, can never truly fulfil expectations: substitutions of fake body parts for real ones can never be as satisfactory as one would wish. This is the case even in a world that seems to value the artificial over the natural, like that of "The Applicant."

"The Jailer"'s evisceration of a marriage that has gone brutally wrong draws on a very literal medical language;<sup>13</sup> the speaker refers to her husband's "high cold masks of amnesia" (227). The *Oxford English Dictionary's* multiple examples of its usage make clear that the derivation and history of the word "amnesia" for "loss of memory" is a medical one (oed.com). Although "amnesia" is the clinical term for loss of memory, the husband's amnesia appears to be a self-serving pretence or behaviour rather than a medical condition. What the speaker refers to here is the husband's detachment and withdrawal of expressions of emotion, as well his refusal to tell her anything.<sup>14</sup>

Heather Clark writes: "In 'The Jailer,' Plath takes the trope of bodily dismemberment to its extreme in a fantasy of torture" (201). Christina Britzolakis argues that the "voice of the later poems" produces "aggressive and rebellious scenarios, whose effect is to satirize the discredited mythology of 1950s femininity. It precipitates a melodrama or black comedy of sexual relations ... which oscillates between victim plots ... and revenge plots" (113, 114). Britzolakis cites "The Jailer" as one of the "victim plots." The poem's references to medicine work through one of Plath's darkest responses to domesticity. But it is important to bear in mind Susan Van Dyne's advice that we "need to resist a critical habit of collapsing all of the poems powered by anger into a single script with a uniform logic" (47).

The poem's domestic scene begins with a description that makes home, or rather jail, appear like the unchanging backdrop of a movie set. The speaker tells us: "The same placard of blue fog is wheeled into position / With the same trees and headstones" (*Collected Poems* 226). A few stanzas later she thinks: "Surely the sky is not that color, / Surely the grass should be rippling" (226). It is as if her close world cannot be real. The punctuation of the latter two lines contributes to the hallucinatory brainwashing effect that the speaker is experiencing. Grammatically, each of these two lines could be a single sentence, but Plath runs them together with a comma. By doing this she makes them into a kind of flat chant, rather than the

---

<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, "Medusa"'s phrase, "Overexposed, like an 'X-ray,'" is purely figurative; so that the simile conveys the terrible vulnerability and humiliation the speaker feels under her mother's paralysing scrutiny (*Collected Poems* 225).

<sup>14</sup> Plath makes a similar use of the word in "Amnesiac" a few days later.

tone of exclamatory amazement or exploratory questioning that their content and syntax might lead us to expect.

The speaker's physical condition has an impact on her surreal view of the world. But also, her horrifying situation contributes her symptoms. So do the powerful drugs she depends upon to control these symptoms. We cannot say what in all of this comes first; what the original root of the problem is: and I think Plath means us not to be able to do this, in order to suggest how entrenched and tangled these issues are. The "night sweats" of the poem's first line, and the "fever" that "trickles and stiffens in my hair" suggest the high temperature that the speaker of "Fever 103°" will experience a few poems later (226).<sup>15</sup> "Fever 103°" refers only to home remedies: "Lemon water, chicken / Water, water make me retch" (232). But in "The Jailer" the speaker depends upon serious pharmaceuticals: "My sleeping capsule, my red and blue zeppelin / Drops me from a terrible altitude" (226). There is an awareness here that the drugs are necessary to the speaker, in that she needs the chemicals to survive her nightmare life. But there is a recognition, also, that they make her vulnerable to other forms of abuse and harm, and impede her ability to fight or escape.

"The Jailer" deploys that tricky word, or tricky subject: "Impotent." "I imagine him / Impotent as distant thunder," the speaker tells us (227). Impotent can mean "powerless, helpless; ineffective." It can also mean "without bodily strength; unable to use one's limbs; helpless, decrepit." Our most usual understanding of the word, though, is the medical one: "Wholly lacking in sexual power; incapable of reproduction" (oed.com). In the excised *Journal* sentences, Plath certainly invokes the latter sense of the word. In "The Jailer," male impotence seems to be in the realm of the speaker's revenge fantasy, rather than an actual medical condition. Even in her journalistic speculations about male fertility, Plath sees that "impotence" is a difficult diagnosis to make with absolute certainty. But "impotent" is certainly a medical word, and in Plath's language it is the ultimate slur that can be made against a man.

The word "impotent" appears in Plath's next October poem, too: "Lesbos." Susan Van Dyne describes "Lesbos" as an "incoherent, splenetic outburst" (60). Certainly the poem's shifts between its different personae – the female speaker, the woman who visits her and is also the poem's narratee, and the women's husbands – can be challenging. Tim Kendall reminds us that "Many of Plath's poems written between 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus' address a specific individual" (161). In the case of "Lesbos," this "specific individual" is "another

---

<sup>15</sup> Plath writes of her own high fevers of more than 103° in an unpublished letter. Lilly. Sylvia Plath to Elizabeth [Compton]. September 8, 1962.

woman" (161). The speaker addresses this woman in the second person, as "you." At times, though, there is a confusion between this "you" and the first person speaker. The confusion sometimes happens when Plath deliberately omits possessive pronouns. At other times it happens when the speaker seems to slip into addressing herself as "you" – talking to herself instead of the other woman. These shifts are not always clearly signalled, as they would be in a novel. The economy of the poem leaves us to puzzle them out. But the effect is that the apparently dichotomised women, or "venomous opposites," can appear to merge into one. And I think that this is a deliberate effect, rather than simply an "incoherent" "outburst."

Deborah Nelson remarks upon the poem's "paradoxical theatricality" that is "performative and yet closed off from public viewing" (32). She goes on to explain, "Both women, rivals for the husband of the speaker, see through the performance of the other, know they are seen through themselves" (33). Christina Britzolakis observes that "The poem is filled with images of domestic space as hell," and this is the case with its many allusions to medicine (113). On October 12, 1962, in the throes of composing the October poems, Plath writes to her mother, "I ... have managed a poem a day before breakfast. All book poems. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me" (*Letters Home* 466). I am struck here by the way Plath uses an image of physical harm to describe the effect of domesticity. It is akin to what Marsha Bryant calls Plath's "*Topography of the Domestic Surreal*" (228).<sup>16</sup> As an example of this "domestic surreal," Bryant cites the "fluorescent light wincing off and on like a terrible migraine" in "Lesbos" (229). The phrase is another yoking of a physical medical condition to the domestic. The woman the speaker addresses appears neurotic. She is a kind of hypochondriac who indulges in ludicrous self-diagnosis. She also has ridiculous – and funny – ideas about what causes her supposed symptoms: "You are ill. / The sun gives you ulcers, the wind gives you T.B" (228). It is difficult not to side with the speaker's mocking tone, here.

However much they fight over the speaker's husband, both of their husbands share one key trait: impotence. The idea of male impotence enters the poem before the actual word. The other woman's "...husband is just no good to you. / His Jew-Mama guards his sweet sex like a pearl" (228). Here, the sense of impotence is overtly sexual: the other woman's husband is not satisfying her. When the word itself actually makes its way into the poem, in the line "The impotent husband slumps out for a coffee," it is not really physiological impotence (228). Rather, it is the man's helplessness to do anything effectual, and especially his failure

---

<sup>16</sup> Bryant, "Ariel's Kitchen," 228, 229.

to navigate his way between the two women. In reality, though, it is the speaker who is "impotent." "I try to keep him in," she says, as if she is an inept jailer, evoking that other October poem (228). But she fails to, and "He lumps it down the plastic cobbled hill" (228). The "plastic cobbled hill" is like something out of a movie set. It recalls the backdrop fakery of the poem's opening lines.

At first, it is not clear which "impotent husband" the speaker is referring to. The speaker does not use the pronoun "My" before "husband slumps out for a coffee." Rather, she uses the indefinite article "The." We might read this as a kind of proto-feminist reversal of the way men sometimes refer to "the wife," with the woman doing it instead. In any case, the indefinite article makes it grammatically difficult to follow whose "husband" the poem refers to. But perhaps this is the point: as the man circulates, so does the woman's possession of him. Nonetheless, the speaker attempts to claim her husband, doing so through her proprietary but failed attempt to stop him from leaving. Both husbands, therefore, are associated with impotence. In the end, the poem suggests that however much the women both desire the speaker's husband, there is little to distinguish between the two men. Both share the same entrapped sense of dissatisfaction in a marriage from which they cannot escape. It is not clear, later in the poem, which of them "is hugging his ball and chain down by the gate," again invoking "The Jailer," so that "Lesbos" might also be read as another view of the problems that the earlier poem addresses (228).

Marsha Bryant writes that "'Cut' opens up a seemingly unstoppable blood jet of the domestic surreal" (230). "Cut" is a poem about an everyday domestic medical crisis. The speaker reacts to her injury with sardonic stoicism and self-care, reaching for home remedies as she steps on her own pool of blood while "Clutching my bottle / Of pink fizz" (235). Presumably the pink fizz is the effect of hydrogen peroxide, the likely occupant of the clutched bottle. The speaker bandages the injury herself, wrapping it in "Gauze" (235). But there is real medicine too here, and a condition that predates the kitchen crisis occasioned by the onion and the knife. In so many of these poems, the speaker has recourse to chemicals to help her to sleep, to wake her up, to get her through the day: "I am ill. / I have taken a pill to kill // The thin / Papery feeling" (235).

If the October poems repeatedly express a desire to escape the most serious kinds of medicine, they also accept its necessity. This is the case in "Poppies in October," where the speaker's glimpse of "the woman in the ambulance / Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly" is a brief window into a real medical crisis (240). Yet that "red heart" tells us nothing about the nature of the woman's physical condition. The speaker can speculate that

it may be a heart attack, but the red bloom is the artificial poppy worn as an emblem of Remembrance Day, and visible on many people's chests from late October until November 11.

"The Tour" is an acerbic sketch of the absurd failure of domestic medicine and self-help. Robin Peel says of "The Tour," it is: "a willingness to adopt the ironical tone which here becomes the whole voice—that contributes to the success of the treatment of the more weighty subjects" (215). Jonathan Ellis gives a brilliant reading of "The Tour" as "a kind of verse letter" (22). Plath uses the poem to respond to Marianne Moore's account of why Moore does not want to endorse *The Colossus*. Ellis tells us that Moore "considered the poems 'bitter, frost-bitten, burnt-out, averse'" (22). In "The Tour," Plath has "metaphorically ripped up Moore's letter, taken scissors to every word and phrase that offended her, and published her reply in a poem" (22).

The narrator of "The Tour" gives her genteel, presumably childless and wealthy "maiden aunt" a tour of her ramshackle, malfunctioning, archaic domestic space (*Collected Poems* 237). We are reminded of Plath's confession to Peter Orr in her interview at the end of that month, "I must say that I am not very genteel" (168). In a comic moment, the aunt appears, ridiculously, to mistake the speaker's "frost box," or malfunctioning refrigerator, for a "cat" (*Collected Poems* 237). The speaker responds with false politeness. With fake gentility and hilariously ineffective graciousness, she attempts to smooth over even the most ludicrous and unsmoothable blunders of her guest: "Though it *looks* like a cat, with its fluffy stuff, pure white" (237). The speaker continues with her pretence of appreciation. It is a kind of mimed sales pitch of her badly behaved machine's many virtues. She seems to continue to take her cue from the aunt's absurd blindness and misunderstanding, exaggerating and elaborating upon it: "You should see the objects it makes! / Millions of needly glass cakes! / Fine for the migraine or the bellyache" (238). What we have here on the one hand is another comically ineffectual home-produced cure: in this case of multi-purpose ice "cakes" that can be used for "the migraine or the bellyache."

On the other hand, when we read the poem with Ellis's comments in mind, we see also that that frostiness is the speaker's own. It comes from her "frost box." It is figurative as well as literal. Those "needly glass cakes" are not just the accidental bi-products of a refrigerator that has gone crazy and is in desperate need of defrosting. They are the speaker's creations, too: cold and dangerous. But there is a sense that to produce them brings relief from "migraine or bellyache"—distress symptoms that are not necessarily caused by physical ailments. We might think of those "needly glass cakes" as poems.

"The Tour" continues, "Toddle on home, and don't trip on the nurse!— // She's pink, she's a born midwife— / She can bring the dead to life /With her wiggly fingers and for a very small fee" (238). Again we have the comic charade of looking on the bright side of things. Despite the speaker's performative satire, we can nonetheless take seriously what she is saying. The reference to "midwife" evokes a different order of reproduction. Midwives can indeed make seemingly dead babies breathe. Elsewhere in Plath's work we have babies and poems as interchangeable, for instance in "Metaphors" and "Stillborn." Here, to "bring the dead to life" is also what a poet can do. The "wiggly fingers" suggest typing. The "very small fee" suggests the remuneration a poet might get for her work, a level of income the aunt would regard with contempt. But what we have here, too, is another moment in the October poems where the speaker appears to merge with another persona, in this case with the nurse/midwife.

It is fitting to end with "Lady Lazarus," a kind of ending poem in itself as one of the last three October poems, all of which were completed on October 29, 1962.<sup>17</sup> I want to offer a new way of reading the poem, by situating it in Plath's thoughts about medicine, and arguing that it sums up her position on medicine in the October poems. The poem is so famous, its lines so well known, that it can feel odd to quote it; a kind of absurdly unnecessary redundancy:

So, so, Herr Doktor.  
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,  
I am your valuable,  
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.  
I turn and burn.

Do not think I underestimate your great concern. (246)

"Lady Lazarus" has of course been read so many ways, by countless Plath scholars. That "charge," that "very large charge," is the electric excitement felt by the audience watching Lady Lazarus's "big strip tease": and what they must pay to do so (246, 245).

But the expense is also literally what the physical effects of the suicide performance cost Lady Lazarus; what she must pay the doctor if she is to get the medical treatment she needs to recover from them. Put in the context of medicine, and Plath's intensifying suspicion towards it, we might read these lines as the speaker's declaration that *she* is what keeps the medical profession in business. Hence, "I am your valuable." The doctor and the enemy are

---

<sup>17</sup> The other two October 29 1962, poems are "Nick and the Candlestick" and "Purdah."

interchangeable; one and the same. In this poem of commodification, medical and otherwise, the speaker of "Lady Lazarus" reads Herr Doktor's solicitude and interest in her – his economically motivated "great concern" – with exactly the scepticism it deserves.

Plath's last poetic moment in the October poems registers a complex recognition of the necessity for, and limits of, doctors; and of their positions in a particular material and monetary infrastructure. Elsewhere in Plath's letters and *Journals*, she expresses admiration for socialised medicine. That, though, is not the context of "Lady Lazarus," which seems to be informed by a very American medical world. Capitalist commercial constraints aside, the speaker realises that she walks and talks only because of a very precarious fix. She shares this unstable state of repair with the speaker of "Daddy," whose words, "But they pulled me out of the sack, / And they stuck me together with glue" could as easily be spoken by Lady Lazarus (224). The "they" of this second line is like the "They" in Lady Lazarus's declaration that "They had to call and call / And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls" (245). *They* are the unspecified but all important medical professionals, lumped together to show how pervasive they are and yet how indistinguishable; and how much a part of her life.

What they use – "glue" – is not literal, but a symbol of how preposterously ineffectual their treatments and tools can be. Medicine can only do so much, "Lady Lazarus" seems to say; it can go a long way, but only so far. In the October poems, medicine can do astonishing things, and sometimes must be depended upon. But despite the "brute / Amused shout: / 'A miracle!' / That knocks me out," Plath shows us again and again that medicine cannot really perform true wonders (246).



## Works Cited

- Bryant, Marsha. "Ariel's Kitchen: Plath, *Ladies Home Journal*, and the Domestic Surreal." Ed. Anita Helle. *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007: 211-235. Print.
- Britzolakis, Christina. "Ariel and Other Poems." Ed. Jo Gill. *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006: 107-123. Print.
- Clark, Heather. *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.
- Didlake, Ralph. "Medical Imagery in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath." In *Plath Profiles* 2 (2009): 135-144. Web. 6 Apr. 2013. <http://www.iun.edu/~nwadmin/plath/vol2/Didlake.pdf>
- Ellis, Jonathan. "On Sylvia Plath's Letters." Eds. Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain. *Representing Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 13-31. Print.
- Helle, Anita. "Reading the Paratexts of Plath's Unabridged *Journals*." *Plath Profiles* 3 Supplement (2010): 94-106. Web. 6 Apr. 2013. [http://www.iun.edu/~nwadmin/plath/vol3\\_Supp/Helle.pdf](http://www.iun.edu/~nwadmin/plath/vol3_Supp/Helle.pdf)
- Kalfopoulou, Adrienne. "Endangered Subjects: The First-person Narrator in Sylvia Plath's Hospital Poems 'Waking in Winter,' 'Tulips,' and 'Three Women'." *Plath Profiles* 5 (2012): 362-371. Web. 6 Apr. 2013. <http://www.iun.edu/~nwadmin/plath/vol5/Kalfopoulou.pdf>
- Kendall, Tim. *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001. Print.
- Moraski, Brittney. "The Missing Sequel: Sylvia Plath and Psychiatry." In *Plath Profiles* 2 (2009): 78-102. Web. 6 Apr. 2013. <http://www.iun.edu/~nwadmin/plath/vol2/Moraski.pdf>
- Nelson, Deborah. "Plath, History and Politics." Ed. Jo Gill. *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006: 21-35. Print.
- Orr, Peter. *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets Conducted by Hilary Morrish, Peter Orr, John Press and Ian Scott-Kilvert*. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1966. Print.
- Peel, Robin. *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics*. London: Associated University Presses, 2002. Print.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber and Faber, 1966. Print.
- . *Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. London: Faber & Faber, 1981. Print.
- . *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Prose Writings*. Ed. Ted Hughes.

- London: Faber & Faber, 1977, 1979. Print.
- . *The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. London: Faber and Faber, 2000. Print.
- . *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*. Ed. Aurelia Schober Plath. London: Faber & Faber, 1975. Print.
- . *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor Books, 2000. Print.
- Roche, Clarissa. "Sylvia Plath: Vignettes from England." Ed. Edward Butscher. *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1977: 81-96. Print.
- Van Dyne, Susan R. *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*. Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1993. Print.