

The Voice Within: Sylvia Plath's Juvenilia, 1947-1950

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Sylvia Plath's 1952 short story, "Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom," drew an enormous amount of media attention when it was published in early 2019. *The New Yorker*, among other publications, billed the story as having been recently discovered when in fact it had been accessible to the public at the Lilly Library, Indiana University, since 1977. But "Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom" is just one of many unpublished short stories and poems in Plath's archive at the Lilly Library. These works, which mainly date from her high school years (1947-50), have received little sustained scholarly attention. Yet they offer startling hints of the writer Plath would become, and reveal how strong an influence both Modernist poetry and progressive politics had on her own burgeoning aesthetic. They also suggest how strongly Plath's high school English teacher, Wilbury Crockett, guided her aesthetic and political instincts. In her high school fiction, Plath's sympathies are already attuned to the plight of marginalized women, while her high school poems show her early innovative efforts to fuse elements of Romanticism and Modernism. This archivally based study tells the story of Sylvia Plath's understudied adolescent literary apprenticeship—one which laid the foundation for two of the most important works of the twentieth century, *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel*.

Of all Plath's high school teachers, Wilbury Crockett had the most profound influence upon her liberal and intellectual education. In his small, college-level Honors

seminar, which lasted all three years of high school, Plath and her fellow “Crocketteers” read between 40-50 works of literature each year by major American authors, as well as modern British and Irish authors such as Hardy, Conrad, Joyce, Woolf, Yeats, Lawrence, Auden, and Dylan Thomas. Crockett also taught Greek drama and philosophy, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Blake, and a few European writers such as Mann, Flaubert, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy. “In other classrooms we learned to memorize,” said Plath’s close friend Perry Norton. “In his classroom we learned to think” (Norton 2012). Three of Plath’s fellow classmates from this seminar remembered that they had read *War and Peace* with Crockett, and presented four 5,000-word papers over the course of the year—all assignments far beyond the typical high school workload (Norton 2012; McCurdy 2016; White 2014).

Crockett’s intimate, demanding seminar suited Plath’s intellectual and creative needs perfectly. In a letter to her German pen-pal, she called him “an extraordinary man. I like him so—he does not try to indoctrinate us with ideas whatsoever, but is continually striving to get us to speak for ourselves and think also for ourselves” (*Letters* 158). He was Plath’s first true literary mentor, and she was determined to prove her worth. Unlike most high school English teachers, Crockett encouraged his students to write creatively and send their writing to national magazines. Rejection slips were to be regarded as “battle scars that precede the victory of publication” (Kolb 318). Plath took Crockett’s advice to heart: she sent out over 50 stories before her first *Seventeen* acceptance in 1950. Crockett had no doubt about Plath’s potential. Plath’s mother Aurelia remembered that during their first parent-teacher conference, Crockett told her Plath “will be able to make writing her profession” (“Biographical Jottings”).

Under Crockett's tutelage, Plath not only began to take herself seriously as a writer, but she began serving her literary apprenticeship in earnest. She wrote papers that dug deep into the technicalities of dactylic and anapestic meter, masculine and feminine rhyme schemes, liquid and sibilant consonants, villanelles, sonnets, rime royal, ottava rima, and rondeau. She explored how poets used particular meters and rhymes to achieve a desired aural effect. At times, she almost seemed to be writing about her own future work—how in Walter de la Mare's "The Listener," for example, "The rhythm suggests the sound of distant hoofbeats: now soft, now loud, it fits in perfectly with the mood of the poem" ("English"). The same has often been said about her technique in "Ariel."

Later, she created her own 21-page "Anthology of American Poetry" for Crockett, which featured poems by H. D., Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edgar Allan Poe, Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg, Sara Teasdale (who had the most entries with five poems) and others. Some of the poems she chose sound like precursors of "Ariel," in which the speaker flies with her mare into the sun, the "cauldron of morning" (*Collected Poems* 240). Amy Lowell's "Night Clouds" tells of a white mare with "golden hoofs" who flies into the heavens: "Fly, mares!" Lowell writes. "Or the tiger sun will leap upon you and destroy you." In "The Sea Gypsy" Richard Hovey writes of flying, by sail, into the sunset on a the "trail of rapture." "Who am I?" by Carl Sandburg, looks forward to Plath's austere, authoritative poetic voice in later poems like "Elm":

I have been to hell and back many times.

I know all about heaven, for I have talked with God.

I dabble in the blood and guts of the terrible.

Plath included two poems about depression—Edwin Arlington Robinson’s “Richard Cory,” in which a wealthy man who is the envy of the town shoots himself, and Robert Frost’s “Desert Places,” in which an “absent-spirited” speaker traveling through a snowy field describes his numbingly white surroundings:

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

(“Anthology”)

Plath’s 1963 “Sheep in Fog,” with its bleak imagery of whiteness, absence, and stars would evoke a strikingly similar mood.

First-person speakers rarely made appearances in Plath’s poems before 1946, but after she began taking Crockett’s class, they crowd nearly all her poems. She also made a pointed metaphorical shift from spring to autumn, which she found a more appropriate season to illuminate her speakers’ Romantic despondency. Excited by her new theme, she circled back repeatedly in her high school poems to imagery of dead, dry leaves, grey dawns, fog, and cold rain. In “Reverie,” the “autumn wind laughed through the bare trees / with a hollow sound”; in “Let the Rain Fall Gently,” she writes, “Let the rain fall with a whisper / On the leaves and on the ground”; in “When the Stars are Pale and Cool,” “It’s

foggy, lass, and in the leaves / I hear the ripple of the rain”; in “The Sleepers,” “rain’s insistent fingers beat / The bolted door”; in “Song of the Daydreamer,” the speaker watches the rain “In the sibilant hush / Of chill, gray dawn”; in “Wild Geese,” “The only sound is the rattle and scrape / Of withered leaves down the windswept street”; and in “Bereft,” “the thin rains fall, / And autumn is lonely and bitter brown.”

Under Crockett, Plath began experimenting with Modernist poetic language; the first time she read T. S. Eliot in any depth was in his class. During her 1948-49 eleventh grade year, she wrote a long paper for him in which she analyzed sections of “The Waste Land,” “Ash Wednesday,” “Mr. Appollinax,” “The Hollow Men,” “La Figlia Che Piange,” and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The paper, for which she received an A-, is a deeply personal reflection on Eliot’s work that suggests the extent of his future influence. Though Plath bemoaned her “lack of insight” and “ignorance” concerning the origins of Eliot’s allusions, she admitted she had found “little oases” of “revelation and beauty” within his work. She was seduced rather than alienated by his erudition, and defended him as a lyric master rather than a mere “poet for the cognoscenti.” One did not need to understand all of Eliot’s allusions to enjoy his poetry, she argued. She liked the Cockney slang of “A Game of Chess,” writing, “all this one hears daily on busses, trams and street cars. The hollow jargon of our country.”

Plath valued Eliot’s “striking irony”—his ability to render deep pathos through absurdity, as in Prufrock’s “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.” She lauded his technical ability as well, noting that he was “a master for making the rhythm of his lines conform to his needs.” Critics would eventually point out her own ability to master poetic momentum through rhythm. Indeed, her depiction of death in Eliot’s “Ash-

Wednesday” almost reads like a critical description of her own late poem, “Edge”: “Eliot transcends the terror and has a ‘mystical vision of the serenity that will follow upon release from the body; even the very agents of dissolution themselves no longer seem terrifying, but are merged into the radiance of death become life’ ” (“T. S. Eliot”).

Plath ended her paper with a meditation on Eliot’s “Preludes,” which seems to have stirred her more than Eliot’s other work. “Preludes” follows a young, disaffected poet-speaker through the stale-smelling slums of Boston as he navigates his way through “grimy scraps” and “newspapers from vacant lots,” bearing witness to “the burnt-out ends of smoky days” (Eliot 13-15). In Eliot, Plath found someone who, like her, reveled in the juxtaposition of high and low. For him, the sordid and the lyrical existed side by side in fragile tandem, just as they would in her own poems. Here was a new model—a poet who could seamlessly allude to Shakespearean tragedy and a slavey’s abortion in the same poem. When Crockett asked his students to create their own “Anthology of American Poetry,” Plath chose to include only one poem by Eliot: “Preludes.”

Plath’s own “City Streets,” written for Crockett in November 1947, is indebted to “Preludes.” Plath explores the metaphoric potential of urban debris in imagistic free verse:

A yellow fog slinks low along the ground
And clings to the dingy brick walls of the tenements
that crowd by the gutter.

A damp newspaper somersaults along with the wind

And then succumbs on the flat pavement, lonely, left behind.

Blue spirals of smoke curl out of the sooty factory chimneys.

A lean gray cat sulks around a rubbish heap,

Seeking food, yet finding none.

These are the wan, gray shreds of the tattered day. (*Letters* 157)

“City Streets” was utterly unlike anything Plath had written before. She dispenses with formal rhyme and writes free verse reminiscent of Eliot and Ezra Pound, and turns away from her usual landscape settings to explore, instead, an urban streetscape. She would return to urban imagery in other high school poems. In “Carnival Nocturne,” the moon is no longer a sublime Romantic symbol, but sadly out of place, “caught / in the telegraph wires” “over the tenement blocks, / spilling queer white / on the waterfront docks.” In “Carnival,” written in June 1948, the speaker is appalled by the garish faces of clowns and the “gaudy” striped tents as the “Artificial faces, empty faces, / Come and go.” The line recalls Eliot’s satire of Boston society in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (Eliot 4). Plath writes, “I am lost, I am lost in the / Carnival crowd.” A similar line would make an appearance in her 1959 poem “Witch Burning”: “I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light” (*Collected Poems* 136).

Plath was self-conscious and self-reflective about her literary vocation in early poems like 1948’s “I Reach Out,” “Obsession” (about writing, not boys), and “Neither

Moonlight Nor Starlight,” in which she defends her vocation to herself and a society skeptical of women writers:

Why do I stay at my inkstained desk
From the dim gray dawn to the dusk of day?
Why do I linger in the loneliness of this bleak place
When I could be bathing in moonlight, stardust
Or the spilling gold of the sun?
(Neither moonlight nor starlight are for me.)

You ask me why I spend my life writing?

...

I write only because
There is a voice within me
That will not be still.

The last stanza of this poem was eventually printed on a plaque dedicated to Plath outside the Wilbury Crockett Library at Wellesley High School—a fitting tribute to the young girl remembered by her classmates not as a suicide but as an exemplar of high literary ambition.

Perhaps the poem from 1947-48 that most looks forward to Plath's future work is the surreal "Tulips at Dawn." There, she succeeds in merging landscape and mindscape as she would in later poems. The poem begins:

Thin blue shadows spatter the lawn;
The tulips are calm in the light of dawn.
The sunlight through their sharp green leaves
Is metallic and chill.

Plath then takes an imaginative leap—"I plummeted downward / Into a well of gold"—as the language of *Ariel* tentatively emerges:

Into the depths of austere whiteness
I go.
Gray shade
And white flashes of cold
Lance my wings.
I am a captive
Of white worlds.
Snow on snow
And steel-gray skies.

“Tulips at Dawn” challenges the idea that Plath discovered her *Ariel* voice in the 1960s. “Into the depths of austere whiteness I go” looks forward to “the substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances” that begins “Ariel”—another dawn poem—fourteen years later (*Collected Poems* 239). As in “Ariel,” the short lines here give momentum to the speaker’s metaphorical flight, while the language of martyrdom and captivity will re-emerge in Plath’s bee poems, “Lady Lazarus,” “Fever 103” and “Purdah.”

Other poems from this period also suggest work that was to come. “Bereft,” an elegiac poem about a speaker who says goodbye to a loved one at the edge of the sea, already exhibits that particular Plathian combination of anger and tenderness toward the lost that will resurface in “Daddy,” “Full Fathom Five,” and “The Colossus”:

So glad to be rid of a part of me
That long after you were gone
I stood on the beach and exultantly
Watched the rising tide come on.

I saw the tide cover the gaunt black rocks
And the water smooth the sand,
And when all your footprints were washed away—
Then I started back to land.

1948's "I Have Found the Perfect World," which draws upon Plath's interest in the Gothic, looks forward to the murderous heroines of *Ariel*. In the poem, the speaker confronts a rival, and admits,

I used to feel the primitive desire to kill you.

I wanted to claw at your face until the blood ran down in wet red drops.

I wanted to tear you hair out in rough handfuls.

I wanted to beat your head against the ground until
your skull was smashed to fragments.

I wanted to do all this and more, while I laughed a mad vicious laughter.

Poems like "Tulips at Dawn" and "I Have Found the Perfect World" make clear that the *Ariel* voice was always within Plath, though it would become silenced, over the years, under layers of New Critical shellac. Ted Hughes would help her recognize the superiority of this starker, less rarified voice, so antithetical to the formal, thesaurus-heavy verse she spent years honing to perfection. Indeed, sections of "I Have Found the Perfect World" sound straight out of Hughes's *oeuvre*.

Yeats was another important early model for Plath. She was particularly drawn to his late poem "The Cold Heaven," which would influence several of her own poems from this period:

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven

That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice,

And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
So wild that every casual thought of that and this
Vanished, and left but memories, that should be out of season
With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago;
Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
Riddled with light. ... (Yeats 125)

The metaphorical possibilities embodied in Yeats's dueling, paradoxical visions of heat and cold, blood and ice, appealed to the young Plath searching for new ways to voice competing senses of ecstasy and despair. Plath's "Alone and Alone in the Woods Was I"—the first poem she wrote for Crockett, with its imagery of ice and heat, exultation and birdsong—is clearly indebted to "The Cold Heaven":

The tones poured about me where I stood
And crashed on the crystal of the wood.
I broke the icy bond that bound me
And tore the frost-film from my eyes.
In ecstasy I gazed around me
At the early morning skies.
[. . .]
And where my soul had sent its cry—
There curved the blue dome of the sky.

1948's "Joy" depicts a speaker whose "very soul" "is drenched / With shining melody," while "Summer Street," also written that year, uses similar Yeatsian language:

Languidly I was drawn

Up—heavenward.

Chill blue waves washed over me,

and iceberg clouds

were needled through with sharp white rays.

[...]

Numbed by giddy, shifting lights

and caught amidst

a whirl of ice, my soul became

part of heaven's boundless sea:

a frosty spear

of shining steel; and just as ice

cracks a thin glass, the spear

began to grow,

shattering the fragile shell

of numbness that

encompassed me. I gasped for breath,

struggled up through death-cold blue—
and I was free!

These poems' biographical value lies not in what they reveal about Plath's psyche, but about her literary predilections. Though early poems like "City Streets," "Alone and Alone in the Woods Was I" and "Summer Street" are derivative, the Eliotic and Yeatsian models on which they are based suggests the artistic direction in which Plath was moving. The imagery of fire and frost, and their corresponding color tones of blue and red, would become symbolic touchstones for her just as they had for Yeats, Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and Dylan Thomas. Like Yeats, Eliot, and her future husband Ted Hughes, she too would fuse elements of Romanticism and Modernism in her poetry to striking effect.

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Wilbury Crockett was a Democrat, and his liberal sympathies made him a target in conservative, Republican Wellesley. "He believed," recalled a former student, "that American society, in its tail-finned post-war boom of success, was in danger of getting it all wrong. His strictures—on materialism, television, spectator sports, celebrities, conspicuous consumption, Miss America contests, fraternities and sororities, political platitudes, journalistic distortion, and deceptive advertising—were brought home intact by youngsters eager to twit to their parents and caused many an uproar around Wellesley

dinner tables” (Kolb 312). Crockett’s attitude toward America’s hollow pleasures was closer to that of the Beat poets than to his students’ parents. “Wellesley was highly Republican,” Louise Giese said, echoing Kolb. “He would talk about moral issues or ethical issues, consumption, and it was probably the only place we were getting it.” Crockett thought, she said, that they “were much too preoccupied with *things*” (White 2014). During the McCarthy era, rumors swirled that he was a communist, and in 1952 he was asked to go before the Wellesley Town Board to discuss his political beliefs. Crockett stated that he was not a communist but a pacifist, which evidently satisfied the board.

Plath’s skepticism toward the stifling norms of the 1950s—which would underscore *The Bell Jar*—took root in Crockett’s class. As she wrote in one assignment for him,

In our era of cellophane-wrapped food, of deep freezes and television sets, we may not only buy things, but we may also purchase ideas and ideals, neatly packaged and labeled according to their contents. “Ladies and gentlemen, you see before you a selection of political opinions. Choose what you will, and fight for your possession. Socialism, Communism, Capitalism, Facism [sic]. Names, names, names.”

Truly there are “masked words” abroad, and masked words have a strange, hypnotic power over us. Instead of asking oneself, “What does this term mean; what are the laws, the real ideals behind it?” we lazily accept the word and use it thoughtlessly in our own speech. ... We are ready to slip into comfortable

“conventional respectability” and accept the fashionable opinions. ... We are skeptical about the value of our own thought. (Plath “Untitled” 1947-48)

In 1951, Plath would write a striking poem, “I Am An American,” that remains uncollected. Her America, defined by capitalism, advertising, affluence, chauvinism, xenophobia, and hypocrisy, is a clear reflection of Crockett’s. It was a dangerous poem to write in a nation made anxious by McCarthy’s witch-hunts. The first stanza reads:

We all know that we are created equal:

All conceived in the hot blood belly

Of the twentieth century turbine;

All born from the same sheet

Of purple three-cent postage stamps;

All spewed like bright green dollar bills

From the same government press;

All baptized with Chanel Number Five

In the name of the Bendix, the Buick, and the Batting Average.

(Plath c. 1951)

This wry, cynical voice would resurface a decade later in *The Bell Jar*.

Crockett’s pacifism strengthened Plath’s own.¹ Pacifist ideas began to appear in her creative and academic work in the late 1940s. In April 1948, she published a front-

¹ See Robin Peel’s monograph, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics*, for more on this topic.

page article in the school paper, *The Bradford*, titled, “The Atomic Threat.” A year later, in March 1949, she wrote an anti-war poem, “Seek No More the Young,” modeled on the World War I verse of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon:

They came, the iron men; their rifles whined,
And some fell limp upon the spattered stone –
The light extinguished and their eyes glazed blind.
But oh! the eyes of those alive—alone!
The tortured panic of the world was there.
Ah! seek no more the young with golden hair.²

In the March 1950 *Christian Science Monitor*, she co-authored an article with Perry Norton, titled “Youth’s Plea for World Peace,” in which they publicly rejected the apocalyptic logic of the arms race between America and Russia. They called nationalism a “dilemma” and advocated instead an embrace of “the basic brotherhood of all human beings” (Norton and Plath 1950). Perry remembered that he and Plath “felt very passionately about the need for avoiding international conflict right after the Second World War.” The two of them were acutely aware, he said, not only of the war’s “horrors,” “but particularly of the Holocaust.” Their pacifism colored their politics.

Plath was drawn to taboo subjects like adultery, madness, and suicide in other papers she wrote for Crockett. During her tenth grade year, she wrote about several novels and short stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose Gothic explorations of Puritan

² All 1947-50 unpublished Plath poems quoted in this article are listed, with their approximate dates of composition and archival locations, in the Works Cited.

sin fascinated her. She found Hester Prynne, from *The Scarlet Letter*, a “regal, full-blooded” woman, though Dimmesdale “moved me not to pity, but rather to scorn. . . . I feel a strong contempt for his weakness” (“The Scarlet Letter”). Hawthorne’s short story “Rappacini’s Daughter” may have inspired her later portrait of “Lady Lazarus”: Plath wrote that she was “caught in the spell” of “the idea of a woman so nourished by poison, that her very breath or touch was fatal to other human beings,” though she was “disappointed to find the typical Hawthorne climax—a moral” (“Reports”). In her later letters and journals, Plath would frequently refer to the story of Rappacini’s daughter.

Plath also read Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* during her tenth grade year with Crockett. It was her “first encounter” with stream-of-consciousness narrative, and the effect was “electrifying.” “At first you thought, ‘What a jumbled conglomeration of vague shapes and shadows!’ But as the faint light rose and increased, strange tints were revealed, and a glossy depth was apparent in the furnishings” (“Mrs. Dalloway”). Her favorite character in the novel was not Mrs. Dalloway, but Septimus Smith, the shell-shocked Great War veteran who commits suicide. His understanding of evil’s hidden but pervasive presence in “civilized” society spoke to her. She also wrote a short report on the 1948 film *The Snake Pit* (based on the novel by Mary Jane Ward) about a schizophrenic writer’s experiences in a mental hospital. Plath felt the film took an admirable moral stand in its depiction of the mentally ill. “There was no suggestion of embarrassed laughter at the sight of ‘crazy people’,” she wrote, “but rather a feeling of compassion.” She felt the film showed the audience that mental patients were to be treated with as much care and sympathy as regular hospital patients. This novel and movie eventually influenced her decision to write about her own experiences at McLean

Hospital in *The Bell Jar*. Over 10 years later, she would remember the work. “Must get out SNAKE PIT,” she would write in her journal in July 1959. “There is an increasing market for mental-hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don’t relive, recreate it” (*Journals* 495). Indeed, *The Snake Pit*’s message, as Plath wrote in her high school report, was similar to that of *The Bell Jar*: “In this woman’s fight for her sanity, we see the struggle of the individual against the institution” (“Untitled, undated”).

These literary and pedagogical influences found their way into Plath’s creative work. Her short stories from high school display a left-leaning sympathy for those on the margins of society, especially women. Though she was clearly experimenting with Modernist alienation, the squalor, poverty and loneliness that afflict her protagonists lend her late 1940s stories a subversive and at times anti-capitalist edge likely influenced by the ideas she encountered in Crockett’s seminar. Populated by single, friendless, unfulfilled women living in lonely boarding houses and working menial jobs, these stories were works of both social protest and high literary experimentation—equal parts James Joyce and Charles Dickens. They were utterly unlike the short fiction that Plath would eventually publish in women’s magazines and were, predictably, turned down by *Seventeen* and *Mademoiselle*. These stories seem to have been written by another author altogether—one with literary aspirations and political concerns very different from teen melodramas such as “And Summer Will Not Come Again,” which Plath published in *Seventeen* in 1950.

Plath’s stories about forgotten women were destined themselves to remain forgotten—like her early poetry, they have received virtually no attention from scholars or biographers. Yet these early stories are among the most interesting in Plath’s juvenilia,

for they reveal her intense interest in lonely, orphaned women living on the periphery of society. After numerous rejections, she would abandon this subject-matter in favor of less literary, more formulaic stories designed to appeal to a mass audience that in the early 1950s had little taste for female lives of quiet desperation. Yet she thought these rejected stories were “better, less trite, less syrupy” than those she would eventually publish, which she called “the usual ‘Seventeen’ drive!” (*Letters* 164-65). She would return to the image of the disenfranchised woman in both *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel*, in which female characters would deliver scathing critiques of the patriarchal, conformist society that had relegated them to the margins.

Eight of the nineteen stories Plath wrote during high school (1947-50) are about working-class women full of dreams but paralyzed by their meager circumstances. If James Joyce’s *Dubliners* was a literary model, her mother Aurelia, who taught secretarial skills at Boston University, was a personal one. In nearly all of these stories, Plath pits freedom and escape against a small life of drudgery and solitude. Madness and suicide threaten.

In 1948’s “Heat,” Judith Anders trudges home from her boring office job to her boarding house. As she waits for the bus in unbearable heat, a voice inside her head berates her for succumbing to a life of “The same work, day in, day out. . . . Filing letters, pounding typewriters. So dull, so dull.” The voice within exhorts her to “get away” and “Break the pattern”—“Find yourself.” Judith answers back that she likes to draw and write; the voice tells her it’s not too late to pursue a different life. When she reaches the boarding house, she goes to her room and immediately falls asleep. She hears the phone ringing for her, but is too tired to answer. The voice in her mind says the person calling is

about to give her a “chance to open the door” to another life. But Judith keeps sleeping. “There was no escape,” Plath ends.³

Similarly, in “East Wind” (1949), the spinster Miss Minton suddenly realizes, on her way home from her dull job, that she must “escape” from her “monotonous” life. Yet her resolve to escape weakens as she nears her dismal apartment building, and contemplates drowning herself in the nearby river. At the last minute she pulls back and returns to her depressing lodgings, haunted by “thin, lonely weeping” of an orphan child outside. Miss Minton would reappear, in richer form, in Plath’s award-winning short story “Sunday at the Mintons,” which would win First Prize in the 1952 *Mademoiselle* fiction contest.

Like “East Wind,” “Gramercy Park” (1948), “Sarah” (1948), and “The Island” (1949) all feature older women living alone and longing for company. Sarah gave up her chance to marry and have a family in order to help her widowed mother—a choice she lives to regret. In “The Island”—a “radio play” Plath co-wrote with her Crockett classmate Mary Ventura—Helen, a lonely widow grieving her drowned husband, eventually drowns herself in an attempt to reunite with him. Helen’s drowning cry, “I’m sinking down ... down” recalls the last line of Plath’s poem “Lorelei”: “Stone, stone, ferry me down there” (*Collected Poems* 95). In “The Dark River” (1949), a single woman cannot feel love on account of “the mysterious black river” of her childhood; the girl she once was is “doomed forever to wander through the lonely hallways of my mind.” The source of the “black river” is never revealed, but the protagonist’s hints of childhood trauma suggest a dramatic, perhaps paternal, loss.

³ All of Plath’s 1947-50 unpublished stories quoted in this article are listed with their approximate dates of composition and archival locations in the Works Cited.

1948's "The Brink," which was rejected by *Seventeen*, is the psychologically distressing story of a single woman, Janet, who loses her grip on reality while riding a city bus on her way home from a dead-end job. Initially, she gazes down at the "women scurrying from store to store" with their "frenzied, aimless" motions, and feels slightly smug in her own meaningless existence, for they, too, lead "absurd little lives." "She was utterly remote from them ... almost happy that nothing mattered." But her thoughts soon become "odd, detached" as the city bus lurches forward. A "curious feeling" like "tiny bubbles" begins to stir inside her, and soon she is desperate to get off the bus. The following passage looks forward to the sinister train ride in "Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom," where the protagonist also passes through dark tunnels as turning wheels mock:

When had she started her journey? She had been on the bus for ages, but she remembered nothing before that. There had been houses, people, and cars, but no beginning—nothing before her bus ride. Her memories suddenly trailed down into darkness. The motion of the bus was ironic now. The turning wheels mocked her. They gulped up the miles and mocked her for not remembering. Darkness, she recalled. A dark tunnel! That was it! She had come out of a dark tunnel on the bus. Still, there was something, something more.

Janet finally demands to be let off the bus, and emerges into the bright sunlight.

"Unaccountably she felt as if she had escaped something deadly—escaped after a difficult struggle." Feeling "warm relief," she begins to relax—that is, until she looks up

at the departing bus and notices the “pale cadaverous faces of the other passengers staring down at her. Their gaze was remote, —curious, —impersonal.” (Plath would use similar language to describe the mental hospital attendants at the end of *The Bell Jar*.) Plath ends her story here, but implies that Janet will once again be overcome by an existential “horror” she cannot outrun. The story’s title, “The Brink,” suggests she has come close to an unveiling, and looks forward to Plath’s late poem “Edge.” Is Janet mad, or has she simply come out of the “darkness” to finally understand the true, hollow nature of existence? Is it this realization that drives her to “the brink” of insanity? Plath will posit similar questions in *The Bell Jar* regarding Esther Greenwood’s breakdown, which may, she hints, be a “sane” response to the oppressive society in which she lives.

The nameless young woman in 1948’s “The Attic View” suffers a darker fate. While searching for a cheap room in a “shabby section of town,” she is drawn to an attic garret with a view of the sea in a boarding-house near the harbor, and rents it despite its lack of heat and electricity. The view is her only solace in a “routine existence” that spans “tedious months”: “She would leave for work after the early boarding-house breakfast of watery coffee, dry toast and pallid oatmeal, buy her lunch at a cheap, out-of-the-way restaurant, and arrive ‘home’ barely in time for supper.” One day, she hears about a “secretarial night-course for working-girls. This sudden possibility of a future—of advancement—was like a glittering rainbow in her dismal world.” She enrolls in the course, but falls ill after walking home in a blizzard. No one except a fellow boarder, “a shy young artist,” notices she has not appeared for meals. Her absence does not bother the mendacious landlady, who simply grunts that it’s none of her affair.

The young woman spends days in and out of fever, watching the sea, “a disturbed mass of darkness, and the dullness of the melting snow ... against the wet, sooty, twilight streets.” She finally, gratefully, succumbs to death: “She was sliding uncertainly into a flowing black space when there was a sudden blinding flash. Warm light enveloped her and shot glinting arrows about her. Beyond the radiant blaze ... all dissolved into blank nothingness.” The landlady finds her dead, and complains to her cronies “how she had been done out of a month’s rent.” Only the artist cares about the young woman’s death—a significant detail in a story that pits uncaring and “impersonal” humanity against the sensitive individual. The story ends as another young woman moves into the vacated room, similarly seduced by the “romantic vistas of ocean, land and sky from her attic window.”

“The Attic View” is melodramatic, but it contains a pointed, politically subversive message: the heroine, who dares to hope for more, dies when she tries to escape oppression. For the editors of women’s magazines in the late 1940s and early 50s, these stories’ messages were perhaps too close to the kind of leftist ideology that was increasingly linked to communism. Plath sympathized with characters trapped in poverty by economic and social forces beyond their control—perhaps because her own family lived on the edge of financial hardship. By her third year with Crockett, she was writing working-class dramas in the tradition of the Irish socialist playwright Sean O’Casey. Her short, grim 1950 play, “Room in the World” is about a poor tenement family that faces desperate times when the father, Ab, loses his job at a factory. Ab, a domestic tyrant, bullies his children into standing on the street with picket signs demanding his job back. But his older daughter, Frances, is humiliated after a pretty classmate passes her. She

rushes home, sobbing, and locks herself in a bedroom. Ab concedes that he has been too hard on the girl, and decides to change the sign to read, "Ain't there room in the world for us?" Plath was a keen observer of the American political landscape and the double standards that defined her socioeconomic place within it.

Why was Plath compelled, again and again, to write about lonely spinsters on the verge of madness and suicide? Another group of high school stories provides a clue about what would become one of the central concerns of Plath's writing life: power. These stories, written between 1948 and 1950, are all set in a comfortable, suburban middle-class world far from the dark boarding houses of Miss Minton and Judith Anders. Yet they too explore the politics of gender, and circle back to women's powerlessness.

"The Visitor" (1948) weighs the merits of marriage against those of a career. The narrator, Margot, recounts a visit from her mother's old art school friend, Esther Holbrook, who has become a famous fashion designer. Margot's mother, by contrast, married a minister after her college graduation and had four children. The story explores the two women's choices in simplistic terms. Margot thinks, initially, that Esther is the more secure: "Esther would describe an experience in Paris or an amusing incident that occurred in London, always managing to suggest the slight superiority of the career woman over the woman who had forfeited ambition and settled down in marriage." Yet by the story's end, Esther reveals her "envy" of Margot's mother: "I never realized how empty my life has been without a family." As the family says goodbye to the cosmopolitan Esther, they notice "shadows beneath her eyes and a general attitude of weariness." Margot's father turns to her mother after the train departs, and says, with a smile, "It's been pretty hard for her." The married mother would achieve a similar victory

over the “career woman” years later in Plath’s 1960 short story “Day of Success” (published posthumously in 1976), which rewrites the same themes in “The Visitor.”

Plath probably wrote “The Visitor” with an eye toward publication in a conservative women’s magazine like the *Ladies Home Journal*. Her own feelings about a career versus marriage and motherhood were much more complicated. Her mother’s experience as a college instructor, with both its intellectual rewards and familial sacrifices, provided a vivid example of the conflict in her own home. After the war, there was tremendous pressure on women to vacate the workforce for returning soldiers; to remain employed was considered an abdication of feminine duty. Aurelia’s experience assured Plath that it was possible to join a profession and raise a family, yet the stigma of a working mother was very real in midcentury, white, middle-class America. Plath’s constant negotiation between domesticity and a literary career would become one of the central dramas of her life.

Other “suburban” stories from this period are narrated by high school girls, and are based upon events in Plath’s adolescence. They examine “the game” played between girls and boys in sexually charged situations. In “A Day in June,” two girlfriends trick a pair of boys into paying for their canoe during an outing. “Why not prove your power? Why not?” asks the female narrator, who attempts to appear “coquettish.” “It takes a while to persuade the boys that you have no money, but you conceal your wallets in your pockets and play the game.” Later, the girls feel “ashamed,” and eventually repay the boys, who walk away, disgusted. The narrator is overcome by self-hatred: “The afternoon shatters around you into a million glassy fragments. Malicious, dancing slivers of green and blue and yellow light rise and while about you ... suffocating, smothering flakes of

color.” Plath suggests the narrator’s misery is the result of larger societal forces beyond her control. The girls have been taught to “prove” their “power” through passive coquetry, but they sense they have demeaned their self-worth in the process.

“First Date” is an interior monologue in which a teenage girl feels paralyzed as she waits to be picked up by the proverbial “boy in a yellow convertible.” She longs to run from the scene, to tell her date that she is sick, but she knows her mother will not allow this. At the same time, she fears the boy will *not* come. “I think I am going to be sick. This time I really am,” the girl says, gliding demurely down the staircase to her waiting date, who has no idea how much anxiety he has caused. But the reader knows. Plath suggests there is something wrong with a ritual in which a woman waits while a man acts. Her protagonist longs to be subject rather than object. The girl’s repeated claim of sickness becomes a metaphor for all that is wrong between the sexes.

The lonely, single women in Plath’s boarding-house stories are casualties of romantic failure; without a marriage and family, they are doomed to lives of monotony and wage-slavery. They are obvious examples of what happens when women opt out of “the game.” But stories like “A Day in June” and “First Date,” with their portraits of unhappy young women trapped within a game whose rules they have not created, also hint at the roots of female powerlessness. The fate of Plath’s spinsters suggests the high price of not playing.

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Plath's brief but tumultuous relationship with a young man named John Hodges was the basis for the only short story Plath published during high school: "And Summer Will Not Come Again," which she wrote during the late summer of 1949 and which appeared in *Seventeen* in August 1950. The story begins when 16-year-old Celia meets a handsome, athletic older boy named Bruce at the town tennis court. He teaches her how to play, and a romance ensues. But when Bruce starts dating another girl, Celia becomes miserable. One day, he greets her in passing.

She let out a torrent of angry phrases ... mean, cutting things she had stored up inside her. "Why, won't your girl friend play with you any more? ... I should have known gentlemen prefer blondes ..." But her sarcastic voice trailed off breathlessly as she saw Bruce's friendly grin vanish. A strange alien look masked his eyes as he waited for her to finish. Too late she stopped the flood of words, frightened at the silence hanging between them. At last he said quietly, "All right, Celia. I won't bother you any more. I hadn't figured you were like this. My mistake."

He turned and walked away. Celia stood, congealed with horror.

(Plath 1950)

Celia then remembers lines from a Sarah Teasdale poem, "An End": "With my own will I turned the summer from me / And summer will not come again." The narrator likewise suggests that it was Celia's strong expression of "will" that pushed Bruce away. The story ends with Celia's despondent cries; Bruce's desertion is somehow *her* fault for

expressing unfeminine anger. “And Summer Will Not Come Again” shows Plath silencing what Tracy Brain has called her “other” voice—the one that could be sarcastic, angry, bitter, and cruel. It is no accident that her least subversive piece of fiction from this period was her first mass-market publication.

Plath took a dramatically different approach to the end of her relationship with John Hodges, however, in a poem she wrote about him on June 10, 1949, “To Ariadne (Deserted by Theseus).” There, the female speaker lashes out against her lover in fury: “Oh, scream in vain for vengeance now, and beat your hands / In vain against the dull impassive stone.” The elegiac poem, written in careful iambic tetrameter with an *abcb* rhyme scheme, is far superior to “And Summer Will Not Come Again,” which obediently conforms to stifling gender codes of the early 1950s. Indeed, the bold, vengeful poem and the cloyingly formulaic story seem written by two different authors. By harnessing the voice of a Classical heroine, Plath was able to write a more authentic, formally impressive work about male betrayal. After her marriage to Ted Hughes ended, she would again turn to mythic female figures—Lady Lazarus, Lady Godiva, Medea, Electra, Clytemnestra—as she searched for resonant symbols of anger, grief, and rebirth.

As Betty Friedan pointed out in *The Feminine Mystique*—published in Britain just a week after Plath’s death in 1963—women’s magazines of the era preferred conservative moral messages. Plath absorbed this preference as her rejections slips piled up during high school; in the coming years, she would allow herself more freedom to innovate in her poetry than in her short stories. She attempted to break into the women’s magazine fiction market for the rest of her life, but with little sustained success. Even her best-known story, the surrealistic “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams,” was rejected by

Sewanee magazine in 1961. Plath had found her métier, “queer and slangy,” but her story’s subjects—fear, anxiety, depression, mental hospitals—were not decorous (*Journals* 441). The *Sewanee* editor who rejected “Johnny Panic” seemed confused by Plath’s experimental prose. Her narrator, he said, was “too removed” from the “normal world.” The story amounted to “little more than notes,” but could she please tell her husband, Ted Hughes, to send them more poems? (Lytle 1961) The situation had not changed much by 1962, when an editor at the British women’s magazine *My Weekly* rejected two of Plath’s short stories, “Shadow Girl” and “A Winter’s Tale.” Though these stories followed a predictable formula, their slight Plathian “weirdnesses,” as Plath once described her aesthetic predilections, put the editor off (*Journals* 520-21). Knopf would turn down *The Bell Jar* for similar reasons. In her rejection letter, the editor of *My Weekly* told Plath that the magazine wanted stories with “nice, ordinary, recognizable homeliness” (Annan 1962). Though Plath wrote short stories that adhered to such strictures in the early 1960s (notably “Day of Success”), her rejected high school poems and stories suggest how strongly her aesthetic and political sympathies were at odds, right from the start, with this conservative midcentury vision—and how early she adopted the themes and images that would resurface in her best work. The influence of Crockett’s seminar upon Plath’s creative and ideological vision should not be underestimated. When Plath published her first poetry collection, *The Colossus*, in 1960, she sent her mentor an inscribed copy that read, “To Mr. Crockett, in whose classroom and wisdom these poems have root.”

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