

Dark Waters: Reading Sylvia Plath

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The truth is I don't know the first time I read Sylvia Plath. I know I should know, that I should remember. But I can't. When I peer back into the tunnel of my reading past, there are signifiers to the first moment I read Plath; possible candidates, events that emerge among my biographic strata. And yet, I can't be sure. The past clouds at my heels like a country too soon foreign and unfamiliar.

Was my first exposure to Plath in high school? As a teen, I started to write poetry. At that time, I had a friend, Lynda Stokes, who introduced me to the poetry of Phyllis Webb – poems like "To Those Friends Who Have Also Considered Suicide." Lynda wrote with a fountain pen and wore navy blue leather penny loafers and listened to The Smiths and The Violent Femmes. Was she the first person to introduce me to Plath, too? It seems like something she would have done. But still. I wonder.

The second candidate who might have formally introduced me to Plath was my first year English professor at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada: Ben Jones. He was American, a draft-dodger if I recall, who favoured Pynchon and Yeats. He was deeply fond of rich syntax, rigorous narrative structures and didactic rhythms. He must have made us read "Daddy." Or did he? The text we used, however, was *20th Century Poetry and Poetics*, an anthology edited by Canadian writer Gary Geddes. Remembering this text I can be sure of, since in its pages is the evidence of my own sophomore hand, struggling to understand what poems were made of, with furiously detailed marginalia, noting themes and poetic meter, among other elements.

What I specifically remember, though, was that in Geddes' small sampling of Plath's poetical works, he had included the poem "Two Campers in Cloud Country (Rock Lake, Canada)." It seemed a curious, anomalous poem; out of place against hard hitters like "Lady Lazarus" and "Ariel." But the poem left a marked impression on me, if only because I had recently gone camping in the interior at Rock Lake at Algonquin Park, Ontario, with a high school friend of mine named Heidi. I also acknowledged the strange coincidence that Plath, whose work I hardly knew at that time, had written a poem about Canada – a poem, that in fact, was about somewhere I had recently travelled.

Next thing I know I'm in a third year English class, reading Plath's *Collected Poems*, which I have independently purchased at the university bookstore. A young poet, I am transformed by the power of her words, emboldened by the force of her voice. Never mind that previous summer, while travelling in England, I coincidentally visited Plath's grave at the urging of the B&B owner whose house I had stayed in Haworth to make a completely non-related pilgrimage to the Brontë Parsonage. Or that when I stood irrevocably transfixed before Plath's headstone – which, weirdly enough, I found almost immediately – I felt like a strange relation; a traitor, having only read a handful of anything she had ever written. No matter. I am at last enraptured. Her poetry is like nothing I have ever read before. It speaks to me directly and intimately, in a way no other poet has ever done. Henceforth, I read everything she has ever written; and everything that has been written about her, sealing my fascination.

And then, I don't remember when or why or how, I stopped reading Plath. This, I suspect now, is because the act of reading Sylvia Plath, as Janet Badia has recently explored, provokes a complex web of negative implications, especially for the female reader. I'm not saying that I was made to feel ashamed reading Plath, but there certainly was an association of juvenility that came with reading her. So I explored other writers, other ideas – Beckett, Joyce, Baudrillard, Cixious – just to name some of the more influential few.

Fast forward fifteen years later. I am married, with children, living in Sault Ste. Marie in Northern Ontario. I decide, for some reason, to reread Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame*. While I'm reading about Plath and Hughes' cross country camping trip in 1959, I remember "Two Campers in Cloud Country (Rock Lake, Canada)." But which Rock Lake was it? I immediately wondered. Because suddenly I was struck by the fact that they might not have stayed at Rock Lake, Algonquin Park at all, but at the Rock Lake that my in-laws owned, a secluded destination off the main highway near Sault Ste. Marie that had once been a popular hunting and fishing camp in the early to mid part of the 20th century. Almost instantly, "Two Campers in Cloud Country (Rock Lake, Canada)" began to resonate with new meaning and significance for me. Could it have been the same Rock Lake?

I started reading Plath again. And what I knew as Rock Lake – the remote Precambrian oasis of one square mile where my husband and I had fallen in love, where we had been married, where my husband had created one of the most significant bodies of visual art of his career, where my children learned how to swim and where we vacationed every summer as a family –

also become the place where Sylvia and Ted had stayed en route through Canada. I began to write poems about them; about their trip; developing an entire body of creative work related to their real and possible experiences.

No matter that I hadn't yet confirmed the exact Rock Lake – although I had contacted Karen Kukil at the Smith archives to be sure – I saw them; felt them, and "Two Campers in Cloud Country (Rock Lake, Canada)" became a kind of elaborate code, a semantic filter through which I not only perceived the environment that surrounded me, but in how I navigated the physical interdimensionality of Plath's writing, as if that poem were a prism, a gateway through which all her writing had come, both before and after. I later learned from Karen Kukil (who worked in partnership with Steve Ennis at Emory to fact-find the truth of the matter for me) that it was indeed Rock Lake, Algonquin Park where they had stayed. But by that time it was already too late. The landscape had already changed.

For me, "Two Campers in Cloud Country" became the "transitional" poem; the defining work that precluded *Ariel*. "Crossing the Water" is often cited as Plath's key transitional poem – but when I finally went to the archives at Smith I discovered, to my astonishment, that "Crossing the Water" was originally entitled "Rock Lake at Night." Written in the spring of 1962, almost two years after "Two Campers in Cloud Country (Rock Lake, Canada)," "Crossing the Water" is a deeply stirring and technically brilliant piece of writing – one of Hughes' favorites – and while it names Canada, it also importantly revisits the symbolic realm of Lethe, which is first mentioned in "Two Campers in Cloud Country" and later, significantly, in the October 1962 poems "Getting There" and "Amnesiac," which is a topic I plan to explore in my presentation at the 2012 Plath Symposium.

Discovering Lethe through Plath also changed the landscape for me. Not just in how I read her, but again, how I perceived Canada and my homeland, not to mention the landscape of my own writing. One of the seven rivers of Hell, Lethe is the river of oblivion, where all those who drink from it forget their earthly sins. Its' sublime and transformative power to simultaneously beget both death and rebirth haunted my imagination, resulting in the publication of *The Black Car*, a chapbook of reflections on the river Lethe, the Canadian underworld, Hell, death, and rebirth. Also a meditation on forgetting, the collection visits other poets' work on Lethe, including poems written after Edna St. Vincent Millay, H.D., and Charles Baudelaire. I began to see the landscape around me, and indeed, all of Canada, as a double for the underworld.

"Rock Lake" – whatever it was; whatever it is – was a portal; the point of entry to understanding what I wanted, what I needed to know, about poetry, among other things.

There is no doubt that going to the archives made a difference. Being at the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College and at the Lilly Library in Bloomington, exposed to primary documents in their original, unedited and unabbreviated states, was vastly important. Not only did it inspire a career change to libraries and archives, but Plath's archives showed me how to listen to her from an unbiased perspective, defining how I would come to re-read and re-interpret all of her literary work. And as I learned more about the intimate details of Plath and Hughes' trip through primary letters, photographs, and documents, as well as through other scholarship, everything shifted for me in a continuously evolving picture, over and over again. Not just of her, but of them, and me, and the landscape surrounding all of us.

I cannot drive on Highway 17 between Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie without thinking about them, especially since the two-lane highway is relatively unchanged since the time they, too, drove the four-hour stretch between cities. I imagine Plath's consternation at Spragge, Iron Bridge, Blind River, the small roadside towns that dot the highway along the long blue north shore of Lake Huron. Or how they would have looked walking down Queen Street in Sault Ste. Marie – just days after a young and very pregnant Queen Elizabeth graced the city for a four-hour visit – seeking out a steak dinner at Mary's Diner, before boarding the late evening ferry that would carry them across the moonlit St. Mary's river. Their past presence here – even for just a few short days – ignites my continuing sense of place and its current surroundings. Clouds especially, distinct from other forms of meteorological phenomena, have become significant due to Plath's descriptions. Is Canada really cloud country? In many ways, as my finished poetry collection about their trip, *Cumulus*, illustrates, I am still only beginning to know.

Reading Sylvia Plath changed how I read, and how I continue to read. Its dissonant engine of sounds and range of emotional depth – and though I didn't realize it the first time, how it physically looked on the page – was incredibly influential in how I approached poetry, wrote poetry, and how I read other poets. Sylvia Plath was, and in many ways continues to be, the measure by which I read all other poets and poetry.

Perhaps what is most profound, however, is how reading Plath has altered my physical body in relation to the landscape. I have gone to the underworld; traversed Lethe without drinking its waters – or perhaps I have already, which is how I've come to be here – rebirthed

through her text, pushed through the dark waters of her writing, to emerge into the landscape of her imagining.

Remarkably, I continue to be held by this cord, tethered to her words, her work, her world. Having read her I feel as if having discovered a whole other country; a place where I have been granted full passage and access to explore, both creatively and critically, without punishment or reprimand. It is a place without geography, but a realm that transcends both time and space, and which continues to evolve, defined only by the mediation and remediation in the sustained and wholly passionate act of reading her.