

from *Art and Alchemy: On Creative Writing and Reading*

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"Lesbos" is your first and absolutely required reading for this seminar. Notice everything. The Plath persona is boiling potatoes. She observes a neighbor's yard from her window. And her toddler has a fit that she finds horrifying. The Plath persona's disgust with her daughter's screaming until her face is distorted and hideous is a response for which many male critics are still hammering nails into her palms. Apparently the good mother automatically transforms all her children's behaviors into endearing manifestations. But one need not be a mother to know that this is not the truth.

And truth is what we're after here, with acetylene torches and machetes. Go after the rest of the poem. After the first statements of fact, nearly three pages of free association follow. But that free association is controlled. It is, as Plath would say "useful."

This remains a misunderstood concept from Freudian-tainted literary criticism. Writers consort with the page to generate the *illusion* of free association. Free association unto itself has no intrinsic value. It's like trying to get extra points because the event described is actual. The novice's mantra of *but it really happened*. We take free association and filter, embellish, restructure and excise the raw scrawl of real thought and make it literary.

While the Plath persona boils potatoes and dares to describe her son's fit as unpleasant, her free association takes her to sirens on the rocks off Cornwall, flirtations with the notion of love affairs, the meaning of the atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima, and with one word, we are back either in that lonely, abandoned house in Devon as winter encroaches. We're moving from the steam of boiling potatoes toward that London kitchen with its hissing gas jets and yawning oven door. The taped and towel-stuffed sills. Slices of buttered bread and cups of milk left for the children in the nursery. But we're not there yet. For *meanwhile*, *there's the stink of baby crap, etc.* "Meanwhile." "Mean." "While."

Plath travels by saying---Last week in Barcelona. Or—Rome was cloudy. Or—In Tahiti I knew divorce was inevitable. Or—Varanasi is where I cremated myself. **Meanwhile** is a word that contains the schematics of time travel. Take your notebooks and research your world with attitude. Moments are distinct peninsulas votive-lit and ravaged by a bitch moon. Details are implications of socio-economic strata, aspirations and irreplaceable loss. Use your Reverse Play.

Time travel with a single word. **Meanwhile.**

Each syllable is a choice. Cymbal and flute, bell, lute, coyote and bongo drum. The writer is a composer. We orchestrate. The writer is an archeologist and architect. We excavate and build. Every sentence is a juncture defined by the writer's selections in the service of articulating sensibility. Truth and free association have no inherent literary legitimacy.