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History and a Case for Prescience: Short Studies of Sylvia Plath's 1956 Poems

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History and a Case for Prescience: Short Studies of Sylvia Plath's 1956 Poems

"[Y]ou are being sounded and unpicked, and charted and reduced to your parts. However your new veiled Southpaw approach I should think is a match for their craft."

– Letter to Sylvia Plath from Ted Hughes, October 6 and 8, 1956

Ted Hughes knew that his wife Sylvia Plath had a few tricks in her poetry, and that her words were not always what they seemed to be. In my work in *Fixed Stars Govern a Life: Decoding Sylvia Plath*, volume one (Stephen F. Austin State University Press, 2014), I reveal new interpretations and multi-layered dimensions of Plath's poetry through the use of the tarot and Qabalah. It was only natural that I should go back to explore Plath's early work and see if she had done the same in *The Collected Poems*, especially those written before her mystical masterpiece of *Ariel*.

Critics of Ted Hughes have complained that Hughes, who edited Sylvia Plath's *The Collected Poems*, considered Plath's work before 1956, when the two came together as a couple, as "Juvenilia." Many see this as Hughes giving himself credit for mentoring Plath, and his discounting her earlier work because it did not have his stamp of influence upon it.

In his introduction to *The Collected Poems*, Hughes admitted, "One can see here, too, how exclusively her writing depended on a supercharged system of inner symbols and images, an enclosed cosmic circus. If that could have been projected visually, the substance and patterning of these poems would have made very curious mandalas. As poems, they are always inspired high jinks, but frequently quite a bit more." He continued, "I worked closely with her and watched the poems being written" (CP, 16). Viewing Plath's early work, pre- and post-1956 through the same mystical framework from which my interpretations of Plath's *Ariel* are structured, it is evident that her pre-1956 poems lack these multiple meanings and that Hughes was absolutely correct in his division of this work from her later poetry. Some poems written after Hughes' appearance in Plath's life still did not make the grade. This is the case for Plath's poems "Aerialist," written on May 30, 1956, and "Touch and Go," written on October 5, 1956, according to her pocket calendar.

It appears that Plath first began to layer meanings in her work, starting with "Conversation Among the Ruins," a poem she wrote *before* her involvement with Hughes. In this poem, Plath begins to use a technique that she would develop to perfection in her *Ariel* poems of 1962 and after.

I have discussed my process of decoding Plath's *Ariel* work in articles featured in other *Plath Profiles* volumes¹, and in *Fixed Stars Govern a Life*, and so I shall not repeat it here. In 1956, Plath was not yet an expert in expanding meanings within her work. This is why her early poetry feels good, is perfect in rhythm and meter, yet most readers acknowledge that the work is not her greatest. In *The Collected Poems*, Hughes edited and changed some of Plath's poems' order, and scholars such as Nancy D. Hargrove have already identified that Hughes even repositioned some outside of the years in which they were written. Why? Because Hughes later imposed that same *Ariel* mystical structure upon *The Collected Poems*; a framework that he and Plath used in all of their work, and one which would ultimately lead to Plath posthumously winning the Pulitzer Prize. Some of her best juvenilia, most notably, "Mad Girl's Love Song," was left out of *The Collected Poems* entirely, because it did not fit the greater structure. Likewise, "Aerialist" and "Touch and Go" were better fits for that section.

My interpretations here are out of the sequence originally published in *The Collected Poems*. I have instead arranged my short studies of each in the chronological order of their writing.

1956 was the year Plath and Hughes met, married, and went on their honeymoon to Benidorm in Alicante, Spain. Plath's poems that are believed to clearly reference Benidorm are: "Southern Sunrise," "Alicante Lullaby," "Dream with Clam-Diggers," "Epitaph for Fire and Flower," "Fiesta Melons," "Spider," "The Goring," "The Beggars," "Departure," and "The Other Two." Hughes placed all of these poems, excluding "The Other Two," in the 1956 section of *The Collected Poems*. He did not group them together, most likely because he was adhering to the Qabalistic format of Plath's themes, and because the themes stretch far beyond Benidorm.

A belief in the occult is not necessary to understand these interpretations of Plath's early work. A

See my work in *Plath Profiles* 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

simple guideline for the reader is to cast the time of the poem's writing against personal, academic, and news events of Plath's day, often recorded in her calendar, letters, and journals. Some of these analyses show the interesting accuracy with which Plath described a future event. I do not tell the reader what to believe, but it is a case for Plath's self-proclaimed premonitions, which seem to have been greater than her own awareness of them. With this guide, Plath's 1956 poems are explained as they are models for news events, whether or not one is well-read on the subject of mysticism. The politics of the day mattered to Plath, and it should also not be forgotten that Plath proclaimed to Peter Orr in a famous interview that she was "rather political" (Orr).

"CONVERSATION AMONG THE RUINS": THE FURIOUS WRECK OF LOVE AFFAIRS AND TUNISIA

Plath's "Conversation Among the Ruins," positioned first in the *Collected Poems* for the year of 1956, is widely read to be a piece that she wrote about the famous Giorgio de Chirico painting of the same name (CP, 21). The notes to the poem explain that Plath had a reproduction of this painting pinned to her door in Cambridge, and so clearly she admired the work. Two years later, in 1958, Plath wrote in her journals of writing two poems inspired by de Chirico: "The Disquieting Muses," and "On the Decline of Oracles" (UJ, 359). Curiously, she did not list "Conversation Among the Ruins" with these other two. This is because Plath's "Conversation Among the Ruins" is less focused on de Chirico's painting, and is instead a triple-metaphor for art, her autobiography, and the world politics of the moment.

In January 1956, Plath's calendar reveals that she had been reading a great deal of works by August Strindberg. Some of the plays mentioned are Strindberg's *After the Fire*, a story of a person returning home to find everything in ruins, and all manner of crimes, sins, and secrets exposed in the rubble for everyone to see. Strindberg's *Dance of Death* is a 1900 play of marital dysfunction; and his *Prometheus Bound* is the Greek model for the dramatic treatment of Satan. These works appear to have been an influence on "Conversation Among the Ruins." Likewise, that same month Plath also read two Chekov plays: *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Cherry Orchard*, also with the overriding themes of losing a family estate ("our bankrupt estate").

A greater bearing on Plath's poem, however, was the news regarding the country of Tunisia, which was going through upheaval in early 1956. Tunisia, formerly Carthage, is known for its ruins, its "wild furies" of wars, its Greco-Roman and Ottoman history. Like Chekov's previously mentioned plays, Tunisia had become a "bankrupt estate" in the late 1800s. It was then taken over by France until 1956, when it finally achieved its independence at around the time Plath probably wrote the poem. Just a few months earlier, in an unpublished excerpt of a letter to her mother Aurelia Plath, dated September 25, 1955, Plath wrote that she and some other students were received by the Countess of Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, at a private reception. What happened in the outside world mattered to Plath, and after this experience, Tunisia was no exception. The reception, held at Barbara Hutton's former palace in Regent's Park London, made a great impression upon this young American girl in sophisticated English society, and the occasion was described by Plath in her letter as "Such elegance."

Plath also might have been feeling like somewhat of a "bankrupt estate" herself. She had just been in France, spending the New Year with her lover, Richard Sassoon. Sassoon was a heavy drinker, occasionally brutal, and an intensely passionate character with a dark side. In her New Year's Eve journal entry, she wrote that she had dreamed "that azure sea I dreamed about on maps in the sixth grade, surrounded by the pink, yellow, green and caramel countries the pyramids and the Sphinx, the holy land, the classic white ruins of the greeks" [sic] (UJ, 549). These colors and images are all invoked in the de Chirico painting, giving Plath reason to name her poem after it.

On Plath's return trip to Paris in February, she learned that Sassoon had dumped her. Her pocket calendar entry on February 11, 1956 reveals her trying to talk herself out of loving Sassoon, focusing on his selfishness and superficiality, as well as the impossibility of a future together. Plath had just had a wild night of lovemaking with Ted Hughes in London, and had struck up an affair for consolation, perhaps, with Giovanni Perego, a journalist in Paris whom she also dated during this time. She wrote in her journals of talking to Giovanni about the artist de Chirico. The timing of her ruined relationship with Sassoon, and the wild night that she was then seeing as a probable mistake with Hughes, cannot be coincidence.

"TALE OF A TUB" AND "ON THE DIFFICULTY OF CONJURING UP A DRYAD": THE SUEZ IN HOT WATER

On February 20, 1956, Plath wrote "Tale of a Tub," while in her own bathtub (CP, 24). "[T]ake care it doesn't get too general," she noted to herself. The poem does not get too general, but rather it becomes a parody of Jonathan Swift's work of the same name, also echoing the latest news of Egypt selling cotton

to Communist China, buying arms from the Soviets, and signing an agreement with Britain. For Plath, the Suez Canal becomes the “tub,” and Britain, Egypt and the USSR stand in for Swift’s three brother characters. Plath’s metaphorical washbowl, towel, and window seem to be their rights, their charges, and ambiguities.

In the news, Egypt had just declared its “holy calling” to become a Muslim state. Plath references the “ample batch of omens” that began twenty years prior, mainly with Britain having been given control of Sudan and maintaining a garrison of 10,000 men in the Suez. Plath’s crab and octopus imagery fits red, communist sickle-claw symbols, as well as spidery Nazi swastikas, “waiting for some accidental break” to steal power. Britain’s Prime Minister Anthony Eden had recently lost the support of the United States and he made a series of blunders at this time, referenced in Plath’s “green of eden,” which pretended the future would be shining fruit springing from “this present waste.”

While Hughes placed Plath’s poem, “On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad” in the 1957 section of *The Collected Poems*, author Nancy D. Hargrove suggests it is actually a 1956 poem in her work, *The Journey Toward Ariel: The Chronology of Sylvia Plath’s Poems 1956-1959* (1991, University Press of Virginia). The circumstances of the world’s events seem to agree. In Greek mythology, a dryad is a tree nymph, the spirit of the tree. Legend holds that when Apollo chased the goddess Daphne to rape her, the Mother Earth, Gaia, swallowed her up and turned her into a Laurel tree to avoid him. Plath’s poem, while referencing this legend, attempts to do the reverse, or to undo the doings of the Earth: to turn the tree into the spirit. Dryads also appear in the ballet *Don Quixote*, a story of a man foolishly jousting with windmills; and as well as the ballet, *Sylvia*, where a shepherd and a maiden come together among forest sprites and the deities’ good will.

“On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad” therefore appears to be another Suez Crisis poem (CP, 65). It begins with the British and French “bric-à-brac” among a busy politician’s desk cluttered with blunt pencils, coffee cup, postage stamps and piles of books. Coffee, grown in the Middle East and Northern Africa, has been an important import for Europeans (“rose-sprigged coffee cup”).

The rooster (“Neighborhood cockcrow”) is a traditional symbol of Egypt. It is a bird that crows with the sun, a representative of the Egyptians’ solar god. Saint Anthony of Egypt was often depicted with a rooster, and Egypt is known for its special breed of Fayoumi rooster. Egypt’s president Nasser, arrogant and “vaunting,” snubbed the “impromptu spiels of wind” from the United Kingdom, France, and Israel, and relations with the West grew tense as Egypt stood firm in their neutral stance through the Cold War. Nasser’s decision to compose the crisis is shown in Plath’s second stanza, and he nationalized the Suez Canal, “To stun sky black out, drive gibbering mad” the powerful nations who were initially so confident they would continue to govern this space. Now, Nasser would control the waters of the trout, the lands of the cock, and the mountains of the ram (Plath’s “Trout, cock, ram”).

The United Nations’ logo is that of a wreath of olive tree branches around a map of the world. This is the “damn scrupulous tree” that “won’t practice wiles.” The “obstinate bark and trunk” called an emergency session. There was no consensus on collective action, due to the vetoes of France and the UK. The “Uniting for Peace” resolution called for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of all foreign forces (France, Britain, and Israel) from occupied territories in Egypt, who had planned to “hoodwink” the canal territory. Plath’s “Palmed off” is not only Nasser receiving arms and/or money, but the palm trees of Egypt. Queen Elizabeth II, the “jilting lady” of Britain, had squandered her “coin, gold leaf stock” for the ditch of the canal, while the beggars of Egypt hatched “no fortune,” and were regarded at that time as “Thieves.” Double-meanings were becoming a natural poetic process for Plath now, like her idols Shakespeare and the other mystic greats, who wove history into their poems while also addressing their personal experiences.



“CHANNEL CROSSING”: CROSSED WIRES, OR THE FIRST DOCUMENTED
PREMONITION?

“Channel Crossing” was one of Plath’s first poems to turn away from the “small, coy love lyric” toward the “larger, social world of other people” (LH, 222). “Channel Crossing” seems superficially to be about her miserable trip, post-honeymoon, by water across the English Channel (CP, 26). This explanation is assumed because the end of August 1956 brought “vomiting misery in a black blow night” for Plath and Hughes on their trip over the English Channel back home. Plath’s pocket calendar also reveals that she had had a “green rough boat crossing” on January 9, 1956, returning from France after a holiday with Sassoon.

In her *Letters Home*, Plath wrote that her poem “Channel Crossing” was finished on February 23, 1956,

two days prior to her even meeting her future husband, Ted Hughes. In her pocket calendar, she called “Channel Crossing” her “Best poem yet,” and with good reason.

“Channel Crossing” perfectly addresses Hungary’s uprising and revolution against Soviet leadership that took place that February. Plath had known Hungarians, had dated a young Hungarian as a teen and another again at twenty, and appears to have been very interested in the region as it was so close to Poland and her father’s homeland. In “Channel Crossing,” Plath playfully hints at her meaning with phrases such as the “hungry seas” and she uses Soviet jargon such as “comrades.” One might also take the title to mean mixed radio signals and spies, and the “waves” to be radio waves. Moreover, the poem

is full of war imagery. Plath understands that the world is “beyond, the neutral view” and the military forces are “rank on rank” and “advancing.” Her words “we freeze” and “casual blasts of ice” reflect the Cold War.

Ending Plath’s third stanza of “Channel Crossing” is a reference to the Old Testament story from the Book of Genesis, where Jacob wrestles the angel, insisting that it tell him his name, or in other interpretations, Jacob says: “I will not go until you bless me.” Many great artists whose work Plath would have known have portrayed this story in painting, including Rembrandt, Delacroix, and Gauguin. The country of Hungary in 1956, with its boundaries and governance ever-changing, were certainly wrestling with the angels to learn who they were.

As mentioned before, Sylvia Plath believed that she had premonitions. This is documented in her journals, where she wrote of dreams that came true, or close to true, around publications and winning awards (LH, 417). In the 1956 notes for *The Collected Poems*, Hughes wrote: “SP frequently mentioned flashes of prescience---always about something unimportant” (CP, 287). Hughes also said of Plath: “Her psychic gifts, at almost any time, were strong enough to make her frequently wish to be rid of them” (Alvarez, 204). Hughes has stated that through art he too had this ability. He believed that his stories “Snow,” “The Suitor” and “The Wound” were all prophecies of his own life (LTH, 643). Might Plath’s “Channel Crossing” have been a prophecy of what was to come, not even realized by Plath in her lifetime?

Four months after Plath wrote “Channel Crossing,” in June 1956, a violent uprising by Polish

workers in Otto Plath’s home city of Poznan was put down by the government, with scores of protesters killed and wounded. There was great upset, concessions were made with the Poles, and neighboring Hungary. Sylvia Plath and the world were watching. *Time* magazine’s “Man of the Year” was the unnamed Hungarian Freedom Fighter, and Plath kept up on all the newspapers and magazines, many of which greatly disturbed her. Hughes was asked at one point to join the effort and fight for the Hungarians (he declined). Plath most likely noticed that the unnamed Freedom Fighter on this cover of *Time Magazine* greatly resembled her husband in appearance. The Warsaw Pact (“To keep some unsaid pact”) had bound Hungary to the Soviet Union, but the country sought instead to be neutral (Plath’s “the neutral view”), as was Austria. Twenty-thousand Hungarian student protesters had a violent clash, rioting against officials (“this rare rumpus which no man can control”) as they tore down a statue of Stalin, set police cars on fire, and cut holes in flags removing the communist coat of arms (“Ransacked in the public eye”).

Even more fascinating is that at the December 6, 1956 Melbourne Olympics, the infamous “Blood in the Water Match” took place, where a Soviet water polo player hit a Hungarian competitor in the eye, resulting in blood gushing into the water. This gives new meaning to the second stanza’s “wallop,



assaulting” and “Retching in bright orange basins” “under the strict mask of his agony.” Enough had already happened on the date of Plath’s February writing to get a sense of where this political upheaval was leading. Yet the premonitory detail in this poem is uncanny.

“PURSUIT”: THE BLACK MARAUDER OF IMPERIALIST FRANCE

Most assume that Plath wrote the predatory poem “Pursuit” for Ted Hughes. In her journals, Plath privately acknowledged that this poem is about “the dark forces of lust.” She hardly consoled her mother in a letter too, writing that it represented “the terrible beauty of death,” and the paradox that the more intensely one lives, the more one burns and consumes the self (*LH*, 225). The poem was written on February 27 and 28, 1956 according to her calendars. According to her journals, Plath was still conflicted over Richard Sassoon, who had left her alone in Paris.

“Pursuit” juxtaposes Plath’s feelings about her own dark, conquering, French imperialist lover with France’s politics at the time (*CP*, 22). She loved France, and Sassoon, and yet she shut her “doors on that dark guilt.” The poem’s reader can easily note that “Pursuit” is full of African details: the panther, jungles, black marauders, and the greed and ransacked lands well-fit the then-current events of Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco’s liberation from French and Spanish protectorates which dominated the news at that time. Indeed, “Pursuit” begins with the epigraph by French dramatist Racine: *Dans le fond des forêts votre image me suit* (“In the heart of the forest, your image follows me”), a nod toward Sassoon. Plath had also been reading Racine on the same day that she met Ted Hughes, and she read the French poet Ronsard the next day when she finished her poem. Additionally, she was reading the Greek classics *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*, and found herself “struck by cold dark fate & ruin” She compared herself with Oedipus, destroyed by lust. The day after meeting Hughes, Plath noted in her calendar that she was “Exhausted & chastened after orgy”—this time presumably with a young man named Hamish Stewart, with whom she left the St. Botolph’s party. The day after the party, Plath acknowledged that she was “obsessed” with Ted Hughes, yet she also romantically entertained Chris Levenson, Mallory Wober, and her former boyfriend Mike Lotz when he came to visit, all in the span of a few days. Plath stated in her journal at that time that she was “suddenly seeing a lot of” a young man interested in scientific mysticism named Gary Haupt too.

Plath’s calendar entry on the day she began “Pursuit” is “self-lived with radiant panther.” Eleven days later, she writes “panther-tormented day with fever & fury” when Ted Hughes comes to town, and on March 11 she referred to her affair in her calendar as a “Continuation of the Ted Travesty.”

From her letters home and the number of men she juggled at the time, we can deduce that the panther is not one specific man, but rather lust itself. In Greek, the name *panther* means *all-animal*, and was the most fearsome of beasts. Plath would have known this as it is explained in *Tom a Bedlam*, the text of a 17th century incantation held at the British Museum which she referred to in her calendar a month later. Plath had been feeding the erotic fires, reading D.H. Lawrence’s racy *The Man Who Died*, as well as Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* (The Flowers of Evil). As D.H. Lawrence used the panther as an analogy for sexual power (Lawrence, 59), Plath eventually began referring to Hughes specifically as a panther and “black marauder” in her journals on March 10, 1956, stealing her own words and images from this poem that came two weeks before, directed at a less-definite target of emotion. Where the poem’s “guttured forest falls to ash,” Plath had written in her journal of herself doing the same. Plath also wrote of this same “fury” and of wearing the “violent, fierce colors” of black, white and red (*UJ*, 233). These are all colors seen in “Pursuit.” Plath’s journals reveal that the “him” of “Pursuit” is a dark and dangerous dream-man who did not yet exist, although Hughes would soon come to embody him:

“Let me someday confront him, only confront him, to make him human, and not that black panther which struts on the forest fringes of hearsay. Such hell. They refuse to face me in daylight. I am not worth that. I must be, when if they ever come. They will not come. I don’t want to eat, to go to tea today. I want to rave out in the streets and confront that big panther, to make the daylight whittle him to lifesize” (*UJ*, 235).

“THE EYE-MOTE”: THAT’S RACING!

Written in Paris on March 26, 1956, according to Plath’s pocket calendar, and not in 1959 where it is placed in *The Collected Poems*, “The Eye-mote” was written “through tears” over Richard Sassoon. Readers of Plath’s letters and journals may also remember that in the last week of her trimester term at Cambridge, on March 17, 1956, Plath got a splinter in her eye. The discomfort could not be subdued and it had to be removed surgically. She wrote to her mother that as the doctor operated, she recounted “how Oedipus and Gloucester in King Lear got new vision through losing eyes, but I would just as soon keep my sight and get new vision, too” (*LH*, 229).

Certainly, Plath’s experience affected and inspired her poem. And yet, “The Eye-mote,” is full of horses

and the sense of horse racing: we see “a field of horses, necks bent, manes blown, / Tails streaming against the green” and the images continue through the poem’s five stanzas (*CP*, 109). This is important because just two days earlier, on March 24, 1956, the 110th renewal of the world-famous Grand National horse race took place in England. The event is probably best remembered for the horse owned by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. The horse, named Devon Loch, took an inexplicable fall on the final straight, just forty yards away from what had looked like a certain victory as it had a five-length lead over his nearest challenger. No one could explain the horse’s strange leap and collapse in what became the world’s most famous steeplechase. It was said the horse jumped a ghost fence, perhaps thinking a shadow was another hurdle. The event coined the term, “To do a Devon Loch,” when something looks like a sure-win yet is a last-minute failure.

In “The Eye-mote,” Plath writes that she dreams she is Oedipus. In Sophocles’ plays, Oedipus stabs his own eyes out using the brooch from his mother Queen Jocasta’s gown. This “brooch-pin” is another connection to the British Queen Mother, who famously commented after the event, “Oh, that’s racing!”

“FAUN”: HOO ARE YOU?

Plath’s poem “Faun” was first called “Metamorphosis,” and is found under this title in *Letters Home* (*LH*, 234). Her pocket calendar entry dated April 18, 1956 reads: “wrote poem re: Ted = Pan.” In her journals, Plath also referenced this same poem as “Faunus” (*UJ*, 410), the Italian version of the Ancient Greeks’ Pan. The Faunus was the mythological grandson to Saturn, and half-goat and half-man, like a satyr. First worshiped as a god of fertility, he ended as a woodland deity, a lustful rural god, and came to represent the Devil himself. Pan, of course, was the spirit Plath and Hughes believed to communicate with via the Ouija board, and Pan is featured in Plath’s “Dialogue Over a Ouija Board” (*CP*, 276-286). Plath wrote her mother that “Faun” was written about a night that she and Ted went out into the moonlight to find owls.

Plath’s journal entry documents that she had written her poem “Faun” roughly two months after meeting Hughes, on or before April 19, 1956. Four days earlier, she had been traveling through Rome with her former boyfriend, Gordon Lameyer, and they had not been getting along. Still, she had a wild night of lovemaking with Gordon before he left, wishing that he was Ted. “Faun” may be another example of Plath’s poetic premonition, however, as it accurately mirrors the news events in China toward the end of that year (*CP*, 35).

In late 1956, The People’s Republic of China’s Chairman, Mao Tse Tung, instituted the Hundred Flowers Campaign. During this campaign, Mao encouraged Chinese citizens to speak up (“On the call this man made”) about things they did not like with the communist regime. Then, the chairman abruptly did an about-face (“the changing shape he cut”) and anyone who had dared to speak was publicly criticized and sent to labor camps.

The mythological faun is tricky and devilish, and the chairman hardened and showed his true self: sprouting goat horns, as seen in Plath’s third stanza. The phrase, “he hooded,” asks “who?” and also sounds like a Chinese name. Mao asked his citizens to turn in anyone who held opinions outside of the Party. On the Chinese flag’s emblem during the Mao era, a “rank” of stars hangs “water-sunk” and like “double star-eyes.” Plath’s “yellow eyes” is yet another hint to China. Plath’s images so accurately describe an event that would take place six months later. Can this all be a coincidence?

“ODE FOR TED”: A DEVILISH DISGUISE

The poem “Ode for Ted” was originally entitled “Poem for Pan,” for the Ancient Greek god of nature and the wild mountains. According to her pocket calendar, Plath began this poem April 20 and finished it on April 21, 1956. Pan, of course, is the same character as “Faun” or “Faunus,” seen earlier.

The “Ode for Ted” title suggests Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy,” and this is probably not by accident. Beethoven was Hughes’ favorite composer, and “Ode to Joy,” from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, was heard everywhere as the music for the winning German athletes on the Unified Team of Germany (East and West Germans competing together) at the 1956 Olympic Games. It was a historical moment for the world.

In 1785, German poet, playwright and historian, Friedrich Schiller, wrote the poem “Ode to Joy,” to accompany Beethoven’s music. The finished ode describes the harmony of God and mankind. Derek Strahan, a friend of both Plath’s and Hughes’ from Cambridge, has published several articles on Beethoven’s mysticism and connection to the Illuminati (Strahan).

As Hughes was fascinated with mysticism and the occult, this information would likely not have escaped him about his musical hero. Strahan wrote that the original Schiller poem was called “Ode to Freedom,” and was actually conceived as a poem of gender equality. However, ideas of “Freedom and Liberty” were revolutionary terms in 18th century Germany, and would have been censored. Therefore, words were changed by Schiller’s final draft. Strahan writes of Schiller’s “Ode to Joy”:

“The radical message in Schiller’s verse is clear. He not only advocates freedom (joy) but, by invoking subversive, anticlerical pagan imagery (through goddess worship) alludes to the secular Goddess ‘Liberty’ (whose image was already a revolutionary icon, and whose statue today stands in New York Harbour, a gift to the US from the French Government to commemorate the birth of democracy). She is the “Daughter of Elysium,” the Greek name for Paradise. Being a “God descended” means that she will bring Paradise to earth. The “stern customs” which prevent the unity of mankind are the barriers of class.

“Music and art are celebrated as weapons in the battle against tyranny. Secret police were present in the audience at the premier of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony to ensure that no treason was sung. It was, but they didn’t notice” (Strahan).

In that year of 1956, German writer E. Blum published *Über Sigmund Freuds: Der Mann Moses und die Monotheistische Religion*. The book drew attention to an essay by Schiller that suggested the Jewish religion grew out of the mystery religions of ancient Egypt (Strahan). We know that Plath owned and had probably read at least one book by Schiller: *The Robbers, Fiesco, Love and Intrigue* (JC Nimmo Publishers, London, 1893) as this book was in her personal library. In Plath’s first version of this poem, entitled “Poem for Pan,” she compared Ted Hughes to the devilish Pan and his freedom to create and destroy the world as he sees fit.

It is a mirror opposite of Schiller’s poem: Schiller’s gentle-men step across Elysium’s paradise of heaven, doing no harm and worshipping the Creator. Plath’s Pan-man is a god unto himself, naming the creatures and causing crops to yield with merely a look. Plath’s Pan crunches the sprouts on the ground, startles the birds, and stalks the animals. Schiller’s creatures have “gentle wings” and “drink of joy / At nature’s breast” (CP, 29). Plath’s man ravages the land and splits open rocks for their gems. Plath’s last stanza image of “this adam’s woman” is of course not only equating herself with the first woman of the Bible, but also to the first human to sin. In a way that is subtly equal to Schiller’s metaphorical art, Plath playfully worships Pan and equality in the guise of an acceptably formal ode.

Plath’s first draft, published in *Letters Home* (LH, 238), has only minor revisions from the final published in *Collected Poems*. Excluding the addition of a stanza break, changes made for sound over meaning (“lagging” becomes “legging”; “hafting” becomes “hefting”; “scent” becomes “scant”). Plath was indeed under Hughes’ spell, in the same way that she described his power to enchant animals. Plath declared that owls and hares came when Hughes whistled, a kind of Pied Piper who lured Plath along with the wild creatures he subdued.

“SONG FOR A SUMMER’S DAY”: SASSOON AND SAWDUST

Plath finished “Song for a Summer’s Day” on April 20, 1956 per her pocket calendar, where it is referred to as “Through Fern & Farm and Walking.” It was first titled “Song” in an early, darker version published in *Letters Home*, which she mailed to her mother on April 21, 1956 (LH, 238-239). There are many changes from the first version of this poem to the last. The final “Song for a Summer’s Day” ends far more brightly in mood (CP, 30). Plath ultimately turned this poem into cinquains, rewriting the original sixteen-lines of the last stanza completely. The final draft of “Song for a Summer’s Day” maintains its bright happiness from start to finish. The first version of this poem, however, is a different story entirely. In this first draft, published in *Letters Home*, the last long stanza sent to her mother suggests that an “artful spider spun / a web” for her man. But was this man Ted Hughes? And was the spider Plath? Judging from Plath’s journal entries, which at this time were still writing to and about Richard Sassoon abandoning her, Plath addressed Sassoon’s abandonment, not Hughes.’ It seems that at this time, Plath considered both Sassoon and her future husband, Ted Hughes, as dangerous and incapable of loving her. Other girls were in Hughes’ life, and judging from Plath’s journals and calendar entries, it is they who are the “spiders.” Her calendar notes on April 17, 1956 that she “felt he’d slept with 5 girls” since she saw him the day before.

It is worth noting other influences on Plath that may have directly or indirectly inspired this poem: Plath’s beloved grandmother was dying of cancer in April 1956; and Ingmar Bergman’s film *Sawdust and Tinsel* was one of the more popular movies released that month. Plath loved Bergman’s films and we know from her journals that she had seen both *The Magician* and *The Seventh Seal*. *Sawdust and Tinsel* was a typical dark Bergman film, dealing with seduction, sexual humiliation, and other themes that well-fit the first draft of Plath’s “Song for a Summer’s Day,” then called “Song.” In *Sawdust and Tinsel*, a very sick circus comes to town on a beautiful summer’s day. Through sexual games and humiliation, those caught up in it are destroyed. The lovemaking in the first version “Song” does not seem to be tender. Plath calls it a “ransacking,” with the line: “I range in my unease.” It appears that Plath feared losing Hughes next, as she likely believed she would lose all men.

"WINTER LANDSCAPE, WITH ROOKS" AND "FIRESONG": THE TALE OF BRITISH DIVER LIONEL "BUSTER" CRABB

"Winter Landscape, with Rooks," was written on February 20, 1956, per Plath's pocket calendar. She had written it just after reading Eugene O'Neill's plays, all full of despairing characters on the fringes of society. Plath found herself likewise feeling "very depressed & antagonistic & hollow". "Winter Landscape with Rooks" is full of O'Neill's absurdities, the brooding alcoholic's "clouded mind," and an absolute bleakness about the future (CP, 21). Plath's "Winter Landscape" is probably most suggestive of O'Neill's great work, *The Ice Man Cometh*.

"Winter Landscape, with Rooks" is also another prophetic poem, as it mirrors the BBC's headlining story that would occur two months later, about the missing British diver, Lionel Crabb. Crabb was sent on a spy mission to investigate the Soviet cruiser *Ordzhonikidze*, which had brought Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin on a diplomatic mission to Britain.

Under the cover of darkness, Crabb dove into Portsmouth Harbour to investigate the propeller ("Water in the millrace") and was never seen again. Plath's "cyclops-eye" sun resembles a periscope. Plath's words of "rock," "fen," "bleakness" and "swans" are all particular to this topic. This story must have been a shock to Plath, as she had been quite enchanted with her own meeting of Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin on this very same visit. Now, "Last summer's reeds are all engraved in ice," and her sympathies toward communism appeared to be shifting before her conscious realization of the fact. The poem cast against Crabb's April 19, 1956 disappearance declares the hopelessness for peace between the Soviets and the West.

Plath's "Firesong" had a first draft finished on April 22, 1956, after the Crabb disappearance had made the news. In her pocket calendar, Plath also mentioned working on "Firesong" again on September 5, 1956. In this calendar, Plath considered "Firesong" one of two "slight" poems, and Hughes believed the title "Firesong" felt like a cliché. As in her poem, "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad," previously discussed, Plath uses "buck, cock, trout" in a similar way to her Dryad's "trout, cock, ram," to represent the conquering of mountains, land, and water.

Plath's "no straight inquiring" in the second stanza of "Firesong" was probably a conscious or unconscious influence of Plato's *Gorgias*, which she was reading on the same day as her first draft in April (CP, 30). The work argues that philosophy is an art, and rhetoric is simply clever word trickery, as seen in the last line of the first stanza.

"Firesong" seems to speak of frogman Crabb "Born green" and "from his crabbed midden," as he gets into a muddy mess and salt water, tricked into a snare like a "shrewd catch." Crabb's body was found in the water, missing its head and hands, on June 9, 1957. The story of this diver dominated the news for months and would later be portrayed in the 1958 film, *The Silent Enemy*, and in Ian Fleming's James Bond adventure, *Thunderball*.

"THE QUEEN'S COMPLAINT": CHECK-MATE

Begun on April 18, 1956 and finished the next day per her pocket calendar, Plath's poem, "Complaint of the Crazy Queen," was enclosed in a letter to her mother on April 29, 1956. It was later retitled, "Mad Queen's Song," and finally titled "The Queen's Complaint." In this poem, Plath uses the same language she had used in describing Hughes in letters to her mother and brother. She called Hughes "hulking" and his movements were like a gallows' "derricks" (CP, 28). Plath said Hughes broke both things and people. He was used to walking over women, and yet she felt that she was strong enough to match him. She claimed his many women of the past and even those in the future did not disturb her, and that she could see into the core of him. It seems that Plath had fallen victim to a young woman's favorite myth of changing a man, and she believed that she would teach Hughes gentleness.

"The Queen's Complaint" poem features a burly man intruding upon a dainty maiden to have his way with her. Plath's line "at cock's crowing" of course bears a double sexual meaning. She looked and tried "all doughty men," *doughty* meaning brave, persistent and courageous, and all characteristics of military men. Plath's poem reveals, and is backed up by her journals and letters, that none could compare with Hughes in sexual force or in his matching her mind. She saw their match as a metaphorical military coup. To Plath, everyone around her, as well as Plath herself, grew small in the shadow of Hughes' importance. Was this a good thing? It seems that Plath didn't know.

It should also be noted that Plath had seen the John Webster play, *The White Devil*, at the ADC Theatre in Cambridge that past October with her friend Jane, and that she read the book on March 10, 1956. *White Devil* addresses the political and moral state of England and the corruption of the royal court in particular. Its first successful production was in 1920, there at the ADC where Plath played a couple parts in other productions. That same month, she was reading political satires such as *The Little World of Don Camillo*, as well as Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*, and *Hedda Gabler*, plays satirizing society

with themes of social change, and Henry Brooke's tyrannical government in *Gustavus Vasa*. Might this poem be another one of Plath's premonitions?

Plath's first two versions of the title suggest that the Queen was not in her right mind to make such claims. Therefore, looking at the times and the ordering, "The Queen's Complaint" seems to also be a playful address of the British claim on the Suez that took place mid-year, about two months after Plath wrote the poem. The Suez, with its own derricks, tanks, pipes, oil tankers and platforms, looks "fierce and black as rooks" and is a marine highway of industry. Ships ramp through its acres, as Plath begins her second stanza, and Britain rudely and incorrectly assumed they would remain in control. In "fury," Egypt "urged him slay" this agreement. Britain tried to reason that the deal was meant to be "naught but good." The antelope symbol in "The Queen's Complaint" is native to Africa, and antelope are treasured in Egypt where herds have been kept since ancient times for both meat and as pets. Other Egyptian symbols of domestication and prey are doves ("gentle doves"), and the Egyptian Fayoumi rooster, a native chicken species along the Nile, and another meaning of Plath's crowing "cock."

Egypt's president used Britain like a cad, and then left with the goods: the canal, in this case. Plath illustrates this in her third stanza of "The Queen's Complaint." The soldiers are seen sent into Egypt in the fourth stanza, and there are battles at "this rare pass" until the British are forced to retreat and give up, "How sad, alas." Like the formerly mighty Sylvia Plath using and discarding men as she pleased, the Suez was conquered.

"BUCOLICS": THE PAINS OF THE PASTORAL

On the first of May 1956, "Mayday," Plath's beloved Grammy died, leaving her husband, "Grampy" Frank Schober, a widower. It was also announced on the BBC News that Japan was in the throes of an unknown epidemic creating ataxia, convulsions, paralysis and more. This was soon identified as Minamata Disease, a condition attacking the nervous system as a result of mercury poisoning.

"Bucolics" was written on May 5, 1956, and reflects this first day of May, and her grandparents and this disease, which was first seen in pastoral cows and other animals, as "Bucolics" first stanza reflects (*CP*, 23). The idea of the barbed wire, the pitchfork, thorn and stinging nettles all reflect the disease's itching, burning and pain. With Minamata Disease, skin peels ("They pitched their coats"), and the contamination was found mostly in water ("where water stood"). Plath hints at Japan with the word "Aslant" for the shape of the Asian eye. She, as well as others, seemed to initially suspect that this might be some leftover from the atomic bombs dropped during World War II ("Above: leaf-wraithed white air, white cloud"). Plath called "Bucolics," a "derivative" poem in her calendar, probably due to its structure and cadence.

"RHYME": BREAKING THE GOLDEN RULE

Plath's poem "Rhyme" may be one of her least-analyzed works, and most readers interpret it as simply a commentary on the creative process. There is a good chance that Plath wrote her poem "Rhyme" around mid-May, when the BBC had announced that Britain's colony, the Gold Coast, would be granted independence to become the nation of Ghana. In March of that year, Plath's journals talk about poet Stephen Spender discussing the depressing misfortune of India's beggars, another formerly British territory (*UJ*, 216). Plath's poem likens Britain to a greedy goose collecting gold but not making its own. The goose-queen simply "begs / Pardon" for all her takeovers in a feeble attempt to appear peaceful (*CP*, 50). The poem ends with a ghastly image of a slit throat, the blood gushing out like rubies. Historically, rubies are widely found in India and fit Plath's "ruby dregs."

"MISS DRAKE PROCEEDS TO SUPPER": DISCOVERY IN THE INSECT WORLD

According to her pocket calendar, Sylvia Plath wrote "Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper" on June 19, 1956, in the sun by the River Seine in Paris, France. This was three days after she and Ted Hughes were married.

Just before their wedding day, Hughes had suggested that Plath should "read not novels or poems only, but books on folklore, fiddler crabs, and meteorites" (*LH*, 342). Plath wrote of looking up spiders, crabs and owls in the college library; of wanting books on wild flowers, birds, and animals of North America; and of reading *Man & the Vertebrates*, *The Personality of Animals*, and *The Sea Around Us*. Plath said, "The animal world to me seems more & more intriguing" (*UJ*, 398). As she became more accomplished, every bit of information, every detail she learned became a potential metaphor, simile or image to be transformed in some way into her deceptively personal words and phrases. Every line sculpted in Plath's poetry would eventually carry the weight of these and many other mirroring references.

In the world of science, a new aquatic insect had just been discovered, the *Hydrometra aemula*, Drake 1956. It seems that Plath likened the delicate, slow-moving insect to an elderly woman in her poem, "Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper" (*CP*, 41). With its spindly legs, "The new woman in the ward / Wears purple, steps carefully." The water touched by its feet comes "Adazzle with bright shards / Of broken

glass.” The Drake is wary of any who might seek “To devour and drag her down.” This poem, as well as Plath’s “Resolve,” are unique for Plath’s work in the way that they have no rhyme at all. As areas by the River Seine have beaches and cobblestone where one can get right to the water’s edge, it is quite possible that Plath watched a French cousin of the water insect while having recently learned of “Miss Drake.”

“ALICANTE LULLABY”: HOLIDAY AT HOLIDAY

Over her infamous Mademoiselle summer, in her single years, and later with Hughes, Plath made occasional trips to New York City night clubs, and certainly knew of, if not attended, the famous Copacabana night club. While Hughes and Plath were on their Spanish honeymoon, the most popular act in America in the 1950s, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, had their last performance at the Copacabana on July 25, 1956. Plath’s second line “Bumblingly” describes Jerry Lewis, the clumsy goof to Dean Martin’s straight man (*CP*, 43). Originally located at 10 East 60th Street, the Copa’s Upper East Side Manhattan neighborhood at this time was full of Italian “yellow-paella eateries” and “back alley balconies,” just as they were experiencing in Alicante, Spain. The “cocks and hens / In the roofgardens” is the audience, which were sometimes royalty and other celebrities (“repose with crowns”) seated in their balconies and laughing (“cackles”).

The serving trolleys of the Copacabana are described as they “trundle” up and down the aisles under the dark theater’s “indigo fizzle” and the swanky “neon-lit palm” trees. Music at the Copacabana was predominantly orchestra, jazz, Latin and Caribbean. The club was known for performers such as Carmen Miranda, Harry Belafonte, Ella Fitzgerald, Tony Bennet, Xavier Cugat, Sam Cooke, Nat King Cole, and Billie Holiday, “goddess of jazz and of quarrels, / Crack-throated mistress” for whom it seems the last stanza of “Alicante Lullaby” was written. While Plath and Hughes were on their holiday, Billie Holiday was at the pinnacle of her career. Billie Holiday notably covered the old Al Jolson song, “Back in Your Own Backyard,” and includes the repeating line, *You’ll see your castles in Spain*. Plath’s first line in “Alicante Lullaby” suggests not only the famous World War II song, “Beer Barrel Polka,” undoubtedly sung there many times, and famously recorded by Holiday. Plath liked jazz music enough to note in her pocket calendar that she enjoyed it on March 2, 1956.

That year of 1956 was also when Holiday’s popular autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*, was released, along with a record of the same title. Like Billie Holiday’s voice, Plath’s final stanza of “Alicante Lullaby” wrestles with vigorous, fast-connoting words (“*con brios*,” “*prestos*,” “*prestissimos*”), words that are free and impulsive (“*capricciosos*,” “*cadenzas*”) and the quiet murmuring sounds of the infamous Lady Day herself, as Holiday was called (“*pianissimo*,” “*susurrous*”).

Hughes labeled “Alicante Lullaby” as a 1956 poem, yet Plath’s day planners reveal this was more likely to have been written in 1959, as Plath scholar Nancy Hargrove concurs. Billie Holiday died July 17, 1959, and this may have been Plath’s tribute to her, while also weaving in the history of the venue and her memories of it and Holiday over the years. Assuming Hughes knew the poem’s inspiration, he may have placed the poem in the 1956 grouping to match with the height of Holiday’s career and the release of her autobiography. Plath may have also built into this poem the famous Copacabana brawl on May 16, 1957, which made news headlines after their Benidorm holiday, when famous players from the Yankees took in a show at the club and got into a fight with a group of drunken bowlers (“bowl the barrels”) who heckled Sammy Davis Jr. with racial slurs.

“LANDOWNERS” AND “DEPARTURE”: THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD!

Hughes placed Plath’s poem, “Landowners,” in the year 1956 in the *Collected Poems*. Plath referenced in her journals writing a poem on the subject of landowners two years later, on July 4, 1958, (*UJ*, 399). It is of course possible that she had another poem on the same subject.

If we agree with Ted Hughes’ placement and read “Landowners” and “Departure” both as 1956 poems, South African Apartheid had been in place for a little over a year, beginning with the forced removal of Blacks from Sophiatown to Soweto. Sophiatown was once the Black epicenter of jazz, blues, and politics. Plath’s most beloved professor, Dr. Dorothea Krook, was from South Africa, as well as some of her closer friends at Cambridge. Plath’s journals reveal that she felt an obligation to give to a scholarship to Black students at Cambridge coming from an apartheid government. And Plath, like her father, was a pacifist.

Plath’s “Landowners” poem is loaded with hints of South Africa, most especially with its word “Indigenous” (*CP*, 53). The removal was part of the government’s plan to turn the country’s urban and residential areas white. Blacks were moved to ghettos or townships, and the town was flattened over the next eight years and removed from the maps of Johannesburg. “Landowners” suggests that those white as ghosts were “envious,” and had to “define / Death as striking root on one land-tract.”

Meanwhile, at the northern end of Africa, the Suez Canal had been seized and claimed for Egypt in 1956. Britain, France, and Israel were at war against Egypt. In an unusual alliance, the United States,

Soviet Union, and United Nations attempted to persuade them to withdraw. This was a different kind of departure from the forced removal of Blacks. Plath's poem, "Departure," ultimately illustrates evacuations at both ends of Africa (CP, 51). The first two stanzas are full of the North African figs and grapes, brick-red porch tiles (Britain's architectural mark upon the area), brassy sun, and lack of money. Plath's third stanza serves to reflect upon these two moments in history occurring simultaneously. She casts the sun and the moon as the north and the south, both weighted with "The leaden slag of the world." *Slag* has a number of definitions, from the least to greatest in vulgarities, especially in Britain. To match it with the word "expose" in Plath's next line suggests the definition of a whore, to be used and not paid for her riches. It is also left over waste metal from mining or smelting operations, yet another connection to South Africa, famous for its mines of diamond, gold, and other valuable metals.

Judging from the words in "Departure," Sylvia Plath believed it was important to "always expose" the truth. The last two stanzas perfectly describe the rocky cliffs of the South African coast, with its many blue bays. It was time for Britain to lick the salt in their wounds, as Plath's last line of "Departure" suggests. The withdrawal upset Europe greatly, even breaking apart close friendships back at Cambridge due to cultural and familial alliances (Sophian).

If "Landowners" and "Departure" are read as 1958 poems, the imperialist theme of accumulating territory in these poems remains: Apartheid continued on in South Africa, and by that year the Egyptians were fully in control of the Suez. Yet there was a new twist: In America, President Dwight D. Eisenhower was getting ready to sign the Alaska Statehood Act into United States law, another great claim on property. "Flimsily peopled," Alaska was another kind of whiteness with its "ghost's / Eyeful" with its snowy mountains and their "vaporous wayfarings." Whether "Landowners" is a 1956 or a 1958 poem, the struggle for land and power is always relevant.

"VANITY FAIR": WAGING WAR AGAINST THE IDIOT BOX

"Vanity Fair" appears to have been written on October 28, 1956, judging from Plath's pocket diary. "Vanity Fair" is Plath's poke at the television sitcoms and soap operas such as *The Grove Family* in the UK, and *As the World Turns* in the United States, which were both becoming popular at the time. In 1956, the BBC also launched a six-part dramatic television series called "Vanity Fair," after the classic William Makepeace Thackeray novel of the same name.

Plath's poem makes it fairly clear that she was not a fan of the newest form of entertainment, television. In Plath's "Vanity Fair," the first stanza appears to be the television itself with its crooked finger antennae beckoning the black and white signal in its "frost-thick weather" (CP, 31). Plath sees television as a "hazardous medium," with witchy connotations. She felt it was designed to create envy and those seeking to copy television models, and to steal the "sky's color" by turning attention to itself. The television promotes gossip ("bruit") and its stars become "holy ones."

In the third stanza, the "furred air" is the staticky picture of the black-and-white television sets of Plath's time. A "midden" is an arcane word for a dung heap, and TV inserts this dung into the skull with "no knife." Plath sees simple church-going girls waylaid by the glamour they see upon its programs.

In the fourth stanza, she shows the young wives in the kitchen, cooking and watching straying lovers and gold-digging women, squandering their night-times ("owl-hours") with tales of dirty beds and unconfessed ("unshriven") deeds. The poem continues addressing the power and irrationality of television over the mind, casting its spell on lovesick girls to believe in an artificial world and to place their own vanity first. Plath has personified television as both "sorceress" and at the end, "Satan's wife." Like the moral of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, "those million brides" in their houses shriek out over what is essentially a sinful attachment to worldly things.

"BLACK ROOK IN RAINY WEATHER": CROWING OVER HUBRIS

In 1956, British Prime Minister Anthony Eden's career had taken a dive over the Suez Crisis and his underestimation of opposition to attack by the United States. Eden was one of the least liked and least successful leaders in British politics, and Plath likened him to the fraudster meaning of "rook" in her poem, "Black Rook in Rainy Weather," although, as Prime Minister, the *castle* chess piece meaning wasn't far off either (CP, 56). Plath got in her digs with "On the stiff twig," as he primed and preened his feathers, known always for his fashion style even in the rain of controversy. In a November 6, 1956 letter to her mother, Plath said that Eden was more or less helping to murder the Hungarians (LH, 284). Plath was thinking about the black rook image as early as January 15, 1956, when she noted "black as rooks" in the top margin of her calendar.

Plath's repeating idea of waiting for the angel in this poem is a nod to Greek poet and diplomat George Seferis (who went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1963). Seferis was minister to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq in this year when Plath wrote "Black Rook in Rainy Weather." For a number of

years he lived in London. Seferis' position was comparable to Eden's, only on a more humble scale.

In his long prose poem, *Mythistorema* (1935), Seferis interwove ancient myths connecting failure of the epic journey with hubris. Seferis's poem begins: "The angel-- / three years we waited for him," and *Mythistorema's* last stanza contains these lines which echo Plath's last stanza of "Black Rook in Rainy Weather": "On the stone of patience we wait for the miracle / that opens the heavens and makes all things possible / we wait for the angel as in the age-old drama..." Plath clearly saw hubris as Anthony Eden's greatest problem and a miraculous angel as the only solution.

"SOLILOQUY OF THE SOLIPIST": TYRANNY TALKING TO ITSELF

Given her interest in the world events, Plath's "Soliloquy of the Solipsist" appears to be Plath's jab at Communism. This time, the action was in Poland. In June of 1956 the Poznań Revolt had taken place in Plath's father's hometown. Scholar Nancy D. Hargrove dates "Soliloquy of the Solipsist" as having been written on November 18, 1956. It was on that day that the Soviet's Nikita Khrushchev told Poland's leader, "We will bury you." Khrushchev was an extreme example of solipsism; to him, his party's existence was the only thing that mattered. That year there were several massive uprisings of the Polish people against the People's Republic of Poland, with its puppet leadership installed by the Soviets. The Russian buildings' Byzantine onion domes belong to the moon in Plath's first stanza (*CP*, 37); the moon was the astronomical satellite that the United States raced the Soviets to reach. In 1956, it was the Soviets who were winning the space race.

The "puppet-people" of Plath's second stanza references the leaders placed in Poland by the Soviets. The Soviet winter and Khrushchev's "absolute power" is evident in the third stanza. The last stanza of "Soliloquy of the Solipsist" casts Khrushchev as the dictatorial god Zeus, denying the fact that his daughter Athena sprang from his head. Similarly, the Polish government, technically a Communist state sprung from its Russian overlords, did not adopt the broken, apathetic spirit of their Russian neighbors.

Extensive news coverage had gone on for months about the riots at Poznań and in Warsaw against Soviet exploitation. Living and working conditions divided the people into pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet Communists. The government denied the Polish people the emotional support and regard for their humanity that is reflected in Plath's words: "Love fiery enough to prove flesh real." A few months after Plath wrote her poem, in the January 1957 *Atlantic*, an issue in which Plath herself had a poem published, *The Atlantic* described the situation this way: "The Kremlin was also forced to take into account the paralysis of will and initiative, of mind and spirit, induced by the dead hand of Stalinism."

"LETTER TO A PURIST": SHAKING UP VIRGINAL VERNACULAR

Plath's "Letter to a Purist" has been dated November 19, 1956 by Hargrove. In the poem, Plath references the giant statue, Colossus of Rhodes, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world (*CP*, 36). The "Cloud-cuckoo" is a reference to Aristophanes, and this phrase is also seen in her 1958 poem, "The Ghost's Leave-taking." The Ancient Greek poet Aristophanes used the expression in his play, *The Birds*, to mock the politics of Athens. Plath's use of "Cloud-cuckoo" both references the original and takes on the modern meaning of unrealistic perfection.

On July 9, 1956, Greece experienced a 7.8 magnitude earthquake causing severe damage, 53 deaths, and triggering the most damaging tsunami in a century, affecting the entire Aegean Sea. Plath would have known about Greece's land, politics, and more from a June 1955 cover story in *The Atlantic* called "Greece Today." We know that she read this issue, as it was one in which her friend Nathaniel LaMar published his "Creole Love Song," a story that Plath raved over in a letter to her mother (*LH*, 192).

The Colossus of Rhodes statue is thought to have been placed straddling the harbor of the Greek island Rhodes, until it came tumbling down in an earthquake in 226 BC. The "Purist" in Plath's title is *Katharevousa*, meaning, "Purist language," a movement increasingly adopted by Greece for official and formal purposes in the 20th century, and especially popular in the mid-1950s. Plath probably compared Greece's linguistic efforts to the close-mindedness of Germany's national *volksgeist*, a conservative pride and protection of the German language and culture. *Katharevousa* is a conservative form of Modern Greek, viewed as a compromise between Ancient Greek and the modern vernacular of the time. It conceived of the Greek language as it might have been, evolving untainted by external influences. Plath mocked this improbable notion in her poem.

"RESOLVE": BATTLING THE INVISIBLE

Scholar Nancy D. Hargrove dates Plath's "Resolve" to be written in November or December of 1956. On December 19, 1956, a thick fog was the BBC News headline, causing death on the roads, railway, ship, air and postal delays ("unserviceable") (*CP*, 52). The dirty fog (smog) was comprised of a sulfurous grit from burning coal and chimneys, trains and industry. This explains Plath's first line: "Day of

mist: day of tarnish" as well as the dying hedges, the film upon the bottles' glass, and the line, "and the coal fire burns." Previous smog four years earlier killed 12,000 people in England within four days and an estimated further 8,000 died from respiratory issues in the months after. To experience pollution like this again in 1956 prompted a hasty resolution for the Clean Air Act. The Act became law in the summer, but would take time to see results. Local authorities ("examiners") were given the power to create smokeless zones and worked to switch residents and industry over to more environmentally-friendly fuels. Plath was in support of this and would not "disenchant" them, nor would she participate in a losing fight with air pollution, "the wind's sneer." "Resolve" is another poem that has no rhyme, but plenty of reason.

"PROSPECT": DOCTOR DEATH

"Prospect" is an interesting short poem that seems to address the fraudster and suspected serial killer, Doctor John Bodkin Adams. Adams lived in Eastbourne, Sussex, a town of "orange-tile rooftops / and chimney pots" on the coastal area known as Beachy Head, where "the fen fog slips" (CP, 28). Dreadnought clay roof tiles, *dreadnought* meaning either a British battleship or a heavy overcoat for stormy weather (Oxford), dot the English countryside, and their pink and orange roof colors have defined England since Roman times, especially in England's eastern and southeastern counties, where Adams lived. A *chimney pot* is British slang for a men's silk dress hat, worn by the upper-crust of society.

Adams was a doctor to the aristocracy, and lived grandly himself as the wealthiest General Practitioner in England at the time. He was arrested on December 19, 1956 and charged with murder. In "Prospect," Plath gets the most mileage out of the word "rooks," playing upon its meanings of con artists, of castles, and the black bird of death. Adams' trial established the legal doctrine of "double effect," explaining the two black rooks. From 1946 to 1956, Adams had found 132 wealthy patients near death and got them to leave generous endowments to him ("cocked on the lone, late, / passer-by").

"SOUTHERN SUNRISE": A POLITICAL POTBOILER

Plath's "Southern Sunrise," is widely believed to be about Benidorm's Bay. However, the Benidorm region has no bay associated with an angel name. The poem "Southern Sunrise" is a better fit to "Angels' Bay," the "Baie des Anges" in the French Riviera. In January of 1956, Plath sent a postcard from Monaco to her mother, picturing this beautiful blue bay, as she had spent three winter weeks in France with Richard Sassoon. By late October of that year, things had changed in this region: Israel's coat of arms, with its "green crescent of palms," had united with France and Britain, bombing Egypt "Inch by bright inch" and "out of the blue drench" of the Suez Canal (CP, 26). The "Suez business," as Hughes called it in a letter to Plath, had also been holding up a trip to Spain that Hughes had planned to take by boat with his uncle through the Mediterranean.

The poem "Southern Sunrise" appears to address even more than the Suez, however. Scholar Nancy D. Hargrove believes that "Southern Sunrise" was actually written in February or March of 1959. Casting it against the events of that date, Egypt was in control of the Suez Canal, and Britain, who had controlled Egypt for the entire twentieth century, still smarted from its loss. Britain had positioned troops to intervene in Jordan in 1958, to stop rioting that threatened the rule of British ally King Hussein.

As the political drama in this area continued over the years, this poem lends itself to either date. Most interestingly, on February 27, 1959, the wreckage of the WWII US Air Force aircraft, Lady Be Good, was found. The plane and its nine crew members were assumed to have crashed in April 1943 and listed as Missing in Action. Returning from their first combat mission bombing Naples, Italy, the plane overflew its base in Libya, another explanation for the desert setting in Plath's poem. The plane was "tilting with the winds" and did not see the flares that were fired to attract its attention ("Sends up its forked / Firework of fronds"). It crashed in the Calanshio Sand Sea of the Libyan Desert, sand being Plath's clear quartz, and deserts being bright. Looking east over Angels' Bay is Italy. Farther east still was Japan, whose "round red" flag rose, having executed American airmen in the Doolittle Raid, an event Plath addressed in her later 1962 poem, "Ariel."²

"TINKER JACK AND THE TIDY WIVES": TURKEYNECK, TRAVELLERS AND MISS LATROBE

The shallowness of plastic surgery, in Hollywood and otherwise, seems to have also bothered Plath, as we see in poems such as "Tinker Jack and the Tidy Wives," written June 7, 1956, with the assumption that one "hag" can be either restored with a face lift, or traded in for a younger model (CP, 34). By 1950, plastic surgery was fully integrated into medicine and the public conscience, with board certification in place and a medical journal exclusively for this field.

Plath's poem was first entitled, "Tinker Jack Traffics with Tidy Wives," implying a sort of criminal exploitation and pimping on the tinkering doctor's part. The sylph-like Sylvia Plath, beautiful and brainy

For more on the Doolittle raid in Plath's poem "Ariel," see *Fixed Stars Govern a Life: Decoding Sylvia Plath, volume one* (2014, Stephen F. Austin State University Press), by Julia Gordon-Bramer.

in that fifties world of Jane Russell bullet bras, had her own inner struggles with wanting to be both sexualized *and* smart. Plath did not like her own nose, and once contemplated getting her nose done (*UJ*, 66, 181).

“Tinker” is an Irish/Scotch word for a traveling man who fixes things that are broken, and like a plastic surgeon might, he sometimes scams to fix what is good enough. The Tinker is usually a Gypsy or Irish Traveller, and not well-respected. In February 1956, Plath was reading Yeats and work by his Irish contemporary, John “Jack” Synge.

Synge’s “The Tinker’s Wedding” is a play about the antics of Irish Tinkers making off with the loot from a wedding that never quite takes place. Synge’s *The Well of the Saints* features two blind beggar-women who believe that they are beautiful, when they are actually old and ugly. Tinkers, beggars and tramps out to exploit beauty, steal money, and run off with the dowries of “Tidy Wives” are the core of Synge’s work, and were therefore surely on Plath’s mind.

The old nursery rhyme *Tinker tailor soldier sailor* is also a part of Virginia Woolf’s last novel, *Between the Acts*, as a woman playfully divines her future by reciting the rhyme and counting cherry stones. *Between the Acts* is full of allusion and uses rhyme to suggest hidden meanings, and Woolf was one of Plath’s favorite writers. Early in 1957, Plath wrote that her arms were full of a “battery” of Woolf novels at Bowes & Bowes bookstore in Cambridge (*UJ*, 269). By July of 1957, Plath said that Woolf’s novels made hers possible (*UJ*, 289).

Plath’s “Tinker Jack and the Tidy Wives” never approaches the ease of a nursery rhyme, and yet its careful rhythm and meter feel like it is just that. Woolf’s *Between the Acts* is called a play within a play, casting the history of England in a negative light. Likewise, Plath’s “Tinker Jack and the Tidy Wives” is a poem within a poem, casting the present day world, England and beyond, as superficial and false. As Woolf’s pageant introduces each character, Plath’s poem introduces each wife. A key character in Woolf’s work is Miss La Trobe, who believed “vanity made all human beings malleable.”

“SPINSTER”: UNLOVABLE IMPERIALISM

The image of the spinster was a popular one in the movies during the 1940s and ‘50s, and the character was often pictured pining over a dead soldier boyfriend whose picture was on the mantel. In 1942, Bette Davis had starred as spinster Charlotte Vale in the film adaptation of Olive Higgins Prouty’s *Now, Voyager*, a book Plath owned, and a popular movie she surely saw, as Prouty was her benefactor at Smith College. By this year, the famous Hollywood star Katherine Hepburn had played a spinster in three starring roles: *The African Queen* (1951); *Summertime*, released as “Summer Madness” in the UK (1955); and *The Rainmaker* (1956). Plath’s language in her poem “Spinster” reveals there is more to this work than just a story of a particular woman (*CP*, 49). With words such as “mutinous,” “treason,” “vulgar motley” and “bedlam,” alongside the month of “April” and Cold War-ish wintery images has Plath casting the country of France as the unloving and unlovable spinster during the Algerian war.

In April 1956, Plath was in Paris. There, she mourned over Richard Sassoon, reeled from Ted Hughes, and passed the time with her old boyfriend Gordon Lameyer and two other gentlemen, one being a political journalist. In her confusion and seeming inability to find love and settle down, Plath may have likened herself to be a spinster. Meanwhile, as she was in the capitol of France, she surely was aware that the Algerian protests against France were increasing (“April walk”).

The National Liberation Front (FLN) sought Soviet support (“longed for winter”) during this Cold War era, but the Soviets were ambivalent. The French public relations’ campaign denied that this was war and pitched their actions as bringing enlightenment and values to a backward culture.

In truth this was a dirty war of village burnings, torture and executions that was all in the news over that “bedlam spring.” A group of priests had published letters by French reservists revealing the truth and the reservists began a rebellion (“vulgar motley”), refusing to fight for their country (“a treason not to be borne”).

It was a messy, simultaneous and escalating fight (“burgeoning”) of French reservists against their own country; and a civil war of loyal French Algerian settlers against the FLA; and of course, France against the FLA.

The “barricade of barb and check” references the Berber languages of North Africa, and “check” is a homophone for “Czech.” Unlike the Czechs in 1938, the Algerian settlers were not going to be manipulated by the FLN. Many tens of thousands of Muslim civilians were killed, abducted, and/or presumed killed by the FLN during the Algerian war.

A new administrative structure was proposed that would give Algeria some autonomy while still being governed by France, by dividing Algeria into five districts (“her five queenly wits”). In 1956, after a series of highly publicized massacres, the French abolished the idea of reform (“She withdrew neatly”).

ON PLATH'S 'HAPPY' POEMS

Over those first six months of marriage with Hughes, Plath told her mother that she was writing new "happy" poems glorifying her love with Ted. The poems she listed were "Two Sisters of Persephone," "Metamorphosis," "Wreath for a Bridal," "Strumpet Song," "Dream with Clam-Diggers," and "Epitaph for Fire and Flower." It is curious that Plath labeled these works as "happy," as no matter how one reads them, each is loaded with ominous portents, a clear dark side, and impending doom. The dream which inspired "Dream with Clam-Diggers" occurred March 11, 1956, when she had only just had her brief fling with Ted Hughes. At that time, Plath was not sure what may become of it. Interestingly, several months later, another dream was recorded in a Benidorm journal entry of notes observing "bait diggers" (*UJ*, 576).

"DREAM WITH CLAM-DIGGERS": A SINKING FEELING

Most consider Plath's "Dream with Clam-Diggers" to be a Benidorm poem. On the most obvious, surface level, this poem portrays the poet's sleeping subconscious, its buried memories, thoughts, and feelings (*CP*, 43). The poem begins with an idyllic early childhood at the beach. Next, evil, dark clam diggers rise from the muck of the bottom with the intent to kill her. "Dream with Clam-Diggers" captures some of the images in Plath's August 13, 1956 notebook entry (*UJ*, 576). However, her calendar shows that she had begun at least the first line of this poem on June 1, 1956, calling it "the dream budded bright."

Plath's March 11, 1956 journals suggest that this poem was partly rooted in memories of a night when a drunken Ted Hughes and his friend threw clots of dirt at a window to wake her. Her dream that night was of returning to Winthrop, and in her journal she wrote:

"...But last night they came, at two in the morning, Phillipa said. Throwing mud on her window, saying my name, the two mixed: mud and my name; my name is mud. She came to look for me, but I was sleeping. Dreaming of being home in Winthrop on a lovely new spring day, walking in pajamas down the streets of melting tar to the sea, the salt freshness, and squatting in the sea in a tangle of green weeds were clam-diggers with osier baskets, rising, one after the other, to look at me in my pajamas, and I hid in spring shame in the trellised arbors of Day's home.

"Mail came through the sewer, and I got only bills. Mail and rice came through the sewer, that bubbling green mucky sewer we played in by the sea, transmuting what corruption, what slime-gilded periwinkles, into what radiant magic. They laughed and said they trusted the mail and rice coming through the sewer. And all this while, those three boys in the dark were treating me like what whore, coming like the soldiers to Blanche DuBois and rolling in the gardens, drunk, and mixing her name with mud" (*UJ*, 235).

It is easy to see elements of Plath's dream in "Dream with Clam-Diggers." However, this poem may also be one of the best examples of Sylvia Plath's premonitory dreams. We must keep in mind the date that Plath started writing, if not completed "Dream with Clam-Diggers" before she and Hughes were even married, much less on their honeymoon in Benidorm, Spain. It is generally assumed that the beach in this poem is the one at Plath's familiar Winthrop, Massachusetts. Nowhere in "Dream with Clam-Diggers" is the beach specifically named. Details such as "pilgrimages" do suggest Massachusetts. Her images of "air winnowed by angels" and "sea-town" suggest ships, as does the more obvious fifth stanza "schooner" and "ship sank." However, Plath has also perfectly described the old seaport town of Nantucket, Massachusetts.

On July 25, 1956, at 10:15 a.m. ("on that hot morning") almost two months after Plath had begun "Dream with Clam-Diggers," the *Andrea Doria* luxury cruise ship would become one of the first televised tragedies. From Italy, the *Andrea Doria* was known as the most beautiful and luxurious ship in the world, its pretty flag pennants strung like Plath's "cockle-shells" (originally "slime-gilded periwinkles" in her dream). The ship, on its hundredth crossing across the Atlantic, had returned to New York City ("she was come / Back to her early sea-town") through the waters of Nantucket. *The Andrea Doria* had serious trouble with listing ("wayward girl"), and had once encountered this problem near Nantucket before, also fitting Plath's poem's sense of returning. Meanwhile, the nearby *Stockholm*, fitting Plath's neighbor image, and "squatting at sea's border," a sturdy Swedish workhorse ship ("She, in her shabby travel garb began"), had just left its dock in New York's busy harbor ("eager toward water"). A thick fog surrounded the *Andrea Doria*, fitting Plath's angelic air. When the ships finally spotted each other in the waters off of Nantucket, it was too late to avoid a collision ("wreck of wave"). Plath's last line in the poem shows the ships advancing, their front windows like squinting eyes, "fixed on murder." *The Stockholm* slammed into the *Andrea Doria's* side. The *Andrea Doria* continued looking beautiful, despite the huge hole in her side which filled with water and took the boat down, fitting Plath's entire third stanza. As the ship "Sloped seaward to plunge in blue," Plath has described the "white fire" of steam and fog. Ships all around rushed to help with rescuing its more than a thousand passengers and crew, fitting Plath's last line of that third stanza. Fifty-two people were killed. This accident remains one of the worst maritime disasters to occur in United States waters.

As Plath traveled by ocean liners to cross the ocean for “her first move of love” to the U.K., this news event, which took place while she and Hughes were on their honeymoon, certainly must have shocked her. We cannot know for sure if she followed this seemingly inescapable event on the news and in the papers, but we can know that her poem foretold of the disaster in perfect detail.

“STRUMPET SONG”: ...AND GOD CREATED FEMALE COMPETITION

Plath wrote in her journals that “Strumpet Song” was written shortly after meeting Hughes (*UJ*, 410). It is a literary treatment of time in the metaphor of a whore (*CP*, 33). Plath’s first encounter with Hughes, when he kissed her “bang smash on the mouth” at a party and she bit his cheek (*UJ*, 212), seems a good match for “that mouth / Made to do violence on.” Hughes’ “seamed face” and Plath’s casting him as incomparable with another man well fits this poem. Hughes was with a different girl that night he met Plath.



But Plath’s work was beyond mere autobiography by now: “Strumpet Song” is also Plath’s judgment on the wildly popular French actress, Brigitte Bardot. At the time Plath wrote this poem, Bardot had recently popularized the bikini and got worldwide attention with the 1956 boundary-pushing film movie, ... *And God Created Woman*, released in Europe in November 1956.

...*And God Created Woman* is about an immoral teenager (“that foul slut”) seducing the men (“Until every man” [...] “Veers to her slouch”) in a respectable, small town. Bardot is known for her swollen, pouty lips (“that mouth/ Made to do violence on”) and the coal-black, heavy eyeliner (“black tarn”). Toward the end of the film, Bardot’s husband slaps her face four times, and she smiles at him.

At the time of writing “Strumpet Song,” Plath either consciously or unconsciously tried to seduce Hughes to remain with her in Britain instead of leaving for Australia with his uncle, as he had planned. She may have compared herself a little bit with Bardot, whom she disliked. Bardot was always cast as the ingénue or siren, usually in a state of undress, and was one of the few French actresses to be wildly adored internationally. Plath might have seen a little of her pre-Hughes seductress-self in Bardot, and her own faults are projected onto the actress (“That seamed face / Askew with blotch, dint, scar”). Nevertheless, Plath closes her poem with the hope that Hughes can look up into her “most chaste own eyes.” Plath’s February 1962 journals also show disdain for the actress,

when a neighborhood girl expressed how much she idolized Bardot (*UJ*, 635).

“EPITAPH FOR FIRE AND FLOWER”: DEATH OF THE HOLLYWOOD MARRIAGE(S)

“Epitaph for Fire and Flower” began on the beach at Benidorm on August 18, 1956. Plath’s pocket calendar titled it by its first line: “You might as well string up.” By the next day, she had given it its final name. Plath had begun reading William Shakespeare’s romp about containing masculine sexual desire in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, on the second day she worked on this poem. “Epitaph for Fire and Flower” is a darkly sinister poem, despite its passion, and readers have questioned if Plath knew her relationship was doomed from the beginning. To read her letters and journals, a case might be made that Plath did know this subconsciously.

In “Epitaph for Fire and Flower,” Plath compares her love to one in the Hollywood camera’s eye, filmed in black and white, to last beyond their short night of life, after the earth swallows their decomposed, dead bodies (*CP*, 45). The poem opens feeling very much like the classic lovers’ scene in the 1953 movie, *From Here to Eternity*, starring Burt Lancaster, Deborah Kerr, and Montgomery Clift. And not coincidentally, just a couple months earlier, on May 12, 1956, Clift had suffered a terrible car accident leaving a party at Liz Taylor’s home. While there were rumors of Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor dating, Taylor was actually married to actor Michael Wilding at the time.

Nevertheless, Clift and Taylor were called “Hollywood’s Most Beautiful Couple,” and they starred together in the film *Raintree County*, in production at that time of the accident. In the wreck, Clift suffered severe head and facial injuries (“crack your skull”), and Liz Taylor was said to have cradled his head in her lap and stopped him from choking by removing loose teeth from his throat. Plath’s second stanza portrays this scene well. Taylor was well-known for her diamonds, and Plath’s “museum diamond” and “hoard faith safe in a fossil,” from the third stanza, is the belief in marriage after film producer Mike Todd gave Taylor a 29.4 carat engagement ring that same year.

After a two-month recovery from the accident, Montgomery Clift’s health and looks suffered, and he lost work. This is all well-described in Plath’s final stanza, with its “languor of wax” being makeup’s

inability to cover the scars, and the broken contracts for Cliff's future movie deals. "Epitaph for Fire and Flower" should not be looked at therefore as a poem solely about Plath and Hughes, but rather juxtaposing her marriage against the passionate and destructive romances of Hollywood.

"TWO SISTERS OF PERSEPHONE": POETRY GODDESSES

Plath read a lot of Plato at Cambridge in 1956, and Plato's country of Greece went through a great deal of political upheaval that year. The island of Cyprus had been under British rule, but was seeking to reunite with Greece. King Paul of Greece had three children with his wife: two sisters and the male heir to the throne. After twenty years of right and leftist split in the Greek Civil War, the two sides of Greece elected the mayor of Corfu who would become their first female mayor. Plath's poem "Two Sisters of Persephone" was written on May 24, 1956 per her pocket calendar, the day after she had begun to read Plato's *Phaedo*, and within the same month she'd read *Gorgias*, *Symposium*, *The Republic* and Karl Popper's related book, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

"Two Sisters of Persephone" represents the two sister/daughters of King Paul, one who became Queen of Spain, the other who remained a "wry virgin to the last" (CP, 31). The ionic Grecian columns fit Plath's "wainscoted room." As the country's economy improved, Plath's language uses accounting images for working problems, calculations, the "sum," the "Dry ticks" and "blown gold." In letters, Plath wrote to her mother about all of these events in Greece and Cyprus, as well as her attentions on African and the Arab states.

1956 was also a year that the poet Emily Dickinson, with whom Plath would later be compared, experienced a revival. The resurrection of this great poet may also be an influence for the virginal woman in the "wainscoted room" of Plath's "Two Sisters of Persephone." John Crowe Ransom published an essay that year called "Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored," and the well-respected *Sewanee Review* featured a piece called "The Poetry of Emily Dickinson" by Sergio Baldi. Even the American cartoon program *Looney Tunes* got into the act, with their March 4, 1956 program featuring Lois Nettleton reciting the poetry of Emily Dickinson as the cartoon's narrative.

The "meager frame" of the Dickinson-like woman marks the time and meter of her work like "A mathematical machine," while Plath seems to have felt that she herself had learned to take more liberties, "Hearing ticks blown gold." Plath's "Two Sisters of Persephone" may be one of Plath's first great poems, layering meanings of history past and present, myth, and the arts. Plath knew this too, calling it her "best poem yet" in her calendar.

"STREET SONG": DOUBLE JEOPARDY

Judging from poems such as "Street Song," Plath seemed to view herself as very blessed, coming from madness intact and in love, but never forgetting her past. This is the most obvious interpretation of "Street Song" (CP, 35). A closer look at the poem, written on October 4, 1956, shows that something is seriously wrong with the world, and that this person should not be let out free. The miracle of freedom is a "mad" one, and this freed person walks among the "common rout," "rout" meaning a disorderly mob or assembly intent on committing an illegal act. The poem's subject "reeks of the butcher's cleaver," and has no "heart and guts" any longer, "bloodied" and suggesting that the person is a killer.

When Plath wrote "Street Song," the trial had recently finished over the murder of the 14-year-old African American boy, Emmett Till. Till allegedly flirted with a married 21-year-old woman. The woman told her husband, and he and his brother kidnapped Till, beat him and gouged out one of his eyes, and then shot him in the head. They dumped the boy's body in the Tallahatchie River, weighed down with a 70-pound cotton gin fan and barbed wire. Law enforcement and media initially decried the violence against Till, but when the state of Mississippi was nationally criticized, the Mississippians eventually began to defend the killers and their state's reputation. Plath's "white-jacketed assassins" detail suggests the Ku Klux Klan.

The September 1955 trial attracted worldwide press attention. After five days, the killers were acquitted of kidnapping and murder, and the world was appalled with headlines of shock as far away as France and Portugal. On January 24, 1956, in a *Look* magazine interview, the killers Bryant and Milam admitted to killing him but were protected against conviction by double jeopardy.

In the literary world, Langston Hughes dedicated a poem known as "Mississippi—1955" to Emmett Till in October of 1955 which was reprinted across the country. William Faulkner wrote two essays on Till, one published in *Harper's* in June 1956 challenging segregation. The event would inspire many other artistic works and became a pivotal moment in the African-American Civil Rights Movement. Later in 1958, Plath expressed sympathy toward the African-American's plight, and disgust toward bigotry after the news story that a Black man named Jimmy Wilson got the death sentence for stealing \$1.95 (UJ, 419).

"DIALOGUE BETWEEN GHOST AND PRIEST," "MONOLOGUE AT 3 A.M.," "THE GLUTTON," AND "NOVEMBER GRAVEYARD": THE EMOTIONAL WEIGHT OF NATIONAL GUILT

Plath's poem, "Dialogue Between Ghost and Priest" talks of the "black November" in the year of 1956 which severely escalated the Cold War. The character of "Father Shawn" may well be the editor of *The New Yorker* at the time, William Shawn. As an editor, Shawn seemed to be one of the few journalists with a conscience. He insisted, for example, that an entire issue of the magazine be dedicated to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Writers loved William Shawn, and J.D. Salinger even dedicated his novel, *Franny and Zooey*, to Shawn, who had first serialized Salinger's work in two separate stories.

In her poem, "Dialogue Between Ghost and Priest," Plath places Shawn in the position of a holy man ("Father Shawn") speaking to a spirit who walks the earth. Shawn asks the newspaper-man's question: "How now" and he directs him to "simply tell." The news of the day of course was the Cold War and the related Hungarian Revolution. Meanwhile, British and French troops had moved in on the Suez Canal ("Gnaws me through" and "this sorry pass") with Israel, against Egypt. Nikita Khrushchev threatened to rain his rockets down on London ("The day of doom"). America's president Eisenhower believed that British imperialism was finished, that Arab nationalism was going to be lasting, and that the Suez Canal was irretrievably lost. Eisenhower was angry at Britain for occupying the canal and not informing him.

In "Dialogue Between Ghost and Priest," Plath saw the love of territory to be "too great love / Of flawed earth-flesh," with governments forgetting about the nearly unseen who live there. The Hungarian Revolution had temporarily paralyzed the Kremlin, "Some damned condition," and "shriveling in torment," until the Russian tanks came and crushed the Hungarian student protesters. Plath's last stanza of her "Dialogue Between Ghost and Priest" reflects the national guilt of watching and doing nothing.

Plath's poem, "November Graveyard" began on September 9, 1956 per her calendar, with the worst of this horror yet to come. At the time of her writing the poem, anti-Communist protesting had escalated and journalists exposed the Soviet's oppression. By late October and through mid-November, thousands of freedom fighters had been massacred and many more were forced to flee, setting the scene of Plath's poem. Plath wrote to her mother in early November that she had been depressed and almost physically sickened by the news of both Britain bombing Egypt in the Suez Crisis, and the Hungarian Revolution. America watched in shame. Eisenhower had pledged to keep out of it, for fear of starting a full-scale war with the Soviets.

Plath's personal guilt about doing nothing during this conflict may lie in the un-restful "Monologue at 3 a.m." written on October 3, 1956. The poem has been compared in mood and format to Louis Simpson's "Summer Storm" (Peel, 147). Outwardly, of course, it is a poem of Plath missing Hughes. But since the end of July that year, martial law had been imposed upon Poland following an anti-Communist revolt. The poem inside the poem appears to be that Plath grieves over that almanac which displays the land of Eastern Europe in its fury and drenching blood, while she does nothing but sit mute and twitch in discomfort.

Unsurprisingly then, Plath's poem, "The Glutton," written on April 27, 1956, is a portrait of British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden. Eden had made a remark summarizing the Western position, to which it seems Plath and the world thought he should have "Cupped quick to mouth." Eden said: "We do not wish to move a finger" for the Hungarians. On this same date, doubts about Eden's future as prime minister were being expressed in the papers as his personal ratings plummeted. Plath played on the nation of Hungary's name with "hunger-stung"; Eden's Englishness shows in the drink of "wassail" as he enjoys his "prime parts" and rich meals. Known to be quite stylish, Eden was "So fitted" in his suits. In her pocket calendar, Plath referred to "The Glutton" as a "good, small, hard, packed poem." Also on the day Plath wrote "The Glutton," Nikita Khrushchev departed London with Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin. It had only been months before, back in February 1956, when Khrushchev had publicly made a bitter attack on his predecessor Stalin, and the world had held hope that the Soviets might ease their pressure on Hungary.

In an April 26, 1956 letter to her mother, Plath wrote that she had attended the reception of the Soviet leaders and shook Bulganin's hand. She had called him a "dear, white-bearded little man with clear blue eyes," and "rubbed elbows" with Anthony Eden. In those times of American McCarthyism, jokes had been made that Plath would not be allowed back into the States for her Communist sympathies. Yet all that was changing as the Soviets showed their fiercer side.

"RECATANTION": AN INCANTATION OF POLITICAL DISGUST

"Recantation" is an undated poem, but considering Britain's stance regarding 1956's crisis in the Suez, the French in Algeria, and the Hungarian Revolution, Sylvia Plath was angry at the United Kingdom too. In "Recantation," she recants her new-found allegiance to her husband's country in disgust over the Cold War politics, playing upon the idea of an occult *incantation*. Plath's symbols in the poem are

distinctly English: tea leaves, the queen, crystal, and her ravens at the Tower of London. She has given them up. It was a "black pilgrimage" from America to England, and the bombings and bullets across the globe made the world a "moon-pocked crystal ball." Plath does not foresee help, nor does the moon bother, to bring peace.

Plath's poem here states that her earlier image of Britain proved to be an illusion, "tricks of sight." The "flower" in her blood may be a Mayflower reference, uniting her with the pilgrims who settled in her American home state of Massachusetts. She feels called to return home: "Go to your greenhorn youth." Plath pledges that her "white hands" are both innocent, and part of the race that gets the benefits of a good life. She would strive to simply "do good."

"THE SHRIKE": RELENTLESS AMBITION

The Shrike bird might have metaphorically flown to the height of its popularity in 1956: President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Air Force One was a Shrike U4-B ("The singular air"). That same year, the television program *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* aired a show called, "Shopping for Death," written by Ray Bradbury. It featured two salesmen trying to console an aggressive, hostile woman named Mrs. Shrike. Plath watched *Hitchcock*, as she alluded to him in some 1955 letters.

In her poem, "The Shrike," written on July 3, 1956, Plath seems to compare herself to this aggressive predatory bird of Africa and Eurasia. There were other influences at work in the layers of meaning for this poem, however. In the news, the Imperialist British and French troops ("Such royal dreams") had withdrawn their troops from the Suez ("her flown mate / Escaped"). Plath addresses the hunger in Africa "With her blank brown eyes starved wide" and the emaciated bodies "With taloned fingers, / Shaking in her skull's cage" and "so hungered."

There was also a popular play running at that time called "The Shrike," by Joseph Kramm. It was set in a mental ward and featured a man who had unsuccessfully tried to commit suicide in the same way that Plath had attempted to when she was twenty, by swallowing a bottle of pills. His bitter and manipulative wife drove him insane with her relentless ambition for him. Plath may have related her to her mother, as well as seen a connection between his attitude and the British over Northern Africa and the Suez especially. Because the fictional Mrs. Shrike had won over the doctors, the man comes to be under his wife's control completely. Did Plath contemplate that her own ambition for her husband ("Such royal dreams beckon this man") and jealousies ("While she, envious bride") may have been too great?

"WREATH FOR A BRIDAL": THE DYSFUNCTIONAL MARRIAGE OF NATIONS

Plath's poem "Wreath for a Bridal" was written on May 17, 1956 and is often read strictly discussing marriage and physical union. That is of course a small part of Plath's meaning, but as with so many of her poems, it is more substantial than simply her own autobiography. It should not be overlooked that on January 21, 1956, Plath read August Strindberg's 1902 play, *The Bridal Crown*, aka, *The Crown Bride*. Strindberg's tale is a dark one, incorporating Swedish folklore, where a young girl kills her baby from her premarital affair with a man of high society in order to wear a virginal crown at her wedding. The girl confesses while walking to the church, and falls through the ice and dies.

Strindberg's story most certainly had bearing on at least the title of Plath's "Wreath for a Bridal." When looking at the political events of the time, Plath used this title also as a metaphor for the marriage of nations: the Warsaw Pact, which had been signed almost exactly a year earlier. Poland, Hungary, Romania, Albania, Bulgaria, the Czechoslovak Republic, and the German Democratic Republic were under Soviet Union control. Trouble began when Hungary wanted out of the Pact.

Plath also plays with definitions of the bridal symbol in her "Wreath for a Bridal" poem. The homophone of *bridal* is *bridle*, to steer and control a horse's head; and the wreath is the metaphoric territory that has become the Soviet's prize under this guise of protection. The word "pact" is evident in the poem, as are Soviet stars and Chinese dragon teeth, and the conditions that went from a lovely pastoral to "stinging nettle" in Plath's second stanza, as it might feel to fall through Strindberg's ice.

"FIESTA MELONS": PIN-UP PUMPKINS AND HOLLYWOOD HONEYDEW

Plath loved Hollywood. Hollywood in 1956 was full of pin-up girls: Liz Taylor was the star of the moment with her movie, *Giant*. Marilyn Monroe starred in *Bus Stop*. Deborah Kerr was back with *The King and I*, and Jayne Mansfield became famous with *The Girl Can't Help It*. Carroll Baker, Anita Ekberg, Sheree North, and Mamie Van Doren also followed in Monroe's platinum-blond bombshell sex-goddess tradition that year with *Baby Doll*, *Zarak*, *The Best Things in Life are Free* and *Star in the Dust*, respectively. Terry Moore held out as the darker-haired pin-up girl, starring in *Between Heaven and Hell*. 1956 was the year of celebrating bosomy curves, and Plath's "Fiesta Melons" is having a bit of fun with so many breasts.

Since her 1951 journal entries, Plath wrote often of other women's figures, especially noting large

breasts. She believed that most American males worshipped women with rounded big breasts (*UJ*, 36), and that hers were small and inadequate (*UJ*, 38, 98). Plath also wrote about Hollywood's female images: "The liquid, gleaming lips of movie actresses quiver in kiss after scintillating kiss; full breasts lift under lace, satin, low scallops: sex incarnate" (*UJ*, 110). In one journal entry, focusing in great detail on a peer's breasts, Plath uses her word "thumpable" from the poem, but this time it was about the girl's nose. Still, the connection between "thumpable" and "breasts" has been made as she calls the melons "thumpable" in her poem. Plath wrote, "I am part man, and I notice women's breasts and thighs with the calculation of a man choosing a mistress ... but that is the artist and the analytical attitude toward the female body ... for I am more a woman; even as I long for full breasts and a beautiful body, so do I abhor the sensuousness which they bring ..." (*UJ*, 55).

Plath occasionally referred to youth as a "green age," and these melons of her third stanza are "Bright green and thumpable," meaning firm young bodies. It is not surprising then that Benidorm would be the inspiration for "Fiesta Melons." With its three nude beaches and many others in the Alicante region, Plath and Hughes had plenty of time to notice "innumerable melons." Plath's notebook on the Benidorm vacation also included observations of a "full-figured" girl in a white bathing suit, as well as breast-like description of a cylindrical beach bag with "watermelon-red" lining (*UJ*, 577).

"THE GORING": NAZI GORE AND GOERING

Plath's journals and calendars reveal that she attended a bullfight in Spain where she witnessed the picador gored by the bull. This of course was the first inspiration for the poem. But Plath had by now become adept in her multiple meanings. In 1956, two important books came out about Nazi leader Hermann Goering, whose name was also spelled "Goring": *Instrument of Tyranny*, by Edward Crankshaw (a regular writer for *The Atlantic Monthly*), and *Hermann Goring*, Charles Henry Bewley's biography. The latter quoted the Luftwaffe Commander-in-Chief, saying: "My measures will not be crippled by any bureaucracy. Here I don't have to worry about Justice; my mission is only to destroy and to exterminate; nothing more." This commander holds the same intention as the Spanish picador.

Between 1950 and 1958, nine major movies or television series were also about or prominently featured Hermann Goering. In reading Plath's poem, "The Goring," and understanding Goering's penchant for collecting artwork, his formal dress, his physical obesity and hunger for death, the man is a fine metaphor for the bullfighting that she and Hughes witnessed.

In her 1958 journals, Plath related bullfighting and Nazi blood-thirst the following year, as she wrote of reading a borrowed book on being a World War II conscientious objector, *The Unfinished Man* by James Byrom (Chatto & Windus, London, 1957) (*UJ*, 343).

"THE BEGGARS": NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES ON HARD TIMES

"The Beggars" is one of Plath's poems seemingly set in Benidorm, Spain. If Plath had been reading the newspapers from home, which Aurelia might have sent, she would have seen that a new version of *Faust* opened at the Theatre on the Green in Wellesley, running July through August. In an article entitled, "The Beggar's Opera," the *Harvard Crimson's* rave review praised stars Jack Cassidy and Shirley Jones in their leading parts. Meanwhile, the famous movie director Werner Jacobs had released his motion picture, *The Beggar Student*. Beggar "tragedians" seemed to be everywhere in 1956. Also that year, Patience Macelwee published *Beggar My Neighbour* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1956), a book about how in economics, policy that benefits one country may be at the expense of others, and even at the expense of a country's own longer term security. Finally, in August of that year, the famous poet and playwright Eugen Berthold Friedrich Brecht, a Marxist who probably had strong feelings about Macelwee's subject and who famously revised "The Beggar's Opera," died on August 14, 1956. The date Plath wrote "The Beggars" is uncertain, but Hughes did place it within Plath's 1956 poems.

"ELLA MASON AND HER ELEVEN CATS": CAT HOUSES IN THE NEWS

Plath wrote "Ella Mason and Her Eleven Cats" on June 2, 1956, per her pocket calendar. Plath spoke a bit of French, and *la maison* translates to "the house." This is less a poem about an animal hoarder, and more explicitly about a *cat house*, or a brothel. This subject was all over the news as 1956 English society wrestled with ideas of church and state, and homosexuality was still viewed as a crime.

In December 1955, The British Medical Association published the well-selling *Homosexuality and prostitution: a memorandum of evidence*, and in May 1956, the Church of England's Moral Welfare Council published their own study on sexual offenders and social punishment. Meanwhile, journalists like Colin MacInnes were building careers writing about the seamier side of London.

Plath's poetic "Ella Mason" lives in "a ramshackle house" in a red light district of London called Somerset Terrace. In Plath's poem, there are "queries" made about Plath's Ella Mason, who lives with eleven

felines at last count, playing “hostess to” the Tabbies and Toms of the neighborhood. In later poems such as “Watercolor at Grantchester Meadows,” Plath also uses the cat as a metaphor for a jaded, unscrupulous woman. In “Ella Mason,” she gives it away in her last two lines: “That vain jades sulk single down bridal nights, / Accurst as wild-cats.”

On the second of August, the Parliament passed the Sexual Offences Act of 1956, which did not criminalize the act of prostitution itself, but did the activities of soliciting and running a house of ill repute. Section 33 of the Sexual Offences Act in Britain reads: *It is an offence for a person to keep a brothel, or to manage, or act or assist in the management of, a brothel.*

“CRYSTAL GAZER”: A DIFFERENT KIND OF GLOBE

Revisions to Plath’s poem “Crystal Gazer” were discussed in Hughes’ October 1956 letters, but Plath’s calendar reveals that she wrote 24 lines (probably the first four stanzas) on June 3, 1956 and worked on it through the next few days. On the 6th, she noted in her calendar that she had barely begun reading Aristotle when she was struck by the poem “Gerd & Bold crack.” This seems to reference the first line of the seventh stanza of “Crystal Gazer.” Aristotle, the philosophical father of Government and Science, among other things, may have had some influence on this poem’s final stanza.

The detail of the “Crystal Gazer” poem suggests that Plath and Hughes had already been working with crystal ball gazing, also known as “scrying” or “seeing.” This said, many read this poem as autobiography. It is clear in Plath’s poem that she foresees the end of love, and the inevitability of death. If one looks deeper, however, this is another 1956 poem of the seeming blessings of the Warsaw Pact which “intertwined” eight Communist states in the Western Bloc, and resulted in “A flash like doomcrack,” for Hungary especially.

The Warsaw Pact had been created to be a treaty of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance, seen in Plath’s second and third stanzas of “Crystal Gazer.” The name “Gerd” is Old Norse/German, a prevailing language across many of those nations. Its homophone, “gird,” means to secure or encircle with a belt or band. Plath did not select this name at random.

Gerd “spins the ball” of the globe, deciding the future. She is “spindle-shanked,” a rather violent description of being set in place, and also a fit for German spiked helmets in the 19th and 20th centuries that saw wide use in the occupations of the Western world. Gerd has “a lens / Fusing time’s three horizons” of the past, present, and future. She would have known that a similar pact had been in existence since 1939 when Soviet forces in alliance with Nazi Germany first occupied Central and Eastern Europe, maintaining the region after the war. She squats, looking “mummy-wise” toward Austria and Hungary. Austria had been united with Hungary until the end of World War I and was the place of origin for Plath’s mother’s side. Plath often referred to Aurelia Plath as “mummy.” Gerd’s knowledge of history, her male behavior (“hoyden”), and desire to govern more than is normally granted aligns her with the communist powers, and especially the Soviet Union. Because she sees disruption ahead, she aims at those “with power to strike” and destroys them.

Three weeks after Plath wrote this poem, in the Eastern Bloc, the Poznań 1956 protests took place. In late June 1956, factory workers in Poland held a series of massive protests against the dictatorial Soviet-placed government and were met with violent oppression. Poznań was the homeland to Otto Plath, Sylvia Plath’s father.

“MAUDLIN”: THE MONTHLY CURSE

Of all the work in the 1956 section of *The Collected Poems*, “Maudlin” may be the one closest to Plath’s autobiography. However, this poem was written in 1959. After all, Plath wrote in her journals on May 25, 1959: “My Maudlin poem is a prophetic little piece. I get the pleasure of a prayer in saying it: Gibbets with her curse the moon’s man” (*UJ*, 485). The question is, what is the poem’s prophesy?

Plath had always been a slave to her menstrual period, which was irregular, heavy, and caused severe cramping. On the day this poem was written, Plath suffered from menstrual cramps, cancelled appointments, and dreamed of drops of blood and tiny white rabbits, seeming to be her subconscious echoing the old adage for a positive pregnancy test, *the rabbit died*.

“Maudlin” addresses the narrator waking up in blood, seeing herself as both a virgin and a hag, a woman without children and getting older. She is “sleep-talking” because she is ruled by her subconscious and hormonal urges. The menstrual cycle is parallel to the moon’s 28-day phases, and this explains “Faggot-bearing Jack,” the man on the moon who carries his load of sticks within the moon-shaped egg that does not crack. This expression “does not crack” might also symbolize a strong man. A gibbet is an upright post with a projecting arm, used to hang men for execution. Plath turns this instrument of death into a verb here, seeing it as a woman pointing and cursing. She curses the man on the moon for causing her this pain every twenty-eight days. He is no good to her without a pregnancy, just as Plath

saw menstrual cramps as “ridiculous” (*UJ*, 486). Plath’s “crackless egg” is one that does not hatch and bring life. She may have also had fun with the slang-meaning of *faggot* as a gay man, who is just as likely not to make a woman pregnant as the man on the moon.

In “Maudlin,” first entitled, “Mad Maudlin,” Plath is jealous of men, who are seen with disgust. This “Jack,” an everyman’s name, is macho (“He kings it”), with ugly descriptive words such as “hogshead” instead of a prettier *cask*. He is “hatched” from these eggs and he swigs, not sips or drinks, his claret-wine, a symbol of blood. Plath’s journal entry from May 20, 1959, around the time this poem was probably written, revealed a fight and tedious silences between herself and Hughes (*UJ*, 484). Everyman Jack, her Hughes, and all men, are “navel-knit to no groan” from the pain of menstrual cramps. Yet Plath believes that any woman would give up being the perfect dream of a mermaid to purchase two separate legs in order to bear a child. Her “at the price of a pin-stitched skin,” sounds painful, and it is. She knows that the maternal body is sometimes torn to give birth, and a body after a baby is never the same.

“SPIDER”: CAUGHT IN WILLIE’S WINNING WEB

Hughes positioned “Spider” as a 1956 poem, but the evidence suggests it may have been written in 1958. In the poem, Plath references the African folklore tale of Anansi, the trickster spider. Hughes noted in *The Collected Poems* that by the end of the year 1956 she had become greatly interested in African folklore, and he cited in his *Winter Pollen* the “explosive transformation that author Paul Radin’s African collection worked on the poetry of Sylvia Plath” (*WP*, 78). In January 4, 1958, Plath herself wrote of reading “myths & folktales & poetry & anthropology” (*UJ*, 306). From this point, folklore shows up creating another level of understanding to much of her work.

While undated, the “Spider” poem’s line, “Last summer I came upon your Spanish cousin” sets the poem *after* Plath and Hughes’ honeymoon in Benidorm, as Plath had not been to Spain before then. In her journal on June 26, 1958, Plath wrote about “the black spider in Spain knotting ants around its rock,” and if one believes that her diary entry inspired the poem, then she wrote this poem in late June 1958 (*UJ*, 398). This seems in conflict with a statement Plath made in her journals on July 27, 1958, when she wrote about having just composed two new Benidorm poems, a subject that had been “closed” to her until then.

Plath wrote in January of 1959 of wanting to do a series of Cambridge and Benidorm poems, but this did not seem to happen (*UJ*, 466). She called her new poems “deeper, more sobre, sombre (yet well colored) than any” she had done before (*UJ*, 410). These comments make “Spider” and her other poem, “The Goring,” likely candidates to have been written in 1958, not in 1956 where they are placed by Hughes in *The Collected Poems*. However, with the “Last summer” reference, it is also possible that Plath wrote “Spider” toward the end of 1956 and had simply forgotten that she wrote the poem.

The year makes no difference. Plath’s “Spider” celebrates the great baseball player Willie Mays, who in 1956 hit 36 home runs and stole 40 bases. Whether looking at 1956, 1957, or 1958, Willie Mays remained an MVP in baseball. Mays was, in Plath-speak, a “black busybody of the folktales,” right behind Jackie Robinson. Why would Plath know or care about baseball? In 1953, she had been romantically involved with a professional ballplayer for the Detroit Tigers, Myron Lotz. Boston is known to take baseball very seriously, and Mays played for the neighboring New York Giants, and later, the New York Mets.

Plath’s “Spider” is loaded with baseball words and metaphor: Willie Mays could field (“squint from center field”), hit “As a sledge hammer,” and run the bases (“nimble filament” and “each time round”) better than almost anyone. The summer season of baseball is named in the second stanza, and Mays had first become a star playing with the Black Barons in the Negro League (Plath’s “baron”). Plath notes the “Spanish cousin” of the prior summer, and that summer of 1955 was when Joe DiMaggio, called “Dago” by teammates, was accepted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. “Dago” is a colloquialism for an Italian, Spanish, or Portuguese-speaking person. By the time of this poem, DiMaggio had already had a short marriage to Hollywood legend, Marilyn Monroe, another celebrity Plath admired.

The MacGregor baseball glove Mays used in the New York Giants was called a “spider web glove,” appropriate to the poem’s name, and Plath’s “gray spool of stone” is home base. Mays outhit, outfielded, and outran everyone to the point it was nearly “Appalling to witness” [...] “His next martyr to the gross cause.”

The baseball stadium is Plath’s “altar tiered” and the ants are the small players and fans, when viewed from a distance or on television. They are “a file of comers, a file of goers.” Plath sees the team players and bases as a “small stonehenge.” As the players touch base, Plath’s “caught ants waved legs in.” Mays is a “spry black deus” (god) in the machine (“Ex machine”) of baseball. In mid-1950s American professional baseball, race began to mean nothing in the face of great talent, “Nor did they seem deterred

by this." "Spider" may have first been inspired by a line of ants and a spider that Plath and Hughes observed in Benidorm, but once one is aware of Plath's layering of meanings, this is an extremely limited interpretation (*UJ*, 255-256).

CONCLUSION

In closing, it has been a fascinating experience returning to Plath's early work and seeing it with new eyes. Plath's skills of applying mysticism to her work had not been fully developed in 1956, although she had accomplished a great deal with layered meanings since her juvenilia. Historical events and dates are verifiable. Whether you believe that some of these are examples of Sylvia Plath's premonitions is up to you. ○

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