

## Shopping For Shades with Sylvia Plath

Helen Decker

She attired herself in the color of the kitchen so she could match the shade correctly.  
She was tired from the morning match of children and poems,  
but now, after the au pair had arrived,  
and after Sylvia had prepared the milk for the children,  
she was ready to test the color scheme of the snow.  
If it had been America,  
she might have gone to Sears.  
There the whites had shades: cream, egg white, off white.  
In London the one shop shade maker had one color,  
and it didn't exactly match the tone of Sylvia's blouse,  
or the white pleated skirt,  
or the white scarf around her white neck,  
or the white skin of her healed wrists,  
or her white belly,  
or her white tears,  
her white pills left behind on a counter,  
the white pages that lay next to her typewriter broken with the black words.  
"It just doesn't seem to be the right shade of white," she told the shade-maker,  
and he,  
stunned,  
brought out another dozen shades,  
sure that one variation must match what she had in mind.  
"It's almost the color of milk,  
more like the porcelain sink,  
or the white stretch of a neck before the noose bruises the flesh.  
It's the white of the glacier as it floats into a puzzle,  
but no,  
it's not the shade of white you have here."

The shop-owner went to the back room and returned with two more shades,  
and Sylvia asked him for powder which she sprinkled onto the table,  
like the snow in London, 1963,  
like the stars falling onto the Cape Cod summer sand,  
and she said, "This white, only more sharp."  
And he went to the backroom,  
opening boxes,  
returning with shades he held against the powered stars,  
and still—it was just not right.  
"Like teeth,  
yours perhaps,"  
and she asked him to smile for her,  
wider, "Yes,"  
while she held the shade up to his mouth,

brought him closer to the mirror,  
asked for a match which she struck and studied;  
his teeth a map,  
the match almost to her fingers,  
he in the mirror, a wide open mouth.

She blew out the match and told him:  
“You have taken good care of your teeth.  
You have brushed and visited the dentist regularly, I can see.  
Do you have a shade a bit, bit, bit lighter than your upper right molar?”  
The shop-owner took her upstairs to his apartment;  
he covered his table with white rice, cotton balls, bed linen, the inside of an envelope,  
molecules, Dickinson’s dress, heat, a lily,  
and Sylvia, handling the shades of white, said:  
“I’ll take them. I’ll take them all.”

Then, traveling back through the white snow,  
climbing the apartment stairs,  
entering the kitchen,  
she opened the boxes until she found the perfect match of white on white,  
and the others she threw out the window into the snow bank below,  
and said that she would wait until spring,  
when the green grass comes,  
and she could find them, again.