

Heptonstall Cemetery: A Memoir, A Tribute, A Defense, and A Eulogy

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for Sylvia Plath, of course, but also Toni Saldivar in appreciation for her careful reading, suggestions, and much more

Even in June, Yorkshire is sunless, windy, blustery and bears the hues of a 19th century daguerrotype: everything grey or sepia-brown. Of course it must have smelled of mortality to one of the American poets of the 20th century who absorbed Shakespeare into the very blood-jet of her poetry, despite her famous disclaimer that "it's presumptuous to say that one is influenced by someone like Shakespeare; one reads Shakespeare, and that's that" (Orr 170). Of course the hills must have made her feel surrounded by kindling--"the horizons ring me like faggots"--thus like a witch, ready to be burned alive (Plath, *Collected* 167). For what? "The sin, the sin," of which she wrote in "Fever 103°" (231)?

In that poem, Plath is the one more definitely sinned against, and yet her desire for purgation is quite nearly palpable, thinking of the God-tongue she wants to lick her flesh into a state of cleanliness, even down to her "aguey [yes, I know the word's literal meaning, as Plath would have, but considering just how keenly attuned her ears, I can't be the only person who also thinks "goosey"?] tendon[s]" (231)? A bout of intestinal flu--especially coupled with that of two children who had to be constantly wiped down and bathed--is enough to make anyone feel crawling in "goosey" bodily filth, but what particular sin did Plath feel she had committed? That of being ultimately unlovable? Is that why she seems almost to exult in her fever, chills, and vomiting, perhaps as a form of penitence?--"I am myself. That is not enough" (226). Not the old, false self, anyway, the pleasing good girl who continued to blame herself, somehow, for her father's death by diabetic putrefaction--and his hubristic failure to seek medical treatment--when she was eight, and asking her mother to



sign a vow never to re-marry, i.e. to re-enter the cycle of attachment of men who would dress all women in "old whore petticoats" (232)? Her father thought he was God, convinced Plath of his status, and she later simultaneously wished to have God-like powers through poetry and motherhood, thus dispensing with the Christian deity who had first created a boring eternity, then sacrificed his own son. But while writing the poems she boasted to her mother would "make her name," imagine the once-again simultaneous guilt Plath must have revisited in condemning Aurelia to a life of poverty and lovelessness, though she seemed to exult in her role as martyr, one Plath spurned--along with the smothering, narcissistic female parent whose existence was largely lived through her daughter--in "Medusa" (Plath, *Letters Home* 468).

Plath and I had oddly similar experiences at "college," finding ourselves in male-dominated environments. Lucas Myers and I share an alma mater--Sewanee--albeit two decades apart: he'd made his way to Cambridge and become Hughes's lifelong friend, while I was admitted under a quota system as part of the tenth class of women. If Plath returned as star-student-cum-faculty member at Smith, having been an undergraduate there, she had a double-vantage point and thus understood her fellow professors' vanity long before I did, how their vivacious-but-serious charm was fed by wide-eyed coeds gazing with devotion, also often confusing their passion for subjects with their teacher. The standard uniform of elbow-patched tweeds is what we'd now call "shabby chic," but it bore no resemblance to the utter drabness of the kitchen rug Plath describes in *The Bell Jar*, trampled, of course, by the wife who stayed at home and washed dishes, probably finding a strand of her own "dense hair" with each freshly cleansed batch (*Collected* 214). Which she would remove immediately, half-disgusted with her failure to eradicate any animal-like shedding, half-triumphant at leaving some trace of that self, or at least a smear of its DNA, on otherwise immaculate plates.

There's no trip taken to Brontë country, at least for the literary-minded, in which one does not pack, as if in a mental suitcase, memories of that entire family's disintegrating minds and tubercular lungs. How tiny and frail they all seemed, I recall after viewing a pair of Charlotte's gloves in New York at the Public Library. I have "the bones of a bird," a Romanian jeweler once pronounced, measuring a watch-band for me, yet attempting to insert half of a single hand would have split Brontë's fine kid leather like a German sausage.

I wore gloves myself the day I visited Plath's grave, removing them only to take photographs. My ex-husband and I were already splitting ourselves: though happy trampling across the Yorkshire moors and returning at night to our lodgings, the model for Thrushcross Grange in *Wuthering Heights*--a manor house turned family hotel, where we were greeted by an enormous mastiff, who terrified me--I was left alone to read and stare through the rain-sluiced windows at black-faced, evil-looking sheep, thinking all the while of what an unfairly bad reputation with which the Brontë sisters had been saddled. Those moors are not gentle and rolling but steep and treacherous, spiked and wiry with gorse, with footing made all the more insecure by the "sheep patties" left behind. The Penistone National Preserve--what a name!--may have been home to three blazingly talented sisters, but not "sissies."

Finally, my ex-husband and I made our way--carefully, silently, through a series of roads no wider than a single car--into Mytholmroyd, where Ted Hughes's family had its tobacconist's shop, and for the first time, I truly understood the horrors of the British class system. Buildings be-



Figure 1: (Photograph courtesy of Michael Stokes)



smutted by centuries of coal smoke. Doors slammed shut with the inchoate and failed longings of those who wanted, more than anything, better lives, if not for themselves--"there is no hope, it is given up"--then for their children (201). Hughes, of course, escaped by virtue of an open scholarship to Cambridge; his sister, Olwyn, to France, and his brother, Gerald, the favored child of his

mother, to Australia. Each seemed to want to put as much distance between themselves and their origins as possible.

Yet Hughes, later in life, saw vast real estate opportunities there, trying to convince Assia Wevill and other paramours to move into houses that could be picked up cheaply, hidden in the dark, damp recesses in West Yorkshire. It was this misdirected lust that persuaded him to permit the publication of both *The Bell Jar* and *Letters Home* in the states. Decisions he later regretted and caused him to clasp an iron fist, like a body part from one of his books for children, around Plath's literary holdings and allow for only those books and essays to be published that met with his approval, though Olwyn came into play as his own mastiff here.

Revisiting that pilgrimage--one made from love and respect, if not awe--to Plath's grave has also provoked an unbidden return of the many, many books I have read about her in the three decades since, as well as an intentional journey back, back, back to the poems themselves, trying to read them afresh, a process which, of course, has raised additional questions, particularly as regards the two versions of *Ariel* we now have and the complex family history that still remains not quite in focus.

Perhaps the latter will never come clear, but one long-held opinion has been widely confirmed--and, I've learned, is shared by Meghan O'Rourke, arguably the younger generation's best reader of Plath--since I began writing this memoir: the *Ariel* Hughes assembled and struggled to have published is a better book than the volume we read as the restored version.¹ "The Hanging Man," for example, one of Plath's most riveting poems, which tells us what horrors she had already suffered, is a work he replaced, while another, "The Swarm," partially generated by Plath's reading about Napoleon, excoriates Hughes in such bitter fashion he can scarcely be said to have arranged the book to spare himself. The poem, in her original table of contents but crossed out, adds immeasurably to the great sequence of bee poems, as Hughes recognized, and his decision here is an implicit but undeniable statement in his belief that artistic excellence ultimately matters beyond any personal cost.

Furthermore, he spent a full year persuading a publisher to accept *Ariel*, and if I'm tempted to reject his fatalistic arrangement of the manuscript, we know that she left a sheaf of

¹ Meghan O'Rourke. "Ariel Redux." *Slate.com*, 7 Dec. 2004. Web.

last poems on her desk whose different tone controverts almost wholly the affirmative note Plath originally hoped for, writing her mother that the original manuscript began with "love" and ended with "spring" (*Collected* 156, 219). But the woman who left Devon already believed in "destiny," even one threatening to choke her, as we know from "The Rabbit Catcher," finished a month before Hughes had his first assignation with Assia Wevill; the "Greek necessity" in "Edge," written only six days before Plath turned on the gas, displays her sense of impending "finality"--a word used in letters to her mother and friends--but pre-dating even her study of classical tragedy at Cambridge, where she met Hughes, Plath's poems often rely on myth and an ancient world governed by superstition, prescience, and inevitability (272). A quick skim through Plath's *Collected Poems*--which I packed, of course, along with *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*--makes clear that Hughes imposed nothing; rather, the shape he gave the American version of *Ariel* is a confirmation of what he'd long known to be true of Plath's character.

Thus, why did the publication of *Ariel: The Restored Edition* ignite such a fresh score of volleys between those convinced that this book was, at last, "the real thing," and those such as O'Rourke, a poet who is decidedly non-partisan? It's scholars and "fans," not practitioners of this our sullen craft and art, who tend to react, not respond, to what amount to political debates and join forces, but Louise Glück, perhaps Plath's most obvious descendant, makes an important point--subtly, sardonically--when she states our cultural expectation that women be "life-affirming."² The survivor of early bouts of self-starvation, Glück similarly learned to tap into her own death-wish, or literal self-paring, through poetic sequences such as "Dedication to Hunger."³ O'Rourke continues her argument with remarkably similar language, putting Hughes's approach to the manuscript in terms of film editing, cutting back "a labored opening sequence," removing others more "conventional (and repetitive)" (*slate.com*). Isn't this precisely what Plath does herself in the revision process of poems like "Ariel," whose various drafts we have, not to mention its predecessor, "Whiteness I Remember," to which O'Rourke points as well? Fully a decade before I read her work on Plath, I heard Stanley Plumly make the same comparison in a casual aside at an already informal talk, calling the book's title poem "anorexic," i.e. "pared," the narrative "cut back" so that we are plunged into the moment's full drama and motion.

² Louise Glück, *Descending Figure*. New York: HarperCollins, 1981.

³ Louise Glück, *Proofs and Theories*. New York: Ecco Press, 1994.

Furthermore, if reading the two *Ariel*'s side by side as Plath's own memorials, the original American version offers a richer, larger, and more complex portrait of her development as an artist, revisiting the Foreword Frieda Hughes, Plath's daughter, offers for the "restored" version she edited, is disturbing at best. Her past of runaways, bad marriages, and bulimia makes the unstable tone almost predictable, leaving the reader with the sense that her words are those of an aggrieved, never-quite-grown-up daughter. Frieda writes pointedly of her father's affair with Wevill as being undertaken on "work-related" trips to London--as though returning books for Hughes to the Exeter library would have excused any Plathian adulteries there--while the adjectives most often applied to her mother are "jealous," "fury," and "rage." In the penultimate paragraph of *Ariel: The Restored Edition*'s Foreword, Frieda Hughes writes that her mother's book left her caught in "an act of revenge, in a voice that had been honed and practiced for years, latterly with the help of my father. Though he became a victim of it, ultimately he did not shy away from its mastery" (xx). Her conclusion? "This new...edition...is the basis for the published *Ariel*, edited by my father. Each version has its own significance though the two histories are one" (xxi).

Frieda's statements deny her mother any agency whatsoever in either the restored *Ariel* or the ones finally published in England and America. While it's impossible to tell the exact source of her anger--Plath's suicide? the loving and motherly image Hughes provided, subsequently rejected as false as Plath's aforementioned "old whore petticoats"? or allegiance, described elsewhere as timorously showing her father a sheaf of poems which anyone else would have advised her to put in a drawer? But over-encouragement was Hughes's habit, as friends attest.⁴

While copy-editing is now considered a luxury even the megacorporate behemoths can't afford, surely HarperCollins could have hired someone with the same eye and ear for repetition I had while teaching Plath at a girls' school. Frieda uses "extraordinary" twice in a single paragraph, both times in regard to her mother's work, with the antecedent her refusal to having British Heritage place one of its signature blue plaques in Yeats's London residence, which housed the flat where Plath ended her life: Fitzroy Road. "English Heritage," Frieda proclaims in indignation at what she saw as an attempt to celebrate her mother's notorious suicide, "had been

⁴ Ben Sonnenberg, *Lost Property*, Summit Books, 1991; Daniel Huws, *Memories of Ted Hughes*, Richard Hollis, Five Leaves, 2010; Lucas Myers, *Crow Steered, Bergs Appeared*, Proctor's Hall Press, 2001, and *An Essential Self: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath*, Richard Hollis, Five Leaves, 2010.

led to believe that my mother had done all her best work at that address, when in fact she'd been there for only eight weeks, written thirteen poems, nursed two sick children, been ill herself, furnished and decorated the flat, and killed herself" (xix). "Herself." "Herself." Thirteen poems within eight weeks, the other activities notwithstanding.

Some of the poems written at Fitzroy Road were indeed among Plath's best, but the number Frieda gives is highly inaccurate, according to my version of the *Collected Poems*. Thus who was Frieda truly commemorating when she insisted that the plaque be placed at 3 Chalcot Square, "where my mother and father had their first London home, where they had lived for twenty-one months, where my mother wrote *The Bell Jar*, published *The Colossus*, and gave birth to me. This was a place where she had truly lived and where she'd been happy and productive--with my father" (xix)? A term that begins and ends the foreword and is finally telling indeed.

Diane Middlebrook's *Her Husband* (2003), widely acclaimed as the first "fair-minded" account of their marriage, confirms that Plath wrote four poems during her time at Chalcot Square and finished *The Bell Jar* only because she was able to escape the flat's baby-squalling confines to the study lent to Hughes by W. S. Merwin and his wife, Dido.



The latter's brief memoir, appended to Anne Stevenson's earlier and rightfully disrespected--if not half-disowned by its author--*Bitter Fame* (1989) claims that the space was never intended for Plath's use, but Dido clearly detested Plath from first meeting till after her death. While she may have been a demanding houseguest, the très condescending, transatlantic snobbery with which Dido depicts Plath scarfing down her paté as though it were "Aunt Dot's meatloaf" seems de trop, non (*Bitter Fame* 341)? In fact, to use a word from Plath's poetry, the entire memoir seems an exercise in pure "bitchery" considering its source: a woman who accomplished nothing more in life than marriage to a future American Poet Laureate, acting as jealous antagonist to another woman who surely would have held the same position had she lived.



Figure 2: (The Guardian, 5 December 2009)

If Hughes, at least through Olwyn, exerted punitive control over Stevenson's attempt at a biography, his generosity can't be faulted in either child's case: yes, he sent both away to boarding school from what seemed mixed motives--protectiveness and his never-arrested desire for freedom--but he never failed to remind Frieda or Nicholas that their educations were made possible by the financial legacy Plath left behind. One wonders if that same legacy, now greatly

expanded, provided the funds used to purchase and decorate Frieda's new home in Wales, whose beautiful dining room boasts a live owl from its sideboard--and, too, how tightly her own fist is now clenched, given Olwyn's age and the suppression of new work on what would seem the same subject as Heather Clark's *The Grief of Influence* (2011),⁵ remains a subject of speculation.

Sadly, not long after *Ariel: The Restored Edition* was issued, Nicholas, the subject of some of Plath's most deeply moving, "human"--"Children might humanize me"--poems, hanged himself in Alaska (Plath, *Journals* 519). I'm told that his colleagues, who considered him quite successful as a teacher and researcher in his own right, were "shocked and saddened" by this genuinely tragic event, but while I have no reason to doubt this report's accuracy, for any such death is deeply disturbing, in the case of Nicholas, many further questions arise, especially as to why no one seems to have noticed any warning signs--all well-documented--and attempted to intervene. First, clinical depression "ran in [Plath's] family on both sides," Middlebrook tells us; indeed, Otto Plath's refusal to seek medical treatment for his infected toe seems a knowing, stubborn courting of death, so one might begin by pronouncing like father, like daughter, then, like mother, like son, two sets of twins keenly sighted but "bitten by bad nature" (*Her Husband* 20, Plath *Collected* 126).

Then there are other doublings, repetitions, and abandonments to be found, each often found to be a direct indicator of suicide: though Gerald, Nicholas's uncle, was his own mother's

⁵ Heather Clark, *The Grief of Influence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Other correspondence anonymous on request of the writer.

favorite and placed himself at a quite nearly unbridgeable remove, Nick and his father were joined only by their love for periodic salmon-fishing excursions to Scotland and Alaska itself, i.e., what sort of closeness comes from trips taken every few years? If it's no accident that Nicholas's chosen career was that of marine biologist, since his father contemplated taking a degree in zoology and his mother once expressed the early yearnings she had had to be a doctor, surely the strangest and most generally insulting--though I could find no letter of protest from his sister--essay I found on the subject of Nicholas's suicide explains his defection from his university post, colleagues, and students as a measure of self-healing, or, to be more exact, making "clay babies," i.e. becoming a potter, also as proof that his mother somehow managed to kill "the one / Solid the spaces lean on, envious. / You are the baby in the barn" (Covington, Plath, *Collected* 242). The argument would be risible if not so thoroughly irresponsible. It may well be beyond human capacity to stop the actions of anyone possessed by thanatos, but did anyone try to intervene, given the widespread use of antidepressants to treat the mildest malady attributed to stress, particularly in a state filled with "the ghosts...of suicides," "infamous" or not--as Plath certainly was, though in "Electra on Azalea Path," from which this line derives, she was writing of her father--with the knowledge that act had taken place in his immediate family if knowing nothing of its precedents? Nick's death occurred approximately four months after the American publication of his father's letters, which express clearly his disappointment that his wife's second child wasn't yet another adoring female, but notice the following quotation in Middlebrook's biography, published five years before that:

...it seems that Hughes held rather ambivalent feelings toward his son. During Plath's pregnancy, he had acknowledged that he would greatly prefer the newcomer to be another girl. "I could do with ten daughters," he wrote to Lucas Myers, now a father of daughters himself. "Sons are just momentary hypodermic needles." And he too makes comparisons that imply favoritism. (Middlebrook 163)

Four x two: didn't any of his friends, especially those living in a state with one of the highest suicide rates in the country, read either passage, make a connection between his sudden drop-out status, and think to worry? Hughes writes of Nick's eyes as bejeweled with tears when first trying to feed him after his mother's death, but isn't it possible that what the infant sensed wasn't only Plath's absence but a lack of genuine, unconditional love from his father, the kind of animal attachment--so to speak--that a parent normally has for a child? The body knows everything, and

long before the mind; or to be specific, I too lost fifteen pounds before I consciously knew that my own husband planned to leave me, and I was, theoretically at least, an adult. Whereas any small, preverbal child, dependent only on his five senses, would have quickly detected his mother's absence, of course, as well his father's grief, preoccupation, general turmoil, and perhaps even that he was the less-favored child.

Plath has too easily been cast as a helpless, neurotic victim, when she was, all along, precisely the same person as that who speaks in the voice of "Lady Lazarus," who suffers, yes, "the great and terrible gift of being reborn," troubled by the necessity of dying first, but who except "a very resourceful woman" could rise from her own ash? (Plath, *Collected* 294) Also to eat, implicitly, her betrayers, Hitler, and the Devil "like air" (247)? Or ride those engines in "Totem" and "The Munich Mannequin" and get off to write more and more and even better poems? For, whether or not she expected to survive her final suicide attempt, I don't believe, as Middlebrook states, that "depression killed Sylvia Plath" (211). Instead, it seems far likelier that she had entered that highly dangerous window when antidepressants--her family practitioner had prescribed Parnate specifically because it takes far quicker effect than others--reach sufficient blood-levels to convince the severely impaired that they have just enough strength to end things instead of recognizing that the medication is working, that their lives and general spirits will improve, and that the bees, flying, will indeed taste a no-longer snow-laden spring. In the lethal "meanwhile," however, Plath relied, as we all do to some extent, on doctors, none of whom told her this, perhaps because the phenomenon was less known at the time.

With similarly child-like dependency on my ex-husband's navigational skills, that day we found--reluctantly, in his case--first Mytholmroyd, then Hebden Bridge, then Hepstonstall itself, remains etched in my mind as clearly as the surrounding landscape. I carried a yellow rose with me while he stayed in the car after arriving at the church itself. I had no idea of how to locate the grave, but fortunately, I stumbled into the friendly sexton, who informed me that Plath's grave lay in the "new part" of the cemetery. I noticed that the stones in my passway, as the subject of my current manuscript in progress, *Rain in Our Door: Duets with Robert Johnson*, sang, were a tilt, uneven, and could easily provoke a sprained ankle or worse. The sexton explained that the older part of the cemetery had been built atop mass graves for those killed during the bubonic plague in the 13th century. With the clouds swirling above my head, so low I could nearly touch them, I felt myself to be in a scene out of Poe, or as if I fully expected Bertha Rochester's hands

to poke through the dirt and grab at my legs, wanting me to join her in uneasy repose.

"Unanointed, unannealed." Uncared for in any sense of the word.

I located Plath's tombstone by accident: an enormous black rook flapped within inches of my face, cackling loudly in my ear and quite nearly causing my heart to stop. I looked down: "Sylvia Plath Hughes..." My first emotion was one of enormous sadness. The dire loneliness implied by Plath's final resting place, so far from any loved ones and surrounded by various members of the Hughes family--although Ted's mother and father did seem to harbor deep feelings of affection for their daughter-in-law and were horrified by his affair with Assia Wevill, whom they considered a Jezebel, a home-wrecker, a scarlet woman responsible for the death of Plath and the ruin of their son's reputation--reached into my heart and yanked with the force of one of those dirt-smeared hands I had feared only moments before.

I saw no signs of desecration, no attempts to scratch "Hughes" from the headstone. What I did notice was an odd scattering of shells, and I picked up one, wondering how on earth it had gotten there. It was many years before I learned that Hughes and the children had spread them on Plath's grave as a reminder of the sea she loved. I assume they were from the Devon beaches, or what passes for beaches to Americans used to sugar-white sand along the Cape or, closer to where I grew up, the Gulf of Mexico. Small difference, and I do not regret keeping the shell as a memento: I have written many times that New England, in which I spent a good chunk of my life, and the American Deep South, have much in common. They have their witches, we have the Devil's music. Plath sang both in modes, with the rumble and razored cry of Beethoven's *Grosse Fugue* beneath, and this is to name but one of the ground-swells, so to speak, that lifts her poetry to the level of that among the highest accomplishments of the twentieth century.

The shell remains in a box with a fallen stone from Yeats's Tower, another from the church at East Coker in whose wall the ashes of T. S. Eliot are interred, a small rock from the driveway of Faulkner's Rowan Oak that to me resembles an arrow head, and a fallen piece of bark from Plath's wych elm at her later home in Devon. Sometimes I take these out and arrange them on the floor, imagining them in a certain pattern fit for a shadow-box. A box of shades whose totems will continue to guide, bless, and be-spell my own efforts at song.

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