

Review of *The Spoken Word: Sylvia Plath* (British Library 2010), ISBN: 978-0-712351-02-7 and *The Spoken Word: Ted Hughes: Poems and Short Stories* (British Library and BBC 2008), ISBN: 978-0-712305-49-5

Carol Bere

Dramatic, visceral, occasionally mesmerizing, memorable—there is little question that these separate recordings from the archives of the BBC and the British Library of live and studio broadcasts of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes reading their poetry offer sheer pleasure in themselves. Yet let me offer a brief caveat at the outset: this review is in no way meant to be a comparison of the poetry of Plath and Hughes, or a critical analysis of the ways in which they influenced each other's work—although I do assume mutual influence at various stages in their writing (and lives)—but rather a commentary on the separate BBC recordings, and perhaps a recognition of areas or periods of intersection in their careers. Hughes obviously had a much longer career, and these BBC recordings (two discs) reflect a span of over 30 years of writing, while the Plath recording (one disc) includes poems and interviews beginning in late 1960 through January 1963. Along with knowledgeable introductions to the recordings by Peter K. Steinberg (Plath) and Alice Oswald (Hughes), respectively, these recordings are also invaluable guides to the early work (particularly in Plath's case), "hearing" both poets in the process of *becoming*, and, perhaps, gaining additional perspective on the poetry of both poets.

What is also apparent in these recordings of Plath and Hughes is the necessity, or more realistically, the benefits of hearing poetry read aloud to fully understand the range of a poet's enterprise and achievement. Oswald cites a letter from Hughes to Plath in which he comments that: "Up to the inventing of Caxton's press, and for most people long after all reading was done aloud. Most people were incapable of reading silently. And Eliot says that the best thing that a poet can do is read aloud poetry as



much as he can. This should be sound" (*Letters of Ted Hughes* 50). The importance of sound in the development of the poets' poems is more evident initially in Hughes's early collections—and a bit later, as critics have remarked, in Plath's poems included in the *Ariel* and *Winter Trees* collections. Yet while Plath spoke of her later poems as being consciously written to be read aloud, it is also clear that words, exploring the breadth and possibilities of language—even sound—is evident in her early work.

The voices of both Plath and Hughes come at us from the past in recordings made as early as 1960, and we can hear even then the distinctive, although obviously different voices of the poets that have made previously available recordings of their work memorable. Their accents are defining, and no doubt contribute to the ways in which we interpret their work. In an interview with Peter Orr in 1962, Plath said that "my accent is American, my way of talk is an American way of talk..."; yet it is clear in listening to the interviews with Plath that by 1960 or 1961—even earlier, perhaps—that her speaking voice, had become somewhat of an amalgam of her Boston accent with British pronunciations of some words and phrases (168). And, more specifically, Plath's accent may be American in a general sense, but her Boston or New England accents still surfaces in both readings and interviews, for example, in words such as "parts," "arts," and "heart," and pronounced by Plath as "pahts," "ahts," and "haht," respectively.

With the exception of the time that Hughes spent with Plath in the U.S. in the late 1950s, and his continuing involvement in translation projects and various travels, Hughes had always lived in England. He spoke about the influence of the dialect of his native West Yorkshire area in an interview with Ekbert Faas: "They have a very distinctive dialect there. Whatever other speech you grow into, presumably your dialect stays alive in a sort of inner freedom....Without it, I doubt if I would ever have written verse"(202). Or, as Hughes has said, the wellsprings of his creativity lay in early childhood impressions of this area, and he remarked that "In writing verse, it's what I hear" ("The Rock"422). More explicitly, as Neil Roberts suggests: "The most important single fact about this linguistic formation is that it is non-metropolitan ... the language exerts a pressure away from the metropolitan 'centre'"(14). Hughes's



dialect is particularly evident in some of the poems in this recording from *Wodwo*, such as "Pibroch," or "Thistles," with its strongly enunciated primitive images of the "birth" of the thistles, that "spike the summer air/Or crackle open under a blue-black pressure/Every one a revengeful burst/Of resurrection..." (Tracks *Pibroch*, I:11; I:3). Yet while Hughes's tone and inflections shifted naturally in readings to accommodate a wide range of poems—on this recording, for example, from the rather audacious hawk in "Hawk Roosting" to the more contemplative lyrics of *Remains of Elmet*—his West Yorkshire accent remained a constant throughout his career.

Moreover, our responses to these recordings will probably be influenced—consciously or unconsciously—by our familiarity with previous recordings of the poetry of Plath and Hughes. Some years ago, for instance, someone gave me a "created" cassette of readings from contemporary poets, which included Plath reading some of her *Ariel* poems. I am not sure today which poems Plath read, other than I remember that "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" were among the selection, nor can I find the cassette, but I do remember being struck by her apparent confidence, the singularity of her voice—the blend of her New England and assumed British accents—and perhaps her nerve and/or courage in writing such poems at the time. I had heard recordings of Hughes reading his poetry, particularly an early collection produced by Caedmon, as well as readings from *Crow*, and his voice was consistently strong, dramatic, and persuasive. Yet I was not prepared for hearing Hughes read in person to a large, interested audience: he was a strong physical presence, his voice was powerful, deep, although occasionally subdued, his Yorkshire accent defining, and he was clearly somewhat shy.

Perhaps this previous familiarity, and no doubt the continued interest in the works of both poets (and their lives together and after) account for what appears to be reviewers' strong interest in the interview by Owen Leeming, "Two of a Kind: Poets in Partnership," recorded on January 18, 1961 (Plath *Spoken Word*, Track 3). We know the end of the story, but what would we have thought about the interview, and perhaps of the individual poets, had we heard the interview in 1961?

I would agree that Plath and Hughes appear to be at ease with each other in the



interview, but there are also moments of self-consciousness, perhaps hesitation, occasional contradictory responses, while the differences between the poets are also quite obvious. In this interview, Plath is, in many ways, the good student and perky housewife (the early 1961 pre-feminist era variety). Plath speaks more in terms of "we": she mentions that "we" would like a big house in the country, with many children, that "they" are very family-oriented—a vision for the future that she wants to promote—but Hughes offers little comment here. Occasionally, one has the sense that Hughes lets Plath take the lead, and do the "bubbling." She explains far more than Hughes does, or perhaps feels the need to reinforce the notion that even though they are committed poets, they lead "normal" lives. Interestingly, Plath remarks that Hughes goes to his room at 9 a.m. to write (unlike other husbands who go to an office), but does not say that Hughes helps her with babysitting so she can write in the afternoon—a rarity, I would assume, in that period.

Hughes, in fact, is a bit diffident, even wry in conversation, but seems to become more fully engaged when he talks of his childhood in Yorkshire, his interest in animals, his early efforts at writing, the encouragement of teachers, his first meeting with Plath, and their brief courtship, which he does here with some humor. The provocative area of the interview, however, occurs when Owen Leeming asks if their marriage is one of opposites, and Hughes comments on "superficial" similarities, living, for example, at the same tempos, but suggests that: "This is a very fortunate covering for temperaments that are extremely different. They content themselves in an imaginative world so they never really come into open conflict" (*Spoken Word* Track 3). Certainly a few "loaded" sentences.

Later in the interview, when Leeming suggests a similarity in the approaches and writing of the two poets, Plath bristles immediately, and asks how he came to "think that," and insists that her work is "really quite, quite different" (Track 3). What is clear in reading Plath's letters and journals, however, is that she had definite concerns in the early stages of living with and working alongside the seemingly confident Hughes that in her efforts to create, she would be overpowered, her work too heavily influenced by him. And in an interview long after Plath's death, Hughes



questioned the notion of influence, suggesting that their verse had not exchanged much, at least "in the early days." But their methods or strategies were clearly different:

Hers were to collect a heap of vivid objects and good words and make a pattern; the pattern would be projected from somewhere deep inside....
My method was to find a thread end and draw the rest out of a hidden tangle.
Her method was more painterly, mine more narrative.... (parisreview.org)

Plath was clearly more at ease, a bit playful, even funny, in "What Made You Stay?" one of a series of interviews with Americans who had made the decision to live and work in England (*Spoken Word* Track 21). In this interview conducted by Marvin Kane, an American, Plath is engaging as she speaks of the eccentricities of the English, particularly her description of her first visit to an English home in which she was offered either a cat or a hot water bottle to keep her warm in bed. Plath's speech incorporates more British pronunciations by this time, yet when she says words such as "artists" or "parcels," for example, we are reminded of her Boston roots. And while this is an interesting, persuasive interview in terms of Plath's reasons for staying in England—life, work, family, etc.—her continual stressing of words, often nouns in sentences, occasionally sounds a bit artificial, almost staged, undercutting listeners' expectations of a natural response to straightforward questions.

Yet Plath is all business, so to speak, in her position as an American poet, reviewing what would become an influential anthology, *Contemporary American Poetry*, edited by Donald Hall (recorded on January 10, 1963), the last recorded entry on the disc. As Steinberg pointed out in his introduction, Plath "kept her finger on the pulse of American poetry," and had been doing some editing and reviewing. Plath's introductory remarks in "New Comment" are measured, controlled, timed to the moment as she states at the outset that "A new spirit is at work in American poetry. I won't say it's a wave. I won't say it's a trend. That's convenient and military..." (Track 23). And she perceptively highlights poets (and poems) that have lasted over the years such as Robert Lowell's "Memories of West Street and Lepke," and Galway Kinnell's poem, "Flower Herding on Mount Monadack."

Plath is also more exuberant about the future of American poetry in the



previously mentioned interview with Peter Orr for the British Council and the Woodberry Poetry Room at Harvard University, which was recorded on October 30, 1962 at the BBC (not included in *The Spoken Word*), and published in *The Poet Speaks* (1966). The recording of this interview has not been commercially released, but can be located at the National Sound Archive, British Library, London and the Woodberry Poetry Room at Harvard University. In answer to Orr's question about "themes that attract you as a poet," Plath says that "I've been very excited by the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, this intense breakthrough into very serious, very emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo" (Orr 167-68). In fact, there is little question that the publication of *Life Studies* in 1959 had a substantial impact on contemporary American poetry both at the time, and for years to come. Briefly, Lowell had essentially opened the gates for poets, particularly younger poets, including Plath, to place the self at the center of the poem, to explore as Plath said, previously "taboo" subjects such as personal family problems as well as psychological and marital issues.

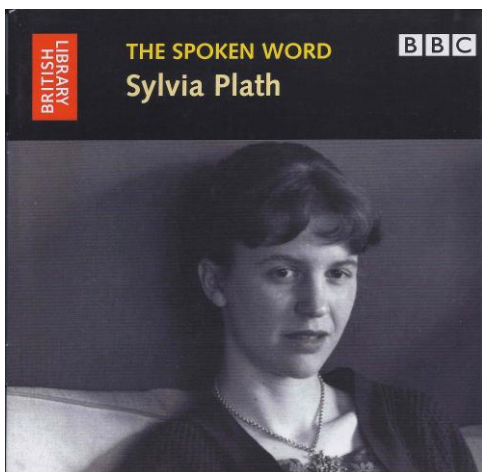
But Plath was a very different poet than Lowell. While he may have ultimately had a greater capacity for objectivity, Plath's poetry and success as a poet was directly linked to her subjectivity, her ability both early and late (and corresponding development of poetic technique) as Steven Gould Axelrod has suggested, for "staged self-exposure," to place personal material center stage in a poem; to explore questions and problems relating to female subjectivity; and ultimately, working through to successful self-discovery (73). Hughes has been excoriated for his (re-)structuring of the poems of *Ariel*, but he certainly offered additional and valid perspective on Plath's efforts when he wrote that the "developing strategies of the verse were invented...to deal with unique self-revelations—of herself to herself" (*Letters of Ted Hughes* 445). More specifically, Hughes read the *Ariel* sequence as a successful "process of 'integration', start to finish" (445).

Sylvia Plath's interview with Peter Orr was one of about forty-five that he conducted with writers (who also read their poetry) as part of a British Council series. The writers were primarily British, although a few Irish and Australian writers were



among those interviewed, while Plath was the only American. As mentioned previously, these selective interviews were published in *The Poet Speaks*. Plath would not have seen the published collection, and while she had read the tea leaves correctly about what were (or would be) the major influences in American poetry, her assessment was clearly not given much weight in England at the time. The preface to the Orr collection of interviews, for example, was written by the critic, Frank Kermode, who questions how historians would use these interviews when attempting to characterize the poetry of the 1960s. Kermode is rather dismissive as he comments that "he [the historian] may note that except for Sylvia Plath, who was an American *anyway* [emphasis mine] there is little apparent interest in the contemporary American 'confessional' poetry, or in the 'projective' or typewriting style that has grown out of Charles Olson's manifesto" (Orr x). Plath may have lived with this prejudice for a few years in England, but she no doubt agreed with the influential critic, Al Alvarez, who argued against what he perceived to be the dangers of "gentility" in English poetry at the time.

In addition to the valuable interviews, *The Spoken Word* recording includes ten poems by Plath, along with her brief introductions to several of the poems. The



earliest poems in this collection are "Spinster," "The Disquieting Muses," "Mushrooms," and "The Stones," the latter two poems written at Yaddo in late 1959 when Plath and Hughes were in residence at the artist's colony in Saratoga, New York (Tracks 12, 10, 4, 16).¹ Plath's poems, "Parliament Hill Fields" and "Candles," were published in *Crossing the Water*, published in 1971, yet written before

the *Ariel* poems. The only poems from *Ariel* included in the recording are "Tulips," and "Berck-Plage," written on June 30, 1962, and the last poem written recorded here (Tracks 19, 22). "Tulips," which was recorded before a live audience at the Mermaid

¹Hughes also wrote several of the poems of *Lupercal*, his second volume, while at Yaddo.



Theatre London, on July 17, 1961, is the only poem of the group, as Steinberg helpfully tells us, "that has not appeared commercially in a reading by the poet before now." Finally, the CD includes all of the extant BBC broadcasts made by Plath that are in the archives of the BBC and the British Library. One wonders how these specific poems were chosen for broadcasts, and whether there are other broadcasts or poems among the missing.

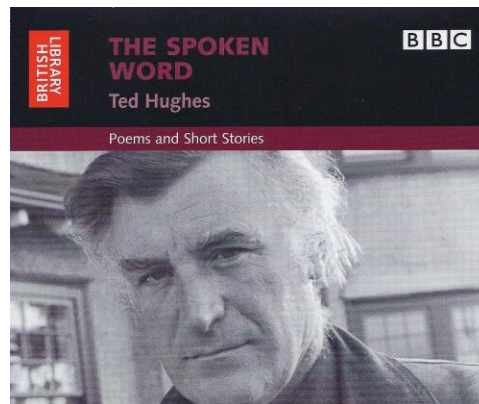
Much of Plath scholarship appears to be based on the assumption by several critics that her early poetry was mainly preparation, the warm-up for the major event, the publication of *Ariel*. Plath, herself, helped to promote this theory, when she said in an often-quoted remark, that when composing her earlier poems collected in *The Colossus*, she "didn't write them to be read aloud," suggesting that they "bore" her now. Plath referred to recent poems she had just read (including "The Rabbit Catcher"), and said that "I've got to say them, I speak them to myself, and I think that this in my own writing development is quite a new thing with me..." (Orr 170). Yet it would be a mistake to discount some of Plath's earlier poems, particularly such poems included in *The Spoken Word* recording such as "The Disquieting Muses" and "Parliament Hill Fields" (Tracks 10, 14). In fact, I listened to all of the poems in this recording several times in chronological order, and they become, in a sense, templates for the development of Plath's voice in her recordings and poetry readings, in general. Early and later, Plath's voice and enunciation are always clear. In an early poem, such as "Mushrooms," for example, Plath seems somewhat removed, emotionless, intent on reading well. And in "The Disquieting Muses," which I listened to at one point while looking at a print of the de Chirico painting (yes, this approach provides a slightly different dimension to the experience), Plath prefigures some of her controlling or dominating "mother" themes, or perhaps her strange muses in their "hood of bone" referred to by Hughes—here, "Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,/They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,"—but her voice is so controlled, emotionless, like the three muses in the painting, that the overall effect is distant, chilling (Plath, *Collected Poems* 273, *Spoken Word* Track 10).

Ted Hughes suggested that in Plath's "The Stones," the seventh section of



"Poem for a Birthday," with its strong influences of Theodore Roethke, that she had undergone a rebirth of sorts, the early stages of transformation. The breakthrough poem, in Hughes's view, was "Tulips," the first poem that Plath wrote spontaneously, and the first sign of her *Ariel* voice. The source of "Tulips" was simple: Plath had received the flowers in the hospital where she had undergone an appendectomy in 1961 (this operation had been preceded by a miscarriage). As the poem builds, the speaker describes her loss of self—the natural feeling, perhaps, of being in a hospital after an operation—and of the interfering, encroaching tulips that "are too red in the first place, they hurt me," but will also deter self-effacement, as she gradually returns to life, becomes "aware of my heart" (Track 19). What is striking about this poem, perhaps, is that while the speaker moves through various psychological states—from loss of self, to gradual awareness, to eventual return—Plath's voice is clear, full, controlled, as is the poem through a relatively structured format of nine septets.

Ted Hughes began his association with the BBC in October 1956, reading Yeats, and he maintained a fairly steady and profitable relationship (with a few lapses) for poetry readings, including occasionally reading the works of other poets, talks, and school broadcasts until about 1995. The two discs of *The Spoken Word* collection comprise,



among other entries, short stories, an excerpt from his play, "The House of Aries," early signature poems such as "The Thought-Fox" from *The Hawk in the Rain*, the much-debated "Hawk Roosting," and the imaginative, visionary and often quoted "Pike" from *Lupercal*:

Stilled legendary depth:
 It was as deep as England. It held
 Pike to immense to stir, so immense and old
 That past nightfall I dared not cast

But silently cast and fished (Track I:8)



Hughes's comments on his role as Poet Laureate as well as several poems from the controversial *Crow* collection are included, along with selections from *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes's poems about the Calder Valley region of West Yorkshire, and the *Moortown* poems, a moving sequence of poems that center on Hughes's farming experiences in Devon, which open out to comment on the cyclical nature of the universe.

The BBC recording also includes a few of Hughes's more popular poems from *Wodwo*, Hughes's third book, such as "Full Moon and Little Frieda" and "Pibroch," as well as a couple of short stories (Tracks I:10; I:11). I had always assumed that Hughes's third volume, *Wodwo*, which was not published until 1967, had been sidelined initially by Plath's death. In fact, the questing, perhaps transitional nature of the collection, Hughes's experimentation with poetic technique, and the generally more exploratory nature of his sequence had led to this assumption, but in a letter Hughes said that almost all of the poems in *Wodwo* had been written before Plath's death—a fact which certainly affects interpretation of some of the poems in the sequence (*Letters of Ted Hughes* 720).

Poems such as "Full Moon and Little Frieda," "Pibroch," and several other poems in *Wodwo*, while different in approach, suggest a world where all things are interrelated and imply faith in the regenerative qualities of the universe—a familiar Hughes theme. We hear these movements in the compelling "Pibroch" (variations on a dirge for bagpipes), where the "sea cries with its meaningless voice," where "a tree struggles to make leaves," and where ultimately "all the stars bow down." (Track I:11). Listening to Hughes read "Full Moon and Little Frieda" again, I am still struck by his distinctive voice, with its characteristically clipped phrases, inherent though controlled power, as he creates (or re-creates) a quiet moment, broken by the enthusiasm of Frieda's (daughter of Hughes and Plath) response:

A cool small evening shrunk to a dog bark and the clank of a bucket—
And you listening
A spider's web, tense for the dew's touch.

.....

"Moon! you cry suddenly, "Moon! Moon!" (Track I:10)



Somehow, as the moon steps back, "like an artist amazed at a work/That points at him amazed," Hughes manages to move rather effortlessly from a very private moment to more universal considerations (Track I:10).

The second disc of *The Spoken Word* collection contains among other entries, several poems from *Remains of Elmet* (1979), a volume that was given added resonance and encouragement by the compelling, evocative, black and white photographs by Fay Godwin with whom Hughes worked on the project.² Elmet was the last independent Celtic kingdom in England, and the poems of *Remains*—essentially Hughes's England—describe a land of history, of hills, chapels, stifling valley, and the wild moors of literature. It is also the land of mill towns, empty farms, deserted parsonages, of people ultimately alienated from their environment—the "remains" of industrialism and, as Hughes sees it, the inherent damages of Methodism—and a region, as he remarked, that always seemed to be "in mourning for the first world war" ("The Rock" 422). Yet there is always the sense in *Remains*, with the "exultant" mood of the moors, and the recurrent images of light in the poetry and in the photographs—that a wish for revitalization, perhaps rebirth is the underlying theme of the collection.

Hughes had consciously circumvented the autobiographical approach in his poetry—in fact, he had always avoided overt disclosures of the self until the publication of *Moortown* (1979), where Hughes's apparent personal involvement is clear, and, of course, in *Birthday Letters* (1998). Yet there is no question that autobiography, Hughes's memories of the area, his family, the people, and of the history of Elmet—underwrite much of the power of the *Remains of Elmet*. I wish that Hughes had included a few poems such as "First Mills," "Heptonstall," and "Top Withens," in his reading. Still, there are memorable poems in this recording, such as

²*Remains of Elmet* had an interesting publication evolution. The collection was first published in a limited edition by Rainbow Press in 1979, with a few photographs, and a couple of months later that year by Faber with over sixty photographs by Fay Godwin. Hughes was not satisfied with the poetry in the 1979 version of *Remains*, and in 1993, *Remains of Elmet* without the photographs was published as part of *Three Books (Cave Birds and River)* with additions, revisions, and deletions to the original *Remains of Elmet* sequence. And in 1994, Hughes published *Elmet*, with *Remains* from the *Three Books* sequence, photographs by Fay Godwin, and poems from some of his earlier books. (All commercial editions were published by Faber.)



"Mount Zion," in which Hughes looks to recapture his childhood memories of a large chapel facing his home: "Blackness/Was a building blocking the moon./It's wall—my first world-direction—Mount Zion's gravestone slab" which he reads with characteristic phrasing that seems to forestall argument (Track II:10). Or, conversely, there are moments of freedom or release in "Football at Slack":

as the wingers leapt, they bicycled in air
and the goalie flew horizontal
and once again a golden holocaust
Lifted the cloud's edge to watch them. (Track II:5)

While there are modulations in Hughes's tone in the poems of *Remains*, in general, this voice, for the most part, is quiet, contemplative.

Yet *Remains of Elmet* opens out to include "Heptonstall Cemetery" (not included in the recording) with its accompanying dramatic photograph of the moors, light, and the church in the distance. Here, in a dramatic scene, where "wind slams" across the moors, and the "spray cuts upward," Hughes suggests a wish for renewal or rebirth, as what I assume are the souls of family members—Thomas, Walter, Edith, Esther, and Sylvia, all "living feathers"—are borne upward, "where all the horizons lift wings," perhaps becoming one with transporting "family of dark swans," flying "toward the Atlantic" (*Remains of Elmet* 122). And while Plath had not been mentioned explicitly in *Remains of Elmet* until this later poem in the sequence, I would suggest that she is an underlying influence or presence throughout the collection.

Finally, the decision to publish specific poems is a carefully considered decision by a poet, and the placement of individual poems in a sequence similarly requires creative choices. How we read a poem is often determined by placement—that is, where a poem is initially located in its original collection or sequence, where it is placed in another grouping in a later publication or collection—and at what stages of publication we first read the poet. I would also suggest that something of the same thinking applies to listening to recordings of a poet, that is, when we first heard he/she read, what poems we heard in subsequent recordings, and our degree of knowledge of the poets' work at various stages of our "listening" experiences will all factor into our



responses to a recording or reading.³ Both Plath and Hughes made several recordings/live readings of their work, yet *The Spoken Word* recordings bring us back to early days (and a little later for Hughes). We have heard and read much since then—and there is no question that these recordings add another dimension to our understanding of the poets—but while these recordings may be the entry points for some—I would also assume that for many, perhaps most "listeners," that their responses to these CDs will necessarily be highly subjective.

³For comprehensive information about the individual recording histories of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, see: (1) Kate Moses, "The Oral Archive," in *The Unraveling Archive*, ed. Anita Helle (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 269-274; (2) Peter K. Steinberg, "Poetry Works: Audio Recordings," <http://www.sylvia-plath.info/poetryworks.html#audio>; and, (3) *Earth-Moon: Information about Ted Hughes*, an extensive website of information, references, bibliographies, etc. about Ted Hughes, operated by Claas Kazzler, <http://www.ted-hughes.info/bibliographies/audiobooks-recordings.html>



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