

Hidden in Plain Sight: On Sylvia Plath's Missing Journals

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for Karen Kukil

Two more notebooks survived for a while, maroon-backed ledgers like the '57-'59 volume, and continued the record from late '59 to within three days of her death. The last of these contained entries for several months, and I destroyed it because I did not want her children to have to read it (in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival). The other disappeared. ("Foreword" xiii)

Ted Hughes wrote the above in his foreword to *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, published in 1982. In a longer piece, "Sylvia Plath and Her Journals," published that same year in the magazine *Grand Street*, Hughes elaborated on the disappearance of the penultimate journal: "The earlier one disappeared more recently (and may, presumably, still turn up)" ("Her Journals" 177).

What events would Plath likely have written about in this journal that *may, presumably, still turn up*? It would have begun when she and Hughes left the United States and sailed for England at the end of 1959—a blank notebook undoubtedly denoting a fresh start, as well as the uncertainty that lay ahead. It would have covered the nineteen months she lived in London: the search for and settling into the flat at Chalcot Square, her pregnancy and the birth of her daughter Frieda, the acceptance and publication of *The Colossus*, a miscarriage, the writing of *The Bell Jar*, and a vacation in France (that included a visit to Berck-Plage). It would have chronicled the move to North Tawton in Devon in the fall of 1961 and her subsequent life at Court Green: the birth of her son Nicholas, enthusiasm for gardening and country life, Hughes's infidelity with Assia Wevill, a trip to Ireland in September 1962, Plath's separation from Hughes, and the writing of the bulk of the *Ariel* poems in October and November. In all likelihood, then, the journal spanned the three-year period between 1959 and 1962, December to December.

Since the last (destroyed) journal "contained entries for several months," it's



probable that Plath started it when she moved from Devon to London in mid-December 1962 (the new ledger again signaling a fresh start), and that it ended, per Hughes, in the first week of February 1963, "within three days of her death" ("Foreword" xiii). Plath spent her last weekend with her friends Jillian and Gerry Becker. She arrived at their London house on the afternoon of Thursday, February 7, returned to her flat on Fitzroy Road that Sunday evening, and took her own life before dawn on Monday, February 11. We can assume that her last journal entry was written prior to her departure for the Beckers', and that she did not bring the journal with her. Jillian Becker's memoir of Plath's final days, *Giving Up*, supports such an assumption. Incidents touched on in this journal might have included Plath's move to and decorating of the Fitzroy flat, Hughes's visits to spend time with the children, her attempts to broaden her social life, her search for a suitable nanny, the unusually severe winter weather and living conditions, and the poems and other writing she completed in her last weeks.

Of course it's not just the external events that interest us. A fairly thorough record of Plath's literary and domestic activities already exists (although her activities from January 6, 1963, where her 1962 desk diary breaks off, until her death are more difficult to trace, and therefore have a mysterious air). We can pinpoint her movements down to the day, sometimes down to the minute. What we're missing, what the absence of these journals deprives us of, is Plath's intense inner dialogue with herself, what she thought and felt about what was happening in her life. "This is her autobiography," says Hughes about the journals, "far from complete, but complex and accurate, where she strove to see herself honestly and fought her way through the unmaking and remaking of herself." It is "the closest we can now get to the real person in her daily life" (xiii). Isn't "the real person in her daily life" what Hughes actually lost—or can be seen as having thrown away? And yet her body of work was left to him, to oversee. *She gave him her life.*

I find the abundant portion of the journals that is available to us, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, overwhelming. Sometimes the writing is so dense, so mentally entangled and slow to digest, I can only handle reading a few pages at a time. Her rigorous intelligence and determination, her powerful and demanding creative drive, require a certain degree of stamina from the reader. One has to work to keep up, to decipher, to participate in the constant *unmaking and remaking of herself*. Yet what is at

first foreign and difficult, later becomes familiar—she's indoctrinated you, made you care about each and every detail of her (the shadow always looms—tragic) life; she's won you over to her cause. How she can suddenly draw you into an experience, an observation, an encounter—make you *live* it.

The Unabridged Journals ends with Plath in the midst of her struggle to become the artist she desires—no, *has*—to become. She's yet to make herself into that (as it will turn out) final metaphorical spectre: the fire-breathing, man-eating Phoenix. The fierce flames of rage (over Hughes's adultery and abandonment, over being born a woman rather than a man, of having to kowtow to a manipulatively controlling mother) have yet to give rise to the Golden Lotus. Circumstances (fate?) have yet to provide, as the poet Robyn Schiff has said, the "perfect storm" for the fulfillment of her literary genius. But Plath is no victim; she was working from deep inside herself outward. In a 1958 passage in *The Unabridged Journals*, at the end of her therapy notes, Plath asks a simple but profound question that is the key to understanding her mission as a writer: *How to express anger creatively?* The poems she wrote within nine days of her separation from Hughes—"The Applicant," "Daddy," "Eavesdropper," "Medusa," "The Jailer," "Lesbos," and "Stopped Dead"—can be read as the answer to that question.

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"Looking over this curtailed journal, one cannot help wondering whether the lost entries for her last three years were not the more important section of it. Those years, after all, produced the work that made her name" ("Her Journals" 177-78). Hughes taunts us with what he's either let slip out of his hands or chosen to withhold: "And we certainly have lost a valuable appendix to all that later writing" (178). What would the missing journals explain? What we already know. That Hughes's affair with Assia Wevill, as Diane Middlebrook tells us, "detonated his marriage," that he "ignited a wildfire that raged out of control" (176). Once Plath was dead, Hughes's guilt kept him from discussing Plath with her own children, kept him from publishing Plath's letters and journals in their entirety. Frieda Hughes recently disclosed that when she was a teenager, Hughes told her, "One day when you are older, you will regret being my daughter" ("Poison" 7).



Though he knew his efforts to conceal his culpability were futile, that one day the whole truth would come out, he and his sister Olwyn attempted to control what scholars and biographers said about his and Plath's private life. Shortly before his death, he released *Birthday Letters*, which contains some great poems and some fascinating factual information, but in the end is a huge cop-out. The guilt he expressed to friends thirty-five years earlier, immediately after Plath's suicide, is non-existent. Either denial won out, or Hughes stubbornly refused to bare his soul. He will not take responsibility for any of the events that led to Plath's demise. It's all *her* fault, American ambition's fault, Mummy's fault, Daddy's fault.

Who, after Plath's death, would have read the missing journals? Hughes, certainly. Assia Wevill's biographers tell us that when she read Plath's last journal, she was "Surprised to learn 'that [Plath and Hughes's] marriage was much dryer' than Ted had described it to her" and that "she was shocked by the extent of Sylvia's hostility and hatred toward her" (*Lover of Unreason* 117). Elaine Feinstein, in her biography of Hughes, echoes this: Assia "was overwhelmed by the spite and malice directed toward herself there" (151). We know that Olwyn Hughes read both journals. In a 1989 letter to the editors of *The New York Review of Books*, Ms. Hughes states that the 1959-1962 journal "went missing nearly 20 years ago" (contradicting her brother's assertion, in 1982, that the journal had recently disappeared) and reveals that "like earlier journals, [it contains] mainly a rich brooding on inward struggles." And: "The final Journal covered the last few weeks of Sylvia's life, spiralling down, in 1963, to death wishing, grey depression, much of it searing, some of it ugly. Ted Hughes destroyed it, possibly mistakenly, certainly understandably, in order, as he says, that her children would not have to read it. I read it, and I think it could have been a nightmare for them" (nybooks.com).

In the seventies, Olwyn Hughes told Judith Kroll that all of Sylvia Plath's journals would be part of an eventual estate sale to a university, and sealed for twenty-five years—all except the last page of the last journal. What was on this last page, presumably written on February 7, 1963, that was so terrible it would be withheld from posterity, so potentially damaging that Hughes admitted in print that he destroyed it *because I did not want her children to have to read it?* In "Edge" (very likely her last

poem, written on February 5, two days before the possible final journal entry), Plath imagines the "illusion of a Greek necessity," imagines

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body . . . (*Collected Poems* 272-73)

"The meaning is terrifying," writes Jillian Becker in *Giving Up* (37). "It suggests that she was thinking of killing her children when she killed herself, to avenge herself, Medea-like, on her husband" (37). Assia Wevill read Plath's last journal, had knowledge of its last page. How big a role did that knowledge play in her decision, in 1969, to kill herself *and* her young daughter by Hughes in the same manner as Plath, gas asphyxiation? It is horrible to say, but was this the only way Assia was able to trump her dead rival, by doing what Plath wanted but either chose not or was unable to do—murder Hughes's offspring?

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On July 9, 1962, just hours before she learned of Hughes's affair with Assia Wevill, Plath said to her mother Aurelia, who was visiting from America, "I have everything in life I've ever wanted: a wonderful husband, two adorable children, a lovely home, and my writing" (*Letters Home* 458). Plath's boastful assertion brings to mind the Greek myth of Niobe: is she tempting the gods to take all of it away from her? It also makes me think of Truman Capote's unfinished novel *Answered Prayers*, titled after a quote by Saint Teresa: "More tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered ones" (Capote vii). In *The Unabridged Journals*, Plath describes hearing Capote at the Sanders Theater in Cambridge in 1958. He reads from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and Plath is "very amused, very moved," though frustrated because Ted won't change seats, move closer so she can get a better look at the author, and thereby depict him more thoroughly in her journal (442).



Even so, her description is vivid: "Big head, as of a prematurely delivered baby, an embryo, big white forehead, little drawstring mouth, shock of blond hair, mincy skippy fairy body in black jacket, velvet or corduroy, couldn't tell from where we sat" (442). The missing chapters of *Answered Prayers* (it's dubious whether Capote actually wrote them) and Plath's missing journals (as well as her missing unfinished novel *Doubletake*, about the breakup of her marriage) are sources of great mystery and speculation. Readers long for the secrets they would reveal (in Capote's case, the dirt on the jet set; in Plath's, the dirt on the breakup that triggered her astounding poetic outpouring). On the verge of death, Capote gave a key to his friend Joanne Carson. A key to a safe deposit box or locker that contained, he said, the completed manuscript of *Answered Prayers*. But he did not tell her where the safe deposit box or locker was located. Only that "the novel will be found when it wants to be found" (en.wikipedia.org).

Luckily, several excerpts from Plath's 1959-1962 journal do exist; they appear as appendices in *The Unabridged Journals*. These excerpts survive because they were written separately, rather than directly in the maroon-backed ledger. "The Inmate" (at the end of Appendix 10) was written between February 27 and March 6, 1961, when Plath was a patient in London's Saint Pancras Hospital. (She was admitted on February 26, had her appendix removed two days later, and recovered until she was discharged on March 8.) In a letter to her mother, dated the day of her admittance, Plath wrote, "I'm bringing a notebook in with me as you (and Ted) suggested to occupy myself by taking down impressions" (*Letters Home* 410). Her impressions are keen and richly detailed ("The life here is made up of details," she says); there's a swift fluidity to her descriptions of the other patients and surroundings, the experience of being "in hospital" (*Unabridged Journals* 602). This is Plath in her transitional period. Earlier in February she'd written "Parliament Hill Fields" (about her February 6 miscarriage), "Whitsun," "Zoo Keeper's Wife," and "Face Lift," and the week before she entered the hospital, two of her first *Ariel* poems, "Morning Song" (the flowered "Victorian nightgown" in the poem shows up in "The Inmate" as "my frilly pink & white Victorian nightgown") and "Barren Woman" (*Collected Poems* 157, *Unabridged Journals* 602). Her stay in the hospital would produce another, "Tulips," written on March 18.

Like all of Plath's journal writing, "The Inmate" is rife with candor (after her

operation, she takes her "first laborious goat-shit") and judgments (annoyed by the constant noise, she complains, "They vacuum all day – little frizzy haired tarty fat lugubrious women mooching up the overnight dust – wooz – wooz") (602-603). Plath quotes her own poetry to herself ("My mendings itch"); confides to a fellow patient who's had a nervous breakdown about her "own breakdown & mis-applied shock treatment"; jots notes about the woman in Bed 1 ("Joan in a plaster cast from toe to bosom for 4 months"), the inspiration for the poem "In Plaster" (604, 605, 607). She also reads and is struck by the late poems of Boris Pasternak ("they excited me immensely"), admiring his "free, lyric line & terse . . . idiom." "I felt," she goes on, "a new start can be made through these. This is the way back to the music. I wept to lose to my new tough prosiness" (606). She had already begun, in the year since completing *The Colossus*, to move away from the strict forms and alliterative density of her earlier work. One can see, in the poems she'd write soon after returning home from the hospital ("In Plaster," "Tulips," and "I Am Vertical") evidence of a looser, more expansive line. Her voice is more relaxed, conversational. The language is clean, free of literary affect. And in the poems she'd compose later in the year, after writing *The Bell Jar* (particularly "Blackberrying," "Finisterre," "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.," "Last Words," "The Moon and the Yew Tree," and "The Babysitters"), her stanzas have freed themselves from the boxlike, syllabic cookie-cutter shapes of the past: lines jut out, many of them spanning (and sometimes even exceeding) the width of the page. Her "new tough prosiness" is in full swing; she's definitely taken a stylistic leap.

The other excerpt (Appendix 15 in *The Unabridged Journals*) is a compilation of notes that Plath kept on her Devon neighbors, thirty-four sheets of lined legal-size paper that she slipped in and out of her typewriter at various moments, to record her impressions, during (roughly) the first six months of 1962. Hughes stated that Plath established this "archive" in order to "accumulat[e] details for future stories" and to "exercis[e] her observation in Flaubertian style": "After visiting a neighbor's house, she would detail the décor and furnishings with laborious tenacity, and upbraid herself for failing to remember exactly what motif adorned that particular lamp, and exhort herself to get a mental photograph of it on her next visit. Similarly with what people wore. She had a special eye for this" (Hughes, "Introduction" 2). In essence, Plath, like any good



writer-spy on the lookout for material, kept a dossier on each of her neighbors. These include the residents in the cottages closest to Court Green, her housekeeper, the doctor and midwife, and town beekeepers. She reported (usually immediately, though sometimes later in what she called "recollections") the things they said and did, what they ate and wore, how they decorated their homes (*Unabridged Journals* 640). Self-flagellation aside, Plath's perceptive abilities are so expertly trained, she's able—in a flash it seems—to size each person up: extract a sense of their life history, assess their character. They are fascinating vignettes, written by Plath at the peak of her power as an artist, in the months leading to her breakup with Hughes. In these months she was also writing "Three Women," "Little Fugue," "Crossing the Water," "Elm," "The Rabbit Catcher," and "Berck-Plage." And, possibly, a novel. (In a passage early in 1962, Plath refers to Mrs. Hamilton's daughter Camilla "from where I got the name for Dido [Merwin] in my novel" (650). Which novel could this be? *Falcon Yard*? *Doubletake*? Plath supposedly began *Doubletake* much later in the year.)

The Devon portraits reveal as much about Plath as they do her neighbors. They give us a glimpse of "the real person in her daily [village] life," and provide some of the biographical pieces we think of as missing because we don't have access to the lost/destroyed journals ("Foreword" xiii). They contain, for instance, an amazing account of Nicholas's birth. (Plath penned a less visceral account in a letter to her mother.) They show us that Plath's efforts to develop relationships with the townspeople were met with disappointment: "I later sobbed . . . for the flat malice of people I keep dreaming into friends" (*Unabridged Journals* 636-37). And they tell us that a month before the Wevills visited Court Green (a visit that set Ted and Assia's affair in motion), Plath was experiencing intense jealousy of Nicola Tyrer, the sixteen-year-old "Lolita" who had a crush on Ted. When Nicola stops by on the pretense of listening to records on the Hugheses's phonograph, Plath catches "Nicola & Ted standing at opposite sides of the path under the bare laburnum like kids back from the date, she posed & coy." (A scene reminiscent of the famous 1958 journal entry in which Plath spies Hughes ambling up from Paradise Pond at Smith College, flirting with a female student.) Plath's reaction is severe, but she talks herself through it: "For some time I seriously considered smashing our old & ridiculous box victrola with an axe. Then this need passed, & I grew a little

wiser" (641).

And we certainly have lost a valuable appendix to all that later writing. By allowing the Devon portraits to be published, Hughes equipped us with an appendix to at least some of *all that later writing*. He knew, and called attention to, their value:

What is especially interesting now about some of these descriptions is the way they fed into Ariel. They are good evidence to prove that poems which seem often to be constructed of arbitrary surreal symbols are really impassioned reorganizations of relevant fact. They show just how much of the poetry is constructed from the bits and pieces of the situation at the source of the poem's theme. A great many of these objects and appearances occur somewhere or other in the journals. ("Introduction" 2)

Shrewdly, he equipped us with an appendix that ends right before Plath's discovery of his infidelity. If you'll recall, Plath learned of it on July 9, 1962; the last portrait entries are dated July 4. "ROSE & PERCY KEY (68)," Plath's notes on her nearest neighbors, supplies the backstory of the *Ariel* poem "Berck-Plage." An elegy for Percy Key, "Berck-Plage" combines images from Plath's vacation in France the year before with Key's death and funeral in Devon.¹ Plath drafted its seven parts in the aftermath of Key's death; she attended his funeral in the midst of working on it, immediately incorporating such details as "Six round black hats," "A glitter of wheat," and "the coffin on its flowery cart" (*Collected Poems* 201, 200). "Berck-Plage" was completed on June 30, the day after Key's burial. Two days later, on July 2, Plath recounted Percy's death and funeral in her journal. Details from the poem appear throughout the passage; the ones quoted above are reiterated as "the bowler-hatted men," "newly glittering wheat," and "The flowery casket" (*Unabridged Journals* 672, 673). It's as if she wanted to create, after the fact, a concordance to her poem.

The notes on the Keys also explain the genesis of "Among the Narcissi," written several months before Percy's death. It is one of the few times Plath uses a real name in a poem: "Percy bows, in his blue peajacket, among the narcissi. . . . the terrible wind tries his breathing" (*Collected Poems* 190). Again, Plath echoes this scene in the journal *after*

¹ Sandra Gilbert's "On the Beach with Sylvia Plath" (in *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*) is an excellent biographical/literary analysis of the poem.



(in this case twelve days) the poem was written: "[Percy] had been walking in the wind among our narcissi in his peajacket. . . . He had a double rupture from coughing" (*Unabridged Journals* 668). Poem: "He is recuperating from something on the lung" (*Collected Poems* 190). Journal: "Then [he was in hospital] again for a big surgery for 'something on the lung.' Did they find him so far gone with cancer they sewed him up again?" (*Unabridged Journals* 671). "Among the Narcissi" is Plath's attempt to come to terms with the fact that Percy Key has received a death sentence. You can feel his doom in the flower-faces that stare up at him "like children, quickly and whitely" (*Collected Poems* 190). Beneath her unease about Percy—deeper psychic disturbances? "Everybody, it seems, is going or dying in this cold mean spring," she wrote in the journal (668). One has to piece together her meaning from the separate Devon portraits: at the end of April, the Tyrers were preparing to move from North Tawton, housekeeper Nancy Axworthy was absent because her mother-in-law was dying, and terminally ill Percy Key was wandering through the narcissi outside Plath's study window. It's not surprising, then, that this was the moment she wrote "Elm," the poem in which, according to Hughes, "the voice of *Ariel* emerges, fully-fledged": "I am terrified by this dark thing / That sleeps in me" ("Sylvia Plath's" 475, *Collected Poems* 193). After Percy dies, Plath, in her journal, confesses relief: he "is the hostage for death, we are safe for the time-being" (*Unabridged Journals* 673).

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Bits and pieces. 1. When Plath wrote "Mystic," with its "humpback in his small, washed cottage," she had to have been thinking of "the humpbacked Elsie Taylor who lives in a tiny cottage with a stuffed fox at the bottom of our lane" (*Collected Poems* 269, *Unabridged Journals* 655). On a tear sheet from the issue of *The New Yorker* in which "Mystic" appeared after Plath's death, Aurelia Plath underlined "humpback" and wrote "Elsie," whom she had met in Devon, in the margin.² 2. Plath and Hughes sold daffodils, which grew abundantly on their property, to the residents of North Tawton. The flowers brought in very little (less than twenty dollars for the entire spring), but it was a point of

² This tear sheet is in the Plath archive at Lilly Library.

pride for Plath, who was frugal, "because it makes it seem as if [Court Green] is 'earning'" (*Letters Home* 454). When she begrudgingly picks three dozen for Rose Key (miffed because she suspects Rose expects them for free), she says, "It had been pouring all day & I wore my Wellingtons" (*Unabridged Journals* 670).³ Plath's real-life Wellingtons make an appearance in the poem "Letter in November." As she paces her property (undeniably Court Green, with its laburnum, grove of apple trees, and "wall of old corpses" [headstones bordering the adjacent church graveyard]), the practicality of the speaker's boots takes on an horrific aspect: "My wellingtons / Squelching and squelching through the beautiful red" (*Collected Poems* 253). Although "the beautiful red" is meant to evoke blood and the bodies of soldiers massacred at Thermopylae, its meaning is double: we know from one of the Devon portraits that there was "nothing like the rich red soil" of North Tawton (*Unabridged Journals* 653). 3. Impossible, when I read "unpleasant verdigris green rug with flowers patterned over it" in the journal, not to think of "The nude / Verdigris of the condor" in the poem "Death & Co" (*Unabridged Journals* 634, *Collected Poems* 254). "Verdigris" is one of the words Plath made her own, like "cicatrix," "purdah," "homunculus," "stasis," and "tor" (257, 242, 235, and 239).

"CHARLIE POLLARD & The Beekeepers" reads like a blueprint for "The Bee Meeting." The journal entry has all the creepiness of the poem—the otherness of the uninitiated; the sense of danger and mystery, "as if we were all party to a rite" performed by a secret cult (*Unabridged Journals* 658). Elaine Showalter: "the poet's fear of the veiled villagers who seem to be conducting some murderous ritual suggests Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery'" (436). A pagan, primal sacrifice. What Plath says about Percy Key, that he is a "hostage for death" that will keep the living "safe for the time-being," also conjures "The Lottery," a controversial short story (published in *The New Yorker* in 1948) with which Plath was surely familiar (*Unabridged Journals* 673). I have, with students, read these three texts in conjunction; they tangibly demonstrate Plath's creative process—archetypal inspiration (story), source experience (journal), artistic synthesis (poem). It's interesting to compare renditions in journal and poem with Plath's typically sugarcoated portrayal in her letter to her mother: "We all wore masks and it was thrilling" (*Letters Home* 457). As well as with Hughes's "The Bee God" (in *Birthday Letters*), in

³ Wellingtons—something I learned from Plath—are waterproof just-below-knee-high rubber boots.



which he deflects guilt by rewriting history and mythicizing events to suit his agenda: "When you wanted bees I never dreamed / It meant your Daddy had come up out of the well" (150). Plath and Hughes collected their hive (on which Plath painted "crimson hearts and flowers, and bluebirds") from Charlie Pollard on June 8; they became beekeepers on June 15, when Pollard delivered a "swarm of docile Italian hybrid bees" (half a dozen of which stung Hughes) (150, *Letters Home* 457). Hughes would initiate his affair with Assia Wevill on June 26. Plath's bee poems, full of factual *objects and appearances*, are a metaphor for the end of her relationship with Hughes, written as that relationship was ending: "Jealousy can open the blood, / It can make black roses" (*Collected Poems* 215-216).

It's hard to believe that Plath didn't also keep a dossier on David and Elizabeth Compton (the dedicatees of *The Bell Jar*), or on Sylvia Crawford (another young Devon mother) and her family, or on the local Irish rector. Plath was fond of the Comptons, but Hughes would have had his reasons for withholding any notes on them. Elizabeth was summarily rejected by Hughes (and his camp) after she divulged details of her friendship with Plath (including the "dirt" on the Plath/Hughes breakup) in her 1977 reminiscence "Sylvia in Devon: 1962." Hughes followers have characterized Elizabeth as an unreliable publicity-seeker; easy to imagine Hughes denying Elizabeth additional attention by hiding any Plath writing about her. From London, Plath wrote to Elizabeth that she and her husband David "appear briefly as angels" in a new novel about North Tawton (*Doubletake*) (106).

In an October 30, 1961 letter to Helga Huws, Plath describes Sylvia Crawford as a pretty but dumb mother of three little girls. The vicar sent Crawford to befriend Plath, who perceives that they are not cut out to be soul mates. The Crawford family is mentioned throughout "ROSE & PERCY KEY (68)." If a separate portrait of the Crawfords does exist (one in which Sylvia Crawford is represented as dull-witted or worse), it's possible Hughes withheld it to spare Crawford hurt or embarrassment.

Plath did not have *any* nice things to say about the rector. In the same letter to Helga Huws, she calls him a simple little man. In a letter Plath wrote to her mother the week before she wrote to Huws, her remarks about the rector are almost identical. In both cases she means to belittle him. There is no dossier on the rector, but Plath's story

"Mothers" could very well be a fictionalization of missing journal entries. In fact, since the purpose of Plath's "archive" was to "accumulat[e] details for future stories," "Mothers" is the only known short story that may have resulted from this procedure ("Introduction" 1-2). The portrait of the rector sounds like it could have been lifted from her journal: "A small, gray man, with protruding ears, an Irish accent and a professionally benign, all-tolerating smile, he spoke of his years in Kenya, where he had known Jomo Kenyatta, of his children in Australia, and of his English wife" (*Johnny Panic* 13).⁴ The story makes note of one of those actual objects that Hughes refers to—and that I find haunting, poignant because it puts us in touch with *the real person in her daily life*—the Blessings Box, "an austere wooden container with a slot into which one was apparently intended to drop money," that the narrator "[finds] herself walking out" of a church service with, that is, finds herself *stealing* (18). In *Giving Up*, Jillian Becker encounters this object in Plath's flat on Fitzroy Road: "From a narrow wall-shelf I picked up a small puritan-plain wooden box with POOR BOX painted on it and a slot for coins in its lid. . . . [Sylvia] said, 'Oh, that was a present. It used to belong to the church near Court Green'" (Becker 5). Did Plath pinch it, or was it a gift? Plath's fiction is usually a minimally altered retelling of genuine events (*The Bell Jar* being a prime example), so my guess is that the former is true.

"Mothers" was first published in the October 1972 issue of *McCall's* under the title "The Mother's Union." Aurelia Plath's marginalia in her copy of the magazine, held at Smith College, informs us that "Mothers" was originally intended as a segment of what would have been the unfinished novel *Doubletake*. If Aurelia is correct, the short story may be the only fragment we'll ever have of the missing novel. Unlike *The Bell Jar*, which is told in the first person, from Esther Greenwood's point of view, "Mothers" is told in the third person, and concerns a woman named Esther. Does this mean *Doubletake* was written in the third person as well? In the story, Esther is married to a man named Tom, has one small child, and is pregnant with another—Plath's own situation when she was new to North Tawton. "Mothers" indicates that there are tensions in the marriage: Esther harbors "little grievances about Tom's not shaving and his letting

⁴ In a stanza excised from a draft of "The Moon and the Yew Tree," Plath's description of the rector is consistent: he is kind and grey, and his ears stick out.



the baby play in the dirt"; one morning, the postman interrupts "Esther . . . arguing loudly and freely with Tom over breakfast" (*Johnny Panic* 11). Were such tensions meant to foreshadow the couple's eventual breakup?

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Plath's various writings show us a side of her that's sometimes hard to take. The Devon portraits are peppered with Jewisms: "short, dark Jewy looking," "a long Jewy nose," "oddly Jewy head," "a Jewy rapaciousness" (*Unabridged Journals* 631, 636, 656, 664). In "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," she aligns herself with Jews victimized during the Holocaust, but these attributions in the journal are of a different order—a perpetuation of inherited stereotypes. It gets worse in some of her unpublished letters. After Hughes left Court Green and Plath was worried (hysterically so) about finances, she feared Hughes's family (who were not Jewish) would discourage Ted from providing her with enough support. Plath's accusations are wild. Her in-laws are materialistic and inhuman, and they are out to get her. They are Jew this, Jewy that—misers, skinflints, even bastards. Granted, these invectives, banged out by a distraught Plath on her manual typewriter, were not intended for publication. Still. . . .

And what about the problematic image in "Ariel": "Nigger-eye / Berries cast dark / Hooks" (*Collected Poems* 239)? I once played the recording of Plath reading this poem in a graduate literature seminar; afterwards, one of the students, African-American, said, "Did she say what I thought she said?" There's no getting around it. It's a word that's used when the speaker deliberately wishes to cause great offense. In her copy of Wallace Stevens's *Collected Poems*, Plath underlined the title "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," indicating it was a poem she liked or found significant. Was this the precedent that gave her permission to use the word? Throughout her *Ariel*—the "Jew-Mama" who "guards [the husband's] sweet sex like a pearl" in "Lesbos," the "faint // Chinese yellow on appalling objects" in "Wintering"; the abundant Nazi appropriations in a number of poems—it's clear that Plath does mean to shock, if not offend (228, 218). The menstrual blood in "Cut." The "weed, hairy as privates" in "Berck-Plage" (197). "Bastard / Masturbating a glitter" in "Death & Co" (254). The "tits / On mermaids and

two-legged dreamgirls" in "The Courage of Shutting-Up" (210). Of course the point is Plath will not keep her mouth shut. She's letting herself be *bad*.

In *The Unabridged Journals*, Karen Kukil cautions that "Plath used the word 'queer' to denote an eccentric or suspicious person, according to her annotated dictionary, and not a homosexual" (2). Plath's 1958 take on Truman Capote (his "little drawstring mouth" and "mincy skippy fairy body") is not overtly offensive, perhaps because in the same passage Plath is intrigued by the reaction of straight males to Capote's effeminateness ("Ted & men hated the homosexual part of him with more than usual fury") and their jealousy of his success (442). All well and good, but there's no mistaking Plath's derision when she uses the word "fairy" in a letter to Lynne Lawner in February 1960. Frustrated by unsuccessful attempts to locate a decent flat, Plath rails about having to "traips[e] all over the great areas of London & seeing filthy, cheerless, lightless, bathless places for \$25 and up a week, & having the two places we liked snatched up minutes before we came, or barred because the fairy decorator owner couldn't abide children, Negros or dogs" (Plath, "Nine Letters" 48). This "fairy decorator" reminds me of the "New York fairy" in Anne Sexton's elegy to Plath, "Sylvia's Death": "how we wanted to let [death] come / like a sadist or a New York fairy // to do his job" (127). When they sat in the Ritz-Carlton bar after Robert Lowell's workshop drinking martinis and relishing their suicide attempts, did Sexton and Plath also cattily put down homosexuals?

Another derogatory gay reference can be found in the worksheets of "Death & Co." Plath's objective in the poem is twofold: to vent her anger at two real men while at the same time imagining them as double aspects of death. In *Bitter Fame*, Anne Stevenson relates how, on August 25, 1962, the poet John Malcolm Brinnin (who would years later write a memoir of one of his best friends, Truman Capote) visited Court Green with his "companion" (Stevenson's word, and a telling word choice) Bill Reid, with the express purpose of offering Hughes a teaching position at the University of Connecticut (253). The Hugheses were heading toward separation; for Plath, Brinnin's offer would have spelled death to her marriage. In an initial draft, Plath's description of the second man (Brinnin?) is explicitly homophobic. As in the finished poem, he "smiles and smokes" and "wants to be loved," and his hair is "long and plausible" (*Collected Poems*



254). But he is also a simpering homosexual who wears yellow gloves, floral clothes, and perfume, and whose hair glitters with brilliantine. His gestures are too hyperactive; the speaker finds him repugnant. The two men have traveled all the way from America to entice her husband, and only have three return tickets. She and her children are excluded from their proposition.

Plath started "Death & Co." on November 12, 1962. She knew the image of the second man wasn't right; it would take her several days, and a number of revisions, to bring the poem to completion. The fawning, effeminately dressed and groomed, smirking *queer* becomes, in the final version, the "Bastard / Masturbating a glitter"—"glitter," the one word she salvages from her earlier draft, no longer qualifying the visitor's appearance, but the result of his perceived (perverted) lust (254). Such disdain in that "glitter." Something of Plath's disparaging intent persists: his ejaculation, because he is homosexual, is ineffectual; it's wasted seed. And her anger is more direct: she out and out calls him a bastard. In the introductory note to "Death & Co.," which she prepared for radio broadcast, Plath conveys that the poem "is about the double or schizophrenic nature of death—the marmoreal coldness of Blake's death mask, say, hand in glove with the fearful softness of worms, water and the other katabolists" (294). Do the yellow gloves of her draft survive in the phrase "hand in glove"? And doesn't the word "softness" retain her scorn for the man's feyness? (Though Plath never uses the word "fey," it's interesting to note that one of its meanings is "full of the sense of approaching death," which certainly fits the theme of the poem.) Plath's antagonism toward these men was indeed tenacious. One wonders: is there a scathing rant about Brinnin and his partner in the missing 1959-1962 journal? Originally, the poem ended with the two men, derided as idiots, leaving with the speaker's gigolo; in her revision process, Plath arrived at a more ominous outcome: the dead bell tolling (presumably) for her. The hidden implication: that Hughes's departure signaled Plath's death? Hughes might have thought so. In his first letter to Aurelia after Plath's suicide, he wrote, "all she wanted to say simply was that if I didn't go back to her she could not live" (*Letters* 215).

I don't believe Plath was a blatant anti-Semite, racist, or homophobe. But her discriminatory outbursts betray an ignorance born of her white, middle-class, mid-20th-century upbringing. This ignorance manifests most prominently—in *The Bell Jar* and the

poems—as fear of otherness. Like many of her contemporaries, Plath was ripe for consciousness-raising. Had she lived, she quite possibly would have participated in—if not sympathized with—the civil rights movements of the late sixties and seventies. Her slurs, I'm sure, would have fallen by the wayside. She might even have come to regret some of her aspersions. Ironically, toward the end of her life Plath was beginning to see herself as weird, as other. She had clairvoyances, gave tarot readings, was dressing more and more like a bohemian. Elizabeth Compton remembers Plath in Devon as "a tall, slim, vividly alive young woman, with waist-length brown hair. She wore a long skirt and dark stockings, which were unusual for those days" ("Sylvia in Devon" 100). "I look very weird & fashionable," she wrote Aurelia on November 7, 1962, describing her new hairstyle (*Letters Home* 479).⁵ She read her work on a BBC programme called "The Weird Ones." And in "America! America!," a brief memoir about the public schools she attended in her youth, written just weeks before she died, Plath, who in some ways was the epitome of overachieving postwar conformity, aligns herself with the "rebel, the artist, the odd," concluding that her efforts to fit in have been a failure: "Somehow it didn't take—this initiation into the nihil of belonging. Maybe I was just too weird to begin with" (*Johnny Panic* 55).

* * *

Diane Middlebrook contends that Hughes "hid[es] his secrets in plain sight, seeming to promise the possibility of reaching a locale of full disclosure, when—as he wrote to Aurelia Plath—'everything will be quite clear, whatever has been hidden will lie in the open'" (287-88). She also notes: "Withholding from others something important to himself, by hiding it in plain sight—that is a defensive stance so prominent in Hughes's character, as far back as you can track him, that you might as well say it *is* his character" (55). Middlebrook's appraisal of Hughes's character rings true, and indicates that we can learn something about the missing Plath texts by looking closely at what Hughes wrote about them. For example, in her research for *Her Husband*, Middlebrook uncovered information about Plath's last journal, the one Hughes said he destroyed. From a letter

⁵ For *Letters Home*, "weird &" were struck and replaced by an ellipsis.



Hughes wrote to A. Alvarez, she learned that the journal contained "complete details" of Plath's final weeks in London, and was "bitterly sad" (216).

For some time I've been noting, as I read and reread Hughes—his poems, his occasional prose, his letters—instances of potential secrets hidden in plain sight. Those moments when an eerie cognizance stops you in your tracks: you suspect that Hughes is revealing more than you, the reader, might realize. Several such moments occur in "Sylvia Plath and Her Journals," Hughes's 1982 essay, which I quoted from earlier. After stressing the importance of "the lost entries [of the journal] for her last three years," Hughes proceeds to describe, in detail, some of Plath's observations, actions, and feelings from that very time period (flat hunting just after arriving in England):

*. . . the December London of 1959 gave her a bad shock—the cars seemed smaller and blacker and dingier than ever, sizzling through black wet streets. The clothes on the people seemed even grubbier than she remembered. And when she lay on a bed in a basement room in a scruffy hotel near Victoria, a week or two later with *The Rack*, by A.E. Ellis, propped open on her pregnant stomach, it seemed to her she had touched a new nadir. (185)*

Is Hughes drawing solely from memory here? As husband, he undoubtedly would have seen a pregnant Plath reading *The Rack*, but did she share all of these observations and feelings with him? The hiss of dark cars on "black wet streets"? The drabness of English clothes? That, emotionally, she felt she had reached a new low? It does sound as if he might be paraphrasing one of her journal entries. The "basement room in a scruffy hotel near Victoria" would be the "cold, cheerless room-and-breakfast place" that Plath mentions in a letter to her mother on January 10, 1960 (*Letters Home* 361). Hughes and Plath stayed there briefly, before moving into a spare room in Helga and Daniel Huws's Rugby Street flat. (They would then move to their own flat at 3 Chalcot Square on February 1). Without Hughes's description, we might not know that Plath read Ellis's *The Rack*, nor when she read it. The copy that Plath read is not to be found in any of the Plath/Hughes archives. In *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics*, Robin Peel picks up on the significance of Hughes's (seemingly casual) disclosure that Plath read this novel, and examines *The Rack* as a possible inspiration for *The Bell Jar*. "Plath may have

been encouraged," he writes, "to return to the subject of her own institutionalization . . . by the success of A.E. Ellis's novel *The Rack*, which in 'Sylvia Plath and her Journals' Ted Hughes says she was reading during her early 1960 pregnancy" (46). Published in 1958 by William Heinemann Ltd. (who would publish Plath's *The Colossus* and *The Bell Jar*), *The Rack* deals with the abhorrent treatments inflicted upon patients in a T.B. sanatorium in the French Alps. Though Peel sees some similarity to *The Bell Jar* in the novel's "caustic tone," he concludes that it "is closer to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* than it is to *The Bell Jar*" (46). Incidentally, both *The Rack* and *The Bell Jar* were published under pseudonyms: Derek Lindsay was the real name of A.E. Ellis; Plath, as many know, concocted the pen name Victoria Lucas. Lindsay and Plath would share the same editor at Heinemann, James Michie.

Later in "Sylvia Plath and Her Journals," Hughes talks about Plath's time in London, after she'd moved there from Devon in mid-December 1962. Hughes defines Plath's attitude toward the poems she'd written at Court Green in October and November:

She knew she had written beyond her wildest dreams. And she had overcome, by a stunning display of power, the bogies in her life. Yet her attitude to the poems was detached. "They saved me," she said, and spoke of them as an episode that was past. (188)

Here Hughes could be recounting an actual conversation with Plath, one in which Plath played down the importance of the poems, possibly because many of them were damning to Hughes. Hughes could not have read much of Plath's new work at this point (he would discover her *Ariel* manuscript after her death), as he and Plath had been living apart since October. But he had caught wind, through Alvarez, that Plath's new poems were wonderful. He had even recommended them to Douglas Cleverdon, a producer at the BBC; a broadcast would provide Plath, a single mother *worried (hysterically so) about finances*, with some income.

Hughes is also privy to Plath's attitude toward the new poems she wrote in London, her very last, which she started composing on January 28, 1963. "She considered these poems a fresh start," he relates. "She liked the different, cooler inspiration (as she described it) and the denser pattern, of the first of these, as they took



shape" (189). He is referring to "Totem" and "The Munich Mannequins," both written on January 28, which in "Publishing Sylvia Plath" (a piece that appeared in *The Observer* in 1971) he says Plath showed him during one of his last visits to her flat on Fitzroy Road. "They seemed to me, and to her too, even finer than the *Ariel* poems. It may seem odd to say she was pleased with them" (165). But Hughes was not familiar enough with the *Ariel* poems, at that moment, to make such a comparison. Like Tracy Brain in *The Other Sylvia Plath* (who wonders if Olwyn Hughes has "a photographic memory, so that she remembers word for word a text [Plath's journal] that supposedly no longer exists"), I wonder how Hughes—nearly two decades later—can claim that Plath "liked the different, cooler inspiration (as she described it) and the denser pattern [of her new poems], as they took shape" (210). As she described it to Hughes? Or in her journal? Did Plath, during their visit, divulge how she felt about her poems "as they took shape"—i.e., as she was writing them? Or was Hughes cribbing from *a text that supposedly no longer exists*?

Hughes was present in mid-January for the launch of *The Bell Jar*, hence his observation that Plath was in "resilient form" ("Her Journals" 189). In his following statement, however, he allows us to peek over his shoulder, into Plath's last journal: "If she felt any qualms at the public release of this supercharged piece of her autobiography, she made no mention of it at the time, either in conversation or in her diary" (189). No apparent distress—in her person or *in her diary*. He wants us to know that Plath did not express any angst about the publication of *The Bell Jar*—the thinly disguised story of her college suicide attempt—in her journal. So was it a prominent factor in her suicide? Hughes himself seems to be searching for the answer to this question. In his introduction to a proposed combined edition of Plath's *Collected Poems* and *The Bell Jar*, Hughes writes, "In late 1962, while the *Ariel* poems were being written, she was correcting the novel's proofs, and worrying over questions of possible libel" (479). Since Hughes was absent from Plath's life when she was writing the *Ariel* poems, how would he know what she was doing or worrying about? (Plath did not openly discuss *The Bell Jar* in her letters to her mother.) This not only contradicts the notion that Plath was undisturbed by the publication of *The Bell Jar*, it begs one to speculate: did Hughes procure this information from Plath's missing journal? And: when exactly did Plath proofread the

galleys of *The Bell Jar*? If she did this in the middle of writing the *Ariel* poems, it makes her achievement all the more astonishing.

* * *

Of the poems in *Birthday Letters* that intrigue me (and many of them do), "The Gypsy" is perhaps the most mysterious. Hughes narrates an incident of which only he has knowledge, as he was the sole witness. It's one of those occasions in the book when, instead of rebutting or rewriting Plath's account of a particular happening, Hughes tells us something new, something heretofore private. In July 1961, on their way to visit poet W.S. Merwin and his wife Dido in the South of France, Plath and Hughes stop (after first seeing Berck-Plage) in Rheims, where they sightsee the ancient cathedral. They sit in the square "Dunking [their] buttered croissants in hot chocolate" (116). Plath, who wears her mackintosh, is engrossed in writing postcards.⁶ A gypsy woman interrupts, tries to interest Plath in a religious pendant. Plath brushes her off with a curt "Non." Reacting as if she'd been stung or slapped, the gypsy points her finger in Plath's face and delivers a curse: "Vous / Crèverez bientôt" (117). Erica Wagner translates this as "You will soon be dead," though a friend fluent in French informs me the idiom is coarser: "You will soon croak" (*Ariel's Gift* 184). Plath is unfazed. Hughes, on the other hand, is freaked out: the gypsy's words are "Heavier than the Cathedral, / Bigger, darker, founded far deeper" (*Birthday Letters* 117). He tries to "neutralize her venom" with spells of his own, ancient Welsh rhymes, and thinks of returning to Rheims to bribe the gypsy into reversing her curse. "But you," he says of Plath, "Never mentioned it. Never recorded it / In your diary" (117). An incident missing from a journal that's missing? Did Hughes have the journal on hand when he wrote "The Gypsy," to fact-check whether Plath had written about it? Did he remember, long after this journal went missing, that she hadn't? As "The Gypsy" is the only account of this incident, is it possible that Hughes is indulging in mythmaking, inventing a kind of fairy tale curse to reinforce the concept of Plath's irrevocable doom? Hughes's own magic is impotent; he's helpless to undo the gypsy's

⁶ This is presumably the same trench coat she wears in the picture on the cover of Anita Helle's *The Unraveling Archive*.



hex, so Plath has to die. Convenient. It doesn't matter that he entered into an affair that "detonated his marriage"—the "whatever," as Robert Lowell said in a letter, that "wrecked her life" (*Words in Air* 513). He's relieved of responsibility; the die was cast. Hughes does say that he and Plath were involved in "note-making" on their trip (*Birthday Letters* 116). Maybe Hughes recorded his feelings about the gypsy's curse is one of his notebooks or journals?

"The Gypsy" tells us something that isn't (if we are to trust Hughes) in Plath's missing journal. Another poem in *Birthday Letters* tells us something that is. "The Rag Rug" reimagines a benign domestic scene as a biblical fall from grace. Plath and Hughes sit in their living room at Court Green (Hughes calls it "that crimson room of our cardiac days," as it was painted red). While Plath braids a rag rug, Hughes reads out loud from Joseph Conrad's novels. Plath plaits her old wool clothes into a rope that Hughes sees as a "viper / That writhed out of the grave / Of your wardrobe." Its loose ends flick like snake tongues. Plath is "Creating [a] serpent that coiled / Into a carpet" (135). This rug, Hughes concludes, "survived our Eden" (137). The symbolism is almost too good to be true; both Plath and Hughes, in their writings, employ this biblical analogy. In May 1962, Plath wrote her mother that Court Green was "like a little garden of Eden" (*Letters Home* 454). Assia Wevill once presented Plath with the gift of a Burmese "painted wooden handcrafted snake." Yehuda Koren and Eilat Negev, Wevill's biographers, surmise that Plath "must have been aware of the totemic significance of the seducing snake . . . a threat or a rival in her own Garden of Eden" (*Lover of Unreason* 82). That her rival's name contained the word "evil" was not lost on Plath; she knew it was "a name with black edges" (*Collected Poems* 205). Remembering "Those long, crimson-shadowed evenings of ours" and the way Plath's hands intensely worked at their task, Hughes reveals, "Later (not much later) / Your diary confided to whoever / What furies you bled into that rug" (*Birthday Letters* 136). His "whoever" strikes me as disingenuous—only a select few would read Plath's journal after her death. He is, more likely, alluding to the fact that Plath, by killing herself, delivered her journal into the hands of others, cavalierly relinquished her (and his) right to privacy. "[T]he tongues / Of fire [Plath's anger] told their tale," he laments in one of the final "Birthday Letters." "And suddenly / Everybody knew everything" (190).

Plath had begun making rugs in 1959, while she and Hughes were living in Boston. A passage in *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* gives us an idea of what the passage Hughes refers to in his poem might sound like: "Braided violently on rug . . . and felt anger flow harmlessly away into the cords of bright soft colored wool. It will be not a prayer rug but an anger rug" (485). Plath wrote this not long after she posed the question, "How to express anger creatively?" (438). Later, at Court Green, Plath continued, based on what Hughes says in "The Rag Rug," to feed her anger, her "furies," into her rug making. What were her furies? They're well documented. The tensions of finding herself a new homeowner and mother at a time when she was coming into mature strength as a writer. And the strains in her marriage, what Hughes calls the "numb distance / Secreting itself between us" (*Birthday Letters* 136). Curiously, Hughes sees the rug as "A drooled curse / From some old bitter woman's rusty mouth" (136). Is he thinking back to the gypsy at the Cathedral of Rheims? Born of anger, the very emotion Hughes provokes in Plath and yet cannot abide, Hughes can only regard the rag rug as a cursed object.

* * *

Hughes viewed *The Bell Jar* as an "accursed book"; it was an albatross that brought him unhappiness, as in 1987, when he found himself a defendant in a libel suit (*Her Husband* 210). He looked upon the novel as a mistake, on Plath's part; he respected her poems much more than her prose. Ultimately, he seems to have talked himself into believing (to mask his own guilt?) that *The Bell Jar* was a principal cause of his wife's suicide. Middlebrook: "The whole catastrophe had been brought on by the publication of . . . *The Bell Jar*, [Hughes] said, 'that required the tranquilizers' her doctor prescribed, and that led directly to her death" (210). Plath's doctor had placed her on a regimen of sleeping pills and antidepressants. Jillian Becker witnessed Plath's pill taking firsthand, when Plath stayed with the Beckers days before her suicide. "She showed me two bottles of pills and told me she must take two of one sort at ten o'clock and two of the other between six and eight in the morning, depending on when she woke" (*Giving Up* 9). The distraught Plath finally fell asleep, but woke and called to Becker in the middle of the



night. "This is always the worst time, this hour of the morning," she told Becker. Plath wanted to take an additional sleeping pill; Becker dissuaded her. And as it was not yet three in the morning, it was too early to take her "waking-up pills" (the antidepressants) (12). In a 1986 letter to Anne Stevenson, Hughes posits that the "tranquilliser drug" was "the key factor in Sylvia's death, the mechanical factor" and imparts some of the content of Plath's supposedly destroyed journal:

In the diaries, which she wrote during her last days, she describes the terrible interval that came regularly between the point where one pill lost its effect and the next pill took hold—a matter of two hours which fell in the early morning. After her death, I learned from her mother that this particular drug had been tried on S, during her recovery from her first suicide attempt, and that it induced such an extreme suicidal reaction, in the gap between doses, that S's mother was warned never to allow it to be given to S under any circumstances. [Plath's doctor] knew nothing about this. In her diary entry, she feared that she wouldn't get through this gap. (Letters 523-24)

Hughes's revelation—and it is a revelation, given his caginess about the subject; he is rarely so direct—was meant for Stevenson's eyes only. In *Bitter Fame* she describes "the terrible interval" Plath suffered between pills: "The early morning depression was the worst time; if she could get through that, she would be all right" (293). This is information Stevenson would also have gathered from interviews with Becker. She does not repeat what Hughes told her in confidence, that Plath wrote about "the gap between doses" in her journal. Hughes's letter to Stevenson was eventually published in *Letters of Ted Hughes* in 2007.

* * *

Ted Hughes once advised Elizabeth Compton that the "time to tell the truth about Sylvia is when you are dying" ("Sylvia in Devon" 107). Many readers seem to think *Birthday Letters* is Hughes's "deathbed" confession, though for me, as I have said, it reads like an exercise in denial, in contestation. Hughes continually twists facts his way, shuns blame. (One exception would be "Robbing Myself," which stands out as a vulnerable expression

of regret.) Whereas *Birthday Letters* is his attempt to settle the facts, his adaptation of Euripides's *Alcestis*, completed shortly before his death, may be where he chose to embed his innermost feelings about Plath and the aftereffects of her death. "I shall mourn you," says Admetos, King of Thessaly, about his wife Alcestis, who has taken his place in death, "Not for a year, but for my entire life" (*Alcestis* 28). Throughout the play, lines and passages evoke the Plath/Hughes drama ("The whole world knows the story"), and a very palpable sense of Hughes's mental state in the wake of Plath's suicide:

Her empty chair. The imprint of her body
On our bed. And the children
Crying for their mother. (86)

*

I shall feel like an animal
With a fatal wound—
Wanting only to crawl off into a hole.
And what will be said about me? (86-87)

*

And now I have to act like a man in control
And manage the funeral. (32)

*

Never in my life
Shall I bury anyone
I loved so much, or who loved me more.
She died for me. (33)

When one of the chorus announces, "We stand in the icy breath of her death," the image of snow-blitzed London and Fitzroy Road on the morning of February 11, 1963 comes immediately to mind (37). When Alcestis says, "But without you I could not live," it summons the words Hughes, raw with grief, wrote to Aurelia Plath: "all she wanted to



say simply was that if I didn't go back to her she could not live" (26, *Letters* 215). And how can we not think of Hughes, and what the shock of Plath's suicide will force him to learn, in the following fateful proclamation:

He does not know what loss is.
Nothing has ever hurt him.
But when she has gone he will know it.
When everything is too late
Then he will know it.
When he has to live in what has happened. (*Alcestis* 15)

Is Hughes, who determinedly refused to "become a public shrine of mourning and remorse" to his dead wife ("I would sooner," he said, "become the opposite"), at last showing us what he chose, for decades, to keep private (*Letters* 215)?

Alcestis, like Plath the poet, "becomes her living death" (*Alcestis* 43). In these lines, Hughes appears to be professing admiration for the manner in which Plath's death and death-obsessed poetry, together, transformed her into a mythic cultural figure:

And when you died
Your death astonished the living.
Your death humbled all of us.
Your death
Was your greatest opportunity
And magnificently you took it. (34)

The "opportunity" here, in the context of the play, is a heroic act. Alcestis voluntarily sacrifices herself in order to save the life of her husband. But this is Ted Hughes writing about a dead woman: his likening her death to her "greatest opportunity" invites us to envision Plath's suicide as a sort of high-stakes career move. Her posthumous fame was nothing less than magnificent. Yet it can't be ignored that Hughes's reshaping of Plath's *Ariel* manuscript played a major role in how her work was received. The purist in me wants to take Hughes to task for failing to honor Plath's original contents. But didn't he alter the manuscript to more accurately reflect what happened in life? In Plath's *Ariel*, a woman emerges triumphant from a dark night of the soul. In Hughes's version, the woman's intended rebirth lapses into a tragic downward spiral.

Middlebrook points out that *Alcestis* "was, coincidentally, one of the works of literature Sylvia Plath had been studying during the first year of [her] marriage" to Ted Hughes (284). By adapting this same play when he was terminally ill, Hughes put an end parenthesis on his historical relationship with Plath. Under the guise of a Greek tragedy, he found a way to take his own advice (to wait to tell the truth about Plath until he was near death) *and* a way to hide his true feelings about her *in plain sight*. Hughes's last work is an answer to Plath's (probable) last poem "Edge," his own "illusion of a Greek necessity" (*Collected Poems* 272).

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Two journals identical to the '57-'59 volume at Smith College: "Autograph manuscript on lined paper half-bound in red cloth with maroon paper over boards" (*Unabridged Journals* 689). In *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, Ronald Hayman says Olwyn Hughes, who read them, "has dismissed the later journals as 'mostly obsessed with her inner psychic states—private notes, anguishings, records of dreams, self-questionings'" (202). In a 2002 review of Elaine Feinstein's *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet*, Jeffrey Meyers suggests that

[Hughes] may well have kept the precious journals, instead of destroying them, and lied about the lost notebook to throw scholars off the scent. They may still exist—kept hidden by his widow or his children—and their appearance would radically change our view of Plath's relations with Hughes and her intensely creative final months.
(newcriterion.com)

What else is missing?

Plath's unfinished novel *Doubletake*, which Hughes in 1979 said was "some 130 pages" in length, and in 1995 said was half that: "sixty, seventy pages" ("Introduction" 1, "The Art of Poetry" 78). Plath, in a letter to Olive Prouty in November 1962, summarized the novel as such: "semi-autobiographical about a wife whose husband turns out to be a deserter and philanderer," although initially she had thought of him as wonderful and perfect (*Her Husband* 198). Koren and Negev



maintain that "Assia's account in her journal of Plath's journal and her unfinished novel is the only surviving testimony as to their content": "Reading the manuscript of Plath's second novel, Assia easily identified David and herself as the Goof-Hoppers, and was disgusted not only by her portrayal as an 'icy, barren woman,' but also by David's character as 'detestable and contemptible'" (117). Also missing is an index card (Hughes allowed Judith Kroll to view it in the 1970s) "on which Plath made an outline and working notes" for the novel. Middlebrook:

According to Kroll, Plath's notes refer to the main characters as "'heroine,' 'rival,' 'husband' and 'rival's husband'"; and Plath had described one of the novel's central actions: "rival says to heroine, 'I shall drive you mad.'" Plath also jotted on the card the titles of two French films she had seen in London that apparently influenced her conception of this novel: Last Year at Marienbad and Jules and Jim She reported to Alvarez that she had high hopes for the new novel. "Much better than The Bell Jar. I've really got something this time." (201)

In his 1995 *Paris Review* interview, Hughes stated, "to tell you the truth, I always assumed her mother took them all, on one of her visits." By "all" he means the "sixty, seventy pages" of "a fragment of a novel" (*Doubletake*) ("The Art of Poetry" 78). Was he really telling "the truth," or simply trying to direct the spotlight elsewhere? If untrue, his statement is irresponsible, and unfair to the Plath family.

In her 1989 letter to *The New York Review of Books*, Olwyn Hughes informs that a Plath short story, "The Mummy," "disappeared at the same time" as the 1959-1962 journal (twenty years earlier). There are eight references to this story in *The Unabridged Journals*, all made while Plath was at Yaddo, the upstate New York artists' colony, in the fall of 1959. Plath finished writing "The Mummy" on October 4, about a month into her residency. It is "A ten page diatribe against the Dark Mother," a "monologue of a mad woman" (512, 507). She equates it to "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams": an "unpleasant psychological" story (522). When it is sent back from *New World Writing* ("with a mimeographed rejection") on November 7, Plath's doubts flare: "It is a very bitter, often melodramatic story, simply an account" (524). Her last reference, on November 12, is one of resignation: though she doesn't really want to publish the story,

she will continue to submit it to magazines "on principle" (527).

Ted Hughes's poem "A Short Film" (in *Birthday Letters*) lets us know that there exists only one film of Sylvia Plath: "a few frames of you skipping, a few seconds, / You aged about ten there, skipping and still skipping" (134). (He also cites this "family film" in "Night-Ride on Ariel": "Mother / Making you dance with her magnetic eye / On your Daddy's coffin" (174).) It was not made to hurt, says Hughes, but "made for happy remembering / By people who were still too young / To have learned about memory" (134). He now considers this film "a dangerous weapon, a time-bomb" that would detonate "what lies in your grave inside us" (134). Are we to believe Hughes inherited the film? Who but Hughes would possess it? Only the Plath family. It sounds like Hughes is watching the film while composing the poem: "You aged about ten *there* [my italics], skipping and still skipping." He is as precise as he is poetic: the film is "Not very clear grey, made out of mist and smudge" (134). Why write and publish a poem about it—announcing its existence—if it is so potentially harmful? Why not quietly secret the film away?

Also unaccounted for is the letter (or letters) that Plath was concerned about posting on the eve of her suicide. Shortly before midnight, she bought stamps from her downstairs neighbor, Trevor Thomas, the last person who would see her alive. Per Ronald Hayman, Plath told Thomas the letters (plural in his account) "were airmail for America, and she had to get them into the post tonight" (11). One was addressed to Aurelia Plath, reports Hayman, and "although [Sylvia] obtained stamps, she didn't post the letters" (16). Aurelia was later told about the letter, but "was given to understand that it would be better if she didn't see it, [so] she didn't try to insist" (16). Peter K. Steinberg (in his *Sylvia Plath*) reiterates Hayman's claim: "At some later point, Aurelia Plath denied her right to see the letter, and its whereabouts is not known" (121).

And where are the letters Plath sent to her in-laws after Hughes moved out of Court Green, when her fury was at its most intense? In them, she alleges that Hughes is having affairs with a number of women in London. "I've seen the letters Sylvia wrote to my parents," Hughes apprised Aurelia a month after Plath had died, "and I imagine she wrote similar ones to you, or worse" (*Letters* 215). There is a rumor that one of Hughes's girlfriends, in the seventies, stole Plath's letters to his family; to this date, their location is



unrevealed.

Missing also are a few pages from Plath's 1962 desk diary. One is the week of September 9, when Plath and Hughes, their marriage in serious trouble, traveled to Ireland to visit the poet Richard Murphy. Hughes abandoned Plath on this trip; she made her way back to Court Green alone. Another is the week of October 7, when Hughes returned to Court Green to pack his things and move out. Plath told her mother that this was a ghastly week. She was already writing the *Ariel* poems; she wrote "The Applicant" on October 11, the day Hughes departed for London, and "Daddy" the following day. It isn't difficult to imagine what Plath, furious over Hughes's desertions, might have scrawled on the missing pages of her desk diary.

Plath's childhood diaries have yet to be published. Nor have the book reviews she wrote for *The New Statesman*, two of which were written concurrently with her *Ariel* poems. Nor have all of her pre-1956 poems—labeled juvenilia by Hughes—been collected and arranged in chronological order. A "complete" poems of Sylvia Plath (versus Hughes's "collected") would give us a broader picture of Plath's development. Her artistic breakthrough between *The Colossus* and *Ariel* was not the first transformation she had undergone as a poet. The shift from her rigorous undergraduate sonnets and villanelles to the less restrained (though still formal) poems of her *Colossus* period is also worthy of close study, as are the early themes she carried forward into her mature style.

Similarly, Plath's letters have yet to be collected. There could be more than a thousand of them. Between 1950 and 1963, she wrote 696 letters to her mother and other family members. The one volume we have, *Letters Home*, which contains those family letters, is highly edited (with alterations in Plath's spelling, paragraph breaks, and even her phrasings); only those who have made the effort to visit the archives where the actual letters are held have a sense of their true content and character.⁷ When Aurelia Plath was editing *Letters Home*, Hughes urged her to "drastically cut" the manuscript, extracting "all the inside dope" on himself; he also stressed that "A collection of her letters to everybody, with all the varied aspects that different correspondents drew out of her," would create a biography of Plath (351, 364, 351). It would more aptly create her autobiography. I imagine a huge tome (possibly in several volumes, like the letters of

⁷ The majority of Plath's letters are held at the Lilly Library and Smith College.

Emily Dickinson or Vincent van Gogh) that gathers together Plath's letters to her family, to her college friends and boyfriends, to her mentor Olive Prouty, to her literary friends, to her editors, etc. Many of Plath's letters are in library collections; some are still in private hands. (Recent news that the British Library has acquired letters from Plath to her sister-in-law Olwyn Hughes confirms that such artifacts continue to surface.) If not a collected letters of Plath, a selected letters along the lines of *The Letters of Ted Hughes* would be a treasure for scholars and general readers alike. But unedited, please. Only when those overseeing Plath's legacy begin to value every word she wrote in her brief life, and work toward preserving those words, can posterity be assured of such a compilation.

There's no telling what could conceivably surface in the future. Gail Crowther's recent discovery of four heretofore unknown poem introductions, written by Plath on the evening of December 13, 1962, just a few days after moving from Devon to London, is, for this Plath devotee, a most amazing find. These introductions went unnoticed for nearly half a century; Crowther should be allowed to "introduce" *them* to the world. Equally exciting are the previously unreleased recordings that were recently made available on the British Library CD *The Spoken Word: Sylvia Plath*. One is of Plath reading "Tulips" in front of an audience at the Mermaid Theatre in London on July 17, 1961. This would have been right after the Hugheses returned from the Merwins' farm in the South of France (and only a couple of weeks after Plath was cursed by the gypsy at Rheims) and right before they went house-hunting in Devon. The audience applauds after Plath is introduced; a few people cough as she recites her poem. She actually sounds a bit nervous. Not as electric as her late studio recordings, where she is in total command of her language, her reading of "Tulips" is nevertheless a rare piece of history: the only recording we have of Plath reading her poetry before a live audience.

Koren and Negev interviewed Richard Larschan, a friend of Aurelia Plath's, who recalled seeing letters that Assia Wevill had written to Aurelia; he was amazed "that Assia would write so familiarly to the mother of someone for whose death she, in some measure, could be considered at least partially responsible" (*Lover of Unreason* 182). Aurelia set Assia's letters aside; they were not part of the archive of Plath materials that she sold to Indiana University, and are, according to the biographers, "possibly in Warren



Plath's possession" (183).

Much more remains hidden from public view. Hughes kept a journal. Assia Wevill kept a journal. Aurelia Plath kept a journal. All have been quoted from or alluded to in various contexts. Each of them also wrote copious letters. It is mind-boggling to contemplate all of the information these documents might contain, and how that information might be disseminated if and when the documents come to light.

* * *

Are Plath's missing journals in the "sealed trunk that waits to be opened and unpacked in the year 2023," as Middlebrook says, "the last bit of the Hughes legacy" that Hughes himself transferred to his archive at Emory University (287)? The contents of this box may not even be "the last bit," given the amount of archival material that has yet to emerge or be collected. Middlebrook tells how Hughes, in the draft of a letter he wrote to Jacqueline Rose in 1990, admitted that he "hid the last journal—about 2 months of entries," rather than destroying it. Hughes frames this news as a secret confession: "I have never told this to anyone" (238). Tracy Brain mirrors Hughes's unsent admission: "I am not sure we should take him at his word that he destroyed her last journal" (209). Brain captures the air of mystery that surrounds Hughes's sealed trunk: "We can only guess at what [it] contains; perhaps one or both of Plath's lost journals, perhaps her missing novel, perhaps poems by Plath and Hughes that nobody has ever seen" (211). Elaine Feinstein wonders if Hughes's own journals might be ensconced in this box. With other Plath "fanatics," I've joked about a *National Treasure* scenario, where a team of adventurous scholars (dressed in black, naturally), in search of Plath's missing journals, break into (using all sorts of high-tech gadgetry) university libraries and safe deposit boxes. "Suspense," Emily Dickinson reminds us, "is Hostiler than Death" (347). But I take solace in what Hughes wrote to Aurelia Plath, that "whatever has been hidden will lie in the open." Is Hughes quoting scripture? *For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.* Solace can also be found in Plath's own words: "The box is only temporary" (*Collected Poems* 213).

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