

On the Road with Sylvia and Ted: Plath and Hughes's 1959 Trip Across America

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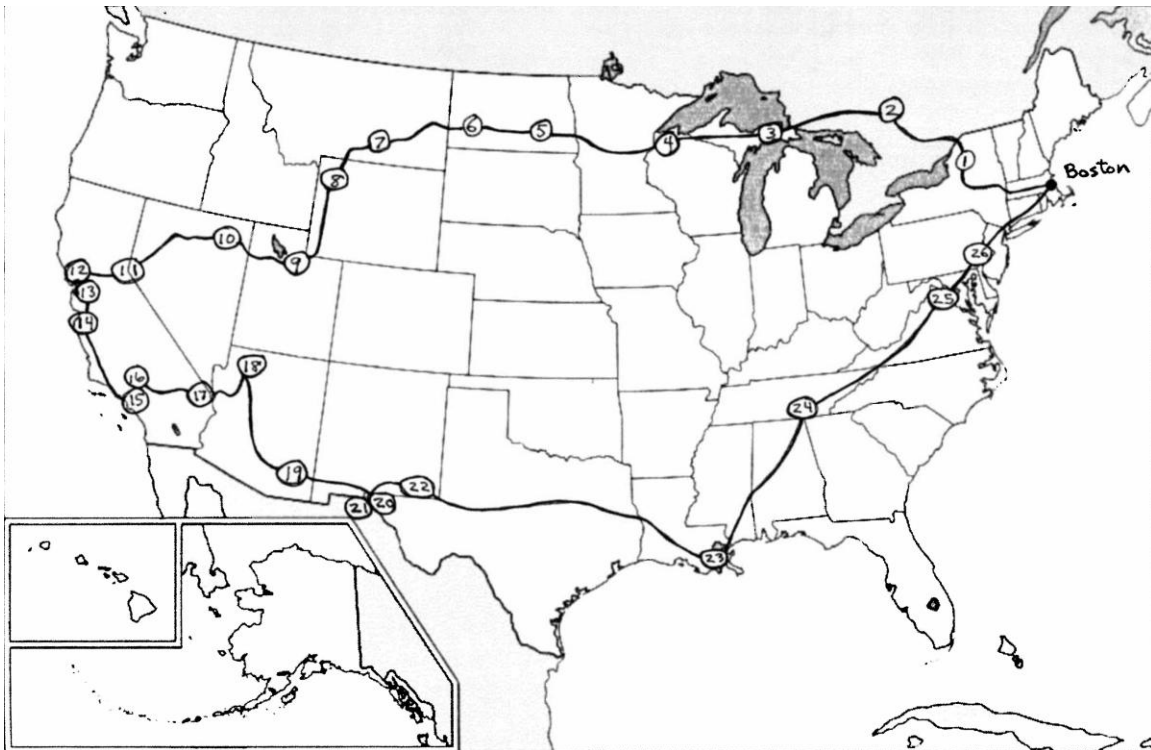
Two years after Jack Kerouac published *On the Road*, poets Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes undertook their own journey across the United States. Though their camping trip was more conventional than the aimless adventures of Kerouac's narrator Sal Paradise, both Plath and Hughes would go on to write a handful of poems (and in Plath's case two short stories) about their travels that capture the dark side of nature—and of human nature. In some respects, Plath and Hughes's route mirrors Paradise's first foray across the continent: East to West Coast, San Francisco to Los Angeles, then back toward the east. Similarities end there. As poets, Plath and Hughes may have had bohemian ideals. But at heart they were two serious, hardworking literary writers looking to rest and relax, to camp and fish, to get to know America and take in the sights.

In early July 1959, Plath and Hughes borrowed Plath's mother's car, a gray 1953 Chevy sedan, and set out on their eight-week cross-country vacation. They planned, when they reached Pasadena, California, to visit Frieda Plath Heinrichs (Plath's father's sister, whom Plath had never met) and her husband Walter J. Heinrichs, a retired surgeon. After living in Boston for nearly a year, Plath and Hughes had decided to return to England. First they would travel the U.S. in July and August, then enjoy a September–November residency at Yaddo, the artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. Unbeknownst to Plath, her first child had been conceived before she and Hughes departed on the road trip. Their daughter Frieda, named after Plath's aunt, would be born in London the following April.

Plath did not keep a journal during the trip. However, it is possible, using the twenty postcards and letters that she sent to her family (along with several that Hughes composed to Plath's mother and brother, Aurelia and Warren, and half a dozen he wrote to his own family), to recreate Plath and Hughes's itinerary, much of it, thanks to Plath's thoroughness of description, in exacting detail, and to identify the highlights of what



Plath elsewhere calls "a brief nomadic existence before plunging onto the next great phase" (*Unabridged Journals* 96).¹ As with much of her journal and letter writing, as well as her poetry and fiction, Plath seems to want to leave a record of her every move, as if she innately understood or believed that others in the future would be interested, as indeed many are. She even seems to invite voyeurism. In one of her first postcards, Plath tells her mother to follow them on her map.



Map Key

- 1) Whetstone Gulf State Park, New York
- 2) Rock Lake, Canada
- 3) Brimley State Park, Michigan
- 4) Cornucopia, Wisconsin
- 5) Just west of Jamestown, North Dakota
- 6) Medora, North Dakota

¹ Plath's correspondence regarding the trip are held at Lilly Library at Indiana University Bloomington, and Hughes's at Emory University in Atlanta.



- 7) Custer, Montana
- 8) Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming
- 9) Salt Lake City, Utah
- 10) Oasis, Nevada
- 11) Lake Tahoe, Nevada
- 12) Stinson Beach, California
- 13) San Francisco, California
- 14) Big Sur, California
- 15) Los Angeles, California
- 16) Pasadena, California
- 17) Essex, California
- 18) Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona
- 19) Outside Tucson, Arizona
- 20) El Paso, Texas
- 21) Juárez, Mexico
- 22) Carlsbad Caverns National Park, New Mexico
- 23) New Orleans, Louisiana
- 24) Sewanee, Tennessee
- 25) Washington, D.C.
- 26) Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Prior to leaving on their trip, Plath and Hughes test out their new camping equipment by sleeping in Aurelia's backyard at 26 Elmwood Road in Wellesley. The tent, which they purchased for \$65.00 (marked down from \$96.00) is shaped like a little house; in a letter to his parents, Hughes draws an image of it. It weighs thirty-five pounds, can easily hold four people, and Hughes can stand and walk around in it. He says that it is sturdy and well-made; it has a sewn-in floor over which they will lay a waterproof tarp. Aurelia bought them their sleeping gear: air mattresses (which fold up to the size of a pillowcase) and thick, fluffy sleeping bags—as comfortable as sleeping in a bed.

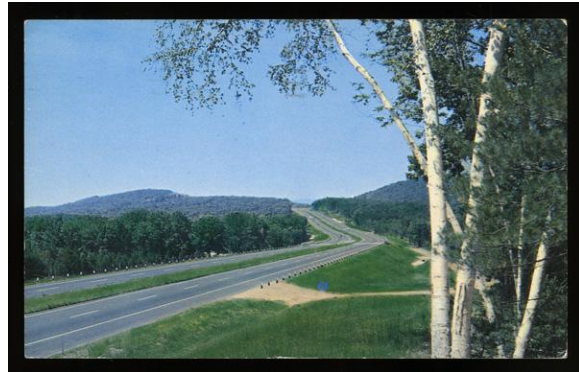
In the Ted Hughes Papers at Emory University, there are several loose pages from a scrapbook Plath evidently assembled. Photographs from their cross-country trip are



affixed with photo corners to the black scrapbook paper (through two hole punches on the left, string once held the book together). With white ink, Plath wrote captions for these pictures. In the first photograph, Plath and Hughes stand in front of Aurelia's Chevy sedan. Plath wears a white blouse, long skirt, and wide belt; Hughes, a black shirt and wrinkled slacks. His right arm is wrapped around Plath's shoulder; you can see his wedding ring on his left hand. They look a bit stiff, posing for the shot, both with closed-mouthed smiles. Plath's caption, dated July 1959, says that they are ready to start their camping trip around America.

1) Tuesday, July 7

SP and TH leave Boston area and drive northwest into New York state. Spend the night in a campground at Whetstone Gulf State Park, between Lowville and Boonville, where they see a baby raccoon.



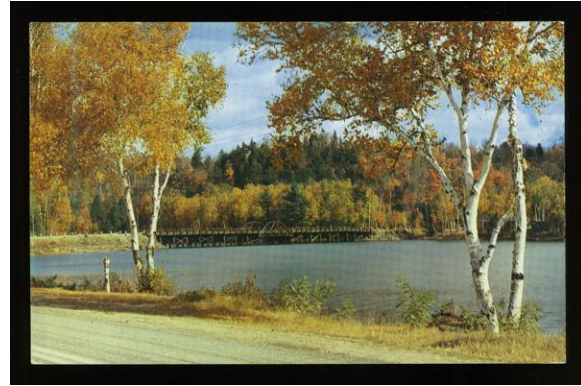
2) Wednesday, July 8–Saturday, July 11

Wednesday: SP and TH cross St. Lawrence River, pass through Canadian customs, and reach Rock Lake (in Algonquin Park, Ontario) in afternoon. They pitch their tent on a site at the edge of the water, between two birches. Pick wild blueberries at sunset. Rent boat and at night row out, the only people on the lake. Under the stars and a new moon, the water is clear as a mirror. SP will later evoke this experience in her poem "Crossing the Water":

Black lake, black boat, two black cut-paper people.
Where do the black trees go that drink here?
Their shadows must cover Canada. (*Collected Poems*, 190)



Thursday: SP and TH fish all day in rowboat, in deserted area under the cliffs. They get many bites and lose lots of worms, but catch nothing. Wife of man in next campsite catches two big lake trout. SP writes postcard to Aurelia from a great rock facing the sun as it sets,



surrounded by rustling birches and pines overlooking Rock Lake. To break up monotony of ten-hour driving days, they will try to spend a day or two at each campsite.

Friday: SP and TH again spend day rowing and fishing. Catch many small perch, saving the eleven largest, which they fry for dinner by the lakeside. For dessert they eat blueberries that they picked on the rock ledges. Algonquin Park is an untouched wilderness where deer come down and drink from the lake.

Saturday: The sound of loons wakes SP and TH at 6:00 a.m. They eat breakfast and at 8:00 take two-mile nature walk. Feed a reddish deer leftover blueberries by hand. One deer sticks its head in car window and licks TH's face.

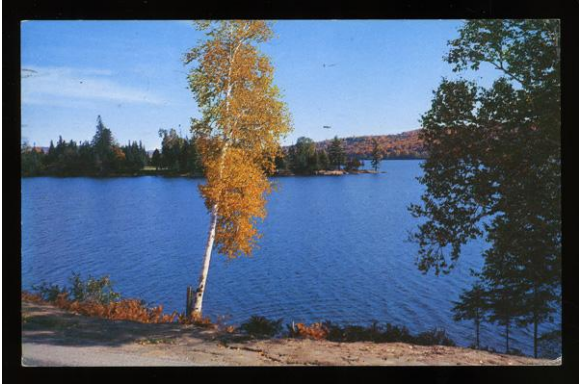
Photographs SP and TH took of each other sitting at picnic table in their campsite can be seen in *"No Other Appetite": Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Blood Jet of Poetry*. Two shots of SP feeding blueberries to deer can be seen in Ronald Hayman's *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* and in *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Two additional shots of SP feeding blueberries to a deer are at Emory: wearing the same blouse, skirt, and belt from their pre-departure photo, she leans forward, smiling, her right hand cupped under the deer's mouth. Also at Emory is a photograph TH took from a distance, at an upward angle from the lake, of SP in their encampment.

SP's poem "Two Campers in Cloud Country" commemorates the time they spent at Rock Lake.

3) Saturday, July 11–Monday, July 13

Saturday: Around 10:00 a.m., SP and TH leave Rock Lake, travel via Routes 60 and 11, and stop to eat lunch in sunny meadow ten miles south of North Bay. Then drive west toward Sault Ste. Marie. SP and TH alternate driving every two hours at the beginning of





the day, every other hour at the end, with breaks for coffee, tea, and snacks. Though appreciative of incredible stretches of green, uninhabited country, with numerous rivers and lakes, SP is struck by the shabbiness of Canadian towns: nothing but gas stations, shacks of tarpaper, and an

abundance of trailer camps. In less than one hour, SP and TH count 100 aluminum trailers on the road. SP admires Canada's vast skies, the masses of sculpted clouds spanning the horizon, the conifer-laden mountains, the fields of cows. At sunset they ferry across St. Marys River, between the two Sault Ste. Maries, into Michigan. Treat themselves to steak dinner at dimly lit diner. By moonlight, drive dirt roads to Brimley State Park. Campground is full when they arrive late, so they find a makeshift spot down the road. On this day alone, they have driven almost 400 miles.

Sunday: SP and TH drive into campground at 9:00 a.m. and set up tent on site with scenic view of Whitefish Bay (Lake Superior). They heat pots of water and give themselves sponge baths. SP hand washes laundry and hangs it on clothesline between tent poles and tree.



She telephones Aurelia, who informs her of several poetry acceptances: "In Midas' Country" and "The Thin People" by *The London Magazine* (published October 1959) and "The Hermit at Outermost House" and "Two Views of a Cadaver Room" by *The Times Literary Supplement* (published November 6, 1959). Later, as it begins to rain, SP sits under porch flap of tent, wearing navy sweater and TH's khaki jacket, and types letter to Aurelia, while TH reads and writes inside tent. SP rhapsodizes about their camping equipment: tent (TH is able to put it up in ten minutes), air mattresses (light as featherbeds), sleeping bags, first-aid kit, Wash 'n Dris, etc. She finds it refreshing, in the late morning or afternoon, to consume hot tea and a deviled egg, and to wash her face.



For dinner SP makes Aunt Jemima pancakes (with remainder of blueberries from Rock Lake) and bacon. Seagulls cry overhead and alight on tent poles.

Monday: SP and TH hire mechanic to change oil in Aurelia's car and install new muffler. Had planned to see freight boats passing through Soo Locks (unconfirmed whether they followed through with plans).

4) Tuesday, July 14-Wednesday, July 15

Tuesday: SP and TH wake at 4:30 a.m. and leave Brimley by 5:00. At 7:40 they spot their first bear, standing by side of road before a wooded area. Not a park bear, it is large and black, its ears raised attentively. The sighting makes their day. Later, a deer leaps out from the trees. SP praises Wisconsin for being less commercialized than Michigan: predominately blue-green woods and picturesque farms. They drive all day without leaving Lake Superior. Pass through town of Iron River and take side road leading to peninsula above Route 2 (the main thoroughfare) in hopes of finding farm where they can pitch their tent. Just north of Cornucopia, the Nozel family allows them to set up camp on their hayfield hilltop. At 5:30 p.m. SP sits in sun outside tent and writes postcard to Aurelia. She can see Lake Superior through birch and apple tree branches; the water is blue and glittery and stretches to the horizon like a boundless sea. SP asks Aurelia to send record of her and TH's poetry acceptances and rejections to the Central Post Office at Yellowstone Park by July 22.

Wednesday: SP spends morning sketching boat in harbor. In afternoon, SP and TH go fishing with twelve-year-old Marcia Nozel. SP takes a liking to the Nozel family, which includes dog, cat, and ducklings. They all eat dinner together: blueberries, wild strawberries, and perch (caught by SP). Mr. Nozel, a commercial fisherman, tells stories while they sit in moonlit apple orchard. To his parents, TH will write that the day in Cornucopia was one of the best of their trip.

In her biography of Plath, *Bitter Fame*, Anne Stevenson tells us that the Nozel family was Polish, that they possessed "the most northerly telephone in Wisconsin," and that on one of the nights Plath and Hughes were in Cornucopia "a hoodlum set fire to a nearby house" (160).



On September 25, at Yaddo, Plath will write in her journal: "Am working on a rambling memoir of Cornucopia." Then, on September 26: "If only my Cornucopia story could get a climax. It is a ramby diary." Then finally, on September 29: "My Cornucopia 'story' is merely an essay on the impossibility of perfect happiness. . . . Pleasant enough places, but rough and undramatic" (*Unabridged Journals* 507, 509, 510-11). The story, titled "A Prospect of Cornucopia," is presumed lost.

Photograph of TH sitting at roadside picnic table in Wisconsin can be seen in *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*. SP's drawing of boat at Cornucopia dock can be seen in the biographical note at the back of *The Bell Jar*. Photograph of SP working on drawing, in peaked straw hat, as well as photograph of TH sitting in front of boat that SP sketched, can be seen in *"No Other Appetite": Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Blood Jet of Poetry*.

5) Thursday, July 16

SP and TH cross Minnesota en route to North Dakota. See two red foxes on the road. Rolling prairie in western Minnesota reminds TH of the moors. Lakes and enormous vistas: skies on top of skies. Drive through Fargo. North Dakota is amazingly flat, straight, and yellow-green. Rich farmland. At night they turn up side dirt road, just west of Jamestown, into tiny town; see almost no one. Camp overnight in grove of trees near local school and town hall, on the edge of the prairie. Birds singing everywhere. They watch thunderstorms along skyline: lightning illuminates columns of clouds.

6) Friday, July 17–Saturday, July 18

Friday: SP and TH wake at dawn and drive across North Dakota under breathtaking skies: half clear and blue; half black, lit by sheet lightning. The prairies are endless, unpeopled, and rife with cows. Pass through Bismark. SP



describes the Badlands as leaping out at them from the prairies. Find tent site in Medora (Theodore Roosevelt National Park), in cottonwood grove overlooking Little Missouri



River. They see deer (not as tame as in Canada), antelope, a coyote, and a prairie dog. To TH, the reddish, striated formations look like layer cakes of soil and rock. The ground smokes and flames, and emits a foul odor of sulphur and tar. In a letter to his parents, TH will draw a sketch of the Badlands: rows of cone-shaped protrusions receding into the distance.

Photograph of TH standing at barbed wire fence, North Dakota prairie in the background, can be seen in *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*.

TH's poem "The Badlands" (in *Birthday Letters*) recounts the night they spent in Medora. He characterizes the landscape as "hellish," "The most inimical place I ever was in" (83, 84). SP, he says, "kept being overwhelmed / By the misery of the place, like a nausea" (84). At sunset they take walk and are startled by racket of a mouse "having a breakdown" in a "rickety thorn-bush" (85). SP says of environment: "This is real evil" (86). In postcard to Aurelia, however, she refers to it as a beautiful spot.

Saturday: In morning SP and TH see grazing deer and eagle. TH types essay under cottonwood trees.

7) Saturday, July 18

SP and TH leave Medora and drive southwest through Montana. Black soil and yellow wheat fields alternate in stripes of ebony and gold toward the horizon's purple mesas. Untouched cattle country. Low ranges of buttes. In café in small



town of Custer, SP writes postcard to Aurelia. They eat a T-bone steak dinner for \$2.50; light, flaky homemade boysenberry pie with ice cream; and coffee. Arrange to camp for free on grounds of congregational church. "They haven't got it grassed yet," says the waitress. So far, Montana is the most beautiful state: cool, dry, and sunny.

8) Sunday, July 19–Thursday, July 23

Sunday: Weary from two days of driving since Badlands, SP and TH reach Yellowstone Park. At entrance, herd of antelope crosses their path. At sight of first bear, they make



ten dollar bet on total number of bears they will see in park. SP guesses ninety-three; TH, seventy-one. In thirty-odd miles between park entrance and campground (Fishing Bridge), they count nineteen bears and cubs, see two moose. Throughout park, bears freely rummage through buried trash cans. Though they had been given pamphlet advising against feeding and contact with bears, SP and TH see other campers blithely feeding and posing for photographs with them. SP calls Aurelia. In evening they fish in river rapids; SP almost catches trout.

Monday: In early morning, SP and TH move into choice campsite on Yellowstone Lake, at edge of woods, in cool and sunny pine grove, after family in trailer vacates. Set up tent and sleep late. TH writes letter to parents about their travels in Cornucopia, the Badlands, and Montana; writes postcards to several others. Nearest trash can is ten feet from tent. SP cooks breakfast of grapefruit and honey, bacon, eggs, fried potatoes, and coffee. Flowers are all around, as are animals and snow-tipped mountains. They rent rowboat and fish on lake, easily catching six-trout limit. SP catches most of fish. Cook all of them and refrigerate what they do not eat in ice chest.

Tuesday: While at Fishing Bridge, SP and TH appreciate the luxurious lavatories: mirrors, flush toilets, and hot water. Do load of wash at laundromat. They drive around Grand Loop Road looking at geysers and paint pots. Arrive back at campsite late, having driven last twenty miles with gas tank gauge on empty. Encounter bear rifling through trash can near tent; their car headlights scare it away. Cook dinner and go to sleep, having methodically washed picnic table and locked food in car and trunk.





Wednesday: At 2:45 a.m. SP is awakened from dream about exploding car by sound of crash outside tent. She wakes TH and they listen "to the unique sounds of a bear rooting through our belongings" (*Letters Home* 349). Tin can rolls past tent. SP looks through screen and sees

huge bear (the fifty-fifth) "in the blue weird light of the moon," eating their food supplies. Bear wanders away, then returns. TH looks out back tent window and sees bear "halfway in the left rear window" of car. They listen to it squeeze juice out of their oranges. At one point, startled by passing car, bear runs by tent and trips on porch rope, causing tent to shake. In morning they find "car window . . . shattered down to the root, and wiry brown bear hairs stuck all along the edge of it." From back seat bear had extracted SP's red bag, which contained "black-and-gilt figured cookie tin we took the date-nut bars in" (now full of Ritz crackers and Hydrox cookies) and postcards (349). Bear had opened tin and eaten contents, and left its paw print on postcard of large bear. In lavatory, woman tells SP that a bear had killed a woman in another campground Sunday night. SP and TH move to site higher in camp, in open sun, further from trash cans. Fellow campers advise that kerosene and red pepper repel bears, so SP and TH wipe kerosene on car (covering broken window with "kerosene-soaked poncho"), strew campsite with red pepper, and spray Fly Ded. They drink Ovaltine, take tranquilizers (which SP had been saving for Donner Pass), go to bed at 9:00 p.m., and sleep "the sleep of the blessed" (350).



Thursday: SP and TH stay day later than planned, fishing from rowboat. In five hours, they again catch limit of six trout. SP, with her perpetual beginner's luck, catches the most and biggest fish. Total number of bears counted in Yellowstone: sixty-seven.

SP will base her short story "The Fifty-Ninth Bear" on the real-life "Bear Incident," as she called it, unarguably the most dramatic event of their road trip. Slight

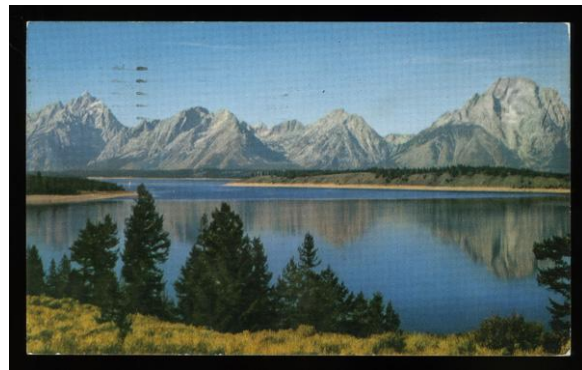


fictional twist: bear mauls husband to death at end of story. TH will write two Yellowstone poems. In "Fishing Bridge," he remembers SP's "delight / Wandering off along the lake's fringe / Towards the shag-headed wilderness / In your bikini" (*Birthday Letters* 87). His "The 59th Bear" can be read as a rebuttal to SP's short story, which he calls a "dud scenario" (94). He views Yellowstone Park as "Mickey Mouse America." "Were these real wild bears?" he asks (89). He saves some of the hairs from the bear that raided Aurelia's car and glues them in his Shakespeare.

Photographs of SP and TH at Yellowstone Lake (TH standing on shore, SP rowing boat) can be seen in *"No Other Appetite": Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Blood Jet of Poetry*. Two shots of SP in rowboat (holding up fish she has just caught and with day's catch of six trout) can be seen in *Letters Home*.

9) Friday, July 24–Saturday, July 25

Friday: SP and TH leave Yellowstone at daybreak, driving through Grand Teton National Park. Stop at Jackson Lake and take pictures. Wyoming is completely unspoiled, like nothing else on Earth: forests, glaciers, mountains, canyons,

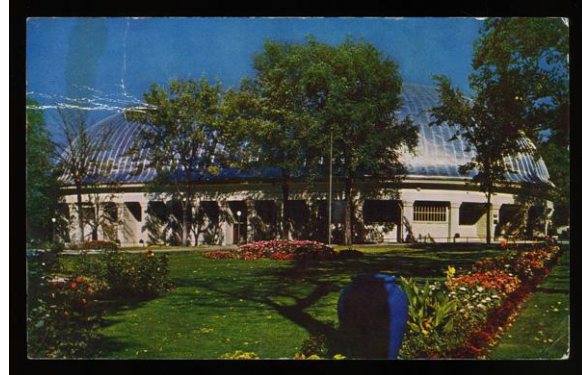


grassland with buffalo. After town of Kemmerer, SP writes postcard to Aurelia and Warren briefly describing bear incident. They pass state line into Utah around 5:00 p.m. Struck by change from expansive plains to verdant landscape: the uncanny and instantaneous way each new state asserts its particular character. Cross Wasatch Range, coasting downhill for ten miles. Salt Lake City spreads below them like a dream—small, single-story houses, all with green lawns. As it is a holiday (Pioneer Day, celebrating Brigham Young's entry into the Salt Lake Valley) they are unable to have broken car window repaired. Drive up long, winding Big Cottonwood Canyon Road and claim last remaining site at Spruces Campground. Now dark, they check with ranger to make sure there are no bears. "Just some thieves," he tells them. Befriend abandoned kitten (white with orange and black spots), feeding it milk and tuna. Cat stays with them until they leave campground the following morning.



Photograph of SP posing in front of Jackson Lake, Wyoming, can be seen in *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*. A companion photo of TH sitting on a low wall in front of the same backdrop is at Emory.

Saturday: Tired after long drive from Yellowstone, SP and TH sleep in. Treat themselves to meal of Kentucky fried chicken, rolls and honey, potatoes and gravy. Attend free noon organ concert at Tabernacle on Temple Square. Drive fourteen miles out of city to



uncrowded beach "resort" (close-set piers with fresh water showers, beer, and hotdog stands) at Great Salt Lake, which is molten silver with a blue horizon line. Walk across unpleasant-smelling, crusted gray salt flats and try to swim, but water too shallow. End up laying half in and half out of the water, and sitting as if in comfortable armchairs, holding their knees. Afterwards they shower and, as it is very hot, drink cold beer. While having car oil changed, SP writes postcard to Aurelia asking her to mail her poetry manuscript ("The Devil of the Stairs," an early incarnation of *The Colossus*), recently rejected by Knopf, to Harcourt Brace in New York; SP will receive their form rejection on October 19, while at Yaddo. Also while at Yaddo, on November 7, SP will write in her journal: "I had a vision last night of our swimming in the Salt Lake: a solid beautiful thing. I thought: this light, this sensation is part of no story. It is a thing in itself and worthy of being worked out in words" (*Unabridged Journals* 524).

10) Saturday, July 25

SP and TH leave Salt Lake City and drive into sunset. See sun set twice. First, over the barren luminosity of Great Salt Lake desert. Then lightning slashes out of purple clouds to their left, and sun descends behind a grid of red clouds to their right. Cross into Nevada, eat steak dinner, then drive an hour to Oasis, a cluster of gas tanks and a café in the middle of nowhere. Gas station attendant gives them permission to camp behind station. Wake in night to see shooting stars and bulls grazing among sagebrush.



11) Sunday, July 26

SP and TH rise at dawn and drive southwest. Nevada is their least favorite state yet: hot and barren. Stop near Lovelock to cook their last Yellowstone trout for lunch in shade of a solitary roadside tree. Also eat corn niblets, tomato and lettuce salad, and milk.

Revived, they drive through dismal brown slot-machine country. Near Reno encounter first traffic since New York, though do not realize they have passed Reno (they mistake it for sparks) until they are in California. Landscape again changes, becoming lush and green. Detour directs them to Lake Tahoe (too much of a resort for their taste), where they camp the night.

12) Monday, July 27–Tuesday, July 28

Monday: Detour enables SP and TH to avoid Donner Pass (SP had been dreading driving it). They continue west across California to Sacramento. In shade of palm trees in Capitol Park, SP makes tomato, ham, and lettuce sandwiches in 114-degree heat. When they get back into car, steering wheel is too hot to touch. Drive through fertile vineyards and orchards of Central Valley, stopping for fresh-squeezed juice at a Giant Orange stand. Then over a network of bridges to San Francisco, which strikes SP as a city of all-white buildings glittering like an alabaster island surrounded by blue water. Hot and fatigued, they cross Golden Gate Bridge and continue north an additional twenty-four miles, at sunset along winding cliff road, with spectacular views of Pacific Ocean, to Stinson Beach State Park. Discover their guidebook is out of date and the campground they were expecting paved into parking lot. SP upset; TH calms her. Drive to seaside town of Drake's Bay, where SP telephones Aurelia and Warren. Aurelia has good news: Faber and Faber has agreed to publish TH's second book of poetry. They are unsure of current title ("The Feast of Lupercal"), so TH will change it to "Lupercalia." (The final book will be called *Lupercal*). Owner of café where they have cold beer and fried chicken suggests that they park car behind his restaurant and sleep down on beach in sleeping bags, under the stars.

Tuesday: SP and TH return to Stinson Beach Park when it opens at 8:00 a.m. Find picnic table in secluded grove where SP makes breakfast of bacon, eggs, and toast. Bathe after heating pots of water. SP types long letter to Aurelia and Warren detailing



bear incident at Yellowstone and their travels across Utah, Nevada, and California. Says they are both looking forward to taking hot baths and eating home-baked meals when they get back. TH adds written comments, referring to road trip as the greatest experience he has ever had. He writes letter to his parents, telling them of Faber's acceptance. It has taken him weeks, he says, to relax enough to enjoy their vacation. The trip has altered his idea of distance: 300 miles is a short drive, 100 miles something to do before 8:00 a.m. SP and TH stay in park till sunset, then again sleep on beach.

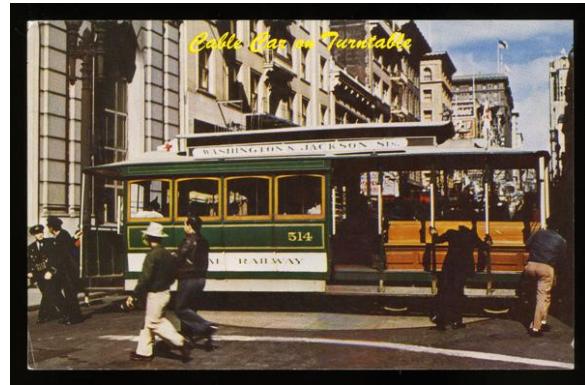
As harbor seals frequent the area, it is possible SP saw some while she was there, and that the memory later inspired the simile "one gray toe / Big as a Frisco seal" in her poem "Daddy" (*Collected Poems* 222).

A photograph of TH sitting in their Stinson Beach hideaway, amidst draped towels and pots of water (for bathing), is at Emory.

From this point, Plath's narrative of the trip becomes far less detailed. Perhaps the rapid pace and the extreme changes of environment begin to catch up with her. Every day of their trek west can be accounted for; not so of their trip down the California coast and east across America. One can almost feel Plath's fatigue in the gaps in her reportage.

13) Wednesday, July 29

SP had said they would drive into San Francisco first thing in the morning, have the broken window on Aurelia's car replaced, and see as much of the city as they could. She had also said she planned to check out bakeries (as she had been dissatisfied with the bread across



America) and that she hoped to wash clothes at a laundromat. SP will later send Aurelia and Warren a postcard of a San Francisco cable car being rotated at turntable, and on a scrapbook page write that she and TH saw Chinatown and Fisherman's Wharf.



14) Thursday, July 30

Anne Stevenson says that SP and TH camped and fished at Big Sur. All SP said was that they intended to stop at a beach camp halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles.

15) Friday, July 31

SP had written that they planned to stay overnight with friends in Los Angeles. It is not certain who they might have visited, or what they might have done while there. It is possible they might have camped a second night at Big Sur, or camped at Carmel on Thursday (SP does note on scrapbook page that they saw Monterey and Carmel) and Big Sur on Friday, and not spent any time in L.A.

16) Saturday, August 1–Monday, August 3

Saturday: SP and TH arrive at the Heinrichses' home at 4579 Lorna Vista Drive in La Cañada (next to Pasadena) in time for lunch. Frieda has prepared cold chicken, string beans, potato salad, tomato and lettuce salad, hot rolls, fresh pineapple, coffee cake, and tea. SP finds Aunt Frieda and Uncle Walter "handsome, fun, and so young in spirit" (*Letters Home* 352). Describes their house as "a little green eden . . . surrounded by pink and red and white oleander bushes," and avocado, peach, guava, persimmon, and fig trees (352). (SP and TH will both later refer to their home in England, Court Green, as Eden.) Aurelia sent ahead a gift for the travelers: shorts and blouse for SP, a shirt for TH. They check into Pasadena hotel.

Sunday: SP telephones Aurelia in morning. She and TH have breakfast at hotel and move to a quieter room with its own bath (for \$11.00) for their second night in Pasadena, in order to renew themselves for their trip back. They continue their visit with the Heinrichses. TH enjoys Walter's company; SP is captivated by Frieda's stories and amazed by her resemblance to Otto Plath (SP's father): "the same clear piercing intelligent bright eyes and face shape" (352). SP types letter to Aurelia and mails her the \$18.07 receipt for new car window (for insurance purposes) and seven endorsed checks

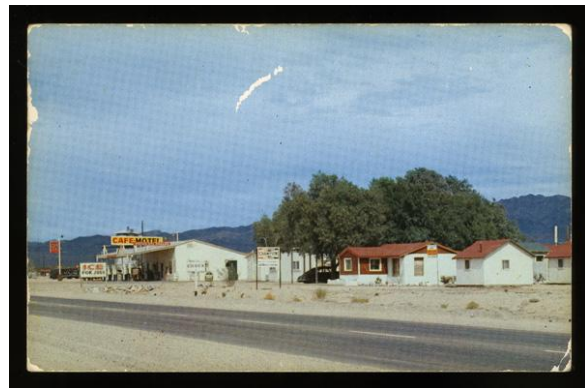


(which Aurelia had sent ahead for their signatures) to be deposited in SP and TH's two savings accounts.

Monday: SP and TH have Aurelia's car tuned up, lubricated, and given its third oil change: it is running like velvet. Chevy mechanic tells them car is in fine shape. SP overcome with emotion when she says good-bye to Heinrichses at 3:00 p.m. Ten days later Frieda will write to Aurelia that there was so much crowded into their limited hours that many things she and Sylvia wanted to talk more about were somehow lost in the scramble.

17) Monday, August 3

SP and TH leave Pasadena in the cool of the afternoon and drive into Mojave Desert. Stop to camp overnight in Essex, a small community forty-one miles west of Needles, California, that catered to tourists traveling Route 66. (Town consisted of gas station, market, and café.) They swelter among hordes of crickets. Crickets eat holes in mattresses and sleeping bag; TH is able to patch them.



SP's poem "Sleep in the Mojave Desert," written one year later, recalls the night they spent there, and the crickets: "Where we lie / The heat-cracked crickets congregate / In their black armorplate and cry" (*Collected Poems* 144).

18) Tuesday, August 4–Wednesday, August 5

SP and TH proceed to Grand Canyon, camp two nights. They are too tired to hike canyon, and disappointed that it can only be traversed through commercialized means. On August 6, TH will write Aurelia and Warren that they saw canyon exactly as pictured on front of postcard. Printed description on back of postcard



reads, "In the final glorious moments of summer sunshine at Grand Canyon, Arizona, mighty cliffs are painted fantastic shades of violet, red and gold."

TH's poem "Grand Canyon" indicates that SP may have been aware she was six weeks pregnant, and that she was scared of the trail mules: "Watching the mules tilt down / Was almost nausea" (*Birthday Letters* 96). Poem also indicates that they listened to a "Cantankerous old-timer" tell tall tales of the canyon's early days, that they watched Navajo dancers perform, and that it was here that someone stole their canvas Desert Water Bag from the front fender of Aurelia's car (96). (Exercising artistic license, SP places the theft at Yellowstone in her story "The Fifty-Ninth Bear").

Two photographs of SP at Grand Canyon are at Emory. She stands at a railing, at twilight, taking in her first view of the scenery, and wears a short-sleeved white blouse and striped shorts (possibly the clothes that Aurelia sent ahead to the Heinrichses).

19) Thursday, August 6

SP and TH drive south through Arizona, skirting the Painted Desert. (They had considered driving east through Albuquerque and Dallas to New Orleans, but changed their minds and decided to venture south.) Sky is overcast, the air too cool to keep car windows open; then it begins to rain. They pass through Phoenix and camp outside Tucson, among large cacti. Tent blown down by hot wind and electrical storm. From then on, they begin succumbing to five-dollar motels.

20) Friday, August 7

As SP and TH drive to El Paso, they see a wolf at the roadside in an Arizona wood. Outside California, the West seems hardly populated. TH likes Arizona: cactus desert and red hills.

21) Saturday, August 8

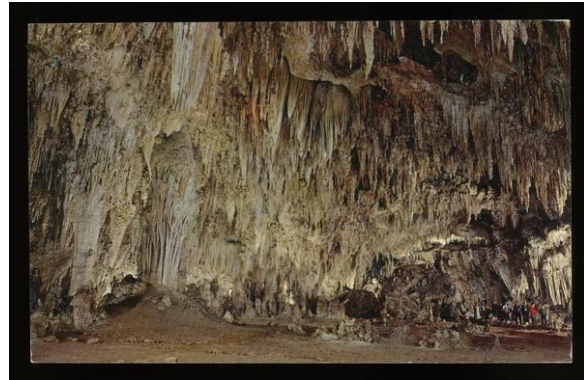
SP and TH spend morning exploring the streets of Juárez. Turned off by tourist trap atmosphere. SP had written that they planned to park car in El Paso, walk across border, and spend a few hours in Juárez, and that this was a safe and easy way to see Mexico. They buy only two beers and return to U.S. with no reluctance.



TH writes postcard to Aurelia and Warren asking them to mail a Leonard Baskin drawing of man praying under a wolf's head to Charles Monteith, TH's editor at Faber and Faber in London. He also writes letter to Monteith informing him drawing is being sent in separate post, and suggesting Baskin do design of wolf's head for cover and/or title page of *Lupercal*. (No design was ultimately used.)

22) Saturday, August 8

SP and TH leave El Paso and drive to Carlsbad Caverns. They arrive in afternoon, in time to walk through half of the caverns. At dusk, they sit in cactus garden to watch millions of bats swarm out of their cave. After bats have emerged, it starts to rain heavily and they fly back into cave. SP cooks dinner of steak, new potatoes, and corn niblets.



In his poem "Carlsbad Caverns," TH describes the swarming bats as a "smoky dragon / Out of a key-hole in earth," and when they retreat into their cave as the "vast ragged body of the genie / Pouring back into the phial" (99, 100). About himself and SP he says: "We weren't sure whether to stay that night or go. / We were where we had never been in our lives. / Visitors—visiting even ourselves" (100).

The last postcard that Plath writes is on August 9, as they drive toward New Orleans through huge Texas. Hughes will write one of his last postcards, to Aurelia and Warren, in New Orleans, a short rhymed poem poking fun at their travels. (This poem is printed in *Letters of Ted Hughes*, edited by Christopher Reid.) Except for their August 28 arrival back in Boston, the dates that follow are all approximate.

Sunday, August 9–Tuesday, August 11

Judging from the pace they were keeping, it probably took SP and TH three days to drive across Texas and Louisiana. Or maybe even less; in his poem TH says they "fled fast into Texas, / There dust & dulness came near to annex us" (*Letters of Ted Hughes* 152). It is likely that they passed through Dallas as planned.



23) Wednesday, August 12–Friday, August 14

According to Anne Stevenson, SP and TH enjoyed New Orleans, "where they swam in the sweltering heat in Lake Pontchartrain" (161). In his poem TH says "in Louisiana's leafy slum / We stewed our bones, being to great poverty come" (*Letters* 152). The picture on his postcard is of Brulatour Courtyard in the French Quarter. The poem also states they are setting their noses for Tennessee. Hughes, who did not date his postcard, mailed it from Sewanee.



Aurelia wrote "1959, Aug. 14" on the card, but it is unclear whether this indicates the day it was written or the day it was received.

24) Saturday, August 15–Saturday, August 22

SP and TH visit Lucas Myers's family in Sewanee, Tennessee, staying with them for about a week. Myers, a close friend of Hughes, is in Paris at the time. Lucas's mother Margaret had written to extend them a warm welcome at Bairnwick, a stone mansion that had housed (until 1948) the elementary school she founded to educate her own children. According to Paul Alexander in *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath*, a local socialite hosted a party for SP and TH. One of the many guests was Monroe Spears, editor of *The Sewanee Review*, who had published poems by SP and TH (two by SP, "Point Shirley" and "The Departure of the Ghost" [early title of "The Ghost's Leavetaking"], were in the current issue). He and his wife Betty helped welcome them to the South. SP had recently submitted her short story "The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle" to Spears; he accepted it on August 25, after SP and TH had left Tennessee.

25) Sunday, August 23–Monday, August 24

According to Stevenson, SP and TH sightsee in Washington, D.C.

26) Tuesday, August 25–Thursday, August 27

SP and TH drive to Philadelphia, where (again per Stevenson) they stay with SP's "adored Uncle Frank" (Aurelia's brother Frank Schober) (161).

Friday, August 28

SP and TH arrive back at Aurelia's house in Wellesley. In *Letters Home*, Aurelia reports that both SP and TH looked "very tan and well," though in SP she "sensed a great weariness" (352). It would take SP some time to assimilate her recent travels. As it was, they had less than two weeks to prepare for their two-month residency at Yaddo (slated to begin September 9) and their move to England in mid-December.

* * *

One surprise in my research for this travelogue was learning that Aurelia and Frieda Heinrichs had a secret arrangement. Aurelia sent her sister-in-law money, to be used to entertain Plath and Hughes while they were in Pasadena. Plath and Hughes had no knowledge of this. It seems the generous lunch that Frieda had waiting for them on August 1 (as well as other amenities the Heinrichses may have provided) was bankrolled by Aurelia. Frieda's letters to Aurelia are touching. After Plath and Hughes have departed, she writes that she didn't know she and her husband could learn to love Sylvia and Ted so much in so short a time. She assures Aurelia that Sylvia and Ted were able to get some rest, and that Frieda, at Aurelia's expense, tried to make them comfortable. But the secret appears to have caused Frieda some guilt. In a follow-up letter, she says she feels like a cheat for not having the courage to tell her niece that the perks were supplied by Aurelia rather than herself: maybe out of selfishness she wanted to be favored a little more than would otherwise have been possible; she asks Aurelia to forgive her for this. Aurelia saved Frieda's letters, and included them among the papers and memorabilia she sold to the Lilly Library at Indiana University, so she must have known one day this secret, as Plath says in a poem, would be "out."

Aurelia's behind-the-scenes string-pulling illustrates the extent to which she tried to facilitate her daughter's happiness. Not only does she covertly fund entertainment, she sends summer clothes, a gift Plath gushingly thanks her for: it fills her with pleasure to



don the trim, cool shorts and blouse, and Ted loves his shirt. On the other hand, the road trip correspondence illustrates the extent to which Plath (and Hughes) relied (and even capitalized) on Aurelia's good graces. Aurelia acts as a literary secretary, keeping track of acceptances and rejections, depositing checks, mailing manuscripts and artwork to editors. The correspondence also shows how Plath, as in the majority of her letters to Aurelia, candy-coats her experiences. Take, for example, her impression of the Badlands: the place strikes her as a manifestation of true evil, yet she tells Aurelia that it is a beautiful spot. We see, too, Plath's need to assuage Aurelia's fears (as in their "safe" way of seeing Mexico) and to justify expenditures such as steak dinners and five-dollar motel rooms. A reader always has to keep tricky relationship dynamics in mind.

In reconstructing Plath and Hughes's road trip, there were a few personal highlights. One was discovering that they initially planned to visit Disneyland while in California. (On the letter in which Plath mentions this, Aurelia wrote "didn't see" next to "Disneyland.") Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes at Disneyland? I would have loved to have heard their reaction to this mecca of American fantasy. Given the very real landscapes and animals they had observed on their trip, how would they have responded to the theme park's cartoonish rendition of nature? If the bears in Yellowstone were too "Mickey Mouse" for Hughes, what would he have made of the audio-animatronic beasts on the Jungle Cruise? And how surreal would it have been for them to board one of the Peter Pan ships and fly over London, considering they were on the verge of moving there? Our paths might even have crossed. My family lived in the San Fernando Valley; almost every summer we visited Disneyland. I had just turned six (my birthday is July 20). I was thrilled to realize, in a star-struck/degrees of separation vein, that for three or four days in 1959, Sylvia Plath and I were in the same metropolitan area.

"Fun" is not a word usually associated with Plath and Hughes, but determining the timeline and route of their trip was precisely that. On eBay I bought (for a mere \$9.99) a 1959 American Geographical Society map of the United States that shows the major thoroughfares of the time. I took down my vintage Game of Life, picked out the blue car (closest to gray), inserted a blue peg and a pink peg, and moved it along the map as Sylvia and Ted advanced to each destination. When they drank Ovaltine in Yellowstone Park, I went out and bought some (hadn't had it since I was a kid) so I could drink along



with them. I loved all the minutiae I found on the Internet: learning that Hydrox was the original Oreo cookie and what a Desert Water Bag looks like, perusing images of Giant Orange stands and of legendary Route 66, and wondering (after consulting a 1953 Chevrolet color chart) whether Aurelia's sedan was "driftwood" or "dusk" gray. I also got a bit of a geography lesson, and became quite good at manipulating Google Maps. As I had the addresses, street views of the Heinrichses' house in California and Aurelia's house in Wellesley, where Plath and Hughes's journey began and ended, were easy to access. About halfway through the trip, I discovered that there is a satellite option and found myself backtracking, zooming in on various locales, such as the Cornucopia harbor and its surrounding farms. *Was that where the Nozels lived?* It would be dizzying, but one could, if so inclined, follow Plath and Hughes's route online, via aerial view.

Perhaps one day some industrious graduate students or a married poet-couple will try to recreate Plath and Hughes's road trip, traveling on the same days to the same locations. That would be a real test in stamina. Perhaps, instead of letters and postcards, they will write a blog as they go along, and photograph themselves in the same spots as Sylvia and Ted. Perhaps they will even try to eat the same food. Perhaps the blog will turn into a book which will turn into a movie, like *Julie & Julia*, which will alternate scenes between Plath and Hughes and their copycats. Perhaps that movie will be called *On the Road with Sylvia & Ted*.



The images in this piece are scans of the actual postcards Sylvia Plath sent while on her cross-country trip. Courtesy of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. The postcards can be found in Plath Mss. II, Box 6.

Postcards

1. Massachusetts Turnpike, looking west, 4 miles east of Westfield Interchange
2. Oxtongue Lake Bridge on Highway #60, near Algonquin Park, Ontario, Canada
3. [Saturday] A view from the highway in Algonquin Provincial Park, showing Lake of Two Rivers
3. [Sunday] Lookout Point, Devil's Island in the Apostle Island Group, Lake Superior
6. Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park, about three miles from entrance, located in the beautiful Badlands near Medora, N.D.
7. Deer graze peacefully in their natural habitat
8. [Tuesday] Old Faithful Geyser, Yellowstone Park
8. [Wednesday] Black Bear, Yellowstone National Park
8. [Thursday] Pond lilies, Isa Lake, Yellowstone National Park
9. [Friday] The Teton Range in Grand Teton National Park
9. [Saturday] L.D.S. Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, Utah
13. Cable Car Turntable, San Francisco
17. O.B. Chambers – Essex, California – Highway 66 Motel, Café and Service Station
18. Grand Canyon, Arizona
22. King's Palace, Carlsbad Caverns National Park, New Mexico
23. Brulatour Courtyard, New Orleans

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