

A Perfectly Beautiful Time: Sylvia Plath at Camp Helen Storrow

Peter K. Steinberg

In "Mystic," a poem that Sylvia Plath wrote on February 1, 1963, the poet recalls "pines in summer" and remembers "[t]he dead smell of sun on wood cabins" (Plath, *Collected Poems* 268). Plath was thinking of her summer camp experiences from the 1940s when she attended Camp Weetamoe in Center Ossipee, New Hampshire (1943-1944); Camp Helen Storrow in Plymouth, Massachusetts (1945-1946); and the Vineyard Sailing Camp at Oak Bluffs, Martha's Vineyard (1947-1948).¹

Plath's childhood had been on her mind. A few days before writing "Mystic," on January 28, 1963, she submitted her recently completed sea script "Landscape of a Childhood" to Leonie Cohn of the British Broadcast Corporation's Talks Department.² The piece memorably concludes: "And this is how it stiffens, my vision of that seaside childhood. My father died, we moved inland" (*Johnny Panic* 130). From here, Plath composed her satiric recollection of attending public schools in Massachusetts in "America! America!" Composed between January 16 and February 4, 1963, Plath made reference in a letter to her mother on the former date saying: "I have a commission for a funny article which I just haven't had time or energy to think of" (*Letters Home* 495). By February 4, Plath updates her mother: "I have done a commissioned article for Punch on my schooldays" (498). "Ocean 1212-W" and "America! America!" serve as overlapping chapters in a creative-literary autobiography, indeed, Susan R. Van Dyne sums this up best when she calls "Ocean 1212-W" a "carefully reconstructed, even mythicized fiction" (*Revising Life* 85). Although much of the article includes reminisces of Plath's inland, Wellesley schooling, she sets "America! America!" in a "rowdy seaside town, where I picked up, like lint, my first ten years of schooling," which is identifiably Winthrop (*Johnny Panic* 40). Thus, it

¹ Just to round out Plath's pre-college summers, in 1949 Plath attended a Unitarian youth conference on Star Island, in the Isle of Shoals off the coast of New Hampshire; and, in 1950, Plath spent most of her time in Wellesley and worked at a nearby farm. It would be the only summer she spent at home between 1942 and 1955.

² When published in the selection of Plath's prose, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, this piece appeared under the title "Ocean 1212-W," a title which Cohn suggested in a letter dated February 8, 1963. See Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (page 109) and "These Ghostly Archives" by Gail Crowther and Peter K. Steinberg, http://www.iun.edu/~nwadmin/plath/vol2/Crowther_Steinberg.pdf, (page 190).



works in tandem with the nostalgia evident in "Ocean 1212-W."

Plath is nostalgic for that past. Given the circumstances of her life in early 1963, it is no wonder. In *The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal says that the nostalgic person creates "a past out of a childhood divested of responsibilities and an imagined landscape invested with all they find missing in the modern world" (25). This is exactly what Plath does in her January 1963 prose articles, "Ocean 1212-W" and "America! America!"

In some of her poetry and prose, Plath uses her past personal or past shared experiences to haunt the archive of her memory and that of her family. This is a theme that runs through her work as can be seen, for example, in poems such as "The Disquieting Muses," where the poet blends her childhood with that of her mother's, and in "The Eye-Mote," where the speaker declares: "What I want back is.../ A place, a time gone out of mind" (Plath, *Collected Poems* 109). The speaker in the poem "In Plaster" recognizes the duplicity of the self when she states: "There are two of me now: / This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one" (158). This view of the past and the present is at first difficult ("I shall never get out of this!"), but she soon learns how both are dependent on the other; how the old (past) self can be of benefit to the new (present) self, and vice versa (158). In "The Babysitters," another poem comparing her two selves – this time through the perspective lens of a decade gone-by – Plath asks "What keyhole have we slipped through, what door has shut? ... Everything has happened" (175). While William Wordsworth claims in "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey," that "I cannot paint / What then I was," in the poem "Doomsday," Plath sees through the obstacle, acknowledging that "Our painted stages fall apart by scenes" (Wordsworth 133, *Collected Poems* 316). This contradicts Plath's speaker's desire in "The Eye-Mote" to return to an earlier self. Recognizing what Gail Crowther terms the "playfulness of time" and the fallibility of memory, Plath practiced in her craft to "paint / what then [she] was" in vignettes that Plath says "immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have" (Crowther 30, Orr 169). Indeed, she admits that as a writer she seeks to "control and manipulate experiences" and "that personal experience is very important" to her poetry (169).

Plath is frequently no less romantic in her idealization of the past as Wordsworth and others, but in her late poem "Mystic," she initially instills the past with a sense of hurt:

The air is a mill of hooks—
Questions without answer,



Glittering and drunk as flies
Whose kiss stings unbearably. (*Collected Poems* 268)

She later asks: "Does the sea / Remember the walker upon it?" (269). The memory of the pain of bug bites gives way. There is resignation in that the footsteps will be erased from memory by the next wave. Lowenthal claims: "The prime function of memory ... is not to preserve the past but to adapt it so as to enrich and manipulate the present" (210). In "Ocean 1212-W," "Mystic," and many other of her works, water is a mnemonic device for Plath which enables her to work creatively with and through her nostalgia. For Plath though, her childhood memory is "sealed ... off like a ship in a bottle" (*Johnny Panic* 130). Remembering "the cold, salt, running hills of the Atlantic" provides access "in one wash of memory" to a world in which "the colours deepen and gleam" (123). We are left in "Mystic," which is strongly derived from "Ocean 1212-W," with the adult speaker of the poem in a tug-of-war with a remembered adolescent self. Ultimately, the poem's speaker – and I would argue Plath herself is the speaker – is able to conquer this nostalgia by bringing herself out of the "black air under pines" and grounding herself in her flat at 23 Fitzroy Road, in the present, hearing "[t]he children leap in their cots" and watching as "[t]he sun blooms" (269).

This paper will focus specifically on the summers of 1945 and 1946, when Plath was "under pines" at Camp Helen Storrow in Plymouth, Massachusetts.³ It is written in response to Gail Crowther's call for papers on "Plath and Place." It attempts to answer some questions Crowther posed in "Sylvia Plath: The Playfulness of Time," a paper printed in the inaugural issue *Plath Profiles*: "What it is that occurs at that meeting point between reader and writer that can affect such a powerful attraction between the two? What role do time, place and space play in this meeting? And what happens when we follow in someone else's footsteps?" (30). This paper will consider the now closed camp as a site of "urban exploration," and in particular, my own two visits to the property in April 2008 and January 2011. "Urban exploration" is defined as "the study of parts of civilization that are normally unseen or off-limits, such as abandoned structures, drains, sewers, tunnels, etc." (dictionary.com). While not actually abandoned, the campsite

³ Helen Storrow (1864-1944), was among many other things a philanthropist and an active leader in the Girl Scouts. In 1917, she founded a Pine Tree Camp, a camp for Girl Scouts at her Long Pond residence in Plymouth, Massachusetts.



remains a place of memory, a place where over the course of decades thousands of children filled the air beneath the canopy of pines with song, laughter, gossip, teasing, and homesick wailing.⁴ Often done via means of trespassing, my "urban explorations" were done with complete awareness and cooperation of the property owners.⁵ Cabins and specialty buildings, a chimneystack, a tennis court, and stone stairs in disrepair are some of the derelict constructions that through abandonment and disuse victims of time, slowly being reclaimed by the earth.

In biographies, Plath's adolescence receives only the most cursory examination with the largest amount of interest focusing on her primary residence during this period at 26 Elmwood Road in Wellesley.⁶ However, these pre-teen and teenage formative years remain an area understudied and undervalued. Combined with my two visits to Camp Helen Storrow, I worked with documents created by Plath during this period now housed in various archives. Held at the Lilly Library at Indiana University, Bloomington, are Plath's carefully preserved postcards and letters sent to her family during the weeks spent away at summer camp. Also held is a July 1945 diary, which Plath kept on a top-spiral bound notebook. The Morgan Library & Museum in New York City holds a "Poems" manuscript Plath made circa 1946. Included in this are handwritten and illustrated poems, several of which came out of her weeks at Camp Helen Storrow.

In working with the archive, I commit an act of permissible, textual trespassing; oftentimes reading words never meant for my eyes. In doing so, I can recreate Plath's weeks at the camp: the past becomes the present: Sylvia Plath is living. She is walking, swimming, and writing. The rest of her life – just over half of her life – still stretches out in front of her. I walk through these woods and explore the terrain of her letters. But it works both ways and I enter the narrative of her life through her words, into an existence nearly thirty years before I was born.

⁴ The term "abandoned" can have negative connotations, which include a willful neglect of property: in this paper I do not want my use of the term to be construed as such.

⁵ Another term for urban exploration is "space hacking," which has much in common with the notion of trespassing.

⁶ This is likely for its location as Plath's first suicide attempt in August 1953. Places where Sylvia Plath lived are high on the list of sites her literary pilgrims seek to see with their own eyes.



One of the areas of Plath's life that had always held an interest for me was her summers at camp.



This is especially the case after reading her letters from camp in the Lilly Library. In April 2008, after making contact with the family that now owns part of the campsite, I was invited down to explore the property. The camp, which closed its doors in the late 1960s after the roof of the dining hall collapsed following a heavy snow, was situated in the southeastern corner of Long Pond.

In the early 1970s, the property was sold by the Girl Scouts to private individuals, and is now a residential area with a few families living on the grounds.⁷ The family I visited makes their residence in the building that was once the main camp house. Immediately upon arriving, the authenticity of the site's former purpose was felt in the form of the bumpy tire-track worn, and unpaved driveway (photograph above). On the right are playing fields, an empty lot that once held a barn, and a tennis court. In the woods to the left, chameleon-like dilapidated structures peek through the skinny lengths of trees.

Camp Helen Storrow had five units of camper's cabins: "Cove," "Hilltop," "Pines," "Ridge," and "Woods." In addition to the main camp building and dining hall, there was an infirmary (also called the "Wishing Well"), a "Px" trading post where various wares such as candy and stamps could be purchased. This is also where Plath would drop-off postcards and letters to her family. Each unit had separate latrines and kitchens. I felt lucky to be visiting in winter and early spring, before the trees leaf. I do hope to visit again one July, the month Plath was here, for an even more genuine experience.

Plath was here. I am here.

I am here to glimpse a ghost, to see if I can find clues to Plath's weeks here which might, as if by magic, still linger. Certainly 1945 and 1946 still exists beneath my feet: the cabins and the trees bare witness, and the pond and the earth, too. Here, under inches of leaves, branches, and pine needles, the earth may hold traces of Plath. On July 3, 1946 in her second

⁷ Correspondence with property owner, April 18, 2008.



year at the camp, she lost a black ribbon. I wonder if that is still here. Plath may have skipped stones that now rest on the bottom of the still pond; footprints that were made in the mud after a rain were covered within weeks by autumn.

How her presence leaves an impression! I suppose I have made a sort of a habit of "haunting" Plath places.⁸ I have always found that the physical (actual) settings of Plath's poetry and prose takes on a greater significance and provides additional texture into understanding the creative process and the inspiration of the work. No site is either too small, or remote, or insignificant. There are the "big sites" like her house at 26 Elmwood Road in Wellesley, her college dormitories, or the building at 23 Fitzroy Road in London. In "Dream with Clam-Digger," Plath describes her dream-self as "Scathed, stained with tedious pilgrimages" (*Collected Poems* 43). This nostalgic visitation takes her to her childhood town of Winthrop. As she enters the town: "No change met her" (44).⁹ Plath's speaker watches children playing on the tidal flats near a green rock and schooner, just as Plath herself did when their age. She is "Plucked back thus sudden to that far innocence" (44). In 2001, I made one of my "tedious pilgrimages" to Winthrop, timing the visit to coincide with an astronomically low tide. The hope was that with the tidal water lower than normal that Plath's green rock may present itself. On the entire stretch of beach behind Johnson Avenue, there was one barnacle-covered rock visible. The photograph, right, captures it and me.



Plath's summer camps are of interest to me because throughout her life, the places she stayed had a profound effect on her creativity. Also, comparatively, very little biographical attention is paid to her formative, youthful years than to the last five or ten years of her life.¹⁰ But

⁸ Many of these places I photographed and the images are on my website "A celebration, this is" <<http://www.sylvia.plath.info/index2.html>>. Additionally, hard copies of these photographs, and many more which do not appear on the website, are held by the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Neilson Library at Smith College.

⁹ Plath writes about the dream that inspired this poem in her on March 11, 1956. See *Unabridged Journals*, page 235. This is directly opposite to what Esther Greenwood sees when, in chapter 12 of *The Bell Jar*, she comments that "In the ten years of my absence, fancy blue and pink and pale green shanties had sprung up on the flat sands of the Point..." (160).

¹⁰ One reason for this is maybe the failure of Plath's Estate to allow scholars to quote from these unpublished materials and the concomitant lack of widespread availability (i.e. publication) of her youthful poems, stories, letters, and diaries.



it is all relevant. Plath was, after all, notoriously revisionary. Her practice of writing and revising is undeniably prevalent in her poetry and also, though less notably, in her prose. Images, themes, and ideas recur regularly; thus poems written in 1962 or 1963 potentially have their roots in something written in 1945 or 1946.

The current property owners of Camp Helen Storrow use a few of the cabins to this day. The original sign for the "Cove" unit house is still here, as well as the fireplace (see photograph below, right). Plath spent her second year at the camp in Cabin 9 of "Cove." On Saturday July 6, 1946, her unit put on a variety show, and Plath was unanimously voted to play to role of Frank Sinatra to sing his "Prisoner of Love." By that night, however, Plath had come down with a cold and ended up lip-syncing while her friend Betsy Powley sang. Plath made the most and dressed wearing a man's white shirt with a bow tie, gray pants, and pulled her hair back (unfortunately, Plath admitted, in a way that she knew her mother disliked). The microphone was a cup on top of a broom. By the end of the number, she had to blow her nose: but Powley kept on singing! Plath also played the umpire in "Casey at the Bat," wearing an old gray sweatshirt and a green visor backwards.¹¹ In a margin of her letter to her mother, Plath drew an umpire calling, with great gusto, "Strike One."¹² The recitation was so well-received that they pleased the campers with an immediate encore. On the next page is a photograph of Plath from August 1946, just after her return from Camp Helen Storrow, which she pasted a scrapbook now held by the Lilly Library. Her Girl Scout uniform is a part of the Smith College Historic Clothing Collection.



¹¹ For more information on the poem "Casey at the Bat," please see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casey_at_the_bat.

¹² Plath's illustration reads "Strrike Oone."





Sylvia Plath, August, 1946. Plath Mss. II. High School Scrapbook. Includes photographs, memorabilia, correspondence and clippings; heavily annotated by Plath. [Oversize no. 3].



Girl Scout Intermediate uniform, worn by Sylvia Plath between 1942 and 1945. Smith College Historic Clothing Collection, accession 1985.2.2, Northampton, MA. Copyright Smith College. This image may be used for research, educational and personal purposes only.





Cabins at Camp Helen Storrow
from Cove and Pines Units.



The cabins are a marvel. Not able to determine which cabin was Cove 9, I explored each of the remaining cabins in the unit, plus some of those in Pines. Names, dates, and drawings live on the wood cabin walls. Many of these date from the 1950's and early 1960's, but in one Cove cabin was "Pauline & Dicky 1946," the very summer Plath was in the unit. In another cabin, the child-like graffiti of a butterfly was painted above the doorway. I think immediately of Plath's precocious fondness of illustrating her poems, letters, and diaries with drawings and I



wonder if she decorated her own cabin's walls? Of course in my mind she did, and I fantasize briefly of opening a cabin door and seeing "Sylvia & Betsy best friends 4 ever" on the wall by an extant bedframe in her bold recognizable script. This would of course be accompanied by a scene of two pre-teen girls possibly lying on the camps beach (photograph left) by the pond at night looking up into a nighttime sky filled with stars

and an O-faced moon.

In her book of forty "Poems" now held at the Morgan Library in New York City, Plath wrote-out in her clear beautiful handwriting many of her best poems written between 1937 and 1946, illustrating many of them also. This book includes occasional poems written during her first year at Camp Helen Storrow in 1945 such "Invitation to Cove," illustrated with what appears to be a card. It is undoubtedly a facsimile, in miniature, of the actual invitation. On July 2, 1945, Plath's unit (Ridge) invited Cove to their unit house for an evening of folk dancing. She reports that it rained that night and as a result the campers danced by the fireplace, and sang campfire songs before bedtime. Another poem, "Farewell to Flash," is adorned with a dark cloud, rain drops and a thick yellow lightning bolt. On July 14, 1945, a favorite camp counselor called Flash, left the Cove unit to join that of Hilltop. By her poem "Camp Helen Storrow," Plath drew a colorful night scene of a cabin, on stilts, situated on a hill by a tree with a large moon rising over a purple hill.¹³ Lowenthal claims that "printing preserves source material virtually as they were"(214). Excepting the stilt-raised latrine, the entire Ridge unit, which sat perched midway

¹³ Plath sent this poem originally to her mother in two parts in letters written on July 7 and July 9, 1945. Each letter was postmarked the same day. Plath did write a letter on the July 8, however, this was not postmarked until the 10th.



up the hill, is gone now. Plath was in Ridge 3 that first year in 1945 and roomed with her Wellesley friend Betsy Powley. The poem Plath re-wrote in her manuscript book and the illustration she gave it "preserves" a scene that is now impossible to reproduce. A modern private residence now occupies the place where, perhaps, the main Ridge unit house sat. This follows Lowenthal's comment that "[e]arlier structures inexorably give way to subsequent ones if only because two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time" (239). "Camp Helen Storrow" is a sixteen-line poem, written possibly by an insomniac camper. The speaker watches the stars move across the sky and communes with nature, listening to tree branches swaying in the wind. She says the grass whispers to the moon, a line reminiscent of her later "Private Ground" and "The Moon and the Yew Tree" where "the grasses / Unload their griefs on my shoes, / The woods creak and ache" and "The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were god" (*Collected Poems* 130, 172). Plath's poem "Invitation to Our Camp Nurse" was composed circa July 10, 1945 and it invites a nurse to a minstrel show put on by both Ridge and Cove that evening. The poem is simply illustrated with a red cross and with "AN" in the middle. I thought these may be the nurse's initials; however, in her 1945 camp diary Plath addresses this invitation to Gret. Another poem dated 1945 is "Awake!" Although this poem makes reference to spring, Plath includes it in her camp diary. The poem mentions a man raising a flag, which the wind will unfurl, and bees flying over clovers. This naturally calls to mind the famous ending of Plath's poem "Wintering": "The bees are flying. They taste the spring" (*Collected Poems* 219). The poem "Betsy and Sylvia" shows two girls close together surrounded by floating hearts, in a conversation that I fancy is gossip, probably about two cute boys. "Rain," likely written while at camp, is illustrated with a figure crouching under a tree while dark grayish-black clouds descend from above. The speaker notices the parched earth and wilting plants need nourishment, which eventually comes as the rain takes over her field of vision.

In 1946, Plath wrote "The Lake," which she illustrated with two crayon drawings.¹⁴ The top illustration is a bird's eye view of a lake possibly from the perspective of the Camp's main house while the other is of three girls rowing in a boat. The poem is a meditation on the lake, full of paradoxes. It is tame and wild, quiet and colorful. At the close of the poem, she calls the lake an eye of the earth, a clear mirror reflecting the moods of the wind and sky. This image

¹⁴ While the camp was situated on the pond, Plath frequently referred to the body of water as a lake.



recurs in the poems "Mirror" (1961), "Morning Song" (1961) and "Child" (1963): "I am silver and exact...The eye of a little god...Now I am a lake;" "the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the winds hand;" and "Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing" (*Collected Poems* 173-174, 157, 265).

I understand how my mind – at the sight of the butterfly – was taken hostage. Lowenthal states, "Memory and history both derive and gain emphasis from physical remains. Tangible survivals provide a vivid immediacy that helps to assure us that there really was a past... relics remain essential bridges between then and now" (xxiii). I have allowed something real – the cabins, the archived poems, the letters, etc. – to graffiti my imagination while at the campsite. I jump back decades to insert myself into the past as if in a Jasper Fforde novel.¹⁵

Lowenthal contends: "To be certain there was a past, we must see at least some of its traces" (247). Though no longer an active camp, the buildings that remain vivify the actions Plath relates in her letters and diary, and likewise, the places and activities that she wrote about take on a higher significance because there are traces which act as points of reference during my exploration. At camp, Plath spent as much time as she could near the water lying on the beach and swimming and rowing boats on the pond. The campers enjoyed lunches and dinner on the beach, as well as spending one night there too.

Sometime before she arrived in 1945, the barn fell and the campers' activities one day included nail picking. The counselors made a contest out of it to see who could collect the most nails. Uncharacteristically, Plath did not win, but in the half-hour they were given, she did pick more than 325 nails, finishing third for individual collecting. In her 1945 diary, Plath tallied all the nails collected that day by her unit: 4,652. Even into the 1970s, I am told, the family living there was still finding nails at this site. The foundation for the barn is still visible, but the only building on the lot now is a small, beige shed (see photograph above).



¹⁵ Jasper Fforde is a Welsh writer whose "Thursday Next" series of novels are a combination of literary fantasy, crime, science fiction. In the series, the characters have the ability to jump across time and books.





Plath's sinuses and frequent colds are a well-documented ailment she suffered with throughout her life. It is not surprising, therefore, that in her letters and diary from camp she referenced visits to the infirmary. The sign is still there (left), but I do not know if it is contemporary to Plath's time.¹⁶ In the diary she kept her first year at camp, Plath mentioned that on July 2 she and Powley had to clear the path to the infirmary. They repeated the activity six days later. On her last day, she had to turn in some records to the infirmary as well, so it appears her first year was trouble free. Not so of her second year.

In 1946, Plath made several visits to the infirmary (see photographs below). On July 3 she required a visit to the nurse as she had a pimple. The size of the pimple must have been extraordinary as she referred to it as a tumor. A few days later she came down with a cold, which persisted a few days and prevented Plath from joining the rest of her Cove unit in their beach sleep-out. She was not too upset by it as those campers that did sleep out reported the next day of being too cold to sleep soundly. By the middle of the month, she had an ingrown toenail which warranted another visit for treatment.



¹⁶ It is in the same style as that of Cove, see photograph above on page 155.



The Trading Post (right), called the "Px," was a place Plath could visit every other day, according to a letter home on July 4, 1945. Plath made frugal use of her money while at camp. In addition to conducting postal transactions such as buying stamps and postcards, Plath purchased items such as a tie, a bathing cap, an autograph book, a sketch book, craft supplies and several boxes of Kleenex.



Of all the places at Camp Helen Storrow, one place truly remains unchanged to how Plath described it in her letters home: a small cemetery.¹⁷ On July 11, 1946, Plath went on a sketching trip with some of her campers. They visited a small family cemetery sandwiched between Ridge Unit and the roadway. The names and dates on the headstones intrigued Plath, and in particular there were three placed close together: a man's headstone placed between his two wives.



Plath comments on the each person's age at death: 40 and 73, respectively for each wife, and the man's 72. Plath writes about a small headstone beside these, that of a little girl who died at aged two. I remembered seeing the cemetery on my first visit in April 2008, but I did not photograph the headstones until my second trip in January 2011. The snow on the ground facilitated the

¹⁷ This cemetery is a family cemetery for the Raymond family. The Raymond's are a prominent Plymouth county/Six Ponds family. On the same day as the sketching trip to the cemetery, an "education van" visited Camp Helen Storrow. Plath reported that the "education van" featured a map of constellations on the ceiling, pamphlets on various natural subjects, a stuffed owl, cases of butterflies and moths, and cages holding living snakes, turtles, water moccasins, and a frog. One of the men who operated the van was named Elmer. The family who owns the campsite now tells me that Elmer is also of the Raymond family, and that as a result of the "education van" he was known as the "Animal Man."



taking of photographs as I was able to rub snow into the stones' etched-grooves, making legible the date and age of the child. In a letter to her mother, Plath said the stone just had the name Lovell on it.¹⁸ However, when I removed snow from the top of the stone, I saw the word "TIRZAH." Tirzah is a Hebrew word meaning "she is my delight," and the girl buried here was the daughter of Calvin and Polly Cahoon Raymond (en.wikipedia.com). For the photograph of the three adult headstones, I had to increase the brightness to make it more legible, the years and elements erode the stone little by little.



Between the cemetery and the site of the old barn is a playing field (photograph below). The campers played sports here, such as softball. The notable pastime of Plath's here was sunbathing, an activity she would only grow to savor as she aged through her teens. The letter she wrote home on July 6, 1946 was written here, and this was also a location where she sought refuge to help finish off her cold. As a rule the campers were not allowed to get sunburns; however, Plath several times enjoyed the sun a bit too much.



¹⁸ On a Raymond family blog, there is no reference to a Lovell listed in this cemetery. See <http://jskent.blogspot.com/2009/09/john-raymond-family-us-1630-current.html> for more information (accessed February 2, 2011).



In addition to the memory Plath draws on in "Mystic," she also recalls her time at summer camps in *The Bell Jar* and periodically throughout her journals.¹⁹ In chapter seven of *The Bell Jar*, when Esther Greenwood is driving with Constantin in his convertible through the streets of Manhattan, she reminisces on "the Girl Scouts and the piano lessons and the water-colour lessons and the dancing lessons and the sailing camp" of her youth (78).

Plath's postcards and letters from Camp Helen Storrow, as well as a diary kept from July 1-15, 1945, detail her eating habits, one of which is a consistent enthusiasm for butter. In these letters the word "butter" is often underlined and followed by exclamation marks. In *The Bell Jar*, several scenes involving eating feature this diary product. At the Ladies' Day luncheon, Esther Greenwood admits: "My favorite dishes are full of butter and cheese and sour cream" (25). This episode at the luncheon – which is based on real events – resulted in ptomaine poisoning which affected all but one of the guest editors.

There is no evidence Plath was drawing on an additional previous experience in the ptomaine scene in *The Bell Jar*; however, on July 3, 1946, a quarter of the camp, including five people in Plath's Cove unit, became ill after eating bad fish. The counselors had to spend their time tending to all the children who were fed soup to settle their stomachs. When Esther recovers from ptomaine poisoning, she notes: "Pads of butter floated on the surface and a faint chickeny aroma fumed up to my nostrils" (49). Later in the novel, Esther is out on a date with Irwin, the mathematics professor she meets on the steps of the Widener Library at Harvard University. At a French restaurant, Esther "drank the herb-green juice" that had collected in the snail shell, thinking to herself, "after months of wholesome, dull asylum diet, I was greedy for butter" (240). Once one has read Plath's earlier diaries and letters from Camp Helen Storrow, one can conclude that Esther Greenwood's exuberant enthusiasm for butter is perfectly aligned with Plath's. It is but one additional instance where Plath's early life informed her adult work.

Visiting Sylvia Plath places – armed with or without an arsenal of printed materials – is a transformative adventure. Significant sites can illumine some of her best known poems, stories, letters and journals, and other biographical facets. For those places less well-known, obscure, or

¹⁹ In *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (Anchor, 2000), see pages: 65, 167, 306, and 430.



hard to get to, there is a peculiar emotional rush that the literary trespasser encounters. For it was Plath's own life, after all, that was perhaps her deepest source of inspiration for a majority of her creative writings. This paper explored my out-of-season visits to the site of a summer camp that made such an impact on Plath's life, which even nearly seventeen years later, within weeks of her death, she was still remembering in her writing.



Works Cited

- Crowther, Gail. "Sylvia Plath: The Playfulness of Time." *Plath Profiles*. Summer 2008. 30-37. <<http://www.iun.edu/~nwadmin/plath/voll/Crowther.pdf>>. Web. 17 Jan 2011.
- Lowenthal, David. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1986. 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.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber and Faber, 1966. Print.
- . *The Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper & Row, 1981. Print.
- . *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. London: Faber and Faber, 1977. Print.
- "Tizrah." *en.wikipedia.com*. *Wikipedia*. Web. 2 Feb. 2011. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tirzah>>
- "Urban Exploration." *Dictionary.com*. Web. 2 Feb. 2011. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/urban+exploration>>
- Van Dyne, Susan R. *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993. Print.

Acknowledgements

Photograph of Sylvia Plath, August 1946 courtesy of the Lilly Library, Indiana University at Bloomington, Indiana and by permission of Susan Plath Winston, Copyright Permissions Agent for Warren J. Plath and the Estate of Aurelia S. Plath. Not to be reproduced without permission.

Girl Scout Intermediate uniform, worn by Sylvia Plath between 1942 and 1945. Smith College Historic Clothing Collection, accession 1985.2.2, Northampton, MA. Copyright Smith College. This image may be used for research, educational and personal purposes only.

All other photographs are the copyright of Peter K. Steinberg and may not be reproduced without permission.

