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Sylvia Plath

Emily LaBarge

I AM NO SHADOW[1]

Face in obscurity, she blows out three white candles that burn at different lengths, fixed to a saucer sitting atop a desk crowded with papers. Streams of smoke rise into the air; thin white lines twist and coil, undulating against the darkness of the surrounding room.

From behind, we see her walk up a short flight of stairs into the kitchen. Backlit with early morning glow, she emerges in silhouette — tall, slender, modest housecoat tied at the waist, long hair hanging down her back — as she moves in a deliberate, efficient manner. She opens and closes cupboards, prepares a tray of tea for one, pauses to look out the large window from where she can see the milkman begin his daily rounds.

Back at the desk, her hands pull a sheet of paper out of a typewriter — neat two line stanzas run down the length of white — gently fingering its edges before turning to pick up a cup of coffee and switch off the radio.

1 Sylvia Plath, 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices', in *Collected Poems,* ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 187.

In the kitchen again, her hands and fingers again, up close as they peel carrots and potatoes, boil pots of water — roiling liquid, rising steam.

Again on the stairs, again walking up in the dim light, and past, and away, always away, and in shadow, from us, where we wait, below. Features invisible, she passes quickly, a baby held against her hip, and ascends to a bathroom where she kneels down on the bare tiles and leans forward to place the infant in the tub.

Outside, grey day, from afar, again the elegant silhouette. Too distant to make out anything clearly. She pushes a pram up a steep green incline, a small child in red scampers behind. Later, she stands alone on the bald hill, the bare black arms of trees snake around her, framing the flat sky.

The black horse whinnies and bucks. From the shoulders down the woman cuts a dark profile against the sun that glints in the distance as she rides, in slow-motion. She pulls in the reigns, feet firmly in stirrups, as her body rises and falls with each gallop. A glimpse of fine jawline, cheekbone, nose, long strands of hair whipping in the wind, before she is eclipsed by the surging light and surrounding scape.

A woman is dragging her shadow in a circle
About a bald hospital saucer.
It resembles the moon, or a sheet of blank paper
And appears to have suffered a sort of private blitzkrieg.[2]

Who is this woman? This shadowy figure, dark remainder, spectral penumbra? The credits tell me she is Sally Sinclair, with her two children, starring as Sylvia Plath and *her* two children, in *Voices & Visions,* a 13-part television series about poets, produced in the late 1980s by the New York Center for Visual History. The programme runs just under an hour and consists primarily of

2 Plath, 'A Life', in *Collected Poems,* 49.

interviews with family, acquaintances, literary critics and fellow poets. These clips sit alongside a collage of static archival images — from photographs to letters, journal entries and working drafts of poems — interspersed with dramatic vignettes in which the speculative outline of Plath goes about her daily routine, face in shadow or head cut off entirely, omitted by the viewfinders' exacting frame. Headless, her dark body makes its way heedless: animated by voiceovers and anecdotes, she rises and rises again, and again, *at about four in the morning — that still blue, almost eternal hour before the baby's cry, before the glassy music of the milkman, settling his bottles.*[3]

The documentary opens with a statement about Plath, who 'lived in London and died last Monday'. The voice and the voiceover are unidentified, and it took me some time to realise that this is a snippet from one of only a few obituaries for Plath — written for *The Observer* by her friend, the poet and critic A. Alvarez, and broadcast on BBC Third Programme shortly after her death — with the result that the first time I watched it, I was astonished that the piece could have been made so quickly. From where did they get the manuscripts? And all the archival sources? How did they rapidly generate the ideas for, not to mention film the bizarre biographical interpretation scenes — the beekeepers and the candles, girls in togas with wreathes of flowers, grey ponies on even greyer moors? Moreover, how were all of these people sitting there, just days following her death, discussing her life and work so calmly, betraying little to no emotion, presenting confident, case-closed analyses of her intentions both literary and personal?

And yet, while the film was in fact made nearly 30 years after Plath's death in 1963, aged 30, it betrays hallmarks — both tonally and structurally — of most of the critical documents about

3 Sylvia Plath, quoted by A. Alvarez in *The Art of Sylvia Plath,* ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 59.

the poet produced from the years following the publication of her posthumous collection *Ariel,* in 1965, up until present day.

Experts brought forward as witnesses.

Close friends and family who speak of the highs the lows the strangeness the difficult nature — *When she was eight years old she saw the new moon and murmured to herself, 'the moon is a lock of witch's hair — and the night winds pause and stare at that strand from a witch's head.*[4] The death drive, the melancholy, the crashing crushing force of energy — *She loved to show her scars and tell her stories of smashing on the basement floor, whatever it was, and the life force, the life force in her was so strong it counteracted all those pills she'd taken.*[5]

Detractors who, smiling and self-assured, detail the volatility, the lack of a certain *gentility* (British shorthand for American): she was a genius but but but she destroyed herself and everything around her and she oh she *needed* it, she *wanted* it — everything for the poetry, the wicked poetry with its blood and its bones, anguished visions and violent shrieks.

Critics who stand in awe of the prolific nature of her final output, fast and furious: a book of poems in roughly a year, many of the finest within under two months. Fellow writers who wince to think of the drive and the discipline, as well as the fierce loneliness and the wilful, resigned isolation.

Other critics who chide and sneer: couldn't have been *that* bad, Sylvia! What a morbid woman, what a singularly not nice girl. No wonder she —

4 Aurelia Plath, quoted in *Voice & Visions: Sylvia Plath* (New York: New York Center for Visual History, 1988), https://www.learner.org/catalog/extras/vvspot/Plath.html.

5 Clarissa Roche, quoted in *Voices & Visions*.

Hackneyed visions of what it might have been like on *that horse,* in *that flat,* in *her mind,* and *those final days.* The body trotted out, sometimes even with her pony, to answer for itself over and over.

Plath's poems are often read as a key to her death, a pre-posthumous text actively scripted to close with the grand finale of suicide — urgently resonant in its harbinger of an event that had already passed by the time the collection could be read as a whole. To me, they have always spoken as uncanny premonitions of the events that would follow: all manner of conjuring, mythology, exorcism, visitation to be exacted upon her body, her — corpus — of — work — intellect — interior — mind — heart — life —

In *The Bell Jar,* Plath's protagonist Esther lies in bed unable to sleep and muses, *I thought the most beautiful thing in the world must be shadow, the million moving shapes and cul-de-sacs of shadow. There was shadow in bureau drawers and closets and suitcases, and shadow under houses and trees and stones, and shadow at the back of people's eyes and smiles, and shadow, miles and miles and miles of it, on the night side of the earth.*[6] In a world, a body and a mind that feels hot, cramped, empty and sizzling with fearful torpor, shadow is a welcome relief: the cool dark beneath the hard slick, the heart of darkness that lurks within, blurred contours, unknowing, distance, mystery preserved. Sally Sinclair, with her silly silhouette and her shaded face, her headless mannequin, is one of many instances in which Plath-after-death is resurrected only to be actively denied many of these things, frozen in both shadow and light. As the poet herself wrote, *Nobody watched me before, now I am watched… Once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins, / And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow.*[7]

6 Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 155.
7 Plath, 'Tulips', in *Collected Poems,* 160.

THERE ARE TWO OF ME NOW[8]

That is to say: divided. More than two, I would say — but of course a set of mirror reflections can ricochet into infinity. A popular Plath-itude is the idea of the 'divided self', put forward by her husband Ted Hughes (and other critics following his suit): for most of her existence, she was dogged by the coincidence of two warring selves — the artificial and the authentic — who violently clashed in both her work and her life. Poetry, like life in general, is full of shackles and expectations, rules, strictures that obscure the real self, the real expression at the centre, wherein lies the difficult truth of the matter — of *all* matters: THE THINGS OF THE WORLD WITH NO GLAZING.[9] Is this a perilous wager, particularly where poetry is concerned?

Linda Wagner Martin writes: *For a young woman to kill herself at the beginning of a successful writing career posed an intriguing and frightening mystery. All kinds of equations between art and life began to be suggested. Had Plath written so personally that she had somehow crossed the boundary between art and life? Was full exploration of the creative process dangerous?*[10] Never mind the troubling myth of wholeness, which disallows for a self in fragments and encourages the notion of a drive towards (and the possibility of) an ultimate synthesis; but what is the boundary between art and life? To what ends does this binary serve? And by what rite, right, write of passage might one attain — *who by fire, who by water*[11] — the glistening at the centre, *the pure gold baby.*[12]

8 Plath, 'In Plaster', in *Collected Poems,* 158.

9 Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath,* ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 485.

10 Linda Wagner Martin, ed., *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1988), 1.

11 Leonard Cohen, 'Who by Fire', *New Skin for the Old Ceremony* (Sound Ideas Studio, CBS-69087, 1974)

12 Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', in *Collected Poems,* 244.

Is there something bare and burned about poetry — *playing with fire* — that it can sear its stark, minimal truths into your flesh until you are flayed, the skin hangs off in strips and you — *who by high ordeal, who by common trial*[13] — kneel down and you bow under the creaking weight and you worry that if the tension keeps up, the heat and the pressure, you will tear in half, wilt in two with a terrible red sigh.

Sliced in two like a flatfish, each of us is perpetually hunting for the matching half of himself.[14]

Split, slit right down the middle — incised.

Cut — slash — burn. The ruthless mantra of many a great writer. And the gore at the core is nothing but — your heart — your authentic self — a truly selfless offering — that comes at a price nonetheless. Scatter the remains to the wind.

WHO HAS DISMEMBERED US?[15]

Printed on 17 February 1963, Alvarez's obituary for Plath was entitled 'A Poet's Epitaph'. As would many after, Alvarez wrote as though the poet had lost an arduous battle with language: *For the last few months she had been writing continuously, almost as though possessed. In these last poems, she was systematically probing that narrow, violent area between the viable and the impossible, between experience which can be transmuted into poetry and that which is overwhelming.*[16]

Alongside his text were printed four poems — 'Edge', 'The Fearful', 'Kindness' and 'Contusion' — and a picture of Plath holding her baby son, Nicholas. Over the poet's shoulder,

13 Cohen, 'Who by Fire'.
14 Aristophanes, quoted in Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 31.
15 Plath, 'Event', in *Collected Poems*, 195.
16 A. Alvarez, 'A Poet's Epitaph', *Weekend Observer,* 17 February 1963, 23.

behind her dark hair and her hesitant smile, is a poster of Isis — goddess of nature and magic, friend to artisans, sinners and slaves — which is said to have presided over Plath's writing desk. The Egyptian myth of Isis describes her collecting and reassembling the scattered parts of her lover, Osiris, after he is murdered and dismembered by his evil brother, Set. It is this theme that underlines the astrological meaning of Isis as the bringing together of fragments, resurrection and re-membering. Isis endures — her name repeats the present tense of the verb 'to be': Is, Is. A sentiment echoed in *The Bell Jar*'s Esther, who — attending the funeral of an old peer — hears the 'old brag' of her heart: *I am, I am, I am.*[17]

In the poem 'Event', Plath's narrator laments the opening of a 'black gap' that love can no longer enter. *My limbs, also, have left me,* she notes, before asking with blank surprise, *Who has dismembered us?*[18] She seems to understand the perilous knife-edge of curiosity, the injustice it can carve into living things, reaching for intimacies that unmask not knowledge but rather *the isolate, slow faults / That kill, that kill, that kill.*[19]

At her death, Plath left a completed manuscript, entitled *Ariel,* which she had carefully arranged to begin with the word 'Love', in a poem about the birth of her daughter, and to end with the word 'Spring', in the final of the 'bee poems', 'Wintering', which speaks of endurance, hibernation and rebirth. Her intestate death resulted in the rights of all her work and materials being passed to her husband at the time, Ted Hughes, who reordered and edited the manuscript to form the famous collection we now know by the same name.

Hughes' *Ariel* omitted 13 of Plath's choices and included 13 of his in their stead — many of them from a handful of poems she

17 Plath, *The Bell Jar,* 256.
18 Plath, 'Event', in *Collected Poems,* 195.
19 Plath, 'Elm', in *Collected Poems,* 193.

had written in the days leading immediately to her death. In his introduction to the *Collected Poems,* he qualifies his actions as practical editorial decisions: he is the keeper of Plath's work, and responsible for its creative integrity, distribution and reception. *Several advisers,* he tells us, *had felt that the violent contradictory feelings expressed in those pieces might prove hard for the reading public to take. In one sense, as it turned out, this apprehension showed some insight.*[20] He explains further that he also *omitted some of the more personally aggressive poems from 1962, and might have omitted one or two more if she had not already published them herself in magazines — so that by 1965 they were widely known.*[21]

Amongst these 'personally aggressive' poems that *were* included are 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus', both of which Plath had read for a BBC broadcast in October 1962, as well as sought publication for around the same time, and which are now considered to be some of the best poems of the 20th century. To a degree, the 'apprehension' seems misguided: the contradictory impulses — the violence, the jarring tension and uncanny, uncomfortable images — are what Plath has become known for and was, arguably, working incredibly hard to achieve, with little regard for whether the reading public would easily 'take' them or not.

So what exactly is the concern? Who is afraid of Sylvia Plath?

Others of the omitted poems would be published in later volumes, *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees,* but some — particularly those that make veiled reference to difficult elements of the Plath–Hughes relationship (they separated in the summer of 1962 and were arranging to divorce at the time of Plath's decease) — would not see the published page until *The Collected Poems,* 1981.

20 Ted Hughes, 'Introduction' to Plath, *Collected Poems,* 15.
21 Ibid.

Cut cut cut — cut it back — parse — chop — hide — cut it again — parcel — neatly in — brown — paper — tied with a — hope the — insides don't — seep —

Difficult. *Difficult. She was very difficult*.[22]

Until *Ariel* was published by Faber & Faber in 1965, the circumstances of Plath's death were not widely known: she was said to have 'died suddenly' — only friends, family and close peers would have known of her early morning suicide by gas oven, and even fewer the lonely particulars of two children in a sealed off nursery room upstairs, plates of bread and butter, glasses of milk carefully laid out in case they got hungry before someone else arrived.

The late poems that Hughes chose to include in his editorial re-arrangement, those written in the weeks leading up to her death, and which Plath felt to be the beginning of another body of work, are excellent. They are also stark, chilling, sinister, cold and resigned. As arranged in the collection, and in light of the surrounding circumstances, instead of Plath's original difficult but ultimately triumphant voice, *Ariel* reads like an expertly crafted suicide script in which the final page is really the final page, the end of the story, the last word, with Plath's corpse tumbling into guttered white silence after the ultimate full stop:

The woman is perfected
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare

22 A. Alvarez, quoted in *Voices & Visions: Sylvia Plath.*

Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.[23]

Here's what you asked for — your pretty package — gagged — no — I mean bound — stamped — a seal of — official —

Was it better that Plath seem a morbid and dangerous necromantic, hell-bent on self-destruction, than that she seem 'personally aggressive' or 'difficult'? Unkind, unpleasant, unfriendly, ungracious, unlikable — *ungrateful*. These are words that have governed the editing of Plath's entire body of work as though the thing to be preserved is a particular kind of woman, one that quite clearly resembles Plath no more in death than in life, rather than a particular kind of work or a creative voice, one that the poet herself intended to be heard.

But maybe she just didn't know any better.

She needed guidance. She needed someone else to tell her what she really wanted; what she really meant to say. To distinguish the real from the false.

This is the better book, oh dutiful apprentice, trust me, follow, and someday soon *I will discharge thee.*[24] This this this is what you sound like. This is what it looks like, the body you left behind.

Just lie — still — for a — it won't — hurt — or well — only — just — a bit —

Plath notoriously consulted Hughes on nearly everything she wrote, and often took 'writing assignments' from him, as he encouraged her to push herself and to continue to develop the

23 Plath, 'Edge', in *Collected Poems,* 272.
24 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest,* in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Scott, Webster, and Geary, 1842), I.II.231.

voice that he could hear buried beneath all of the neat structural preoccupations that governed much of her early work. Yet, in late journal entries, Plath writes things like, *Must try poems. DO NOT SHOW ANY TO TED. I sometimes feel a paralysis come over me: his opinion is so important to me. Didn't show him the bull one: a small victory.*[25] Hughes himself noted, following their separation, a sense of breaking free that Plath began to pursue more persistently in her work, perhaps pushing towards that 'authentic self' — one previous hindrance of which might have been the well-intentioned, but perhaps inadequate governing tutelage of her husband. Inadequate as in — limited. As in, what the poet Hughes might have thought Plath was, or could be, both in life and in death, might not have accorded with her own creative wishes and visions — her violent contradictions — her difficult, intemperate, unapologetic I.

We murder to dissect.[26]

These points and their many surrounding arguments, both populist and literary, are decades old and there is enough other literature to consult for the finer points. It is just to say, here, that it smarts to read private journals published with OMISSION — OMISSION — OMISSION — and endless strains of ellipses where the 'nasty', 'vicious', 'untrue' or, bizarrely, 'erotically limiting'[27] bits have been excised like malignant tumours in a manner that recalls Plath's 'The Surgeon at 2am',

It is a statue the orderlies are wheeling off.
I have perfected it.
I am left with an arm or a leg,
A set of teeth, or stones
To rattle in a bottle and take home,

25 Plath, *Unabridged Journals,* 467.
26 William Wordsworth, 'The Tables Turned', in *Lyrical Ballads: With a Few Other Poems* (London: Biggs and Cottle, 1798), 180.
27 Frances McCullough, 'Editor's Note', in Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath,* ed. Frances McCullough (New York: Random House, 1982), xii.

And tissue in slices—a pathological salami.
Tonight the parts are entombed in an icebox.
Tomorrow they will swim
In vinegar like saint's relics.
Tomorrow the patient will have a clean, pink plastic limb.[28]

I guess, at the end of the day, no one likes a big mess.

The evidence is ample, here and elsewhere in life, that we do not always know how to care for one we might love, or have loved. We do not always understand or want to see who they struggle to become, for this is unknown even to them. Those who can no longer speak must be protected and yes, to a degree, spoken for. But might we find a way even so to let the body remain as it is — intact — even as it yawns with cavernous fissures and rotten flesh? For this partial wholeness is less dangerous than one that places a cold cast death mask over the face and says, I saw, I see, I say, I speak, I knew, I know — the truth, what she wanted, or would have, had she really known herself — here — in this — charnel house —

Nights, I squat in the cornucopia,
Of your left ear, out of the window,

Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.
The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.[29]

In 'The Colossus', Plath's narrator is the caretaker of an inert giant who quietly looms ominous and omnipresent, a dead weight. She describes the tender machinations required to labour over the landscape of his body, *Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol / I crawl like an ant in mourning / Over the weedy*

28 Plath, 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.', in *Collected Poems,* 170.
29 Plath, 'The Colossus', in *Collected Poems,* 130.

acres of your brow / To mend the immense skull-plates and clear / The bald, white tumuli from your eyes.[30]

Bones, whiteness, bald and hard, faceless skulls play a central role in Plath's imagery. The moon is *white as a knuckle and terribly upset,*[31] she watches from the sky where she *has nothing to be sad about, / Staring from her hood of bone. // She is used to this sort of thing. Her blacks crackle and drag.*[32] There is everywhere the sense of a *bonewhite light, like death, behind all things*[33] that sears the bleached O-gape of bone sockets fulsome with emptiness that nonetheless harbours, with cool desolation, a person who murmurs sweet entreaties into the ear of a deaf giant. There is a whispering along the bones — a creature that scratches for the honey at the centre of the marrow comb, a voice *that does not know what it has done to deserve baldness, errors, infidelities,*[34] but wants to get to the bottom of *the deep tap roo*t to find out.

THERE IS A CHARGE[35]

'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams' tells the story of a young girl who works as Assistant to the Secretary in an Out-Patient Department of a Clinic Building at the City Hospital, where her job is primarily to type up records. In these records she finds described the dreams of patients, in which she feels she can see at work, coursing, the major force of the world — panic: *Panic with a dog-face, devil-face, hag-face, whore-face, panic in capital letters with no face at all — it's the same Johnny Panic, awake or asleep.* Feeling she understands the rich blue veins, the deep truth currents of panic that run everywhere just under the skin, she anoints herself 'dream connoisseur', faithful servant to Johnny

30 Ibid., 129.
31 Plath, 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', in *Collected Poems,* 173.
32 Plath, 'Edge', in *Collected Poems,* 272.
33 Plath, 'Insomniac', in *Collected Poems,* 163.
34 Donald Barthelme, 'The Indian Uprising', in *Sixty Stories* (London: Penguin, 2003), 104.
35 Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', in *Collected Poems,* 246.

Panic, for whom she will compile the Bible of Dreams — the motto of which reads: *Perfect fear casteth out all else.*[36]

By day she is just a regular working girl: no one can see the dark, frayed knowledge that scores through her centre. By night, she hatches a plan to stay in the hospital record room overnight, a marathon run at her dutiful transcriptions. When she is found out, the Clinic Director and his baleful assistant take her to a cold white room where she is undressed, robed in white sheets, extended on a cot and held down: *the crown of wire is placed on my head, the wafer of forgetfulness on my tongue.*[37] As the machine begins to whir and the orderlies stand over her reciting a devotional chant about fear, the girl sees the face of Johnny Panic and she is *shaken like a leaf in the teeth of glory…His Word charges and illumines the universe. The air crackles with his blue-tongued lightning-haloed angels…He Forgets not his own.*[38] Even as the girl is punished for her dark truths and insights, she prevails — by them, through them, in them she is exalted — still waters run deep.

There is a question to be posed, in writing as elsewhere, about who benefits from certain varieties of silences and forgetfulness. About what kind of anaesthetic is really necessary — and who should be given the power — and the choice — to administer it. To determine who and when and how needs to be softened around the edges and why, which is not always for her — his, their, your, our — own good.

I love the locust tree
the sweet white locust
How much?

36 Sylvia Plath, 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams', in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (Cutchogue: Buccaneer Books, 1994), 160.
37 Ibid., 166.
38 Ibid.

How much?
How much does it cost
to love the locust tree
in bloom?[39]

The notion of cost is an interesting one. It's true that we do pay for things, in all manner of ways, sometimes dearly. William Carlos Williams' poem seems to address the cost of beauty, perhaps where poetry is concerned: how much will be lost or gained in attempting to love the locust tree in bloom, in person, in mind, in words.

In a *New York Review of Books* essay, 'On Sylvia Plath', Elizabeth Hardwick writes, *But even in recollection — and* The Bell Jar *was written more than a decade after the happenings — Sylvia Plath does not ask the cost.*[40] In this case, I am unclear as to what is being addressed: the cost of what? Hardwick describes the voice of Plath's fiction and poetry as destructive, paranoid, angry, bitter, vengeful, arrogant, suffering, ungenerous and aggressive — qualities that she describes as 'reckless'; but again: reckless with what? What is the gamble? What is at stake? Hardwick seems to suggest not only that the use of difficult or challenging autobiographical material for inspiration exacts a price from the writer, but that particular *kinds* of writing — language, tone, imagery — are dangerous, and possibly even morally or ethically erroneous, for writer and reader alike.

In an interview with Peter Orr, Plath described poetry as a 'tyrannical discipline', *you've got to go so far, so fast, in such a small space you just have to burn away all the peripherals.*[41] Who is it, then? Who pays for the idea that if poetry goes too far, too

39 William Carlos Williams, 'The Library', in *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 95.

40 Elizabeth Hardwick, 'On Sylvia Plath', *The New York Review of Books,* 12 August, 1971, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1971/08/12/on-sylvia- plath/.

41 Sylvia Plath, 'A 1962 Interview with Peter Orr', in *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets Conducted by Hilary Morrish, Peter Orr,*

fast, in too small a space, it carries the price tag of a human life? Who benefits from the closing of the gap between things that inspire work and the final work itself, replacing the imaginative space with a body or a fractured psyche that cannot withstand productive osmosis?

Later in the same interview, Plath explains, *I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrific, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience…with an informed and intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be* relevant, *and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on.*[42]

One of the more assiduous dissections of Plath's posthumous body has been the correlation of every known event in her life — either as noted in her journals, or remembered by (a select number of) the people who knew her — with her creative work. A leads directly to B with little to no room for interpretation or imagination on the part of poet and reader alike and 'misreadings' are corrected with citations of the 'truth', as in the notes that accompany 'Death & Co.' in *The Collected Poems*. Plath's introduction for a BBC reading is cited, and explains, *This poem is about the double or schizophrenic nature of death — the marmoreal coldness of Blake's death mask, say, hand in glove with the fearful softness of worms, water and other katabolists. I imagine these two aspects of death as two men, two business friends who have come to call.* Underneath her statement is a correction from

John Press, and Ian Scott-Kilvery. (London: Routledge, 1966), http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/orrinterview.htm.

42 Ibid.

the collection's omniscient narrator: *The actual occasion was a visit by well-meaning men who invited TH [Ted Hughes] to live abroad at a tempting salary, and whom she therefore resented.*[43]

Must we read such a poem as having an 'actual occasion'? Is it redundant to declare the truth content of a creative document? In what circumstances must a writer and her narrator(s) or voices, her life and her work be considered one and the same? In this rendering of Plath's body of work, where is the current, the blue jolt volt — the *charge* at the core — the insistent beating of the heart, you can hear it, *It really goes*[44] — the crackle, sizzle, burn of something rising out of itself? Where is the poet with her great discipline and mastery of difficult experience, her refusal of narcissism, her ability to imagine beyond literal transcriptions of the every day, to transcend, to create: *to write.*

In Plath's work, the charge that electrocutes — burns bare along the nerve — is also the charge that electrifies the imagination, tears open the plain surfaces to reveal the surging, essential, often difficult truths of being human as a state that inevitably involves moments of pain and suffering. The daily acknowledgement of these aspects of life has been chosen by many as a critical, imperative pursuit within creative work — one for which there is no price or threat of personal annihilation, but rather the reward of evolution and endurance.

It is this pact that Plath forges with her readers when she invites them for *The big strip tease./ Gentleman, ladies,* and when she charges them, *a very large charge / For a word or a touch / Or a bit of blood.*[45] The voice of Ariel as a whole is notable for its hard disdain and lack of self-pity, its blank, nursery rhyme taunts. It is this voice, which asks for nothing, that *the peanut-crunching*

43 Plath, 'Notes: 1962', in *Collected Poems,* 294.
44 Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', in *Collected Poems,* 246.
45 Ibid., 245–46.

crowd[46] hears and follows nonetheless because it dares to make unsavoury promises: come with me and I'll show you. And they do and they have and they probably always will. Not even Wordsworth thought poetry was all clouds and daffodils.

Without this charge, it is no wonder that when she rises from the table Plath lurches, unsteady and bewildered, recalling the empty, imprisoned figures of her own work: 'The Applicant' who is presented with *A living doll, everywhere you look. / It can sew, it can cook, / It can talk, talk, talk.*[47] — or 'The Munich Mannequins' who, in their barren perfection, in their sulphur loveliness, in their smiles, lean *Naked and bald in their furs, / Orange lollies on silver sticks, // Intolerable, without mind.*[48]

The sutures stretch and tear where the thread is pulled too tightly, stiches uneven and hasty, recalling Mary Shelley's description of *Frankenstein* as her 'hideous progeny'.[49] Shelley's monster is monstrous not because of his literal monstrousness, but because he reveals to us our impoverished and unenlightened nature upon beholding difference that we find terrifying because of its proximity to our own. Running on either side of this fine line, both human and monster suffer and grow in strength, in equal measure: for they are intimately bound. And the body exhumed can never again be made whole.

THE SPINE BONES BARED FOR A MOMENT[50]

There is this cave
In the air behind my body
That nobody is going to touch:
A cloister, a silence

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46 Ibid.
47 Plath, 'The Applicant', in *Collected Poems,* 222.
48 Plath, 'The Munich Mannequins', in *Collected Poems,* 263.
49 Mary Shelley, 'Appendix I: Introduction to Shelley's 1831 Edition', in *Frankenstein* (Peterborough: Broadview Editions, 2012), 351.
50 Plath, 'Zoo-Keeper's Wife', in *Collected Poems,* 154.

Closing around a blossom of fire.
When I stand upright in the wind,
My bones turn to dark emeralds.[51]

It has taken me almost two years to understand how to write this essay. Never more have I wished I had read only primary and no secondary sources — the words of Plath alone, which had always meant so much to me, and nothing else surrounding. A litany of bony voices rises out of the warring remains like the endless question mark of a spine — with all of its fluids and delicate systems of nerves exposed, slender tangents of ribs winging faint chimes. So many tender possibilities for paralysis, trapped between knobby truths and impossible contradictions.

Never more have I found it more difficult to finish something as the words keep running keep keep running down and down and make more and less and un- and deeply- and never- and none- and all-important sense. Running down the middle of the middle, the heart of the heart of the body, which is the spine, there is a stately column of vertebrae. A litanous backbone of adjectives that interlock and fuse together, keeping both the woman and the poems standing up straight, even as they sway and sometimes falter under the force of gravity. And the eyes — they can still move — but she does not — she cannot — she never — ever — speaks just — listens — and stares — and — stares — as they —

Luminous
Successful
Vulnerable
Brilliant
Unrelenting
Ungenerous
Bitter
Resentful

51 James Wright, 'The Jewel', in *The Branch Will Not Break* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), 17.

Self-destructive
Disturbing
Disturbed
Unkind
Ungrateful
Vicious
Appendectomy
Nasty
Wicked
Malicious
Problematic
Vehement
Passionate
Goal-oriented
Confident
Competitive
Lively
Excessive
Hungry
Greedy
Harrowing
Hysterical
Sinusitis
Aggressive
Vengeful
Wrathful
Remorseless
Cruel
Humiliating
Miscarriage
Manipulative
Capable
Tough
Punishing
Polite
Pretty
Attractive

Glamorous
Neat
Tidy
Clean
Young
Mother
Forceful
Brisk
Housewife
Plain
Mousy
Normal
Fever
Alert
Bright
Friendly
Insomnia
Distant
Composed
Anxiety
Blonde
Witty
American
Fresh
Charming
Depression
Controlled
Shameless
Shameful
Brave
Brazen
Powerful
Talented
Dangerous
Witch
Necromantic
Disciplined

Gaunt
Priestess
Possessed
Animal
Driven
Sick
Hateful
Vengeful
Reckless
Genius

In the last months of working on this essay, there was a rat living in my house. Every night, as I lay in bed reading, a persistent scratching, gnawing noise would emerge from the cabinet beneath the sink. Later, after I had shoved old jars and tin foil into the space from which I felt sure the rat came, my DIY solutions managed only to amplify the noise and there would be the sound — rather predictably — of clinking glass and scrunching metal. Traps and poison were placed around the house, and the scratching slowly grew more and more faint; but you could still hear the creature dragging itself through the walls. One night I heard it under the stairs, scrabbling violently, before a long silence; and in the morning, one last, long scratch ended in a tumbling sound that seemed to fall into the place beneath my sink, where the tell-tale jars were interned. Sitting at my desk all day, staring at these words on these pages, I thought I could smell a rat. And I also started to think the rat was me: there must be a reason, here and now, that it had chosen my home for its final resting place. The cupboard made a snickering noise each time I opened it to check for any signs of evidence, and I imagined the rat's invisible mouth curled back in a sick smile — grinning wider and wider with knowledge of my dark paranoia — his skin shrivelling and shrinking to expose row after row of teeth filed to points.

He's laughing at me, I thought. *He knows,* I knew.

This is just to say, critically, that I know I am in line with all of the other birds of Plath prey waiting to behold whatever it is that remains, even though I'm sure that by this point all of the best cuts have been sold. But I wait, I am still waiting, in any case. Like all of the others, I suppose I too say I do it for her, while I try to ignore the feeling that there is a scalpel trembling in my hand. And I try not to hear her on the BBC programme about American poets in England, 'What made you stay?', describing her attachment to British butcher shops:

And I have since become devoted to the British butcher shops and I'm — I'm not by any means an expert, but I think you have to know your cuts of meat and it's a rather creative process to choose them out of the animal almost on the hook and I think this is an experience that I — I really was deprived of in America.[52]

THE BLOOD JET IS POETRY[53]

Words, words, to stop the deluge through the thumbhole in the dike, Plath writes in her journal, 1958; and in a later entry, 1959, *what inner decisions, what inner murder or prison break must I commit if I want to speak from my true deep voice in writing? Where are my small incidents; the blood poured from the shoes?*[54] Writing is the pumping piston, the aorta, the deepest blue red viscous that animates, snakes and pulses and without which she — we — you — I — cannot live.

Words, blood, fluid, holes, fissures, open, pouring, gushing, breaking, striking, wounding, spurting, rising, running, spilling, *What a thrill —*[55] and language falls like *Axes / After whose*

52 Sylvia Plath, 'What Made You stay?', *A World of Sound,* BBC Home Service, 7 September 1962, 3.30pm.
53 Plath, 'Kindness', in *Collected Poems,* 270.
54 Plath, *Unabridged Journals,* 318, 368–69.
55 Sylvia Plath, 'Cut', in *Ariel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 23.

stroke the wood rings, / And the echoes! / Echoes travelling / Off from the centre like horses.[56]

The echoes resound and return, *Words dry and riderless, / The indefatigable hoof-taps,*[57] evoking Plath's early morning horse rides in Devon. Her steed named Ariel appears in the eponymous poem as *God's lioness, / How one we grow,* on whom she is hauled through the air, incandescent in scarlet motion: *And I / Am the arrow, // The dew that flies / Suicidal, at one with the drive / Into the red // Eye, the cauldron of morning.*[58] The echoes and the words, the blade against wood and the feeling of a great force finally breaking loose, with a relished howl of freedom, also recall Ariel of *The Tempest,* who was for 12 years imprisoned in a cloven pine by the evil witch Sycorax. The spirit is freed by the magician Prospero, to whom he is then indentured to perform various deeds in order to gain his liberty. Only Plath's Ariel, 'Ariel', Ariel is wayward and knows her power — she pulses and strains in her confines, heaves and throbs and escapes, rather than slavishly awaiting the impoverished freedom bestowed by another. *And but one word with one of us?* she seems to taunt, knowing the risk at hand, *couple it with something; make it a word and a blow.*[59]

The blood jet is poetry,
There is no stopping it.[60]

In these late poems the voice rises to a fever pitch, surging alongside veins of bloodshot ore that pulse in rhythm and rhyme. Alvarez remembers Plath's insistence upon sharing new work with him, late in 1962, that the poems be read out loud: *I want*

56 Plath, 'Words', in *Ariel,* 86.
57 Ibid.
58 Plath, 'Ariel', in *Ariel,* 37.
59 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet,* in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare,* III.I.39–40.
60 Plath, 'Kindness', in *Ariel,* 83.

you to hear *them.*[61] Hardwick, too, remembers attending a reading at which *these bitter poems were 'beautifully' read, projected in full-throated, plump, diction-perfect, Englishy, mesmerizing cadences, all round and rapid, and paced and spaced…Clearly, perfectly, staring you down.*[62] The dybbuk speaks: the voice rises and rises: a bloody ventriloquism that breaks the levy, streams through the dike: inside pours forth to outside: joyful excrescence, ecstatic filth.

In a letter to her mother, Plath wrote, *I shall be one of the few women poets in the world who is a fully rejoicing woman…I am a woman and glad of it, and my songs will be of the fertility of the earth.*[63] That her songs taste of *Black sweet blood mouthfuls,*[64] that their voices ring idiosyncratic, unconventional, uncanny and — to some — unacceptable, is a triumphant affirmation.

THE HEART HAS NOT STOPPED[65]

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said, "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter—bitter," he answered;

"But I like it
"Because it is bitter,
"And because it is my heart."[66]

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61 A. Alvarez, quoted in *Voice & Visions: Sylvia Plath*.
62 Hardwick, 'On Sylvia Plath'.
63 Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 256.
64 Plath, 'Ariel', in *Ariel,* 36.
65 Plath, 'Mystic', in *Collected Poems,* 269.
66 Stephen Crane, 'In the Desert', in *The Complete Poems of Stephen Crane* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 3.

The essential organs provide fertile nourishment, if in metaphor alone. Haruspicy is a form of divination that involves reading the entrails of sacrificed animals, in some cases to reveal truths about the mysteries of the human body — physical aberration, illness, projected courses of healing. Examine the organs, what remains, and in them see the life of an entire body. Eat of the heart, even your own, and experience the bitter revelations of all that hides within the fleshy joy of human tissue: hold it in the air for all to see, fine beating alchemy. But, *Alas, the heart is not a metaphor — or not only a metaphor.*[67]

The narrating voice of Plath's 'Mystic' asks, *Is there no great love, only tenderness? / Does the sea // Remember the walker upon it?*[68] To remember, always, that any body, that every body, once lived.

This body was angry and scared, jubilant and exhilarated — this body loved and hurt and fell and got up again — this body wrote stories and poems and hoped and felt foolish and was brilliant nonetheless — this body tried hard to hide what was wrong — this body was a child who carried a heavy school bag, it dug into her shoulders — this body missed her father after he died — this body was a baby whose mother nursed and held it — this body was lonely — this body had electrodes placed on her temples and felt every violent shock as though she was being tortured — this body wondered what she was being punished for — this body had her own babies and held and nursed and loved them — this body tried and failed and failed again and failed better — or worse — depending on who you ask.

In 'Laugh of the Medusa', Cixous writes, *If there is a 'propriety of woman', it is paradoxically her capacity to depropriate unselfishly, body without end, without appendage, without principal 'parts'…This doesn't mean that she's undifferentiated magma, but*

67 Elizabeth Hardwick, *Sleepless Nights* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 91.

68 Plath, 'Mystic', in *Collected Poems,* 269.

that she doesn't lord it over her body or her desire…Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours.[69] At the end of the day, empathy is the tenderest alchemy, so intimately bound with imagination and understanding. Everything in pieces, memories, flashes — scattered linguistic exhalations of the body, mind and heart, with no longing for specious unity.

When Plath read 'Lady Lazarus' in a reading prepared for the BBC, she introduced it by explaining, *The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman.*[70] The poem is often interpreted as a detailing of Plath's own suicide attempts, three in number, with one final success. But I like the idea of the Phoenix being also just a *good, plain, very resourceful woman* — foremost in her arsenal of resources, a talent not just for dying, but for life-sustaining poetry that cannot expire, that continues to write itself into the future. In one of the Lady's attempts at death she *rocked shut // As a seashell. / They had to call and call / And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.*[71] A metaphorical nod, perhaps, to Ariel's song in *The Tempest,* which haunts the margins of much of Plath's oeuvre:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

69 Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 875–93, at 889.
70 Plath, 'Notes: 1962', in *Collected Poems,* 292.
71 Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', in *Collected Poems,* 245.

Plath's maggots glitter and flash, rotting opalescent figments carefully preserved as jewels to be admired at a later date for their potential to reveal, like shimmering pearls, the entirety of distant worlds reached only by a mind turning and turning in its own depths of contemplation — endless fathoms of fathoming.

Something rich and strange.

They had to call and call.

In 'Last Words', Plath outlines a funeral in which the speaker imagines what will happen to her body — what rites and passages, what gains and losses — after she dies: *I do not want a plain box, she says, I want a sarcophagus / With tigery stripes, and a face on it / Round as the moon, to stare up. / I want to be looking at them when they come.*[72] The voice of this poem worries about her spirit escaping like steam, *One day it won't come back,* and imagines that the blue eye of her turquoise will comfort when the soles of her feet grow cold. Surrounded by tokens that purr with warmth and happy scents, she dissolves into the constellation of her afterlife to come — dark and content.

Let me have my copper cooking pots, let my rouge pots
Bloom about me like night flowers, with a good smell.
They will roll me up in bandages, they will store my heart
Under my feet in a neat parcel.
I shall hardly know myself. It will be dark,
And the shine of these small things sweeter than the face of Ishtar.[73]

I hope that of all, of any of the parts that remain, for Plath, or for me or for you — for any body, for every body — this is the case. And I hope we are looking at them when they come and that our last words are our own.

72 Plath, 'Last Words', in *Collected Poems,* 172.
73 Ibid.