

Plath Profiles



Volume 13

Staying in with COVID Sivvy

by Crystal Hurdle

She'd be horrible
let's get that clear up front
unlike the colour of her mucous

in early stages of sinusitis symptoms
she would use up that window
ever narrowing
to party hardy
knowing she'd be bed-bound for weeks
with stuffed-up dead head raging fevers

worse than small children in playgrounds
worse than transmitting bat and bird vectors
she'd be an infection mechanism
her whole body a ready syringe
from the tips of her toes to the top of her head

with her brown roots
up in the air
Sivvy and her hair!
an updo ponytail, in coronets
long blonde like the girl
in that old Faberge shampoo commercial
you'll tell two friends
and they'll tell two friends
and so on
and so on
the TV screen erupting in multiple frames
trajectories of transmission

Sivvy's lank hair horse-like when Alvarez smelled it
even then she reeked of flu contamination, mutation

a mad bad Typhoid Mary
whispering love and contagion
into yet another new boyfriend's ear
why she needed so many of them
The graph reveals cases going up and up!

after a long monologue more nasal than usual
hand to sweaty hand, French kissing
moist laryngeal whisper to lure victims closer
PS I'm contagious, pass it on

the pestilential Plath carrier
No desire to flatten any curve
sheds fetish DNA and sore-throated sequins
on a red carpet to nowhere quickly anywhere

she unprotected from villagers in gloves and visor masks
she unprotected from the bees, from the potato people
yes, but more so
they from her

hive mind mentality
handshaking to seal the deal
index case
Victoria Lucas
heck, look to her
Sivvy no patient zero
always has to be first in everything

penicillin does nothing for a virus
but she'd demand more and still more
cocaine sprays antibiotic resistance
codeine, nose drops, pyribenzamine
tiskets in her up and at 'em skipping basket
lined with homemade hankies
not just a two bed-sheet cold
sick-bed food snipped
to bite-sized pieces
swallow, gargle, choke

she'd be the source of her own transmission
no sneezing into an elbow

would flagrantly pick her nose
odious olfactory organ
lovingly expound on the viscosity
the colour
the turgidity
essence of putrescence dabbed behind one ear
pestilential perfume
the mucous, its crusted jelly so jewel-pretty
she'd collect germy globules in bud vases
drop in insolent secreting flowers for the sickbed tray
actively injecting infection

never mind if this overachiever were pre- or asymptomatic
social distancing not for her
quarantines only of her own making
when she hunkered down
in writerly self-isolation

in the early days of her and Ted
delighted to quarantine with him
for longer than fourteen days
at least a full month
try for a pregnancy
replicate, multiply
exchanging oxycontin for oxytocin

Ted's lack of hygiene less writerly not artful
fingernail scrapings and dandruff on his desk
Sivvy would attack with spatulas and plates
Ted's befouled secretaire, his black pen, fabulous fomites
the love of his pheromone-y pong
careful what she breathes in
inspire so close to
expire

cooking exotic recipes
sustaining him affectionately, lavishly
like a mother bird feeding her young
I know you like your sweet and savoury Sivvy
Here's a loving spoonful
a couple of droplets for flavor
Sivvy's secret sauce
she would stir her brew
of contagion

making sure she used again and again
the same spoon
with which she tested for
more sugar? more salt?

A spoonful of Sivvy helps the medicine go down

and he
like others before him
begging bowl in tremulous inflamed hand
would come back for
...more

About the Cover Artwork: A Creative Exploration and Review of “Red Comet”

Reading Sylvia Plath has always been a pivotal encounter for me. Thus, the inspiration for this cover artwork draws directly from the unique experiences I have envisioned of Plath herself while reading through Heather Clark's *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*. From the beginning of page XX of Clark's Prologue, her goals for writing this work are clearly stated. The focus of the scratchy-lined drawing around Plath's body represents action and movement with “Plath Unbound”, as Clark herself unbinds the magic from the mythos in an honest portrayal of the things that readers might miss while untangling themselves from rumor and ruin and finding themselves inside Plath's own soul.

For example, while strolling through nature, Clark relates that both Plath and her husband Ted Hughes had found a wounded bird, having fallen from its nest. After a week of nursing, which proved non-beneficial, Ted wrapped the creature within a cloth and put it to final sleep (*Bird, nursing and asphyxiating of*, pages 400, 402-403; Index page 720). As Clark also relates on page 528, the burial of the bird occurred under a stone where it was later found. This shows both compassion and despair, as Plath confirms an incident which held such impact on her own emotions.

After reviewing Julio Cortázar's “Hopscotch” method of reading in a non-linear fashion and applying this open-ended structure to reading the detailed 41-page index of “Red Comet”, these understandings become amplified by inviting the reader to use this same strategy in order to pinpoint specific moments of Plath's life. This further illuminates Plath as a complex being rather than a 2d-biographical representation of herself according to a prefixed timeline, as her childhood years develop her into the full person that she became and provide insight into her psyche.

As a beekeeper's daughter, confirmed on both pages 3 and 714, Plath places bees as central figures in both her writing and her married life alike—this is why I have chosen to include this imagery in my art. Bees symbolize fertility, soul intention, and the Divine, placing Plath directly inside her more spiritual path. Part of the childhood with Plath that resonates with me the most is the importance of both religion and community in her formative years, as indicated

on page 1108 of the Index. The Girl Scouts were an important part of Plath's childhood development, as were religious beliefs; however, her Christian upbringing traversed several denominations, spanning Lutheran, Unitarian, and United Methodist ideals of spirituality (page 1112 index; pgs 6, 9-11). Yet, paradoxically, page 81 also details the luxury of just lying in bed on weekends, which I have depicted in the artwork, lamenting how quickly Monday arrives, denoting more of a personal journey through spirituality rather than traditional orthodoxy.

Allusions to music are also robust throughout her works. Specifically, the piano scene from "The Bell Jar" and references to the viola can be found on page 70 of Clark's amazing index. One needs only look towards the melody of Plath's own words to find music.

Based on the benefit of Cortázar's reading method, I propose to begin with the Index, and then proceed accordingly to the reader's interests. This sequence enables everyone to find their way to what "speaks" to them in Plath's life. By drawing your own map and connecting the dots as they resonate for you, this also creates another opportunity to appreciate Plath from a deeply personal perspective. She invites us in with her eyes—those which many have commented on as being a piercing blue (page 25).

Indeed, "Red Comet" can be read from front to back in its 1118 page entirety. But this is not the only path. The reader has choices to walk in nature with Plath in this way—whether it be in a sequence or on an adventurous path, or simply forging a path of their own. And this is what makes "Red Comet" so enjoyable and intriguing—it challenges the reader to make Plath their own.

— Vivian O'Shaughnessy

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "V.E. O'Shaughnessy". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Editor's Note

"We've been through a lot."

We began our call for papers for the 13th volume of *Plath Profiles* with this phrase, and I'm *still* being struck, constantly, in barrages with the brilliance of a meteor shower, by the tenacity of the past 2 years. I know I'm not alone in this. If we are meant to be "resilient" - the word one author in this volume uses as the catchphrase, of sorts, for optimism these days - in the face of COVID, then COVID itself, and the conditions it surrounds itself with, are just as resilient. Not to be a drag, but we are still in the state of muchness that "a lot" implies. Our CFP has now attained a sad irony. Whether it's COVID, struggles for racial justice, disquieting white supremacist rallies, emotional and financial debt and depletion, or just the omnipresent, complete, toxic (yet often uplifting) landscape of social media and the internet, we are still going through *a lot* and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. The magic light of vaccination has dwindled to a glimmer of hope. Yet here we remain.

Here we remain, gathering around the Sylvia Plath campfire, telling the stories that keep us here, keep us going, keep us engaged and feeling and being human. What story would Sylvia tell herself (reflexively or perhaps as a mirror) around this campfire? I like to think that she would revel in puns, or take a long sonic dive in the local swimming pool, step into the shoes of a janitor, or bring out her witch tools, just as the writers in this volume imagine. I like to think she would be *resilient*, too, that her biographical situation is not proof of escapism or what might be termed "weakness" by those who don't know Sylvia as we might and as we want to show her in the world. Sylvia's witchy bonfires and frantic *Ariel* scribbles were dreams of deep humanity, empathy, and connection in the face of the tragedy that is being human, being in a body, trying to be in relationship, being through *a lot*.

This is our campfire. These are our stories. And for now, let them be enough. We can survive - we can thrive - in the face of continuing uncertainty *because* we persist in believing in the power of poetry, of story, of beingness.

Welcome to Volume 13 of *Plath Profiles*.

I risked waxing sentimental with this note, but I'm in the business of granting myself more permission these days. Some of that permission blends the boundaries I put between myself and others in the hope of compassionate exchange. This may look like sentimentality, and so be it. Some of that permission includes binge-watching children's cartoons when I just *can't* with the world. In deep sentimentality and gratitude, this volume brings together some of the brightest lights in the Plath community in the hopes of pointing at a path forward in the face of struggle and in pointing out a Plath-path for this journal that is growing quickly in scope and review strength. We, the editors, want *Plath Profiles* to be symbolic of the community that gathers around Plath and her work, not just a publication. We used a uniquely symmetrical structure for this volume, centering around the fulcrum of scholastic exchange between Plath writers and scholars in Gail Crowther's new work and bookending with two iterations of a truly groundbreaking and heartbreaking poem by Crystal Hurdle. We hope you feel as deeply heard and felt by this symmetry and by all of the indispensable work in this volume as we do. We hope *Plath Profiles* can be a symbol and a light for you.

In the hope of further community-building, *Plath Profiles* is issuing a special call for BIPOC topics and contributors. If we've learned anything in the last two years, it's that we need to open the field - every field. Plath studies is a bit navel-gazey, and that can sometimes blind us to conversations worthy of notice, including the absence (and persistence) of race in Plath's work. We invite you to consider this topic, outlined in the call, from any angle for the next volume, and we hope you will share the call with your peers and friends. If you have questions about contributing work to the journal, please email us at PlathProfiles@gmail.com. We look forward to speaking with you.

Additionally, please visit the Indiana University submission page at <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/plath/submission/wizard> for electronic submissions.

There's no end to this work or to the possibilities we want to embed in this editor's note, and so we must abruptly, hopefully write...

Together in Plath,

Editors Eric, Dolores, and Bill

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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Pan/Pun:

Doubletake and Double Exposure in “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath

by Christopher Nield

Abstract

My essay examines the many faces of Pan in Sylvia Plath’s poetry and prose. I begin with an apparently simple question: why is the phrase “panzer-man” repeated in “Daddy”? I argue that this repetition asks us to look twice at the phrase – and to see that, in conjunction with the line, “a cleft in your chin instead of your foot,” Plath offers the reader a pun on the ancient Greek god Pan. I identify this as the Pan/pun: a ludic principle that elucidates key literary strategies in *Ariel*, specifically panic as an expression of the Romantic sublime and the use of satire to construct a drama of fertility versus sterility.

Introduction

Why is the phrase “panzer-man” repeated in Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy”? “Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You— ” she chants.¹ On the face of it, the repetition evokes obsession,

1 Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 223. All references to “panzer-man” relate to this source. In this essay, all quotations from Plath’s poems are taken from *Collected Poems* and are referred to parenthetically by page number.

and momentarily possessed by the poem’s incantatory momentum, we are unlikely to pause and probe deeper – yet it follows another puzzling repetition. When Plath says, “And my Taroc Pack and my Taroc Pack” (223), are we supposed to picture two decks of cards? This seems doubtful. Perhaps she is merely maintaining the rhythm of the opening line, “You do not do, you do not do” (222), which propels the blitzkrieg of rhyming that takes us on a nightmarish tour of wars, mass-murder, vampirism and the joys of modern marriage. But why does the poem begin with this repetition? Is it simply to dramatise the psycho-analytical category of repetition-compulsion? In search of further explanation, any close reader of Plath is likely to turn to her obsession with the double or doppelgänger. Plath’s undergraduate thesis *The Magic Mirror*² explored the double in Dostoevsky, for instance, and according to Plath’s notes, her *Ariel* poem “Death & Co” is about the “double or schizophrenic nature of death.”³ Is there doubling at play in “Daddy”? Seeking textual confirmation, we look again

2 Sylvia Plath, *The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky’s Novels* (Llanwddyn, Powys: Embers Handpress, 1989).

3 Plath, *Collected Poems*, 294.

perhaps at the reference to the “black man who/ Bit my pretty red heart in two” (222-23). In two?

Plath explained that “Daddy” was spoken by: a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the *two strains* [my emphasis] marry and paralyse each other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.”⁴

It could be argued, therefore, that the opening repetition of “You do not do” announces the theme of doubleness, explored in the battle between these “two strains” for supremacy. Certainly, the poem is constructed around opposites such as white/black, woman/man, Jew/Nazi and psychological/political, although these contrasts do not map neatly onto each other. Can we add exoteric/esoteric or literal/ludic? Plath’s mysteriously vanishing second novel was called *Doubletake* and then *Double Exposure*⁵: can we perform our own doubletake at this double “panzer-man” to see if there is more to this figure than meets the eye?

On the face of it, “panzer-man” has a single meaning. The speaker depicts her father as the driver of a Panzer tank as part of the Nazi war machine – and this image forms part of the poem’s fascist iconography that includes the Luftwaffe, the swastika and Hitler’s autobiography *Mein Kampf*. In German, “panzer” means “armour” so we could also relate this to the emotional armour worn by a domestic or political tyrant. Yet the repetition of “panzer-man” encourages us to look for a double meaning.

If we were to see (and hear) a pun on the Greek

4 Ibid., 293.

5 Sylvia Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume 2: 1956–1963*, eds. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2018), 814.

god Pan, for instance, our interpretation would be immediately strengthened by the following lines, “a cleft in your chin instead of your foot/ But no less a devil for that” (223), which aptly describe the cloven-footed god of myth. Note that the “panzer-man” is “a devil,” not “the devil”; nor is “devil” capitalised. This is both a Pagan fiend as well as a Christian conception of Satan.

The free play of the signifier (“panzer-man”) is released by this possible new signification (Pan) that moves away from what is literally signified (Nazi tank-driver) and, as we shall see, all semantic hell breaks loose. In fact, pursuing the multiple textual clues to the Pan/pun will reveal a fundamental organising principle hidden within the work of one of the 20th century’s major poets, one found in, among others, *The Colossus* (1961), her notes to her abandoned novel *Falcon Yard*, her curious experiment with drama, *Dialogue Over a Ouija Board*, her short story “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams,” and the *Ariel* poems.

Pan/pun as Supernatural Fiend

To discover how Plath saw Pan, it is worth turning to her guide to the Tarot, *The Painted Caravan* by Basil Ivan Rákóczi, which she bought in October 1956.⁶ The book begins: “Symbols are doors leading to the hidden chambers of the mind.”⁷ The “esoteric key” to these doors is owned by the “Master Gypsy” who “is generally a woman in spite of her title.”⁸ Plath claims this authority, referring to her “gypsy ancestress” (223). To use the Tarot is also to step into the role of great poet, with T.S. Eliot

6 Gail Crowther and Peter K. Steinberg, *These Ghostly Archives* (Stroud: Fonhill Media, 2017), 167.

7 Basil Ivan Rákóczi, *The Painted Caravan: A Penetration into the Secrets of the Tarot Cards* (The Hague: L.J.C. Boucher, 1954), 7.

8 Ibid.

as the key literary precedent. *The Painted Caravan* praises the "prophetic work" of "The Waste Land," composed from "consciously cultivated, but subjective, obsession with archetypes of occult law"⁹ and the book's climatic illustration is of Eliot's "drowned Phoenician Sailor."¹⁰ Rákóczi says of the Devil card:

To the Initiate this card represents the hidden face of Osiris, the true face of the Dark Sun, and corresponds to *Pan, the Goatfoot God* [my emphasis], who was the son of Hermes, said to be the originator of the Tarot.

Rákóczi describes how the Initiate and the Master (the Lady Isis) then marry:

They enter the deepest sanctuary and behold him whom we call *Pan or Faunus* [my emphasis] seated upon the High Altar, with a torch of fire between his horns, a beneficent power to those who love him, *striker of panic dread* [my emphasis] and even death to those that hate him. Pan was a God before all Gods came forth and is beyond all Gods."¹¹

Rákóczi glosses the card as "The Devil, Satan, Baphomet, Lucifer or the Master of the Coven,"¹² so this figure is multiple, ambivalent. In the context of Nazism, seeing Pan in "panzer" would present fascism as a horrifying, death-dealing perversion of Paganism, as well as Satanic from a Christian perspective. However, that puzzlingly doubled Taroc Pack insinuates that no symbol is singular, and while Pan is akin to the Grim Reaper in one context, he is the bringer of poetic inspiration in another. The Pan/pun is a skeleton key to not just one secret room in Plath's work, but many – starting with the library.

Pan/pun as Canonical Conversation

As a figure from mythology, Pan connects Plath to the literary canon via possible allusions to "Universal Pan"¹³ in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the Pan who sings of "the giant wars"¹⁴ in Shelley's "Song of Pan" and, in particular, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "A Musical Instrument," with its teasing opening, "What was he doing the Great God Pan/ Down in the reeds in the river?"¹⁵ The simple answer is that he is fashioning a pipe from a reed. Barrett Browning refers to the story of Pan's failed seduction of the nymph Syrinx, where in frustration, Pan "bound together reeds of unequal length, since their love was unequal, and so invented a new musical instrument, the reed pipe (Greek *syrinx*)."¹⁶ Curiously, even the myth of Pan the piper is founded on a pun. In the poem, this action forms a parallel with the muse singling out a man for his poetic vocation, one that promises ecstasy and alienation, as the reed pipe can never more return to the ordinary reeds around it – a sense echoed in "Mystic" by Plath, in which she asks, "Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?" (268.)

Look twice, however, at Pan's instrument. Pan "hacked and hewed as a great god can" with his "hard bleak steel."¹⁷ His call is "piercing sweet."¹⁸ What we see is one of the most pornographic of all Victorian poems. The parallel between Pan's ravishment of the reed

13 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. John Leonard (London: Penguin, 2003), iv. 266.

14 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Song of Pan," in *The Major Works*, eds. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 27.

15 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "A Musical Instrument," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume 2* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), p.1048, line 1.

16 William Hansen, *Classical Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 255.

17 Barrett Browning, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume 2*, p. 1048, lines 15-16.

18 Ibid., p.1049, line 32.

9 Ibid., 24

10 T.S. Eliot. "The Waste Land" in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 54.

11 Ibid., 55.

12 Ibid.

and Pan “making a poet out of a man”¹⁹ creates a jolt of pansexual ambiguity, one true to his origins: “ancient art depicts him engaged in making a pass at Aphrodite, chasing after a shepherd lad, or having sexual intercourse with a goat.”²⁰ The relevance of this to “Daddy” is in Plath’s depiction of the man with a “love of the rack and the screw” and her transgressive assent to these desires: “And I said I do, I do” (224).

Can we do a double-take at that repeated “I do”? On the one hand, the repetition suggests the eager submission of the bride. On the other, it evokes the “I do” spoken by both bride and groom, with the previous “I” incorporating both. In this sense, the speaker, who “made a model” of her father to marry recognises that, at the wedding, she played the role of both the bride and the groom – and, in that realisation, asserts her *Pandrogyny*, her integration of the warring elements within herself. As Rákóczi writes in his passage on Pan: “the Initiate and the Master are now mysteriously become one entity.”²¹ Absorbing the male principle, the speaker no longer seeks it in the external world and is ready to assert, “So daddy I’m finally through” (224).

Pan/pun as Confessional Code

If “Pan or Faunus,” as referred to by Rákóczi, was significant to Plath, we would expect to find this “Goatfoot God” elsewhere in her prose and poetry. Indeed, there is an extraordinary chain of associations around Pan in Plath’s notes for her abandoned novel *Falcon Yard*, which Heather Clark dates to late 1958.²² Plath writes:

19 Ibid., line 39.

20 Hansen, *Classical Mythology*, 255.

21 Rákóczi, *The Painted Caravan*, 55.

22 Heather Clark, *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2020), 541.

Denise Peregrine: Heroine, kinetic. Voyager, no Penelope. Leonard: Hero. God-man, because spermy, creator. Dionysiac. Pan. How to lead pan into world of toast and nappies. Falcon Yard: Love, bird of prey. Victors and victims. A fable of faithfulness. Risen out of depravity and suffering.²³

Falcon Yard was named after the place where Plath met her husband, the poet Ted Hughes in 1956 – and Clark states that the novel was driven by Plath’s desire “to write celebratory prose about her Cambridge experience and love for Hughes.”²⁴

In Plath’s notes, therefore, the imaginative links between Hughes as Hero, the God-man, Pan and Dionysius are laid bare. If these links exist in a “fable of faithfulness” and an escape from “depravity” it is not surprising that in a poem like “Daddy,” responding to Hughes’s unfaithfulness, the “God-man” hero reverts to a Pan-man in his cruellest, darkest form, a “Panzer Man” of armoured cruelty in a wartime landscape of “victors and victims.”

Pan as “Faunus” also appears in Plath’s poem “Faun” (1956). Here “stars hung water-sunk, so a rank/ Of double star-eyes lit/ Boughs where those owls sat” (35). These “yellow eyes”, “watched the changing shape” of a man: “Saw hoof harden from foot, saw sprout/ Goat-horns; marked how god rose/ And galloped woodward in that guise” (35). Note those “double star-eyes”: we are in the realm of the doubletake and double exposure, where a man becomes Pan. Diane Middlebrook argues that the faun is a reference to Hughes: “he turns into a goat-footed god before [Plath’s] very eyes.”²⁵ As readers, too, we are being told to see beyond the obvious, that poetry is metaphor and metamorphosis, a way of transforming

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath – A Marriage* (London: Little, Brown, 2004), 37.

reality. Look again and the closing lines contain a striking blasphemy, disguised by the lower case "g" of "god". The lack of an article prior to "god" implies that this man is the incarnation of God Himself, like Christ, but in the figure of Pan or even Satan.

Curiously, Plath looked twice at this poem – twice. First, at some point after reading Rákóczi, she changed the original title from "Metamorphosis" to "Faun." Secondly, in "Daddy," she evokes the Satanic reading of the Faun at the moment her marriage was breaking down – "no less a devil for that" (223). She also returns Hughes, in his guise as god of poetry, to mere mortal: "panzer-man" could be read as "Pan zer/the man" in a cod-German accent – this sounds absurd until we remember Plath recited "Daddy" to her friend Clarissa Roche in a "mocking, comical voice".²⁶

"Daddy" provides an even plainer example of intertextual subversion in the phrase "a man in black" which alludes to her poem "Man in Black" (1958), where the man is described rapturously as the "fixed vortex" (109) that holds reality together. In "Black Coat," Hughes sees this man as himself; he speaks of "that double image" and Plath's "eye's inbuilt double exposure."²⁷ Yet there are more such images.

Within two days of meeting Hughes, Plath had written "Pursuit," which begins: "There is a panther stalks me down/ One day I'll have my death of him" (22). In her diary entry for 6th March 1956, she states this is the poem "which I wrote about Ted."²⁸ In the prankish spirit of the Pan/pun is it too much to hear the near homophone of "panzer" and "panther"? How much separates the voiced alveolar sibilant and

the unvoiced interdental non-sibilant fricative? Very little it seems for Plath.

We find evidence she links Pan and "panther" in the version of "Nick and the Candlestick" recorded for the BBC in 1962. In lines cut from the final draft, she says:

The brass Atlas you inherited is hefting his milk-pillar. He kneels, head bent, a panther head on a panther pelt, gnawing his forehead, each incisor a wide, bright *horn* [my emphasis], the panther mane squirming, a million gold worms down his back, a bearded Greek. Under the gold bowl of his navel, where his phallus and balls should be, a panther claw – I leave you the mystery. It is not the firmament that makes him look so sick, this philosopher; maybe it's the panther jaw, the beastly lobotomy.²⁹

As if in a surreal painting, Pan's horns are glimpsed in the panther's incisors. The teeth enact a "beastly lobotomy" that links Barrett Browning's "Great God Pan" who is "half a beast"³⁰ with the inmates of the asylum in *The Bell Jar*. Even the "brass Atlas" undergoes a metamorphosis, this "bearded Greek" deep in an "Old cave" (241) is more "philosopher" than hero, more Plato than Atlas.

What this all confirms is Hughes's description of Plath's "super-charged system of inner symbols"(16), providing us with insights into the personal content of "Daddy" and how she transmutes it into poetry through fiendish wordplay. Indeed, the confessional is but one turn of the Pan/pun. "Pursuit" begins with a quotation from Racine: "*Dans le fond des forêts votre image me suit*", which translates literally as: "In the heart of the forest, his image follows me." (22). Read in the light of "Faun," the image of the panther pursues her in the woods

26 Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 277.

27 Ted Hughes, "Black Coat," in *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 103.

28 Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950–1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 225.

29 Stephen Tabor, *Sylvia Plath: An Analytical Bibliography* (London: Mansell Publishing Ltd, 1987), 143. Tabor sets the text as prose.

30 Barrett Browning, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume 2, 1048.

where Pan is said to dwell. Plath's "picture" (223) of her father, cleft in chin, will continue to take on meaning, as the panther's voice "spells a trance" (23).

Pan/Pun as Muse/Metaphor

Plath's most explicit reference to Pan is in "Dialogue Over a Ouija Board" (1957-58). This verse drama is based according to Hughes on the "actual 'spirit' text"³¹ of one of the ouija board sessions he conducted with Plath from late 1956 onwards in which they conjured up a spirit called Pan.³² This is how Plath writes about Pan in her journal on 4th July 1958:

Last night Ted & I did PAN for the first time in America. We were rested, warm, happy in our work & the overturned brandy glass responded admiringly, oddly, often with charming humour. Even if our own hot subconscious pushes it (It says when asked, that it is 'like us') we had more fun than a movie. There are so many questions to ask it. I wonder how much is our own intuition working, and how much queer accident, and how much 'my father's spirit.'³³

She adds, "Kolossus is Pan's 'family god'."³⁴ Note that they "did" Pan (echoed in "you do not do") and that Pan is seen as, possibly, her father's spirit, ruled over by "kolossus" which Plath returned to a year later in "The Colossus," where the shattered figure deems itself a "Mouthpiece of the dead" (129) This becomes the "Ghastly statue" in "Daddy" (222).

More "fun than a movie": the Pan/pun is a ludic spirit of intuition, chance, superstition and art, one that Plath neither takes as literally true or false, but useful as a prompt for

31 Plath, *Collected Poems*, 276.

32 Ted Hughes, *Letters of Ted Hughes*. Edited by Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 87-88

33 Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*, 400.

34 Ibid.

writing. In April 1958, Ted Hughes described how he and Plath "pool resources, you know, psychically" before stating, "it's like in a ouija board"³⁵. In "Dialogue Over a Ouija Board," Pan is indeed linked to verse, will sometimes "jog off" in "jabberwocky" (279) but is "a bright/ Boy, prone to compose queer poetry/ In apt iambs" (280), rather like a raddled, Renaissance Peter Pan.

In her introduction to her *Living Poet* broadcast of 1961, Plath states her poems are "quite emphatically about the things of this world", but goes on to say "when I say 'this world' I include, of course, such feelings as fear and despair and barrenness, as well as domestic love and delight in nature. These darker emotions may well put on the mask of quite unworldly things, such as ghosts or trolls or antique gods."³⁶

Pan is certainly one of these gods, but in "Dialogue Over a Ouija Board," what "darker emotions" does he represent? The figure seems to embody LeRoy and Sibyl's hopes they have been elected, like the reed in "A Musical Instrument," by the spirit of poetry. Yet he also represents the struggle for psychic dominance between them. The board between the couple, Sibyl and LeRoy, becomes a "battlefield" in which as "rival parents" they each want to claim "Pan's prowess" as their "own creation" (284).

The drama's relevance to "Daddy" is evident from its obsession with doubleness, twoness:

Sibyl claims that "Pan's a mere puppet/ Of our two intuitions" (279) and that he is "our first-breached brat/ Fusing two talents, a sort of psychic bastard." (280).

35 Hughes made these remarks on April 18 1958 at the end of a poetry recording in Springfield, MA. This can be heard at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqlhR4QIweQ>

36 Sylvia Plath, 'Introduction,' 1961, track 8 on *The Spoken Word: Plath*, The British Library Publishing Division, 2010, compact disc

LeRoy says, "Pan's laugh/ Is on the two of us" (282).

Sibyl accuses Pan of telling "two lies" (283).

LeRoy counters: "Call them two plucked/ Fruits of your willful [sic] tree" (283).

Sibyl says: "we two glower from our separate camps" (284).

As the dialogue draws to a close, Leroy states: "Let us stake/Death's two dreams down with the body that bled the vein,/ As is the use with vampires" (285). Plath enacts the same ritual in "Daddy": invoking the "panzer-man" in order to stake him through the heart like Dracula. The drama echoes "Daddy" at several moments, notably when the spirit spells out: "A plumage of raw worms" (279) and when Sibyl comments how tedious she finds this idea of "rot/ Feeding at the root of things" (279). We hear the same images in "Daddy": "the black telephone's off at the root/ The voices just can't worm through" (224).

Suitably for a work dominated by doubleness, "Dialogue Over a Ouija Board" can be interpreted in broadly two ways. Firstly, the couple come to a realisation of Pan's perversity and shock themselves back to life. Secondly, they retreat from the impish imagination and wake to the desolation of reality. In this sense, the work dramatises the doomed search for a transcendental signifier to grant ultimate singularity to meaning. The letters form words but what they signify is riddingly multiple: the sign, the clear flash of meaning from beyond, is never glimpsed. At first Pan claims to live "I-N-G-O-D-P-I-/ E" (282) then "I-N-/ G-O-D-H-E-A-D" (282) and finally, as Sibyl exclaims, "In core of nerve!" (284). The search for presence leads to absence. After the couple dismiss his messages, Pan insults them as "A-P-E-/ S" (284), leading them to smash the glass.

If God within a Christian universe is the transcendental signifier, then the principle of the Pan/pun is the opposite: it is the deferral of meaning that the LeRoy and Sibyl fail to accept. In their final shared chant, the couple wish: "When lights go out/ May two real people breathe in a real room" (286). Yet darkness suggests ignorance, not wisdom. LeRoy announces that: "the dream/ Of dreamers is dispelled" (286). By breaking the glass and "dispelling" or unspelling the assembled letters, the poets may have vanquished their muse. The fact that the "table looks as if would stay a table/ All night long" (286) leaves the couple subject to brute fact, recalling Plath's poem "The Ghost's Leavetaking," which depicts the moment of waking as "this joint between two worlds and two entirely/ Incompatible modes of time" (90). The "lunar conundrums" which seem to mean "so profoundly much" (90) disappear from "the dreaming skull" (91) and joy is replaced by the "no-color void" (90) of despair. The Pan/pun, with its perpetual doubleness, slides to a halt.

Pan/Pun as Spirit/Magic

One line in "Dialogue Over a Ouija Board" does rather chill the blood. Sibyl remarks mockingly, "who'll/ Come on call like that but Pan?" (277). Does this line gloss Plath's use of address in "Daddy"? If so, calling out to the "panzer-man" Plath turns poetic apostrophe into preternatural invocation. She is, in effect, summoning the same spirit conjured up in the Ouija board sessions with Hughes to take decisive control of their shared muse. The "dispelling" of Pan is revoked and Pan is spelled out once more in the letters that make up the poem – and we, too, are implicated in the ritual when we recite the words ourselves. In this guise, the phrase "panzer-man" signals a profound shift in the nature of the text. Poem as political commentary or poem as confession

transforms into poem as spell, curse or charm.

If we think of a spell as a genre, Northrop Frye's comments on its strategies apply remarkably well to "Daddy":

The rhetoric of charm is dissociative and incantatory: it sets up a pattern of sound so complex and repetitive that the ordinary processes of response are short-circuited. Refrain, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, pun, antithesis: every repetitive device to rhetoric is called into play.³⁷

Nearly all of these are packed into "panzer-man" itself; there is the pun on Pan; the repetition of the phrase acts as a rhythmic refrain of the opening line; "pan" and "man" chime in sound but clash as an antithesis, and there is a possible pun of "pa" or daddy in "panzer". The poem begins with the macaronic pun of do/du and is full of assonance: with "foot" "root" and "brute" (223) all carrying the vowel-sound of the "oo" rhyme. Frye helps us see that Plath aims to paralyse our will and then to free it with these devices, so that we experience the speaker's predicament. If Plath, in Rákóczi's terms, is the Master of the coven and we the Initiate, then we too become one in the moment of reciting the poem.

Pan/Pun as Johnny Panic

Pan is, as Rákóczi puts it, the "striker of panic-dread". This is backed up by classical sources. The Greek traveller Pausanias writes: "Causeless fears, they say, are inspired by Pan."³⁸ This meaning lives on in the etymology of the English word "panic," which derives from

37 Northrop Frye, "Charms and Riddles," in *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth and Society* (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1976), 126.

38 Pausanias, *Pausanias' Description of Greece, Volume 1*, trans. James. G. Frazer (London: Macmillan:

Pan³⁹. In Plath's short story "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" (1959), panic is pandemic. The speaker begins: "Well, from where I sit, I figure the world is run by one thing and this one thing only. Panic with a dog-face, devil-face [my emphasis], hag-face, whore-face, panic in capital letters with no face at all – it's the same Johnny Panic, awake or asleep."⁴⁰ Pan, God and the Devil converge again. Johnny Pan/Panic is the Lord of all, who suffuses all of the patients' dreams and fears, "injecting a poetic element"⁴¹ the speaker salutes.

The story offers a tragic vision of life split between the neurotic life-force of Johnny Panic and the bolts of the ECT machine. Madness or numbness. Poetry or conformity. Panic sees through the lies of authority, spread by the "false priests in surgical gowns and masks whose one lifework is to unseat Johnny Panic from his own throne,"⁴² but also leads to suicide: Johnny Panic's "love is the twenty-storey leap, the rope at the throat, the knife at the heart"⁴³. Throughout, the forces of society are trying to prevent the very breakthrough that the speaker is working towards in "Daddy". This is echoed in *The Bell Jar*, when Esther Greenwood is given electric shock treatment at the hospital. She says of the "cadaverous"⁴⁴ woman who attends her, "she set something on my tongue and in panic I bit down,"⁴⁵ as if she were being given communion. Esther's mind is wiped out "like chalk on a blackboard"⁴⁶; as if rendered blank by the father who stands "at the

39 *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 20 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.)

40 Sylvia Plath, "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 17.

41 *Ibid.*, 22.

42 *Ibid.*, 32-33.

43 *Ibid.*, 33.

44 Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 225.

45 *Ibid.*, 226

46 *Ibid.*

blackboard" (223) in "Daddy."

The speaker of "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" compares the people around her to animals who "can't see the slaughter house at the end of the track."⁴⁷ The soothing "talk, talk, talk" of these "psyche-doctors"⁴⁸ is like the "obscene" language, "an engine, an engine / Chuffing" (223) the speaker off to Auschwitz in "Daddy", where the doubled "engine" exposes the transition from rhetoric to reality – a terse rebuttal of the idea that language is a closed-system of signs.

One of the doctors' victims, Harry Bilbo, is returned to the "crass fate these doctors call health and happiness". He is a "changed man", "the pure Panic-light had left his face."⁴⁹ Pan returns to man, in a reversion of the metamorphosis in "Faun". Harry's name suggests a double-nature, both man and fairytale creature: the everyday "Harry" contrasts with the unusual surname "Bilbo" which recalls Bilbo Baggins, the hero of *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. Plath was reading Tolkien at the time; in a letter to Lynne Lawner on March 11th 1959 she mentions both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; she had recently finished "the last of the Tolkien trilogy."⁵⁰ This overlaps with the same period she wrote *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, which by December 16th 1958 she thought ready to be submitted for publication.⁵¹ In her journal entry for March 20th she writes:

Finished the Tolkien trilogy. A triumph. A battle of the pans and kevas. I don't know when I

47 Ibid., 26.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 27.

50 Sylvia Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume 2: 1956–1963*. Edited by Peter K Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2018), 302.

51 Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950 – 1962*, 441.

have been so moved.⁵²

Here impish "pans" personify Tolkien's forces of chaos, his orcs and goblins, and the fair-skinned Keva from Irish mythology (daughter of Fionn mac Cumhaill) personifies his elves and other heroes.⁵³ Curiously, this reference to devilish "pans" follows on immediately from Plath's confession that her "old panic" is "back"⁵⁴. If we look at the passage through the ludic principle of the Pan/pun, what we can perhaps infer is that Plath was deeply moved precisely because she saw in the rout of Tolkien's "pans" a symbolic defeat of her own "panic".

The nod to Tolkien in "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" reinforces Harry Bilbo's descent from imaginative delirium to mundanity, although this transition is expressed with drawling irony: the speaker herself might be deranged. Reading Plath's story one enters "one of those endless perspectives between two mirrors"⁵⁵ the speaker finds in a patient's dream. At the finale, Johnny Panic's "top priests" tied up in strait jackets try to communicate with her but they only manage "queer croaks and grunts, as if their tongues were locked in their jaws"⁵⁶ reminiscent of the "tongue stuck" in the speaker's "jaw" in "Daddy" (223). In the looking-glass world of the story, only panic sets us free.

Pan/pun as Panic Attack/Holy Dread

In "Daddy" the speaker's experience of panic is double: she is both victim and victimiser.

She begins in a state of extreme fear, "barely

52 Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950 – 1962*, 475.

53 The English "Keva" is derived from the Irish Caoimhe or Cébha, meaning "of the Fair Skin." See: Peter Berresford Ellis, *A Dictionary of Irish Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1991), 57.

54 Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950 – 1962*, 475.

55 Ibid., 22.

56 Ibid., 31.

daring to breathe or Achoo" (222), her heart "in two" (223) yet it is she who aims to inspire fear – and stop her daddy's heart with a stake. This panic is felt by the reader in the relentless rhyme, which is likely to make the heart beat faster, followed by the shock of the Holocaust imagery. In "Lesbos," the face of the screaming young girl is "red and white, a panic," seemingly both angry and ashen with fear. She is "schizophrenic" (227) or double.

In poems like "Lady Lazarus" and "Purdah," silenced women rise to cause terror to their oppressors. Lady Lazarus warns "Herr God, Herr Lucifer" (another double-faced Pan?): "Beware/ Beware" (246); the veiled woman produces Clytemnestra's deadly "cloak of holes"; the male hero is reduced to the "shriek in the bath" (244). Plath's biographer Anne Stevenson even claimed that she "picked up something of the terrorist in Sylvia's extreme personality."⁵⁷ This is tasteless hyperbole; I would argue instead that in her work Plath is practising an aesthetics of panic – poetry as panic attack – with links to the Romantic cult of the sublime. Indeed, Lady Lazarus stridently echoes Coleridge's poet-visionary in "Kubla Khan" ("Beware! Beware!") who inspires "holy dread."⁵⁸ Such dread is also found in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

Like one who, on a lonely road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And, having once turned round, walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.⁵⁹

57 Diehl, Madeline Strong. "A Biographer's Dilemma." *Michigan Today*, April 1990 Vol. 22, No.2. Accessed 02 January, 2020. <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu>

58 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kublai Khan," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume 2, p. 349, line 49.

59 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume 2, p. 342, lines 446-51.

It features, too, in Shelley's "Mont Blanc," with its vision of humanity's subjection to nature's brute power:

The race
of man flies far in dread; his work and
dwelling
Vanish like smoke before the tempest's
stream.⁶⁰

Such dread is visionary, granting the poet access to what Shelley earlier describes as "a trance, sublime and strange,"⁶¹ and later culminates in a celebration of "the human mind's imaginings" which redeem nature's "vacancy."⁶²

For Edmund Burke, the sublime is a "mode of terror, or of pain."⁶³ For Plath, this exultation of pleasure/pain not only relates to the sadomasochistic drama of "Daddy," but could be seen as her Romantic rejection of the "gentility principle" identified by A. Alvarez in *The New Poetry*.⁶⁴ Assessing British poetry, Plath said:

I think it is in a bit of a strait-jacket, if I may say so. There was an essay by Alvarez, the British critic: his arguments about the dangers of gentility in England are very pertinent, very true.⁶⁵

Plath intends to untie the knots of the strait-jacket worn by Johnny Panic's devotees – to

60 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Mont Blanc," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume 2, p. 669, lines 117-19.

61 Ibid., p. 667, line 35.

62 Ibid., p. 669, lines 144-45.

63 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Dublin, Graisberry & Campbell, 1779), 187.

64 A. Alvarez, "The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle," in *The New Poetry*, ed. A. Alvarez (London: Penguin 1962), 17.

65 Peter Orr, ed., *The Poet Speaks* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 168.

confront what Rákóczi describes as Pan's "panic dread"⁶⁶ and manipulate "madness" and "torture" with an "informed and intelligent mind"⁶⁷. Such panic not only induces the terror and wisdom of the sublime, as with Coleridge and Shelley, but shrieks of laughter too.

Pan/Pun as Satyr/Satire

The dance of Pan/pun continues, as the free play of the signifier suggests another figure in our pantheon. This is the braying, ithyphallic satyr. In classical mythology, the half-god half-goat Pan merges with the half-man half-horse. "Pans and satyrs become difficult to distinguish from each other, since satyrs come to be represented with goat features."⁶⁸ In "Daddy," this figure is recognisable from his "love of the rack and the screw" (223); Plath's original draft even read: "A man in black with a sexy look"; "sexy" then became "Meinkampf."⁶⁹ For confirmation, we see that in "Gigolo" the "man in black" appears again as a roué dressed in "snazzy blacks." The "smiles of women/ Gulp" at his "bulk" (267). In the earlier poem "Ouija," the figure that rises from the glass is less the disembodied spirit of the "Dialogue Over a Ouija Board" and more akin to the drunken satyr Silenus, sexually voracious and the bearer of wisdom, who "godly, doddering" spells out his "amorous nostalgias" (76). And as the figure of Pan is crucial to understanding the aesthetics of terror in "Daddy," so the Satyr helps us appreciate its style, its satirical iconoclasm. Satyr and satire are bound by literary precedent – see, for instance, Rochester's "Satyr Against Mankind."⁷⁰ Indeed, Plath's description "a cleft

in your chin instead of your foot" (223) is similar to Flanders and Swan's introduction to their satirical 1963 revue, "At The Drop of Another Hat": "satire squats, hoof in mouth, under every bush."⁷¹

To grasp Plath's method, it is useful to refer to Northrop Fry's definition of "satire of the high norm,"⁷² likened to Jonathan Swift. This satirist, "will show us society suddenly in telescope as posturing and dignified pygmies, or in a microscope as hideous and reeking giants."⁷³ Such distortions are found throughout *Ariel*. In "Daddy" we see the father as colossus, whereas the sky can only "squeak" (223) like a mouse. In "Stopped Dead" the millionaire "fatso" is sunk in his "seven chins" (230); in "Amnesiac" the husband is tucked in by "a minute doctor" (234). Plath nods to Swift in "Gulliver," where the giant male hero is held down by "spider-men" the size of "inchworms" (251). Satirical techniques in "Daddy" also include paradox, epigram and sarcastic baby-talk: "Daddy I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time" (222); "Every woman adores a fascist" (223); and "gobbledygoo" (223).

The spirit of satire, focused on the vices of society, may appear to contradict the supernatural associations of the Pan/pun, but the two converge in Plath's use of apostrophe within the tradition of the satirical peroration, the ritualistic casting out of stupidity or evil. Warren Chernaik speaks of the "terrible powers of the satirist to kill or maim" and "the curse, or the exorcism of the troubling demon" at which point "narrator and poet merge."⁷⁴

He compares the final line of "Daddy" with
(London: Nonesuch Press, 1926), 35-39.

⁷¹ Cited by John T. Gilmore, *Satire* (London: Routledge, 2017), 38.

⁷² Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 234.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Warren Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom in Restoration Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 77.

⁶⁶ Rákóczi, *The Painted Caravan*, 11.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 170

⁶⁸ Hansen, *Classical Mythology*, 256.

⁶⁹ Plath's first draft of "Daddy" is photographed here: <https://sinaqueyras.com/2018/04/12/sylvia-plaths-daddy/>

⁷⁰ John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester. *Collected Works of John Wilmot Earl of Rochester*, ed. John Hayward

passages from Rochester's "A Ramble in Saint James's Parke,"⁷⁵ Sir Thomas Wyatt's "My Lute Awake" and John Donne's "The Apparition."⁷⁶ Another example would be Pope's attack on the double-natured Sporus in "Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot": "His wit all see-saw, between that and this, / Now high, now low, now Master up, now Miss."⁷⁷ As discussed, such perorations are found in "Lady Lazarus" and "Purdah". Plath's *modus operandi* is caught too in "The Other" when she says, "I have your head on my wall" (202). Plath lines up her enemies and hexes them, one by one.

Celebrating the satyr in the Pan/pun allows us to see Plath's poetry afresh: as visionary satire, in the manner of William Blake, combining sublimity with scorn. *Ariel* is another *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The context of "Daddy" is a sequence in which Plath controversially identifies her freedom as a woman with her fertility. Thrown into chaos, she confronts the forces of sterility that imperil her, depicted as mocking exaggerations: the patriarchal "God-man" who is no longer "spermy" or a "creator"⁷⁸ but a murderous fascist ("Daddy"); the mother as smothering jellyfish ("Medusa"); the husband as tyrant ("Jailor"); the greedy capitalist ("Stopped Dead") and the figures of conformity (the villagers in "The Bee Meeting"). Identifying both this theme and its satirical delivery allows the modern reader to understand the context of such poems as "Lesbos," where homosexuality is sardonically evoked and rejected, and "Amnesiac," where the proto-feminist sister is seen in hallucinatory terms as a barren prostitute, driven by money – poems that could otherwise be dismissed as homophobic and misogynistic. Against sterility, Plath cherishes life in the shape of her children

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 234.

77 Alexander Pope, "Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot," in *Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 323-324.

78 Heather Clark, *Red Comet*, 541.

in "Morning Song", "Nick and the Candlestick" and "The Night Dances." At the centre of this procession of masks is the child in "You're": the one who has her "own face on" (141). In their original order, from "Morning Song" to "Wintering," the poems not only move from "Love" to "spring," they trace a pilgrim's progress from the Magnificat – "magnifying your arrival" (157) – to the blossoming "Christmas roses" (215).

Pan/pun as Domestic Bliss/Ruin

Ted Hughes provides a poignant coda to the Pan/pun in his poem "The Pan". Placed after "The Minotaur" in *Birthday Letters*, the reader is primed to meet the Pan of pipe and forest; instead, Hughes writes about an apparently trifling moment, when he bought a saucepan before moving into his Devonshire home Court Green with Plath. However, this ordinary scene is transformed by a supernatural touch: Hughes is being watched by his own doppelgänger and a woman who possibly represents Assia Weevil, his future lover and rival to Plath. We have entered a world of doubles and double-meanings.

Remarkably, not only does Hughes evoke the "panzer-man" with his internal rhyme of "pan" and "man," but his imagery of "baby things"⁷⁹ is strikingly close to Plath's notes to *Falcon Yard*, in which she ponders: "How to lead pan (sic) into world of toast and nappies." The mundane image of the saucepan insinuates that Pan, as their shared poetic muse, has been sacrificed to marital chores. In a letter in 1957, Hughes states, "I read the spirit of the Lord as the King of the ouija-board Pans, i.e. the one who does not come until you have walked through the fire."⁸⁰ In fact, the poem appears to play on the phrase, "out of the frying pan

79 Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 121.

80 Hughes, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, 100-01.

and into the fire." If the pan, "to heat milk and babyfood,"⁸¹ represents his domestic life with Plath that Hughes is about to reject in his love affair with Assia, then he ruefully intimates the hellish consequences. As Hughes squeezes back behind "the wheel" of his "Morris Traveller"⁸², the Tarot's Wheel of Fortune is about to take a sudden turn.

Two poems later, in "The Lodger," Hughes writes about a force "hid" in his "heart," causing "pangs" and "poundings,"⁸³ an "alien joker"⁸⁴ leading him to believe he is about to die of a cardiac arrest. I read this as Pan in his guise of panic-dread. Seeking textual confirmation of this interpretation, I note that the lapping of "loose blood" in Hughes's "throat" is compared to "a bird escaped,"⁸⁵ which in the image world of *Birthday Letters* recalls Plath's "Panic-bird."⁸⁶ In "The Bird," Pan/ic is the force that finally breaks free, smashing the "glass dome"⁸⁷ of the bell jar with the clarion song of *Ariel*.

Conclusion: Panorama of Pan

"Pan" as a prefix means "all"⁸⁸ and, indeed, the signifying power of the Pan/pun appears dizzying: Panzer-man, Pan the man, Panther man. Pan as fascist, Pan as Hughes, Pan as god of poetry, Pan as devil, Pan as panic, Pan as the sublime, Pan as satyr, Pan as satire, Pan as kitchenware. Pan is Pa, Pan is the Daddy. The Pan/pun elucidates the technique and content of Plath's "Daddy" and the *Ariel* poems, their exploration of sublime states of terror with the

satirical intent to break free of psychological and societal paralysis through laughter – confronting personal fears as part of an attack on the absurdity of the modern world at the very moment satire was booming in Britain post-Suez.⁸⁹

After "Daddy," the Pan/pun is glimpsed in "Cut," where the speaker's "thumb stump" evokes a goatishly jumping "trepanned veteran" [my emphasis] (236) – a lobotomised asylum inmate thrashing, perhaps, on the point of death. Later, in Plath's book review of *Lord Byron's Wife*, Byron's sister Augusta is characterised as "the hectic if unsuccessful Pandarus."⁹⁰ This allusion teasingly connects Chaucer's seedy procurer Pandarus in *Troilus and Criseyde* with both Augusta and Ted Hughes's sister Olwyn. In her letters, Plath states that Augusta "is the dead spit of Olwyn"⁹¹ and that, in *Lord Byron's Wife*, "so much is relevant, even Ted's attachment to his sister who never wanted him to marry."⁹² The reference to Pandarus, punningly twinned with the "panzer man", insinuates that Olwyn is a meddling influence on her Byronic brother's relationships with women.

In Plath's final letter, she writes heartbreakingly of "slipping into this pit of panic and deepfreeze,"⁹³ but where the Panic-bird defeated her in life, it soars in her work as muse, magical being and metaphor. The Pan/pun magnifies the myriad aspects of her poetry, rather than reducing it to any one category: we see it intermingling the political, autobiographical, classical, literary,

81 Hughes, *Birthday Letters*, 121.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., 124.

84 Ibid., 126.

85 Ibid., 125.

86 Ibid., 77.

87 Ibid., 78.

88 *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 20 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.)

89 See Christopher Booker on satire in the 1960s in *The Neophiliacs* (London: Collins, 1969).

90 Sylvia Plath, "Suffering Angel", *New Statesman* (7 December 1962): 828-9; review of Malcolm Elwin, *Lord Byron's Wife* (London: Macdonald, 1962).

91 Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume 2*, 923.

92 Ibid., 936.

93 Ibid., 968.

psychological, and supernatural, exposing these as distinctions that exist only in the conscious mind. For a moment, reading Plath, we glimpse the Panthalassan Ocean of the unconscious.

Ultimately, the Pan/pun celebrates the godlike power of poetry to connect: to wreak pandemonium on singular meaning as a panacea for what Plath terms "the separateness of everything."⁹⁴ The pun goes down to the smallest constituent of language, the phoneme, and fetches up a *Pantasmagoria* of semantic possibilities, putting the signifier rather than the signified at the "core of nerve" (284). Plath writes, as Jacqueline Rose says, "at the point of tension – pleasure/danger, your fault/my fault, high/low culture – without resolution or dissipation of what produces the clash between the two."⁹⁵ Plath's words are always double, always ready for the doubletake, the double exposure.

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94 Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 121.

95 Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago Press, 1991), 10.

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Plath's Bee Poems:

Flying, Freedom, and Fertility in Witch Imagery

by Dorka Tamás

Introduction

This paper argues that fertility in Sylvia Plath's bee sequence functions as a source of female power which links female sexual reproduction, creative production, and the supernatural. My analysis of the bee poems relies on the concept of fertility associated with female supernatural powers, which functions as a source of freedom and autonomy of the poetic persona embodied in the queen bee. I argue that the queen and the bees are often portrayed as diabolic and have witch-like characteristics. My reading establishes a connection between Plath's bee poems and popular twentieth-century anthropological works on fertility and the supernatural. The hypothesis that witches participated in a fertility cult was popularized by Margaret Murray; her theory had been recited until scholars of the witch-hunt demonstrated she falsified evidence and fabricated her theory. The other well-known anthropological work is *The Golden Bough* by Sir James George Frazer which I consider as an influence on Plath's thoughts on fertility. In the bee poems, Plath portrays the female persona conscious of her reproductive, sexual, and creative powers which suggest a connection between fertility, poetic

inspiration, and witch imagery.

This paper argues that the bee poems portray a witch-like poetic persona and recognise fertility as a form of female power which function as Plath's representation of her two perceived identities – the poet and the mother – in which she incorporated supernatural elements. I suggest that the poems which were written in October 1962, in particular, the bee poems which use the witch imagery associated with fertility and productivity, could have been a result of discovering Ted Hughes's love poems written to Assia Wevill in which he portrayed Plath as a hag. Plath's letter addressed to Dr Ruth Beuscher dated on 29 September 1962 gives evidence on vital information:

...found them --- sheafs of passionate love poems to this woman, this one woman to whom he has been growing more & more faithful, describing their orgasms, her ivory body, her smell, her beauty, saying in a world of beauties he married a hag, talking about "now I have hacked the octopus off my ring finger." Many are fine poems. (L2 843)

Two of the referenced poems have been identified (L2 843n1) therefore, it is clear that the letter is not a groundless allegation. Further, Plath's quotation from Hughes's poem which indicates his entrapment in the marriage echoes one of his earlier letters in which he claimed to Lucas Myers that he had been "wived, ringed, and roofed" (qtd. in Clark 55). I propose that Hughes's portrayal of Plath as a hag, who is a more repulsive and elderly version of the witch, influenced her to use the female supernatural figure as a poetic identity. This paper argues that Plath's portrayal of the witch-like persona in many of the *Ariel* poems can be read as a poetic response or reclamation of the hag-like identity Hughes depicted her with. In bee poems, fertility functions both as sexual-reproductive and creative-intellectual power which is the main source of female autonomy. By using the supernatural female figure associated with fertility originated from Murray's theory, Plath links female fertility with creative and supernatural powers.

To move on, I turn to Margaret Murray's witch-cult theory to fully understand how and why Plath could have associated witches with fertility. I also study Plath's knowledge of fertility sourced from *The Golden Bough* which argues for Plath's thoughts on fertility and sexual reproduction.

Witch-Cult and Fertility

In the early twentieth century, the Egyptologist Margaret Alice Murray popularised the idea of the fertility cult of witches. Her main book *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) builds on the idea that witches participated in a fertility cult during the Middle Ages and early modern period where they celebrated the Horned God who became the Christian representation of the Devil. Murray established her hypothesis based on the manipulated, edited confessions from different parts and times of Western-Europe, ideas without any grounding, and by

relying on her anthropological knowledge of tribal fertility rituals. Murray's witch-cult idea was inspired by previous popular writings, such as Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière* (1862) and Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) (Cohn 150-152). Despite some earlier critics, such as George L. Burr (1922), her hypothesis continued to be popular for decades and her entry on "Witchcraft" in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* remained unchanged, even, when it was reprinted in 1969 (Simpson 89). The more established critiques of Murray's witch-cult theory started to be widespread during the 1960s-70s, among the many scholars, Keith Thomas, Alan Macfarlane, and Norman Cohn criticised her work. However, the purge of Murray's theories from academia did not mean that her enormous influence was ended: her witch-cult theory influenced many of the Neo-Pagan movements. The most influential figure of the twentieth-century Neo-Paganism has been Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca who used several ideas from Murray's theory: she even wrote the introduction for his book, *Witchcraft Today* (1954).

Plath's relationship to the occult has been the focus of the past studies, such as the influence of Tarot cards: Mary Kurtzman's essay from 1988 "Plath "Ariel" and Tarot", and more recently by Julia Gordon-Bramer's book *Fixed Stars Govern a Life* (2014) which "decodes" the *Ariel* poems with the meaning of the major arcana cards from Tarot. Plath's involvement with occult practices has been examined by Judith Kroll in *Chapters in a Mythology* (1976), Timothy Materer in "Sylvia Plath: Occultism as Source and Symptom" published in *Modernist Alchemy* (1995), and Helen Sword in the essay from 1994, "James Merrill, Sylvia Plath, and the Poetics of Ouija". These studies almost always look at Plath's engagement with the supernatural as a result of her meeting with Ted Hughes which inspired poems such as "Ouija" and "Goatsucker". The previous

researches give too much credit to Hughes's influence.¹ For example, Plath showed interest in paganism from her adolescent age which has generally been overlooked by critics who explored her religious beliefs. Her letters and journals are well-documented with her thoughts on religion: in a letter from 1955 to her friend, Elinor Friedman Klein, Plath identified herself with humanist paganism: 'I am the tabu: the "Christian girl" (I can't convince them I'm healthy pagan)' (L1 1040). This view is also expressed in, for example, a juvenilia poem, "Sonnet: To Time": "So cry for the pagan girl left picking olives / Beside a sunblue sea, and mourn the flagon" (CP 311). She regarded the pagan girl in the poem as a representation of closeness to nature as opposed to the mechanical modern age (L1 396). Her religious thoughts and those represented in her poetry give an account of her views of paganism which she identified with nature-centredness. While there is no evidence that Plath was a practitioner of paganism, some of her views align with beliefs of the Neo-Pagan religion, Wicca.²

1 A common error which biographers and scholars have committed is to attribute Plath's interest in magic and occultism to Ted Hughes. Wagner-Martin highlights that Plath got a Tarot pack for her birthday in 1956 from Hughes in *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), 138. Print.

Yet, Plath mentions ten days before her birthday, on the 17 October 1956 to Hughes that she is reading Basil Rakoczi's *The Painted Caravan: A Penetration into the Secrets of the Tarot Cards* (1954), she writes: 'I began reading my "Painted Caravan" book; it is my favourite book'. *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956* (London: Faber, 2017), 1306. Print.

She only mentions getting the pack of Tarot cards from Hughes on the 28 October 1956: "he gave a lovely Tarot pack of cards". *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume II: 1956–1963* (London: Faber, 2018), 4. Print.

2 In 1954, Plath noted that her ideal marriage ceremony would be "a kind of pagan ritual", close to nature, symbolising "life force and fertility". *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956* (London: Faber, 2017), 688. Print.

Plath also often used the concept of "sun-worship" or "sun cult" referring to sunbathing, she associates this with

Despite the lack of evidence and scholarly interest in Plath's knowledge of Murray's witch-cult theory, my research suggests that she was familiar with the idea of the fertility cult of witches or had some knowledge of the Neo-Pagan movements in Britain. One of the sources could have been newspapers which often featured articles on the growth of Neo-Paganism when Plath lived in England. Plath could have read articles from *The Observer* whose poetry editor was Al Alvarez, Plath's friend and literary critic. Articles include a piece by Gerald Gardner on "Modern Witches" from 1956, a statement from the Archbishop of Liverpool warning against the rising immigrant pagans in Britain, and a report from Exeter stating that witches in Devon are still practising both black and white magic.³ While living in Devon, Plath could have heard or read in local newspapers about the claims concerning the community of Exeter. For her English 21 high school senior year course in which Plath studied *The House of the Seven Gables*, Plath educated herself on the subject for the project on Hawthorne by, for example, reading from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* a section on witchcraft laws.⁴ The same edition of the encyclopaedia featured Murray's definition of "Witchcraft" which describes the alleged cult of witches which Plath also could have encountered.⁵ It

paganism. *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume I: 1940–1956* (London: Faber, 2017), 732; 736; 1181. Print.

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3 Gardner, Gerald B. "Modern Witches." *The Observer* (1901–2003), Dec 16 1956, p. 2. ProQuest. Web. 17 Jan. 2019.; "'PAGAN TENDENCIES IN BRITAIN'." *The Manchester Guardian* (1901–1959), 05 Apr. 1956, p. 2. ProQuest. Web. 17 Jan. 2019.; "'Devon Witches Still Practising'." *The Observer* (1901–2003), 13 May 1956, p. 9. ProQuest. Web. 17 Jan. 2019.

4 From "Library of Sylvia Plath". *Library Thing*; Plath, Sylvia. *The House of the Seven Gables*; Project. Holograph with instructor's comments. 24 p. For English 21. Box 10, Folder 1. Plath MSS. II, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

5 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 14th edition (London: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1932) vol. 23, 686–688. Print.

is also likely that she encountered the fertility cult of witches in Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* which was influential in Plath's poetry.⁶ While to my knowledge, no work has explored Ted Hughes's familiarity with Murray's witch-cult theory, some of his poems show awareness of the subject, such as "Witches" published first in 1958:

Once was every woman the witch
To ride a weed the ragwort road:
Devil to so whatever she would:
Each rosebud, every old bitch.
(...)
Dancing in Ireland nightly, gone
To Norway (the ploughboy bridled),
Nightlong under the blackamoor spraddled,
Back beside their spouse by dawn

As if they had dreamed all. Did they dream it?

Oh, our science says they did. (THCP 80)

The poem describes several claims which can be found in Murray's book, such as the night rides of witches and sexual encounters with the Devil which previously has been regarded as dreaming, hallucination, or hysteria of women, claims that Murray dismisses (10; 177). Hughes also studied anthropology at the University of Cambridge (Brandes 69). Therefore, he was likely to gain knowledge of the then-celebrated witch-cult hypothesis. Plath likely encountered ideas about the fertility cult of witches through Hughes's knowledge of anthropology, interest in witches and folklore, and his introduction of *The White Goddess* to her. To sum up, I propose that to some extent, Plath was familiar with Murray's fertility cult theory described in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* which could

⁶ Graves references Murray's witch-cult theory in one of his footnotes in the chapter "The Tree Alphabet (2)" as supporting material. He also loosely uses the concept of "witch cult" throughout his book referring to the alleged cult of witches from ancient and medieval times. *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber, 1961), 201. Print.

have influenced her ideas on fertility and the supernatural.

Plath received *The Golden Bough* as a present from her mother; she first mentions reading Frazer's anthropological book in 1954 in a letter to her mother which she read for her Smith dissertation (L1 822-823). Her copy of the book is kept at the Smith archives, which contains Plath's annotation and underlining.⁷ Plath's journals and letters provide evidence on her interest in the concept of fertility which started to appear roughly the same time when she mentions reading *The Golden Bough*. In a letter addressed to a friend, Philip E. McCurdy from February 1954, Plath expressed her thoughts on wedding rituals stating that she does not "worship in the cult of the diamond" and her ideal marriage ceremony "would be best performed on a rock cliff overlooking the ocean (my personal symbol of life force and fertility) (...) a kind of pagan ritual" (L1 688). Here, Plath echoes a romanticised view of paganism which she associates with nature-centredness symbolising fertility. Some months later, in a letter addressed to Melvin Woody, Plath gives an account of her thoughts on fertility rituals criticising Woody's "sterile" ideas about reproduction:

Your concept of a completed ritual act of fertility is as incomplete and sterile as any I could imagine! (...) Do you accept the fact that the demand of fertility in fertility, creation (not of male euphoria) of babies, and the care of such? Can you deny that the end of fertility is reproduction, not just the hedony which you condone as "a ritual act of fertility allowing no aesthetic distance?" (L1 745).

In the citation, Plath condemns fertility rituals which are centred on male pleasure, she argues that fertility should focus on reproduction, therefore shifting the focus to the female

⁷ From "Library of Sylvia Plath". *Library Thing*.

perspective. The letter gives evidence of Plath's attribution of female and reproductive forces to fertility. Some years later, in a journal entry from January 1959, Plath writes about fertility suggesting the influence of *The Golden Bough*: "Talked easily [with Shirley Baldwin Norton] about babies, fertility, amazingly frank and pleasant. (...) Must read some Sociology, Spock on babies. All questions answered. Can I do the poems? By a kind of contagion?" (J 466-467). Plath also notes that she is not interested in men "at all", only in "women and womentalk" (J 466). The entry gives an account on Plath's recurring interest in the topic of fertility which she associates with a women-centred view of sexual reproduction. In the citation, she also associates reproductive fertility with fertile poetry writing, as a kind of contagion. Plath's phrasing suggests the influence of Frazer's theory of contagious magic (a type of sympathetic magic) which depends on the idea of contact as contagion (174-175). In this context, Plath suggests that fertile sexual reproduction would produce fertile poetry. To conclude, *The Golden Bough* is an essential source for Plath's thoughts on fertility and reproduction which influenced her thoughts on fertility before she became a mother. The evidence suggests that Plath's view of fertility was female-centred and reproduction-oriented which she also depicted in her poetry, such as in the bee sequence. To conclude this section, I argue that anthropological works heavily influenced Plath's thoughts and poetry on fertility, particularly on the fertility rituals which are associated with female supernatural figures and powers. In the next section, I look at the bee sequence, my reading comparing the beehive to a witch-cult and I argue that the function of the witch-cult hypothesis is to source the reproductive and creative fertility from the supernatural and establish the autonomy of the poetic and female identity.

The studies which rely on images of the fertility

of the bees often refer to Plath's earlier poem, "The Beekeeper's Daughter". Susan Van Dyne argues that the "pulsing sexuality of the female bees" functions as a threat to the control of the beekeeper-father (*Revising Life* 107). Plath's representation of the bees anticipates the fertile female group in the bee sequence: "The Golden Rain Tree drips its powders down. / In these little boudoirs streaked with orange and red" (CP 118). The sexual connotation of the boudoirs and the colour red establishes the bees as fertile women who are servants of the beekeeper-father: "The anthers nod their heads, potent as kings / To father dynasties" (CP 118). In "The Beekeeper's Daughter", there is a connection between the erotic and the deathly symbolised by honey (Scheerer 472): "A fruit that's death to taste: dark flesh, dark parings" (CP 118). The "The Beekeeper's Daughter" presents the queen bee as the fertile and sexual leader of the hive to whom "no mother can contest," which suggests her divine character. Her matriarchal character evokes the cult of fertility goddesses from ancient cultures, such as Diana (Frazer 40). Further, among Mediterranean and Near East cultures, bees and bee wax have been strongly tied with fertility goddesses (Carlson 2). Some critics, such as Tim Kendall also sourced Plath's bee metaphor from antique cultures; he argues for the influence of Plato's *Ion* which "proposes an account of poetic inspiration which draws a direct parallel between bees and the poets" (*Sylvia Plath* 128). This interpretation argues for the association of bees with creative writing which builds from the notion of poetic inspiration as fertility. To sum up, fertility has often been discussed in regards to the bee poems, my reading argues another reading and proposes the inclusion of the supernatural in the narrative fertility as female (re)productive power.

The Fertility Cult of Bees

In this section, I look at the bee sequence. My reading compares the beehive to a witch-cult and argues that the function of the witch-cult hypothesis is to source reproductive and creative fertility from the supernatural and establish the autonomy of the poetic and female identity. The most important difference between Murray's fertility cult hypothesis and Plath's poems is the idea that the witch-cult worshipped a male deity, the Horned God, also known as the Devil. Murray often likens her fertility cult hypothesis of witches to tribal cultures who held fertility rites in the belief of increasing the fertility of crops which indicates that she applied her knowledge of anthropology to the witch-cult hypothesis (Murray 177). Plath's bee poems portray a fertile beehive which is focused on the female supernatural in the image of the queen bee. This, however, is not in contradiction with Murray's witch-cult, but rather shows that Plath used other influences for her portrayal of the bees and the persona of the queen bee. For example, critics argued for the appearance of the *White Goddess* in the poems (Ferrier 209; 216). My reading proposes that Plath did not feel comfortable with the idea of a male-centred fertility cult, as suggested previously from her journals and letters, but considered fertility as reproduction-oriented and centred on women's experiences. Murray's witch-cult theory and Frazer's ideas about fertility rites provide a basis for Plath's bee sequence which portrays the "coven" of bees in which fertility and productivity become the main supernatural female powers of the queen bee and poetic persona.

I argue that the initiation ceremony and hierarchical structure of the bees in "The Bee Meeting" can be compared to Murray's description of witch covens. Previously scholars, such as Rosenblatt and Van Dyne argued for the interpretation of "The Bee Meeting" as a ritualistic initiation.⁸ I propose that the poem

uses supernatural elements and it alludes to an initiations ceremony into a witch coven. Some critics, such as Ford, propose a similar interpretation and argue that Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" short story influenced Plath's poem.⁹ Building on from this idea, I argue that the speaker imagines the meeting of the familiar faces as a witches' gathering in which she is initiated. "The Bee Meeting" takes place among a small village community who under their protective clothes become unfamiliar and strange to the speaker: "Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are the villagers — / The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees"; "here is the secretary of bees with her white shop smock"; "Which is the rector now, is it that man in black? / Which is the midwife, is that her blue coat?" (CP 211). The speaker positions herself as the new member of the group who is initiated into the coven of beekeeping. In the initiation ceremony, wearing specific types of clothes and colours is part of the ritual: "Now they are giving me a fashionable white straw Italian hat / And a black veil that molds to my face, they are making me one of them" (CP 211). Murray describes the admission ceremonies into the covens like a new baptism and getting the Devil's mark (74-75). In the poem, the speaker feels unsure about her initiation to the beekeeper community; she does not accept the bees, yet, she wears the clothing which makes her belong to the community. This can be considered a "baptism" into the coven. The

ation (USA: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 29. Print; Van Dyne, Susan R. *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems* (London: University of North Carolina, 1993), 105. Print; Perloff, Marjorie. The Two Ariels: The (Re) making Of The Sylvia Plath Canon". *The American Poetry Review*, 13.6. (1984): 10-18. JSTOR. Web.; Kroll, Judith. *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1976), 142; 145-147. Print.

⁹ Lindberg-Seyersted, Brita. *Sylvia Plath: Studies in Her Poetry and Her Personality* (Oslo: Novus Press, 2002), 11. Print.; Ford, Karen Jackson. *Gender and the Poetics of Excess* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 142. Print.

8 Rosenblatt, Jon. *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*

speaker describes the honey-making of the bees which throughout the poems appears as a symbol of their female fertility which alludes to the idea of the fertility cult: "The white hive is snug as a virgin, / Sealing off her brood cells, her honey, and quietly humming" (CP 212). Further, the stinging of the bees can be considered a "mark" of the initiation which the speaker does not get. Only at the third poem of the sequence, "Sting," does the speaker start feeling sympathetic towards the bees and identify with the queen which can suggest she received her "mark" from the bees.

According to Murray, the witch covens had thirteen members. She mentions the following roles: "the Devil" (a man dressed up in an animal disguise, black costume, who is the leader of the sabbath, rather than an actual religious figure), officers, leader of dance, and Queen of Sabbath (31; 188-189; 194). In "The Bee Meeting", there are nine members named if we include the queen bee, the magician-father, and the virgin bees (which are not numbered), the members of ceremony can be considered thirteen. In *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, Murray cites from confessions of accused witches to describe the identity of "the Devil" who is often referred to as "a man in black" clothing (34). In the poem, the rector is called "that man in black" which alludes to Plath's representation of the diabolic father figure in "Daddy" and "Man in Black". Among the village members, he is the only religious figure who takes up the shape of the devilish character. In Plath's short story about the day at the beekeepers, "Charlie Pollard and the Beekeepers," the diabolic relationship between the rector and the bees is directly expressed:

"See all the bees round the Rector's dark trousers!" whispered the woman. "They don't seem to like white." I was grateful for my white smock.' (...) "Maybe they want to join his church," one man, emboldened by the anonymity of the

hats, suggested. (J 657).

The bees' attraction to the man in black and his dark colour suggest their diabolic nature opposed to the protective white colour, which I suggest, alludes to white magic. The woman's suggestion in the short story that the bees want to join the rector's church indicates the "unorthodox" church of the witch coven. The reference to the speaker's magician-father ("I am the magician's girl who does not flinch" (CP 212)) also indicates that the village gathering has some kind of magical or supernatural element; Ford argues that the "magician's girl" self-characterisation associates the speaker with sorcery (145). The poem suggests that beekeeping (identified as magic) is the shared practice of the group members in which the speaker is initiated. In my interpretation, the speaker has to choose between paternal or white magic, which is the art of beekeeping, and the fertility of the beehive which stands for female supernatural powers. In "The Bee Meeting", the speaker distances herself from both the bees and the group members which means she has not yet decided which tradition of the supernatural powers she is going to take on. As the sequence continues, she identifies more with the fertility of the bees and the queen bee. To sum up, my analysis proposes that the gathering of the villagers in "The Bee Meeting" resembles Murray's account of the organisation structure and rituals of the covens. My interpretation of the bees' association with fertility offers a reading in which Plath engages with the supernatural connotations of the concept.

The diabolic nature of the bees is suggested in their characterisation as dark in "The Arrival of the Bee Box" poem ("It is dark, dark, / (...) Black on black, angrily clambering" (CP 213)), their attraction to the "man in black" figure, and the bees' opposition to the whiteness suggesting the white magic of the father-beekeeper. Van Dyne notes that Plath made the most revision

of "Sting": in the draft Plath gave much more power to the third person who is watching the speaker and the man in white who embodies the father-beekeeper (*Revising Life* 107;109). In the draft lines, Plath did not refer to the sexual nature of the queen bee; she is simply portrayed as diabolic. Van Dyne reads Plath's draft portraying the male spy on her creative process who can be both the father or Hughes which suggests that the bees, particularly the queen bee, refuse male authority (*Revising Life* 109). In this reading, the reproductive and creative supernatural powers of the beehive do not only reject the male presence but kill it – see the stinging of the father. In "Wintering", the last poem of the sequence, Plath explicitly names the gathering of the bees a dark mass which alludes to the witches' sabbath: "Now they ball in a mass, / Black / Mind against all that white" (CP 218). The lines express that the bees stand against "all that white" which can refer to the white and protective magic of father-beekeeper. Murray often quoted from the book of Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière* (1862), a historical study on witchcraft which was one of the first studies which popularised the idea of an organised witch-society consisting mostly of peasants. In his book, Michelet writes about the Black Mass:

His [the Devil's] nocturnal Sabbaths are merely an unimportant relic of Paganism. He honours and fears the moon, exerting as she does an influence over the productions of the soil. Old women are her devotees, and burn little candles in honour of Dianom (Diana-Luna-Hecaté). (98-99)

The quotation gives an account of the witch covens which, according to Michelet, consist of old women who are devoted to the Lunar Goddesses. He also notes the important role of the Moon which proposes supernatural female powers associated with fertility and witches. Although there is no account of whether

Plath was familiar with the book or the ideas presented in it, the bee poems show a similarity to Michelet's Black Mass idea, such as the diabolic nature of the bees and their worship of a female fertility deity embodied by the queen bee.

Throughout the poems, there are allusions to female sexual reproduction, such as in "The Bee Meeting": "Is it blood clots the tendrils are dragging up that string? / No, no, it is scarlet flowers that will one day be edible" (CP 211). In "Sting", production of the honey of the bees is often likened to female fertility: "Of winged, unmiraculous women, / Honey-drudgers."; Here is my honey-machine, / It will work without thinking, / Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin" (CP 214-215). The honey-making of the bees is a kind of fertility rite which is both productions of food and the sweet substance which is associated with female reproduction and stands for the autonomy of the bees. The poem "Wintering" is the most explicit about female powers and rebirth and also uses allusions to the bees' possession of supernatural power:

They can only carry their dead.
The bees are all women,
Maids and the long royal lady.
They have got rid of the men, (CP 218)

The first line presents the bees as being able to cross to the underworld. In Ancient Greek and Roman mythology, the bees represented a borderland between the gods and humans, having been linked with divine qualities which support their supernatural being (Carlson 19). The lines which present the female-only fertility hive suggest the assertion of female powers and fertile reproduction. Among the bees, Plath names the maidens and the queen who correspond to Murray's description of the two most important female roles in witch covens. The line, "They have got rid of the men" also suggests the refusal of the male deity whom

Murray identifies as the Horned God. Previously some of Plath's poems expressed interest in his figure and considered the male deity as a source of poetic inspiration.¹⁰ In the bee poems, the poetic persona sources her powers from fertility which is characterised as reproductive, creative, and supernatural. Plath's continuous assertion of the bees as women who are honey-makers suggests their reproduction-oriented female fertility cult. In the bee poems, the bees stand for a female identity which is maternal, sexual, creative, and supernatural suggesting that the rebirth of the poetic persona – from the controlling paternal and romantic relationship – is only possible in a female fertile environment. To sum up, Murray's witch-cult hypothesis offers a reading which looks at fertility associated with the supernatural as a cult-like female practice which helps to achieve the fulfilment of the female subject. In the next section, I focus on the portrayal of the queen bee as a supernatural female figure and look at her association of certain characteristics with a witch-like persona which appears in much of Plath's poetry.

Poetic Identity in Witch Imagery

In this section, I argue that Plath portrays the queen bee as witch-like with fertility and female powers. I also propose that in some *Ariel* poems Plath merged the poetic persona who embodies the female supernatural with witch imagery. In the bee sequence, the queen's and the speaker's identity become interchangeable, which gives an account of Plath's portrayal of the queen bee as a representation of her poetic self. The queen first appears in "The

¹⁰ Plath named the spirit who allegedly was visiting them in their Ouija reading session Pan. The Greek god has been also the name of the Horned God worshipped according to Murray. Plath wrote in her letters that she turned to Pan asking for subjects to her poetry writing (L2 258-259). His presence is suggested in the poem, "Ouija" ("The old god, too, writes aureate poetry") and in "Faun" ("Goat-horns. Marked how god rose / And galloped woodward in that guise") (CP 35; 77).

Bee Meeting" poem in which she is described as a wise and old woman: "Is she hiding, is she eating honey? She is very clever. / She is old, old, old, she must live another year, and she knows it" (CP 212). While undergoing the initiation ceremony, the speaker is the most interested in the queen bee's character: "The old queen does not show herself, is she so ungrateful?" (CP 212). The queen bee is the matriarch of the bee colony who, similar to the other bees, has supernatural powers. Besides being the central figure of the fertility bee-cult, her most important supernatural power is that she is able to be resurrected – similar to other poetic personas in the *Ariel* poems. She has powers, as "The Beekeeper's Daughter" poem claims, "no mother can contest" (CP 118) which makes her the most fertile and most powerful among the bees. The draft of "Stings" also suggests that she is "Black as the devil" which proposes the queen bee's diabolic powers. The queen bee has also been likened to a "totem of female power"; her role is essential to the survival of the bee colony (Britzolakis 98). In "The Bee Meeting", the queen bee is portrayed as a murderess who escapes from the beekeepers wanting to sacrifice her: "The upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her. / The villagers are moving the virgins, there will be no killing" (CP 212). The lines associate the queen with aerial qualities. Margaret Dickie argues that description of the queen bee alludes to two Egyptian goddesses: Sekhmet, the goddess of warriors and healing, and Bast, who is known as the lioness goddess (Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes 164-165). In my view, Isis had a greater influence on Plath's bee poems. Isis is the goddess of magic and life and is considered a mother goddess, all of which describe many of the characteristics of the queen bee. Plath and Hughes had a large engraving of Isis, and Plath also gave her daughter the name Isis as an "astrological name" (L2 406; 518) which further suggests the importance of Isis in Plath's life. In the sixth

volume of *The Golden Bough*, Frazer argues that Isis was also known as the goddess of corn, therefore associated with fertile land (116-117). For Plath, Isis also could have symbolised a maternal witch-goddess.

In "Sting", the queen's and the speaker's relationship become tied together; the speaker explicitly names herself a queen who experiences a rebirth. Similarly, the queen bee wakes up from her hibernation. The "almost magical rebirth" portrayed in the bee poems further suggests the engagement with the supernatural in the sequence (Wood 117).

Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of
glass?

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet (CP 215)

Critics such as Van Dyne have noted the similarities of the "lion-red" characterisation of the queen bee to the resurrected self in "Lady Lazarus" who asserts: "I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" and the burning virgin in "Fever 103°" (*Revising Life* 112-113). In other words, Plath's portrayal of the poetic personas in the poems she wrote in October 1962 show resemblances, are often characterised as fertile or sexual, are reborn, and struggle with a male opponent for survival. Like the queen bee, the speaker of "Lady Lazarus" also flies – in the body of a phoenix – and rejects men as equals. The poetic personas are characterised by the colour red which has sexual and reproductive connotations and alludes to burning signifying rebirth. Further, "Witch Burning" also gives evidence of Plath's early association of the witch figure with fiery red which burns her: "The red tongues will teach the truth" (CP 135).

I suggest that Plath associated red hair

with a sexual and witchy identity which her correspondence gives an account of. In the letter addressed to Dr Beuscher from 1961, Plath writes about her "Wicked Witch Trauma" which she explains was triggered by Olwyn Hughes's hostility towards her during the Christmas she spent at the Hughes's in Yorkshire. Here, Plath describes Olwyn's behaviour, attributing special function to her red hair as associated with promiscuous sexuality: "She acted like a jealous mistress, down to the red-dyed hair" (L2 564). Plath notes that Olwyn was "lecturing" her about "the meaning of womanhood" which Plath considered offensive as Olwyn Hughes did not have children. In the same paragraph, Plath identifies her husband with "Prince Charming" for whom she and Olwyn (identified as the wicked witch) had to compete. The letter is essential to understanding Plath's associations of red hair and sexuality with witch imagery. I argue that Plath used this connection to portray some of her poetic personas in the *Ariel* poems in which the colour red suggests witch-like characteristics. On the other hand, redness associated with fire and rebirth also appears in "Witch Burning". In the poem from 1959, Plath did not use the witch as an embodiment of her poetic persona, yet, it gives an account on her interest in the supernatural female figure whose rebirth symbolises flying, freedom, and unrestricted sexuality. As I proposed at the beginning, the allusions to witch-like figures in the poems Plath wrote in October 1962 are, in some way, the result of wanting to reclaim her poetic identity as hag-like. She transforms the hag into a sexual, fertile, and creative poetic persona and uses her creative and maternal fertility which Plath felt inspired by. The red hair which Plath previously associated with the unsympathetic characteristics of a promiscuous and witchy Olwyn becomes the "lion-red body" of the queen bee and the phoenix-like red hair of the speaker in "Lady Lazarus". Therefore, for Plath, the colour red which suggests fertility,

sexuality, and rebirth was also associated with the witch-like figure.

In "Wintering", there is no mention of the queen bee, which can be read as the speaker having completely merged with the queen's persona. The poem focuses on female survival, the Black Mass of the beehive, and recounting of her possessions: "I have my honey, / Six jars of it, / Six cat's eyes in the wine cellar" (CP 217). The lines give an account of the fertile product of the beekeeping associated with female sexuality. The speaker's reciting of her honey collection echoes the listing of ingredients of brew which can be read as a protective charm used for the survival of bees. Although in "Wintering" the relationship between the speaker and the bees reaches its final state, there is still a distance between the hive and the speaker/queen who never fully belongs to the colony: "Neither cruel nor indifferent, / Only ignorant. / This is the time of hanging on for the bees—the bees / So slow I hardly know them" (CP 218). Britzolakis argues that in this poem the allegory of a matriarchal community is undeveloped, and "Wintering" concludes the metaphor of beekeeping as "the materiality of writing as social practice" which highlights the relationship between poetic inspiration and fertility in the poem (99). The end line ("The bees are flying. They taste the spring." (CP 219)) uses the analogy between the renewal of nature and female reproduction (Van Dyne, *Revising Life* 114). My analysis of the bee poems argues that Plath used witch imagery to portray the bees as dark and diabolic and fertile flying women, which alludes to Margaret Murray's fertility cult hypothesis. Plath's portrayal of the supernatural character of the female bees is suggested in her continuous reference to the diabolic nature of the bees, the association of beekeeping with magic, the resurrection of the queen bee, and the allusions to the witches' gathering. To sum up, I argue that Plath used the witch imagery associated with fertility to

assert the supernatural qualities she attributed to her reproductive and productive powers with which she also responded in her poems to the hag-like identity with which Hughes described her.

Conclusion

The bee poems give an account of Plath's wish for creative and female autonomy in which fertility associated with women and the supernatural plays a crucial role. My analysis argues that the bee sequence can be read not only as Plath's poetic expression of female powers and autonomy but of the use of the supernatural, particularly the witch figure, as a source of poetic inspiration. Conclusively, the bee sequence reimagines fertility as a supernatural female power of the bees who thrive creatively and sexually. Their flying movements further suggest freedom and allusion to witch imagery.

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Window

by Ron Riecki

Window. The COVID ward, modern consumption itself—
Bodies in sheets, cold, shivering, fevers' fire,
meditating in boredom in rooms numb with television hovering
over their scalding heads, the geography
of poverty, how hearts coagulate, how some can't move, paralyzed.

COVID ward window. The dead monologues. How I look out, see shadow
of trees, a park, a basketball rim haloing nothing, a brick wall,
behind it, kids playing, in secret, passing a football back and forth in Redding's sick air,
rusty with fireplaces set on fire, smoke everywhere,
planes opening up to release fire retardant something that does nothing at all.

Window. A spider sitting
and sitting while the center of the ward wails for a loveless prayer that they can breathe.

Last Minute

by Austin Alexis

I no longer know their dimension.

They sing from its heartless core,
these muses, belting out
creepy cadences I once deciphered
but now cringe at, uncomprehending.

Coming from my low-tech stove,
the muses' chanting lacks effective volume.
If they'll ask me to pick up my pen
to pen a verse or even a letter,
I'll murmur about missing ears.

Snug in my realm of fumes,
only the loss of oxygen makes sense.
Lost in a self-induced drowsiness,
my mind stays too loose to fathom
any instructions, sensations or inspiration

other than this safe shift
to a phase where sound shreds itself,
this funky transition to a silence
even my babies' cries die in,
this walled-in sanctuary

of a void that harbors peace.

Drinks with Sylvia

Interview and Review

"I began to think vodka was my drink at last. It didn't taste like anything, but it went straight down into my stomach like a sword swallows' sword and made me feel powerful and godlike."

- Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

The Dual Literary Biography of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton: *A Review of* *Three-Martini Afternoons at the Ritz: The Rebellion of* *Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton by Gail Crowther* *by Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick*

Gail Crowther's *Three-Martini Afternoons at the Ritz: The Rebellion of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton* provides an expert account of two of the most important poets of the twentieth century: Pulitzer-Prize winners Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and Anne Sexton (1928-1974). Through the course of the book, we engage with the lives and works of these two writers topically and thematically, a powerful and effective way to structure a dual literary biography. As a result of the format and approach, we can see the similarities and differences emerge between Plath and Sexton, whom Crowther grounds in their literary, cultural, social, and historical contexts. Moreover, Crowther's writing will captivate scholarly readers and a more general reading public as she deftly synthesizes archival materials, literary texts, biographies, and interviews. The majority of the interviews have not been previously cited, and an insert of photographic images, several published for the first time, is included as a noteworthy addition. Crowther's book sets the example for a dual literary biography in its encompassing and smart treatment, and it is remarkable, too, in its empathetic and energetic tone: this reader marveled at how Crowther produced a work

that is both scholarly and a page turner.

From the very beginning, we are alerted to the fact that this book is a significant contribution to Plath studies and Sexton studies because it assumes an unabashedly feminist, literary, biographical, and sociological framework within which to interpret and present these women writers and their contributions. Crowther explains how Plath and Sexton constituted literary, feminist rebels before the advent of second wave feminism, how they "trouble what society and culture does to women" and how their personal and literary "voices disrupt dominant ideals" (xvii). We see the structure deftly laid bare in the chapter titles: *Rebels, Early Days, Sex, Marriage, Mothering, Writing, Mental Illness, and Suicide*, followed by an Epilogue, in which we encounter thoughtful reflections about the contours of Plath and Sexton studies from the 1960s to our own day. The book traces how Plath and Sexton participated in a social rebellion, one in which the domestic merges with literary and business worlds; women function as agents and authors of their own lives; and women become agitating advocates for women's participation, equity, and equality in all aspects of their lives, despite

the dearth of feminist models. Part of Plath's and Sexton's appeal might lie in their hybridity: as both conformists and rebels, they illustrated and proved what female genius can do and what female rebelliousness can look like in the twentieth century, but their lives and work also surface the obstacles and hardships faced by women who assume the roles of poet-wife-mother simultaneously and who both strive for and chafe under conformity. Crowther's intersectional feminist approach takes into account gender but also race, social class, age, ability, and sexual orientation, all the while locating these within specific geographical, historical, and cultural moments and spaces in the lives and literature of the authors. One cannot underscore enough how significant her approach is: it promises to reorient us as readers and scholars in the literary scholarship and in our cultural understanding of these two literary giants. Consequently, Crowther refuses to abide by sexist overtures; she refutes the notion of Plath and Sexton as "crazy, suicidal women, an attitude that impressively manages to sweep up sexism and stigma toward mental illness and suicide in one powerful ball of dismissal" (8). Rather than let sexist jokes about Plath's suicide slide, for instance, or unchecked bias run rampant in literature as a discipline, Crowther recognizes them for what they are. A focus of this book is to "humanize the women," just as archival artifacts and realia do (9).

In an unflinching and courageous fashion, this book takes on gendered violence, trauma, and other ugly subjects with vigor and sensitivity. We encounter topics ranging from domestic violence to emotional and symbolic violence in chapters three, four, and five. One takeaway: Plath and Sexton's lives offer material and lessons we can learn from and from which we *should* learn. With sensitivity, Crowther delves into the common scenario that those who are abused and traumatized find themselves: they can turn their pain and suffering inward and

defeat themselves, as appears to be Plath's case, or they can turn it outward and hurt those closest to them, as we see with Sexton. Another unsavory subject is inequality and/or inequity in the workplace, specifically in the literary marketplace. In forging ahead as literary rebels, Plath and Sexton experienced, at times, what we would call imposter syndrome today (152, 154-55), despite the fact that they were highly regarded poets. But we must remember that they worked in a sexist field, one that exhibited a "lack of diversity, lack of equal pay, lack of recognition, [and] sexist reviews" (146-47). Chapters seven and eight deal with mental illness and suicide respectively, and readers learn that, notwithstanding having advocates on their side, Plath and Sexton suffered tremendously through poor healthcare (i.e., botched electroconvulsive therapy and poorly understood and poorly monitored experimental drug therapies). It is all the more remarkable that Plath and Sexton led, as Crowther summarizes in chapter eight with respect to Plath, a life that can best be described as "[r]esilient, strong, intelligent, caring, political, and no-nonsense" (210).

Powerfully, Crowther concludes that we cannot do away with Plath or Sexton because the lives they lived and the literature they produced comprise a legacy that led us to where we are today: "They played their part in blasting open taboo subjects that have allowed the rest of us to walk much easier down a path that was pretty much forbidden to them" (233). Furthermore, we must acknowledge that they engaged in "exposing all those wrongs that still exist, and all those universal themes that will never go away: love, death, sex, pain, joy. They were so ahead of their time and the ripple effect of their rebellion travels through the decades, playing its own part in the long, slow struggle that is social change" (232). We have Crowther's book to thank for centering and delineating these important lives, literary texts, and legacies.

“Kicking Down the Door of Fame”: An Interview with Gail Crowther, Plath Scholar and Author of *Three Martini Afternoons at the Ritz*

by Catherine Rankovic

Catherine Rankovic (CR): I am interested in hearing about what seem to be the troves of new information you have found about Sexton and Plath; for example, the trove that yielded the 1963 photo of Court Green.

Gail Crowther (GC): I think the biggest treasure trove of material to arrive while I was writing *Three-Martinis* was the release of the Harriet Rosenstein papers at Emory. This was a massive thing and contained so much new information, new perspectives, new details that it took a long time to sift through while also trying to hit deadline. The beautiful photograph of Court Green in 1963 came from the Estate of Elizabeth Sigmund, along with an original picture of Plath and her children from 1962 (not included in the book) and photographs from Heptonstall taken in the 1970s. In terms of Sexton material, I spent a very intense week in her archive at the Harry Ransome Center which is wonderful, but I have to say I think my best insight into her came from invaluable exchanges with her daughter, Linda, who was so supportive of my book and was able to share some stories (good and bad) about her mother. The other trove that I am proud of are the professional photographs taken of

significant places connected to Plath and Sexton – the poetry workshop classroom in Boston University and the building at Bay State Road. But also really beautiful photographs of their two graves; Plath’s in rambling, wild Heptonstall, and Sexton’s under snow in Jamaica Plain.

Plath has pretty much haunted my imagination since I was 13 years old, so writing about her always feels like pulling on an exceptionally welcome and comfortable old coat that you love.

CR: From all the material you must have had to gather in order to write *Three-Martinis*, even going so far as to read and comment on Plath’s and Sexton’s address books, you must have left out some utterly fascinating information that you dearly wanted to explore further. What was left out? Will we ever hear about it?

GC: Yes, there is always so much that either never makes it into the book or gets edited out at some stage. I started writing about some of these things on my blog which you can read

about at <https://gailcrowther.com/> and I will probably continue to publish the odd piece on there about it. Some of the most frustrating things I had to leave out were photographs, just because it was impossible to either clear copyright, or because they were way too expensive to include. Other bits of information I suspect will form future papers and articles. But I also Tweet and Instagram quite a few archive treasures as well. The only things that will likely never see the light of day are the stories told to me off the record with a promise to never publish them. Some of these are rather eyebrow raising, but I like to think I'm an ethical researcher and if someone asks for my confidence they will get it. Though I suppose these stories now form part of my archive, so in the future if anyone ever wants that...

CR: Both Plath and Sexton left behind thousands of pages of writing and numerous recordings. So you had to be very selective when choosing which of their works most illuminated the points you were making. You did an amazing job of selecting. What was your thinking as you chose and wrote?

GC: I think because I was trained to write a PhD, I always set off a project whether that's a paper or a book with concrete research questions – usually no more than about two. What are my main aims and what do I want to explore? This tends to keep research within fairly strict boundaries and with a clear focus. This doesn't mean I'm not flexible because obviously certain information can come to light that throws a whole new perspective on things. But even so, having a clear idea of what is being explored helps this selection process immensely, like training a finely tuned lens. In the case of *Three-Martinis*, it was very much all about how rebellious Plath and Sexton were for their cultural moment (and ways in which they were not). I also wanted a contemporary angle to this as well, though – how does it compare to

today? What role did they play, as Sexton put it, in kicking down the door of fame for the rest of us?

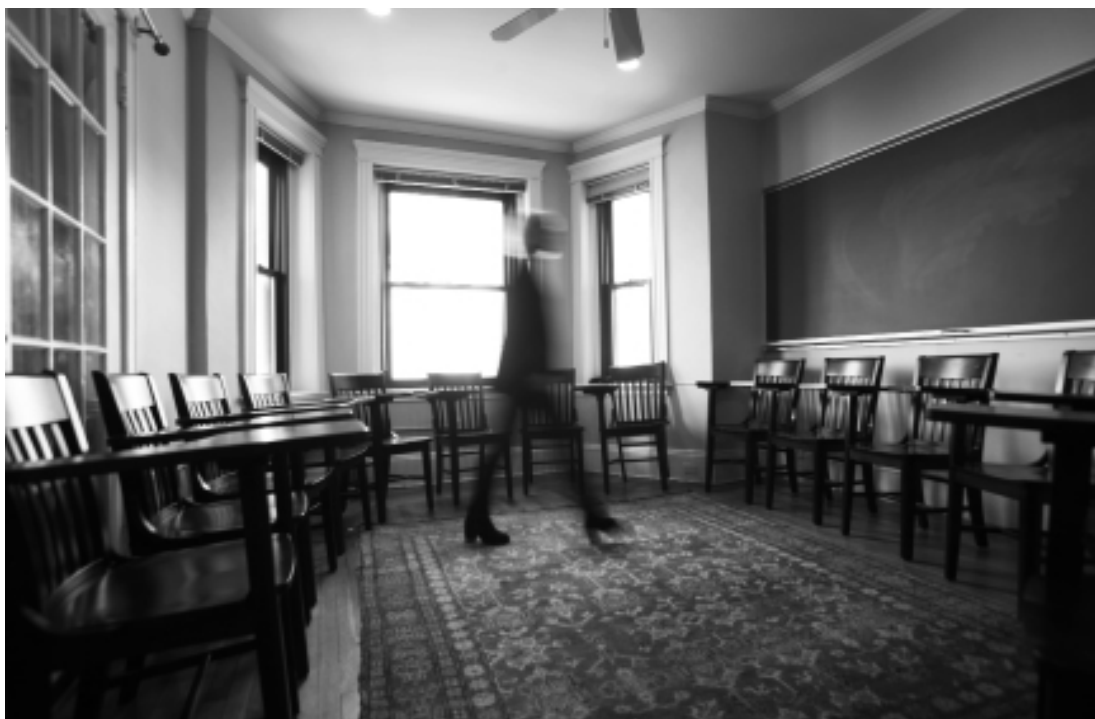
CR: I am sure that these two poets haunted (or maybe consumed!) your imagination during the years that you worked on the book. If you could have tea or a martini with Sylvia Plath, what would you want to ask her? What do you think she might say about the pandemic?

GC: Plath has pretty much haunted my imagination since I was 13 years old, so writing about her always feels like pulling on an exceptionally welcome and comfortable old coat that you love. Sexton was new to me, so there was the excitement of getting to know her. I'd love to have had martinis with both of them, though I expect I'd have been slightly in awe and a little bit scared of Plath and just got very drunk and rowdy with Sexton. There are so many things I would like to ask Plath, not just about her actual writing, but her writing day, how she managed to organize her professional and personal lives. I loved her fashion, so I'd have liked for her to show me the inside of her closet. I would like to have picked daffodils and apples with her in Court Green and gone to the Everyman Cinema in Hampstead to watch Bergman films and talked about them afterwards. But, of course, in my mind she's perpetually young. If she were alive today, she'd be in her late 80s, so I'd like to think I could have the life-changing sort of friendship with her that I had with Elizabeth Sigmund where you can listen to stories and soak up their warmth and wisdom. Had Plath still lived in England during the pandemic I would have been obsessed with the undoubted pithy and devastating tweets she'd have fired out about the incompetent handling of it all.

CR: Is there anything else you wish to tell our audience?

GC: I think my main aim in writing *Three-Martinis*, in fact all of my books, is to highlight how Plath (and Sexton) were exceptional but relatable women. It always really pleases me when someone contacts me to say my book has sent them back to Plath's or Sexton's poems. That is the gift they have left us, and it excites me that they are so firmly cemented in our contemporary cultural consciousness surrounded by vibrant scholarship, a keen interest that shows no sign of waning, and a lot of professional love that perhaps in some ways they lacked in their lifetimes. Now I am writing a new book about another complex woman writer, but Plath and Sexton sit in my writer's foundations, pretty much informing everything that I do, like friendly guides. Who could ask for better comrades?

Interview conducted via email.





Photography by Kevin Cummins

The Speciality of the Photograph:

Caught in Time - Sylvia's Court Green

by Dr. Gail Crowther

'One day quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realised then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: "I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor."'¹



Court Green, Devon, April 1963. Copyright Estate of Elizabeth Sigmund

One of my favourite tasks when writing a book

¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 3.

is choosing photographs. There is something so solid and singular about an image. This fleeting slice of history (for surely as soon as the photograph is taken it is already history) evokes and informs. While I was writing my latest book, *Three-Martini Afternoons at the Ritz: The Rebellion of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton*, it felt as important to me to depict places as much as people. One problem with places, however, is that they have a tendency to change. Houses are knocked down or extended. Towns are re-designed and re-planned. Whole streets can disappear. Often it is difficult to see a place through the eyes of the time you are writing about. As Roland Barthes claimed in the epitaph above, incredulously, an image can make you realise that a gaze can be frozen in history. You, as a viewer may be locked out of that time forever, and the closest you can get will be meeting the visual *has-beenness* of a secondary image.

Sylvia Plath's Devon home, Court Green, has changed in many ways over the years. It is much smarter. The garden is managed and manicured. The inside corridor running from front to back door that was paved with cobbles from Napoleonic days, has been altered to contain a ninety-degree angle. Plath's famously

photographed sitting room where she was pictured in front of red fireplace on a red rug, is now a kitchen. The thatch which Plath described as a spider-dropping mess, is now tidy and intact. Some things, however, have stayed the same. The “wall of old corpses” that separate the garden from the adjoining churchyard are still there.² Plath’s daffodils bloom every spring covering Court Green’s lawns in a primrose-yellow loveliness. Her cobbled courtyard, that once contained the tail-trail of a pheasant in the snow, is surrounded by the house on one side and a collection of outbuildings on the other.

Photographs taken in Plath’s day show fragmented glimpses inside and outside of her home. Her red, sitting room window-seat, her bookshelves, her black, horse-hair, Victorian chair, a beaming, heavily pregnant Plath in 1961 holding Frieda at a yellow-painted front door. Until recently the oldest picture I had seen of Court Green’s entire exterior dated from 1972. These images taken on a visit by Plath’s previous American editor Frances McCullough show a rather battered house and garden.³ More excitingly, the elms are visible, rising from the shoulder of the Roman mound with their “strangle of branches”⁴ and Plath’s black, Morris station wagon is parked up in the court. These photographs are evocative not only because they capture certain things that Plath owned or wrote about, but because they take us further back in time, further away from the present and closer to the *thenness* of Plath. They still, however, were taken nearly a decade after her death.

In 2019 sitting in a London kitchen with William Sigmund and two large folders of material in front of us, I was about to see an image of Court Green that would become one of the favourite

2 See Plath’s poem “Letter in November”, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 253.

3 These images can be viewed in my co-authored book *These Ghostly Archives: The Unearthing of Sylvia Plath* (Stroud: Fonthill, 2017).

4 See Plath’s poem “Elm”, *Collected Poems*, 193.

pictures I chose for my book. Taken in April 1963 by Elizabeth Sigmund, the back of Court Green is photographed just weeks after Plath’s death. There are so many Barthian *punctums* popping out of this image that I struggle to describe them all.⁵ The first feature that I noticed was the terrible state of the thatch. Much more in keeping with Plath’s description, and this is especially evident beneath the chimney in the far right of the frame. It was while I was looking at this, that my eyes wandered slightly lower, hitting the very edge of the shot, and I realised that for the first time, I was seeing the window to Ted Hughes’s attic study under the eaves of the thatch. How an image makes ghosts flare into being! Suddenly I recalled Plath’s letter to Ruth Beuscher about her discovery of love poems written by Hughes to Assia Wevill on his desk in this room. Olwyn Hughes described a passage from Plath’s “missing” journal in which she writes about reading these love poems, standing at this window, looking into the courtyard, crying, and realising that her marriage is over. Here in this photograph we are standing on the outside of the room looking up, looking in. I felt my misplaced-by-time gaze bump up against Plath’s figure, still there, looking out, in some weird sort of time-shift, all mediated by a photographic piece of paper. This temporal shock, the piercing fractured chronology, is perfectly described by Barthes who says that as well as details, photographs can also contain “[t]his new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (“that-has-been”), its pure representation.”⁶ Plath’s *has-been* is immortalized, or as she might say “pinned and anesthetized”.⁷

5 Barthes defined a *punctum* as a detail in a photograph that leaps out at us unexpectedly and pierces the soul.

6 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.

7 See Plath’s poem “Kindness”, *Collected Poems*, 269.

We also see, in shadow, the ancient back door into the house, the same door that the postman would knock upon, open, and casually throw mail onto the cobbled corridor floor. Above this door we see the multiple-paned window of the spare bedroom where Nicholas Farrar Hughes was born and which looked across the court yard to the elms. The window to the left of the back door is the second kitchen where Plath kept her washing machine and sink. Further to the left the adjoining building contained the long room above the garage that Plath intended to renovate into living quarters for a permanent nanny for the children.

The reason that I love this photograph is because it allows us see Court Green as Plath would have seen it, as she wrote about it, as it appears in her poems, prose, and letters. Time is immobilized and our gaze can travel back to meet hers for one untenable, seemingly impossible, moment.

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The Sylvia Plath Cocktail

Shake 1 ½ ounces of gin, 1 teaspoon of grenadine, 1 tablespoon of cream and an egg white into a shaker. Pour 1 tablespoon of raspberry coulis into the bottom of a Martini glass. Strain the cocktail over the top and garnish with a raspberry.

This is a raspberry twist on an American classic, the Pink Lady. Like Plath's oeuvre, this punchy drink has suffered historical critique by male cocktail critics for its feminine name and appearance. With just enough grenadine and cream to create its signature pink hue, this is a gin Martini in a frock.



Drink recipe by The Drinks Business

Expanding Visions

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Plath Profiles

Wailing on Wanting:

The Traumatizing Influence of Parental Figures in Sylvia Plath's "I Want, I Want" and "The Colossus"

by Nicole Salama

On February 19, 1956, Sylvia Plath wrote in her journal about her desire for strong parental figures: "I need a father. I need a mother. I need some older, wiser being to cry to. I talk to God, but the sky is empty, and Orion walks by and doesn't speak" (Plath, 199). Even during her adult life, Plath clearly struggled with conceptions of parental relationships. The religious and mythological comparison between parents, God, and Orion suggests a perpetual failure of these relationships to be lasting and meaningful. This parallel between parents and divine figures appears regularly in Plath's poetry, often in conjunction with depictions of the development of youthful figures. "I Want, I Want" and "The Colossus" both present the parent-child relationship as fundamentally traumatizing. By exploring ancient or religious narratives of these relationships, Plath pivots from the autobiographical to depict a world in which the very state of childhood is, at root, a traumatic position. In Plath's poetry, parents, whether mortal or divine, at best fail to adequately fulfill the needs of their children, or at worst, abuse them during the developmental period when they are most vulnerable.

Both Plath's "I Want, I Want" and "The

Colossus" examine the traumatic impact of parental figures on youthful subjects. The poems appear in Plath's first collection of poetry also titled *The Colossus*, which was originally published in 1960 by Heinemann. Plath wrote "I Want, I Want" two years earlier in 1958, and "The Colossus" in 1959. In the overlooked "I Want, I Want," Plath transforms the Christian narrative of salvation into a quintessential example of extreme childhood trauma. She describes hallmark scenes of the narrative, specifically Christ's nativity, the creation of the world, and Christ's crucifixion to expose the traumatic existence of the Christ Child. Plath interweaves the baby, his mother, and his father, connecting them primarily through explicitly naming the parents in relation to the infant and through the limited wailing action of the child. While the mother's failure to create as an earth goddess deity figure traumatizes her child, the father's apathetic creation of predatory creatures displays his brutal intentions for his son. In contrast, "The Colossus" examines the attempt of an apparently adult daughter to reassemble a statue of her father despite the continuous futility of her labor. Plath describes both the perpetual work of the speaker and her evident

desire for communication with her father, whose absence traumatizes the speaker. However, by the conclusion of the poem, the speaker ultimately accomplishes neither of these goals, and Plath provides no evidence of any progress. Instead, Plath employs miniature imagery to portray the speaker as childlike. Additionally, the speaker's failure to adequately communicate with her father traumatically suspends her development. Plath ultimately creates an ever-youthful speaker frozen in the recurring experience of her failed relationship with her father.

In the world of Plath studies, critics have most often deployed trauma theory to analyze her literature through a biographical lens, viewing and presenting her poetry as primarily confessional. Lynda Bundtzen links Plath's fascination with psychoanalysis to the traumatic experience of her father's death during Plath's childhood, as well as the unique relationship Plath had with her mother, one fraught with both love and tension. Bundtzen analyzes Plath's "Daddy" to demonstrate both the overwhelming presence of trauma in Plath's poetry and her explicit use of psychoanalysis to shape her work. Her analysis also links the dissolution of Plath's marriage to Ted Hughes after she discovers his affair with the early passing of Plath's father, acknowledging that this death acts as an instigating trauma during her childhood (47). Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick also delves into Plath's personal trauma as a means of identifying key moments in her later poetry in her article "Interpretations and Implications of Trauma and Narrative in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*." In *Ariel*, Plath struggles "to articulate a response to trauma, whether it is a personal, local, or global one in nature, and that may be due, in part, to Plath's sensitivity to trauma stories and to her own tragic past and outlook on life" (121). Goodspeed-Chadwick then conflates Plath's marital troubles and loss of her father with the trauma evident in her poetry, presenting a

gendered reading of trauma in Plath's *Ariel*, as is typical of Plath scholarship.¹

Although it is often useful to understand Plath's biography, too extreme a dependence on the biographical details of her life can limit potential readings of her work. Scholarship on trauma in Plath's work tends to focus on confessional readings of her later poems, psychoanalyzing Plath through her poetry. However, these readings neglect other important concerns of the poetry while often limiting any understanding of Plath's speakers to a confessional, biographical representation of Plath herself. In the prologue to her biography on Plath, Heather Clark astutely notes, "Plath's poems now seem locked in a fixed context: 'confessional,' 'feminist.' Yet she wrote her poems before these terms entered the cultural imagination" (xxii). Plath's poetry brilliantly invites readers to explore a variety of themes and issues, of which her life is only a part. As such, the readings I propose here are not designed to usurp prior biographical readings but to supplement and, at times, complicate them by reading the infant subject of "I Want, I Want" and the speaker of "The Colossus" as distinct figures from Plath herself. These interpretations emphasize Plath's nuanced vision of childhood as an essentially traumatic state of being, not only for herself, but also as a marker of the human experience.

Cruelty and Indifference of the Christian Salvation Narrative in "I Want, I Want"

Very few critics examine "I Want, I Want" in

1 Kathleen Margaret Lant examines only the connotations of the female body as an adult in Plath's poetry, and Jooyoung Park focuses on images of a specifically maternal body. Meanwhile, though Jahan Ramazani departs from the norm by asserting that "Plath helped to free women poets from the prostrate role assigned by literary and gender codes to the female mourner," he also places her in a distinctly adult and gendered conversation (1,143).

their analysis of Plath. However, when scholars do include "I Want, I Want" in their research, they tend to only briefly interpret it to support a larger conclusion. These interpretations often emphasize the mother figure and Plath's own story rather than the highly symbolic features of the poem. Occasionally, these critics choose to focus on the mother in the poem rather than the child. This scholarship often arises from a tendency to force the poem to adhere to a confessional reading. For example, Pamela Smith deems "I Want, I Want" to be about Plath's "resentment of the tyrannical baby," suggesting that Frieda, Plath's daughter and eldest child, perhaps serves as the inspiration for such a figure (19). In drawing this conclusion to present a possible confessional reading of the poem, Smith overlooks that Plath wrote the poem more than a year prior to Frieda's birth in 1960. Nephie Christodoulides provides a more extensive reading of "I Want, I Want" in her book, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking: Motherhood in Sylvia Plath's Work*. However, her reading focuses solely on the abject relationship between mother and child that causes the child to turn to the father and ultimately relies on a confessional perspective. She describes the baby as the "daughter-persona" and conflates the child with Plath herself noting, "Like the baby god persona in the poem, Plath is hurled back and forth between two poles" (159; 163). Other scholars discuss infants in some of Plath's other work, again primarily to analyze motherhood. Nevertheless, this scholarship offers insights that can also be applied to "I Want, I Want." Maria Sanchez examines portrayals of culpable mothers in Plath's poetry, delineating failures of motherhood and the impact of those failures on children. Jooyoung Park explores the mother-daughter relationships in Plath's work. Of "I Want, I Want," Park argues that "deprived of a good mother, the narrator suffers complete and utter devastation" ("I Could Kill," 471). Park neglects to further consider the implications of this trauma, but her

article successfully presents the relationship of a mother with her child as one which continuously shapes both figures involved.

The distinct appearance of the baby in the first lines of "I Want, I Want" emphasizes the child's already traumatic life. Plath describes the infant subject of the poem as "the baby god / Immense, bald, though baby-headed" (ln. 1-2). The "immense" proportions of the baby's head portray it as uncharacteristically, extremely large for an infant. The phrase "bald, though baby-headed" establishes the physical traits of the child as an indicator of his trauma. The baby's baldness marks him as uncharacteristically old despite his evident youth. At this moment, he is also little more than a disembodied head. Plath's focus on the head of the child rather than the body as a whole provides the reader with a sense of decapitation as a physical manifestation of the child's trauma. The introduction of the baby figure, through its appearance at the start of the poem, mimics the infant's new introduction to the world after its emergence from the womb, clearly headfirst. By focusing on the baby himself at the beginning of the poem, Plath presents the very act of birthing as a kind of decapitation, the entrance of a wailing head into an indifferent world.

The poem quickly frames this massive child as a Christ figure. Jeannine Dobbs notes that the description of the child in "Moonrise," another piece by Plath, depicts "a figure resembling Father Time or perhaps Father Death, rather than a child. Thus, the birth or the anticipations of that experience includes its antithesis" (14). The depiction of the baby figure in "I Want, I Want" operates similarly. However, in this instance, Plath's description of the infant as "the baby god" immediately connects the baby figure to the infant Christ (ln. 1). Markey recognizes that "the 'Baby god,'" is "synonymous with Christ" (58). However, Christodoulides believes there are alternative, more convincing interpretations. She argues,

"The 'baby god' in the poem might be Jesus Christ himself, but the word "god" (written in lower case 'g') might be used ironically to denote any baby whose many demands always are given priority and must be satisfied at the expense of the mother's" (160). By disregarding the importance of the religious allusion, Christodoulides inaccurately discounts the importance of the Christian narrative Plath uses as a foundation for the entire poem. Plath's presentation of the baby figure as Christ promptly alludes to the traumatic death Christ is destined for, even at his birth. Birth thus becomes intimately connected with death in "I Want, I Want," just as Dobbs suggests of "Moonrise." The narrative of "I Want, I Want" becomes a retelling of the Christian salvation story, portraying the story of Christ's life as a terrifying tale that exposes the trauma of childhood.

Plath uses the baby's inarticulate cries to illustrate his lack of agency and inability to defend against the traumatic actions of his parents. She presents the baby as the primary subject figure of the poem by defining the other figures in relation to the child: as "mother" and "father." Despite his status as the primary subject figure of the poem, Plath limits the baby's actions to crying: "Cried out for the mother's dug" (ln. 3). Not only does the fragmentation of the child's language indicate trauma, but also the baby is not yet old enough to possess a grasp of language at all. In fact, Plath's first description of the baby as "open-mouthed" both alludes to the hunger of the child and physically prepares the baby to emit his wail (ln. 1). The child's cry imparts his basic needs rather than acting as a direct expression of the infant himself. After his mother denies him the basic satisfaction he requires, the baby violently hungers for blood: "Cried then for the father's blood" (ln. 5). Plath transforms the child's wail from one which voices the hunger of the baby to a cry for revenge against the

father. The desire for blood directly blames the father-figure for his child's early trauma. Dobbs describes the crying as "terrible, insatiable demands" that the baby makes (13). However, this interpretation places the blame on the infant rather than on his parents. The vengeful desire of the infant's second cry emphasizes that it is not the cry of the baby that is "terrible" but rather the failure or inaction of his respective parents to satisfy his needs. The infant's inability to take any action other than crying, along with his absence from the poem following this second cry, highlights his lack of agency. It is also important to recognize that the baby is not the speaker of the poem. Apart from the title, which will be discussed later, there is no mention of an "I." Plath presents the baby as another figure, rather than the speaker, of the poem, cementing his position as powerless: subject to the whims of his parents and unable to even communicate his own narrative.

The crying action also serves to highlight the baby's traumatic lack of nourishment from both of his parental figures. The action of the first stanza of the poem refers to an unsuccessful attempt at breastfeeding: "Open mouthed, the baby god /... Cried out for the mother's dug. / The dry volcanoes cracked and split, // Sand abraded the milkless lip" (ln. 1-5). In this "dry," desert-like environment, the baby's need for milk is met with "sand." The milk and nourishment that the child seeks become a desperate need rather than a new and temporary hunger. The caesura in the first line places further emphasis on the hungry crying of the child to indicate the immediacy of the need for nourishment that the child experiences. The end-stopped third line of the poem then highlights the basic nature of the need, presenting the child's cry for milk as normal by concluding the thought without providing any additional justification. Additionally, the "sand" indicates a premature roughening of the child because of the trauma that results from a failure

to satisfy his hunger. Since the mother's breasts are also described as "dry," Plath offers little hope of future nourishment for the child and directly attributes this problem to the mother's inability to provide. In her article on maternal culpability in Plath's work, Sanchez also notes of another poem that the mother figure's "lack of multiplicity or abundance signifies her lack of motherhood" (132). Sanchez's reading allows for a new conception of the baby's need to address his father in the second stanza of the poem. Upon realizing his mother's failure to provide nourishment, the baby then seeks an alternate form of satisfaction from his father: "Cried then for the father's blood" (ln. 6). Plath transforms the desire for physical nourishment into a desire for retribution. The appetite of the "baby god" to drink blood also alludes to the Last Supper. Plath thus fuses images of the child's nativity with an immediate need for retribution for the trauma he experiences as a result of the crucifixion. This desire indicates that the trauma disrupts the child's life enough to overwhelm natural need. However, like the child's plea for his mother's milk, this cry also ultimately remains unsatisfied, indicating the longevity of the trauma and predicting future bereavement.

In her description of the mother figure's difficulty breastfeeding her child, Plath illustrates that the traumatic experience of the mother in turn inflicts trauma on her child. Plath's description of "the mother's dug" is the only reference to the mother in the entirety of the poem (ln. 3). Plath thus positions her as an object instead of an actor. The description of the mother's breast as a "dug," or udder, portrays her in animalistic terms. Not only does this objectify the mother, but it also indicates that her primary purpose as a mother is to fulfill the physical needs of her child, which she ultimately does not accomplish. The next mention of the mother's breasts disconnects them from her: "The dry volcanoes cracked and split" (ln. 4). The mother devolves further here into an inanimate part

of nature. Her value then is diminished by her inability to perform her function. Though the volcanoes attempt to erupt, they are still "dry," and therefore unable to do so. Furthermore, the cracking and splitting of the mother's breasts describes the cutting and chafing the mother herself feels, producing blood as a result of her pain rather than milk. Interestingly, the baby rejects his mother's blood only to seek that of his father. The different requests the baby asks of his parents demonstrate that while the mother's inability to provide still hurts her child, the father's abuse is different because it is blatantly intentional. Unfortunately, the mother still inflicts trauma on the infant, though not as maliciously. Park argues that "the lack of boundaries between the m/other and the baby hint at a borderline state: There is no distinction between two bodies" ("Splitting Maternal Body," 94). However, as Sanchez notes of a different Plath poem, the failure to establish a bodily connection also proves traumatic: "The separation of mother and child result in injury: something has gone wrong with motherhood" (133). In the case of "I Want, I Want," as a result of the mother's inability to breastfeed the baby, the lack of bodily connection which the baby requires for nourishment conveys the trauma of the mother onto the infant.

Plath also emphasizes the traumatic impact of the mother figure by portraying her as an earth goddess who fails to create: "The dry volcanoes cracked and split" (ln. 4). Park believes that "the primordial mother in Plath's poems engenders the tremendous potential for creation" ("I Could Kill," 490). However, these "dry volcanoes" fail to emit magma and create no new land. Instead, all that remains of the failed eruption is the violent quaking and pressure which causes the volcanoes to "split." In his analysis of larger volcanic eruptions, S. Self argues that "huge explosive eruptions are one of the few natural phenomena that can produce global catastrophic effects" (2,074).

The cracking action of these volcanoes signifies this largescale catastrophic event. Though the description of the mother's breasts depicts her as a version of mother nature, the volcanic eruptions which serve as her method of creation do so through violent destruction. Additionally, the mother's inability to create in her role as earth goddess signifies the helplessness of the baby figure. Instead, nature is increasingly "dry" and dead rather than green and new as the presence of a typical earth goddess ought to engender. This dryness therefore transforms the baby and its connotations of newness into an already decrepit figure.

The father also clearly serves as a creator figure in the second stanza. Plath credits the father with the functionality of a variety of animals: "Who set wasp, wolf and shark to work, / Engineered the gannet's beak" (ln. 7-8). These lines portray the father figure as the creator God of the Bible in Genesis 1. Plath includes a variety of animals of air, land, and sea in reference to the fourth and fifth days of creation. Unlike the biblical account, Plath's use of the verbs "set" and "engineered" depict the creation process as mechanical, rather than one which exudes divine interest and care. The "work" which the father figure intends for these animals portrays them as tools. The father figure creates them specifically to accomplish work rather than to grant them life. Additionally, each of these animals are antagonistic, further creating an atmosphere of violence even in new creation. Nancy Hargrove notes that in Plath's poetry "God is associated with violent predatory animals" to portray his extreme brutality ("Christian Imagery," 12). Furthermore, by specifying the gannet, and particularly its beak, Plath draws attention to the bird's hunger and the hunting technique it uses to sate that hunger. In her overview of gannets and their characteristics, Katrina van Grouw describes the functionality of the beak and jaw of gannets: "A hinged upper mandible, special adaptations

in the articulation of the lower jaw, and flexible plates making up the bill's surface enable the large bill to open into an even larger gape, allowing the passage of all but the biggest fish" (143). Like the gannet, the father figure's creation of the child leaves the baby hungry. However, although the father creates the gannet's beak to enable the bird to feed itself adequately, he simultaneously allows his own child to starve.

Plath also describes the father figure's creation of man in ghastly terms. Even as they begin to inhabit their bodies, the new men have gaunt bodily forms: "Dry-eyed, the inveterate patriarch / raised his men of skin and bone" (ln. 9-10). Plath structures the first line of the third stanza in the same manner as the first line of the poem. The parallel syntax of the two lines emphasizes the father's apathy to the plight of both his son and his creation of man. In her brief mention of "I Want, I Want," Hargrove suggests that the poem "uses references to the crucified Christ to suggest that the world was created by a harsh and violent god as a place of anguish and suffering for its inhabitants" ("Christian Imagery," 14). While Hargrove's analysis accurately describes Plath's depiction of God, she fails to acknowledge that this violence in creation is evident even before Plath's description of Christ's crucifixion. The gaunt description of the men's bodies suggests the torture of the Holocaust, once again fusing images of new life with macabre, painful deaths. The "skin and bone" characterization of the men's bodies also suggests a similar hunger to that the baby continuously experiences throughout the poem. Plath thus twists the biblical sixth day of creation, which God deems "very good" in the Bible, into a horrific event (Genesis 1:29). Furthermore, by labeling the father figure as "dry-eyed" and "inveterate," Plath portrays him as rigid and unsympathetic in his violence.² The father's dryness also mimics

² Hargrove finds that the structure and rhyme scheme, or lack thereof, of the poem emphasizes the stri-

the mother's inability to breastfeed, reaffirming that the father is unable to nourish both his child and the men he creates. Through the father figure's creation of man, Plath emphasizes that he lacks empathy for his son.

Plath's version of the creation of man also serves to introduce the crucifixion scene of the poem. She begins the third and final stanza of the poem with the father figure's creation of his human subjects: "Dry-eyed, the inveterate patriarch / raised his men of skin and bone" (ln. 9-10). The separation of the creation of man from the rest of the Genesis 1 scene connects the creation of man more explicitly with the crucifixion of Christ. Plath then rearranges the order of events in the salvation narrative from creation, nativity, and crucifixion to nativity, then creation, and crucifixion. In doing so, she alters the causal need for Christ's death on the cross. In her analysis of Plath's spirituality, Jennifer Holden-Kirwan observes that in Plath's "Brasilia," "God's history of destruction is exposed in Mary's request to spare Jesus and prevent him from becoming the redeemer of humanity" (303). Although the mother figure is silent in "I Want, I Want," the same destructive tendency is evident in the father figure as there is no need for a redeemer at the time of the child's birth. Janice Markey identifies the crucifixion as unnecessary in the context of the poem: "Christ's death on the cross appears not as a sacrifice for the salvation of humanity, but rather as an egocentric act, for which the human community and not Christ will have to suffer" (58). However, she blatantly ignores the additional trauma which the Christ Child suffers as a result of the father's intent to torture all his creations. Rather than sending his son to redeem a preexisting creation, the father figure creates the necessity for his son's

dent content of the poem: "The complex syllabic pattern with an aberration in the third stanza (7-8-7-8, 8-7-8-7, 10-7-8-8) along with the absence of a set rhyme scheme reinforces the harshness of the content" (*Journey toward Ariel*, 205)

impending crucifixion. The men are therefore not only tortured by their birth themselves, but also become a tool of the father figure meant to torture the baby. Furthermore, by officially recognizing the father figure as a "patriarch," Plath not only references the patriarchal establishment of traditional Christian churches, but she also specifically alludes to the three biblical patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In doing so, Plath presents another gruesome biblical depiction of childhood trauma in Abraham's willingness to literally sacrifice his son Isaac at God's behest.³ Plath thus demonstrates a habitual tendency of the Christian God to demand inhumane sacrifice of children while also indicating multiple examples of fathers' apathy concerning their respective sons' lives. Additionally, by characterizing him as "inveterate," she presents this habit as essentially immutable, negating the possibility of hope for the cessation of the infant's trauma.

Unlike the baby figure, the new beings, whom the father-figure creates, do not seek revenge from the father for the traumatized bodies which they possess. Instead, they turn to the child. These men become "barbs on the crown of gilded wire, / Thorns on the bloody rose-stem" (ln. 11-12). Considering the "work" which the father creates animals to do, the work of these men, as the father-figure envisions it, becomes the torture that Christ experiences on the cross. Dobbs argues that these lines "vaguely suggest the crucifixion and set up a parallel between it and childbirth" (14). However, while Plath obviously depicts elements of the crucifixion, she does not compare it with childbirth. Instead, the crucifixion becomes the father's response to the baby's wailing. By making "barbs" and "thorns" the primary subjects of the final

3 Genesis 22:9-10 records a similar narrative of a father sacrificing a son: "Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son."

two lines of the poem, Plath emphasizes the traumatic torture of the incident rather than the majestic or salvific Christian implications. These “barbs” also evoke the image of barbed wire, once again dragging Christ into the more recent historical horrors of the Holocaust and inventing new methods of torture for the baby. Additionally, in the final line, only the thorns and the stem of the rose exist, without a blossom. While the baby in the first stanza is only a head, the rose head is loped off in the final stanza. The “bloody rose-stem” takes the place of the baby figure’s body, imprinting the trauma of the crucifixion upon him. However, the baby himself remains unmentioned in the latter portion of the poem. Plath reshapes the child’s body and omits further mention of him to indicate that the trauma of both birth and death on the cross severs the baby from potential possession of a human identity, reducing him to the pain he suffers. Luke Ferretter asserts that Plath identifies suffering with Christianity: “One of the ways in which Christian ideas and images are true, for Plath, is as representations of the complex psychological suffering of her poems’ speakers” (109). Although Ferretter does not mention the poem specifically, his analysis applies to “I Want, I Want.” Plath precludes the potential for Christ’s resurrection by ending the poem with the blood of his crucifixion. She thus strips the biblical salvation narrative of its redemptive nature, exposing the violence of both the nativity and the crucifixion for which it allows. The combination of these two events during the period of the baby’s infancy adds an extra layer of horror to the already gruesome events of the crucifixion of an adult.

The baby figure’s vague presence amidst his own crucifixion necessitates a deeper examination of the poem’s title, “I Want, I Want.” While there is no speaker for the poem, the baby claims the closest role to a speaker. The title reveals the meaning of the baby’s cries throughout the poem. The trauma of the child

indicates, however, that his “want” is a necessity rather than the implied desire. Although the word “want” appears as a verb, it also appropriates the definition of its noun version, evoking an atmosphere of deficiency and need, which the poem delineates. The presence of an “I” subject in the title but not in the content of the poem itself suggests the baby’s traumatic dissociation of self. Additionally, the repetition of the simple syntax “I want” twice in the title indicates the baby’s difficulty processing his own needs, then voicing them, and receiving a beneficial response. The title thus prefigures the structure of the entire poem as the baby’s cries shape it. The comma in the title also highlights the fragmentation of the child’s language. Plath’s use of a comma in the title rather than periods further emphasizes that the infant remains in a perpetual state of need, traumatizing him to the point at which both his development and his language fail. Finally, the title echoes Christ’s words on the cross as he cries: “I thirst” (John 19:28). Thus, Plath uses the title to foreshadow both the baby’s permanent “want” or lack of nourishment and the ending of his life at the conclusion of the poem.

Images of Size and Speech in “The Colossus”

Although the speaker of “The Colossus” appears as an adult, her labor, which centers completely around the reconstruction of an absent father figure, demonstrates that she occupies a traumatized mental state comparable to that of the infant in “I Want, I Want.” Through the speaker’s labor, Plath portrays the passing of time as meaningless in “The Colossus.” The beginning of the poem indicates a futility in work: “I shall never get you put together entirely / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed” (ln. 1-2). While Plath presents the speaker immediately, this introduction illustrates the reliance of the speaker’s identity on the work that occupies her. Plath uses the adverbs “never” and

"entirely" to illustrate the immensity and impossibility of the task the speaker undertakes to recreate her father's image cohesively. In his analysis of a collection of Plath's father poems as elegies, Jahan Ramazani argues that these lines indicate a departure from the successful processing of grief which elegies typically represent: "If traditional elegies represent therapeutic mourning, Plath's elegy represents its breakdown" (1,147). Ramazani adequately identifies the traumatic connotations of speaker's unfinished work. The staccato punctuation of the second line heightens the fragmented depiction of the father's form and even suggests that a complete "pieced" work would be evidently imperfect. The worthlessness of the labor also impacts the growth of the speaker: "Thirty years now I have labored / To dredge the silt from your throat. / I am none the wiser" (ln. 8-10). Plath quantifies the speaker's work in terms of time by specifying the "thirty years" she spends on the task. However, she then equates that progression of time with the speaker's assertion that she is "none the wiser." This connection negates the understanding that the speaker progresses as she technically ages. Additionally, the continuous "labor" of the speaker suggests a reverse childbirth, likening the work of the speaker to an effort to mother her own father. As a result, time and causal relationships lose further definition as Plath creates a world for her speaker absent these linear limitations. Michelle Balaev describes this phenomenon in her overview of trauma theory: "The traumatic experience remains frozen in a timeless, haunting state" (366). Ultimately, while the speaker inhabits an adult position as both a sculptor and a grown woman mourning her father, this sense of forestalled time also keeps her in a traumatized childlike state. The portrayal of time as lacking significant influence remains even in the last stanza of the poem: "My hours are married to shadow / No longer do I listen" (ln. 28-29). Plath once again fuses

the concept of time in the form of "hours" with the vague portrayal of "shadow."⁴ This connection emphasizes that time remains ephemeral. Robert Mollinger describes the speaker's intimacy with shadow as evidence of the lasting impact of her father: "She cannot eliminate her father from her mind and from her life" (47). This psychological haunting permanently impacts the speaker, freezing her development as a result of her traumatic relationship with her father. Furthermore, by relating time to "shadow" through marriage, Plath illustrates that the speaker is unable to properly progress beyond her relationship with her father. Instead, she remains "married" to the traumatic parental relationship of her childhood. Her work on her father's statue even after thirty years emphasizes this stagnancy. From the first lines to the last stanza, the continuous efforts of the speaker remain futile, highlighting Plath's portrayal of time and its effect on the speaker as impotent.

The small physical dimensions of the speaker reaffirm her position as youthful in the poem. Plath utilizes miniature objects and insects to portray the speaker as a child: "Scaling little ladders with glue pots and pails of lysol / I crawl like an ant in mourning" (ln. 11-12). Morris describes these implements as "ludicrously inadequate," attributing the dimensions to the impossibility of the task which the speaker attempts to accomplish (37). However, these tools are not too "little" for the speaker, who compares herself to an "ant." Rather, Plath indicates that the speaker is "little" like the ladders. Deryn Rees-Jones argues that the

4 Scholarship on the function of "shadow" in the final stanza abounds. Most criticism asserts that the shadow reaffirms a negative ending or attitude for the speaker. Christopher Morris connects the shadow to Hades and the underworld, likening the speaker to Persephone (35). John Rietz reads the shadow as a representation of "the past, the memory of her father" (421). Mollinger also indicates that the shadow could imply "that the father is reborn in the child and this resurrection can be symbolized by the shadow" (47).

poem “deals with the loss of the literally small, pre-adolescent self” (285). However, the speaker is psychologically still a child. Her crawling action suggests that the speaker has yet to properly mature into adulthood and remains unable to walk, especially on her own. Plath attributes the littleness of the speaker to her father through her emphasis that this antlike condition reflects an attitude of “mourning.” Gabriele Rippl asserts: “The overwhelming monumentality of the historical (Egyptian, Babylonian and Roman) fragments becomes obvious in the reduction of the human figure to the shape of an insect” (65). While history’s influence on both the poem and the speaker is evident, Rippl overlooks the more personal influence of the speaker’s father. The memory of her father, one that the speaker remains unable to process properly, literally forces her back into the size and actions of her childhood self.

The speaker is also notably small in comparison to the colossal embodiment of her father: “Nights, I squat in the cornucopia / Of your left ear, out of the wind” (ln. 24-25). Her ability to confine herself within her father’s ear emphasizes her miniature size.⁵ By depicting this habitation as nightly, Plath depicts the child curled up in the cradle of her father’s ear. In this way, the father becomes important to the protection and comfort of the childlike speaker by keeping her “out of the wind.” His absence results in the traumatic need for the speaker to shelter herself, but she can only do so with what remains of him. Ramazani identifies habitation of this enclosure as traumatic: “Trapped within his ruins, she is condemned to a world defined by his catastrophic death: she must ever lament a father she detests too much to allow him a rebirth” (1148). The speaker’s size ultimately emphasizes that, as a result of her damaging relationship with her father, like an infant, she is unable to live a life without him. The ruins she

⁵ Morris also connects the “squat” of the speaker with “the ugliness of both birth and the poetic process” (42).

cannot fix ensnare her, trapping her in a womb-like enclosure which keeps her perpetually too young and undeveloped for independent life.

The speaker’s desire for communication further emphasizes her childlike reliance on her father. Her position in her father’s ear suggests a wish to be heard: “Nights, I squat in the cornucopia / Of your left ear” (ln. 24-25). Plath contrasts the speaker’s intentional proximity to her father’s ear with her lack of speech. Morris claims: “The speaker in Plath’s poem has the problem of ultimately finding the right word, the right speech” (35). The fragmentation of her speech further highlights the trauma which the speaker associates with her father and remains unable to overcome. Her inability to voice her thoughts to her father contradicts the image of plenty Plath alludes to with the “cornucopia.” Instead, this contrast highlights the speaker’s solitude and need. Uta Gosmann views the speaker’s position as indicative of her limited exposure to the world beyond her father: “Her contemplation and experience of the outside world are entirely determined by her position within the skull of the ‘colossus’” (39). The speaker knows nothing of the world and cannot surpass childhood innocence because communication between her and her father fails. Just as the speaker longs for her father to hear her, she also works in order to listen to her father: “I have labored / To dredge the silt from your throat. / I am none the wiser” (ln. 8-10). The speaker indicates that the effect of her father’s inability to speak hinders her mental development by admitting that she is “none the wiser.” Through her identification of this specific task while narrating her history of labor, the speaker acknowledges communication with her father as her ultimate goal. However, as long as her labor is ineffective and communication remains impossible, Plath’s speaker cannot overcome her trauma and escape her stalled childlike state. Bundtzen discusses Plath’s use of poetry as a therapeutic attempt at enacting the psychoanalytic “talking

cure," which allows patients to process trauma through discussion (38-39). This method of therapy also plays a role for the speaker of "The Colossus," albeit one that is unsuccessful, pointing instead to childlike failures of speech.

The communication which Plath does record in the poem ultimately fails to diminish the impact of the speaker's trauma. The animal noises which the speaker hears from her father in fact only further torment her: "Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles / Proceed from your great lips. / It's worse than a barnyard" (ln. 3-5). Rippl identifies these sounds as "incomprehensible" (65). This overly simplistic conclusion overlooks the speaker's extensive attempt to describe the exact sounds which her father emits. The speaker purposefully listens to her father's sounds and picks up the two distinct registers of "mule-bray" and "pig-grunt." The differentiation between the two meaningless noises proves that the speaker participates in an ongoing act of listening for meaning in the sounds her father makes. She acknowledges them as "worse than a barnyard," but that conclusion does not stop her from actively listening. This comparison emphasizes that even the noises the speaker does encounter are out of place and therefore devastatingly and completely useless to her. Nevertheless, she traumatically continues to strain to encounter a voice that is meaningful to her where none exists. This effort, like the speaker's artistic labor, also proves futile. The act of listening and communication remains unnaturally one-sided, automatically making it unsuccessful. Ultimately, the speaker fails to achieve any sort of successful communication. Instead, she stops searching for words by the end of the poem: "No longer do I listen" (ln. 29). This resignation suggests a perpetual lack of resolution for the speaker, indicating her inability to progress beyond her childlike state in the future.

The prominence of traumatic portrayals of youth and parental relationships in both of these

earlier poems highlights Plath's burgeoning exploration of disquieting childhoods. Though it is often overlooked, analysis of "I Want, I Want" creates new avenues of exploration for Plath's more iconic poems, such as "The Colossus." Furthermore, Plath's focus on childhood utilizing religious allusions in "I Want, I Want" acts similarly to her later poem, "Nick and the Candlestick." While criticism tends to categorize all but Plath's best-known poems by the time period in which she wrote them, the similarity between these two poems suggests an ongoing development of themes of youth throughout Plath's poetry.

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An Uncanny Wintering

by Eva Stenskar

In *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Ludwig Wittgenstein likens a person's subconscious thoughts to an underworld, a hidden, uncanny secret cellar (25), and in *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard states that cellars are made up of passages with padlocked doors, and further refers to the cellar as the place one goes to dream and to "(lose) oneself in the distant corridors of an obscure etymology, looking for the treasure that cannot be found in words" (166). Anthony Vidler, meanwhile, refers to the cellar as something damp, in which bric-a-brac is deposited, and that if it weren't so, our memory would be released from its unhealthy preoccupations and we would be able to live in the present (The Architectural Uncanny 64). That, in turn, suggests Sigmund Freud's idea of *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny, something that used to be familiar but has, through repression, become estranged. (Uncanny 148). There's obviously something deeply uncanny about a cellar. And it is in a cellar, that "Wintering", the last poem in Plath's bee sequence, takes place. The first stanza confirms the space, and introduces the activity:

This is the easy time, there is nothing doing.
I have whirled the midwife's extractor,
I have my honey,
Six jars of it,
Six cat's eyes in the wine cellar,

What is the speaker doing in the cellar to begin with? Is she hiding something? Can she not perform her activity in daylight? The extractor along with the whirling suggest some kind of magic machinery, and magic, along with sorcery, is mentioned in Freud's *The Uncanny* as one of a number of unheimlich factors (149). In *Totem and Taboo*, he expands on the meaning of magic, and describes it thus: "Magic must serve the most varied purposes. It must subject the process of nature to the will of man, protect the individual against enemies and dangers, and give him the power to injure his enemies" (67). It also picks up where "The Bee Meeting" left off, with the resourceful magician's girl who doesn't flinch. There are also the jars of honey, which seem to have a luminous sheen to them, which prompts the speaker to liken them to the eyes of a cat, adding to the sense of magic. For what is magic without a cat? The jars themselves suggest test tubes or beakers, the type of paraphernalia typically found in a chemical laboratory. There's also the fact that the extractor belongs to the midwife, which has an old-fashioned ring to it, something hinting at magical powers, and also of course life and the producing of life. It is not life per se, but honey, that is being produced here, a Biblical allusion to hope for deliverance, for Exodus 3:8 mentions how the Israelites will be delivered out of the hand of the Egyptians and be brought to the land "flowing with milk and honey".

Wintering in a dark without window
At the heart of the house
Next to the last tenant's rancid jam
And the bottles of empty glitters –
Sir So-and-so's gin.

The second stanza confirms the sense of a confined space at the center of something, "the heart of the house", as if it the poem takes place in the realm of life and death. The sweetness of the honey and its symbol of hope has been replaced with old jam, "rancid", implying something contaminated or musty, very much like the idea of the cellar itself. Something old and stale. Here no cat's eyes shine, rather the glitter of old gin bottles.

This is the room I have never been in.
This is the room I could never breathe in.
The black bunched in there like a bat,
No light

David Holbrook, in *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, recognizes the cellar as the same cellar in which Esther Greenwood in Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* tries to kill herself, which was an autobiographical recount of Plath's own suicide attempt, which took place in the cellar of her family home (227). The cellar, viewed with that knowledge, becomes a space filled with anxiety and despair: "The room is like one that can recur in dreams – the room of the self that one fears is empty, decayed, deathly – the room which symbolises the fear of the internal breakdown," (228) Holbrook goes on to write. The poem also intimates that the cellar is a coffin, which yet again brings about the idea of being buried alive – "dark without a window", "the room I have never been in", "the room I could never breathe in" for instance, are good examples – bolstered with such graveyard effects as cats and bats. Suddenly we are far from the promise of the land of flowing honey and all suggestions of life have evaporated, as

the very basic activity of someone alive, that of breathing, is no longer possible. The title of the poem suggests not death necessarily, but hibernation (the bees in the poem hibernate), or something akin to holding one's breath, patience perhaps. Meanwhile there's the image of something "black bunched in there like a bat", recalling the panic bird of "Elm", that dark alien thing the speaker feels inside.

If we are to read "Wintering" in a similar vein, it brings us back to Holbrook's idea of the cellar as the room of the *self*, rather than a physical space outside of the self. That would position the "black bunched in there like a bat" *inside* the speaker, as anxiety – perhaps – amongst other feelings, "honey" for real hope, "rancid old jam" for, as it says in "Elm": "the isolate, slow faults" that the speaker cannot seem to overcome, the false hope of the "glitter" of the gin bottles that belong to somebody else.

No light
But the torch and its faint

Chinese yellow on appalling objects –
Black asininity. Decay.
Possession.
It is they who own me.
Neither cruel nor indifferent.

There is light, however vague and disappointing. The light is yellow, a color which value is difficult to decipher in Plath's poetry. In an earlier poem, "In Plaster", yellow stands for something old and ugly, but in later poetry that doesn't necessarily hold true. However, here the faint light falls on appalling objects: "Black asininity", "decay", "possession". It is fairly obvious now, that the focus has shifted from the cellar as a space *outside* the speaker, to the speaker's secret innermost core, the faint light illuminating her faults. Holbrook argues that there is paranoia in the word "asininity": "it is as if she fears an animal predator in the dark, which

she projects from her inner world – as Mahler does when he sees (and hears) the howling ape of existential nothingness in *Das Lied von der Erde* (228). That nothingness, again, is a continuation from the maddening “voice of nothing” that the tree in “Elm” detects in the poet. Holbrook, however, seems to indicate that the predator is projected from the speaker’s inner world onto her outer world, while perhaps the cellar is her inner world. The speaker cannot get out of herself, she cannot command her anxieties to go away, it is they “who own (her)”. She calls that ownership neither cruel nor indifferent, only, as we see in the first line of the following stanza, “ignorant”:

Only ignorant.
This is the time of hanging on for the bees –
the bees
(...)
Filing like soldiers
To the syrup tin

I read the “hanging on” as further evidence that this is not death, not a complete “burial alive” scenario, but instead a kind of hibernation. It seems also as if the speaker identifies with the bees, like them she is in for a long season, a “wintering”, when there is nothing much – the “nothing doing” of the first stanza - but waiting to do. A season for slowing down, for hanging on, something to endure.

The whirling activity taking place in the dark, the turning of one thing into something else (extracting honey from the honeycomb) may also very well suggest a metamorphosis not unlike that of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly, which in this case would suggest the cellar space, whether mental or physical in nature, as a version of the dark encasement of a cocoon. “Filing like soldiers” also lends itself to the idea of “hanging on”, as in “soldier on”.

That this is a season in suspension becomes

even clearer in the sixth stanza, where the speaker reveals that the syrup tin the bees crowd to, is just that, an ersatz for the real sweetness they cannot have:

To make up for the honey I’ve taken.
Tate and Lyle keeps them going,
(...)
It is Tate and Lyle they live on, instead of
flowers.
They take it. The cold sets in.

The next stanzas offer a shift, the binary couple “black” and “white” is introduced. The bees balling in a black mass, which the speaker likens to a “mind”, against the whiteness of the “smiling” snow. The poem goes through a shift here, the “I” was dropped already in the sixth stanza, and the next lines seem to want to break out of the physical as well as mental space of the cellar into the open. It takes on a new path; from the dark and damp, from the black balled mass of the mind to the outside, and the white snow, and – eventually - up in the air.

Now they ball in a mass,
Black
Mind against all that white
The smile of the snow is white
It spreads itself out, a mile-long body of
Meissen

Into which, on warm days,
They can only carry their dead.
The bees are all women,
Maids and the long royal lady
They have got rid of the men,

The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors
Winter is for women –
The woman, still at her knitting,
At the cradle of Spanish walnut,
Her body a bulb in the cold and too dumb
to think.

The resourcefulness of the women has made survivors of them – like the bees themselves – it is the women alone who survive the hard season. But what of the speaker? What happens to her? Since the “I” was dropped, she must have merged her identity with that of the bees, and the women, for whom the winter season exists. Thus, the speaker too is a survivor of the cold season. The trick for this survival is patience, to “hang on”, to quietly be doing “hanging on” activities such as whirling honey, knitting, watching the baby in the cradle, being still like a bulb in the snow, making do with ersatz sweetness, waiting for spring, not thinking. The speaker, like the bees, is ready to break out of the cellar, the cocoon of both physical and mental space.

Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas
Succeed in banking their fires
To enter another year?
What will they taste of, the Christmas
roses? The bees are flying. They taste the
spring.

The theme of rebirth was one well used by Plath, especially through exploring the Biblical story about Lazarus (John 11:1-4), the dead man who was brought back to life by Jesus. She had used it as a theme for “Poem for a Birthday” already in 1959, and then, in the fall of 1962, she revived it in the poem “Lady Lazarus”. Earlier journal excerpts shows that her fascination with the story began as early as 1956 (Plath 199) and one particular entry, from June 15, 1959, points to her thinking of Lazarus as a theme for short stories and possibly even her novel *The Bell Jar*: “MENTAL HOSPITAL STORIES: Lazarus theme. Come back from the dead. Kicking off thermometers. Violent ward. LAZARUS MY LOVE.” (Plath 497). The trajectory of “Wintering”, starting in the dark cellar and ending with the flying bees tasting spring, very much suggests the Lazarus theme, which – translated into unheimlich – might read “the

return of the dead”. One may of course push the Lazarus envelope even further and argue that it is the Jesus story itself that “Wintering” blooms out of. While Lazarus was brought out of the grave, Jesus also *rose* and *ascended* into Heaven. There are a few clues in the poem, that point to this. Apart from the movement from the grave to the sky, which I just discussed, there’s the bees “flying”, suggesting a further upward ascent, not just a departure from the grave, and the reference to the Christmas roses, blooming in the snow, perhaps a somewhat vague reference to Christ. Christ figures quite a bit in Plath’s later poetry. In the poem “Years”, written about a month after “Wintering”, she writes about “(t)he awful / God-bit in him / Dying to fly and be done with it?” While these particular lines suggest a desire to die, rather than a hope for spring and renewed life, it is of interest to demonstrate the idea of Christ and flying. I found, quite by chance and quite uncannily, a reference in Nicholas Royle’s *Uncanny* that speaks to these lines. It is written regarding the death drive in the poetry of T.S. Eliot but might as well have been written about the death drive in the poetry of Plath: “T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) is one of innumerable literary texts that provide correspondences with Freud’s theory. Pervasively characterized by articulations of the desire to be *still*, to have it all over and *done with*” (Royle 98). The italics are mine.

Plath’s poetry hinges a great deal on suspense, shock, and fear, and she utilizes almost all of the concepts, which Freud files as “uncanny”. In “Wintering”, as I have shown, the dark cellar – a grave of sorts – is an uncanny space suggestive of something repressed while simultaneously being a place where creativity surges and magic can happen.

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Slow Knowledge

by Gregory Moore

Sylvia
it's been
too long that I
have lived and
not known
you

and slow my
knowledge comes

although
I feel
that we were
before I
ever realized
that I
think
and understand
what you meant
and
why you
left

Columbia

by Joan Noëldchen

I know what it is to be
In a room without locks
On the door and a nine-thirty curfew,
All I could do is curl up in my bed
And listen to the sounds of police sirens coming from the street, five floors below
The hospital has sounds at night. The nurses and attendants catch a breath between tasks. There is
always movement and lights in the hallways.
I must keep my cool sanity in a psych ward. I must give the correct responses to others.
When I am alone at night, I am with God in reality.
I am strangely calm until I pass the entrance. I am kept like an animal on display.
Miracles await after a rain. The colors run from the clouds. My covenant is in the sky. I hang on to
hope after the bow fades and the sun appears.

Custodian

by Jeffrey Sommer

Through the dust she came
In the dead of night,
Sweeping the floor
As an angel might,
A woman of the city
A child of the sea,
More and less than she appeared to be
With a mood for every moment
A song for every season
She did what she must,
She danced with her broom
And smiled in the dust

Call for Submissions

CFP: BIPOC Writers and Intersectionality in Plath

Deadline: Juneteenth, 2022

What are the connections of Plath studies and Plath's writing with intersectionality, racial justice, Pan-African, and diasporic studies? Are these connections meaningful ways to engage in scholarship of Plath, or is Plath and her era "in the way"? How can we as responsible, ethical scholars critique Plath and reposition her work and the work of writers like her in the context of social justice in 2021 and beyond? What questions can we ask the canon and how can we productively interrogate writers who, up to now, have been given the floor over other writers - of color, differently-abled, LGBTQIA+, trans*, and other identities? In the present era of intense scrutiny, amid the vital work of reparations and accountability and anxiety over race and other aspects of identities collective and individual, *Plath Profiles* wants to reflect on how our study and field has both failed and succeeded in the ongoing struggle against oppression.

Plath Profiles has always been and will continue to be supportive of the work of all scholars and writers in our community. We want to open the floor in Volume 13 by soliciting and acknowledging the work of BIPOC writers in Plath studies and BIPOC writers and thinkers who have yet to express their connections to Plath. We encourage submissions of all kinds that question the boundaries of Plath studies, both from BIPOC writers and writers examining questions of race within and surrounding Plath's works, history, personal life, and existing scholarship. What are the questions we need to be asking right now, no matter how difficult? How can we learn from Sylvia? How can Sylvia Plath be reimaged in the 21st century?

Submit your work for this call to *Plath Profiles* through OJS. Feel free to indicate in your submission that you are responding specifically to this call if you desire. You may also indicate your personal connections to these questions, and we encourage notes of biographical connection to the call, but do not require any self-identification as part of the submission. Please note that *Plath Profiles* does not and will not discriminate on the basis of identity or any other personal characteristic in the review of submissions; we hope to hear from everyone while encouraging open scholarship and debate. Send us the difficult work! We release a new issue of *Plath Profiles* one to two times annually.

Rolling Submissions Call

Plath Profiles is an interdisciplinary journal that welcomes the submission of scholarly articles on the subject of Plath's writings as well as art, poetry, book

reviews, memoir, and student research relating to Plath's work and life. Submissions may directly engage with Plath as a historical subject, literary giant, and contested site; imitate Plath's style and sensibilities to generate new writing; utilize feminist, post-colonial, post-structural, and other strategies to analyze her work; or propose a new path for Plath studies. *Plath Profiles* reviews unsolicited book reviews and is interested in covering as many Plath-related publications as possible.

All submissions are peer-reviewed and subject to editing with consent of the author(s). Our goal as an editorial staff is to provide feedback to every writer to promote growth in the field.

Our response time is between 2-6 months. Please wait a year between publishing and resubmitting. We release a new issue of *Plath Profiles* approximately once annually.

The editors request the following stipulations:

- Articles should have a maximum of 7000 words.
- Creative submissions should be a maximum of 5 pages for prose and 7 pages for poetry. We reserve the right to review only the first 5 or 7 pages of any submission in this category.
- All articles must be submitted electronically via the Scholarworks/OJS website; NO email submissions, NO exceptions. Please save as a Microsoft Word document, double-spaced, 12 point type, indents .25, no tabs, no unnecessary hard returns, name and title on every page.
- Images and diagrams must be submitted separately, be fully credited, and have rights obtained in advance by the author of the work submitted.
- Include a short biography of no more than 50 words, included in the body of the file after the works cited.
- Poor formatting or proofreading may result in the rejection of your submission.
- Articles must include an abstract as part of the submission. For creative submissions please provide a brief description of the engagement with Plath's oeuvre.
- Articles must be fully referenced using MLA or CMS with full and accurate footnotes as necessary. The responsibility for supplying and accurately presenting such information is the author's alone. References must be from acceptable, relevant sources.
- If an article is approved, it is the duty of the author to submit updates and revisions to their work by deadline(s) as stipulated.
- The Editor and the Editorial Board reserve the right to withdraw articles and/or their approval for articles at any time and without prior notification. Their decision is final. Please respect editorial prerogative and the peer review process.
- Long quotations from Plath's works must fall within the guidelines of 'fair use'. For more information, please see <http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html>

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If you are interested in becoming a reader for *Plath Profiles*, email us at PlathProfiles@gmail.com!

Biographies

WRITERS & POETS

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AUSTIN ALEXIS is the author of the full-length collection *Privacy Issues* (Broadside Lotus Press, Madgett Poetry Award) and two chapbooks. His fiction, poetry and reviews have appeared in *Barrow Street*, *The Journal*, *Paterson Literary Review*, and elsewhere. He received scholarships from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and Vermont Studio Center.

ALAN BRITT

ALAN BRITT has been nominated for the 2021 International Janus Pannonius Prize awarded by the Hungarian Centre of PEN International for excellence in poetry from any part of the world. Previous nominated recipients include Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Charles Bernstein and Yves Bonnefoy. Alan served as judge for the 2018 The Bitter Oleander Press Library of Poetry Book Award and was interviewed at The Library of Congress for *The Poet and the Poem*. He has published 18 books of poetry and served as Art Agent for the late great Ultra Violet while often reading poetry at her Chelsea, New York studio. A graduate of the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University he currently teaches English/Creative Writing at Towson University.

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JULIE GOODSPEED-CHADWICK, Ph.D., is an IUPUI Chancellor's Professor of English, IU Bicentennial Professor (2019-2021), and affiliate faculty in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Indiana University-Purdue University Columbus. She is the author of *Reclaiming Assia Wevill: Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and the Literary Imagination* (LSU Press, 2019) and co-editor, with Peter K. Steinberg, of *The Collected Writings of Assia Wevill*, forthcoming from LSU Press in November 2021.

GAIL CROWTHER

DR. GAIL CROWTHER is a freelance writer, researcher and sociology academic who specialises in Sylvia Plath studies, archives, and the importance of place. Her most recent book *Three-Martini Afternoons at the Ritz: The Rebellion of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton* was published in April 2021. She has also written *The Haunted Reader* and *Sylvia Plath* and co-

authored two other books *A Year's Turning: Sylvia Plath in Devon* and *These Ghostly Archives: The Unearthing of Sylvia Plath*.

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), jogging, cycling (badly—joggers can pass her), weaving, and quilting. 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

CHRISTOPHER NIELD

C.P. NIELD is a poet whose work has appeared in *New Poetries IV* (Carcanet) and *The Poet's Quest for God* (Eyewear), as well as leading journals such as *The Spectator*, *New Humanist*, *New European*, *Standpoint*, *Ambit*, *Agenda*, *Acumen*, *The London Magazine*, *The Critic*, *The Rialto*, *The Warwick Review*, *Stand*, *Poetry Wales*, *PN Review*, *The North*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Arion Journal* and *Magma*. In 2006, he was one of the winners of the Keats-Shelley Prize. He has a Master's degree in Modernist Literature from St. Edmund's College at the University of Cambridge and a BA in English Literature from the University of Leeds. In 2020, he graduated with a distinction from East Anglia University's MA in Poetry.

JOAN NOËLDECHEN

JOAN NOËLDECHEN, has been recognized by Marquis Who's Who Top Artists for dedication, achievements, and leadership in poetry. She is a poet, performer, and literary artist celebrating dozens of published poetry anthologies, screenplays, and narrative works over a decades-long career. Born in upstate New York to a family of creative luminaries including musician Ann Percival, graphic artist H.C. Noel, and producer Dick Noel, she loved reading and visiting the library as a child and knew that she wanted to write books by the time she was seven years old.

Inspired by Anne Frank's diary and the poetry of Carl Sandburg, Ms. Noëldechen began writing prolifically and had been featured in anthologies and magazines by her teenage years. In addition to writing, she is a natural actor, and was cast in more than 25 productions in the early 1980s, winning awards for her performances from the International Thespian Society in 1980 and 1981. Ms. Noëldechen graduated from Flagler College in 1985 with a Bachelor

of Arts in drama and English, and pursued an apprenticeship at the Flat Rock Playhouse the same year.

Since the 1990s, Ms. Noëldechen has published or contributed to more than 30 collections and anthologies, including collaborative works with Silvi M. Richardson and Pamela Constance. She considers having had the chance to be edited by June Cotner, Aldo Magi and Nancy Tupper Ling to be a career highlight, and her writing continues to appear in journals, magazines and newspapers in addition to independently-published volumes. Recent works to her credit include "Drifting Off Haywood," "Alpine Poems" and "Betrayal in Your Beekman Arms," and her early poetry was notably collected in "Ashes & Embers: Complete Poems 1979-1999." She is a member of the Academy of American Poets, a patron of Flagler College and enjoys leisure time spent outdoors and reading the work of other poets. In recognition of her accomplishments as an independent writer and creator, Ms. Noëldechen was presented with the Albert Nelson Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award.

CATHERINE RANKOVIC

Catherine Rankovic, independent Plath scholar, has studied astrology for fun and profit since 1976. Under the pseudonym Sylvia Sky she has published articles in *American Astrology* and *Dell Horoscope* and three books including *Tetrabiblos for the 21st Century*, a fresh translation of Ptolemy's second-century "bible of astrology." An Aquarius with Scorpio rising, she is a member of the American Federation of Astrologers and the St. Louis Astrological Association.

RON RIEKKI

RON RIEKKI's books include *My Ancestors are Reindeer Herders and I Am Melting in Extinction* (Apprentice House Press), *Posttraumatic* (Hoot 'n' Waddle), and *U.P.* (Ghost Road Press). Riekki co-edited *Undocumented* (Michigan State University Press) and *The Many Lives of The Evil Dead* (McFarland), and edited *The Many Lives of It* (McFarland), *And Here* (MSU Press), *Here* (MSU Press, Independent Publisher Book Award), and *The Way North* (Wayne State University Press, Michigan Notable Book).

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DORKA TAMÁS is a PhD student in English at the University of Exeter researching on the supernatural Sylvia Plath's poetry. She is also a part-time teaching assistant in Exeter. Dorka has presented in several conferences on various topics and is a member of the Magic Research Group operating at Exeter.

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Vivian's work can be viewed presently in these collections: Washington D.C. Library of Congress, New York City New York City Public Library- Lions -Morgan Library and Museum - MOMA Paris, France Bibliotheque nationale de Francois Mitterand - Litterature and Art pour la jeunesse - Centre Pompidou Kandinsky Library - Institut du Monde Arabe educatives - American Library - Louvres Education, London, England, Southbank Centre, and The Poetry Library Buenos Aires, Argentina Xul Solar Museo. Website: www.vivianoshaughnessy.com IG @vivianoshaughnessy

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Working with pen and ink and water colours, as an illustrator, NAT TAFT enjoys being inspired by the written word, which offers new dimensions and challenges to her art. Her artist alter-ego Natascha Perks loves travelling to and painting landscapes in oil and acrylic of various picturesque places in her home province of supernatural British Columbia. After a number of one-woman shows, she now exhibits her work at Picture Perfect Gallery in Kelowna, BC. A collaboration with Hurdle, something she has long wanted to do, can now be crossed off her bucket list. Relatively new to the "operatic tragedy" (Taft) of the Plath-Hughes saga, which she enjoyed researching, Nat comes down firmly in Camp Sylvia. She can be reached by email at nattaft@gmail.com

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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.

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DOLORES BATTEN is an English Lecturer at Eastern Florida State College and a PhD candidate at the University of Central Florida. 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, Dolores's personal work as writer and scholar includes "The Female Helix of Paradox and Identity within the Mirrored Imagery of the *Bell Jar*" (2019) and "A Review of Warbles by Alex Z. Salinas" in *As If Magazine* (2020), along with several conference

presentations for *Progressive Connexions*, *The National English Language Arts Association (NEMLA)*, and *The Popular Culture Association (PCA)*. She is also the current recipient of the Best Student Paper Award for the 2020-2021 Popular Culture Association, for her work "Multilinear Narratives: Chaos Theory and Refuting "Flat-Earth" Philosophies in Kingdom Hearts".

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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.

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Gary Leising is a professor and chair of English at Utica College in New York. He has published and presented on Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, James Dickey, and other contemporary poets. He is also the author of one book and three chapbooks of poetry.

SCARLETT PETERSON, REVIEWER



SCARLETT PETERSON received her MFA in poetry at Georgia College. She is currently working on her PhD at Georgia State. She is editor in chief of Exhume Magazine, and was formerly an assistant editor of poetry for Arts and Letters. Her poetry has appeared or is upcoming in Pennsylvania English, Ink and Nebula, Moon City Review, Fire Poetry, Cosmonauts Avenue, Gargoyle Magazine, and more. Her nonfiction has appeared in Madcap Review, and Counterclock Journal.

CATHERINE RANKOVIC, REVIEWER



CATHERINE RANKOVIC, MA, MFA, is a reader for Plath Profiles. Her essay "Medusa's Metadata: Introduction to Aurelia Plath's Gregg Shorthand Annotations" will be published in the forthcoming volume *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sylvia Plath*. See Aureliaplath.info for Catherine's ongoing research and discoveries about Aurelia Plath.

HIROMI YASHIDA, REVIEWER



HIROMI YASHIDA is an independent literary scholar, a poet, and a freelance writer and editor. Her scholarly interests include Sylvia Plath, James Joyce, the Beat Generation, the psychoanalysis of gender and race, and poststructuralist poetics. While serving as a copy editor for *Gidra* magazine, and as a poetry reader for *Flying Island Journal*, she leads a poetry workshop for the award-winning VITAL program at the Monroe County Public Library in Bloomington, Indiana. Her poem, "Realia," based on her experience of curating a Sylvia Plath exhibition at the Lilly Library, is included in her poetry chapbook, *Icarus Burning*, a finalist selection for the 2019 New Women's

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ABIGAIL MORESHEAD is a PhD student in the Texts & Technology program at the University of Central Florida, specializing in digital humanities. Abigail researches digital archival practices and textual scholarship, women's writing and publishing, gendered labor, and intellectual networks. Abigail earned an MA in Literary, Cultural, and Textual studies at UCF, during which she served as assistant editor of *The Faulkner Journal*. Abigail also teaches literature and writing courses for UCF's English department and is an intern with the Johnson's Dictionary Online project.

Inject me, infect me:

origins of the Sivvy and Ted COVID poems

by Crystal Hurdle

Plath was of little use to me at the beginning of the pandemic. March 2020 brought unknowing. Under lockdown, I wondered if I would return to the university classroom to teach. Would my book be published later spring as planned? Writing allowed me some solace through naming, putting a shape to my dread. On Easter Sunday, hit with a series of images, I began work on 'covidpoems,' so titled for two weeks before separating them into discrete pieces. Many featured a narrator close to me or, worse, the person I feared COVID and its restrictions might turn me into. I was home fulltime, teaching online (dreaded more than infection), the main pleasure of forty years of teaching the face-to-face contact. My husband, after a few days of working from home, decided that his all-but empty office building was as safe as anywhere (especially with an edgy wife at home).

As many did, I spent time decluttering, still hopeful that our kitchen reno would go ahead in May 2020 (still waiting). My "Sparkling" puts a violent spin on it:

Marie advises us to declutter
I think of the chopsticks, the stiletto heels
already discarded on her say-so
If I'm not too sentimental

I'd love to bring those bayonets back
how penetrating in skin so soft

desperate times call for desperate measures
war measures, so tidy

life-changing
sparking joy

A recovering quilter, I experimented with mask-making, following an on-line *Good Housekeeping* video, regretting anew that *Ladies Home Journal* (a Plath fave, as mine) had bitten the dust. I soon gave up, completing only four of the fiddly things. The resultant poem, "Mask with Blades," features a pivoting seamstress crafting home-made non-medical masks, next to the body of her dead-for-days husband:

and I think of my scissors
the pretty pearl-handled ones you gave me

on our thirtieth wedding anniversary
dulled from hacking at my incorrigible hair

and rust-bloodied from having stabbed you a
day ago

The wedding scissors are reminiscent of Plath's.

Some humour had to come in, too, to relieve the tension. When coffee shops reopened, their washrooms did not. Result, other than a strained bladder, was "Peeing in the Park with Brian: a Post-COVID-Isolation Outing Poem incorporating Brian's requests with some magical realism thrown

in for good measure." I wanted to lighten things up for my friend, a recent widower, though little was funny:

We're peeing while social distancing
still talking, communing with nature
An ant struggles to right itself in the new
freshets
but he is borne away by the rising yellow tide
COVID collateral damage
and then Brian's thin trickle becomes a rivulet
then a ravaging river
our piddle refuses to socially distance

I kept thinking of coupledness and the intensity of being together. Friends working from home with their spouses bemoaned how loud the other's voice was and how difficult to Zoom teach in the same house. I envied those under the house arrest of big families. One friend was "bubbling" not only with her husband, but also their adult son, his partner, and two tenants, alternating festive dinners cooked by each. A walk with my husband through a nature conservancy with its new, strange signage about staying apart the width of an eagle's span spawned "Distance":

You and I continue to walk
the imaginary eagle between us
a head like a revolving owl's
it directs its severe gaze between one of us
and then the other
its cowl as golden as today's unseasonable
sun
its feathers intricate shiny spikes, small bones

(Note the bird imagery, which comes later in "Riding.")

And then Sivvy proper came crashing in the COVID poem series. I recoil from sick friends who, unable to hear with plugged-up ears, lean in ever closer. I thought of Plath who, when she could feel the onset of sinusitis, used the narrow window she had in which to party hardy. I drafted

what was first called "Typhoid Sivvy."

Peter Steinberg's post about removal of hardened snot under the desks at Smith College, tested to identify any as Plath's (!), delighted me even when I (belatedly) realized it was an April Fool's joke. Clearly not the only one interested in the grotesque ;), I capitalized on the mucous of sinusitis in the poem, as I had the scatological in "Peeing in the Park." Thinking of mathematical doubling, vectors of transmission, I recalled a shampoo commercial from my youth that resembled a Zoom screen, which I was seeing too much of. How applicable it would be to Plath's wonderful hair.

The poem grew from a focus on her alone to her and Ted: "Isolating with COVID Sivvy." The gyres of Yeats' "The Second Coming" were on my mind as I edited my poem with the same title, completing proofs on *Sick Witch*, whose anticipated May first publication date had come and gone. An early draft of Yeats' poem had the subheadings 'Evidence' and 'Prediction,' so with "COVID Sivvy," I tried these and others ('prognosis,' 'projection,' and 'prophecy') but soon got rid of them, impossible to separate cause from effect in the *Groundhog Day* pandemic world when undulations have replaced linear forward movement.

An occasional newspaper column called "Staying in with ... [name of a local celebrity]" allowed me to think more about the effects of lockdown. The star of our cancelled summer Shakespeare festival mentioned complete and sudden loss of income. Other celebrities spoke of cooking and gardening more, with, of note, several writers admitting their day-to-day lives had not much changed. Questions included "Where are you spending most of your time? Who are you with? What is something that you are doing that you don't normally do? What are you doing for exercise? What worries you? If and when it ends, what will be different?"

Summer happened. The pandemic continued. I prebooked a lane for outdoor swimming and arrived in my bathing suit as change rooms were closed. Many of my COVID poems were published. Dreading further online teaching, I

finally decided to retire early. I drove through the dawn-quiet midday streets, devoid of customary Vancouver traffic (even the cyclists were not venturing out) to drop off final proofs. I submitted "Staying in with COVID Sivvy" to *Plath Profiles* the last day of July, coincidentally, the day I turned in my office keys and my beloved yoga studio shut forever, victim of the pandemic. So many closings! The poem was soon given a qualified rejection: "[W]e liked the premise of the poem, but felt that it needed some additional work... [W]e are currently in the moment of the poem, and it may not be applicable in 2021"

Disappointing, but fortunately, I had other fish to fry. *Sick Witch* was published late August. Newly retired, I reveled in the expansiveness of writing time, working on two novels. About my draft mystery, a critiquing friend deplored my "fascination (fixation? obsession?) with Plath and Hughes." Similarly, of my novel, he said, "Plath seems intrusive, somehow doesn't feel integrated into / integral to [the protagonist] as a character." This was a wakeup call. As much as I loved Sivvy, I had to excise her from my fiction. (Not that she would go away. She's tenacious as fuck.)

With the October Zoom launch of *Sick Witch*, I introduced "Typhoid Mary Speaks aboard the Shanghaied Ship," by mentioning Plath's infectious actions as sickness descended. She was clearly still on my mind. Reading children's biographies of famous authors, I wondered if one about Plath was possible, so revisited her background and then Hughes' as well. "Caw Caw Caaaw! Crow in the Mirror: Notes towards a Picture-less Picture Book for Kiddies About the poets Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath that Probably Can Never be Written*" is perhaps more parody for adults than bio for children.

Throughout her life, Sylvia had low points when she found it hard to smile, even if people told her to take that frown and turn it upside down. That comment doesn't always help when people have depression, which is when sadness is very deep and goes on for a long time. She was very driven and put lots of

pressure on herself, which is not a good thing to do. It is better to be kind to yourself, to treat yourself like your best friend. A young psychiatrist, Ruth Beuscher, helped by getting her to talk about her problems. Sylvia was able to write about her black moods, which was helpful. It is always good to use your words. So, use your words.

Plath's depression weighed on me. All her calibrations and calculation, her planning and discipline in arranging her time, in sending work to publishers, would be for naught in pandemic times.

Lockdown waves (gyres?) continued. More restrictions. In-person yoga classes disappeared. The grim statistics persisted: case counts, hospitalizations, deaths, mutant strains. As with many, there were no celebrations for my November birthday. South of the border, which had been closed for months, what was happening with Trump? The world, already crazy, had gone madder. An antidote was reading Heather Clark's brilliant biography of Plath, chased with a shooter of Rollyson.

I spent the first Christmas ever without my father and sister, in across-the-strait Victoria (though it might well have been on the moon), at home with my husband, in North Vancouver. No inessential travel was allowed between various BC health regions, so holidays were without usual traditions, family, friends. Our house reeked of bleach as much as chocolate gingerbread with eggnog icing. Abuse against women was on the rise, as was divorce. I wondered how those in unhappy marriages were able to cope, especially if their shared space was small. A news article polled what people liked (!) about the pandemic. Some said it provided a good excuse for not seeing people they disliked. I immediately thought that, with such reasoning, Plath would be able to keep Aurelia away from her on pandemic grounds, but tensions would be heightened in her and Ted's two-person bubble.

One very wet January weekend, I walked along the raging Capilano River, into which I've 'dipped' in the summer. A friend and I watched a heron

alight and depart, circling: visionary. Her entire family in Russia had been stricken by COVID. How different things were country to country. New variants were on the rise. International travel had been prohibited for months... Plath had been in different countries. Yes, there was more to say about Plath in a pandemic.

My mentor's widow said she was glad he had been spared the pandemic, having died just before, though I bemoaned his loss. My husband and I said the same about his mother. How awkward she would have been adjusting a mask smeared with her bright lipstick. I recalled friend Brian's wife having narrowly missed the pandemic because of her March death. Was dying better than going through the crisis? Why should Plath have missed it? I'd written before in "Blood Jet" about her having "escaped" menopause. Perhaps, she *deserved* to go through the pandemic?

As in the early 'covidpoems,' the raw material for the Riding sequence came in a flurry, thirteen pages of single-spaced handwritten text on a day that also saw me sewing an apron from a man's dress shirt and completing some collages. Domesticated and artsy/craftsy, did I channel Plath? Ambrose Bierce's definition of marriage is "The state or condition of a community consisting of a master, a mistress, and two slaves, making all, two." How heightened wedlock (a jail?) has become through COVID. The famously small places (cells?) in which Plath/Hughes had lived. And so it began.

In Spain, only one person was permitted out to shop. Plath and Hughes had honeymooned in Spain. Early in the pandemic, UKers were allowed out only to exercise. Plath and Hughes had lived in various cities in Britain. All over, sourdough baking was so popular that flour and eggs were often sold out. Plath was a great cook. I thought of the circling, cycling of the pandemic. Gyres of despair. Brief reprieve, and then on lockdown again. *Sliding Doors*. Something happening in another country brings a taste of the horror that will soon be ours. Impossibility of escape, the repetition, the monotony of 'Blursday.'

The poem would cover the duration of their coupledness, highlighting where they had lived. Boston (the longest section) struck me as where, without the tethers of teaching, Plath, already stuck, would have floundered in a pandemic. Such rich city life existed just beyond their building's doors, but a world away. I resisted including all of the places, such as Yaddo and Paris, they had visited. As Esther said in *The Bell Jar*, fearing her future, "wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok—I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air." Theirs now a bell jar for two, neither known for 'resiliency,' the pandemic adjective of the day. Though Plath had been able to 'pivot' from Europe to America, from poetry to fiction, from bride to new mother, change was never easy.

While I was sick of Zoom and was (crazily) repeating "Namaste" to my favourite YouTube yoga teacher, who had no idea of my existence, I wanted Ted and Sylvia, to be in their own time, without the distraction of technology, facing only themselves over and over and over. (And birds and animals, living creatures smaller than themselves, as a motif.)

Absconding Ted would have an epiphany, come back to his family, but be carrying COVID with him. No such thing as a happy ending or even an ending.... Sunday's cursive draft went to the computer on Monday Jan. 18th, where it went through all-day revisions, variously labelled 'pestilent poem,' then 'pandemic plath poem.' After a few more days of work, it was "Riding" by that Thursday.

The most extensive revising after the whirlwind writing week was of the North Yorkshire segment. A writing group member requested "more moors" and recommended Anne Carson's "The Glass Essay" (fabulous). I enjoyed the Brontë research, the peering at UK park websites, seeing the impact of the pandemic on the natural world so far away. Bird lover, I was delighted to find that Yorkshire grouse make a sound like "come back." How well that could fit with Plath and Hughes

and their open-air lovemaking. And another small creature could be victim. Something would have to die.

In April 2021, just over a year into the pandemic, I read the Yorkshire piece at Inverse, a poetry event put on by the BC Federation of Writers. *Plath Profiles* accepted the long poem in June: "we are obsessed. This latest long piece is truly incredible! The way you wove together the life histories of the poets, their psyches and aesthetics, and the current pandemic and our way of life these days is truly, unsettlingly perfect." Yay! Now there's a happy ending that resists immunity. Or is it another beginning?

Now sick of the pandemic (if not of Sivvy), as it winds down, I see how much more I could do! A sequel? There is much raw material in the subject of vaccination alone. I made sure my husband (from an antivax family) had all his shots (like a dog) before we married. What would Plath have done if Hughes refused to get vaccinated? So many possible topics: quarantines and mandatory stays (in Canada) at quarantine hotels; self-interested public health officials; restrictions being lifted dependent on a certain percentage of the country being vaccinated; Alberta even holding a lottery to encourage people to get shots. Would Sivvy take a chance on AstraZeneca (used widely in the UK) with its possible clotting? Coming out of the pandemic...if an activity is allowed, is it necessarily safe? Would Sylvia return to live theatre with or without social distancing or reduced capacity? How soon would she shed her mask so stained by her crimson lipstick? In an early poem from my collection *After Ted & Sylvia* (2003), Plath "struggle[d] to take off [her] face mask ... but it [was] welded on." Now, what would Sylvia do?

I've been long infected with Plath as doppelgänger muse. Disquieting, yes. My emissary into other worlds, my companion in understanding this one. Too late for inoculation.

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‘Inspire’ so Close to ‘Expire’:

*Riding out the Pandemic with Poet
Partners Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath*

by Crystal Hurdle
illustrated by Nat Taft



Cambridge, England:

allowed out for only one hour a day to exercise
(Ted riding on the back of Sylvia's bike is
not deemed exercise)
no moors within walking distance and for only one hour
barely time to warm up much less to find love
too many people are strolling along the Cam

officials say punting is not considered *proper* exercise
(so much contradiction from the health authorities)
one mask doesn't know what the other is saying
officials today say declaiming poetry to the cows is too much like singing
officials tomorrow that exhorting Chaucer is too much like singing
the frowsy officials mansplain with more expectorate
than an *a cappella* choir

please stop or you will face a stiff fine
one that will cost you [the price of five poems]
distanced Sivvy translate-calculates in her head
she doesn't want that!
her poems hard-earned
as is this brand-new fiancé

Benidorm, Spain:

the pestilential Plath carrier
no desire to flatten any curve
sheds fetish DNA and sore-throated sequins
on a red carpet to nowhere quickly anywhere

at last!
Spain, but only one person from a household allowed to shop
Ted doesn't bargain well enough for the potatoes
annoyed at her annoyance

They chafe under lockdown
no more afternoons in the sea
just empty day on empty day
with the other
one's double
The long expanse of dining table between them shrinks
until each other's face is in each other's face



they breathe in the other's air
they are each other

dawning duplicate smiles
delighted they sing

North Yorkshire, England:

Sylvia:
rolling in the bracken, the heath
the nuthatch grey blue with a yellow belly
flits like a sunny puzzle piece of sky
greenly translucent damselfly alights on fern, foxglove
I can see through Ted not transparent enough
he too lifts up off love over

the moors are undulating, ululating, singing

an injured grouse calls *Go-back, back, back*
Ted stands above, fractures its skull with a rock
puts it out of its misery
tells me it is a favour

I can't breathe
Why? Why? Why?
am winded to my bones, wuthering
too long a silent walk

sobering stones in the Haworth graveyard
slanted by the light
the parsonage museum visit
infected? incubating?
Emily never married
I reach out an ungloved finger to rock the Brontës' cradle
Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, Anne, all babies once
Dead at 38, 31, 30, 29
Was the tuberculosis that took dear Emily
a precursor to COVID?
no need to socially distance with the dead

cunning miniature books house
the Brontës' shared childhood worlds so big
maybe Ted is brother Branwell rather than Cathy's Heathcliff
My iron man and I not so much ill-fated lovers as siblings of the soul?



but I need moor love
 no need for stupid masks in the hollows in the moors
 the little privacy given by Ted's parents here is small bother
 --open air better for love
 marriage, in sickness and in health
 cruelty excepted, accepted?--
 our two-person orb able to float far with the wind
 diaphanous, gossamer

(like that wretched virus)

the moors are undulating, ululating, exhorting, expectorating, spewing--

Come-back, back, back! my beloved says above
 I struggle against distraction
 my air sacs stronger than any bird's
 test and trace
 Ted is all heath, all health
 I flutter to our love

breathing and heart beating as wide as our grassy sea



Cambridge, England:

Though now her husband, shhh! their marriage is secret. Will the pandemic burst open this bubble? They try to stay in her room at Whitstead but can cook only so much on that single fucking gas ring, not even two rings to echo their coupledness, even stodgy dorm food (a plague on the dining hall's restricted COVID hours) has its charms, though she must smuggle it back to the room for bunking-in Ted, not as if he can just go out and fish for trout. And her Newnham dormmates think it's another silly Sylvia story that Ted is one of her household. As if. Though she has been bringing fewer men 'home' lately. Other girls have been chided for entertaining their fuckbuddies while under quarantine.

The marriage is official
 They move to grungy 55 Eltisley Ave
 She studies Ted as much as her books
 his lack of hygiene less writerly not artful
 fingernail scrapings and dandruff on his desk
 Ted's befouled secretaire, his black pen, fabulous fomites
 the love of his pheromone-y pong

careful what she breathes in

inspire so close to
expire



Eastham, Massachusetts:

A poor boy from West Yorkshire--

in that small cottage community, all she does is bake cakes, often flat, never frosted properly with his mother's seven-minute boiled icing. And her mother to have wasted so much money on this small cardboard cottage in an ersatz community. Like a leper colony, he thinks, but does not say. The lighthouse is miles away and no proper, real way to reach it. Every step precarious. The bikes don't run well, and nobody will pick up hitchhikers during COVID, even if they were allowed outside. But. They. Do. Go. Mask up for a secret swim in their sea.

--believes salt kills germs.

Northampton, Massachusetts:

The plague comes too late for her to get out of teaching. And he likes *his* students. The colleges, universities and schools will close soon enough, but by then, the young marrieds will be gone.

Child's Park signage. "Walk with only members of your own household." "Capacity limits in effect." "Trespassers will be prosecuted." Did he see what he thought he did?

Prosecutors will be trespassed.

The clock strikes thirteen, and all are not welcome here.

The rhododendron pickers are not thinking of the common good, just their good. They are rapacious. And they are not two metres apart. Sylvia wonders when she can shuck off the Smith school marm seriousness and go blonde again. Hating rule breakers, she strokes her pilfered rose. If only she could like the aesthetics of illness, if only she could find some way for it to work for her.

Ted is looking with interest at the smiling illegal-dance-preparing girls, none of them wearing masks, hair long and streaming. Sylvia is wearing a mask with a smile painted on. She takes it off and puts it on upside down. Ted needs to have things spelled out for him.

What is his wife saying, wanting now? Why does her mask look different?

Sivvy in a pandemic?
She'd be horrible
let's get that clear up front
unlike the colour of her mucous

in early stages of sinusitis symptoms
she would use up that window
ever narrowing
to party hardy
worse than those rhododendron stealers
knowing she'd be bed-bound for weeks
with stuffed-up dead head raging fevers

worse than small children in playgrounds
those wandering right now in Child's Park
worse than transmitting bat and bird vectors
she'd be an infection mechanism
her whole body a ready syringe
from the tips of her toes to the top of her head

with her brown roots
up in the air
Sivvy and her hair!
an updo ponytail, in coronets
long blonde like the girl
in that old Faberge shampoo commercial
you'll tell two friends
and they'll tell two friends
and so on and so on
the TV screen erupting in multiple frames
trajectories of transmission

Not long after, they find an abandoned baby bird. (Sylvia tries not to think about the Yorkshire grouse.) Book-learned, neither thinks of it as a possible vector for contagion. But so much about the disease, so much about each other, is not yet known. Like children, they make it a nest in a shoebox. They feed it with an eyedropper. They are unable to nurse it back to health. Ted gasses it to death. Sylvia wonders if it were her bird-bony body in the box. What a rich symbol! If only COVID offered as much. But COVID is also in that nest.

never mind if this overachiever were pre- or asymptomatic
social distancing not for her
quarantines only of her own making
when she hunkers down
in writerly self-isolation



Travel restrictions come into effect—Sivvy uses these to keep Aurelia in Wellesley and away from Northampton and then away from them in Boston. Don't let her in. Let the rules work against her. But not against Sylvia who after her teaching stint is not staying in Northampton for love or money. She'll take her love with her.

Boston, Massachusetts:

Suddenly the slicks want different kinds of articles, different kinds of stories, on pandemic pivots, and goodness gracious, what can she write about? Paula's snowsuit seems less than useless. Sylvia panics and doesn't want to continue with her hospital job when all are wearing masks, and ventilators are in short supply. Maybe Massachusetts General will become the epicentre of the virus. She quits early on. The fish in the aquarium in their new apartment sicken. Should she offer to give them mouth to mouth? She strokes the gills and wonders if they can breathe in COVID. Can fish transmit it? Are the public swimming pools open? Not that she would go into one. Should she Wim Hof in the Charles to keep up her immunity? The fish die on her watch. Well, on Ted's too.

She becomes nervous that other faux poets will get ahead when everyone is in lockdown. Others will steal her idea. She thought of it first! She didn't need a global pandemic to stay home and be with Ted and write and be with Ted until she feels sick in the head and would rather lay in bed and feel sick with dread to be with Ted and/who would sooner be dead. (Famous last words: One of us had to die.)

Others use the pandemic and their increased time at home to learn new things such as crafts. Sylvia tries to collage with the daily paper, but she can't wrest irony and comic juxtapositions from the pages. It's all COVID COVID COVID, daily numbers, rates of transmission, viral strains, as if it's a war effort and there's a war going on. Besides, she has too few old magazines with which to work, wants to save back issues of *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, and especially *Poetry*, in which their work appears whole, save it whole, so the poems have a frame, a place, a space, a context, unlike what they have now in this libidinous never-ending Mary Ventura lockdown on a train that goes nowhere because it never leaves the station of the heart is where the home is where the heart is where the hate is.

And she doesn't want to try shadow boxing because she wants a target, and she knows he will hit back; instead, she marches in place, and her sinews become secateurs. How her legs could crack his



head like a nutcracker if he comes close enough to give her pleasure with his wily word-entreated tongue.

They could have dance parties, but she is too proper, it is too silly, and what good is dancing except to attract a mate?

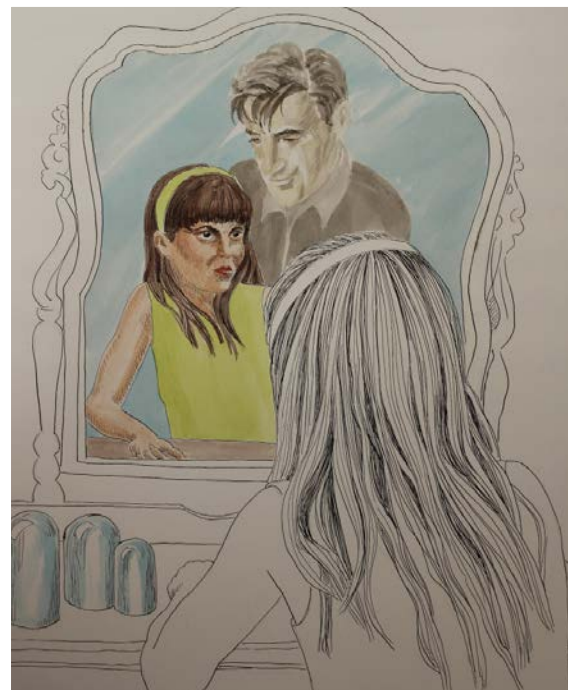
Where is he? Where did he go? Why is he in the stairwell? To whom is he speaking? Those wretched Sassoons? Surely, with the travel restrictions they can't have come over. Isn't the UK variant increasingly virulent? Why does the blackness follow her everywhere? Shouldn't someone just build a wall? Why is he entertaining thoughts of them, and isn't it dangerous to be sharing the same air? Already encrusted in coal, already blackened. Like most of her cakes. Others use the time wisely, learn how to bake bread, but she is not interested in that. Cake and cake and cake: it is enough. The smell of the sourdough—she did try, though she pretends not because it was not successful, and she is all about success—is as rank as semen, and she did not want to watch the inevitable rising so like a pregnant belly or to have to cope with the impacted horror of dead yeast, something flat and barren, not on her watch. And Ted's loaves are so silky high and delicious! Why is it always Ted? Should they use their time productively in the bedroom? People predict a rash of new babies nine months after lockdown, but she doesn't want to be pregnant now, not now, it is too early, it is too late.

She has been locked down already, by the harsh Taskmistress Poetry who doesn't give time off for good behavior except to offer more of the same, more time in which to rhyme too narrowly, to pattern too constrictively. Sylvia is sick of writing. She is sick of writer's block. Sick of Poetry and, mostly, sick of Ted.

Ted has gone off on another walk though he's already had his hour. He says he'll risk the fine though they can ill-afford it. He laughs at her fear. She is too wifely, he says, too feminine. He says that what the pandemic has taught him and what it should be teaching her is to manage risk. He says, there will always be risk. Without risk there is no edge, no future.

Sylvia's dreams:
cauldron of hot loathing
his grey face my mirror image
clawing against the Plexiglas of the bar cart
on the train and bell jars everywhere
climbing up and out
Ted penetrating bubble after bubble
his penis a syringe
loosey goosey women their heads in their hands
like those disquieting muses, lop-headed

crucible fever fever
bell jar with two inside scraping as they strive to escape
a glassed-in desert island
with his rank breath



surely COVID can't be any worse

notes for her future novel:

Doreen's college mates will have pocketbook covers to match every outfit

matching masks too

perhaps made by Hilda, the pivoting hatmaker

(would *Ladies Home Journal* be interested?)

Esther unable to sew

pretty scraps of fabric into such fashionable

non-medical masks

yet another thing she can't do to add to her list

but will they serve a greater good?

keep the pestilence in or out?

Sylvia has been getting out.

Guru Lowell tells them to write about Corona, but Ted has already suggested this. She is interested in the purple-blue lesions on COVID toes. The synecdoche appeals. She thinks in body parts. Would Ted's privates turn blue, fall off leprously?

Then Lowell's auditors are told not to come back. The university will figure something out for the *proper* students of whom Sivvy is not one. She struggles. She even misses rival Anne Sexton, her martini twin, though the bars are closing ever earlier: to fit in an after-class drink, they'd have to be there before the class even started, though there no longer is one.

Sylvia wants to follow Lowell's suggestions at the same time she wants to spurn him. She's not yet ready to write about her mental instability but maybe she should catch COVID to have something physical to write about? She debates, doesn't wash her hands. Ted scoffs at "good hand hygiene." He thinks hand sanitizer is ridiculous, says, "Alcohol has a much better use," so maybe the choice will be taken out of her hands, and he will just give it to her as he's given so much else.

She squeezes sanitizer onto Ted, but he's impatient, shoves her away, yells at her for her ablutions of neat bleach, her douching with it to prevent pregnancy before she is ready. She thinks the president idiotic and histrionic, but who knows? So many believe him, he is almost a Poetry for the unwashed masses, she dunks her diaphragm in and then wonders at the searing exquisite pain. The



apartment stinks of bleach, miscarried poems, sourdough starter, resentment, deflating hopes.

they are allowed out for only one hour a day, to exercise
they argue about which hour, witch hour

Ted wants to see the sunrise
she doesn't
she is slugabed for her aching
she wants to see the sunset

he suggests separate walks
he at the beginning of the day
she, its end

she is gobsmacked
how can they still be a couple
never mind the remaining 22 hours
of each other's company

he is light lissome effervescent when making his escape
it is legitimate
it must satisfy even her rules
he wants never to come back

that first morning
the sun is full on, risen
when he grudgingly returns
plots more plots, more escapes, in his head and elsewhere

she tastes the workings of his brain
she knows he wants her left behind

as the shadows lengthen in her setting sun
stranger than De Chirico's
she muses
thinks of killing him
getting rid of her competition
a loving slam over the head with a frying pan full of
the potatoes and onions he so loves

she'll do it after her walk
after tea
scalding the cups
heating the dollops of milk
doing it his English way

he won't see it coming
because he will be
writing writing his endless black scrawl
in his endless black Borgesian notebook
extracting yet another poem from his dawn-walk
insidious rivalry and ribaldry

she walks more quickly as she plans
she could be the source of her own transmission no sneezing into an elbow
could flagrantly pick her nose odious olfactory organ
lovingly expound on the viscosity
the colour
the turgidity
--Lowell was right!--
essence of putrescence dabbed behind one ear
pestilential perfume
the mucous, its crusted jelly so jewel-pretty
she will collect gummy globules in bud vases
drop in insolent secreting flowers for the sickbed tray
actively inject infection

cook exotic recipes
sustain Ted affectionately, lavishly
like a mother bird feeding her young
I know you like your sweet and savoury Sivvy
Here's a loving spoonful
a couple of droplets for flavor
Sivvy's secret sauce

she will stir her brew
of contagion
making sure to use again and again
the same spoon
with which she tested for
more sugar? more salt?

a spoonful of Sivvy will help the medicine go down

and he
like others before him
begging bowl in tremulous inflamed scabrous hand
will come back for
...more

Sylvia smiles, enters the building



but the plan doesn't work
better in theory than in practice
he is immune to her contagion-charm

she weeps
and he tuts at her tears
not touching her
no solace but no necessary transmission
plans his next solitary walk and the one after that

Everything now on lockdown:

Sylvia's nightmares:
penicillin does nothing for the virus
nor cocaine sprays, codeine, nose drops, pyribenzamine
former sinusitis saviours
COVID not just a two bed-sheet cold
he refuses to nurse her
she snips sick-bed food
to bite-sized pieces
swallow, gurgle, choke
wakes strangled in hot sheets
Ted gone

Sivvy:

We will be waiting a long time for the vaccine. Poets are not paramedics, poetry is not an essential service, though Poetry begs to differ, but her declaiming voice is as high-pitched as an autistic dog's, so that very few can hear her, though Ted is able to do so, and Poetry is able to reign him in suddenly with a sharp yank of her leash, and why am I unable to do so? The leash puddles around his ankles, and he looks at it with a grin, and then meets my eyes so steadfastly, spitefully. He knows I can do nothing, and he knows I know. Then he laughs. How I hate that sound.

inspire so close to
expire

After the fish, they require a small animal to nurse and fail to save. A house fly in their Willow St. apartment? One from the bedroom bay window where he writes? No, it will have to be one from the living room bay window where *she* writes. There is no end of faltering flies. They might as well expend their energies on something even more purposeless than poetry.

Sivvy:

...but noose control is necessary, and he won't stay under mine. He laughs again and consults the Ouija. I pretend not to listen to the words that are really in his mouth with a thinly disguised American accent as if that is enough to fool me, just saying what he wants to say and pretending it's

other, those words about sickness and sacrifice and the long sharp odds.

Ted's nightmare:

a mad bad Typhoid Mary
whispering love and contagion
into yet another new boyfriend's ear
why she needs so many of them
The graph reveals cases going up and up!

after a long monologue more nasal than usual
hand to sweaty hand, French-kissing
moist laryngeal whisper to lure victims closer
PS I'm contagious, pass it on

Sivvy:

The disease, it is coming. I write sequels to "Fever 103°" and "I am Vertical." Perhaps better if Ted gets it and not I, so that I can observe him. Will there be buboes? He sneered at my Benidorm fever. Payback time. Has he brought in the pestilence from his most recent walk?

He smells like sourdough. Has he been fucking someone else in the fecund fields in the little pockets of shrubbery along the Charles River? Did he do so along the River Cam? Here I thought I was clever reminding him that he could not go inside anyone's house, but he has found the loophole. He knows how much I liked our fucking out-of-doors, and he has betrayed me in that too, there's the smell of rabid pussy on him, and the stink is COVID pestilent. He breathes her droplets on me, and I know I am taken I am caught I am caught. I can see my end as I feel the constriction of a beginning headache. He, vector, and I, soon, dead queen. I did not know it would come to this. I won't be able to see my
sunset
today
sunset
will
come to me.

London, England:

Back in the UK
Sylvia is broody, nesting
they could save neither bird nor fish
but what about a human being?
Frieda started off so small, two cells
the gamete even the zygote
smaller than a fly

ecstatic to quarantine with Ted



for longer than the required fourteen days
for another trimester and another
to exchange oxycontin for oxytocin
as purposeful as poetry



Devon, England:

Nick is about to be born just as the news comes about a strange virus in Wuhan. Sylvia laughs about the name. Is there such a place? She brays like a horse. She isn't much for anything "Oriental." They are so far from London now with their young daughter, their thatched house, their writerly half days, share and share about, it now seems a made-up place, like something in a story book.

The baby comes at the same time as a new round of restrictions. They are already bubbled and fraught, no baby 'help' allowed in. Sylvia is frantic. Journalist Siv Arb can't come; Ted can't go to the BBC; the Wevills will stay trapped in London. Choose your ending. Plop over a different half page of the board book if you don't like the one in your hands.

But in all versions, Ted is fighting to get away. He can't recognize the new baby boy as his own, his milky sour wife so shapeless and alien, her breasts again no longer for him. He doesn't fear the disease. He is of the earth: it won't get him. But he dreads what the officials will make people do because of it. He is already isolating. He is already quarantined. He must get away. He must. Their property is big enough, but it is not enough. He can circle it in no time with his seven-league boots, able to return almost before he starts.

Devon is deserted. Not even one curtain twitches. Is everyone dead already? Has his small family been so cut off that they are unaware of an apocalypse? He walks through vacant North Tawton; perhaps it is just the raw late winter cold that keeps all inside, surely, he is imagining things, why, the fishmonger whose trout is never fresh enough will greet him as he reaches the next corner, but no, he is all alone, now in his own bubble of one, and he wonders if this is what he wanted all along, as he stands waiting at the train station for a train that never comes.

He stands for minutes, or is it hours? He looks at the trees, the far fields, hoar frost on the grass. The blades move in a slow jeweled dance. It is meadow, not moor, its own self, but enough. He spies a bird of prey, some type of hawk, a Peregrine falcon, he believes. Watching it is centering, calming.

His breathing slows. He remembers Sylvia on their wedding day, her fierceness as she types out his poems, her smooth skin, her chameleon hair, her own poetry. She has given him such a dear daughter, whom he loves and already misses, and now a son. There is no need for rivalry. Like the elements of the landscape, they are all in this together.

With that, he strides home but not before he has picked something up from when he slammed his fist down on the contaminated sill of the empty ticket booth, twice: once when, enraged, he realized it was empty and another when he had his epiphany, but it doesn't matter on which occasion, and Sylvia keeps Court Green so meticulously clean, you could eat off the floors, lick the sill of the ticket booth were they to have it in their home, which they do not, but that doesn't matter now, and he brings the pestilence into the household, piggybacking it, as he once did his daughter. All the painted hearts and flowers in the world won't do any good. Nothing will prevent its coming.

The train station will be decommissioned soon enough. After the many deaths.

handshaking to seal the deal
index case
Sivvy no patient zero
always has to be first in everything

she unprotected from villagers in gloves and visor masks
she unprotected from the bees, from the potato people
yes, but more so
they from her

Sivvy's lank hair horse-like when critic/lover/Ted-stand-in Alvarez smells/smelled/will
smell it
she reeks of flu contamination, mutation

One last time, Ted and Sylvia will attempt to nurse another dying animal, but not Ariel: Their use of tweezers, specialty implements, is exacting, is impossible. They try on smaller and smaller animals and insects. They are hopeful about the bee, really put their full selves into it, it is an effigy of themselves, but no. Then they move on to an amoeba and then the Coronavirus itself. By then, so late in the pandemic, it is about to sicken and die.

inspire so close to
expire

but they save it
she is orbiting moon to his earth
she is but a light particle to his blazing sun
she the glycoprotein spike transfiguring
for this is what Poetry does
he the Coronavirus ssRNA
he remains the same, immutable

she is fickle, female, opportunistic
she will make things more deadly
more easily transferrable
they are part of a whole
stronger when united than when separate
crowning their love
they can never part
and through them
it lives

Notes:

- *The Brontës as children and into adulthood created fantasy worlds, writing small books about them.*
- *Wim Hof (Iceman) touts the health benefits of cold-water swimming and bathing.*
- *Plath and Anne Sexton audited Robert Lowell's creative writing class in 1959.*
- *Plath suffered from frequent bouts of sinusitis, for which she received a host of treatments in the States, less so in the UK.*
- *Sylvia rode a horse called Ariel, its name the title of one of her most famous poems in a collection of the same name.*

Ferocious Solitude

by Alan Britt

*Ferocious solitude
and 58 griefs for breakfast.*

Hardboiled!

*If I were down to 2 months,
what else could I do
but write poems made
of switchblades
dipped in kerosene
poised to destroy
the universe as I knew it?*

"I've been long infected with Plath as doppelgänger muse.
Disquieting, yes.
My emissary into other worlds,
my companion in understanding this one.
Too late for inoculation."

- Crystal Hurdle, *Infect Me, Inject Me*

