



Opening the “Locked Cabinet of Things”: Catherine Bowman’s The Plath Cabinet

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Most treatments of Sylvia Plath begin with biography. Yet Catherine Bowman’s new collection of poetry, The Plath Cabinet, does not do so. Instead, by focusing on lesser-known objects that belonged to Plath, such as a paper doll collection and a series of wedding invitations, Bowman can approach Plath from unexpected viewpoints and situate the objects within a 1950s cultural narrative.

The first poem, “Sylvia Plath’s Mouths,” sets the stage for the book as a collage of objects and texts creating their own narrative. The poem reconfigures a number of Plath phrases, all of which include the word *mouth*. The mouth is a literal opening, but it is an opening to a range of emotions and experiences as well, a life/death paradox embodied in “That mouth made to do violence on” (1) and “A garden of mouthings, I am all mouth” (12).

While the image of the mouth is important in establishing a theme of articulation, Bowman also includes two poetic series to provide cohesion for the volume: nine prose poems on paper dolls and four imaginary wedding invitations. Both re-examine the traditional romance narrative.

The poems on paper dolls are important not only because Plath was a maker and collector of paper dolls (she had over 150), but because they speak literally to a female construction. Stylized paper doll costumes appear on the cover of the book. The dresses and sweaters anticipate a buxom woman with a tiny waist, and there are plenty of matching accessories—purse, hat, and gloves. (Although these are paper doll costumes, they conjure up the outfits of the Barbie doll, launched in 1959.) One tiny, well-placed detail on the cover is a falling pair of binoculars, turned neither inward nor outward, signaling an ambivalence that Bowman takes advantage of: a subtle act of freefall that mirrors the metaphorical freefall of her collection. While the poems from this paper doll series are interspersed throughout the collection—providing a feeling of modulation and return—they also need to be read as a group.

The first prose poem in this series, “Paper Dolls: Toy Theater,” is a list of items, some of which reference Plath’s suicide attempts (and ultimate suicide): “death certificates, gum wrappers, lunacy papers, razor-blade wrappers, receipts” (12). With a theme of theatricality, Bowman blurs the boundary between the imaginary and real. The costumes may be changed, depending on the performance: “Kept in a toy trunk, little costumes with transportable bodies for a toy theater” (12). Once this expectation has been established, the other eight poems go on to examine the paper doll costumes.

“Paper Dolls: Gold Hostess Frock with Top Hat” deserves special attention in terms of its self-consciousness about the paradoxical role of women—observing a surface world of manners, on the one hand, and containing a ferocious animal sexuality, on the other. The poem comments on the performance aspect of the 1950s dinner party by using circus imagery: “Top hat, double-D breasts, a long-sleeved lion tamer’s waistcoat, leather choker. A leather apron drafted from fairy-tale leftovers” (37). Yet word choices such as *beasting* (37), *impaled* (37), and *stripped* (37) indicate the animal ferocity just beneath the surface. This ferocity is both orgasmic and terrifying: “Lift her apron up and it’s all lion radiance” (37) and “the adults-only lion roar” (37).

The wedding invitation poems, based on actual invitations from the Plath collection at the Lilly Library, subvert the language of societal customs by inserting Plath phrases at critical junctures. There is also a pun in that the reader is “invited” to participate in this re-envisioning. One wedding location is “Lever of His Wet Dreams / Weedy Greens, Vermont” (“Wedding Invitation I,” 9-10); one mother of the bride is “Mrs. S. Swallow It All” (“Wedding Invitation II,” 1). The variations range from the silly, to the sexual, to the intimidating. The poems become slightly more menacing, as the book continues. For instance, “Mr. and Mrs. Naked and Bald / have the Wind’s Sneer” (“Wedding Invitation III,” 1-2), and in the last poem the husband is “Mr. My Fear, My Fear, My Fear” (“Wedding Invitation IV,” 5). While some of the invitations verge on the nonsensical, the crossing of language reflects the way that Plath was both attracted to, and repelled by, conventional society. The invitations show how easily a well-understood form may be subverted, underscoring the grammar of expectation and participation.



In a book so self-conscious about 1950s culture, it is easy to make the leap to the poem “Sylvia’s Second Marriage,” where Plath is imagined as a new Lucy for Ricky Ricardo, “singing / thanks to the god of crossroads, / saying, *Sylvia, you got some ‘splainin’ to do*” (9-11). The Lucy/Sylvia narrative braids itself with other Plath narratives, both real and imagined. Sylvia, now with Lucille Ball’s red hair in the poem, was known for coloring her hair; and the party scene in the poem—

she in a gown, white
and wrapped tight as a top-
secret White House memo
erased (15-18)

—is reminiscent of the famous party scene in The Bell Jar, a fictional account of Plath’s own experience as a Mademoiselle guest editor. In the Lucy narrative, though, Plath is reimagined as Doreen, the worldly sophisticate, literally wearing her clothes:

Doreen looked terrific. She was wearing a strapless white lace dress
zipped up over a snug corset affair that curved her in at the middle and
bulged her out again spectacularly above and below, and her skin had a
bronzy polish under the pale dusting powder. She smelled strong as a
whole perfume store. (6)

At the same time, Ricky Ricardo is now a madcap Ted Hughes figure: “they reenact vows in tight hard / gutturals. Rhumba couplets / drive the crowd wild” (20-22). For Bowman, this TV show narrative, with its hyperbolic antics, provides a striking counterpoint to the hyperbolic events of Plath’s own life. This poem is important, then, for bringing together unlikely cultural/personal events and showing their connection.

Bowman also, at times, uses a factual style, giving emotional subject matter an air of objectivity. “Sylvia’s Photo Album” uses quick, fragmentary descriptions to recreate the experience of looking at such an album:

Front view, big smile.
Front view, sitting at angle, bare shoulders,
Side view, looking at crystal ball held above head.
Holding crystal ball in front of face. (7-10)

The images in the poem start with the personal, move through relationships, and end with Plath's death: "Plath. Head only; mounted on cardboard. / Woods and field with river" (18-19). The irony is that a photo album is usually personal, but Plath is reduced to a series of images, almost as if her life were a series of entries in an art catalogue.

"Dimensions" uses this factual strategy as well; the whole poem is simply a list of measurements of ordinary objects: a crib, an oven, a typewriter, and paper. Inserting the oven changes the interpretation of the others in the list, making the piece more poignant: "26.5 inches wide, 22.5 inches deep, 13.5 inches high" (54). By using this unsentimental approach, Bowman makes the suicide chilling, as it is placed within an ordinary context; moreover, the oven seems physically very small, given its devastating result.

At the end of the collection, Bowman writes, "It is difficult to express the tenderness evoked by spending time with this repository of feelings, this locked cabinet of things" (69). By opening the "locked cabinet of things," Catherine Bowman provides essential reading. As a response to Sylvia Plath, her culture, and her work, there is nothing else like it.



Works Cited

Bowman, Catherine. The Plath Cabinet. New York: Four Way Books, 2009.

Plath, Sylvia. The Bell Jar. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.