

Biography of Sylvia Plath

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Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on October 27, 1932, the first child of Otto Emil Plath (1885–1940) and Aurelia Schober Plath (1906–94). Their immediate family would be small, the only other addition being a son, Warren Joseph Plath, who was born on April 27, 1935. The family lived on the first floor of a two-story house at 24 Prince Street in the Boston neighborhood of Jamaica Plain. The Plaths moved in 1936 to the peninsula of Winthrop.

The new residence was at 92 Johnson Avenue. The back of the house looked out over a part of Winthrop Bay to Boston Harbor, Boston Airport (now Logan), and the city of Boston. Aurelia Plath's parents, Frank Schober (1880–1965) and Aurelia Greenwood Schober (1887–1956), lived a few miles away at 892 Shirley Street in the neighborhood of Point Shirley. This house backed onto Yirrell Beach and the Atlantic Ocean. With Winthrop being a peninsula, any direction one goes in town leads eventually to water, and this actuality had a profound impact on the childhood of Sylvia Plath.

Sylvia Plath's father, Otto, was a German instructor and biology professor at Boston University. He emigrated from Grabow, Germany, in 1900. Her mother, Aurelia, was raised in Winthrop and attended Boston University, where as a student she met her future husband. In order to marry, however, Otto Plath needed a divorce, having married and quickly become estranged from his first wife.

Education was important to the Plaths. Learning English quickly upon arrival in the country, Otto Plath was an industrious student, attending Northwestern University, the University of Washington, and Harvard University. He also soon affiliated himself with Columbia University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of California at Berkeley. In 1922, Otto Plath began working for Boston University, dedicating himself to his teaching and writing. These efforts culminated in 1934—the year

his daughter turned two—when Macmillan published his monograph *Bumblebees and Their Ways*.

Aurelia Schober Plath, too, was an avid reader, pupil, and eventual teacher. Her college thesis, “The Paracelsus of History and Literature” (1930), is not for the weary. Aurelia Plath’s thesis explored Paracelsus’s “presence in literary works such as Goethe’s *Faust*, Robert Browning’s ‘Paracelsus’ and E. G. Kolbenheyer’s historical novel *Paracelsus*” (Christodoulides 247). Thus it is clear to see that both Sylvia and Warren Plath were blessed from the beginning with the impetus to excel in educational pursuits.

Sylvia Plath’s formative years in Winthrop (1936–42) provided her with nearly all the material and inspiration her imagination would need to develop into one of the twentieth century’s most gifted writers. In addition to fairies and other magical creatures, Plath’s earliest poems and stories make use of the real landscape—the sea, sand, rocks, and marine life—at her doorstep. Nurtured by her parents’ deep respect for written expression, the young Plath, to whom her parents read nursery rhymes and stories, quickly learned that it was possible to create worlds with words herself. Near the end of her life, Plath wrote in “Landscape of a Childhood”¹ with fondness of her childhood spent by the ocean: “My childhood landscape was not land but the end of the land—the cold, salt, running hills of the Atlantic. I sometimes think my vision of the sea is the clearest thing I own” (“Ocean 1212-W” 123).

However, that seaside childhood and the clarity of memory with which it endowed her ended prematurely. In the summer of 1940, Otto Plath stubbed his toe, which rapidly became gangrenous. Complications from his unidentified diabetes warranted the amputation of his left leg just above his knee on October 12, 1940. He died of an embolism in his lung on November 5, 1940, just nine days after his daughter’s eighth birthday. Otto Plath’s health had been steadily declining for a number of years due in part to a self-misdiagnosis of lung cancer; the disease of diabetes mellitus from which he actually suffered went untreated.

Within two years, Aurelia Plath and her parents moved into a modest-sized house at 26 Elmwood Road in Wellesley. The peninsula of Winthrop, which on clear days provided Plath with sweeping views of the ocean and harbor islands, was replaced by the stultifying network of suburban canopied trees. This move had a profound impact on Plath's imagination. If the vision of Plath's early childhood by her seaside was, for her, "the clearest thing I own," the move inland felt like exile. She concludes her late prose piece "Ocean 1212-W" by saying that her childhood memories "sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle—beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete" (130). While she lamented the move and missed the ocean, Wellesley provided the Plaths with a superior quality of living and a better school system. It was a move up.

Plath, now ten years old, entered school at the Marshall Perrin Elementary School, repeating the fifth grade. In Winthrop, she had showed such proficiency that she began her schooling early, and holding her back now put her into classes with children her own age. Plath showed academic promise and motivation, completing forty book reports in one school year. In terms of social and extracurricular activities, Plath took piano lessons and joined the Girl Scouts. Plath's love of reading and learning spilled into her imagination and fueled a desire to create both poems and paintings.

For much of Plath's writing life, form and appearance dominated the process of creating poetry. By the mid-1940s, Plath prepared her best and favorite poems in book format: neatly printing them in composition notebooks and illustrating her poems with scenes as varied as the topics. Adorning her poem "Snow" from 1940 are evergreens and a house with snowflakes falling around it and smoke wafting from the chimney. Plath decorated a 1943 poem called "Marcia and Sylvia" with two girls as close confidants, one whispering something into the other's ear. In 1945, Plath's "King of the Ice" had another winter scene. From the perspective of the watcher on the banks of a frozen pond, Plath's hockey player skates, stick high, puck on the move. A mountain is in the background, and wind visibly pushing clouds.

From an early age, Sylvia Plath took poetry—creating it and reading it—seriously. As an enthusiastic reader, she copied her favorite poems and verses in notebooks, making her own youthful anthologies.² Plath routinely received acknowledgement, certificates, and awards for the quality of her written and oral work, her creativity, and her helpfulness in classroom discussions.

Contrary to her attraction to poetry, Plath's reading in the mid-1940s was also heavy in the genre of prose. The authors she gravitated toward included Richard Halliburton (*The Glorious Adventure*, *Richard Halliburton's Complete Book of Marvels*, *The Flying Carpet*, and *Seven League Boots*); Adèle de Leeuw (*Linda Marsh*, *Gay Design*, *Career for Jennifer*, *A Place for Herself*, and *Island Adventure: A Novel for Girls*); and Caroline Dale Snedeker (*The Perilous Seat*, *Theras and His Town*, *Downright Dency*, *The Forgotten Daughter*, and *Unchartered Ways*), to name but a few. She also read Homer, Margaret Mitchell, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, and Jules Verne.³ Just as Plath devoured the writings of others, she dreamed others would one day devour her own writing, saying as much in an August 30, 1951, journal entry: "It is sad to be able only to mouth other poets. I want someone to mouth me" (*Journals* 92).

Plath spent weeks away from home during the summers from 1943 to 1949, regularly writing home to her family. These letters are a rich source of information about her daily activities and food consumption, giving insight into adolescent competitiveness and sometimes including her original poetry and drawings. Plath's aptitude for both writing and art was recognized and nurtured by her peers. While at Camp Helen Storrow in 1946, Plath actively contributed poems and other content to the camp's newspaper. The poems Plath wrote at this time include "Mornings of Mist" and "The Lake." In "The Lake," the body of water is personified with all the visible and hidden characteristics of a creature and has undertones of her later mature poetry, including "Mirror" (1961) and "Child" (1963).

During her first summer at the Vineyard Sailing Camp in 1947, Plath, at fourteen years old, was five-foot-eight and weighed less than 120 pounds. In her first letter home, Plath asked her mother to save all the letters so that she could write about them in her diary after the camp concluded.

This activity of writing letters—as well as a journal—became a habit Plath maintained throughout her life. Often the two represent different sides or perspectives of an event. A letter might be descriptive and thus presented or colored in ways that show the more positive side of the story. While her journal might touch on the same incident, the style of writing fluctuates between a critical introspection and a creative prose. Basically, Plath was practicing her art—even from this early age.

In her teens, Plath submitted her poems to her school newspapers, her camp newspapers, and national publications. In August 1941, her first poem, a four-line meditation on what she hears on the summer nights, appeared in the *Boston Herald*. The following year, on August 2, 1942, a drawing of hers, “Funny Face,” was published in the same newspaper. By 1945, she was publishing her poetry and prose in the *Phillipian*, her school newspaper at the Alice L. Phillips Junior High. When she entered high school at the Gamaliel Bradford Senior High School in September 1947, she continued to see her work appear in print in the *Bradford*. For her senior year of high school (1949–50), Plath was elected coeditor of the publication.

The summer before her senior year, Plath went to a Unitarian conference on Star Island, in the Isles of Shoals off the coast of Maine and New Hampshire. For Plath, then a girl of sixteen, the retreat and the summer were more about boys and dating than religious intentions. She kept a record of her dating this summer, a list that reaches to twenty-one names. She classified these dates as either a memorable event or a memorable boy. Only one of the dates, John Hall, was both. Plath reached beyond her Wellesley environs for these dates, going to Cape Cod and other Massachusetts towns for their varied attractions. At this time, too, her diary graduates from being the musings of a girl to the

thoughts of a young woman. In November 13, 1949, two-and-a-half weeks after she turned seventeen, Plath rededicated herself to the practice of journal writing after lapses in chronicling the events of her life. She had become more philosophical during the summer, recognizing both that she was a composite of her life's experiences and that there was always room in which one can grow and begin to know oneself. Plath wrote:

As of today I have decided to keep a diary again—just a place where I can write my thoughts and opinions when I have a moment. Somehow I have to keep and hold the rapture of being seventeen . . . In reflecting back upon these last sixteen years I can see tragedies and happiness . . . I still do not know myself. Perhaps I never will. But I feel free—unbound by responsibility. (*Letters Home* 39–40)

The journal entry came just after her first publication in *Seventeen* magazine. Plath had been submitting poems and stories to the teen periodical for years and been met with nothing but rejections. The first publication was in the “When I’m a Parent” article of the November 1949 issue and is an unattributed quote in answer to the question:

Sooner or later, every teen-ager says fervently: “When I’m a parent, I’ll do thus and so.” If your mother or father show particular understanding, you make a mental note that you’ll treat your children as intelligently . . . So we asked a number of you what your do’s and don’ts are . . . Here are the most illuminating and provocative. You said, “When I’m a parent . . .” (77)

Plath’s response was “I will not pry, but I will never go to the opposite extreme and be indifferent to my child’s experiences outside the home” (77).⁴

At the close of both her sophomore and junior years at the Gamaliel Bradford Senior High School, Plath published an artwork titled “View of Commencement” in the local Wellesley newspaper, the *Townsmen*.

The June 1948 piece shows nine cap-and-gowned students in a procession leading to a pillared doorway. Plath's figures walk toward the doorway and, once through it, are shown to be plummeting into a dark unknown. The June 1949 "View" is far more detailed, including a couple dancing, a choir, sports imagery, the high school's exterior, a piano, and painter's pallet, with a female figure at the end looking at a building with the word "College" set above a doorway (*Townsmen* 4–5).

During her senior year of high school, Plath maintained her academic excellence and, as a result of years of accomplishment, was accepted by Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, for the class of 1954. As a senior, she published the article "High School Highlights" in the *Townsmen* and an article cowritten with her classmate Perry Norton entitled "Youth's Plea for World Peace" in the national *Christian Science Monitor*, in addition to contributing five poems ("Question," "White Phlox," "Complaint," "Family Reunion," and "The Farewell") to the *Bradford*. Between high school graduation and college matriculation, Plath's poem "Bitter Strawberries" appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor*.

Plath possessed a thick skin for dealing with rejections and perseverance to continue trying, and after receiving more than fifty rejections, *Seventeen* published her first story—"And Summer Will Not Come Again"—in the August 1950 issue, followed by her poem "Ode to a Bitten Plum" in November.

Plath received a partial scholarship from Olive Higgins Prouty, author of *Now*, *Voyager* and *Stella Dallas*, the latter of which was made into a radio serial. Plath was encouraged to write to Prouty to thank her for the funding, which was reserved for a student interested in and showing promise in writing. Plath first met Prouty during her Christmas vacation from school as a freshman. Plath eventually wrote an article about the meeting, "Tea with Olive Higgins Prouty." The afternoon with Prouty helped Plath remember that in life there are infinite sources of material of which a writer can make use. Around this time, taking Prouty's advice to heart, Plath wrote in her journal, in an

undated entry: “Write about your own experience. By that experience someone else may be a bit richer some day” (*Journals* 47).

Plath’s early academic career is an understudied area in her personal and professional development. Many of her high school, college, and graduate school papers are retained in various archives, as are her notebooks for the courses. In these documents, one sees not just her developing mind and critical acumen, but also a wide range of materials read.

Plath maintained excellent grades in college and received quite a number of distinguished honors, participating in various extracurricular activities on campus and in Northampton at large. She made the dean’s list in each of her full academic years, was a Neilson Scholar in 1951 and 1952, and was elected into the Phi Beta Kappa honor society in 1953. Among other activities, she taught children ten hours a week at the People’s Institute and served as secretary of the electoral board, a *Press Board* correspondent, and editor of the *Smith Review*.

During her summers away from college, Plath earned money as a mother’s helper in Swampscott and Chatham, Massachusetts; waitressed in West Harwich, Massachusetts; served as a guest editor for *Mademoiselle* magazine’s college issue in New York City; and attended Harvard Summer School. During her guest editorship at *Mademoiselle* in June 1953, Plath—who was coming off a busy, successful junior year—was introduced to a completely new side of life. The fast-paced environment in New York City, her growing responsibilities as a student and a budding writer, and societal expectations and anxieties culminated in what was termed “nervous exhaustion,” which led her to attempt suicide on August 24, 1953.

During this summer, a doctor prescribed Plath sleeping pills to help her rest, and she saw a psychiatrist who botched electroconvulsive treatment (ECT), making her worse, not better. In the afternoon of August 24, Plath wrote a note saying that she was going for a walk and secreted herself away in a crawl space in the basement of the family

home at 26 Elmwood Road, swallowing about forty sleeping pills and hoping for the oblivion of death.

Her disappearance and discovery in the afternoon of August 26 made national headlines. Once found, Plath was taken to a local hospital to begin recovering. She ultimately recuperated at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, under the care of Dr. Ruth Barnhouse Beuscher, and returned to Smith in the spring of 1954 to repeat the second semester of her junior year. Plath continued to see Beuscher when she was in the Wellesley area.

During the summer of 1954, Plath attended Harvard Summer School, living with three fellow Smith students in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As a senior the following academic year, Plath took a heavily English-based curriculum that included courses on Shakespeare and the twentieth-century American novel as well as intensive courses on writing short stories and poetry. Plath graduated from Smith College *summa cum laude* on June 6, 1955, and planned to continue her education under a Fulbright Scholarship at Newnham College, Cambridge University, in England.

Plath sailed to England on the RMS *Queen Elizabeth*, arriving at Southampton, England, via Cherbourg, France, on September 20, 1955. She lived at Whitstead, a house for foreign students, at 4 Barton Road and immediately ensconced herself in Cambridge life. Plath joined the Cambridge University Amateur Dramatics Club, gaining the opportunity to play the role of Phoebe Clinket from *Three Hours after Marriage* (1717), written by Alexander Pope, John Gay, and John Arbuthnot, and the role of Alice in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614).

At the winter break, Plath traveled to Paris, Nice, Monaco, and Italy with her boyfriend Richard Sassoon, a graduate of Yale studying at the Sorbonne. Shortly after arriving back at Cambridge in 1956, Sassoon severed their relationship. She harbored hopes of reconciliation; however, her letters to him went unread and unanswered. Living with a mild depression into February, on the twenty-fifth of that month, Plath

visited a Cambridge psychiatrist who provided her with some support. She wrote that day in her journal: “The dialogue between my Writing and my Life is always in danger of becoming a slithering shifting of responsibility, of evasive rationalizing . . . What I fear most, I think, is death of the imagination” (*Journals* 208, 210). That night she attended a party at the Women’s Union in Falcon Yard for the launch of a new journal, the *Saint Botolph’s Review*. That night Plath “got drunk, very very beautifully drunk” and met the poet Ted Hughes (210). In the highly charged meeting, Hughes took off Plath’s headband and earrings, and in a passionate moment, Plath bit Hughes’s cheek, drawing blood.

Throughout the spring of 1956, Plath continued with her studies, writing poetry and short stories, with dreams of writing a novel. During a spring recess from her academics, she again traveled to Paris, hoping to see Sassoon. However, he was not to be found, leaving Plath to comment in her journal: “never before had a man gone off to leave me to cry after” (*Journals* 553). Several days later, Plath left Paris after meeting up with her former boyfriend Gordon Lameyer, traveling by train through Germany and then Austria on their way to Venice and Rome. Arriving back in England on April 13, 1956, Plath’s courtship with Hughes intensified rapidly, and on June 16, the two married in London. Plath and Hughes honeymooned in Alicante and Benidorm, Spain, where they continued getting to know each other and writing, their main vocation. Plath continued to see her poems, stories, and journalistic articles appear in journals in England and in the United States.

As an extension of her own publishing pursuits, Plath typed and submitted her husband’s work as well. In February 1957, Hughes’s first book of poems, *The Hawk in the Rain*, was accepted for publication in the United States by Harper & Row, being trumpeted by three great poets: W. H. Auden, Marianne Moore, and Stephen Spender. In June, Plath finished her studies in Cambridge and prepared to sail back

to the United States to enjoy time on Cape Cod before commencing a year of teaching English to first-year students at her alma mater.

The couple arrived in New York City on June 25, 1957. After acclimating to the United States at the Plath home in Wellesley, Plath and Hughes spent six weeks resting and writing in Eastham on Cape Cod. Plath experienced an extreme bout of writer's block and a pregnancy scare during this time, a period that she compared in her journals to "that deadly summer of 1953" (*Journals* 293). With the teaching job at Smith looming, Plath prepared herself as best she could, thinking it would "give me a sense of reality" (294). Toward the end of their stay on the Cape, Plath visited Rock Harbor; this occasioned a poem "Mussel-Hunter at Rock Harbor," which became her first *New Yorker* magazine acceptance the following year.

Plath and Hughes rented an apartment at 337 Elm Street, Northampton, across the street from Childs Memorial Park and close to Smith's campus. The rigors of trying to write with the demands of teaching proved a major hurdle for Plath, and though she was well regarded as an instructor in English and offered a second year of teaching, she rejected this career path outright.⁵

Though largely consumed by her teaching requirements, Plath had a burst of creativity during the spring recess in 1958, writing eight poems, all inspired by the art of Giorgio de Chirico, Paul Klee, and Henri Rousseau. She was inspired also by Childs Park, writing poems such as "Childs Park Stones" and "Fable of the Rhododendron Stealers." Starting in 1958, Plath also began recording her poetry at the invitation of people who recognized that she was a budding poet. On April 18, she recorded thirteen poems with Lee Anderson, and on June 13, she recorded fifteen poems for John Sweeney and the Woodberry Poetry Room at Harvard University.

Reading her poetry for an audience helped Plath to hear her own voice, which was heavily constrained by self-imposed conformity. A prime example is her poem "Mussel-Hunter at Rock Harbor." In a letter to her brother, Warren, Plath writes, "Read it aloud for the sounds

of it. This is written in what's known as 'syllabic verse,' measuring lines not by heavy and light stresses, but by the *number* of syllables, which here is 7" (*Letters Home* 344; italics in orig.). The poem is accomplished, but it lacks the freer flow of thought, image, and metaphor that characterizes her later poetry.

After the academic year ended, Plath and Hughes moved to 9 Willow Street in Boston's Beacon Hill neighborhood, where their apartment had a view of Back Bay, the Charles River, and Cambridge. Full-time writing proved just as stressful as teaching, leaving Plath with a series of writer's blocks. To ease the pressure of earning an income on writing alone, Plath took two part-time jobs: one at the Sanskrit and Indian Studies Department at Harvard and one as a secretary in the psychiatric ward at Massachusetts General Hospital. Plath was briefly a patient there herself just five years earlier after her first suicide attempt. She secretly made transcriptions of patient files to use as grist for her creative writing, and the experience of working there manifested itself in two highly regarded short stories, "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" and "The Daughters of Blossom Street," as well as her October 1959 "Poem for a Birthday."

In December 1958, Plath resumed therapy sessions with her McLean psychiatrist, Dr. Beuscher, and in early 1959, she audited Robert Lowell's poetry course at Boston University. The therapy sessions forced Plath to examine family issues, and the poetry course introduced her to the confessional style of poetry that Lowell was writing and that fellow student Anne Sexton would take up. Both experiences broke open new subjects for writing for Plath, and the effect on her creative writing was like an earthquake that fissures a landscape irreparably. Also in February, Plath recorded an additional seventeen poems for Harvard's Poetry Room.

Plath and Hughes were invited to the writers' colony Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York, from September to November 1959. Before assuming their residency there, in July and August, the couple traveled across the United States and Canada.⁶ When they left Wellesley

on their trip, Plath was unknowingly pregnant with her first child. Prior to this conception, however, they decided to return to England, where they felt there were more opportunities for writers. Plath wrote in her journal: "I'd like to work in London. A novel, a novel. I'd send it to a British publisher first. Feel my first book of poems should be published, however limited" (*Journals* 526).

Though she had dry spells during which creativity felt scarce, Plath was producing both poems and stories. She submitted prospective collections several times a year to various publishers, entering "first book" contests. When a rejection came, Plath shuffled the order of the poems, adding in new ones, removing old ones, and sent out the manuscript to a different publisher. Though she failed to publish a collection, nearly all the poetry Plath wrote at this time was published in periodicals in England and the United States.

At Yaddo, she finally broke through her latest writer's block, creating poetry that represented a dramatic shift voice and subject. Her new poetry deeply and personally explored topics such as her father ("The Colossus"), herself ("Poem for a Birthday"), and through the metaphor of lowly fungus, the situation of women in contemporary society ("Mushrooms"). During her residence at Yaddo, Plath produced nearly a dozen poems that formed the basis for a new poetry collection.

Plath and Hughes sailed from New York on the steamship *United States*, arriving in Southampton, England, on December 14, 1959. Initially the couple went to the Beacon, the Hughes family house in Heptonstall, England, but shortly after, in January, they traveled to London to begin looking for a place to live. By February 1, 1960, the couple moved into a small apartment at 3 Chalcot Square near to Regent's Park, Primrose Hill, and the London Zoo, and on April 1, Plath gave birth to her first child, Frieda Rebecca.

Plath quickly compiled a new collection titled *The Colossus and Other Poems* and submitted it to the publisher William Heinemann, who accepted it within a week and published it in October 1960. By January 1961, Plath was pregnant for a second time, though ultimately

she miscarried on February 6. A few weeks later, Plath had an appendectomy, staying for a week in the hospital. The surgery coincided with Plath receiving a first-reading contract from the *New Yorker*, which came with a higher payment for each acceptance, cost-of-living advances, and other perks. Plath also took notes while in the hospital, which shortly inspired the poems “In Plaster” and “Tulips” and her novel, *The Bell Jar*.

Once out of the hospital, Plath began using the study of her nearby friends, the poet W. S. Merwin and his wife, Dido. Plath and Hughes had met the Merwins—who preceded them in relocating to London—in Boston. In the Merwins’ London study, which overlooked Primrose Hill, Plath began writing a novel loosely based on the events of the summer of 1953, when she was a guest editor at *Mademoiselle*, and the suicide attempt that followed. Plath wrote the novel quickly—so quickly in fact that one cannot pin down either a start or finish date. The closest scholars can get is a marginal note in her journals, in which Plath records that by August 22, 1961, she had written the novel (*Journals* 696). Knowing that the novel was based on her own life, Plath rarely mentioned specific details to anyone about it, adopting the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas for publication. Heinemann accepted the book sometime in the summer or early fall of 1961. Through the fall, she and her editors cleaned up the text and addressed libel issues. Originally scheduled to be published in 1962, Plath asked Heinemann to delay it as she was awarded a Eugene F. Saxton grant to write a novel. Plath packaged up *The Bell Jar* in four parcels and submitted her already completed novel in quarterly installments.

In the summer of 1961, Plath’s mother visited England, meeting her granddaughter for the first time. During her stay, Plath and Hughes traveled to visit the Merwins at their home in the French countryside at Lacan de Loubressac, visiting Berck-Plage and Finisterre on the coast and the Dordogne region. Four days after they returned from France, Plath—who had recently found out that she was pregnant again—and Hughes participated in the poetry festival at the Mermaid Theatre on

July 17. Plath read “Tulips,” a poem commissioned for the festival and written shortly after her appendectomy in March.⁷ In August, still taking advantage of the free child care Plath’s mother provided, Plath and Hughes began to house hunt for their growing family outside of London. Eventually they settled on a house called Court Green in North Tawton, Devonshire, subletting their Chalcot Square flat to a Canadian poet, David Wevill, and his wife, Assia.

Preparing the house proved quite time consuming; however, in October, Plath wrote several poems, the best being “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” inspired by the view from her study window, which illustrated maturation in her voice. Her second child, Nicholas Farrar, was born on January 17, 1962. By March and April, Plath began writing again. Plath’s poetry at this time concerned the experience of being a woman (*Three Women*), family romance (“Little Fugue”), and her Devonian landscape (“Among the Narcissi,” “Elm,” and “Pheasant”).

The weekend of May 19, 1962, the Wevills visited Court Green. Later that spring, Hughes and Assia Wevill began an affair, which was discovered by Plath on July 9, when she intercepted a telephone call from Wevill. After a failed attempt at reconciliation during a trip to western Ireland, the marriage broke down. Hughes spent the majority of his time in London, staying with various friends until he secured his own apartment and leaving Plath alone in North Tawton with the children. From late September into early November, the emotional upheaval of the spring and summer manifested itself in what seems a nearly impossible feat of poetry composition. In that six-week period, Plath wrote thirty-four searing, highly emotive, and personal poems, which cut ties with her old poetic self, creating a newly minted, mythologized persona. These poems became *Ariel*,⁸ the manuscript of which Plath assembled before her death and that would go on to speak for her after her voice was silenced.

In November 1962, Plath visited London and found an apartment at 23 Fitzroy Road to rent. She realized that country life was unbearable for her, needing the stimulation and culture provided by the big city.

London offered the companionship of friends as well as cultural attractions such as cinemas, theaters, and other necessary distractions. Plath had had regular work for the British Broadcasting Corporation, both reading her own poems and those of others, and continued to obtain work opportunities through them, reviewing an anthology book on air in early January 1963. On December 10, Plath and the children moved into the Fitzroy Road apartment, which had once been the home of W. B. Yeats, a long-standing poetic idol of hers. Just as soon as she began to outfit the apartment with furnishings, the weather in England turned foul, leaving snow and ice to build up on the streets and sidewalks, pipes to freeze, and a host of other inconveniences.

A short poetic burst from January 28 through February 5, 1963, along with the composition of shorter prose pieces in January was all the creativity Plath could muster. By the weekend of February 8, Plath was no longer able to cope with caring for herself and her two small children, all of whom had suffered from recent bouts of the flu, and they stayed for several days with friends in Islington. However, the disappointments and exhaustive stresses from the previous summer and fall overcame Plath's strong will and vision, and on the morning of February 11, 1963, she took her life. Sylvia Plath was buried on February 16, 1963, in Heptonstall, England.

Notes

1. Later published under the title "Ocean 1212-W."
2. Two such books assembled by Plath are held in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library, New York City.
3. All authors and titles from reading certificates Plath received and are held in Plath MSS II at the Lilly Library, Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana.
4. The materials for this may be found in Plath MSS II at the Lilly Library, Indiana University. The acceptance letter is dated October 4, 1949, and in her *Publications* scrapbook, Box 15. Plath was paid ten dollars for the response.
5. For a review of Plath's teaching year, see Golden.
6. For more on this cross-country trip, see Trinidad.

7. Plath was recorded reading her poem by the British Library, and it was included on the 2010 audio CD *The Spoken Word: Sylvia Plath*.
8. First published in England in 1965 and the United States in 1966, *Ariel* established Plath as a major contemporary poet and went on to be among the most famous poetry collections in the twentieth century. But this *Ariel* did not maintain Plath's order and selection of poems. In 2004, *Ariel: The Restored Edition* was published to critical acclaim.

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