The Everlasting Monday[1]

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The cold metal of the oven floor strikes her cheek like a slap, and Sylvia nearly hits her head as she starts upright. She stumbles backward and stares at the open oven with its mouth agape. She leans down and grasps the handle, slamming the door shut. As she does so, the hinges creak with mournful reproach. Quickly, she switches off the gas, clicking all the knobs with triumphant snaps.

She takes a shallow breath in, and forces herself exhale more deeply. She places her hand on her diaphragm and pushes it flat. Then she puts both hands on the small of her back and arches, standing up straight.

Why should she?

Despite the overcast morning sky, she can see a slight cloud of vapors dissipating in front of the pane. She unlatches the window and pushes on either side of the sill to open it, but it is warped and resists. The wisps of vapors beckon, she thinks for an instant, like fingers.

But, no. She has done it. She has closed the oven door. She has switched off the gas.

Why should she? Who does he think he is? Who does he think she is?

Still struggling with the window, Sylvia seizes the towel at the base of the sill, which she had rolled earlier to block the escape of any fumes, and tosses it aside. It rolls away from her feet and hits the baseboard with a relieved sigh. She grips the window handles more tightly and pushes again. He is not! She throws her shoulder into the task and finally forces the sash free. He is not worth it!

She reaches back and grabs a paper from the table to wave the vapors away, into the London street, fully drenched with February.

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[1] Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen V Kukil. New York: Random House, 2000. 373. Print.

At times she has wondered if the winter will ever end. It seems to Sylvia every neighbor is feeling it with her—this weight and despair. That is some comfort. To be among others. To try. To make an effort, together.

She must check on the deaf man downstairs. She had said she would. She must not despair. All Londoners are feeling the strain—the frozen drifts, the candle queues, the burst pipes, the stubborn masses of ice at every step.

footsteps like bird tracks looping from door to door[2]

Anyone could read the headlines, get lost in the fog, feel the frozen rain, hear the tears of their children sodden with colds.

Sylvia must not succumb. She must emerge from this mood, and do so soon.

She must make a list! The laundry needs doing. There are the bedroom curtains to sew. There is her daughter's nursery school to think of—her supplies. Her infant son will be needing more diapers.

Kleenex paddipads, black-currant juice, rose-hip syrup, and bottles of nose drops and cough medicine[3]

And there are all those pages to write! To reveal. Lunch with her new editor! Is it today? Her immediate thoughts, her verse, the new novel, all the literary images that need tending. Tending to in ink.

The wet dawn inks are doing their blue dissolve.

ring on ring,

A series of weddings.[4]

She must get it down. She must find a pen.

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[2] Plath, Sylvia. "Snow Blitz." *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose, and Diary Excerpts*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000. 28. Print.
[3] "Snow Blitz" 28.
[4] Plath, Sylvia. "Winter Trees." *The Collected Poems*. Cutchogue, New York: Buccaneer Books, 1981. 257. Print.

It is then Sylvia looks down at her hands. She realizes with a start that she is holding one of her new poems, which she has been using to clear the air. She looks up, struck with the realization, and sees her reflection in the window, a sardonic smile already on her lips. To clear the air!

What will he think when he reads it? What will any of them think? It is sheer genius, her new material, and they had better realize it! In fact, they had better review it, compete for it, publish it, bestow awards upon it, jostle one another in line at the book shop in anticipation of it, and pay great sums for tickets to hear her read it aloud!

I have my honey,

Six jars of it,[5]

How could she have ever allowed herself, she wonders, to consider his work superior? How could she ever have subverted her own writing—praising, accommodating, and holding up his? How debilitating it had become for her to do so recently, how draining. How her chest, her whole body, had ached, for years, really, to draw a full breath in his presence. To formulate a complete thought, to draft a sentence, to compose a line of verse, without judgment or reproof.

Always, it seems to her, she had tried to do the proper thing. Nearly always. She had behaved properly, adopting that submissive role in front of men. Developed that crippling habit of fawning. "Sycophancy," physicians call it. "Sycophantic." "Sycophant."

In trying to be like the "normal" girls, hadn't she always kept herself clean, running the water and going through the sterile rituals at the sink, bending and scrubbing? Hadn't she kept her hair long, despite the hideous bobby pins? Hadn't she layered on the perfume, puckered incessantly at the lipstick, continuously applied the concealer?

Hadn't she made effort after effort to pose and smile in all those college pictures? Almost all.

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[5] "Wintering" 217.

The trouble was, she had realized for a long while now, that she had believed it, expecting her just reward. To be deemed worthy of him. To earn his love. To be able to rely forever upon his loyalty.

Of course he would probably prefer Sylvia remain his wedded ingénue, typing and retyping for him, cleaning up after his submissions, positioning his words on the page, in the envelope, to the quarterlies, for grandeur.

But these recent pages are all her own, fresh and alluring. There is no denying she feels set free in her writing these days—unburdened, undomesticated, uninhibited, liberated, and it is a feeling she plans to sustain, maybe even to celebrate. Celebrate herself!

Won't he be shocked to hear what she's done? To see what she is truly capable of?

I made a fire; being tired

Of the white fists of old

Letters and their death rattle[6]

And why not? Weren't those words once dedicated to her? Didn't she once inhabit them? Weren't they once hers? Was not she once his? Once.

Once, but not again. Though Sylvia has, of course, heard the gossips talking. At times, she has stilled herself, craned her neck, cocked an ear, and held her breath to hear each bit more clearly. To catch each prediction of what would be her future. She knows the latest prattle is all about his remorse, and the most common scenario always ends with his returning. To her and to the children. Reuniting us.

As if he could! As if there was any semblance of the plural anymore, as if she, singular, would be waiting, would be the same.

You do not do, you do not do

Any more,[7]

[6] "Burning the Letters" 204.

She begins to lower the window, and a paper on the kitchen table flutters. She is mildly startled, then has to brace herself a moment before examining it more closely. She recognizes the notepaper, but the letters look foreign to her, like crippled language, written in a stranger's hand.

Her shoulders fall and she places her other hand on the table for support. She realizes it is indeed her note—the one she had planned to leave upon departure.

Her pained script is so tightly wrought the words themselves appear to be choking. They are in need of air, Sylvia thinks, after a slight pause. In desperate need of air.

On impulse, she grips and tears the sheet, creating chaotic, brittle applause as she mangles it, before holding the pieces tightly in her eager fist. Oddly, it feels good to her to have written them. To have gotten them down before tearing them up.

It will feel even better, though, she realizes, to release these clenched words, to set that part of herself free. She leans out over the windowsill and lets them go, opening her hand and scattering the fragments to the east wind.

There! She pulls herself back inside and briskly strikes the flats of her palms against one another. That is done! She has done it.

The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,[8]

She'll leave Medea to the destruction and blackness, twisting her children and laying them back in. Sylvia will continue to unfurl her love for her own babies, and lift them up—lift them up high in praise.

As for him, she thinks, she might as well give him over. Might as well let the other woman have him. The other women. Let them have him. What is left of him, that is, without his wife and children.

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[7] "Daddy" 222.
[8] "Edge" 272.

You hand me two children, two roses.[9]

Let any of the others try to replace his family, to create for him that sense of importance in his life, of adoration and support, that blend of desire and security, which she had provided for him every day since they'd met, every day since they had been blessed first with a daughter, then, just when it seemed they could ask no more from life than that dream fulfilled, a son.

Hadn't he dedicated a two-part piece to their daughter? Made allusions to flowers and stars in her name? Poeticized her smile?

Hadn't he made majestic on the page their son's innocence? Paid homage to their son's perfect eyes, compared them to her own, in perpetual glimmer?

Where will he ever find more inspiration than that? Nowhere. No one. Never.

Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?[10]

She resolves, herself, to be a source of continual inspiration to the children. No more of that wretched weeping she has been indulging in, allowing herself to heave and dwell, bewildering them into their own sobbing at all hours.

Not this troublous

Wringing of hands, this dark

Ceiling without a star.[11]

No, that time has passed. That time, and who can calculate how much more?

Even if she cared to, where would she begin counting? Devon? Paris? Cambridge?

Oh, damn, St. Botolph! She lets out a sharp laugh in spite of herself. Maybe she should be thanking him, the patron saint of safe arrival.

In a very real sense, she has arrived. She has graduated. She has forgone teaching. She has written. She is writing. She has published. She has established herself.

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[9] "Kindness" 270.
[10] "Mystic" 268.
[11] "Child" 265.

And it is not over yet. She should thank him, the patron saint of safe journey—for who can say what is to come?

Let her estranged husband have his part of London, with all its dank and dismal flair. Let him find the wildlife he seeks in its streets.

Sylvia's part of the city will be Fitzroy Road.

like coming home to a small, loving village[12]

The salon she has sought to create will soon be underway. She will make Yeats proud, transforming her flat into a center of literary activity—her own intellect thriving with that of academics, poets, and children's authors as well. Her invitations will be issued, accepted, cherished, sought after.

Whenever she allows herself to truly feel this optimism, and to calm her mind and rest in it, even for a moment, she feels instinctively, and with certainty, her life is no longer about what he has done with his. She knows, also without doubt, it does not have to be only one or the other who achieves literary success. The literary world is immense. There is room, she is sure, for both of them.

When she thinks of the hope she has almost let go of this morning, the thought of losing it, not the London morning edging in through the open pane, chills her.

And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes

Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.[13]

She will reside in her own part of London, then, in the coming months, preside over, savor her role, too, in her own Court, and gather again those ancient and enduring daffodils, even more dramatic, more abundant, more exhilarating. She will remember years past, for the sake of the children, but she will not linger. Spring will soon come. Easter is not so far off after all.

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[12] Plath, Sylvia. *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*. Ed. Aurelia Schober Plath. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. 488. Print.
[13] Plath, Sylvia. "Tulips." *The Collected Poems*. Cutchogue, New York: Buccaneer Books, 1981. 162. Print.

The future is enough to live for and will be. The worst of it—her miscarriage, her illness, her deference, his discontent, his betrayal—has passed. The worst time of day, the worst time of year, the worst time of her life. She must shift her focus to what endures. She must write her own morning song.

Sylvia finally closes the window and turns toward the kitchen door. She kneels to unroll the towels and clothing she had earlier jammed in at the base of it. She has to pull hard to dislodge the cloth she had wedged in so tightly, and she must stop for an instant to catch and pace her breath.

It is over, she tells herself. She has done it.

With newfound strength, she pulls the door open wide, and feels herself striding forward, ascending. She tries to slow her step and keep herself from flying up the stairs to the landing. She reminds herself of the time and the fact that the children will still be sleeping. She strains to hear if they stir. She wishes they would.

I wake to listen:

A far sea moves in my ear.[14]

She mounts the stairs one at a time, like one of her toddling daughter's kittens. How clumsy and charming they are—the kitties, the children. How they lift her mood, distracting her from the tiny hardships that might take hold of her daily if it were not for their boundlessness, light feet, and innocence.

She must let them know, every day, that they are precious to her. That she simply could not do without them. That they will never have to do without her.

Once at the top of the stairs, she moves down the darkened hallway and passes the sitting room. In the room next to the children's, she catches sight of the white shelf paper, listing their doctor's number, which she had scrawled earlier. It wavers there, half mocking her. She snatches it from the handle of the pram and crumples the note, regretting and crushing hard her reason for writing it.

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[14] "Morning Song" 157.

You will be aware of an absence, presently,

Growing beside you, like a tree,[15]

At the door of the nursery, Sylvia kneels and begins to quietly ease the masking tape from around the doorjamb. The adhesive sticks to her hands like tangible regret, which she briefly taps together, as if to see if any of its hold remains, before briskly rubbing her fingers free.

She remains kneeling, at once aware of her position on the floorboards. She feels the bodily reverence of her stance, as if in church. Kneeling at their threshold. A beggar, a believer, a mother redeemed.

The candle

Gulps and recovers its small altitude,[16]

She rises and steadies herself. The doorknob turns warm in her palm, like an alm, and she slowly turns it and pushes the door open, crossing the threshold and feeling the warmth radiating upon her bit by bit until she is fully awash in the glow of their presence.

She resists the immediate inner pull she feels toward her son, and makes herself check on her daughter first, bending low over the small bed, her body a question mark as she ponders her.

All night your moth-breath

Flickers among the flat pink roses.[17]

Although there is that familiar sensation of looking in a mirror or at one of her own childhood photographs, there is, in addition, always an absence of recognition, a disbelief in the beauty before her, that it could be from her, that it could reflect the best in her, that it could guide her, that it will bind them always.

The window square

[15] "For a Fatherless Son" 205.
[16] "Nick and the Candlestick" 241.
[17] "Morning Song" 157.

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try

Your handful of notes;[18]

She must close the window. She must drive away the cold before they catch a chill. But she cannot resist a whiff of him any longer, and leans over the cot to breathe in her son. He is her handsome tonic, her calm, her love laden bouquet she never wants to let go from her arms.

O love, how did you get here?

O embryo[19]

There is so much yet to do. Teach them to read, to write, to recite, to ride. What might they think of horseback? The feeding of an apple, the nuzzle of the horse, the glide of the curry brush, the elevation upon its back, the ethereal motion, the broad expanse of inspiring views—that is what she wants for them most of all. That is what she will bring them to and will bring to them as they grow.

How one we grow,

And I

Am the arrow,[20]

Sylvia wraps herself more tightly in her robe and considers the room and its bright feeling of bliss, the way standing in it makes her feel as if anything is possible, even now. Especially now.

Perhaps there will someday be a Blue Plaque posted in her honor as there is in Yeats' at her front door. How she relishes it—*Irish poet and dramatist lived here*[21]—every time she enters. Destined. Kindred. Coming home.

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[18] "Morning Song" 157.
[19] "Nick and the Candlestick" 241.
[20] "Ariel" 239.
[21] Cole 3.

She wonders if Yeats rested in this very room as a boy, where her own son now lies, sighing and dreaming.

the old fresh joys,[22]

the Yeatsian idea of…fresh starts[23]

She will take the children on holiday! Of course! She doesn't know why the idea has not occurred to her sooner. They will visit Ballylee.

The children will adore the draw of the sea, the charm of the immaculate countryside, drinking warm milk from the ringing silver pail, being wrapped in cabled, handknit throws. Sylvia will introduce them to the good-hearted people she met when she was last there, and expose them to the deep and lilting sounds of the Irish language. She has always wanted the children to know her literary heroes, her admired traditions, her muses.

They are old enough now. She can manage. The ferry will amuse them—their first real adventure alone together. With a final shiver running through her, she crosses between them and, with a great clatter, closes their fragile, yawning window.

The children startle awake at the sound, and at once there is a clamorous upheaval of blankets, and bedclothes, and young limbs, and nimble fingers, and upturned faces, all in need of soothing.

It is a cacophony so immediate and original and full of joy, that Sylvia can hardly bear it. Bear the pure sensation of being needed by them. Bear the thought of it all belonging to her. Of it being of her own making.

To keep herself from becoming undone and dissolving completely into tears, she reaches for the cups of milk and bread she had placed on the table very early that morning. She must nourish them. She must wash and dress them. She must comb their hair. She must coo and enthuse. She must be all that they need her to be. She must be. Be herself. Her. Here.

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[22] Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen V Kukil. New York: Random House, 2000. 525. Print.
[23] *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 373.

In the next moment, there is a ringing and a rapping below, and Sylvia and the children hastily turn their attention to it.

a work & a life of eternal Mondays, eternal launderings & fresh starts[24]

Glancing out the window at the stoop below, she remembers the appointments she had set up for today.

Here is her nurse at the bell. They will no doubt set her pill regime, consult with her doctor, wrest with the pre-dawn troubles together.

The children's au pair will surely turn up next. They are all three of them eager to meet her. This one will be the perfect fit. Sylvia can feel it.

Now the housepainters are arriving, pulling their truck up alongside the curb, paint cans swinging like shining handbells of all tones, ringing out a common song of everyday faith.

She must gather the children and answer the door, show them all in, take them in hand, point the way.

Above all, she reminds herself with abiding assurance, she must request a cheerful color—something uplifting and vibrant—full of life.

[24] *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 373.

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