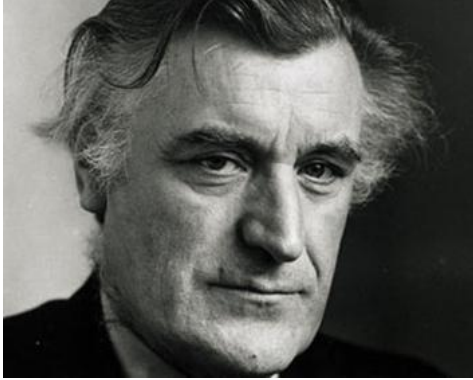


Ted and Sylvia (and ‘Weavy Ass-hole’)

I’ve chosen the month of February to remember the events surrounding Sylvia Plath’s suicide. She ended her life in the early hours of Monday, February 11th 1963. I wasn’t aware of this at the time, being only 13 and attending a school where poetry came very low in the school’s priorities. My housemaster would smile condescendingly and growl amicably, “But poetry’s for *sissies!*”



At some point around the early Eighties, when I was teaching at Shaftesbury High School, I hired a minibus and drove about twelve 5th Form girls to Poole Arts Centre to hear Ted Hughes read some of his poetry. There were about 300 in the hall and he was on a platform, looking grim, grizzled and very much the “poet” star. Of course, I had primed the girls to be prepared to ask some questions, if questions were called for and we had studied quite a few poems in depth.

He delivered his offerings with suitably dramatic éclat, in his gritty, ‘we-take-no-prisoners’, Yorkshire accent. The chairman then indicated he would take questions. One of the girls stood up and politely asked where he had found the inspiration for one of the poems. “WHERE DID I FIND MY INSPIRATION....?” he thundered explosively. “You should know better than to ask a poet where his inspiration comes from! You should NEVER ask a poet a question like that! Sit down!”

There was a horrible silence in the hall, she turned bright red and sat down. To my lasting regret, I didn’t then have the courage (nor, in those days, the instinct) to stand up and tell him where to get off. How DARE he, a supposedly sensitive poet, of all people, have the nerve to speak to my pupil like that?

To this day, that memory rankles and has coloured my view of his achievement as a poet, let alone as a husband, father and general human being. No poem for me says more about him, as a sometimes violent, selfish, amoral *oaf*, than this very revealing poem, “Hawk Roosting”. By then he was married to Sylvia Plath. I find I have to prompt pupils to dig a little deeper as the poem unwinds (it’s in many ways a very good *poem*) – “but birds DON’T actually think like this! Humans do!” And this poet seems to find satisfaction in identifying with what he sees as the bird’s freedom and *entitlement* to be an utter... psychopath: “My manners are tearing off heads...”, “I’m going to keep things like this.”

Hawk Roosting by Ted Hughes (1960)

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
Inaction, no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.
 It took the whole of Creation
 To produce my foot, my each feather:
 Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly -
 I kill where I please because it is all mine.
 There is no sophistry in my body:
 My manners are tearing off heads -

The allotment of death.
 For the one path of my flight is direct
 Through the bones of the living.
 No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.
 Nothing has changed since I began.
 My eye has permitted no change.
 I am going to keep things like this.

It's interesting to compare this with Tennyson's poem below. Both birds are anthropomorphised with "hands" and "feet". Both are predatory killers (though "fall" for the eagle is ambiguous given the negativity attached to the word), both are lords of their territories. But there is considerably more subtlety around Tennyson's kingly eagle. Are the "walls" his prison or his protection? There may be a sense of absolute sovereignty, but nothing like the megalomaniac assertions of the hawk. "There is no sophistry in my body..." is very telling. This killer has not a grain of feeling for his environment; he gets what he wants by brute force, with "No arguments" asserting his right.

We also notice in the construction of each poem, how the Tennyson verse is rather formally rhymed and end-stopped (each line concludes with punctuation and a pause for effect). Is "lonely" positive or negative? Again, the effect is ambiguous; he might want company. By contrast, Hughes' hawk doesn't rhyme and the lines run on 'carelessly' – this animal is a rule breaker and there is little to suggest why the verse is even divided into stanzas at all.

The poem is powerful, for all that, however. I'm not suggesting it's necessarily a bad poem, merely that it gives us a very interesting insight into the mind of the writer, who is so taken with what he imagines to be the defining characteristics of his subject. That hawks may care for their young or be loyal to their mates, does not quite enter into the equation here!

THE EAGLE by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

FRAGMENT

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
 Close to the sun in lonely lands,
 Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
 He watches from his mountain walls,
 And like a thunderbolt he falls. 1851

Even in an early, clever and relatively innocent poem, the much anthologised “The Thought-Fox”, we see Hughes using poetry to “trap” a beautiful, but also a feral animal, the fox. The feral hunter hunted by another feral “hunter”!

It’s all about power and possession for Hughes.

The Thought-Fox

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:
 Something else is alive
 Besides the clock's loneliness
 And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:
 Something more near
 Though deeper within darkness
 Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
 A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;
 Two eyes serve a movement, that now
 And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow
 Between trees, and warily a lame
 Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
 Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,
 A widening deepening greenness,
 Brilliantly, concentratedly,
 Coming about its own business

Till, with sudden sharp hot stink of fox
 It enters the dark hole of the head.
 The window is starless still; the clock ticks,
 The page is printed.



A brilliant English student, who at Smith College in the States had edited the college literary magazine, Sylvia Plath was beautiful, precocious, eager for love, for literary success and for living life to the full. She had had several relationships with boyfriends and was bubbling with vitality and creativity. In this photo taken in 1953 (in her “platinum summer”) on a beach by her then boyfriend, Gordon Lameyer, we see her in Marilyn-mode right down to the bleached hair! But the happiness was brittle and skin-

deep; there was an enduring vulnerability that can be partly traced back to the death of her father from complications arising from an amputated leg, when she was only eight years old. In December 1953, she tried to kill herself with sleeping pills following a mental breakdown. She had been unsuccessful in being accepted for Frank O’Connor’s writing seminar at Harvard and had had electrotherapy, which hadn’t worked well. She wrote,

“You saw visions of yourself in a straitjacket, and a drain on the family, murdering your mother in actuality, killing the edifice of love and respect – built up over the years in the hearts of other people... Fear, big & ugly and snivelling. Fear of not succeeding intellectually and academically: the worst blow to security. Fear of failing to live up to the fast & furious prize-winning pace of these last years.”

It was only after receiving a Fulbright scholarship in 1955 and moving to Newnham College, Cambridge, that she felt she had found someone who matched her passion and lust for living. Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath first met in 1956; there was instant attraction and they married that summer. In ‘Pursuit’, an early poem about him, she wrote ominously,

“There is a panther stalks me down:
One day I’ll have my death of him;
His greed has set the woods aflame,
He prowls more lordly than the sun.”

It seemed, on the surface however, a dream marriage; both were attractive, young, passionate about each other and about their poetry. Yet Hughes could be very dominating, violent, abrupt and unfeeling: not ideal for someone prone to clinical depression and inwardly fragile.

In 1958, Plath had poems accepted by *The New Yorker* and in 1961 she had *The Colossus*, her first poetry collection (the only one published in her lifetime) accepted for publication. Her poems are marked by the precision of her words and images but very often, at their heart, there is an awareness of pain existing alongside happiness. In “Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows”, for example, a poem set in Cambridge where she and Hughes first



met, the ‘painting’ seems full of pleasant images of students punting on the Granta amongst sheep and water-rats in a scene of:

“Hedging meadows of benign
Arcadian green”

“Arcadian” is a little ambiguous already with shades of ‘Et In Arcadia Ego’ – the classical awareness of death in the midst of a pastoral paradise. The poem ends with just such a reflection.

Droll vegetarian, the water rat
Saws down a reed and swims from his limber grove,
While the students stroll or sit,
Hands laced, in a moony indolence of love —
Black-gowned, but unaware
How in such mild air
The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out.

The couple moved to Devon in 1961, to save money, be closer to nature and for Ted to escape the fame of London, though by now Plath was establishing herself as a writer. They sub-let their London flat to a couple they both liked, David and Assia Wevill.



Life in the country, however, was harsh, with a very cold winter, two small children, lots of washing to do (for Plath rather than Hughes!) and no carpets for months. Plath’s mother sent over an American washing machine and vitamins!

Sylvia, however, was receiving prizes for her novel “The Bell Jar” and for poems and was reviewing for the *New Statesman*.

It was in early July of 1962 when the bombshell burst and she heard Assia’s voice at the end of the phone pretending to be a man asking for Ted Hughes and saying, “Can I see you?” This was after Sylvia had caught them once kissing when the couple visited them for a weekend in Devon.

Assia’s family had come to Britain to escape Hitler’s Germany. She was very attractive (William Trevor, who worked in the same office, where Assia worked as a copywriter, thought she looked somewhat like Sophia Loren) and very much a go-getter, already on her *third* marriage and an aspiring poet herself. Assia was determined to seduce Hughes and, strangely, she never seems to have felt, afterwards, any guilt whatsoever for Plath’s suicide. Indeed, she was



fascinated to move into Court Green, Devon, soon after the break-up, and sleep in the same bed where Plath had slept with Hughes.

Ted Hughes' response to being found out, initially, was to leave Sylvia at home in Devon and take a "holiday" in London to get away from the storm of questions. She was shattered.

"I am simply not cool & sophisticated. My marriage is the centre of my being, I have given everything without reserve.... I write not in compensation, out of sorrow, but from an overflow, a surplus of joy... I feel ugly and a fool, when I have so felt beautiful & capable of being a wonderful happy mother and wife and writing novels for fun & money. I am just sick. What can I do?"

Nine days later, she wrote in a slightly different vein to her American analyst, Dr Ruth Beuscher.

"What has this Weavy Ass-hole... got that I haven't... I mean I was not schooled with love for two years by my French lover for nothing.... I'm damned if I am going to be a wife-mother every minute of the day."

With the shock came a certain elation. Her life *had* been stagnating, she concluded.



"It is not very much consolation to me that Ted really deeply & faithfully loves me, while he follows any woman with bright hair, or an essay on Shakespeare, or an ability for flamenco dancing... I feel if he really loved me he would see how this hurt damages my whole being, makes it barren, & deprives me of my joy in lovemaking with him."

Plath considered an open marriage but felt she couldn't stand it. "What I don't want to be," she wrote, "is an un-fucked wife."

Ted's unfeeling reaction to Plath's despair, when he later returned to Devon and the inevitable emotional turmoil, was to tell her, "this is a prison, I am an institution, the children should never have been born." Her lowest point must have come with the discovery of poems about his and Assia's love-making, "describing their orgasms, her ivory body, her smell, her beauty, saying in a world of beauty he married a hag..." as Sylvia baldly noted.

They couldn't go on living together and Hughes left for London again (and Assia). The day after Ted Hughes left her, Plath wrote "Daddy", one of her most famous and most shocking poems, in which so much of her pain and fury is dramatically evident.

Daddy

You do not do, you do not do
 Any more, black shoe
 In which I have lived like a foot
 For thirty years, poor and white,
 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
 You died before I had time——
 Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
 Ghastly statue with one gray toe
 Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
 Where it pours bean green over blue
 In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
 I used to pray to recover you.
 Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
 Scraped flat by the roller
 Of wars, wars, wars.
 But the name of the town is common.
 My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
 So I never could tell where you
 Put your foot, your root,
 I never could talk to you.
 The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
 Ich, ich, ich, ich,
 I could hardly speak.
 I thought every German was you.
 And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
 Chuffing me off like a Jew.
 A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz,
 Belsen.
 I began to talk like a Jew.
 I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer
 of Vienna
 Are not very pure or true.
 With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
 And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
 I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of *you*,
 With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
 And your neat mustache
 And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
 Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You——



At an interview in 1961

Not God but a swastika
 So black no sky could squeak through.
 Every woman adores a Fascist,
 The boot in the face, the brute
 Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
 In the picture I have of you,
 A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
 But no less a devil for that, no not
 Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
 I was ten when they buried you.
 At twenty I tried to die
 And get back, back, back to you.
 I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
 And they stuck me together with glue.
 And then I knew what to do.
 I made a model of you,
 A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
 And I said I do, I do.
 So daddy, I'm finally through.
 The black telephone's off at the root,
 The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two——
 The vampire who said he was you
 And drank my blood for a year,
 Seven years, if you want to know.
 Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
 And the villagers never liked you.
 They are dancing and stamping on you.
 They always *knew* it was you.
 Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.



Sylvia with her mother
 and the two children

The pain and shock of Ted Hughes' desertion seems to have triggered even deeper feelings of abandonment, caused by her father's death when she was so young. The extraordinary use of Holocaust imagery and Nazi violence shocks by its extreme nature. The rhymes of "- oo" sounds reverberate like a hellish drumbeat.

On her own in Devon, Plath wrote and looked after the children. Nick, the second, had been born that January. At the end of October 1962, Plath found a flat in Fitzroy Street in

Primrose Hill, where WB Yeats had once lived. It was at this time that she was writing “Lady Lazarus”, one of her most powerful poems, again, as in “Daddy”, using allusions and images of the Holocaust and the Nazi era to represent her tortured, agonised feelings – and also to set down in black and white more ideas of suicide. She had already attempted suicide at least once before and her poetry alone gave stark warnings of what might happen.

Lady Lazarus

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it——

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?——

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot——
The big striptease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
 My knees.
 I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
 The first time it happened I was ten.
 It was an accident.

The second time I meant
 To last it out and not come back at all.
 I rocked shut

As a seashell.
 They had to call and call
 And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying
 Is an art, like everything else.
 I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
 I do it so it feels real.
 I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
 It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
 It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
 To the same place, the same face, the same brute
 Amused shout:

'A miracle!'
 That knocks me out.
 There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
 For the hearing of my heart——
 It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
 For a word or a touch
 Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
 So, so, Herr Doktor.
 So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there——

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

There were (bipolar) highs and lows. “Now I am out of Ted’s shadow everybody tells me their life story & warms up to me and the babies right away Life is such fun.” Frieda, her little daughter was coming out of the “awful regression she went into after Ted’s desertion”.

She filed for divorce (a measly £1,000 a year), Ted saw the children every Thursday and she was now writing new poems in a huge burst of creativity, “...in the still, blue, almost eternal hour before cockcrow, before the baby’s cry, before the glassy music of the milkman”. *The Bell Jar*, her novel, came out (under a pseudonym) to critical acclaim.

But that winter, in January and February 1963, the snow came in huge quantities and it was bitterly cold. I remember that winter particularly well, as everybody was snowed in for days. There was no school and I remember long treks with friends to find good sledging up on the hills. There were no cars moving anywhere up in North Wales.

Hughes had visited the children on Thursday 7th February as usual. There had been talk of a reconciliation, but Plath was not sure. That weekend, he admitted that he had left his own flat to spend the weekend with yet another girlfriend, Susan Alliston, yet another poet. They spent the night in a friend’s flat in Rugby Street, where Hughes and Plath had first made love and had also spent their wedding night. If Plath had wanted or tried to contact him, she couldn’t have, as she had no idea that he was elsewhere.

Plath was on medication from Dr Horder, and early on Monday 11th of February 1963, she very carefully left breakfast out for her two children, sealing their bedroom door so they should not be gassed, and then she opened the gas taps on the oven at around 4.30 am and put her head inside.

The question still remains: why did she leave a note on the children’s pushchair downstairs saying, “Call Dr Horder” with his phone number? Was she expecting to be found? A nurse was due to call that morning and apparently Plath had asked the downstairs’ neighbour, Mr Williams, for some stamps, a few hours before, also checking at what time he

was going to leave the house. In theory, she might have expected Mr Williams to have seen the note left on the pushchair downstairs. Dr Horder, on the other hand, who had been very worried about her and was visiting her nearly daily and trying to get her admitted to hospital, believes that her death was deliberate but due to her illness. The latest theory suggests that she had been trying to contact a new man she was interested in, but he had turned her down. There is no evidence that that actually happened, however.

“Edge” is Plath’s last poem, written and dated six days before her death.

Edge

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

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

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare

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

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag.

Clearly, this is all about death and suicide, though the reference to the children is puzzling given that Plath cared very much about her children. There is a terrible sense of no going back in the poem: a calm acceptance of the inevitability of everything. There seems no rancour, no explanation or analysis – “She is used to this sort of thing...”.



Here is Ted Hughes later with Assia and their daughter Shura, conceived during their affair, while Plath was alive. Faced with Hughes' serial infidelities, Assia later committed suicide in a state of depression very similar to Plath's own. Unlike Plath's children, however, the child, Shura, was killed beside her mother. All such terrible and unnecessary deaths! The poison spread wide and Nicholas, Plath's son, took his life in 2009, overcome similarly by depression.

Where does this all leave us?

My heart goes out to Sylvia Plath. Clinical depression is a terrible thing and medication and treatment then was primitive. For her, this was a terrible sentence that she had been fighting against all her life. For him it must have been difficult to live with, certainly, but I cannot read Hughes' poetry without seeing and feeling a raw, brutish selfishness that seems to lie at the heart of his being. Both poets, Plath and Hughes, were "visceral", in the sense that their poetry comes from, and wrenches, the gut – there are no holds barred for either. The problem, however, is that Hughes was more of the predator, the male, the macho "Panther", and Plath (and Assia also et alia) was more the female, the hunted, the possessed, feeling that her own situation was also shared by most women. She wrote a poem I like called "Mushrooms", which imagines these feminine, stealthy, unobtrusive plants, gradually gathering force, instinctively and naturally. Quite a feminist poem in its way.

History, on the whole, has not been sympathetic towards Ted Hughes. His final attempt to counter the vitriol of many of his critics was the publication of *Birthday Letters*, just before he died in 1998. This is a series of moving poems, at the end of his life, reflecting on their love and marriage and Plath's death. They were written slowly and secretly over twenty-five years. They are terrible regrets and re-visitations, which, nevertheless, cut no ice with the furiously pro-Plath/anti-Hughes crowd.

Was she so prone to depression and so dangerously bi-polar that she would have committed suicide whatever the circumstances of her life? Or was she driven over the "edge" by the cruel and selfish infidelities of her husband. Was it the uncommonly cold winter that had isolated her further? The story has always had many questions left unanswered, but on the whole, the main details had seemed fairly straightforward and generally agreed upon.

Then, fairly recently, in 2010, there was the surprise of a "last letter"!

Surfacing after Hughes' death in 1998 came the draft of a 'poem' discovered by Melvyn Bragg and Carol Hughes, Ted's widow - found amongst his papers. It was published in 2010 and is an extraordinary document – evidently unfinished, part poem, part memoir, part recognition of guilt (at last) and part exculpation. What do we make of it? That it was never published indicates how private it was felt to be. Incomplete? Inaccurate? A response to those who had always felt he was unfeeling and drove her to her death? See what you make of it.

LAST LETTER

What happened that night? Your final night.
 Double, treble exposure
 Over everything. Late afternoon, Friday,
 My last sight of you alive.
 Burning your letter to me, in the ashtray,
 With that strange smile. Had I bungled your plan?
 Had it surprised me sooner than you purposed?
 Had I rushed it back to you too promptly?
 One hour later—you would have been gone
 Where I could not have traced you.
 I would have turned from your locked red door
 That nobody would open
 Still holding your letter,
 A thunderbolt that could not earth itself.
 That would have been electric shock treatment
 For me.
 Repeated over and over, all weekend,
 As often as I read it, or thought of it.
 That would have remade my brains, and my life.
 The treatment that you planned needed some time.
 I cannot imagine
 How I would have got through that weekend.
 I cannot imagine. Had you plotted it all?

Your note reached me too soon—that same day,
 Friday afternoon, posted in the morning.
 The prevalent devils expedited it.
 That was one more straw of ill-luck
 Drawn against you by the Post-Office
 And added to your load. I moved fast,
 Through the snow-blue, February, London twilight.
 Wept with relief when you opened the door.
 A huddle of riddles in solution. Precocious tears
 That failed to interpret to me, failed to divulge
 Their real import. But what did you say
 Over the smoking shards of that letter
 So carefully annihilated, so calmly,
 That let me release you, and leave you
 To blow its ashes off your plan—off the ashtray
 Against which you would lean for me to read
 The Doctor's phone-number.
 My escape
 Had become such a hunted thing
 Sleepless, hopeless, all its dreams exhausted,
 Only wanting to be recaptured, only
 Wanting to drop, out of its vacuum.

Two days of dangling nothing. Two days gratis.
 Two days in no calendar, but stolen
 From no world,
 Beyond actuality, feeling, or name.

My love-life grabbed it. My numbed love-life
 With its two mad needles,
 Embroidering their rose, piercing and tugging
 At their tapestry, their bloody tattoo
 Somewhere behind my navel,
 Treading that morass of emblazon,
 Two mad needles, criss-crossing their stitches,
 Selecting among my nerves
 For their colours, refashioning me
 Inside my own skin, each refashioning the other
 With their self-caricatures,
 Their obsessed in and out. Two women
 Each with her needle.

That night
 My Dellarobia Susan. I moved
 With the circumspection
 Of a flame in a fuse. My whole fury
 Was an abandoned effort to blow up
 The old globe where shadows bent over
 My telltale track of ashes. I raced
 From and from, face backwards, a film reversed,
 Towards what? We went to Rugby Street
 Where you and I began.
 Why did we go there? Of all places
 Why did we go there? Perversity
 In the artistry of our fate
 Adjusted its refinements for you, for me
 And for Susan. Solitaire
 Played by the Minotaur of that maze
 Even included Helen, in the ground-floor flat.
 You had noted her—a girl for a story.
 You never met her. Few ever met her,
 Except across the ears and raving mask
 Of her Alsatian. You had not even glimpsed her.
 You had only recoiled
 When her demented animal crashed its weight
 Against her door, as we slipped through the hallway;
 And heard it choking on infinite German hatred.

That Sunday night she eased her door open
 Its few permitted inches.
 Susan greeted the black eyes, the unhappy
 Overweight, lovely face, that peeped out
 Across the little chain. The door closed.

We heard her consoling her jailor
 Inside her cell, its kennel, where, days later,
 She gassed her ferocious kupo, and herself.

Susan and I spent that night
 In our wedding bed. I had not seen it
 Since we lay there on our wedding day.
 I did not take her back to my own bed.
 It had occurred to me, your weekend over,
 You might appear—a surprise visitation.
 Did you appear, to tap at my dark window?
 So I stayed with Susan, hiding from you,
 In our own wedding bed—the same from which
 Within three years she would be taken to die
 In that same hospital where, within twelve hours,
 I would find you dead.
 Monday morning
 I drove her to work, in the City,
 Then parked my van North of Euston Road
 And returned to where my telephone waited.

What happened that night, inside your hours,
 Is as unknown as if it never happened.
 What accumulation of your whole life,
 Like effort unconscious, like birth
 Pushing through the membrane of each slow second
 Into the next, happened
 Only as if it could not happen,
 As if it was not happening. How often
 Did the phone ring there in my empty room,
 You hearing the ring in your receiver—
 At both ends the fading memory
 Of a telephone ringing, in a brain
 As if already dead. I count
 How often you walked to the phone-booth
 At the bottom of St George's terrace.
 You are there whenever I look, just turning
 Out of Fitzroy Road, crossing over
 Between the heaped up banks of dirty sugar.
 In your long black coat,
 With your plait coiled up at the back of your hair
 You walk unable to move, or wake, and are
 Already nobody walking
 Walking by the railings under Primrose Hill
 Towards the phone booth that can never be reached.
 Before midnight. After midnight. Again.
 Again. Again. And, near dawn, again.

At what position of the hands on my watch-face
 Did your last attempt,

Already deeply past
 My being able to hear it, shake the pillow
 Of that empty bed? A last time
 Lightly touch at my books, and my papers?
 By the time I got there my phone was asleep.
 The pillow innocent. My room slept,
 Already filled with the snowlit morning light.
 I lit my fire. I had got out my papers.
 And I had started to write when the telephone
 Jerked awake, in a jabbering alarm,
 Remembering everything. It recovered in my hand.
 Then a voice like a selected weapon
 Or a measured injection,
 Coolly delivered its four words
 Deep into my ear: 'Your wife is dead.'

There are many details in this that nobody knew or expected. If it is all true, it throws new light on the events of that weekend. The ironies *are* dreadful and seemingly fated to be.

And yet.

A lot of this sounds somewhat exculpatory and quite self-centred. Is it wish-fulfilment? Did it all *really* take place like this? We have no real way of knowing whether it is true or not. Hughes, here, seems to state that Plath wrote him a suicide note on the Friday morning and that it arrived *too early*, on the Friday evening (posted on Friday morning) and that when he hurried round with it, panic-stricken, she burnt it in front of him with a “strange smile” on her face, as if reassuring him that there was no need for alarm.

And yet, he confesses quite freely that he took Susan Alliston, another of his infidelities, not to his own flat but back to the flat in Rugby Street where he and Plath had slept when they got married. They would not be interrupted there. How concerned was he really about Plath’s state of mind?

“It had occurred to me, your weekend over,
 You might appear—a surprise visitation.”

What this meant, of course, was that Plath could not phone him – he obviously did not want her to intrude on him. Instead, he agonises over the fantasy – for he had no way of knowing if she DID try to contact him – of her desperately trying to reach him by phone and failing. I’m sorry, but this strikes me as an attempt to show concern that wasn’t really there at the time. It calls into question, even, his assertion that he had received this supposed suicide letter to him prematurely (in the old days it WAS possible to receive a letter in the afternoon that had been posted in the morning).

Assuming this is not just a desperately sad and distorted fantasy, it nevertheless gives us Ted Hughes trying to net our sympathies. More of this is about him rather than her. He may well have been desperately sorry and deeply troubled, but he still crafts his “letter and it is, even in its erratic and jagged formulation a composed utterance. I find it suspect, since he wants our pity to be turned towards *him*, going about his normal life, returning to his flat, unaware of her death until being made so brutally aware over the phone.

I don’t wish to be unfair here; the events for all concerned, were horrific and tragic - this is an agonised piece of writing. But, in a way it exonerates him somewhat. He did his best. He hurried round. Plath released him with her “strange smile”. It was cruel luck for *her*

that *he* had chosen to spend the weekend in bed with his lover in a place where, deliberately, he could not be interrupted!

Hmmm!

Here, by way of a postscript are some of Plath's drawings. They were exhibited in 2011. I hadn't known that she sketched and they are really interesting. Hughes, according to Frieda, his daughter, said that they were a source of calming concentration for Sylvia. They show a clarity and attention to detail that one finds in the poems also. They are similarly "cool", in the sense that there is a sort of dispassionate, almost forensic investigation of the subject under inspection. They share that quality in the poems – a sort of stepping back to calmly inspect and analyse, even in the most agonising circumstances.

In the States



In Paris



Ted Hughes around the time of their marriage



My apologies for such a long posting, particularly if you already know most of this, but Hughes and Plath have both been working around in my bloodstream for some years. (I have since been studying Boswell's early writings and how he suffered from clinical depression in much the same way. He's interesting, because with Boswell, you get the full account - he wrote compulsively!) Plath's story is a compelling one and the two protagonists are very photogenic, as well as poetically gifted and intense. It somehow unfolds like a Greek tragedy, with the same pitiless and seemingly inexorable fatefulness. Yet, at the same time, it is in part a tale of selfishness, thoughtlessness, anger and impatience, as well as yet another instance of the destructive power of depression, that surfaces so often in history and that seems always so implacable. David Foster Wallace, Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Edward Thomas, Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Boswell... one could rapidly make a long list.

Did Ted Hughes' *behaviour* push Sylvia Plath into suicide or was the germ always there, as her writing seems to show quite clearly. In the end, Hughes is not really Plath's wild "panther" so much as the caged "jaguar" of another poem of his, which I like as a poem. Here, Hughes identifies with the jaguar in the zoo – like himself, a "visionary", imprisoned by society (and in Hughes' case imprisoned by domesticity, home, children etc.). Both refuse the passivity of their environment and both refuse to accept or acknowledge their confinement. Both are on show before a public they ignore or scorn (even high school teenagers!) and both dream of "wildernesses of freedom" where they can behave with the instinctive, animal impulses they claim as their entitlement. Not even the "bars" of the verses can restrain Hughes. The stanzas all "run on" with deliberate enjambments - with one notable exception, where the poem switches direction. The poem is good, but who would really live with such an animal?

The Jaguar

The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun.
 The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut
 Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut.
 Fatigued with indolence, tiger and lion

Lie still as the sun. The boa-constrictor's coil
Is a fossil. Cage after cage seems empty, or
Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw.
It might be painted on a nursery wall.

But who runs like the rest past these arrives
At a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized,
As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged
Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes

On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom—
The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,
By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear—
He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him

More than to the visionary his cell:
His stride is wildernesses of freedom:
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.
Over the cage floor the horizons come.