

In the spring of 1970, Harriet Rosenstein began to interview Ruth Barnhouse about the four-month period Sylvia Plath spent at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts. Seventeen years earlier, in September 1953, Plath was recovering from a suicide attempt that occurred shortly after her summer internship at *Mademoiselle* magazine in New York City, and Barnhouse had taken over her treatment.

After Plath's release from McLean, she continued a course of therapy with Barnhouse resulting in a friendship that included social interactions and correspondence that went on until a week before Plath died on February 11, 1963. No other medical professional invited such intimacy with Plath or formed a bond that bolstered the poet and enraged her husband, who considered himself her only worthy partner and collaborator.

In Hughes's poetry and letters, it is clear, especially in her last days, that he was still struggling for Plath's heart and that even decades after her death, in *Birthday Letters*, he could no more let go of her than Plath could sever herself from Barnhouse, who, in turn, clung to Plath and responded to Rosenstein almost as a kind of surrogate for the relationship that ended with the poet's suicide.

The Barnhouse-Rosenstein collaboration began with the skeptical therapist interviewing the biographer about her motives and methods, but this initial wariness soon segued into in-depth conversations, a word that seems more appropriate than interviews, since the two women seemed alike in sensibility and outlook. In fact, Rosenstein

would go on to a thirty-five-year career as a licensed social worker with a private psychotherapy practice.

Rosenstein recorded Barnhouse reading from Plath's medical history and all the notes the therapist made about her patient's case not only at McLean but in private sessions conducted after Plath's release from McLean hospital. Barnhouse recommended key texts about depression and loss and arranged meetings between the biographer and suicidologists and psychiatrists. Just before Rosenstein's departure for England to do more interviewing for the Plath biography, Barnhouse entrusted the biographer with fourteen letters Plath had written to Barnhouse between 1960 and 1963. During this period Plath worked on her novel, *The Bell Jar*, creating a character, Dr. Nolan, based on Barnhouse.

Barnhouse broke down while attempting to read the Plath letters to Rosenstein. In fact, only three of the letters were read aloud. The therapist, overwhelmed, began weeping and could not go on. She needed an alter ego, and the biographer served as the therapist's only way of continuing a relationship with Plath that at times had seemed simply too painful to bear. The letters, as Rosenstein put it in her court affidavit, expressed "extremities of feeling, thought and content." The trauma of possession that had prompted Barnhouse to burn earlier Plath letters now returned, but with a difference. Now she believed she had found someone to preserve Plath's legacy—someone apart from the coterie that protected Hughes and disparaged Plath. According to Rosenstein, biographer and therapist agreed that the letters would not be released during Barnhouse's lifetime but would eventually become available to scholars and biographers as soon as those named in the letters were also deceased.

For three years, beginning with the move to England in 1960, Plath struggled to overcome her misgivings about Hughes and raise a family, often presenting in letters to her mother only the cheerful side of the marriage. The couple had moved from Boston, where Plath had hoped her husband would find a new land in which to create great poetry. Instead Hughes had closed up, disparaging America and Americans, and returned to a Britain he had previously said was decadent and without a future. Yet Plath accompanied her husband to London, first,

and then to a country home. When Al Alvarez first visited the couple at their Chalcot Square flat in London, he noticed that Plath had receded into the background. Indeed, at first he did not recognize her as the poet he had published when he was employed as poetry editor at *The Observer*. Even worse, Ted's friends seemed unable to empathize with Sylvia's increasing feelings of isolation. Their incomprehension is best revealed in Dido Merwin's malicious memoir included as an appendix to the Hughes-approved biography by Anne Stevenson. Rosenstein interviewed poet W. S. Merwin, then Dido's husband, on April 15 and 16, 1974, and recorded his conviction that Plath had a "purely destructive" influence on Ted Hughes. Merwin called her a "finagaler" and better at getting her way than Ted. In her notes, Rosenstein expressed her amazed response to Merwin's dismissal of what the biographer called Hughes's "flagrant, adolescent acting-out and up with Assia [Wevill]." Merwin said, "So what! Big deal." And yet Merwin admitted he had never even met Assia Wevill, whose flagrant pursuit of Hughes was witnessed by Al Alvarez, who quoted to me from the journal he kept at the time.

In such hostile company, Plath relied on Barnhouse as a lifeline. Plath's mother, in the view of Plath and her therapist, was part of the problem, since Aurelia Plath had subordinated herself to her autocratic husband, Otto, and seemed not to fully take in the strains Plath experienced herself as mother, poet, and wife, doing her best to accommodate herself to a foreign land that lionized her husband. What Barnhouse actually said about Aurelia Plath is not yet available, although it may be divulged if Harriet Rosenstein's work is ever publicly released. We can, however, glean something of Barnhouse's attitude toward Plath's mother in her discussion of how women form a "negative image of femininity." Speaking of another case, she mentions the "emotional incompetence of the mother who was unable to defend either herself or her daughter from male brutality."

Plath's American friends supported her, and a few British women commiserated with her plight, but only Barnhouse understood the trajectory, the rise and fall, of Plath's hopes for a new life, pinned so desperately on Hughes, her poetry, and her children. As Plath wrote in one of

her journals, she believed in Barnhouse “because she is a clever woman who knows her business & I admire her. She is for me ‘a permissive mother figure.’ I can tell her anything, and she won’t turn a hair or scold me or withhold her listening which is a pleasant substitute for love.”

Nearing a complete collapse in her last days, Plath wrote to Barnhouse, asking to stay with the therapist, who worried that the poet was approaching a crisis similar to the one that had resulted in her 1953 suicide attempt. In fact, Plath had alluded to her suicidal feelings when she said her state of mind was like the way she had felt before when she had done “that.” Her therapist knew what “that” meant but also agonized about what it would mean for her own marriage, and decided, in the end, not to invite Plath into her home. This was a stunning blow to Plath, who had already rejected her mother’s plea to come home from England. Unable to reject Plath outright, the therapist chose not to answer some of her patient’s letters, thus setting up a lifelong train of regret. When Rosenstein showed Plath’s letters to her therapist to Karen Kukil, the esteemed editor of Plath’s journals, Kukil concluded Plath had shared personal details about Hughes and her children with a profound honesty that went far beyond what she felt able to convey to others, no matter how close they were to her.

Barnhouse confided to Rosenstein that this harrowing last period in Plath’s life continued to trouble the therapist, who believed she had let the poet down. This feeling that some kind of intervention, some change in the terms of Plath’s life, might have saved her is part of what has propelled so many biographers, beginning with Rosenstein, to get the story of Plath’s life right. Barnhouse looked to Rosenstein for a kind of salvation or redemption, as Plath herself had sought a savior. The ironies and parallels and plights of patient, therapist, and biographer converge in a triangulated tragedy that is only now emerging.

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She had never wanted to live in the country! It was his idea. What was a home to him? No more, it seemed, than a waystation. When she had met him, he was a scruffy ex-student, still hanging around Cambridge, not getting on with much, really, except a dilligentish dabbling in poetry. He had a great voice, one that he worked hard on perfecting, so that he could hold a room with his verse. Ben Sonnenberg became so rapt in listening to Ted Hughes that he fell off his chair, and as Ted picked him up, still talking, Ben felt the vibrations of Ted's voice "running down his arm." It was a voice "as deep as England," Sonnenberg recalled, quoting from the famous Hughes poem, "Pike." Plath was not the only one Hughes could hypnotize with his voice.

But washing his hair and suiting up for a career seemed to Hughes like a sell-out. But of what, really? She had to ask him. Wasn't he, in fact, selling himself short as a poet by keeping it all to himself and his mates? He shrugged and shuffled and wore a smile that lighted up his darkly handsome looks. Later, all of this overwhelmed him: that first poetry prize Harper had awarded him, the country home (Court Green), the BBC jobs in London. She had pushed him into it, and that is exactly how he saw it, too, telling her "You made me a professional," as if she had robbed him not only of his amateur standing but of his innocence. He was the aggrieved one! She suspected what those trips from Court Green to London amounted to. Al Alvarez had hinted as much. But Ted had treated her as a nagging housewife, scorning her suspicions. It had been the same at Smith. What *was* that Amherst stu-

dent doing by his side, seventeen miles from *his* campus on Sylvia's home grounds? Again, he said she was hysterical, beside herself with jealousy, even though it was plain to her that even her friends who did not like Ted would bed him if he made the first move. Then the phone rang at Court Green and it was her: Assia Wevill, lowering her voice, trying to sound like a man, Sylvia thought, and asking for Ted, this woman who had entered Court Green like Keats's Lamia, this woman who had so agitated a usually mild-mannered professor at her school in British Columbia that he had stood up in the middle of lunch and shouted: "You bitch!" And walked out. Sylvia ripped the phone wire out of the wall and Ted out of her life, telling him to go, NOW, in front of her mother. It was humiliating and aggravating but the only way to deal with this passive aggressive man who never appeared to do anything on his own and seduced his friends and (now she knew) lovers to see her as the gorgon, turning the fun-loving, spontaneous Ted, the independent one they all cherished, into her stony pillar of a husband.

Even the way he left her had been infuriating. No protests. He just took the train to London to his confidants, sleeping on their sofas, reveling in the freedom of the boy-poet in all his ruffled charm taken in by the women and men worried about him. She had thrown him out, he would say in his hangdog way. What was a fellow to do? She was so demanding, so unrelenting, so *responsible*. He had fled, banished. He was the desperate one. He was making the moves to repair their rupture. He took the blame, of course, but that was just it: He shouldered her hurts. And it infuriated her to see how well his confessions of failure, of how he had let her down, beguiled his friends, only too willing to confer over poor Ted, unable to perform according to her exacting standards. How well his plight played with them. He was the grieving one! She had abandoned him to his own devices. He flailed himself. His self-recrimination played better than her outrage, which his friends regarded as another sign of the high-handed perfectionist Plath they could not abide. She offered no succor, and so Ted, as always, turned to them as the faithful friend, their leader, and they acquitted him, Ted absolved.

With Ted, they could all feel young and friendly again. The shifty-eyed Ted of the David Levine caricature was nowhere in evidence, the

paranoid delusions tucked in the hooded brows of the artist's portrait of the poet whose face was a fortification, with its jutting jaw and cantilevered nose. Sylvia the serious, the earnest, party-pooper Plath, constituted their pasquinade. The laborious, thesaurus-bound Sylvia Plath paled beside their free-spirited Ted. She was so sick of the "Let Ted be Ted" bandwagon. When she had entered a pub, they closed ranks, saying she was all business, whisking Ted away from them, from the ages-old creative anarchy of sharing a pint, the Irishness of it all, even if they weren't Irish. She had to be in control, they said. But what did they know of her, of what she wrote in her journals—how a woman could not enter a bar and just be one of the boys, without the boys assuming she was just there for the taking? Natural? Spontaneous? Exactly how was a woman Ted still called a "poetesse" supposed to behave in this sodden, fraternal atmosphere? Brother Sylvia? And what did Ted dream of at such moments? Was he off fishing with his older brother Gerald? Brotherly bonds broke through the marriage vows isolating Sylvia, who did her best in letters and journals to prove how tough she could be when she was not, at the same time, resisting the male club pounding out its prerogatives. Rough sex in the bedroom, yes, but how thuggish of her to insist on commanding other scenes where men were supposed to dominate. Even the sensitive and rugged rock climbing Al Alvarez, Ted's match in everything except the writing of great poetry, when he first met Sylvia in the Hughes home, did not recognize the poet he had published but only the pliant wife of his friend and drinking companion, Ted Hughes. The conventional-looking, medium-brown-haired Sylvia Plath, no longer dyed platinum blonde, had to remind the amazed Alvarez that he had published her, that, in effect, she had her own place on Parnassus.

Wasn't every moment, for her, a fight for life, a fight for her work, a struggle for poetry that Ted turned into his birthright? She relished combat and put off his retinue who resented that their sovereign took up his post at a small hall table in their little London flat while Sylvia and the baby luxuriated in their own room. For all his power as a "king player," to use Daniel Weissbort's words, Ted had a clique that "sometimes, despite your reverberations, all but shouted you down," Weiss-

bort reflected in “On Your Retinue.” In fact, Ted ruled while seeming to abdicate. He “made quite a show of being unaccompanied,” and his friends “humoured” him, as Weissbort, turning directly to Hughes in the poem, admitted that they wished “for you the singleness, aloneness / That you maybe wished for yourself.” This Cambridge student’s vision of the man poet excluded Sylvia Plath. The Hughes contingent even wished to think that their wish to be without her was, really, his own.

Poetry was for Ted; she was the pretender. That he did not complain but only sulked or seemed subdued meant that poor Ted no longer led, a devastating thought for his coterie. He was so long suffering, they said, so solicitous to her majesty’s every mood. That without her, he had floundered never seemed to occur to them. That what he made of himself was *her* never penetrated their proprietorial sensibilities. Even after he left Court Green, and she moved to London, he kept returning to her hearth—to see the children, to be sure—but mainly to recover her on *his* terms. He was the desperate one who took out of her only so much as she wanted to give him. For her, the rest was poetry, to be safeguarded even at her own peril. His frustration at her refusal to give in to him would last his lifetime and result in two books of self-exculpating poetry that, in the end, could not return to him what she had taken away. Emma Tennant, watching Ted bed her and other women, concluded that in the end, he always returned to Sylvia Plath, betraying his other women, including his wife Carol, for his first true love.

Who were these congregants who worshipped at the shrine of St. Botolph? This patron saint of tramps, celebrated for his learning, had seventy or so churches all over Britain dedicated to him, holding his relics and celebrating his feast day (June 17). Lucas Myers, heading up the Hughes disciples, had a room in the rectory at St. Botolph’s Church in Cambridge, where along with Daniel Huws, Daniel Weissbort, David Ross, and Than (Nathaniel) Minton, Myers established the *St. Boltoph’s Review*, a fittingly named renegade rival to the two established university literary magazines. In “Our Cambridge,” Daniel Weissbort later wrote, “We spoke of it to malign or mock it,” as they created what they fancied was “an alternative Cambridge we cobbled together.” In retrospect, though, he doubted their independence, saying “it was like a mag-

net / pushing us away. / But pushing back, we lingered a little, / pressing into that resistance.” In prose, he added “We imagined we were making quite an impact on Cambridge, but I rather fancy we were not.”

Sylvia’s journal for February 25, 1956, took the measure of these St. Botolph’s novices. Lucas Myers, who would show the greatest animus toward her, she described as “satanic after we had run through the poetry in St. Botolph’s and yelled about it.” Daniel Huws appeared “frightfully pale and . . . looking incredibly young to even think hard yet.” Than Minton was so small you’d have to “sit down to talk to him,” and next to Than, “also small,” Daniel Weissbort. Huws had already made dismissive references to her poetry, which he deemed too refined for their supposedly harder tastes. On February 5, 1958, her opinion had not changed: “How Ted got his friends I don’t know—they are so small & wistful & half-drowned compared to him—Danny Weissbort & Than Minton & Dan Huws & David Ross all writing meek miserable adoring letters from London, all self-conscious, grubbing, sorrowing with no knit forces & disciplines—their demons formless and pale like grubs under turned stones and their genii asleep on the dark side of the cold moon.”

Sylvia wrote as a superior to these diminished men. Hughes scholar Ann Skea reminds us that for Hughes “Every living woman’ represents a test which the Goddess sets for the human male. Every living woman embodies the Goddess.” Only Plath passed the Hughes test, and only Hughes passed hers. His male retinue resented her accordingly—although later Daniel Huws made his peace with her, and Than Minton recognized her significance and power. At the very end of *A Memoir of Ted Hughes* (2015), Minton concludes, without elaboration: “At his funeral I felt Ted had found peace in the Shekinah.” This seems a message delivered directly to the cohort who shared Hughes’s devotion to Jewish mysticism. Ann Skea explains: “the Goddess became the Hebrew Shekinah, the female aspect of God, exiled in our world. In Hebrew teachings, it is the duty of Adam and his descendants to rescue the Shekinah from exile and reunite her with the male aspect of God.” To a Jungian believer in the male principle (animus) and the female principle (anima) the tragedy of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes reflected the disorder caused by the misalignment of the male and female principles.

Ted Hughes, the cynosure of these Cambridge votaries, appeared as a Homeric figure to Minton. He admired Ted's "huge wooden bow," the fitting weapon for a hero, expert in archery. Minton could not even bend the bow back. "I felt utterly defeated: a Tom Thumb in a world of giants. The bow belonged to a giant. The giant was Ted Hughes." This mythological creation with a "life-enhancing laugh . . . friendly and deeply human . . . gentle and kind" rejuvenated the "demoralized and exhausted" Minton who had decided, the day after Sylvia bit Ted at the St. Boltoph's party, not to sit his exams. Minton's father contacted Ted, the one to know what had happened to Than, and Ted ousted Than from his depression, and it was to Ted that Than owed his Cambridge MA.

Meeting Olwyn in Paris, Minton wrote in *A Memoir of Ted Hughes*, was a "joyful experience," like meeting "a feminine version of Ted himself . . . very warm, friendly and witty." Minton and Olwyn were, after all, of the same apostolic communion. The poet Elaine Feinstein described Olwyn, who would become Feinstein's friend and agent, as an "impressive figure, handsome with a big-boned body . . . dressed with style. . . . She read everything with intensity." Olwyn organized constellations of friends for Feinstein, including novelist Alan Sillitoe and his wife, Ruth Fainlight, both of whom also befriended Sylvia. Minton wrote poetry but became a psychiatrist. Sylvia appears in his memoir in the fall of 1962, estranged from Ted, "irritated" and hardly looking at Minton when he shows up unannounced at the Fitzroy Road flat. Six years earlier, Minton remembered, she seemed "happily excited" after a walk in the green meadows of Granchester, but in 1962 she was, he speculated, "on the edge of a psychotic, agitated depression."

Plath came along when the Cambridge rebel/disciples were just getting started, with plans to somehow acquire an island and establish their own esthetic commune in something like, I suppose, Coleridge's and Southey's plans for Pantisocracy—in Greek: "equal or level government by/for all." But those poets went on to high achievements. The Hughes followers were failures—as measured by their own high standards. They had no "practical plan," Myers admits, and all they could do is regret Ted's "defection." Myers called himself "stalemated," but he did not allow his own defeat to inhibit his relentless attack on Plath. To the

Jungian, Myers represents pure animus. Sylvia was enough of a Jungian to feel the powerful male forces arrayed against her. She emphasized that besides being little, the Hughes adherents were “dark.”

Myers took the lead in calling Sylvia “abnormal.” She had drawn first blood, and he could never forgive her. She had danced with him first at the St. Boltoph’s party, and then rejected him for Ted and the blood rite of their communion. Myers read her through his own sense of failure, claiming “gifted though she was . . . her gift could only develop as far as it did through stimulus of Ted.” She needed Ted’s blood and had heedlessly wounded Myers’s hero. Her suicide, Myers insisted, had nothing to do with Ted’s adultery. “Ted was driven to waywardness by Sylvia herself,” by which he meant her possessiveness—only one manifestation of her narcissism in wanting Ted and the world only for herself. But Sylvia was not alone, even by Myers’s account in *Crow Steered Bergs Appeared* (2001): “Everybody wanted not just a piece of him but they wanted him entire.” I presume this applies to Myers too, and that what he resented is that Ted’s fealty to Sylvia inevitably meant Myers only got Hughes piecemeal. Since Ted could not be attacked without destroying Myers’s paragon, the only available prey for Myers was Plath.

Did Myers simply ignore her other side, the one who wrote to him on March 11, 1957: “I couldn’t let Ted’s letter fly off without talking some too. It was great hearing from you & we both miss you very much.” She wanted him to stay with them before they sailed for America. She promised good meals. “Now please, please send us whatever you’ve written & write. Let me be a kind of secretary.” She claimed “professional status now & I’d be glad to type them up & send them around—also to type your book whenever you get together your poems.” What to make of such a generous offer? Myers mentions but makes nothing of it in “Ah Youth . . . Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath at Cambridge and After,” included in *Bitter Fame*. And yet she went beyond offers of help, saying “before I’d even met or seen you or Ted, I was stunned & awed then by both of you & wrote a whole paragraph: ‘And I have learned something from E. Lucas Myers, although he does not know me & will never know I’ve learned it’ & proceeded to say in detail why I felt you were the fine poet you are. I had one of my blinding flashes of intuition

about you & Ted then—that you both were destined to be poets & the preview of your books broke in on my mind like lightning.” This, too, evidently made no impression on Myers. He lashed out at the woman who had taken away his Adam. “I had expected Ted to preserve his freedom from everything but poetry and, if he were eventually to get married, to marry someone much like his present wife [Carol], highly intelligent but close to nature, a daughter of the English countryside.” What was wrong with Sylvia? Too commercial and materialistic bent on finding a place in the “American English Literary Establishment, a shallow sea hostile to his [Ted’s] happiness. . . .” Ted Hughes, poet laureate, played no part in Myers’s prognostication.

When pre-Sylvia Ted pitched a tent in the garden next to Myers’s refurbished chicken-coop apartment, which he occupied before securing a room in the St. Boltoph’s rectory, an enraptured Myers called the setup a “Garden of Eden.” When Ted invited a woman to spend the night in his tent, she emerged to tell Myers, “Ted’s so big and hot.” But in Myers’s book, Ted is never the aggressor: “It was unlike Ted to thrust himself on a woman (for one thing, he would not seem to need to),” Myers wrote: “[I]t was Sylvia who made advances.” Biting Ted had been a calculated gesture meant to intrigue him. Myers evidently did not know or remember that in fact, as Jonathan Bate discovered, Ted had heard all about Sylvia, the talk about her, before meeting her, and before she bit him, he had already grabbed her hair band and earrings. He had come to the St. Boltoph’s party with her in mind. Myers proffered the most anodyne interpretation of Ted’s brutal poetry. Harold Bloom, then a sometime participant in the St. Boltoph’s crew and later to become a distinguished critic, persistently attacked the violence of Ted’s verse and his “taste for violence,” but Myers “contended that this was a faulty reading of the poetry, which deals with predation, as it routinely occurs in nature. . . .” How predation is not violence and what routine really had to do with it did not satisfy Bloom, who remained a significant dissenter in the Hughes-led confraternity.

It irked Myers that Ted had abandoned his motley dissenting band of brothers for the spic and span Sylvia who got good grades. “The authorities,” as he puts it, “approved of Sylvia.” To Myers, she was the

antithesis of the alienated artist, the dissolute Ted he had adored. Her theatricality disturbed Myers who alternately thought of her as a phony and a dupe, supposing she had been an “enthusiastic American” tricked into writing a “gushing article” for a student newspaper and posing in a “bathing costume”—such a quaint term for Sylvia’s swimsuit. Sylvia hardly seemed fooled by the fuss she had created, sending home clippings and a message to her mother: “With love from Betty Grable.” Myers supposed, given Plath’s behavior toward him, that she lacked the ability to criticize herself. He makes that astounding judgment even after reading her journals, though not the self-analysis she conducted in her letters to Dr. Barnhouse. Here’s how he reads her journals: “Her struggles . . . were struggles for success and mastery, not with her own behavior.” Who else reads the journals this way? Ted Hughes thought otherwise, describing Plath’s journals as a turn “toward the world and other people . . . To forget herself in some exploration of outer reality—in which she took, after all, such constant, intense delight.” Entirely absent from Myers’s view is “her will to face what was wrong in herself, and to drag it out into examination, and to remake it—that is what is so impressive,” as Hughes wrote in his introduction to the 1982 edition of her journals. So absorbed is Sylvia in herself, Myers is certain, that she did not love her children “enough to live for them and reject suicide for their sakes.” Not a word in Myers about the nature of depression and its causes.

How did such a conniving woman get the best of Ted Hughes? “Sylvia had a way of making other people believe what she wanted them to believe,” Myers observes—as though such a statement could not be applied to Ted Hughes and his impact on others. “Affection and sexual passion stood in the way” of poor Ted’s ability to detect Sylvia’s snares. The extent to which Myers indulged in a willful cover-up of Ted’s own behavior is his discreet reference to Susan Alliston, Ted’s bedmate on the night Sylvia died: “Ted befriended Susan,” is all we are told. Sylvia’s friends, when Myers can even bear to mention them, are quickly dispatched: Elizabeth [Sigmund] was the sort of friend anyone would want to have—she always agreed and never questioned you.” So Sylvia had her way with Elizabeth, according to Myers, even though the per-

ceptive Elizabeth had plenty of opportunity to observe Ted alone and talk to him and make up her own mind.

Other than his worship of Ted, what allowed Myers to write such consistently negative accounts of Plath? One reason stands out: Hughes never discussed Plath in any depth with Myers—at most writing a sentence or two, such as this one in a letter of December 9, 1959, extolling twelve new poems Plath had written: “I’ve already stolen several things from them.” Read the Hughes-Myers correspondence throughout Ted’s years with Sylvia, and you will see that Ted rarely even mentions her and never imparts to Myers anything at all about his intense collaboration with her. Myers supposes this is because Ted knew Myers did not like Sylvia and did not want to hear about her. For Myers, Ted’s reticence is another admirable quality. But Sylvia’s absence from Ted’s letters also meant Myers had no idea of how much she had contributed to Ted’s development, or that she supplied the brilliance that Myers himself lacked, even though in her own estimation, Myers had promise as a poet. She did not realize what a prudish person he would become, indulging in prurient speculation that had no basis in fact: “Sylvia was far more passionate sexually than the average person,” writes the expert sexologist in *Crow Steered*: “She also, as Ted did not report to me, may have been sexually more violent if ‘the flesh rips you had inscribed across my back’ (‘Fidelity’) were put there very frequently.” Myers’s evidence? One Hughes poem.

Myers on Plath’s mental state: “perhaps no one could have pasted her permanently together.” Pasted suggests how artificial and fragile he supposed her to be. More than once, he speaks of Ted Hughes as an innocent and unwary of the wiles of the “poetess *maudite* of our own times and language.” Only once does Myers let slip a glimpse of another Plath: “I remember Sylvia’s treating me in a very friendly way. I remember her vitality and vivacity.” In the main, though, Myers has Sylvia wearing down Ted’s initial reluctance to engage with her: “Ted had compared her unflatteringly to Jane [Baltzell],” a fellow American at Cambridge. Only an “unwary” Ted, then, could be seduced: “As time went on, Ted became less than objective about Sylvia in the manner of people in love.”

Feeding much of Myers's animus is his reading of Plath biographies, which he regards without any sense of discrimination as inaccurate, hostile to Hughes, and indulgent of Plath's faults. And yet Myers repeatedly issues speculations and judgments with no foundation in fact: "Esther Greenwood as a demanding and reproachful martyr must have been inexplicable to Aurelia when the book came into her hands." He uses that same telling and nugatory formulation in saying "Medusa" "must have" upset Aurelia, regarding the poem as simply a repudiation of the mother. Plath's psychiatrists are deemed "disastrous," and so knowing is Myers that he can say "almost anyone else [other than Ted] would have" left Sylvia "in their first months together."

It is also important to Myers that he rehabilitate Assia Wevill, shunned by William and Edith Hughes. Ted wrote to Lucas on August 28, 1963: "my other great problem is company for Frieda & Nick. I intend to get a woman to do housework, until my family simmer down enough to make no trouble about Assia. There have been explosions along that front." Myers wrote: "I never understood how such otherwise good parents could make things difficult for Assia at a time when Ted most needed support, whereas they had been tolerant of Sylvia's peculiarities." The simple truth is that whatever Sylvia's "peculiarities"—and there were plenty to go around in the Hughes family—Edith, especially, liked Sylvia and was shocked at her son's abandonment of his wife. Is that so hard to understand? Poor Assia, Myers just won't leave her alone and has to add another attack on the overwhelming Sylvia, who "had a knack, before and after she died, of making people aware of her side of things and Assia had no countervailing technique." But there is more. Attempting to palliate Hughes's denigrating treatment of Assia in the *Birthday Letters* poem, "Dreamers," in which she appears "filthy with erotic mystery," Myers calls it "Sylvia's view of Assia."

Myers's aberrant analysis of Plath would not matter so much except that it was shared by many of those enamored of Ted Hughes. They would isolate Sylvia so far as they could without alienating Ted, so that her own later plans for a salon would become difficult. At Cambridge, in London, Sylvia had few allies and many more who resented her and suspected her motives. They made assumptions, often not articulated

as openly as Myers, who attributed Sylvia's rigidity to a Germanic, moralistic, New England home life, presided over by a mother with "no sense of humour" and who lived a "joyless life." Myers longed for Shirley, the woman Ted courted just before Sylvia's arrival. Myers described Shirley as a "sensitive, handsome, light-brown-haired and deep-eyed woman, quite English, quite reserved, and the polar opposite of Sylvia." Shirley was "a more authentic person" and certainly a more pliable one than Plath, who did not wait on a bridge for Ted, as Shirley did, but barged into the male sanctum. In Myers's view, Ted never saw the real Sylvia Plath. He needed, instead, "her mythology."

Sylvia Plath first read the poetry of Ted Hughes in *St. Botolph's Review* during her first Fulbright year at Cambridge. On a chilly day, February 25, 1956, she bought a copy on the street from Bertram Wyatt-Brown, then dating her friend Jane Baltzell, and read Myers and Hughes with mounting excitement. Although Wyatt-Brown disliked her gushing over Ted's impious verse, he invited her to the *St. Botolph's* party that day in Falcon Yard, when she asked him how she could meet Ted Hughes. As Wyatt-Brown later explained, the "undergraduate literary press" rejected the *St. Botolph's* poets, and for all their bravado, bolstered by drinking a fifth of bourbon before the party, they were an anxious lot. Though none of them said so, it seems obvious now that they craved a savior, a hero to tower over the academic wits and to convince them they were part of a literary vanguard. Wyatt-Brown recalled that what should have been a "bright festival of song and dance" became "a sinister affair, out of control. Among us there moved a mood of desperation and cruel bitterness. It surfaced like a serpent from the depths." The *St. Botolph's* contingent, unsettled, vulnerable, and confused, not sure if they were at the forefront of a new esthetic movement or really at the end of their aspirations, "feared the worst." The truth is the *St. Botolph's Review* was a one-off, except for a sort of commemorative issue that appeared in 2005, and those poets, except for Hughes, their greatest hope, had no impact on contemporary poetry.

Sylvia danced with Myers, a six-footer, one of the few men she considered her size, while another giant, the six-foot-four Michael Boddy played the trombone and Daniel Weissbort the piano. The party had

begun in a dejected mood, Jane Baltzell remembered, with the St. Botolph's crew conspicuous for their "shabby drabness"—of a piece really with a postwar sooty Britain that had yet to regain its shine. Plath brought an American glow and would give off sparks as soon as the party began to jazz up. She described the "syncopated strut of the piano" and watched the Bohemian boys in turtleneck sweaters and the girls "blue eyelidded or elegant in black." Myers was drunk and chasing women in a room, Hughes remembered, with "large stained glass churchish windows," which were smashed during the rowdy party. Women did not play much of a part in the poetry scene, and Plath's own contributions were discounted by Myers, Huws, and others as studied and naively American. Hughes said the *Review* was mistaken for a parish magazine. In fact, Wyatt-Brown had to explain to Sylvia he was not selling a theological tract. The few readers who bought it called it obscene. Myers, an American cousin of poet Allen Tate, the Southern Agrarian poet aligned with T. S. Eliot's elitist ethos, had a "slow crazy english jive," Plath observed. Like others in the *St. Botolph's* circle, he sneered at her publications in magazines like *Mademoiselle*. Daniel Huws, in print, had even called her a fraud, although beautiful, so that she had to be keenly aware of her impact on these timorous British souls. The rough-hewn Ted Hughes had the strong voice of a hard-drinking Elizabethan poet, as one of his male contemporaries put it, and an aura, an effortless presence that beguiled women and men. He was blunt and direct and liked to talk, all of which disarmed and delighted women used to English reticence. This was no poet as Prufrock. Although he charmed both sexes, he could dress down a man, who would not only take the hiding but feel that, no matter how hard to stand, it had been worth the big man's trouble. Derek Strahan, subject to one of Ted's drubbings, reflected: "it did help me rediscover myself."

Sylvia knew Ted was trouble. In her journal, she prefaced his entrance with a one-sentence Gothic premonition: "Then the worst happened." He was "huge." He had a pointed presence like a Gothic cathedral. Daniel Weissbort later remembered the "sheer scale of him, in the confined space of his car, was sometimes overwhelming." Scale, rather than size, suggests just how imposing Ted Hughes could seem. He watched her

dance and then approached. Compared to his compatriots, he was sober. Sylvia Plath had to shout up at him in the midst of this Walpurgis Night party of the Bram Stoker variety, quoting from the Hughes poems she had memorized. Ted often spoke highly of memorization, believing it stimulated creativity, and so to hear his words shot back at him by this bold American proved irresistible. Reduced to two words by his astonishment, he said “You like?” What did those two words reveal? Perhaps a budding poet that for all his imposing presence, was still a tentative bloke, rather pathetically hanging around Cambridge after graduation—a little lost really and ready for a pick me up. But he wore his stature well and could seem as menacing and charming as Bella Lugosi.

As if to forestall this Count Dracula who gave her a savage kiss and to refute her reputation as decidedly academic and even timid, she retaliated by reciting Hughes’s own onslaught on women in poems like “Secretary”: “If I should touch her she would shriek and weeping / Crawl off to nurse the terrible wound.” She recited this poem, which had appeared in *St. Botolph’s Review*. She was not prepared to crawl, let alone cry. He had come to the party with the “quite English” Shirley, Myers noted, but Hughes had read at least one Plath poem, published in *Chequer*, one of those Cambridge literary magazines the St. Botolphians despised, and he was looking for her, or someone like her to wrest him away from the rut of his post-Cambridge existence. After all, taking a degree had not resulted in meaningful work, and he haunted the school’s environs making do with the adulation of his partisans. He left Plath mourning about his “obligations” (Shirley) while making off with trophies of Sylvia, pocketing her hairband.

Dismissing Ted & Co, Hamish Stewart, one of Plath’s pale and pink admirers, said, “They are phonies,” adding that “[Ted] is the biggest seducer in Cambridge.” Ted’s stalwart, Lucas Myers, disputed Ted’s reputation as a Lovelace while providing an account of how Ted had taken a woman sleeping in Myers’s bed to the tent Ted had set up in a garden outside his friend’s chicken coop room. Myers supposed this kind of coupling occurred only once because Myers was privy to just this one assignation.

Sylvia called her meeting with Ted a “misfortune,” and yet she could not resist him, and so once infected she could not find the antidote. She

had read his poetry, which she called “clever and terrible and lonely,” as though he needed her company, when she recalled how he said her name, “Sylvia, in a blasting wind which shot off in the desert behind my eyes, behind his eyes . . .” Desert? The word invokes a barrenness, and her instantaneous intuition that both of them were coming out of a dry period, one for Ted that had been a prolonged suspension of his talent, emerging only fitfully in fine poems even as he contemplated chucking it all to join his brother Gerald in Australia to farm and hunt and perhaps even forsake the life of writing; and for Sylvia, still to find her voice as a poet, notwithstanding all her precocious publications, Ted struck her as a galvanizing force, stimulating her competitive proclivities. Two weeks later, on his return to Cambridge from his London job, he tried to call her out at night, but he threw dirt clods at the wrong window. He made sure, though, that Lucas Myers gave Sylvia his London address: 18 Rugby Street. “Don’t forget Sylvia and discretion,” he wrote to Myers, who later annotated the letter: “Ted almost never asked me to do anything for him. . . . This is the only instance I can remember in which he asked me to do something for him I didn’t want to do.” Why not? In *Crow Steered Bergs Appeared*, he explained that he had been asked to do “an errand more Pandaric than was welcome.”

Myers disliked Sylvia and never changed his opinion. To him, she exemplified all the worst self-advertising features of the American psyche. He thought of Ted as a renegade, and Ted abetted this false view of him in a letter to Myers, facetiously calling W. H. Auden, Marianne Moore, and Stephen Spender the “trinity” and the “enemy,” although he had no trouble later accepting their encomiums and the Harper’s poetry award. The Ted Hughes ensemble seemed devastated. Hughes would later say Plath had branded him. This was no exaggeration. Wyatt-Brown had watched it all at the party, where he played bartender and served Sylvia drinks, and remembered that the next day “everybody gossiped about Ted’s bloody cheek.” Sylvia had wounded their hero, a shocking event in Cambridge where men vastly outnumbered women confined to two female colleges. The Hughesmen came to suspect Plath was pushing Ted very hard into a marriage he would regret. She stood flamboyantly opposed to their smug misogyny.

Wyatt-Brown later characterized the St. Botolph's code, "a certain Anglo-American male attitude toward female writers" that proved so detrimental to any understanding of Plath:

At that time Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner dominated the literary landscape like great, virile colossi, however tarnished the image has lately become. To compete against such reputations must have been discouraging for a female writer like Sylvia Plath. One of her early sponsors, Stephen Spender, who had little use for any of the Botolph clique, took a typically English swipe at the supposedly female source of Sylvia's creativity. He pointed out that, while Wilfred Owen's message "came out of the peculiar circumstances of the trenches" of the Great War, the case with Plath was different. "Her femininity is that her hysteria comes completely out of herself," Spender pontificated, implying that hysteria was purely a female problem.

Yet for most males—even Hemingway and Faulkner—their validation in war was a ruse. Faulkner pretended a war record when he did not even get out of flight school in Toronto, and Hemingway has now become famous for his huge lies about the extent of his wounds in World War I and his pathetic inflation of his soldiering in World War II. Ted's appeal did not depend on military feats or prowess on the battlefield. Plath, a pacifist without much interest in war stories, had no problem detecting phonies, and Spender himself dismissed the St. Botolph's literati as pretenders. That they found Sylvia Plath so disturbing is an index of their own self-doubts. She quickly identified Hughes as the only writer worth her time.

Myers would later lay down the curse under which he believed Sylvia Plath suffered. He said her letters home were a fraud because they sought to appease a mother demanding her daughter's love. The love turned to hate that was then encouraged by Plath's therapist, who gave the poet permission to express her enmity. Never able to reconcile conflicting impulses to love and hate—so Myers believed—Plath projected her ambivalence not only on to her mother but onto everyone else in her sphere. No wonder Ted could not cope with his deeply damaged

wife, his friends assured one another, proclaiming their anathema on Plath. To his kindred, Hughes had gone native, entranced with the “aboriginal thickness” of her mouth. In her eyes “popping with inky joy” he saw something dark in her that responded to him. The electrification of their first meeting dismayed his acolytes shut out from the contest of these two overpowering poets.

A month after the St. Botolph’s party, on her way to Paris to seek out Richard Sassoon, Plath’s diminutive but seductive poet-lover, Myers dropped her off at 18 Rugby Street, where Hughes stayed while in London, even though after that first clash-kiss with Hughes, she had not expected a rematch. Sassoon still suited her—small, to be sure, but also soigné and a welcome diversion from “stuffy and insular” Cambridge. He had written her many literary letters, in a playfully erotic Frenchified language, that aroused her. Elizabeth Winder calls Sassoon a “spanking sadist,” which may be a bit extreme, but he did rule Sylvia as part of his seduction of her. And like Ted, he had depressive periods that made his bond with Sylvia an assortative coupling—the term Kay Redfield Jamison applies to manic depressive partners. Hughes and Sassoon, for all their differences in stature and talent, were akin to the *poète maudit* and as such served as antidotes to the clean-living, proper males who provided Sylvia with no challenge. But now Sassoon had retreated, overwhelmed by her importunate advances. Even after Plath met Hughes, Sassoon maintained his hold on her imagination. Sassoon stood out in words that Bate applies to Hughes: “loosh, and *intensely* his own man.” Hughes was even more so, and to Shirley: “Above all he was a poet. Of that he was certain.” Shirley believed that she was “part of that certainty, that ‘self,’” Bate reports: “Later, when she had to accept that this was no longer true, the effect was devastating.” After Ted first met Sylvia, he began to avoid Shirley, and she knew, almost immediately, that their romance was over. Like Sylvia later on, Shirley felt forsaken. Bate’s parting words for Shirley suit what happened to Sylvia as well: “With the help of friends, she struggled through her last term at Cambridge and her final exams. She knew that nothing could change what had happened, but confronting her loss, accepting it, she found almost impossible. Ted had a deep and lasting impact on her life.”

At 18 Rugby, Sylvia and Ted had their first sexual encounter. His poetry revealed a misogynistic strain that seemed to take itself to bed when he called her Shirley, as though his women were interchangeable. Or was he actually thinking of Shirley, the “ethereal Celtic girl” described in Jonathan Bate’s biography. To her, he was so authentic compared with his effete male contemporaries. He cooked for her, as he would for Sylvia, and she adored him. Was he weighing the possibilities while in bed with Sylvia? The pliable Shirley, the competitive Plath? Sylvia left scratches on him during their robust intercourse, and she departed for Paris with a bruised and raw face and neck.

Ted, warming up for Sylvia, had put Shirley, reading English at Cambridge, through her paces, challenging her to identify short quotations from Marlowe and Shakespeare. He read Dylan Thomas, one of Sylvia’s favorites, to Shirley. Ted had taken Shirley home, and there, again like Sylvia, she met the withdrawn father, the house-proud mother, and the overpowering sister, “a striking blonde Viking goddess,” who took Shirley’s hand, examined it, and said: “You have some nasty moments coming.” You did not have to be Sylvia Plath to feel the chill. At least Sylvia did not have to sleep with Olwyn, as Shirley did, trying to keep her distance by spending the night on the far edge of the bed. Better to risk falling off than coming in contact with such malice. Shirley accompanied Ted to Haworth Parsonage, as Sylvia would later do, and to Shirley, Ted seemed, like Heathcliff, “part of that landscape, elemental, unchangeable.” When the couple then went directly to Shirley’s home in Liverpool, her shocked mother, reacting to the damage, said to her daughter: “You look as though you haven’t slept for a week.” Shirley might as well have been that rattled outlander, Mr. Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*. Ted was asked to leave when Shirley’s father discovered that the couple were sleeping together.

The Hughes hangers-on showed up at 18 Rugby—you know like those at court gathering to monitor the monarch’s consummation of his desire, although in this case the Hughesmen hovered outside the flat. Michael Boddy sat on the curb with Lucas Myers awaiting their audience with Hughes. In her journal, an annoyed Sylvia imagined how they would bruit about the news of this new Anglo-American conju-

gation of poets, although they would put it in much more pejorative traditional terms, making her Ted's mistress. Right away, Plath understood that her liaison would become part of the royal theater these men made of their play with Ted Hughes. Boddy and Myers, unwilling to leave the couple on their own, went back into the flat, at which point Sylvia and Ted left to go to her hotel, where they embarked on a night of passion. It all seemed so terrifically upsetting and improbable to the Hughes company. Margaret Daphne Scott, who would marry Boddy, had been present at that St. Botolph's party, when one of Ted's shocked female followers told Scott: "Ted's just kissed that American girl." Scott scoffed: "Oh, don't worry, I'm sure it won't come to anything." Scott later laughed at her misunderstanding of this fateful moment. She had shunned Plath, a pushy American, as too self-involved and aggressive to win over Hughes. Plath would not be able to penetrate his force field, which permitted only one great man, which is to say one great poet, to rule. Scott, who does not appear in Plath biographies, is just one of those overlooked women in the room. Sylvia's robust pursuit of men went down poorly in the postwar straitened economy of emotion that women and men practiced, except when they were drunk. To her most Englishman seemed effete, except for Mallory Wober, tall, dark, and handsome like a figure "hewn out of the Himalayas," a forthright Cambridge contemporary, "warm and intuitive." This stalwart hero who shared his records with her and entertained her by playing the organ could not match Ted's erotic and esthetic appeal, even though Mallory's name, she told him, had the right number of syllables to create a dramatic effect. This was the histrionic Hughes woman the St. Botolph's men simply could not dream of in their philosophy but that he had already projected in his yearning poetry. Daniel Weissbort later admitted in a poem, "Remember Cambridge" that Hughes could never forget or forgive their qualms about Sylvia: "Your memory let none of it go."