From the Artist of
The Hanged Woman

Sylvia Plath was known to have an intimate and complicated relationship with the occult, dabbling in Ouija, tarot, crystal balls, and astrology. Her poetry reads a constant conversation with another world, and this cover is inspired by that sometimes illuminating, sometimes desperate connection to the mystical. Tarot cards have long been used as a fortune telling device, with many psychics espousing its benefits in life, including as a memory aid and adding clarity and peace to life. Plath herself often used tarot as a meditative device and for inspiration, bringing it directly into poems such as “Ariel,” “Daddy,” and “The Hanging Man.”

For the 12th volume of Plath Profiles, I chose the 12th trump card in a traditional tarot deck, The Hanged Man. Plath herself is placed in the role of the hanged man. Her relationship with the occult was so deep and complicated, and I think this piece brings that into focus. There’s also a lot of relevancy today with what The Hanged Man symbolizes: surrender, sacrifice, and suspension within time. 2020 hasn’t been the easiest year, and as we sit trapped within our homes, time has become meaningless and we feel the constant struggle and sacrifices to be able to have as normal lives as possible within the chaos.

— Kathleen Qiu

Robert Eric Shoemaker:
Welcome, reader, to Volume 12 of Plath Profiles.

2020 has been quite a year, to say the very least. Amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic, anti-racist activism, and climate change’s raging wildfires and devastating hurricanes, we at Plath Profiles have used this journal and our interest in Plath and her work as a grounding zone. In this, “occult” Volume 12, we hope that you find solace and a catalyst for your own scholarly and creative work in the growing storm.

In this volume, you will find poetry, scholarship and hybrid writing that explores Sylvia Plath’s work as mystically and magically invested in transformation. Plath’s occult interests, from her Ouija practice with Ted Hughes to her witchy bonfires, are no secret to our community, though you might be surprised at how few beyond our circle know of Plath’s commitment to the esoteric arts. Her interest in the occult, the intentionality of her work’s investment in gnosis and magick, and the intensity of scholarship possible in this regard have been less explored than we might imagine. In this volume, we hope you find inspiration to continue and expand on Plath’s witchier qualities.

The works in this volume, including a hybrid musical composition score, student work, visual art, numerous poems and essays, and an interview with Julia Gordon-Bramer, a Plath scholar, are all intensively peer-reviewed and edited, often with peer revision assistance that is uncommon in the publishing realm. We pride ourselves on our interest in each individual contributor’s work and process, and we hope you see the fruits of this labor. In this spirit of collaboration, we reached out to Julia Gordon-Bramer and Catherine Rankovic, two fellow Plath enthusiasts for their very different brief takes on Plath and the occult to introduce this volume. As you can see, the range of interests and commentary on this aspect of Plath scholarship is vast:

In Four Voices


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EDITOR’S NOTE

Julia Gordon-Bramer:

It has always fascinated me that Sylvia Plath’s husband, Ted Hughes, has been widely examined regarding his occult pursuits, but almost no academic exploration (beyond my own) has been made of Plath’s practices with the supernatural. Or perhaps I should say, her obsessions with it. The common reader does not understand that there are atheists out there, as Plath told others she was, who are also deeply spiritual. I’m excited for this forthcoming edition of Plath Profiles and the serious look it takes at a passion of Plath’s that is a raging current running throughout her work and lending to a wider understanding.

Catherine Rankovic:

An occultist actively seeks power and gain, often through tools such as cards, crystal balls, incantations or horoscopes; the use of such for those ends is called magic(k). A mystic seeks unity and wisdom, is receptive, and wants less rather than more.

Sylvia Plath dabbled in the occult but was not a mystic, nor (as Ted Hughes would have it) was she bedeviled by “psychic gifts” seemingly never used except to catch him cheating. Her writings show a character hyper-rational, practical, keen-eyed, and worldly. The “Mystic” of her eponymous poem returns to Earth with a thud. We, not Plath, are the “spiritual but not religious” New Agers communing with an idealized spirit or “ghost” of Plath imagined to “haunt” our favorite places, or alleged to have led a well-hidden mystical magickal spiritual life precisely aligned with our New Age values.

Above all, Plath was a dedicated writer and experienced inspirations and breakthroughs to higher levels—not of spirit but of confidence, nerve and skill. Those are part of a working writer’s experience, remarkable but not mystical or magical at all. For her hard work on the Ariel poems we have ample documentation.

Eternity bores me,
I never wanted it.

Dolores Batten:

As we usher in this volume, we would also like to take a moment to highlight some incredible developments in the Plath world. First off, major kudos are due to Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil for their wonderful work in the production and editing of The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Vol. II, 1956-1963, now recognized as one of the “Top Books of The Decade” by The Sunday Times of London. Credit must also be extended to the many Smith College students who worked on both the transcribing and compiling the over 1,400 letters included in the Volume, according to Kukil.

We would also like to take this opportunity to introduce our Plathian readers to the brand new induction of the first official Plath Society. If you would like more information, please contact: plathsoc@gmail.com.

This special issue of Plath Profiles has a specific focus on ideas of spirituality and enlightenment, as we know that this has been an extremely hard time in our world’s history for everyone, and want to remind our readers that, no matter the struggle, this will get better, and reading is healing. We are all in this together!

Thank you so much to our regular readers for your continued support, and to our new readers, we hope that you enjoy this Volume of Plath Profiles.

If you are a writer interested in submission, please review the guidelines in the end material of the journal.

Have a wonderful upcoming holiday season, and we will see you in 2021!

Sincerely,

The Editors of Plath Profiles

Dolores Batten and Robert Eric Shoemaker are the editors of Plath Profiles; Catherine Rankovic and Julia Gordon-Bramer are contributors and Plath scholars.

We are always looking for new submissions to continue the scholarly discourse and creative output of our Plath-centric network. If you have any questions, comments, ideas, or would be interested in helping with the process of publication for Plath Profiles, please email our organization at PlathProfiles@gmail.com.

In addition, if your would like to submit work for future consideration, please visit the Indiana University submission page at https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/plath/submission/wizard.

Thank you again for your patronage, and we look forward to continuing to provide you with the only Plath-based academic journal in the world, Plath Profiles.

About the Journal

William K. Buckley, Professor Emeritus at Indiana University Northwest, founded Plath Profiles in 2008 at Oxford University in the U.K. during a Sylvia Plath convention. He announced his intention for such a journal and the response from Plath scholars was immediate. The response to this journal since 2009 has been overwhelming.

Plath Profiles prints essays, poetry, art, memoirs, book reviews, responses, student essays, and notes, along with new media and released documents from the Plath estate. Indiana University is also the home of the Lilly Library, which has the largest and most extensive collection of materials on Plath.
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by Annie Finch

“The moon is my mother.”
— Sylvia Plath

She takes me in, deep in, till I’m exiled,
Then pricks my ankles with small bats and owls;
The moon is my mother. She grows bald and wild,
Turning us, on, through blue night’s long-beguiled
dark-facing light; though every steeple scowls,
This door is open; I will be her child,
Dancing the touch that’s still unreconciled,
Singing out the inheritance of growls.
The moon is my mother; she grows bald and wild.
Which is our face? Was it ours till we smiled?
( Eight great tongues find a ninth that sprouts and growls;)
This door is open; I will be her child
And line the nest I have not yet defiled
With grass unloading griefs, or Gods, till it howls.
The moon is my mother; she grows bald and wild
As Mary was, before they made her “mild.”
Gather our draping hoods, our snoods, our cowls!
The moon is my mother. She grows bald and wild;
This door is open. I will be her child.

Instructions for a musical improvisation after
Sylvia Plath’s “Poem for a Birthday”—for
female speaker and very small ensemble of
unspecified instrumentalists

1. Who

Instructions to each musician individually:

Extract a prime motive from the pitch class set
{0,1,4}. Let this motive appear in 33 musical
iterations, or phrases, in which the motive
is perpetually varied and developed and
metamorphosed. Within a single iteration, it
may be extended beyond the length of a three-
ote note phrase; likewise, it may be contracted
to one or two notes. Articulation within each
iteration or phrase need not be legato followed
by a breath, but there should be a definite
distinction made between one iteration and
the next. Intonation is flexible and need not
be confined to the equidistant dodecaphonic
universe. Microtones are encouraged.

Instrumentalists may use their voices.
Instrumentalists may include non-pitched
variations of the prime motive among the 33,
including silent variations.
You are responsible individually for measuring
out your phrased iterations and counting to
33 then stopping. It is most likely that you will
lose your way within the burgeoning musical
creative process, losing count of your iterations:
the rhythmicity of your musical breathing and
phrasing as you improvise will suppress your
capacity for banal counting, and it is most likely
that you will not know when and whether you
have reached the number 33. That is how it
should be. But this does not relieve you of the
responsibility for measuring out your phrased
iterations and counting to 33 then stopping.
When you have stopped, hearken toward the
ensuing silence as it grows.

Instructions to the musicians collectively:

Listen to each other. Allow a free contrapuntal
texture to emerge between you. There should
be a sense of searching and unease in this
musical conversation. The overall texture should
be lushly vegetative yet confined and somewhat
musty in character.

After the 33 motivic iterations, when the silence
has grown dense and tangible, let a bulb of
musical light infiltrate and overwhelm the space
for an extended moment—short enough for it
to have the character of a puncture or fracture
in the stream of undifferentiated time, yet long
enough for it to convey the amplified sense of

Maenad

by Danaë Killian

1 Sylvia Plath, “Poem for a Birthday.” Collected Poems, ed.
a Birthday” is in seven parts: “Who”; “Dark House”; “Maenad”; “The
Beast”; “Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond”; “Witch Burning”; and “The
Stones.” Each of the seven episodes comprising these instructions for
a musical improvisation is named, in sequence, after one of the parts
of Plath’s poem. The title of the improvisation as a whole—Maenad—
takes its name from the third poem in Plath’s sequence, which the female
speaker is instructed to declaim in its entirety within the improvisation’s
corresponding episode.

2 For an introductory elucidation of pitch class set theory, see
Allen Forte, The Structure of Atonal Music (New Haven: Yale University
Press, 1973). The pitch class set is both abstract and specific—its content
cannot be better represented in some other more concrete way. How-
ever, as a guide for musicians unfamiliar with pitch class set theory, the
constellation of tones C–C sharp–E gives a straightforward example of a
three-tone series drawn from the pitch class set {0, 1, 4}.
Plath’s biographical experience of surviving a suicide attempt, which involved her lying three days unconscious in a cellar, as though entombed, before she was discovered and brought like Lazarus back into the realm of the living. “Who,” the opening poetic episode in Plath’s sequence, contains 33 lines, which might be symbolic of Christ, who is said to have been aged 33 when he raised Lazarus and was crucified shortly thereafter. Plath’s association of the biblical story of Lazarus with the pivotal near-death experience in her own biography is famously articulated in her 1962 poem “Lady Lazarus.”

2. Dark House

Instructions to all performers:
Be very still in your bodies, as if frozen. Let silence keep growingdarkly.
Experience the yearning to speak or to cry.
Repress it.
After a little while, consider yourselves adjusted to the silence and the darkness. Let yourselves melt into it; let your muscles thaw. Subtly, then in ever bigger motions, let your limbs begin to move toward expressive movement, toward singing with your arms and dancing with your feet, but always receding again into stillness.
You may interact with your instruments in this process, but do not sound them. A series of three waves should arise in the silence through these movements, which are as-if-audible musical phrases. Each time you recede into darkness and stillness, feel yourself warmer and cosier (you may hug yourselves). Learn to trust the darkness that represses your voice. Learn to feel safe when you are denied your freedom. Imagine you have Stockholm Syndrome. After the three waves, a brisk, friendly conversation is to arise between the performers.

Symptom of the number 33:
In its sequence of seven poetic episodes, Plath’s “Poem for a Birthday” traces a process of mystical death and resurrection. It draws on Plath’s biographical experience of surviving a suicide attempt, which involved her lying three days unconscious in a cellar, as though entombed, before she was discovered and brought like Lazarus back into the realm of the living. “Who,” the opening poetic episode in Plath’s sequence, contains 33 lines, which might be symbolic of Christ, who is said to have been aged 33 when he raised Lazarus and was crucified shortly thereafter. Plath’s association of the biblical story of Lazarus with the pivotal near-death experience in her own biography is famously articulated in her 1962 poem “Lady Lazarus.”

3. Maenad

Instructions to female speaker:
Declaim “Maenad” from Sylvia Plath’s “Poem for a Birthday.” (To speak all of these words out loud in front of an audience requires permission from the Estate of Sylvia Plath. Ask for it.)
Instructions to the musicians:
Listen and watch.
Breathe with the spoken poetry.
If you are inspired to join your tone to words, or to the spaces between words, the words will welcome you, as long as you do not turn their clear and hard-forged speech into a song.
Let silence be your queen.

4. The Beast

Instructions to female speaker:
The following lines, drawn from Plath’s poem (and slightly misquoted), are to be spoken between them:

- “It is warm and tolerable in the bowel of the root.”
- “My belly moves. I must make more maps.”
- “All-mouth’s to blame. He’s a fat sort.”
- “I made it myself—whistling, wiggling my ears, thinking of something else.”

After the conversation, there should be one more wave of as-if-audible limb-music.
Then, one musician should play or sing a descending scale of seven notes, in any intonation.

5. Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond

Instructions to the musicians:
An atmosphere of coldness and stillness prevails. No stars are reflected in the surface of your dull, despairing, slow-drawn tones, which do reflect each other. Listen for undines drowning beneath the surface of your sound, drowning into each other’s reflections. Because they have lost the stars the undines are headless. They are looking for the head and lyre of Orpheus.
After a while, one musician should play or sing an ascending scale of seven gold-shining notes, in any intonation, as if the lyre of Orpheus had been found.
Silence.
Someone should sing something. High up. Lamenting but flying. A flute or a violin would do for this.
Silence again.
Instructions to female speaker:
Let the spirit PAN inform you. Let the spirit of Orpheus inform you. Let the spirit of the beast inform you. Let the spirit of the flute inform you. Let the spirit of the flute notes from a reedy pond inform you. Let the spirit of the music inform you. Let the spirit of the sound inform you.

More exactly quoted, as would be required in a scholarly essay, these lines would read: “It is warm and tolerable / in the bowel of the root”.

“...a fat sort”...

“...whistling, wiggling my ears / thinking of something else.”

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5. More exactly quoted, as would be required in a scholarly essay, these lines would read: “It is warm and tolerable / in the bowel of the root.” “My belly moves / I must make more maps.” “All-mouth’s to blame. He’s a fat sort.” “I made it myself—whistling, wiggling my ears / thinking of something else.” Plath, “Poem for a Birthday.” 132-133.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Plath records in her journal entry for 4 July 1958 how on the
Imagine, too, the crowd around Christ crying “Crucify him!” Your scales are red flames, which are the red blood of the flames’ victim.

Stop abruptly.

Female speaker:

“What large eyes the dead have!
I am intimate with a hairy spirit.” 12

Instructions to the musicians:

Cleanse the speaker of the hairy spirit. Growl at her with fierce tones. Scourge her. Lead her into brightness. Re-sound the bulb of light from the first episode, “Who,” and sustain it (with free variation) until the speaker intervenes.

Female speaker:

“I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light.” 13

7. The Stones

Instructions to the musicians:

Imagine being reborn as a shop mannequin. Plath’s image of being put back together again and reborn in “The Stones” is animated by mistrust, helplessness and horror as the poem’s speaker watches from a dissociated distance the operations of “the city where men are mended.” 14

Prompt (unspoken): “This is the after-hell: I see the light.” 15

Use percussive sounds to beat out the rhythms of a plastic heart. Use cloyingly gentle, lyrical motives to swaddle limbs made of rubber. Keep it short. None of this is very believable.

Female speaker:

“Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.” 16

Those words intervene to mark the end of the improvisation. The musicians should now form their chosen final gestures, either in sound or in movement.

Hold.

Break the spell. The end.

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9  Ibid. 401. The song is a setting of Heinrich’s poem “Locan.” Plath’s mother probably sang Friedrich Silcher’s setting, which for a time enjoyed considerable popularity. However, I would encourage the female speaker to instead have in mind the less well-known 1834 setting by Clara Schumann, whose husband Robert attempted suicide in February 1854 by throwing himself off a bridge into the Rhine.

10  Plath, “Poem for a Birthday,” 135.

11  Ibid.

12  Ibid.

13  Ibid., 136.

14  Ibid.

15  Ibid.

16  Ibid., 137.
Sylvia Plath’s Fixed Stars

by Catherine Rankovic

Sylvia Plath’s Fixed Stars

“Fixed stars” are all the stars in the sky assigned to the units called constellations. The brighter of these fixed stars, if prominent at the time of birth, are said to influence an individual’s character and life events. Given the resonance of the concluding words “[f]ixed stars / Govern a life,” in Sylvia Plath’s poem “Words,” I wanted to identify the fixed stars in Plath’s natal astrological chart and discuss their significance in Western astrology, the type practiced by Plath’s husband Ted Hughes, who all his adult life used astrology as an augury and for character analysis. Plath’s readership will then be familiar with “fixed stars” as a concept and with the names and significance of the fixed stars in Sylvia Plath’s natal chart, information neither Plath nor Hughes left in writing.

In our century, the only excuse for attention to astrology is that there appears to be something to it. Whether fixed stars actually can or do “govern a life,” or whether Plath or Hughes believed that, and which of the pair was first to say so are infinitely debatable issues. Taking the subject about as seriously as Hughes did, and using, as he did, Western astrology’s classic geocentric method, we begin with the facts of Sylvia Plath’s birth. Plath was born October 27, 1932 at 2:10 p.m. in Boston, Massachusetts. Mathematical formulae and atlases terrestrial and sidereal permit astrologers to draw up from this information an astronomically accurate, two-dimensional 360-degree diagram called a natal chart or birth chart, uniquely Plath’s and forever hers. [Fig. 1] It will lead us to Plath’s natal fixed stars.

1 Ted Hughes in the poem “A Dream,” p. 118 in Birthday Letters, wrote, “Not dreams, I had said, but fixed stars / Govern a life.”

[Fig. 1. Sylvia Plath’s natal astrological chart. The chart’s ascendant point is at 29 degrees 22 minutes of Aquarius]
Sylvia Plath at first imagined that astrology was “psychic” or intuitive, requiring a knack, but that is never true: Chart interpretation and prognostication are skills and arts anyone can acquire through instruction, readings, case studies, and practice; one might even add to the literature by becoming a scholar. Astrologers use case studies as jurists use precedents. Hughes in his notebook calculated and sketched the natal charts of celebrities such as T.S. Eliot and Sigmund Freud apparently seeking to uncover in them signifiers of their genius or fame. Hughes later began and then abandoned a study of celebrities born with the Sun in Capricorn. He was well-informed, but nothing indicates Ted Hughes as an astrologer had a unique inspiration. One’s natal chart never alters, but far from decreeing “a fate set in stone,” a natal chart, like a map, reveals a donnée, the lay of the land. An astrologer can read from a natal chart the client’s inclinations, gifts, and weaknesses, and can point to and explain the telling factors. Clients are then free to choose how to act on their astrological givens. Neither occult, meaning “hidden,” nor mystical, from a root word meaning “eyes and lips closed,” the maps and mechanics of the cosmos are plain for all to see, and 4,000 years of testimony is open to anyone wanting to know what it means and how to get the best of it. That fixed stars might be said to “govern” a life does not mean fixed stars “dictate” or decree a particular and inevitable “fate.” Being helpless star-crossed happens only in drama.

Claudius Ptolemy, founder of Western astrology and author of its “bible,” cautioned that astrology is not able to reveal everything and that people own their own futures except when nature, meaning specifically earthly phenomena, has the last word. For example, volcanoes and earthquakes, generated by earthly and not cosmic forces, are not astrologically predictable. Swim beyond the limit of your strength and you will drown, not because stars and planets ordained it but because your choice defined the body’s natural limitations. Hughes knew well the works of Dante and Shakespeare, and both of them paraphrased a universally recognized astrological dictum, its exact English wording credited to Sir Francis Bacon: “The stars impel; they do not compel.” “As above, so below” is a Hermetic axiom, not an astrological one. Sylvia Plath might have believed in astrological “fate” and foreordination, but Hughes knew better. He did not leave his completed manuscripts to an “inevitable” “fate” “compelled” by stars or planets. Instead he calculated and specified for his publishers astrologically auspicious publication dates.

While not incorrect, a person’s Sun sign alone is a meager basis for character analysis. Put succinctly, the Sun sign shows what the individual wants, the Moon sign what they feel they need, and the rising sign how they go about getting it. In reference to Sylvia Plath, a Sun in Scorpio native is sensual, intense, possessive, and driven. A Libra Moon native tends to be artistic, judgmental, and critical. A person with Aquarius rising presents as chilly, cerebral, focused, and less interested in people than in attention or acclaim. The odds of being born with Aquarius rising are 1 in 12, so that is not special, but Western astrology says an ascendant point at 29 degrees, in Plath’s case 29 degrees of Aquarius, is “critical” or afflicted; not good. At 29 degrees
of any zodiac sign, an ascendant point or a planet is said to approaching the end of its journey through the sign’s 30 degrees and is weak and depleted, to be refreshed only by its upcoming entry into 0 degrees of the following sign, which in Plath’s case would have been Pisces.

A natal ascendant point at 29 degrees is like a tire with a slow leak. It destabilizes the entire chart and correspondingly the native and their prospects. Had Sylvia Plath been born at 2:14 p.m. instead of 2:10 she would have had 0 degrees of Pisces rising, a fresh and invigorated ascendant degree. Plath horoscopes in print and online—her natal chart is a popular case study—sometimes argue that Plath’s birth time of 2:10 must be wrong, that the sign Pisces was surely rising at her birth because Pisces is “the sign of the poet.” That neglects the fact that Plath was not solely a poet. The odds of being born with an ascendant at a critical degree are 1 in 30.

Plath’s birth chart has seven fixed stars influential by position or eminence. Fixed stars, out beyond the planets, provide a layer of information Western astrologers find so rarified that they consider only one fixed star: Algol, the notorious Demon Star, Eye of the Gorgon, in the sign Taurus. Plath’s chart has an Algol contact we will discuss. Fixed stars were to the ancient Egyptians and Greeks a chart’s most important elements, but Western astrology, codified around 150 C.E., like the Romans gave planets first place in chart analysis and prognostication. Fixed stars gradually became no more influential when the stars are two, three, or even five degrees apart from the sweet spot. In my opinion, one degree of separation merits attention.

Two degrees is an indicator. Fixed stars three degrees from conjunction are too far from a conjunction to count; we are, after all, crediting with influence pinpoints of light trillions of miles away.16

Fixed stars of greater magnitude have greater influence on the life, the more so if they are among what 18th-century astronomers styled “The Four Royal Stars of Persia”: Aldebaran, Regulus, Antares, and Fomalhaut.17 Absent any proof they were ever “royal” or “Persian,” astrologers still honor these stars’ historical role as heralds of the four seasons and also the evidence drawn from case studies indicating that these stars wield power as tradition says they do. This matters because the “royal star” Regulus is Sylvia Plath’s most influential fixed star.

In a natal chart there are two types of fixed stars: natal and heliacal. Let us first discuss Plath’s natal fixed stars.

**Regulus on Plath’s Descendant Point**

Fixed star Regulus is a fiery blue-white first-magnitude star, “the heart of the Lion,” in the constellation Leo. Regulus at 28 degrees 53 minutes of Leo was on Plath’s descendant point, opposite Plath’s ascendant. The star Regulus had set in the west less than one clock minute before her birth.

Regulus, meaning “prince” or “little king,” when present at any chart’s any cardinal point signifies fame equivalent to royal status. U.S. President Donald Trump has Regulus on his ascendant. It is said that a fixed star on the ascendant shows its influence at the native’s birth or in youth, and a star at the descendant in old age or after death. An astrologer might then be tempted to interpret Plath’s Regulus as fame bestowed posthumously, as in fact it was. Yet a good astrologer always wants more light on the subject, and perhaps turns to comparative studies using the charts of public figures.

I found few public figures/celebrities born with Regulus on the descendant. One movie actor and Plath contemporary Audrey Hepburn, born May 4, 1929. Apart from their Regulus placements, Plath’s and Hepburn’s natal charts are not alike. Hepburn lived a full life, and while living won for her artistry and charitable work acclaim that has long survived her (she died in 1993). Fixed stars identify Audrey Hepburn rather as Plath’s Regulus’s opposite counterpart, and their biographical parallels, such as absent fathers with rightist politics, are fascinating.18 A critic pointed out that Hepburn as an actress “seemed drawn to films focused on reinvention”: The princess in Roman Holiday preys to be a commoner; the nun in The Nun’s Story embraces and then rejects religious life; petty crook Holly Golightly in Breakfast at Tiffany’s pines for money and status, and in the most iconic Hepburn photograph wears a diamond tiara, like royalty.19

Tradition promises those with a prominent Regulus worldly success, with the hazard of a sudden downfall. Brady specifies that the downfall is the temptation to take revenge (Brady, 263). Sylvia Plath was skillful and could be vengeful, and did not spare herself.20 Her suicide in 1963 and the highly irregular publication of her creative works conjured from critics fantastical reinventions of Plath as a “priestess cultivating her hysteria,”21 a “literary dragon,”22 “psychotic,” a feminist, a man-hater, a woman-hater, a Briton, bathing beauty, post-modernist, an assaultive artist, a goth, a witch, and so on. Hepburn had the time, money, and support to craft her own image and legacy. Plath did not.

Also born with Regulus descendant: the multifaceted Hollywood actress Merle Oberon, a fabulous beauty who played Cathy to Laurence Olivier’s Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights (1939). She was born February 19, 1911, in India to a 12-year-old and had to hide and lie about her origins all of her life, only to be “outed” by a nephew’s roman à clef and, after her death, a documentary film. Oberon married Hollywood film director Alexander Korda, and when he was knighted for wartime film work she became Lady Korda, nobleswoman.

**Rukbat and Deneb Algedi at Plath’s Ascendant Point**

Two small fixed stars were within one degree of Plath’s ascendant point. Third-magnitude star Rukbat was nearest it.4 Arab astronomers named 16 See some astrologers require that fixed stars be both latitudinally and longitudinally aligned in order to count as influential.

17 Davis, George A. “The So-Called Royal Stars of Persia.” Popular Astronomy, Volume LIII, No. 4, April 1945, pp. 149-158.

18 Biographer Carl Rollyson (2013) styled Plath as literature’s “Marylin Monroe.” Plath wrote in her journal entry of December 12, 1958 that her father Otto “hailed Hitler in the privacy of his home” (Journals, 430).

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this star in the constellation Sagittarius for the stellar archer’s knee. Brady says Rukbat represents the archer’s armpit, a locus of strength as he draws back his bow. An individual with Rukbat rising might be a “rock of Gibraltar” for others, yet also stubborn, to their own detriment (Brady, 296).

Just 0 degrees 4 seconds behind the fixed star Rukbat was Deneb Algedi, Arabic for “tail of the kid goat,” a second-magnitude star nonetheless the brightest in the dim constellation Capricorn. Interpretations of Deneb Algedi rising are contradictory and inconclusive, and when this is so, comparative studies can again be helpful. President Abraham Lincoln was born with Deneb Algedi at 1 degree 12 minutes from his ascendant. Brady says this star, although not strong, “bestows a sense of justice, of wanting to be a ‘savior’,” adding that Saint Teresa of Calcutta, a Roman Catholic missionary nun who cared for the poor and dying, had Deneb Algedi rising (noon). Saint Teresa and self-obsessed “save me” scene-maker Plath seem like polar opposites, but that is a superficial judgement. Born in Albania on August 26, 1910, the world-famous and picturesque Nobel Peace Prize-winning Teresa shrewdly banked billions of dollars in donations, and while publicly doctrinaire had a crisis of faith that tortured her for years. Had Plath and Teresa been born around that time, they might have had in common one feeble fixed star does not tell, and an honest astrologer will not pretend to know. Fixed-star astrologer Elisabeth Ebertin-Hoffmann in the 1930s wrote that Deneb Algedi indicates integrit y and inventiveness, and gives as an example 25. She described “save me” scenes recounting Plath’s dramatic “save me” scenes.

For the birth of Sylvia Plath one might have expected more prominent and distinguished ascendant stars. The royal star Fomalhaut, granter of creative genius and mental instability, at Plath’s birth was about to rise, yet was farther than three degrees from Plath’s ascendant midpoint.24 Consider then how the two humblest fixed stars might be appropriate governors of Plath’s afflicted ascendant degree. Rukbat perhaps was a stabilizing influence, or a trained and unyielding core, such as a competitive athlete relies on. One source says Deneb Algedi as a rising star grants the ability to wring joy from sorrow. Not entirely satisfied, I looked up what astronomers have learned about these stars. Rukbat and Deneb Algedi are both binary stars emitting inexplicably extreme amounts of radiation.

Fixed Star Pollux in Conjunction with Pluto

The fixed star Pollux is within the official boundaries of the constellation Gemini, the zodiac’s Twins, but through precession (the Earth’s axis turning on its own axis, so slowly that its motion is not apparent during a human lifetime) Pollux is now astrologically in the zodiac sign Cancer. Sylvia Plath’s natal Pluto was at 23 degrees 27 minutes of Cancer, just past conjunction with natal Pollux at 22 degrees 16 minutes; within one degree of Taurus, therefore exerts some influence on her Pluto, and through Pluto, on her chart and character.

We now face the fact that Pluto, the solar system’s most threatening, obscure and slowest-moving planet, takes 248 years to circle the zodiac once, and was cheek-to-cheek with the fixed star Pollux from September 1932 to July 1933. This complicates matters. Public figures born in and around that time seem to share, in their formative years, only the unprecedented background hum and gripping dramatic tension of radio programming. It happens that everyone born from July 1914 to August 1938, a span of twenty-four years, was born, like Plath, with Pluto in the sign Cancer. So Pluto’s influence is said to be less personal than generational or transpersonal, granting each generation a discernible preoccupation and a legacy. For those born with Pluto in Cancer, including Plath’s husband and friends, and maybe your grandparents, that preoccupation was defense, its flip side chronic insecurity.

A reading of Sylvia Plath’s Pollux from an astrol ogist well-schooled in classical mythology who had never heard of Plath might be thus: “Pollux, the twin of Castor, was a boxer, a pugilist, so this fixed star’s effect, when in conjunction with a natal planet or cardinal point, is to prod the native always to be spoiling for a fight. With the planet Pluto in conjunction with Pollux, the native perceives the stakes in any and all conflicts to be life or death, because Pluto, named for the lord of the underworld, destroys and re-generates, poison and cures, and is associated culturally with the phoenix bird and historically with nuclear power.”

I have somewhere read a passage blaming Plath’s Pluto-Pollux conjunction for Plath’s displays of bad temper. I would venture that everyone born between 1914 and 1938 had that same potential close to the surface, with reason.

Fixed Star Algor in Conjunction with Plath’s Chiron

Algor is the “winking eye” star in the severed head of the monster Medusa, carried in the sky by the constellation of her killer, Perseus. It is a universally dreaded and malefic star. Algor in Arabic means “head of the demon”; the word “alcohol” shares its roots. Telescopes prove Algor to be a triple star system, two of its stars regularly eclipsing each other. Appearing to the human eye to be a single star, Algor dims from second to third magnitude and back every 69 hours, “winking” as does no other star. Algor activated by an astrological conjunction has always meant bad news. Natives might literally lose their heads, as did the mythical Medusa, or figuratively, as did New York’s U.S. House representative Anthony Weiner, born September 4, 1964, with his natal Jupiter in conjunction with Algor. In 2011 Weiner sent women photographs showing his unclotted body from the neck down only, then denied doing it. He at last surrendered to the FBI in 2017, on May 19, a day the Sun was aligned with Algor, putting the guilt line to his reputation and career.25 The many gruesome Algor case studies seem to lend substance to this star’s association with an early and violent end. Princess Diana of Wales, born July 1, 1961, her natal Venus in conjunction with Algor, died at age 36 in a car wreck. As did Plath, movie comedienne Jayne Mansfield, born April 19, 1933, had Algor in conjunction with her natal Chiron (Chiron, pronounced “Ky-e-rah,” will be explained.) Mansfield died in a 1967 car wreck and rumor said she had been decapitated. Yet thousands of people with Algor contacts live long and successfully. Every natal chart has 10 planets and four cardinal points, so the chances of a natal contact with Algor are relatively high. Hating to tell clients anything discovered in 1977, Chiron, a day burnt-out comet orbiting completing a circuit of our solar system every 50 years. This type of orbiting body, 25

23 For “scene-maker Sylvia Plath,” see, for example, Plath’s own journal writings, and memoirs by Nancy Hunter Steinm and Didi Menin recounting Plath’s dramatic “save me” scenes.
24 Some astrologers will grant the “four royal stars” up to five degrees of influence.
26 This was Algor’s position in 1932. Because of precession, Algor’s position in 2020 is 26 degrees 10 minutes of Taurus.
neither planet nor asteroid, is called a centaur. Plath of course never heard of Chiron, but astrologers embraced Chiron so swiftly and fully that by 1988 a catalog of planetary positions valid for the entire twentieth century was revised and reprinted to include the position of Chiron.

Astrologers take very seriously astronomers’ namings of newly discovered orbiting bodies such as centaurs and asteroids and draw astrological correspondences from the names and their classical associations. Thus the asteroid Juno (a potent factor in Sylvia Plath’s natal chart) represents marriage; the asteroid Eris represents conflict, and so on. The mythical Chiron, instead of the usual incorrigible hybrid of man and beast, was a healer and teacher, but had his own wound that all his art could not heal.

Chiron’s discovery in 1977, it is said, represents the awareness emerging in the 1970s that all humans are inwardly wounded and in need.28 Ted Hughes’s natal Moon was in exact conjunc- tion with Chiron, signifying a twice-gifted but wounded psyche driven by a hybrid nature.

Plath’s Chiron in conjunction with fixed star Algol suggests violence stemming from feminine rage or outrage and a tragic inability to heal herself. Because Algol is Medusa’s winking eye, it is tempting to conclude that Plath’s inner wound was dealt by her mother, the subject of Plath’s poem “Medusa,” but saying so does not make it so. The poem “Medusa” makes no reference to anything remotely like Algol.

As of 2015 a crater on the planet Mercury is named “Plath,” for Sylvia Plath, and doubtless an astrologer will soon claim it signifies or symbolizes something about the real Sylvia Plath. In case you think I am making fun only of astrologers, consider that it is most firmly believed that Plath suffered terribly from the psychological wound inflicted by her father’s death when she was eight years old. Following a scientifically life and after, she won popularity as a writer and icon only after her death. “Anonymous of 379” calls Alpheratz, rising or setting, a positive influence on marriage or travels. Plath’s trans-atlantic travels in the 1950s were opportunities unusual for a woman in her early twenties who was not born rich. Her married life was largely positive and productive, yet the influence of any fixed star would have been overwhelmed by weightier factors in her natal chart and in her husband’s. Had she known that, she might have made other choices.

To return to Sylvia Plath’s poem “Words,” which began this discussion, the poem’s final lines in full say, “From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars / Govern a life.” Hughes’s poem “The Bee God” says, “[f]ixed stars / At the bottom of the well” (Birthday Letters, 152). A folk belief says that from the bottom of a well the stars directly overhead are visible even in daylight. That is untrue. But the two poets are in accord on the inversion of the natural order: Their fixed stars govern not from the vault of heaven but from underwater (Plath’s “from the bottom of the pool”) and underground (Hughes). Despite this radical displacement the stars continue to govern. The only change is that they shine upward, toward the earth’s surface, where humans dwell with the forces of nature.

In “Words,” speechless natural forms such as tree trunks and a pool suffer deliberate blows and disruptions that make them ring, echo, well with tears, and ripple. These vibrations, struck from wounded sources, form words which flee in all directions like unbridled horses. Years later their maker encounters on a road the same words, “dry and riderless,” perhaps printed. They continue to circulate and resound while “a life,” unnamed, an entity without identity, is governed, the poem says, by fixed stars sunk- en and submerged rather than heavenly. These fixed stars are nameless, undifferentiated, and fixity is their only trait the poem’s speaker cares to name. “Fixed” and nothing else implies that these stars, earthbound, no longer part of the celestial clockwork, cannot move or be moved. How they became earthbound is not said. Nonetheless, they govern “a life” from where they are.

Plath’s poem “Years,” written November 16, 1962, jeers stars as “bright stupid confetti.” In the poems Plath wrote between that poem and “Words,” written February 1, 1963, the phrases “Starless and fatherless” (“Sheep in Fog”) and “Ceiling without a star” (“Child”) suggest that without stars, guidance is absent. The usage is metaphorical, but it is literally true that stars serve humans as useful navigational guides. “Fixed” and “govern” peg the stars in “Words” as specifically astrological and having their own agency. “Words” seems to say that the grandly infinite, godlike cosmic forces light-years away have been grounded and stilled, and only ch- thonic forces such as death and decay now govern “a life,” which by definition must be mortal. Meanwhile, words travel at will and pay no mind to matters such as lifespan.

28 The speaker of Hughes’s poem “Horoscopy” in Birthday Letters (p. 64) explicitly replaces an astrological explanation for Plath’s troubles with a Freudian “Mummy-Daddy” explanation.

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Works Cited

The Magician’s Girl: An Interview with Julia Gordon-Bramer, Plath Scholar and Mystic by Robert E Shoemaker

Julia Gordon-Bramer is a Sylvia Plath scholar with a special interest in occult practices, especially the Tarot of which she is a regular practitioner. I first met Julia as I was onboarding to become the next poetry editor for Plath Profiles. In the process of bringing our new staff members together to train with former editors and contributors, I got to know Julia and become familiar with her work. I wanted to go deeper in order to understand the workings of the occult in Plath’s poetry and Julia’s personal interests, as these resonate deeply with my own current research questions on poetry and magic. What does it mean for poetry to be “magical”? What might a magical poetics look like? Julia, when asked these and other questions, was more than game to talk Plath, poetics, magic, Ouija, Tarot, Kabbalah, and many other fascinating topics.

What follows is an excerpt from the transcription of my oral history interview with Julia, which will soon be permanently housed in Naropa University’s Archives and Special Collections. I am interviewing a variety of poets on their interests in the occult as part of a larger project on magical poetics. For more information on this project, contact me, Robert Eric Shoemaker, with the address at the end of this selection.

-Eric

...(Begin Interview Selection...)
Initially, I realized that the book Ariel, not the original publication, but the restored edition... restored by Sylvia Plath's and Ted Hughes's daughter, Frieda Hughes...she [Frieda] wanted Ariel published as her mother had intended. And when I saw the ordering of the poems, it became quite clear to me—So, “Morning Song” is the Fool card, and “The Couriers” is the High Priestess, and, you know, and it goes on in perfect Tarot order. And I realized, when you know the Tarot card meaning that's corresponding to each of these poems, it just unlocked the meaning of the poems in an incredible way.

I had to prove that this wasn't just my theory, and at first I just had basic hints, like in “Daddy.” Of course, she [Plath] says, “with my gypsy ancestral strain and my weird luck and my Taroc pack, and my Taroc pack, I may be a bit of a Jew.” So, I was like, is Taroc pack the same as Tarot? and I looked it up and and sure enough, it is. And the whole Jewish thing got me headlong into Kabbalah, ancient Jewish mysticism, upon which Tarot is structured.

Kabbalah is a real deep, heady subject to get into in an interview...here's where I lose most people, they ask me about the Plath stuff, and if I say the word Kabbalah, all of a sudden, they go fuzzy and, you know, it's like, “Yeah, I don't know about all that.” But think of it like all of the occult practices. And even non-occult practices, like mythology, numerology, astrology, even astronomy kinda gets in there. They have this organizational system to them, and they all relate. And so, what I mean by that is if I'm looking at a mystical story, you know, the Greek gods or whatever, it has a corresponding constellation in astronomy...and there's even numbers assigned to this thing, which is where the numerology gets in. [Then], there's alchemy. I mean, it goes on forever. This...this series of connections, it's like a connect-the-dots game of relationships. And so, you know, when I explore a Plath poem, what I learned was every poem in Ariel—now, this is not true for every single poem she's ever written, but Ariel was her masterpiece—every poem in Ariel has at least six different meanings...

You know, what a poem can do is mind blowing, how the same set of words can be interpreted all of these different-yet-related ways. So, when you explore a Plath poem, like let's just take the first one in Ariel, “Morning Song.” And, she says, “Love set you going like a fat gold watch.” Well, on a historical level, she wrote that poem on Valentine's Day in 1962. “Love set it going,” you know. And the “fat gold watch”—” there was a new element that had just been discovered in science called Lawrencium, and one of the further lines... “take your place among the elements,” like, it's so obviously part of a news story that she brought into that which, which is awesome. But...most poets would stop there and say “Okay, cool. There's this, like other double meaning here—” but Plath, she did more than that. She did triple, quadruple...she just had this gift for milking the meanings of words and going in all these different directions and saying different, yet related things. So, yeah, it's just phenomenal. What she did with one set of words, in the poem, is truly a spell, it's truly magic. And it's working on us on those subconscious levels, even if we don't understand...

RES: Yeah. Mhm. It's that correspondence. Yeah...
And you, you’ve mentioned that people are afraid of this, sort of, weirdness of the occult meanings of Plath's poems. And then, I guess, in general, of the weirdness of the occult.

JGB: Sure.
RES: Even though, you know, as you say in in your volumes, it's in so many poets' and other writer's work...

JGB: ...You know, I think the “intellectual atheist” is the predominant view, and it's interesting because Plath herself, she called herself an atheist, but she was the most spiritual atheist ever. And she also called herself a pagan. And she called herself [this] regularly, especially in her last months, when she was corresponding with a Catholic priest. And she was, of course, married to Ted Hughes, they were into all kinds of occult activities together, doing Ouija boards and crystal balls and astrology and [automatic] free-writing. And, I mean, it just goes on and on with those two, and so, a very spiritual atheist, and certainly not atheist in any sort of traditional sense of the word. I think most atheists have no interest in spirit, and Plath seemed by far the most spiritual. She was quite obsessed, I think, with talking to the other side, channeling the other side. And I think she did a pretty good job of it in a lot of respects...

RES: ...I'm very curious about the the channeling aspects and how that influenced her writing...

JGB: Ted Hughes taught her meditation, and he was a practitioner of Kundalini (Yoga)...it's a kind of energy work, and it's about aligning your chakras. Having the energy rise from the base root chakra all the way up through the crown at the top and really opening up to the source. And we know for a fact that Ted Hughes practiced this meditation regularly and taught it to Sylvia. That was around the time that Ted Hughes was knocked for kind of taking all the credit for Sylvia's greatness. But I really, I really give it to him because Sylvia wrote, before she met Ted, she wrote some nice, neat little poems. And and some of them were good, but she wasn't half the person she became, you know, and she became who she was not just from the intensity of the relationship with Ted Hughes, but the training by Ted Hughes—and he did train her...they did meditation, and they did all these spiritual endeavors...all of this stuff was her training ground to open up to spirit. And now, whether you want to call it spirit, as in, a possession, or whether you want to call it spirit as in channeling the source, maybe the greatest creative source. There are different belief systems. So, some people would believe this is evil and that she's been possessed by demons. I don't believe that. I’m more of the source crowd. But, well, you know, certainly in the early 1960s, late 1950s—source is kind of a New Age word that they didn't have back then.

It was all very Yeatsian. And, you know, Sylvia likened herself [and Ted] to William Butler and Georgie Yeats, practicing in their towers. She's been quoted saying such things. And so, Ted developed her. And when she drew upon, when she got into the subconscious, then I think she was able to really see the symbols, past and present, going through mythology, going into science, you know, going into alchemy. People say, you know, “woah, woah, alchemy. That's totally out there. That's totally weird.” Well, her mother got her master’s thesis on Paracelsus, the first and foremost alchemist, and Plath read all of her mother's books. That's another fact. And, Plath was quite a mystical child and teenager before Ted Hughes.

So, it all just totally lines up. All the evidence is there. She went to the Unitarian church, and she used to go to Sunday school where her Sunday school homework was on zodiac, and she was carving alchemical symbols in wooden sticks at summer camp. She was not your normal kid having your normal American childhood. She was getting into the occult stuff way before the average person, way before me, and I was young at it...

RES: ...There is a connection [in] Plath's writing or in your own writing between gender and the occult. I think it connects to this training idea of Ted for Sylvia.
RES: It’s, you know, a lot of their relationship has interesting relationships of gender and power.

JGB: So I...I wrote this book, which has just been sitting on my hard drive for a couple of years now, called The Magician’s Girl, which is basically looking at the relationship between Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes from the occult perspective...as far as gender, I just mention it because I call it The Magician’s Girl after that line in “The Bee Meeting,” um, “I am the magician’s girl. I do not flinch.” And I bought rights to a photograph that I want to use for the cover of Sylvia and Ted from 1956, and it’s a very cute couple picture, and she’s looking down demurely and he’s looking at her. It’s almost like father-daughter, you know, which is a little creepy and a little Oedipal. Of, Elektra, in this case. And...on one hand it feeds all, it perpetuates all the cliches about her. Because most people look at “Daddy” in poems like that and say, “Oh, look, she’s aligning Ted with her father and making them both these terrible men,” and they’re just sort of saying the victim thing and missing the alternate meaning...meanings.

But, I do think for the times, I mean, we know that the fifties and sixties was a real repressive time for women. And she was a product of her time, and she’s written many times...“Ted’s career is more important than mine,” and, “I want to be the perfect homemaker,” you know, she had all of those sort of, uh, subservient aspirations, if there can be such a thing. But, at the same time, she couldn’t quite fight her own ambition and ego to to be great...she still was true to herself in all that she could be...

But yeah, back in that time, men owned the poetry scene, I mean, never mind mysticism. Men were, it was a paternalistic society entirely. And men were [considered to be] the serious poets and women [considered to] just kind of dabble at it. You can read about what Plath’s friends, Adrienne Rich or Anne Sexton, for example, they were sort of, along with Sylvia, they were sort of breaking through that, but still several notches below in status. And the kind of money they were making and where they were published, you know, the men were seen as the great poets, [pictured smoking] their pipes, and the women were just, um, “Oh, she’s talented,” you know, a talented little girl kind of thing...let’s look at, traditionally with mysticism—men, men are shamans. Men are sorcerers. Women are witches. You know? It’s almost, ah, insulting...

You probably heard of some of the [New Age] ideas, like The Secret, or something like that. You know, the idea is, we create our reality. Sylvia did it on every level. Except I think, well, I have some theories about, like, where she went wrong...but as far as art goes, she was the genius’s genius and a complete master of symbolism and layering of this meaning, which I think is the ultimate poetic spell. I think it’s a spell as much or more than anything else could be. And that’s why she’s lasted and continues to last.

RES: I agree. I think you’re right to point at layering meaning as the casting of this spell. I think that’s a very—that’s, to me, a very exciting definition. Of a magical poetry. What that could mean, because it is something that you can develop control of, I guess, that you can craft...I don’t know if you’re thinking that any of her practices, uh, artistic or mystical, were, like, if she did go too far in those or if they were in any sense dangerous to her. Mentally and physically.

JGB: I have some theories. You know, Al Alvarez, who was a famous London Times critic and friend of Sylvia Plath, he wrote an article called “Did Black Magic Kill Sylvia Plath?”...He knew enough about them personally to know that they were practicing and that he...when Sylvia learned of Ted’s betrayal and felt so humiliated and degraded, I mean, no doubt, she lost it.

She had kind of a breakdown, and yeah, she was doing witchy bonfires and putting a lot of hate out there, to speak in New Age [lingo] about it for a minute...You know, what we put our mind on grows. She was growing anger. She was growing hate. She was growing discontent beyond what she was able to manage.

But getting into more mystical points of view...Kabbalah, as I said, is ancient Jewish mysticism. Now, I’m not saying this is right or wrong, but the rabbis of old, when they were practicing this, they determined that no one under the age of 40 and no female should ever do Kabbalah. So it was for men over 40. End of story, and they determined it was not safe for anybody outside of those parameters, and God’s punishment, they believed, was insanity. And I thought, “Well, that’s really interesting.” And, you know, Ted was not 40 when he did it. He was in his early 30s, and, um, and he certainly had his pains, too. And I don’t know, it might be argued that he was, you know, he had his version of insanity. It wasn’t maybe the same as Sylvia’s, but, yeah, she broke the rules of Kabbalah. Absolutely, she did. And, certainly her focus got very, very negative toward the end. I think nobody can deny that. And nobody can deny that she probably had some biological problems contribute to it. You know, just with depression. She probably had a clinical depression...she may have been bipolar.

She gave Ted all her power, and she got totally weak. And she wasn’t looking at her own reactions and she just wasn’t helping herself at all...she was feeding and manifesting this monster inside of her, basically, which ultimately was her own demise...If she’d been my friend, I’d be saying, you know, “Girl, quit giving him all your energy. You’re gonna take care of yourself.” And she was so broken in those last days, and you’ve got to also remember it was a winter from hell, it was the storm of the century in London, as far as snow and ice. Her pipes burst, and there was no heat. And she had two small children...they all had the flu, you know? She’d been abandoned with babies, and, I mean, it was just like a culmination of everything going wrong. So, you can see how that would be the breaking point to someone already fragile.

RES: Right. Right. I think it does make sense that all of that sort of combined, um, to create the perfect storm...I don’t know if you’ve noticed this in your own work or anything, but the more I look at different writers who use mystical practices to create their poetry, the more I see different tendencies for self-destruction in certain cases.

JGB: Sometimes. I’m reading Merwin right now, and you know, W.S. Merwin was a friend of Plath and Hughes, and he’s quite mystical. I mean, he was more into Buddhism and meditation and stuff, but there’s a lot of mysticism in there, but he’s an example of the positive use of it. And it doesn’t have to take everyone down. It’s just, it’s ego, you know...I think, ultimately, ego took Plath down, too, she couldn’t handle—it was really striving to be such a perfectionist. And when her life plan fell apart and didn’t go, her husband wasn’t who she thought he was, and everything just started to crumble...well, she was so orderly and so controlled, and she had such a grip on how her life was gonna go. And for the most part, that really worked for her. And, I mean, she got her Fulbright, and she got all her different awards...but she couldn’t handle the heart, you know, that was something else. That was something a little less able to be controlled.

...She’s the Vincent Van Gogh or she’s the Jack Kerouac, the...what did Kerouac say...the roman candle burns out brightly, but fast. And so many people say, “Oh, what if? What would she have done if she had lived to be 60 or 70 or 80 or even older?” I’m not sure she would have pulled out the poems of such intensity that she would have
did at 30. Because, I mean, I just believe—this is getting into my spirituality; she was on her path, and her path was to do it all young and burn out, and, like Van Gogh or Kerouac, some people have all the intensity up front, and we love them. And we’re fascinated by them because usually they die young and beautiful, like Jim Morrison. You know, like all the rock stars, Kurt Cobain, you know. We can ask, “God, how (did they do what) they did at that young age?” But I think if Plath had lived, she would be less acclaimed, and she would have just been one of the old-timey greats like Mick Jagger is. Does that make sense?

RES: It’s, uh, it does, and I think that there’s a lot to that. I mean, I think that’s why people are so drawn to biographical reads [of Plath]...because it was so, uh, flash-bang-quick. You know, and there was a big, a big, ah, number at the end, I guess.

JGB: Yeah, right. You know, they left. They left with a bang...And that gives us a feeling of, incompleteness. As the audience, anyway. And the, “Oh, my God.” You know, we love them so much, and it’s like they’re immortalized because they’re stuck in that moment. And so, a healthy life lives through that moment and goes on and does some other things and ages and grows old, and that moment cannot be sustained. Not forever. You’re not gonna be at the top of the charts forever. You might do it for 10 years, you know, and same with poetry...

I often look at Plath’s poems and wonder if she’d even get published today. You know, when I read some, because, frankly, they’re very white, they’re very heterosexual, you know, they’re not current. Today, we want a mix of of expression and representation of the people out there who have been silenced in the past. So, even though these are ultimate works of genius, she was right for her time. She was exactly right for her time.

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morning song. sunflowers. marginal winds.
four figures walk down a hill toward you, dear voyeur.
from left to right: young father, boy (toddler), girl (slightly older), young mother.
all hold hands. all make a chain. a handsome family.
sunflowers in foreground. mozart plays.
COLOR FIELD
wooded park. this is not jean renoir's picnic on the grass.
the young mother in a belted, floral dress with a cardigan over her shoulders. she extinguishes the remains of a small camp fire by pouring water on it.
both children under a makeshift canopy of mosquito netting held up by branches. the toddler squirms. his mother soothes him back to sleep. she rejoins her napping husband by the base of a leafy tree. the t-shirted husband wakes. they kiss.
pan of wooded park reveals a pond. other couples relaxing. an old man fishes.
the young family are leaving. the husband carries two large baskets. the wife carries the son. the girl ambles behind. each of them in their own world. the husband's work truck heads back to the city.
COLOR FIELD
post office, by an indoor telephone booth. the young husband meets a sunny, kittenish woman by chance.
strong attraction. close-up of a chagall stamp, “bride and groom of the eiffel tower.”
midday. a street café. the young husband has a glass of wine while the endearing bit poem continued, “Allegory Without...”
player from the post office drinks a cup of coffee.
in her modern apartment. blank walls and a vase of daisies. they begin an affair.
COLOR FIELD
the same wooded park. the young wife, again in a summer dress she has sewed herself, puts the children down for a nap under the canopy of mosquito netting. her young husband leans against the base of a tree with the daughter's doll in his hands, picking grass out of its long hair made of yarn.
the wife lies down on a blanket next to her husband. for comfort she removes a sheer scarf from her head that she had twisted into a headband. an intense discussion in hushed voices follows. at one point the wife takes the doll out of her husband's hands. tall, dry grasses in afternoon light. he confesses to his affair with the other woman. he confesses his happiness. mozart plays. the young wife undresses as her young husband kisses her face, her neck, her arms with exuberance. she continues to undress. he tosses aside the light jacket he is sitting on, it lands on the grasses. after sex, the young husband sleeps. the young wife stares at you, dear voyeur. her breasts casually exposed. her head rests on her young husband's shoulder and on his dark chest hair.
bird song. the daughter wakes and calls for her mother. the young father is still asleep under a blanket. his young wife is no longer beside him. the daughter runs over to him as he awakes. she whines for her mother.
the young father and the two children search the wooded park. he calls his wife's name repeatedly. he inquires as he passes others in the wooded park. suddenly he leaves the children with a woman reading a glossy magazine. he bolts toward a crowd at the pond's edge. the group of strangers move aside. the young wife's dead body has been pulled from the pond. her soaked, leaden dress. no shoes. wintering.
Walking the Edesess Trail at Eagle Creek State Park in Late October
by Jeremy Flick

The oaks and maples bear all, molting appendages, phalanges blowing in the breeze.

The leaves shout out to me, It’s in our nature, they say, to fall, to wilt, to die. The footpath tightens as I round the lake. It’s bleak and murky. The leaves try to persuade me with whiskey and gold. Don’t you want to fly? They’re aware I’ve considered jumping before. Plath calls to me from a beehive, behind a curtain of wax. She is a sweet God, in control. I am a placebo, a seed with no soil, a bee without pollen. She forgives me. The ground feels loose.

I was stronger fifteen years ago, before my mother drank her empathy away. The leaves wouldn’t understand.

The leaves will soon grow tired. The leaves have no choice, the leaves have no choice, their skeletons scatter along the trail ahead and today I won’t sleep with them on the dirt.

An Open Wound
by Elizabeth Bolton

The wound reopens, emits breath pungent as from the veined throats of Plath’s yawning hospital tulips;
a heavy bee’s harassment in circles around the face urges a woman backwards.

It is both obsession and abuse to be bothered for one’s open red petals, cheap sateen and suggestive in their landscape of sterility.

We wounded, we obvious, we splayed open and red-lipped: we attract them.
Shelter Magazines

by Crystal Hope Hurdle

the 3 Chalcot Square apartment newly decorated when the Plath-Hughes moved in
Sylvia's rose wallpaper clean but blowsy
thinks Assia, new tenant
the vermilion in the kitchen and hall
too much like blood
not enough like passion
even five coats would not be enough whitewash
that murderous violent crimson hue
might as well have been black
Assia likes to wear black
fashionable, exotic
sublet-er wants to make her mark
but all in good time
one can always lease to own
Assia as plunderer
wants elegance
in house, fashion, …men
but on little or no money
no splurging for her
at Fitzroy Road
Sylvia gone so suddenly
just like that
Assia hangs back at the threshold
dragging her patent leather feet
suddenly a school girl
not a real inhabitant
like those alien mewling children
so she brings in finds
from the street for cheering
she brings in offerings
if termites accompany, so much the better
to hollow out Sylvia's presence
so strong in her absence
in Court Green
Sylvia is phantom queen
playing her on the black and white tiles of the playroom
moving deftly ahead
Frieda runs and hides under its white trestle table
Assia delights in being able to finally
use her own round table
latterly stored at Court Green
greets it like a friend
so few of those lately
embraces it, hugs it, arms fully extended
to take in its whole wide circumference
much better than Sylvia's scrawny elm plank table-desk
made by Ted
lovingly planed by him and Warren
do-it-yourselfers before it was fashionable
poverty makes strange bedfellows
Poking about she sinks shin deep deeper
into the red wall-to-wall of Sylvia's study
She explains that the desk reviles her
but Ted just isn't in the mood
it's Assia's/ it's Sylvia's/ who cares?
ownership, claim, a myth
the children make their own claim
the scary small dark roomhole wormhole off the kitchen
a Bluebeard's? rustling with whimpers, keening
she avoids
good advice—
but try to make it one's own
and then swap it out
don't do things room by room
Assia looks at each with awed contempt
the walls too pink, too red, too labial
On the furniture so many red hearts
claim ownership, asset having been loved
her teal-dripping paintbrush is excoriated
and she's afraid to tell Ted
a struggle for Assia living here there and everywhere
always with the scent of Sylvia before her
pheromones she can't douche away
what to do with that blasted matrimonial bed
at least not at Fitzroy Road
she thinks and fears, having rolled over there
into a Ted-shaped declivity
she will not think on that
the imprint of Sylvia's body sinks deep
and all the ethnic coverlets in the world
baby blankets end to end
—why won't Nicholas stop crying?—
crewel work or vintage or hand-quilted
as if she has the time! (never mind the talent)
won't convex the concavity

House and Home
Vintage Flea Market Style
flip though any shelter magazine
copy any spread
but try to make it one's own
conflicting advice
such a struggle
especially with no money
Assia benefits from Sylvia wanting NEW
Dido horrified at this weirdly American desire for posh
by the time it came to Assia
the Bendix washing machine
plumbed though four feet of stone wall
Sylvia in the bore holes, that cooker, the mattress
oh that mattress!
even so soon
it was already sticky with fingerprints
white elephant grungy
second-hand
just like Ted
Rising She Spreads  
by Federica Santini

Rising she spreads her pleated hands, her mouth a white slash. Cold and wide her face opens up to the fall of flakes from above, walls of pain recede in tight spires.

Her eyelashes frosted, she dreams a fresh dream of foxes and hares pawing gently in meadows of ice. Wrapped in the white light of dawn, twenty-four: the veil of a bride, twenty-nine: swollen with milk.

The flakes from the plaster keep falling: this is the place where the ceiling collapses.

Easters  
by Federica Santini

As we walk in the sparse light of moon on cracked ice sticky as yolk on the counter your obscurity shines from within.

These hands who hate us don’t need any pleasing. Better to float like a rotten egg or a witch, in egg-easters of rounded re-births, our whirling of hopes ill repaid. We are all broken down here.

Sleepless we lie on the rug with silver bracelets of smoke twirled around our elegant wrists.

These ones who love us breathe with our same mouth.
Dear Sylvia

by Heidi Seaborn

~Sylvia Plath wrote in her 1959 diary: “Marilyn Monroe appeared to me last night in a dream…I spoke, almost in tears, of how much she … meant to us…She gave me an expert manicure…She invited me to visit during the Christmas holidays, promising a new, flowering life.”

Give me your bitten hand.
I will paint each moon sliver—
Amaryllis red.

If you are a girl
swirled in the thick of a dream,

I am a play
of red-tongued wolves and barn owl howls.

Let me curl into your hair, crawl beneath
your winter. Scrawl me in lines.

Let me mean everything to you.

I promise lavender and honey cakes
and the taste of Christmas roses.

When I Lose My Mind

by Heidi Seaborn

~in collaboration with Plath & Sexton

I drown bees in champagne
lick
their fuzzy bodies
spread
wing fragments
with honey
across skin stung

the throats of our wrists

brave lilies

crazy ladies

bees caught in the wrong hive

rip
like a bruised

peach brains
rot
like black bananas

I’m always someone’s nectar
even here
in the lavender

see me

take these little pills—string of pearls

the bees are flying.
Today I sewed a quilt block of a little girl, but the block only shows her profile, Partly covered by something one can twirl—That twirling object that covers her face is a beautiful umbrella with hearts. I picked out the hearts fabric because It was the kind of hearts Sylvia drew or painted When she had time for her various arts.

One of her letters mentions how she liked to try to sew Some smocks for her daughter And her description caused me to feel a glow She noted that smocks were easier to wash Which carved out some extra time For her to write something That made her feel fine Perhaps she wrote a poem that day And put it away

Because as a homemaker and mother, her time to herself went astray Later...she woke up very early to create Something in writing that made her feel great In the hours before dawn, she could dare to suggest Whatever she wanted In her secret time nest Thoughts for so many to relate to and know they are not alone... Were left behind in writing While she enjoyed her sleepless time alone.


William Buckley, Plath Portrait, 2002
The poem, “Child,” by Sylvia Plath was written two weeks before she died. As a reader of Sylvia Plath’s letters and poetry, I was inspired to create the appliqued and tied quilt shown. “Child” produced an unexpected stream of tears when I read it aloud for the first time.

I designed the art form of this quilt with Sylvia Plath’s description of taking her children to the zoo in mind. Sylvia wrote to her Aunt Dotty on December 14, 1962: “Frieda has been dying to go to the Zoo, two minutes away, & I took her & Nick Wednesday—she was fascinated by the owls that ‘had bottoms just like Frieda’, the lions, the new baby elephant & the penguins swimming round.” I chose bright and colorful fabric for the outer border of the quilt because it has lions and a baby elephant like Sylvia wrote to her Aunt Dotty.

Each letter of the poem, the date the poem was written, the last two lines that contain the citation of the poem, and each quilt block were appliqued by zig zag stitching with a sewing machine.

Three of the six unique appliqued quilt blocks were also designed with Sylvia in mind. The balloons block was created with another one of Sylvia’s poems, “Balloons,” in mind. Sylvia wrote to her mother on December 21, 1962, “If you ever want to make another hit, send some more kitty balloons!” The “April snowdrop” block not only contains an appliqued snowdrop flower, but the background fabric on it has a tiny owl in reference to Frieda’s love for the owls from the zoo. The “penguins” block also refers to Frieda’s enjoyment of the penguins from the zoo.

The other three quilt blocks are my own interpretative creations: the block of the child with the umbrella symbolizes protection from the rain; the block of the three fluffy ducks was inspired by the mention of ducks in the poem itself; The “red tulip” block made me think of Sylvia’s poem, “Tulips,” and it was fitting to give her a flower in remembrance of her vibrant spirit.

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Nevertheless, Plath came to self-awareness within the standardized male-female binary system, and she had difficulty extricating herself from its valorization of maleness and its fixed, inflated sense of biological difference. That gender system conventionally evoked a parallel but distinct senior-junior binary, which privileged seniority. She seemed unable to escape both of those constructs, no matter how hard she tried. She over-identified with power of masculinist seniority, causing her speakers either to obey, to assail, or to emulate male authority. Often they do a strange combination of all of those strategies at once.

In a related way, Plath's narrators attempt to reflect their sensual drift but often fail to find a way to do so. Her texts protest sexual rigidity while on the way to reinforcing it as inevitable or even, at times, preferable. For example, in her Journals, Plath recalls asking her psychiatrist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher, “What does a woman see in another woman that she doesn’t see in a man: tenderness?” (460). Perhaps not coincidentally, on the same page she also wrote: “Glimmer last night of pleasure, which slipped away” (Journals 460). Plath replicates this exchange in The Bell Jar, when Esther Greenwood asks her psychiatrist, Dr. Nolan, “What does a woman see in another woman that she can’t see in a man?” (Bell Jar 219). The psychiatrist replies, “tenderness.” Esther comments, “That shut me up” (219). Yet Esther, like Plath herself, chooses to enter a heterosexual marriage in which

Sensual drift, which pervades midcentury American poetry, appears in a particularly anxiety-ridden form in the work of Sylvia Plath. In an era Alan Nadel has labeled “containment culture” and Tom Engelhardt has called “an American culture of victory” (Nadel 2; Engelhardt 4), Plath’s writing gnaws away at the containment structures, the “gender rigidity” (Rippon 206), and the triumphalism of normative sexual and gendered performance. Through its complicated subversions and “breakthroughs” (Orr 167), Plath’s poetry and prose expose the resistances embedded within the very boundaries and binaries shaping Cold War epistemics.

Plath produced an especially conflicted set of rebellions against the gendered and sexual norms of official midcentury culture. She furiously critiqued the containments of female expression imposed by male supremacist ideology. She felt that the concept of “maleness” facilitated men’s “conservation of creative power” (Journals 437). She railed in her prose and poems against the “big conquering boys” and “jealous gods” who made the rules (Journals 199, Poems 179). In her novel The Bell Jar, her protagonist Esther Greenwood says she hates “the thought of being under a man’s thumb,” and she wonders, “Why was I so unmatrial and apart?” (Bell Jar 221, 222). In Plath’s later poems, the female speakers repeatedly satirize or vituperate senior male figures such as “Daddy,” “The Jailer,” and “Herr God, Herr Lucifer” (Poems 222, 226, 246).

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gender roles were pre-assigned and the female mother role inevitable. This contradictory yeaming for and rejection of a non-normative sexual identity recurs in Plath's writing, as when she praises Elizabeth Bishop for being "surprising, never rigid" and yet marginalizes her as "lesbian & fanciful & jeweled" (Journals 516, 222). This ambivalence also appears in The Bell Jar, in which the unhappily heterosexual Esther is mirrored by her lesbian double, Joan Gilling. Esther admits to being "fascinated" by Joan (219). She says that Joan’s "thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own" (Bell Jar 219). Esther’s approach-avoidance toward her double is intense. When Joan says, “I like you," Esther replies “I don’t like you. You make me puke if you want to know" (220). But soon she thinks, “I would always treasure Joan. It was as if we had been forced together by some overwhelming circumstance, like war or plague, and shared a world of our own" (225). Toward the end of the novel, Plath kills Joan off just when she initiates Esther into the physical pain and emotional blankness she associated with heterosexual intercourse. At Joan’s funeral, Esther asks herself what I thought I was burying” (198). Implicitly, it is a side of herself she refuses to inter: the “wry, black image” of lesbian desire, which she here associates with Joan’s suicide, providing an interesting sidelight on the enigma of Plath’s own suicide. Esther will not absorb and make familiar the currents of her sexual identity that are variant to her other sexual currents or to her illusion of heterosexual wholeness. Instead she expels and buries her sexual otherness, her complicated multiplicity, her wry black image, her queerness. We see a similar conflict embedded in Plath’s poem “Medusa,” Suzanne Juhasz argues in A Desire for Women that the “preoedipal relationship with the mother” is the originary power behind all desire, and particularly lesbian desire (Juhasz 11, 15-22). But Plath asked herself, “What do you do with your hate for your mother and all mother figures?” (Journals 435). Plath’s textual “I” figures her mother as a medusa—at once a Gorgon monster of classical myth and a small jellyfish whose full name, “medusa aurelia,” contains the name of Plath’s mother, Aurelia. The poem treats its central vaginal image as an object of repulsion—a negation that suggests the repressed presence of desire. The poem ends ambiguously: Off, off, eely tentacle! There is nothing between us. (Poems 222). In these concluding lines, we note first a wish for separation—a declaration that mother and daughter have nothing in common (“nothing between us”). But coiled within that manifest assertion hides its negated but enduring opposite—a fear or hope that there is actually no difference between mother and daughter (“nothing between us”). Instead of not touching at all, they touch at all locations; they permeate each other. Or to adopt Freud’s insight in his essay “Negation” (235), the speaker’s negative assertion of having “nothing” in common with her mother masks the initial suspicion bubbling up to consciousness that they have everything in common.

In the poem “Lesbos,” similarly, a fantasy of same-sex desire arises from unconscious desire, and is then transformed by a censorious consciousness into an impassioned denunciation of the female acquaintance or rival with whom she experiences a transitory closeness (Poems 227). The speaker’s visit with the other woman is flooded with an erotic desire that is ambiguously ascribed either to the other woman or to the speaker herself, or to both as a shared fantasy: I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair. I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair. We should meet in another life, we should meet in air. (228)

Yet the speaker explicitly rejects this fantasy in the poem’s conclusion: “Even in your Zen heaven we shan’t meet” (230). The disgust here and throughout the poem may be understood as a “reaction formation” (Freud, “Three Essays” 178, 232, 238-39)—that is, as a defense against a feared or unacceptable impulse, the nature of which is suggested by the poem’s title. One could plausibly view that title as simply ironic, but given the complexity of Plath’s writing about desire, I think it is even more plausible to regard it as ambivalent. One of Plath’s ways to consider a possibility was to denounce it. The female acquaintance may be a desired but repellant other, but she could also be yet another “wry, black image” of the speaker herself (J 179). As an object of identification, she articulates, among other things, the antagonism toward children that Plath’s speakers often feel but have difficulty admitting. Yet the antagonism stubbornly refuses to remain underground, appearing for example in the final lines of the poem “Metaphors” (where pregnancy is compared to eating a bag of green apples) and in Esther Greenwood’s offhand comment in The Bell Jar that she would “go mad” if she had to care for a baby all day (Poems 116; Bell Jar 222).

The effort at the very end of “Lesbos” to secure heteronormative identity and autonomy at any price, to immobilize a fantasy of sensual drift, can thus be seen as a frightened reaction against the always already-present otherness within the self as well as a rejection of an otherness that is external. Plath’s speaker rejects her own sexual difference, attempting instead to adhere to the regulatory system that Adrienne Rich—Plath’s closest “rival” (Unabridged Journals 360) and wry counter-image—was later to call “compulsory heterosexuality.” (Rich 23). Yet Plath’s enticing title, “Lesbos,” strains against the text’s exaggerated disgust, suggesting an anxious, ambiguous set of split affinities. At this early moment in what might have been a long career but wasn’t, her speaker tilts momentarily both toward and away from same-sex desire and queer identity.

We can see the Plathian clash of opposites repeated in many of her most famous poems, for example, “Daddy.” The speaker here directs a torrent of ridicule, fury, and yearning toward the father—and implicitly toward all patriarchs, who are teasingly unapproachable and omnipresent at the same time. She starkly distinguishes genders from each other as she stages a confrontation between male power and female victimization. The only way for drift to occur in the Manichean epistemics of “Daddy” is for positions simply to reverse, which is just what happens in the poem’s final apostrophe to the father:

There’s a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never like you.
They are dancing and stamping on you. They always knew it was you.

Daddy, daddy, you bastard,
I’m through. (Poems 224)

The father figure lies back in a supine, stereotypically feminized posture, while the villagers—the speaker’s surrogates—trample him to death. A poem about male cruelty ends with the female voice momentarily, fantastically assuming the guise of male sadism. The result is neither peace nor pleasure but some kind of ambiguous apocalypse: “I’m through.” Is the speaker through with anger, through with fathers, through with male impersonation, through with this poem, or through life with
The only way Plath could fully imagine the identity drift she sought yet feared was to displace the male-female agon entirely. In “Three Women,” the text occupies female space, drifting among the sounds of three women’s voices, each echoing the others yet distinct. Each speaker is a young, pregnant woman about to undergo childbirth, a miscarriage, or an abortion. In what Foucault might call the “heterotopic” space of the hospital (Foucault 5), and in what I would call the heterotropic space of discourse, two of the women ultimately accept the viability of psychic and sexual mobility, while the third sinks, perhaps irretrievably, into the stasis of loss and melancholy.

The first reinvigorated woman has a son, who she prays will “marry what he wants and where he will” (Poems 186). This verse, which marks a transformation of this speaker’s earlier social conformity, carries with it a queer aura, congruent with Ginsberg’s asserted desire for a “man / or woman, I don’t care what any more” (“Message,” Collected Poems 191). Plath’s gender-fluid formulation actually goes beyond the man/woman binary still present in Ginsberg’s assertion. The second reinvigorated woman, who has suffered a miscarriage and is arguably the hero of the poem, expresses her sense of recovery through a figure of dynamic change: “The little grasses / Crack through stone, and they are green with life” (Poems 187). Plath has surmounted her personal emotions and memories in a way that troubled Eliot’s clear-cut distinction between “the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (“Tradition” 41). The poem now retains, even flaunted, the marks of its precipitating passions and became emmeshed with the practices of everyday life, suspended somewhere between the refreshment of art through radical innovation and the de-idealization of art through an obliteration of its borders. Plath’s often anguished and uncertain queering of the subject carried with it a challenge to the poetic traditions of an earlier era.

Moreover, in subverting gendered and sexual norms, she undermined what Kaja Silverman calls the “dominant fiction” of her age. As Silverman tells us, “the dominant fiction not only offers the representational system by means of which the subject typically assumes a sexual identity, and takes on the desires commensurate with that identity, but forms the stable core around which a nation’s and a period’s ‘reality’ coheres” (41). Thus, Sylvia Plath’s contestations of sexual identity ultimately challenged not only her self-understanding and her poetic inheritance but also her social reality, and ours.

Plath’s ambiguous attachment to the heteronormative gender paradigm usually exposed a countervailing impulse toward queerness which, though hidden, was eager to make its presence known. The restless sexual and gendered identifications in her work opened a space for a similarly complicated poetics. Her confessional “I” spoke from personal emotions and memories in a way that troubled Eliot’s clear-cut distinction between “the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (“Tradition” 41). The poem now retained, even flaunted, the marks of its precipitating passions and became emmeshed with the practices of everyday life, suspended somewhere between the refreshment of art through radical innovation and the de-idealization of art through an obliteration of its borders. Plath’s often anguished and uncertain queering of the subject carried with it a challenge to the poetic traditions of an earlier era.

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The Sourcing of Esther Greenwood

by William Blair

Layered with pseudonyms, The Bell Jar continues to challenge both academics and the reading public to search for the source and the possible significance of the novel's disguises used so liberally by Sylvia Plath. The novel was first published pseudonymously (by "Victoria Lucas"), is narrated pseudonymously (by "Esther Greenwood"), and on one occasion this pseudonymous narrator identifies herself pseudonymously (as "Ellie Higginbottom"). As Christina Britzolakis appropriately notes, The Bell Jar is "a novel whose reading has always revolved stubbornly around problems of naming: the naming, pre-eminently, of the author's relationship to her first-person narrator, and of both author and narrator to 'Sylvia Plath'" (32). It is unsurprising, then, that many of her biographers, editors and critics continue to emphasize the importance of her reliance, if not dependency, on disguise. Steven Gould Axelrod's position on the importance of names is "a type of pilgrim's progress (peregrination) for girls through the multiple forms and products of twentieth-century cultural life" (185). Alternatively, Diane Wood Middlebrook provides an explanation for "Greenwood." In her Introduction to Everyman's 1998 publication to The Bell Jar, Middlebrook suggests, "Salinger's model (Catcher) licensed Plath to explore through Esther the situation of a young woman – green wood-- ...." (xii). Axelrod also observes, "Esther's surname, 'Greenwood,' duplicates one of Plath's maternal family names, Greenwood" (11).

To these explanations, add the observation of Karen Kukil, the editor of the very fine Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, who states that Plath adopted "Esther Greenwood" "late in the process" of writing the novel. This, in turn, would give added credence to Anne Stevenson's assertion that Plath did not want The Bell Jar "to be judged as the work of a poet" (285). Whatever the source of and rationale for her aliases, it is generally accepted by Plath's biographers that she wished to protect certain individuals, especially her mother, from the pain of recognition.

The collective shortcoming with these explanations for the choice of "Esther Greenwood" is that they fail to address the significance of her full name. "Esther" is ignored as if that name were of no consequence, whereas "Greenwood" is addressed as if it were the lone significant half of her name. This is, in fact, how the critics' approaches to Victoria Lucas and Esther Greenwood differ. "Victoria Lucas" is always fully reasoned, while the entire name "Esther Greenwood" is never completely explained. How, then, does one solve the full-name problem?

The solution to this critical deficiency is, I believe, surprisingly evident. The antecedent and likely source for Plath's "Esther Greenwood" appears in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Unnatural Mother." Written in 1916, this largely semi-autobiographical work actually features a character named Esther Greenwood whose controversial death provoked criticism much like the condemnation that Plath would have certainly anticipated while she was completing her novel only months before her suicide.

Although the character Esther Greenwood is absent (she is dead) in "The Unnatural Mother", the story centers around her unfortunate, untimely, and to most, unforgivable death. Four speakers representing various "types" of women (one married, one widowed, an "old maid," and one "unmarried at thirty-six") recount for their male listener how Esther lost her life. All but the youngest expresses shock and disapproval for a mother who put her own and her child's safety at risk, notwithstanding that she saved the lives of 1,500 people from three villages.

From what was her vantage point, Esther witnessed a dam give way. She rushed to alert the villagers, who "sent word down valley on horseback." Unfortunately, Esther drowned just as she returned to rescue her own daughter, who was miraculously found alive "swimmin' round in its bed." It is for this lack of maternal behavior, evidenced in her poor judgment or mixed-up priorities, that three of the four women excoriate Esther after her death.

Old Mrs. Briggs makes it abundantly clear that "No mother that was a mother would desert her own child for anything on earth" (116). The widowed Martha Simmons is equally harsh in her criticism of Esther, saying, "Mothers have the instinct – that is, all natural mothers have. But dear me! There's some as don't seem to be mothers—even when they have a child" (118). Even Miss Jacobs, the "old maid" feels entitled to condemn Esther as well. Early in the story it is she who brands Esther "an unnatural mother" (116).

Only the unmarried Maria Amelia Briggs, one of Mrs. Briggs' thirteen children, defends Esther's behavior. She remarks, "You don't any of you seem to think what she did for all of us -- ... " (115). Maria focuses on those whose lives were saved, suggesting that Esther's risk-taking was for a greater good. The male City Boarder to whom the story is told neither passes judgment nor expresses disapproval.

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How, then did Plath manage to adopt as an alias the identical full name of a character who appeared in a short story decades earlier? And, if this adoption was, as I assert, deliberate, why did she do it? After all, there is no evidence that indicates Sylvia Plath was familiar with “The Unnatural Mother.” As an undergraduate at Smith, she registered for three literature courses in which she may have been exposed to Gilman. Those courses were Eng. 211 (Literature in the 19th and 20th Centuries), Eng. 321b (American Fiction 1830-1900), and Eng. 417b (20th Century American Novel). However, Elizabeth W. Harries, the English Chair at Smith, believes that “... it’s unlikely that Sylvia Plath was exposed to the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman while she was at Smith.” Apparently, “Gilman and a host of other women writers ... didn’t become part of the Smith curriculum until the early 70’s with the advent of feminist criticism.”

Plath’s Journals are also a valuable source for the naysayers because they lack any mention of the short story or, for that matter, her familiarity with Gilman. Even her teaching notes at Indiana University make no mention of Gilman or her works (Cape). So rather than relying on what would be a most improbable coincidence, how are we to explain Plath’s use of an identical full name used by an established female author decades earlier? I posit that lack of academic and journal evidence notwithstanding, Plath was indeed aware of Gilman’s short story. The adoption of the central character’s name as a stand-in for Plath herself illustrates a keen awareness of the inevitable post-mortem criticism she too would face for having to accept the highly improbable likelihood that coincidence is responsible for Plath’s choice of the identical name for her protagonist. After all, she was a Smith College alumna, a Fulbright scholar, a successful poet, and an English instructor at her alma mater. This pedigree noted, it is hardly a stretch to suggest the sentiment that Plath sourced from “The Unnatural Mother” the name for her pseudonymous narrator. In having done so, Plath may very well be acknowledging from the grave that she too fully expects to be the target of harsh criticism, particularly from those who consider themselves natural mothers.

Esther Greenwood’s unnatural behavior. Old Mrs. Briggs makes it very clear during one of her many criticisms that “… that woman [Esther Greenwood] never seemed to have the first spark of maternal feeling to the end” (122). In truth, neither Sylvia Plath nor the two Esther Greenwoods ever beheld with maternal orthodoxy according to the unwritten but understood precepts of their respective decades.

Further, that Plath adopted the name Esther Greenwood “late in the process” while being treated for depression and in a conflicted state of mind is yet another indication that she surely would have anticipated widespread condemnation for her decision to leave her children without a mother. It would be comforting to believe that perhaps she found some solace or took refuge in an observation she had made in an earlier journal entry. In April of 1959, she wrote, “If you are dead, no one can criticize you, or, if they do, it doesn’t hurt” (478).

Lastly, there is an intriguing relationship between Gilman’s motives for writing “The Unnatural Mother” and the likely reason behind Plath’s adoption of “Esther Greenwood” as her narrator’s name in The Bell Jar. “The Unnatural Mother” was apparently inspired by “… the scandal surrounding her [Gilman’s] divorce in 1894, in which she relinquished custody of her daughter ...” (Biographical vi). If, then, we are to read the earlier Esther Greenwood as Gilman much-maligned, is it not then appropriate to view Esther Greenwood as Plath soon to be much-maligned? After all, as a consequence of her suicide Plath too would very soon abandon her children, and at the very least, she would certainly have anticipated the post-mortem criticism that would inevitably follow her to the grave. As Tracy Brain observes, “Plath speaks to and from the writers who preceded her ...” (167), and so it should come as little surprise when critics actually compare Sylvia Plath to Charlette Perkins Gilman (see Axelrod and Wagner-Martin).

The position that Plath’s “Esther Greenwood” is a successor to Gilman’s remedies a number of thorny issues. On the most basic level, it supplies a source explanation for “Esther Greenwood’s” entire name. No other critical examination accomplishes this task. At the same time, this argument relieves the reader from having to accept the highly improbable likelihood that coincidence is responsible for Plath’s choice of the identical name for her protagonist. After all, she was a Smith College alumna, a Fulbright scholar, a successful poet, and an English instructor at her alma mater. This pedigree noted, it is hardly a stretch to suggest the sentiment that Plath sourced from “The Unnatural Mother” the name for her pseudonymous narrator. In having done so, Plath may very well be acknowledging from the grave that she too fully expects to be the target of harsh criticism, particularly from those who consider themselves natural mothers.
A “Memoir on choosing to be the ‘One’ who ‘sits’ or ‘the [O]ther, without’”

by Sarah Josie Pridgeon

“I, sitting here brainless as if wanting both a baby and a career but god knows what if it isn’t writing. What inner decision, what inner murder or prison-break must I commit if I want to speak from my true deep voice in writing … and not feel this jam up of feeling behind a glass-dam fancy-facade of numb dumb wordage” (Sylvia Plath, The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1975:469, emphasis added)

“Over the countless “images” of all that has once been, now heaped together and merged into an indeterminate featureless mass, there reigns Persephone – the eternally unique” (Carl G. Jung and Carl Kerényi, The Science of Mythology, 1949:147-148)

Sylvia Plath’s works continue to resonate with women irrespective of their age and life stage. Looking deeper, her oeuvre, which ended in 1963, portrays the phases of the feminine; the unavoidable junctures women experience intra- and inter-personally as they advance from child to adolescent, young adult to adult, to woman or mother, grandmother. This is a memoir of my first encounter with Plath’s work and an attempt to explain the reason why her art and life continue to be a timeless source of inspiration, fascination and encouragement to myself and other women.

Carefully dressed and spritely punctual, I took a seat in the lecture hall and awaited my first class of the semester. I had been a student at the University of the Free State for 4 years. In Bloemfontein, South Africa, the winters are ruthless and the summers even more so. The extreme temperatures build both character and muscle with the initial shedding and later adorning of layers of clothes. Luckily for me, the winter was slowly subsiding. The rest of the class rustled in and found their seats. My first lecture was a 3rd year undergraduate English Literature class which started off with an introduction to the Confessional Poets. I sat patiently, my module guide opened and my pencil sharpened. I waited for the lecturer to walk in.

In swept Doctor Brooks, tall, bold, and with a certain gusto that assumed authority without demand. She appeared to be in her mid-40s and she looked incredibly hip with her black leather jacket, silver-peppered chic bangs and watery blue eyes. Without makeup, and with-out pretence, she swooped behind the podium and slumped her baggy black handbag and pile of books on the counter. She wore bright blood red lipstick, round, bulbous gold earrings with equally loud gold bangles that clattered and clanged when she spoke. It was the first time I had ever seen her and I was reminded of a bright, iridescent firefly, somehow unfairly caught in the unfamiliar epoch of 2013.

The class sat still and alert, like a clan of meer-
the transference of arcane yet intuitive and accessible knowledge. It was an awakening, or a revival. It was the telling of an archetypal story that resounded fully and deeply among the listeners. We sat, enraptured.

There are, in effect, two callings women hear. We can consider the first woman in the poem; we can study a trade and find a job. We can pursue our metaphorical “mathematical machine” and establish a career in a “dark wainscoted room”. We can develop our minds professionally through whichever occupation gives us meaning, harness and develop ideas and inspirations. During the course of this singular investment, as we determinedly pour our energy into “calculating each sum”, our other un- or over-used faculties will begin to give way. From persistent use our eyes may become “squint”, our “frame” “meagre” and “pale”.

As a result, Plath warns that this choice may be a “barren enterprise”, where eventually, the “[d]ry ticks [that] mark time” will also secretly foster resentment at concentrating on a career at the cost of denying other pursuits. If we consider the word “barren”, it points to a womb that is unused, uncultivated. Perhaps, after committing ourselves to the advancement of a career, towards the end of life we will realise that this path is unfertile. Atrophy mindset and, “turned bitter/ And sallow as any lemon”, the lonely career woman is, in fact, a “wry virgin to the last”. Again, if we reflect on the word choice “virgin”, like “barren”, it suggests a lack of female experience or exploration of a faculty created for use. Lonely, with only the fruits reaped from our metaphorical “mathematical machine”, we can become “[b]ronzed as earth”. Our senses are awakened and galvanised. Unlike the former “dry” and “pale” sister, we “[b]urn open”, explore our sexuality, fecundity, and let our “red silk flare”. We court, couple and “[g]row quick” with seed”. We foster birth and nurture precious progeny. We produce one/may fine and unique creation/s from our flesh. This is also fulfilling, it is “labor’s pride”, a fruit of another kind.

“She sees how their red silk flare/ Of petaled blood/ Burns open to the sun’s blade.” rumbled Dr. Brookes’s voice. Suddenly, she looked up from the text. “And they say that women "shouldn’t" wear white pants when they menstruate!” she exclaimed, with sudden vigour. “What nonsense! Absolute rubbish, really…” She held her palms facing upward in earnest and her bangles clanged with an incensed enthusiasm that I feared would later become her hallmark. “Wear whatever pants you want!” she preached as she banged her fist on the counter.

I looked around the room to see the girls giggling self-consciously while the boys shuffled in their seats. The girls had suddenly found it of utmost importance to avert their faces and search for something in their handbags, or examine their notes. “In fact,” she continued nonplussed, “women should celebrate when they’re having their period. They should jump up and down with joy. It means, your body works! Isn’t that fantastic!” She smiled. This revelation rippled among my classmates who looked shyly at Dr. Brookes. I smiled too, agreeing that this sentiment cohered with the second sister’s message.

Women, innately abstuse, ambiguous and ambivalent by design, endeavour to balance these inherent opposites throughout their lives. We walk a fine line with this perpetual predicament. In our attempt to reconcile these dichotomies we make a crucial choice, not without literally life-changing ramifications. To choose one at the cost of another; or to take and balance both. There are two roads that women can travel. Which sister shall we choose to be, in our house? The one who “sits”, or the other, “without”? “[B]arren” or “[b]ronzed”?

Both vocations are creative, and women create. By design, we can incubate and nourish from inception to birth. We can house and sustain a seed until it ripens, foster its development and enrich its life. The proclivity to nurture and shape our surroundings and make life beautiful shows how women are inherently ‘pregnant’ with life and possibility. In woman exists the unique and positive potential can be manifested through forms that the qualities represent. Women have the ability to tap into the Amazonian strength, the Matriarch/Wise Old Woman for wisdom, the Queen for sovereignty, Earth Mother for vitality, the Female/Princess Hero in

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finding her life’s quest and many more tradition- 
al and mythical archetypes.  
However, women can also destroy. The other side of the double-edged sword comprises an equally resourceful disposition which can spit, scorn, corrupt and demolish. She can incite, beguile, seduce and conceal. She can rumour monger, sow seeds of doubt and insecurity; her malice can cause boundless suffering to achieve her own desires. These qualities are effectuated through a power-hungry Evil Queen, a possess- 

tive and vain Evil Stepmother, a lustful and subversive Seductress/Temptress, a subversive Lady Macbeth, a Munchausen by proxy mother. Fairy tales, myths, folk stories and tales are not too far fetched in their representation of these qualities.  
Likewise, as the speaker demarcates, we can “play” a “duet of shade and light” between these two or more faces. We can “play” out our roles and identities as our personalities evolve. We can create both: a family, home, children and career. We can access and “burn” into all our faculties. But “can”, does not guarantee quality of life, or wholeness. Creating or choosing one option destroys, or reduces, achieving the full manifestation; the totality of the other. More than any other writer, Plath portrayed and developed the psychic tension that resulted from these conflicting, innate drives.  
Women can marry into motherhood at the cost, and if required, through a power-hungry Evil Queen. Fairy tales, myths, folk stories and tales are not too far fetched in their representation of these qualities.  
On the other hand, encountering this inevitable juncture doesn’t distress all women. It is not the 1950s after all and most women are equipped with the knowledge of, for example, The Feminine Mystique. They are capable of balancing their conflicting, innate and very female desires and needs. However, it only bothers those who want more. It troubles those who, like Plath, and her autobiographical character, Esther, are “determined to ‘have it all’” (Wagner, 2000:7), or, as Esther’s boss Jay Cee states in The Bell Jar (1963): “She [Esther] wants […] to be everything” (Plath, 1964:97, emphasis added). Likewise, Esther expresses this desire herself later on in the autobiographical novel, “I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket” (Plath, 1963:79, emphasis added).  
Dr. Brooks paused before reading the last stanza. The class waited. Then she looked up meaningfully and read the final lines:  

Inscribed above her head, these lines:  
While flowering, ladies, scant love not  
Lest all your fruit  
Be but this black outcrop of stones.  

This inscription presents the crux in every woman’s narrative. Plath was especially articu- 
late about the dual nature of woman. Written in 1957 at the age of 25, as one of her earlier poems, it presents the relevant and inevitable choice(s) every woman will make. In essence, the speaker warns that, in life, there is always a sacrifice, and she counsels us to choose wisely. The tone of the last quatrains is indeed as grave as the inscription upon the second sister’s tomb. It is a timeless poem that presents the conflict- 

ing urges within women, with the characteristic tension and hunger with which Plath writes. It is also an exemplary poem to introduce Plath’s oeuvre and her era.  

Plath presents us with choice. By sketching the two feminine extremes in this oracular poem, she depicts a detailed panorama for her read- 
ers. She shows them their options so that they will make their decisions wisely. Equally, she counsels that it is our responsibility to give our lives meaning and purpose through whichever choice(s) we make. We must make peace with our choices and live without regret or resentment.  

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“Now let us read Lady Lazarus,” Dr. Brooks announced. She logged into the computer and searched on YouTube while she spoke. She rattled away at the keyboard, pushing buttons here and there. “Aha! Plath can read this to us herself. How wonderful.” She clicked on a link⁴ and a deep, proud, inescapably American voice began to read the poem.  

During a pause in discussion, or to create effect, Dr. Brooks would ring her hands upwards and gently tug at her hair with a sense of urgency. Her bangs would sparkle and clang like a chorus of spirited school children. To me, this echoed the underlying intensity in the poem. She listened carefully while the recording played. We did the same. Plath read her poem with a chilling bravado, a sangfroid that boasted power. The cool voice performed its art while my classmates and I sat very quietly and listened.  

I was fortunate to have been introduced to Plath’s work by an inspirational lecturer who understands and appreciates it. Dr. Brooks easily articulated the messages in Plath’s work and gave relevant depth and insight into her poems. Plath’s poetry is challenging to teach to students. Her work is confessional, meditative, tormented, existential and seer-like, the prop-
erties of which catalyse into an anfractuous and highly concentrated plethora. It also requires, I believe, life experience and for the reader to have endured some degree of suffering to be able to understand¹. Plath used her own mental and physical struggles in two ways: as material for the content of her work and as an impetus to stimulate the creative process.  

A panoramic view of Plath’s work portrays a lineage of specific symbols; throughout her development as a writer and woman, certain images and symbols in her work can be seen as milestones or portents that foreshadow signif-
ificant stages in her writing and life. This com-plexity was also understood by Ted Hughes. Of the “substance and patterning” of her poems, Hughes (in Plath, 1960:16) states that “… her writing depended on a supercharged system of inner symbols and images, an enclosed cosmic circus”. These “symbols and images” are time-
less and potent.  

Plath studied the work of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, founder of analytical psychology. Plath states in her diary that she found “confirmations of certain images” in her “Mummy sto-ny”, when reading Jung’s work (Plath, 2000:154). As such, I have found that his theories are highly applicable and valuable when analysing her work. This is due to the power and relativity of the symbols and archetypes Plath uses, a Jungian reading of her work is immensely applicable and enlightening. Jung (1982:126) states that “These are three essential aspects of the mother: her cherishing and nourishing goodness, her orgastic emotionality, and her Stygian depths”. Further, elsewhere in Plath Profiles, Jungian analyst Susan Schwartz (2011:55-56, emphasis added) identifies Plath’s interest in Jung’s work: “… his concepts of the collective unconscious, the archetypes and the use of symbolic imag-ery”⁵. The two polarised destinations on

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¹ I refer to Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique (United States: W. W. Norton and Co., 1963). This book was released the same year Plath’s death, and it is a testament to the culture and era of American women.  
² Plath was an accomplished pianist and frequently used the piano in her poetry, as in “Two Tongues” (1962).  
³ Below is the link for the reading of an earlier version of ‘Lady Lazarus’ in 1962 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkK2fwZfVjA  
⁴ For example, hospital patients found solace in reading Plath’s poems about physical and mental health during their recovery (see Moraski, 2009).
a plane, i.e. the two sisters, portray a continuum of archetypes woman can access.


Plath captures these phases and faces with an ease and accuracy unlike any other writer, and she explores them without pretence and affectation. She explores them confessionally. And she has written, I argue, more dynamically and deliberately about women than any other writer, viscerally investigating the various archetypes and identities vicariously in her own life and work.

In 1959 Plath (2000:502) wrote, “Forget myself, myself. Become a vehicle of the world, a tongue, a voice. Abandon my ego.” She tirelessly sought “woman-wisdom” (Plath, 2000:450) and she shared her findings. This is also the reason women and scholars find echoes and reflections of Plath’s themes such as existential inquiry, mental and physical illness, identity construction, nature, relationships and cultural ideologies in their own lives; they find support and empathy in her voice.

It is, in effect, reflective in her audience’s ethos. It is the “haunting”, as Jacqueline Rose (2010) so accurately described; a primordial and collective “mythology” as Judith Kroll (2010) captures. Titular in both of their studies, such a haunting and mythology result from the above-mentioned “tongue” and “voice” in Plath’s work that both resonate with and pique her reader’s curiosity. Plath’s work embodies familiar stories and patterns relevant to woman.

In an attempt to describe the attraction to her work, many adjectives come to mind: macabre, ambivalent, intense, melancholic, anxious, violent, and intense; notwithstanding the often overlooked eager, witty, lively, diligent, passionate, compassionate and courageous attributes of her work. Above all, and most importantly, Plath was hungry and she was driven. The Jugernaut of her work shows her tireless pursuit to explore each role and identity possible, to appease her “unitive urge” (Smith, 1972), evident in Plath’s dedication to her art. It is indicative of what daughter Freida Hughes describes in Sylvia Plath: Inside the Bell Jar (2018) as “phenomenal work ethic”, by which she should be remembered. Plath’s work took time to gain traction and recognition.

To conclude, even today, Plath's is indeed a voice “[t]hat will not be still” (Plath, 1975: 35). The attraction in her writing is in fact much more than a symbol, metaphor, conflict, quote or character. It is her voice.

“And that’s it for today, ladies and gents” she announced into the still, entranced lecture hall. “Next lesson we will discuss Anne Sexton and she’ll tell us all about how poetry led her by the hand out of madness!” The hive of students began steadily rousing themselves. She flicked off the projector, plucked her open books from the podium’s surface and flumped them into her handbag before sweeping out into the corridor.

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Student Essays

Plath Profiles

The Depths of Fictional Fathers and the Sea for Sylvia Plath:
A Portal to the Afterlife
by Kylie Burger

Born in 1932, Plath and her family moved to Winthrop, Massachusetts in 1936 where they resided for six years. It was there that she frequented the ocean like many young children, gradually developing a personal connection with the sea. After the unexpected death of her father in 1940, everything about Plath's youthhood changed, quite possibly altering the outcome of her life. An integral aspect of Plath's relationship with her father Otto shone through in their shared connection to the ocean, later becoming one of the most influential components in her work. In numerous accounts of her own life, Plath spoke of the sea and its genuine appeal to her. This fixation stemmed from the profound connection between the water and her father. The loss of Otto Plath was a driving force behind the fictional fathers who she created and their correlation to the sea.

Literary critics offer many interpretations of Sylvia and Otto Plath's relationship on and off the page. It is shown that Otto was her idol, as many fathers are to their daughters. Scholar John Reitz writes in “The Father as Muse in Sylvia Plath’s Poetry,” “By all accounts, including her own, Otto Plath was a kind, loving father…” (417). Though some researchers on Plath's life believe that she may have grown to despise her father for leaving her at the age of eight via his death, most conclude that Plath always held him near her heart for his strong affection towards her. For instance, Plath's fictional surrogate of herself in “Among the Bumblebees” – Alice Denway – feels an unbreakable bond with her father even after his death: “She did not know then that in all the rest of her life there would be no one to walk with her, like him”, suggesting that only the father would ever inhabit that place in her heart (Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams 327). Alice's father and Plath's father become one, so close together that readers cannot clearly distinguish between fiction or reality. For Sylvia Plath and many of her fictional characters, the sea becomes a pivotal aspect of their lives, resulting in a consistent portrayal of fathers as irrevocably connected with the sea.

Sylvia Plath's life with her father was not distinguishable from that of other children her age. She and her family lived in Winthrop, Massachusetts up until a few years after her father’s death. It was there that she lived like most of her peers, collecting treasures found on the beach and...
often getting into mischief. She recounts in her essay “Ocean 1212 – W” that her “childhood landscape was not land but the end of the land – the cold, salt, running hills of the Atlantic” (Johnny Panic... 21). The sea and shoreline of her home were places she spent time with her father; these experiences with him would continue to be a factor throughout her life. Susan E. Schwartz wrote that, “…the daughter takes a look around and sees herself reflected back in the eyes of her father so that what she looks like in part is related to what she sees from him” (“Parallax” 300). Many of Plath’s biographers make it apparent that as a child she dotted on her father as much as he showed affection for her. In “Ocean 1212 – W,” Plath writes of a moment when she, as a small child, crawled toward the sea. Though her mother catches up with her before she crawls into the water, she wonders, “what would have happened if [she] had managed to pierce that looking-glass” (Johnny Panic... 21). As Schwartz had noted that the stages of the father reflect the daughter, Plath has acknowledged a similar notion by stating that the ocean is like a mirror showing her true self in its reflection.

She explains an inherent desire to reach the sea in her essay “Ocean 1212-W.” The water beckoned to her: “I crawled straight for the coming wave…” (10). The mind’s image of water was indubitably apparent in her as a small child. Ronald Hayman states in his essay of the importance of the sea to a young Sylvia: “To [Plath], the sea seemed a huge, radiant animal, breathing and reflecting light” (143). For her, the ocean was a magical place she could float into where the world outside would be unable to claw its way in. The sea was also filled with numerous gifts that sparked a never-ending imagination for Plath long into her adult life. Edward Butscher comments in his biography of Plath that “The sandy beach was a constant source of unexpected treasures, shells, petrified wood, starfish relics, crab husks, and the like” (10). For Sylvia this realm was unlike any on land and encapsulated the brightness of youthhood, forever kept on the shores of Winthrop.

It is important to note that the ocean was not just a peaceful world of newfound joys for Plath prior to her father’s death. The ability of mother ocean to turn into a malevolent being also impacted the writer. For Plath, the ocean was proven to be a dichotomous raging being of both happiness and “the discovery of death” (Butscher 10). As she mentions in “Ocean 1212-W,” a destructive hurricane hit the coast of Winthrop when she was about six years old. This menacing creature brought to the surface how something entirely pure could also serve as a bringer of death, too: “The hurricane was nature without her maternal mask on and it revealed the other side of the sea, the womb as a grave” (12). After witnessing the unforeseen anger of a raging sea as a small child, Plath became aware that death was a possibility even among the most beautiful of landscapes, including her childhood with Otto. The turn from a naive life into one with the knowledge of annihilation changed Plath after the loss of her father. This melancholic shift in the water’s nature served to create a “phantom relationship” with Otto due to his departure from her at an untimely age (304). This comes through in many of her poems and prose expositions – which will be discussed further on – where she tries to reconnect with someone no longer living.

On land, her experience became very different after the passing of Otto in 1940. In “The Parallax Between Daughters and Fathers,” Susan E. Schwartz suggests, “Her father’s premature death...haunted her with fluctuating psychological symptoms. His death brought destruction to the childhood attachment prior to the natural separation between daughter and father” (305). According to Schwartz, Plath suffered the loss of someone that is not supposed to happen until much later in life, once an individual matures. This loss impacted her more severely as a child than it would have as an adult, leading to her constant search for Otto among one of the places she felt the most connected with him: the sea.

Another conflicting aspect occurring on land after her father’s death was the sudden marriage of Aurelia Schober Plath’s sister. Sylvia witnessed how quickly something sad like a funeral could morph into the happiness of a ceremony for marriage – she saw the sorrow of death become joy, as well as the beauty of nature evolve into a monster (Butscher 15). While seeing how fast the world could change its focus, Plath was enlightened at far too young an age with “…a continual awareness of mortality, a dark stain on the brightest day, which would evolve into a fundamental perception of universal process as death in birth, endless images…” (15). This would forever leave its mark on her in youth, stunting her growth away from it in later years.

In “The Parallax Between Daughters and Fathers” Schwartz suggests that Plath was forced to create a “phantom relationship” with Otto due to his departure from her at an untimely age (304). This comes through in many of her poems and prose expositions – which will be discussed further on – where she tries to reconnect with someone no longer living.

The ocean also changed for Plath after Otto’s passing, becoming a relic of her father in a way that someone would keep a beloved necklace of someone they lost. For Sylvia, the sea held everything that her father was and ever would be “because [of] its emotional value [which] is inherently linked to its associations with her dead father, and the loss of the one is inextricable from the loss of the other” (Lowe 23). The sea off the coast of Winthrop in particular would never fade from her memories of Otto. They were connected in many ways and through her writing she was able to keep that bond with the man she idolized as a child. A few years after her father’s passing, Plath’s family moved inland away from the sea. This caused an emotional loss much like that of her parent; it was like she had lost him all over again. Peter J. Lowe describes how childhood ended for Plath, as did her direct association with Otto, though their relationship continued symbolically throughout the entirety of her career:

Childhood happiness ends with the death of the father, prompting a move, both physical and emotional, away from the location in which such happiness was found. These early summers remain happy memories for Plath, but the self that figures in them is crucially distinct from the person she becomes. (22)

This move away from the place where she so fondly remembered her dead father prompted in her mind a change she was somewhat aware of. Plath establishes the need to facilitate their father-daughter bond through the seascapes in her work and with the fictional fathers she created alongside their shores.

A particularly compelling correlation to Plath’s life is discussed in great detail by researcher Bradley K. Shewaga. He delves into the impact that children’s books like “The Little Mermaid” had on her belief in the magic of the sea. He suggests that the character may have been a model for Plath to follow later in life, especially in regard to how she viewed her relationship to Otto after his death (106). One researcher found an old version of “Ocean 1212-W” in which Plath wrote about her affection for the tale of the mermaid – this later led to her love for drawing the character as well (106). The tale of “The Little Mermaid” by Hans Christian Andersen depicted a mermaid who is threatened to forever remain on land if she does not murder
the man she loves. The mermaid refuses to do so and instead "threw herself from the ship into the sea, and thought her body was dissolving into foam..." (112). The mermaid chooses to keep the man she adores alive, rather than kill him to become a mermaid once more. In doing so forgoes her ocean life knowing she will no longer be able to live amongst her people.

Plath was much like the title character in Ander sen’s children’s story she found herself drawn to as a young child. Peter J. Lowe offers that, “In ‘Ocean 1212-W’ she pondered whether she could have become a mermaid if she had succeeded in reaching the sea; now, her desire to enact this wish is strongly linked with a desire to regain union with a father figure” (30). Plath had often dreamed of being a mermaid, though she decided to deny herself this joining with the sea so forgoes her ocean life knowing she will no longer be able to live amongst her people.

There are many works of hers to be considered when weighing the possibility of fictionalized fathers and the sea becoming one. These pieces include: “Ocean 1212-W,” “Among the Bumblebees,” “The Colossus,” and “Full Fathom Five.” To first examine “Ocean 1212-W” it is important to note that this essay presents Plath’s own feelings about her relationship with her father swam, “Alice would stand...watching him from afar. In that moment, the fictional father is shown in the ocean and as an embodiment of the fictional father figure, a notion she derived from her own who diaried how Plath herself felt about fatherly strength and command of the water. This demonstrates in this excerpt is the fictional father’s strength and command of the water. This continues all throughout the text.

I. When illustrating her family’s move inland, Plath composes her thoughts on it directly after the hurricane’s departure. It is no coincidence that as an adult in 1962 while writing the essay she remembers the two experiences – the hurricane and the move – as separated merely by a paragraph break:

   And this is how it stiffens, my vision of that seaside childhood. My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle – beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth. (27)

That part of her life remained by the sea and did not follow her when she, her mother, and War ren moved inland. She tried to access these moments by bringing them to life in her work. Hay man notes in his article how “her father's death and the move inland are separated only by a comma; in fact the family didn’t leave Winthrop until two years after he died, but she associated losing him with losing the sea” (144). The loss of both her father and later the loss of the place where she remembered him the most joyfully proved to be impactful on Plath. It was like she buried him twice, once in the ground and then in the move inland. "We belonged once to the sea 1212-W" it is important to note that this essay presents Plath’s own feelings about her relationship with Otto, the ocean, and how it felt to move inland. This was perhaps a further separation from him than in his death. In particular, the work demonstrates how Plath’s childhood innocence shifted to one aware of death in its many forms. Speaking directly of the hurricane mentioned previously, Plath writes, “My final memory of the sea is of violence...” (Johnny Panic... 27). For her, this beautiful ocean became a symbol of danger, much like her beloved father’s death resulted in her understanding that those we love can leave us at any moment.

II. The second work to consider is fictional. In “Among the Bumblebees” written in the early 1950s there are many nods to her life experience with Otto and the ocean in her eight years with him – including the fictional father’s death which is a replica of Plath’s own father’s demise. The story follows a girl much like Plath herself named Alice Denway whose relationship with her father is reflected upon. This work in particular remarks on the immense greatness of the fictional father to Alice:

   …[he] had been a giant of a man...the blue blaze of his eyes...when he laughed, it sounded as if all the waves of the ocean were breaking and roaring up the beach together. Alice worshiped her father because he was so powerful, and everybody did what he commanded... (Johnny Panic... 320)

It is important to note that the color of Alice’s father’s eyes is the same as the ocean itself, and that his laugh boomed much like the crashing of waves onto the shoreline. He remained powerful in charge of everyone and everything around him, including the ocean which seemed to be at his mercy. Throughout the work, the fictional father is shown in the ocean and as an overpowering force among nature. While the father swam, “Alice would stand...watching him from afar. In that moment, the powerful propellers of his arms” (323 – 324). Demonstrated in this excerpt is the fictional father’s strength and command of the water. This continues all throughout the text.

iii. Alice’s father becomes bedridden like Otto Plath was at the end of his life and loses his when the thunder would rumble in the gloomy darkness, he “would roar with laughter” in the face of such a menacing foe for a child. Later in the story, Plath writes that:

   Alice learned to sing the thunder song with her father: "Thor is angry. Thor is angry. Boom, boom, boom! Boom, boom, boom! We don’t care. We don’t care. Boom, boom, boom! And above the resonant sounding baritone of her father’s voice, the thunder rumbled harmless as a tame lion. (324)

This chant is one that Sylvia and Otto shouted in actuality when a major storm would shake the house. It also appears in her 1957 poem “The Disquieting Muses.” Like the ocean, the storm was no match for Alice’s father. He feared the storms but as soon as he started to chant, the storm’s power seemed to lessen and submit to his rule.

ii. His ruling power is true for one other aspect of nature – bumblebees. The father is the commander of their lives as well in that “he could catch bumblebees. That was something no one else’s father could do” (325). Otto Plath was also known to have the bees because he could tell which ones would sting him and those that were safe to hold. For a young girl like Sylvia – and for her fictional surrogate Alice – this was like having a superpower no one else had. Throughout the text, the fictional father takes on the god-like role that Otto had in real life. Through Alice’s father’s power and command over the natural world readers get a grasp on how Plath herself felt about fatherly figures, a notion she derived from her own who was her idol in many regards.

ii. Alice’s father becomes bedridden like Otto Plath was at the end of his life and loses his
Plath tries throughout the poem to put the pieces of her speaker's father—who symbolizes her father and his imagined loss and his memory, like the ocean—back together entirely…” (417). This is indeed the speaker's psyche…” (417). This is indeed the speaker's psyche…” (417). This is indeed the speaker's psyche…” (417). This is indeed the speaker's psyche…” (417). This is indeed the speaker's psyche…” (417). This is indeed the speaker's psyche…” (417).

III. Another piece that conveys the idea of fictional fathers in various ways works which portray strong god-like fathers similar to her own.

IV. The last example of Plath's work to consider when thinking about how she portrays fictional fathers and the ocean together is her poem “Full Fathom Five” which was composed in 1958. Immediately, Plath's speaker remarks a father's presence:

Old man, you surface suddenly. Then you come in with the tide's coming
When seas wash cold, foam-Covered, with long hair, white beard, far-flung, A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves
Crest and trough. (92, 1 – 6)

Here, there is a direct line to the speaker discussing how her father comes alive only with the waves rolling in. His hair and beard are white like the ocean's tides rolling onto the shoreline. She remembers him only at times when the sea brings him to life. Like this fictional father, Plath's own is revived through the life of the water and is brought back from the dead repeatedly throughout the poem.

i. The father's power is mentioned again in this piece and his resting place—the ocean for this fictional man—is where the speaker desperately wants to be. The following lines depict this idea:

…You defy other godhood. I walk dry on your kingdom's border. Exiled to no good. Your shelled bed I remember.

Father, this thick air is murderous. I would breathe water. (93, 40 – 45)

For the speaker, who resembles Plath in many regards, the father is just out of reach from her grasp. Like Plath's childhood with Otto, the fictional father portrayed in these lines remains lost to the depths of the ocean—where Plath felt her father's memory was laid to rest. For her, Otto was lost at sea among a world of never-ending waves. The kingdom that the father resides in is the afterlife, here depicted metaphorically as the ocean. The speaker cannot manage to live on land any longer among the “murderous” air of the land dwellers. She pleads to join her father in death, though here that is illustrated as a serene reunion. If the reunion is to be considered from her perspective, Plath conveys that she herself would survive in water rather than land. The sea is her salvation—her rebirth into the child she once was when Otto lived.

Critics have a lot to say about how Sylvia Plath's poetry brought to light her own need for Otto Plath. His silence became a factor in her writing…” (“Sylvia Plath: A Split in the Mirror” 61). Many of her works were a reflection of what she felt was an unfair loss of Otto. Plath's poetry is known for its uncanny ability to pull the father by his collar from the fathoms of the ocean into the world of the living once more.

Otto Plath was a driving force for his daughter's life's work in many ways. Plath acknowledged her use of personal connections within her works, remarking in The Journals that Otto was a “father-sea-god muse” (244). In her own words the renowned poet provides concrete evidence of her focus on her deceased idol. He had become interwoven in a variety of literary pieces such that it became difficult not to read her works autobiographically. In Schwartz's “The Parallax Between Daughters and Fathers,” she discusses how Plath's writing was her mechanism of coping with the loss of her father at such a young and impressionable age (303 – 304). Schwartz goes on to say that her work “was an attempt to make sense of the death and destruction she associated with her father” (303 – 304). Given the depictions of the ocean and fictional fathers as dangerous, yet enticing, this is a reasonable explanation for Plath's choice in topic. Throughout her life she would spend much of her creative energy on reviving Otto through the fictionalization of paternal figures. The depths of the water served as a portal through which she could see the reflection of her childhood and of her father. Though his image was often distorted and broken into pieces, Otto Plath is in countless aspects the living, magical roll of the tide.
Works Cited


William Buckley, Plath after Ariel, 2007
Review: “Reclaiming Assia Wevill: Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Literary Imagination” by Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick

by Gary Leising


The twenty-first century has seen the publication of significant works in Sylvia Plath studies including 2000's The Unabridged Journals, 2004's Ariel: The Restored Edition, the two volumes of her letters in 2017 and 2018, and 2019’s Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom— that only lists newly published works by Plath. A list of remarkable new criticism and biography remains incomplete here because of space but includes Tracy Brain’s The Other Sylvia Plath (2001), Heather Clark’s The Grief of Influence (2010), Carl Rollyson’s American lis (2013), Andrew Wilson’s Mad Girl’s Love Song (2013), and the edited collections The Unraveling Archive (Ed. Anita Heuwa, 2007) and Sylvia Plath in Context (Ed. Brain, 2019). There are, of course, two more biographies to excite Plath scholars in 2020: Rollyson’s The Last Days of Sylvia Plath and Clark’s Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath. As we are gifted with more by and about Sylvia Plath, it is also worth noting a stunning new volume on the so-called “other woman” in Plath’s life: Reclaiming Assia Wevill by Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick (LSU Press, 2019). As Plath studies evolve with greater access to Plath’s archive, we should also value how much we can learn about the lives and works of those who played significant roles in Plath’s life. The value of Goodspeed-Chadwick’s book for Plath’s readers, however, goes beyond the insightful chapter on Plath’s representations of Wevill; the book’s presentation of Assia Wevill as a person worth knowing more about than as “other woman” or inspiration for Plath’s and Hughes’s poems performs a necessary act of “feminist recuperation of [Wevill’s] reputation, artistic work, and influence” (1).

Reclaiming Assia Wevill begins with the useful story of how readers of Plath and Hughes have come to know Wevill with a fascinating literary review beginning with Yehuda Amichai’s poem “The Death of A.G.” We are reminded that for years Wevill was elided from public knowledge of Plath’s life.1 The value of Goodspeed-Chadwick’s book for Plath’s readers, however, goes beyond the insightful chapter on Plath’s representations of Wevill; the book’s presentation of Assia Wevill as a person worth knowing more about than as “other woman” or inspiration for Plath’s and Hughes’s poems performs a necessary act of “feminist recuperation of [Wevill’s] reputation, artistic work, and influence” (1).

Reclaiming Assia Wevill begins with the useful story of how readers of Plath and Hughes have come to know Wevill with a fascinating literary review beginning with Yehuda Amichai’s poem “The Death of A.G.” We are reminded that for years Wevill was elided from public knowledge of their lives. She was “Ted’s girl” in the 1975 collection of Plath’s Letters Home and referred to as “Olga” in Edward Butcher’s 1976 Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness. Goodspeed-Chadwick’s book works against this “traditional approach to Assia,” which includes “the eclipse of her personal hood; and the disregard or lack or acknowledgement for her own artistry” (5). The awareness that Assia has been reduced to the role of muse—another woman to spur on Plath’s jealous, angry poems or a temptress who has seduced Hughes away from his wife—might be the most useful idea a reader can take away from this book. That is, after reading this book, we no longer continue to see Assia as something of a bit player (again, “the other woman”) in a famous literary romance. Goodspeed-Chadwick provides a more developed treatment of [Wevill that] rewrites the trope of villainous and/or seductive mistress and the beautiful but destructive woman. Instead of serving this reductive stereotype or archetype, we serve better justice to Assia and other women when we realize that Assia was a victim in her life, too, and what we have done, ultimately, is blame the victim for her traumatic outcome and ending. (23) Wevill is immortalized in Plath’s and Hughes’s writing, but Goodspeed-Chadwick shows us how Hughes in particular “has crafted a legacy for Assia that defy her rather than giving her fame” (76). Such a portrayal extends beyond the poems of Plath and Hughes that Goodspeed-Chadwick intelligently discusses to the twenty-first century portrayals of Wevill addressed in the book’s final chapter, which addresses the film Sylvia and representations of Wevill in fiction.

One of the book’s strengths can be seen in examining its second chapter, “Sylvia Plath’s Representations of Assia Wevill.” Here we find thoughtful explanations and discussion of the five poems Plath wrote inspired by Wevill’s presence in her life. Goodspeed-Chadwick usefully balances biographical details with close reading and theoretical discussion. Though are all good, I find the analysis of “Childless Woman” especially strong, perhaps because this seems like the least discussed of these five poems. The discussion of the various poetic devices—symbol, metonymy, simile, and imagery— reminds readers how rich with figurative meaning Plath’s poems are. Of note in this chapter is the way Goodspeed-Chadwick frames the discussion of the poems with feminist theory. In her conclusion, she reminds us that we only have Plath’s (and in her next chapter, Hughes’s) voice to describe Wevill. We are missing Wevill’s description of Plath and Hughes: “[the omission in the literary imagination, ‘she rearticulates us, ‘should be noted to Assia and other women when we realize that Assia was a victim’” Plath’s and Hughes: “” (52). This is a vital feminist argument, and we can extrapolate from Goodspeed-Chadwick’s treatment of Wevill as a “woman who deserves better than what she encountered in her life” (3) to consider how society (both past and present) describes, values, and treats women, whether it be in literary texts, the media, courtrooms, or through health care.

As Goodspeed-Chadwick notes that “Plath’s body of work has long fascinated an academic audience and a general one simultaneously” (52), it is worth praising this book’s ability to reach a wide audience. Goodspeed-Chadwick writes effectively for both scholars and general readers. She lays out arguments underpinned by feminist critics such as Judith Butler and Iris Marion Young with discussion of Rita Felski’s “literature of shock.” Yet she also crafts her arguments with a structure that seems to this...
reader to be a kind of good storytelling as, for example, she explains the representations of Wevill in Plath’s poetry. Her discussion of “Words Heard, by Accident, Over the Phone” sets up the analysis of its “themes of defilement and victimization” (42) with a clear discussion of the biographical incident that inspired Plath. Goodspeed-Chadwick tells such stories from Wevill’s life not only in a compelling fashion, but also with utter reliability as she draws on various biographies and letters, making us aware of contradictory tellings. The depth of research here demonstrates that in the contested zone of the Plath/Hughes/Wevill triangle, this book understands what we can and cannot know and how we might make our best interpretations of the lives and the work.

Goodspeed-Chadwick shows us that viewing Assia Wevill in a limited, one-dimensional manner affects the ways in which we might see other women, both in literature and in our own times. Thus she offers us a view of Wevill as successful translator of Amichai’s poems as well as the writer of a very successful and praised advertising campaign. She argues that “one way we can redress misogynistic or sexist wrongs is to seek out, validate, and celebrate significant women and their work” (149). This book does so for Assia Wevill; it serves as a vital critical assessment to stand alongside Yehuda Koren and Eliat Negev’s biography Lover of Unreason. Doing as much for Assia Wevill serves as a model for all of us engaging in scholarship on or teaching the work of Plath and Hughes. As Goodspeed-Chadwick concludes: “This book will serve its purpose if Assia’s life can be viewed and understood as a paradigm that demonstrates the personal is political, that literature and the ‘real world’ reflect and inform each other, and that women’s lives and bodies need championing now as much as ever” (178).

3 Wevill’s cinematic “Lost Island” ad for Sea Witch hair color receives much discussion. Available for viewing online, it is a remarkable accomplishment illustrating, Goodspeed-Chadwick notes, Wevill’s glamorous intelligence and professional success (140-141).
WRITERS & POETS

SEBASTIEN AURILLON

SEBASTIEN AURILLON is a colorist who uses the constraints of outlines to tame the dynamism of the colors that he wields. A Parisian who was nurtured by his love and respect for the form and style of early 20th century European painters, he has managed to combine the inspiration that he garnered from that era to create work that is uniquely his own.

During the 1990s his curiosity in esthetics grew as he regularly frequented the Centre Pompidou and the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris. Later on, working as a young adult for French luxury groups in Paris, he was constantly surrounded with the intricate image of these high-end brands and found himself drawn to the study of volume, shapes and colors.

At the turn of the new century, with a growing passion for art, he began to teach himself painting and left the corporate world to fully immerse himself in his new artistic research. This new journey eventually brought him to New York City in 2006 where he lived for over 10 years, before relocating to Los Angeles.

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ELIZABETH BOLTON is a doctoral researcher and writer/poet at the University of Toronto where I study poetic literacy practices as they pertain to self-transformation, in the context of education. My poems and short stories have been published in Existere Journal, Open Minds Quarterly, EVENT Magazine and Mothers Always Write, among others.

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WILLIAM BLAIR holds a B.S. and M.S. in English and a B.A. in Anthropology from Central Connecticut State University. His other published works of literary criticism include articles on George Orwell and Mark Twain. He is a humanities adjunct instructor at Naugatuck Valley Community College in Waterbury, Ct.

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KYLIE BURGER is currently a Graduate student at Utica College in Utica, New York. She is studying Adolescence Education to be an English teacher, recognizing her role as a future educator to impact students through literature. Aside from enjoying the staples of being an English nerd—reading and writing—Kylie soaks up memorable adventures with her two dogs and cat, as well as her wonderful family and loving friends.

ANNIE FINCH

ANNIE FINCH’S most recent poetry collections are The Poetry Witch Little Book of Spells and Spells: New and Selected Poems (both from Wesleyan University Press). Her books for poets and poetry lovers include A Poet’s Craft, Villanelles, and The Body of Poetry. Finch’s poetry has been published in Poetry, The New York Times, and The Penguin Book of Twentieth-Century American Poetry. She holds a Ph.D from Stanford University, has taught widely, and offers online classes in poetry and more at anniefinch.com

JEREMY FLICK

JEREMY FLICK earned an MFA in Poetry from the University of Kentucky. His poetry has been published in The Matador Review and other journals, as well as a 2019 Best of the Net Nominee. Jeremy has poetry book reviews in The Hollins Critic and Rain Taxi. His website is jeremyaflick.com.

CRYSTAL HURDLE

Recovering instructor CRYSTAL HURDLE, after teaching English and Creative Writing at Capilano University (North Vancouver) for 35 years, is reinventing herself in retirement by practicing yoga (wimpily), cycling, jogging (badly—cyclists can pass her), weaving, and quilling. After decades of attending beginners’ dance classes, she’d like to move up to intermediate but doubts such will happen in this lifetime. A self-confessed Plath and Hughes addict, she developed and taught two courses (creative writing and literature) in which their work figured prominently. Sick Witch (2020) and After Ted & Sylvia (2003) were published by Ronsdale Press. Teacher’s Pets, a teen novel in verse, was published by Tightrope Books in 2014, and is part of the 2020 North Shore Authors’ Collection in the public library system. Her work, poetry and prose, has been published nationally and internationally. Her website is crystalhurdle.ca

DANAE KILLIAN

DANAE KILLIAN, PhD, is an Australian concert pianist whose expressionistic performances consistently engage with modern poetry, Sylvia Plath’s in particular. Danæ is a core artist with new music ensemble Forest Collective and an Honorary Fellow in the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne. She has been a Fulbright Scholar and an Endeavour Postdoctoral Research Fellow. Danæ Killian’s CD recordings include the complete solo piano works of Arnold Schoenberg, music for viola and piano by Ernest Bloch (with Barbara Hornung), and the chamber music of Eve Duncan, all with Move Records.
SARAH JOSIE PRIDGEON

SARAH JOSIE PRIDGEON is an Editor at a Leadership Institute in Cape Town, South Africa. She completed her M.A. in 2017 for her dissertation titled ‘A Woman’s Pilgrimage to Herself through the Mother Complex: A Jungian Reading of Selected Works by Sylvia Plath’.

DAVID RADAVICH

DAVID RADAVICH’S latest narrative collection is America Abroad: An Epic of Discovery (2019), companion volume to his earlier America Bound: An Epic for Our Time (2007). Recent lyric collections are Middle-East Mezze (2011) and The Countries We Live In (2014). His plays have been performed across the U.S. and in Europe.

FEDERICA SANTINI

FEDERICA SANTINI lives in Atlanta, Georgia, and she is the Professor of Italian and Interdisciplinary Studies at Kennesaw State University. A literary critic, poet, and translator, her work has appeared in many journals in North America and Europe, including Auto/Graph, The Ocotillo Review, JIT, il verri, and Snapdragon among others.

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HEIDI SEABORN is Executive Editor of The Adroit Journal and author of the award-winning debut collection Give a Girl Chaos (C&R Press/Mastodon Books, 2019) and two chapbooks. Since Heidi returned to writing in 2016, she’s won or been shortlisted for over two dozen awards and her poetry has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies such as American Poetry Journal, Frontier, Greensboro Review, The Missouri Review, Mississippi Review, Penn Review, The Slowdown and Tar River. She holds an MFA in Poetry from NYU. www.heidiseabornpoet.com

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ALICIA CALDANARO WILDFANG earned her Master of Library Science degree and a Specialization in Special Collections certificate that included working on the manuscripts of Athol Fugard, from Indiana University, Bloomington, in December 1999. She was employed as a librarian and later became a homemaker.

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WILLIAM BUCKLEY, PhD, FOUNDING EDITOR

WILLIAM BUCKLEY is a retired Indiana University Northwest professor and a poet whose work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, the most honored literary project in America. He also is the founder and editor of Plath Profiles, an online journal of interdisciplinary studies on Sylvia Plath, originally founded during his time at Oxford University in the UK.

ROBERT ERIC SHOEMAKER, POETRY EDITOR

ROBERT ERIC SHOEMAKER is a poet-playwright, translator, and theatre artist. Eric holds an MFA in Creative Writing & Poetics from Naropa University and is currently a Comparative Humanities PhD student at the University of Louisville. Eric’s writing has appeared in Asymptote, Signs and Society, Gender Forum, Jacket2, and other journals. Eric has released two books, We Knew No Mortality (2018) and 30 Days Dry (2015). Follow Eric’s work at reshoeemaker.com.

DOLORES BATTEN, ESSAY EDITOR

DOLORES BATTEN is an English Lecturer at Eastern Florida State College. She holds an M.A. in Literature and Language from St. Mary’s University in San Antonio, TX, and is an active member in both the Sigma Tau Delta English Honors Society as well as the National Society for Leadership and Success. With over 9 years of experience in the teaching profession, her current plans now include pursuing a PhD in Texts and Technology through the University of Central Florida.

KATHLEEN QIU, LAYOUT EDITOR

KATHLEEN QIU is a Los Angeles based costume and graphic designer. She has her MFA in Costume Design from the Academy of Art University and designs for various theater and film companies around the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles. She published her first book, Glass Domes, under the pseudonym Zella Faye Blanche. Follow her work at www.kathleenq.com and Instagram @kat.jlq.
My Face

by David Radavich

I don’t know you anymore.

Some stranger has gotten into my mirror
and changed all the locks.

Why should I look into that abyss?

Those eyes don’t see back; they stare
down and inward,
rose that has forgotten
its former vase.

History is over-rated:
its endless wars, injustice,
creases between rich and poor
that split open then crash.

The tsar never saw
his own serfs.

But now doesn’t
belong to me either:
this ghost in the glass
boarding a train
there’s no getting off.
XII

THE HANGED WOMAN