Last Rites

George Fitzgerald

I - A Feather for My Shelf

For something like forty years -- as I write this -- regardless of the fact that Sylvia Plath was already dead by the time I'd read a single one of her poems, I have wanted to prevent her from committing suicide; I've wanted to reach into her journals, yank her from the page, and say, "Stop! Don't do it! I'll explain in good time. I'll save you!"

For another number of years, a dozen or so, when I was living in either New Hampshire or Vermont, I observed her October birthday by visiting the Rare Book Room at Smith College's library; it holds many books from Plath's personal collection, as well as photos, diaries, letters, and various mementos connected to her.

The room is plain but elegant, varnished and polished. Looking in any direction one's eye can feast on beautiful wood -- hand-crafted glass-doored bookcases line two of the paneled walls; there are twelve good-sized tables, aligned in two rows, set with sturdy upholstered chairs; the floor is oak; four large windows, framed in oak, dominate the west wall.

To a Plath-obsessive, the room is hallowed. Each time I entered it I mentally genuflected and dipped my fingers into an imaginary font of holy water.

On my several visits, the room had never had more than a few people in it -- just the librarian, a few presumed scholars, and me. One year, though, as I entered, I was jarred to see that the room was *crowded.* Every table was occupied. Where, I wondered, am I going to find a seat? I noticed a screen, incommensurate with the room's character, set up against the far wall of bookcases.

I went to the windowed office in the corner where visitors are obliged to register. I glanced around for the usual librarian, the one who'd greeted me on every previous visit, expecting to be recognized by her.

Instead, a well-tailored man, blue-blazered, tie, gray trousers, looking to be about forty-five, and exuding an air of authority, approached me. "Can I help you?" he asked. From his tone I took him to mean *can I help you get your ass out of here?* I could *feel* him looking down his nose at my worn brown leather jacket and my jeans.

"Yes, I'd like to read some of Sylvia Plath's original journals that are here."

"They've all been published," the man said dismissively. "There's nothing here that hasn't been published."

That (at the time) was not correct; only *selections* from her journals had been published. The inaccuracy of his statement, coming from within his authoritative stance, gob smacked me. Any respectable member of the cult of Sylvia Plath would know better than to make such a statement. My dander was up. He deserved to be punched and bloodied. I'm not, however, the sort of guy who punches and bloodies. I don't like lawsuits; I don't want jail time. Nor am I one of those quick-witted, silver-tongued, self-confident types who could respond: "Upon what authority -- which authority you just sadly debased -- are you making this outlandish claim?"

I said instead, "No, the ones published are expurgated."

Just then I saw the familiar librarian, the one who'd always greeted me kindly, coming out of an inner office that lies just beyond the windowed office. She smiled as she saw me. Everything was going to be okay now. A few steps more and she was addressing me. "Hi! How are you?" she said, welcomingly. I turned away from the jumped-up man, hoping it seemed like a dismissal. I smiled at the librarian.

"I'm good! It's Sylvia's birthday, so here I am again!"

"I was expecting you! You're very faithful! So what would you like to see today?"

"I'd like to read some in her journals ... I guess I'd start with the 1950-53 volume."

"Let's see," she said, laying her index finger against her lips as if this would make it easier to think. "How shall we handle this? They're using this room for a class today and the lights are going to be dimmed because they'll be showing some slides." Then, gesturing with her hand for me to follow, she said, "I know! Come with me!"

I followed her into an inner office. She cleared off an area of a jam-stacked table and pulled out a chair for me.

"Sit here. And I'll be right back."

Momentarily she came out carrying a box that contained the photocopied pages of Plath's journals. The pages presented Plath's extraordinarily neat penmanship.

"Thank you!" I said. I removed a notebook and a pencil from my small green knapsack, preparing to read and make notes.

Shortly the librarian was back at my side. "Excuse me," she said. "Since it *is* her birthday

and since you *are* so faithful, I think you deserve to hold the real thing." She dangled out for me a pair of white muslim gloves ... one is required to put these on before handling certain original materials, which act remind me of the altar of my youth, ritual-crammed stage upon which I, as an acolyte, would pour water over the priest's fingers before the latter touched the sacred wafer.

My hands properly sheathed, the librarian handed me a volume of Sylvia Plath's original journal, a ledger-like bound volume, familiar in the 1950s, perhaps nine by twelve, close to three inches thick -- one of the very volumes over which Sylvia Plath had bent her head, had held in her hands; a volume whose pages were filled with ink from her own pen.

Taking the journal, which the librarian had presented opened, I closed it. I examined the binding. I lovingly ran my hands over the cover, and then I looked hastily at pages here and there. I examined the neatness and uniformity of Sylvia's handwriting; it is neater than the penmanship of manuscripts I have seen of her poems; here I see few crossed-out words, no scrawls in the margins. I supposed that in her obsessive determination to be as perfect as possible, she must have written the journal's entries first in draft and then copied them super-neatly into the ledgers -- an amazing and time-consuming task, but youth thinks youth is timeless, and certainly time does stretch itself further in one's early years. As for the manuscripts of the poems I'd seen, worked over and over, redrafted, copied anew and anew, I imagined that when working on one draft after another her pen moved quickly to capture the sentences forming in her brain, while, even as she hurried, her fervid imagination improved those sentences with better words, more words, a fetching metaphor, new inspirations, fresher turns of phrase ... the brain working so fast that the thoughts needed to be jotted hastily.

After a while the librarian returned. "Thank you very much!" I said. I intended for my voice to sound like a swoon of appreciation. I put the precious artifact back into her hands. She left the room to return it to the vault.

I sat then for an hour or so reading from the photocopied pages, copying down some things that I knew were not in the expurgated published version, passages that were so well-executed and interesting that I wondered why they had been left out of the published version -- a matter of space, I presumed.

After the hour or so, the librarian returned to my side. "The class out front is over if you'd be more comfortable in the main room," she said.

"Oh, good, I really like that space!"

With the room all to myself now, I took a break from reading the journals. I asked the librarian to unlock and open a glass door of one of the bookcases which holds books from Sylvia Plath's personal library. I removed her copy of the Modern Library edition, Volume One, *Swann's Way*, of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past.*

Glancing through the book, I was struck by a particular passage which Plath had underlined:

> There is a species of hymenoptera, observed by Fabre, the burrowing wasp, which in order to provide a supply of fresh meat for her offspring after her own decease, calls in the science of anatomy to amplify the resources of her instinctive cruelty, and, having made a collection of weevils and spiders, proceeds with marvelous knowledge and skill to pierce the nerve-center on which their power of locomotion (but none of their other vital functions) depends, so that the paralyzed insect, beside which her egg is laid, will furnish the larva, when it is hatched, with a tamed and inoffensive quarry, incapable either of flight or of resistance, but perfectly fresh for the larder. (Proust 175-176)

Had she recalled this passage, I wondered, before sticking her head into the oven on that cold February morning in London in 1963? Did she recall the burrowing wasp in her cautionary act of placing of milk and biscuits at the bedsides of her children, and having, with tape and rolled towels, carefully sealed off the room in which they were sleeping? Did she see herself, in this milk-and-biscuits-act, as a metaphor? Did she not recognize the seeds for another marvelous poem she could have written ... wasps, maternity, love?

Examining the book further, I discovered, tucked between pages 176 and 177, a small feather; from this point on there was no further underlining, no further marginalia. It seemed clear that this is where Sylvia Plath gave up on *Remembrance of Things Past;* like so many others who set out to accomplish Proust's thousands of pages, she apparently failed. It's not surprising -- it takes a lot of time and perseverance to read four thousand pages. One of my friends, who'd given up on Proust, said, "When it took the first thirty pages for the boy to get to sleep, I gave up."

I didn't finish *Remembrance of Things Past* until in my late thirties.

If Sylvia Plath had read beyond the feather, I wondered, if she had read on to the finish, would she not have become wiser? Would she have better known how to cope with a philandering husband? Would she have achieved a certain serenity, a better, safer outlook on life? Would she have recognized, thanks to Proust, that both love and jealousy are folly; that they

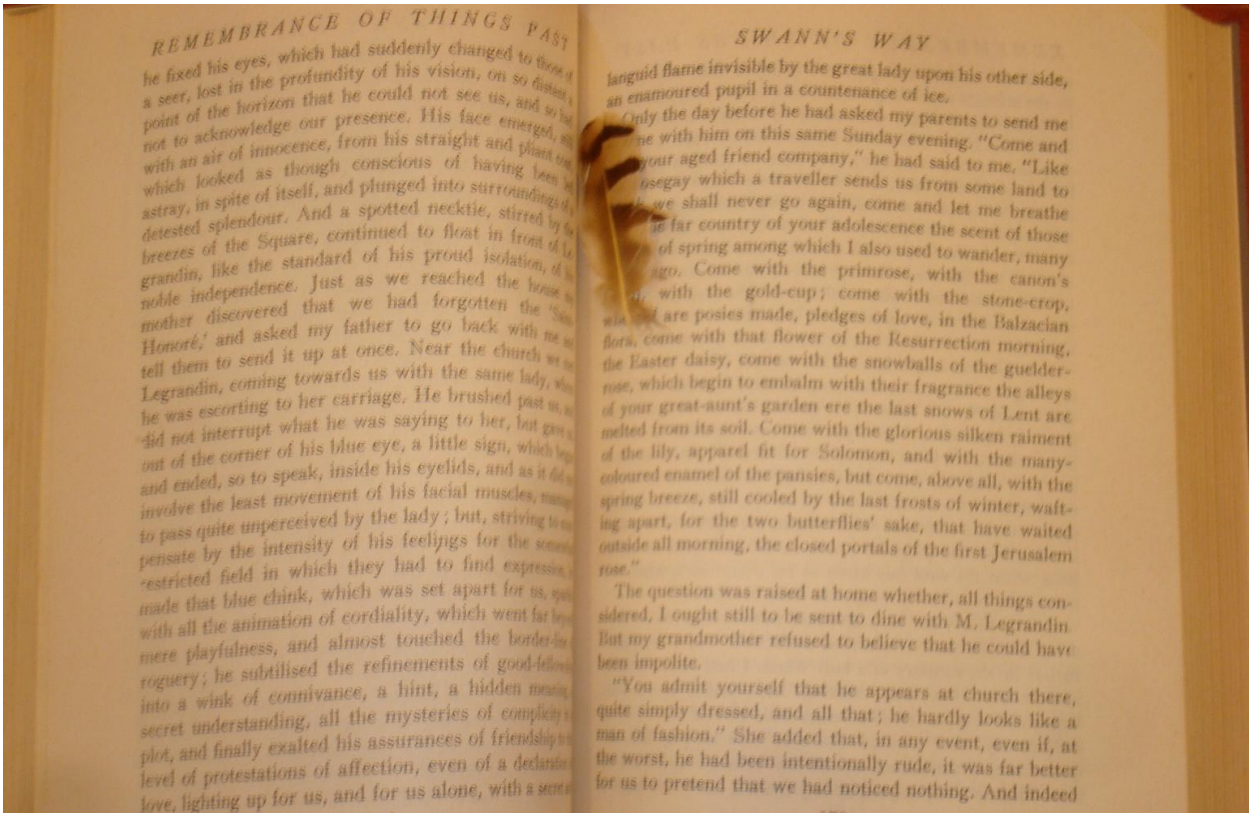
become, in the case of a great writer, merely grist for the mill?

I wished that I could have been, on that final cold London day in 1963, her guardian angel. "Finish Proust first!" I would have said. "No one should die without having finished Proust!"

The hopelessness of my fantasy hurt; I added it to the bushels of hurt that, as regards Sylvia Plath, had been hurting me for decades.

It is going to hurt forever.

Easily persuading myself that it was Plath herself who had inserted the feather in the book between pages 176 and 177, I coveted it. I looked around. The librarian, in the windowed office over in the corner, was focused on her work. I gathered my notebook and my pencils and put them in my knapsack. Then I put the feather in my knapsack. I stood and went to the librarian to say my *thank you* and my *good-bye* and my *see you next year*.



Walking through the long corridors of the library, turning left here and right there, I am surprised to come upon the stuffed-shirt-of-a-man who earlier had tried to make me feel

unwelcome in the Rare Book Room. He and a group of students -- they looked to number a dozen-or-so -- were flocked about one of the vitrines in which -- as along several of the main corridors of the Smith College Library -- rare manuscripts are displayed. He, as well as several students, looked up as I passed. I held his eye, quickly removed my right hand from my pocket, lowered all its fingers except the middle one, and lifted that individual finger up to lay it against my right cheek. Moving on, as I did, and looking ahead now, I wasn't able to see if there was any change in his countenance.

Outside, I walked along the curving sidewalks of the beautiful sunny autumn-tinged campus of Smith College. I looked at several of the large-lettered messages that are invariably scrawled in chalk on the sidewalks. Most of them called for political action, or announced meetings, but I noticed one -- it was the one with the largest letters, chalked in gigantic foot-high font -- I could appreciate:

I LOVE MY PENIS!

I drove to a coffee shop on the main street of Northampton. It felt a little bit Parisian to sit at a sidewalk table in the sun with a *cafe latte.* While gazing at passersby I pondered just what sort of person would write I LOVE MY PENIS on a sidewalk at one of the country's most radically-feminist colleges.

I removed Sylvia's feather from my knapsack to admire it. It was mine now. I planned to put it in a small glass jar when I got home, a jar in which I'd put, some twenty years earlier, a walnut I'd gathered from the yard of Emily Dickinson's home in Amherst. The jar sets on one of my bookshelves, the one that holds the twenty-or-so books I own that were written by or about Sylvia Plath.

I loved having Sylvia Plath's feather.

I also loved my penis.

II. The Poet on the Hill

It's spring, 2002. I notice, in *The Boston Globe,* an interesting price for a round-trip flight between Boston to Manchester.

It's early evening when, in the car I rented at the Manchester airport, I reach a town called Hebden Bridge. It lies in a narrow steep-walled valley. The roads and houses, terraced up the side of the valley, are retained by deep sloping walls of stone; these walls, engineered marvels, seem like the gigantic hands of some mythically powerful god who is preventing the town from tumbling into the river below.

As I drive around town, up and then down the steep narrow roads, crossing handsome, gracefully arched stone bridges, looking for lodging, I have a sudden sensation that this valley feels like what *home* should feel like. It is somehow *enclosing* me better than any place on earth has ever enclosed me. It is as if I was meant to have been born here -- having been born in Indiana was a terrible mistake.

I credit this new strange feeling to genetics, and I wonder if my Irish ancestors, having built untold miles of stone walls, passed down to their descendants an affinity for and love of stone-stacking. I, a son of a Kerryman, *love* stones.

I spot a Bed & Breakfast called "Myrtle Grove." I stop the car. A set of stone stairs leads from the road up to the house. The house is built of stone, to which ivy clings. The roof is made of a purplish slate. I knock at the door. I'm invited in.

Upon entering I realize immediately that I am supposed to have lived my life not just in this valley, but in these rooms. Myrtle Grove strikes me as the perfect dwelling place. *One could not help but become a poet here.* The floors are huge slabs of stone. The fireplace's sides and mantel are each composed of one single slab of stone. Every window in the place is of unusual dimensions and oddly placed.

I am warmed by the substantiality of granite. It is solid. It is supremely sensible. It seeps into my soul.

The proprietress, an attractive woman of perhaps fifty, offers her hand. "I'm Maureen," she says, as she leads me up the stairs to look at the room. "And you are …?

"I'm George."

"And what brings you to Hebden Bridge?"

"I've come to visit the grave of an American poet named Sylvia Plath. She's buried in Heptonstall."

We've reached a landing where the stairs veer to the left. Maureen halts.

"Look!" she says. She presents, with a sweep of her hand, a window, and then steps aside

to give me room to stand at it. I look out at the valley's opposite wall. Atop it, in diffused evening light, there are black silhouettes of a village.

"What you see up there is the hamlet of Heptonstall," Maureen says. "And see that church tower above the tree line?" I do! I see it! "She's buried in the yard next to it."

A line for a poem falls into my brain. I give the poem a title: "The Poet on the Hill." Inasmuch as the world, at the moment, seems capable of perfection, I envision this poem's title will eventually appear in the distinctive *New Yorker* font -- never mind that I've never composed a successful poem in my life.

I can see that Maureen is pleased with the thrill she has given me. I am recognizing in her a kindred soul. Her face and demeanor are warm; my spirit mingles with hers. I implore fate to arrange that she becomes my friend, for fate to guide me as to the best way of insinuating myself into her heart. I want to embrace her. I want to embrace the town. I want to embrace the entire Calder Valley.

Actually, I want to weep because Maureen, Hebden Bridge, the Calder Valley, and all the local history are not mine.

I take the room, settle myself into it, and then walk down the steep hill to the center of town and have dinner in the restaurant of the town's single hotel.

When I return to Myrtle Grove, Maureen and her husband, John, are sitting at a small table in the kitchen, finishing up their dinner. She invites me to have tea with them.

The three of us sit at a table in the yard. They are a warm, lovely pair. We talk about books and writers. I admire various plants and flowers in Maureen's garden, several of which I've never seen before.

"I'll mail you some seeds," she says.

Darkness settles in. The evening turns chilly. I go up to my room. I get warm and snug beneath a comforter. I will read myself to sleep with a book of poems by Yeats which I've removed from a full bookcase next to the bed.

I hear a tap-tap at the door.

"Come in!"

Maureen enters. She's carrying a small tray with nips of Irish whiskey. She sits at the foot of my bed. We talk and talk. She reaches for a Norton anthology of poems from a shelf; we take turns reading a few favorite poems to each other.

After we share second nips of the whiskey, Maureen goes downstairs.

Happily coddled, I sleep the sleep of the happy.

In the morning Maureen, John, and I have breakfast together. Then John heads off for work. Maureen and I linger an hour over second cups of coffee.

Finally I go up and fetch my suitcase. Maureen and I embrace. I feel imbued by potential; potential which, if it existed before, had vanished years ago; and now I realize that this fresh feeling of potentiality can be fulfilled only if somehow I could start my life over in this house, and in this town.

I'm beaten at the start.

Maureen and I embrace and kiss one another's cheeks. She wipes, with the side of her hand, a tear that is running down my cheek.

I head across the valley and up its other side.

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I park in the lot of Heptonstall's elementary school. I walk through town toward the church without coming upon any shops, without encountering another human being. It seems like a ghost town, and gives me the same feeling I'd once had in a French town called Illiers-Combray where Proust lived as a child -- a feeling that I am being peered at from behind the lace curtained-windows of gray silent houses.

I arrive at the rear of the church and walk along the side to the front. Ancient graves surround the church.

Across the way is another graveyard. It's more of this age: regimented, plotted, markers aligned in orderly rows.

A man in a far corner tends a roaring brush fire. He's perhaps fifty, thin, and seems contented with the company of his fire. I know that feeling. Back home my house sets on a double lot and there are about thirty trees out back; every spring I conduct a day-long brush fire.

I approach the man and his spectacle of blaze. He hasn't noticed that there is anyone around until I say "Hi!"

"Good morning to you!"

"I wonder if you could show me where Sylvia Plath is buried?"

"Come," he beckons softly. Holding his rake out front like a parade major holds a baton, he leads me along the side of the graveyard. Turning back to me he says, "You like her poems

then, do you?"

"Yes. They're great. She's my favorite poet."

"It's nice how people show up. From all over the world they'll come."

He stops now, and gestures with his free arm. "Here we are. You'll find it down the way then, close to the end."

"Much obliged!"

"Not a'tall." He heads back to his fire.

The grave is well tended. The plot is bordered with large stones, stones the size of two fists. Within the stone-border, Alpine plants have been set, and bunches of yellow tulips are blooming, and other good-sized stones are placed.

The granite marker is relatively new, yet another replacement of those which were desecrated over the years by, presumably, feminists who burned with animosity towards a man who, in their view, represented much that was awful in his gender. On more than a couple of occasions they'd descended upon Heptonstall to chisel away at the *Hughes* on the gravestone until it would read simply *Sylvia Plath.* (I'm not against feminism -- I'm all for it -- but don't like property destruction.)

One of my favorite past-times is wandering in cemeteries. They are parks for the soul; places in which to lose yourself, places to contemplate that which has passed and which had nothing to do with you; names, dates, heartbreaks, epitaphs, plants, bouquets of flowers both plastic and real, histories, trees, skies, evergreens, But here, in Heptonstall, I feel less the usual -- my mind overflows with thousands of thoughts, starting with the idea of a young girl who, years ago, in her suburban Boston home, said to God that she'd never speak to Him again. The entire biography of Sylvia

Plath floats through my mind. And here, in her final resting place, she seems so *alone*, and *lonely*. So far *away*.

The nicest thing anyone ever said to: my dear friend Abby once said, "If Marilyn Monroe had had a friend like you, she'd still be alive."

All those empty *if*' and *if only's* of life -- breaking, over and over again, one's heart.

Finally, I feel like a Christian who, tantalizingly close to touching the hem of the garment, knows that the hem is out of reach.

I kneel at the foot of the plot. I perform a sign of the cross just in case it *does* means something.

There is nothing to say, but I say it anyway: "I wish I could have helped you. I am too late. I am sorry." And then, *"If only, according to Abby, you'd had a friend like me."*

I glance around to see if there's anything to take as a memento ... a pebble to put in my bookshelf jar that holds Plath's feather, or a blossom to seal within a book. But I can't. This is *truly* hallowed ground.

I turn away. My heart, which has for so many years ached with the melancholy of what seems now like an ancient separation -- bleeds now with a fresh severance.

III - Sufficient Obsession

Not long after the February, 1963, suicide of Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, the husband from whom she was estranged, wrote to a stateside friend: "That's the end of my life. The rest is posthumous" (Gifford 15).

This "posthumous" part of his life lasted for more than thirty-five years. It is well known to those of us who have read book after book which had anything to do with Sylvia Plath; the events of his "posthumous" life included moving back into Court Green, the Dorset home he and Plath had bought; bringing Assia Weevil -- the *other* woman -- into that home -- the woman whose affair with Hughes, which began some months before Plath's death, must have been, when Plath learned about it, like a sledgehammer slamming down again and again, bruise upon bruise, *ad infinitum*, on her psyche. Plath may have come to believe that only death could stop the hammering.

And, six years into Hughes's "posthumous" life, Assia Weevil took her own life in a

fashion similar to that used by Plath -- excepting that Weevil took with her the daughter, Shura, born of her union with Hughes.

Eventually Hughes married the daughter of a nearby farmer. He raised his children, he farmed, he fished, he hunted. He had other affairs. Throughout his "posthumous" life, poems got written. Many are tinged with imagery of violence.

In 1984 Hughes was appointed by Queen Elizabeth to be the Poet Laureate of Britain. At his death in 1998, his position gave him the right of burial in Westminster Abbey; instead his ashes were spread near his home in Dorset, along the River Taw, where he had loved to hike and fish.

His death prompted the publication of numerous books. I read all that I came across, including, notably, biographies of him by Elaine Feinstein and by Diane Middlebrook; the 784 paged *Letters of Ted Hughes;* even the memoir of a woman who had had an affair with Hughes, and who evidently had written the memoir years earlier, making me wonder if she had waited to cash in on her tiny place in his notoriety in order to avoid a lawsuit ... *the dead can not sue; the dead can not testify in a court of law*.

Toward the end of this century's first decade the thought came to me that I wanted to be finished with Plath. I wanted to break up.

Enough. Enough is enough. I'm going to read more Hermann Hesse and more Thomas Mann; some Robert Musil; some Tolstoy; some of the good stuff I never got around to. I know all I need to know about Sylvia Plath. I don't want to be obsessed any longer. Perhaps I'll take up with Edna Millay.

But obsession, while it may dwindle, doesn't just come to a full stop, and there was more sadness to come. On March 16, 2009, Ted and Sylvia's son, Nicholas, who was said to have been a quiet, respected, well-liked ichthyologist in Alaska, who, if questioned about his famous parents, brushed aside those queries by commenting that his passion was not for literature, but for biology, hung himself at his home near Fairbanks. He was just forty-seven.

Further sadness: shortly after the death of Nicholas Hughes, I saw, on the Internet, an article in an English tabloid which featured a picture of Sylvia holding the baby Nicholas. Written over the photograph was the headline "Sylvia Plath and the Child She Killed."

Enough! I want to be done with all the sadnesses caused by the infidelity of one certain man. I no longer want to be one of those described by that man as one of "the dogs... eating" the

mother of his children (Hughes 195). *I want to stop thinking about Sylvia Plath. I want to stop wanting what is not possible: preventing her suicide.*

III. Ceremony

There was, on September 1, 2010, a press release from the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine headlined: "Sylvia Plath to be Inducted in Poets' Corner."

The word *closure* came to mind. Even if there is really no such thing as closure. still, I could mark my intended cessation of Plath-obsession with ceremony. I *needed* to attend the two nights of the induction ceremonies. I phoned my dear friend Ellen Farnum, who lives on the Lower East Side, and reserved couch-space for a long weekend.

The Poet's Corner was established in 1983. Each year, one American poet is selected for the honor of induction. A stone plaque, engraved with a line from her or his work, is installed on the wall in the "Poets' Corner" of the cathedral. The quote that would be chosen from Plath's work would join those of other greats: Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Langston Hughes, Emily Dickinson, W.H. Auden, Tennessee Williams, Robert Lowell, and so forth.

The cathedral would present a program celebrating Plath on a Thursday evening. The formal induction would take place on the Sunday following, November 7th, in conjunction with the traditional Episcopalian Evensong.

(Interestingly, two poets, T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, are honored in both the Poets' Corner at Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, as well as the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey in London; Eliot, having been born in St. Louise, became a citizen of Britain; Auden, born in Yorktown, became an American.)

The Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, is magnificent. It is said to be the largest Gothic cathedral in the world. But it is more than large. It is gigantic. It is mammoth. It is enormous. It is colossal. It is an awesomely majestic space; even an agnostic, comfortably knowing himself to be, in the words of e e cummings, a "human merely being," can gaze in awe at the grandeur expressed in honor of a "greater" being whom some think of as *The* creator (Cummings 663). One can lean against one of the cathedral's soaring pillars for a digital snapshot and notice seconds later how small

man is compared to the grandeur of faith.

The Thursday evening program, "A Celebration of Sylvia Plath", consisted of speeches and readings of her poems -- Karen V. Kukil, an Associate Curator at the Smith College Rare Book Room, where so much Plath material is held, spoke about passages from Plath's journals (which journals, in the unabridged edition, Kukil edited). Marilyn Nelson, distinguished in scholarly gown, the Poet in Residence at the Cathedral, spoke of her personal appreciation of Plath's work. Poet Annie Finch spoke about Plath's magic with our language. Several Plath poems were read by members of louderARTS, a Lower East Side consortium which refers to itself as "the home for all things performance poetry in New York City." The consortium performers were beautiful, professional, and excellent. They were followed by Irish-born poet Paul Muldoon's recitation of "Daddy." Then, a pianist, a clarinetist, and a soprano performed three Plath poems which had been set to music by composer Ned Rorem. All in all, a beautifully dignified ceremony ... nothing more could be wished for except that Sylvia Plath herself could have been there to soak up the deep admiration that she has earned with her astonishing poetry ... and I found myself hoping that there *is* some sort of life after death, and that Plath was, indeed, seeing all.

The November Seventh Sunday late-afternoon ceremony, the formal induction, was incorporated within the lovely Episcopalian Evensong. Three additional Plath poems were spoken -- poet Major Jackson's recitation of "Daddy" was especially eloquent, his voice a special gift.

At the end of Evensong, all present were invited to gather at The Poets' Corner for the

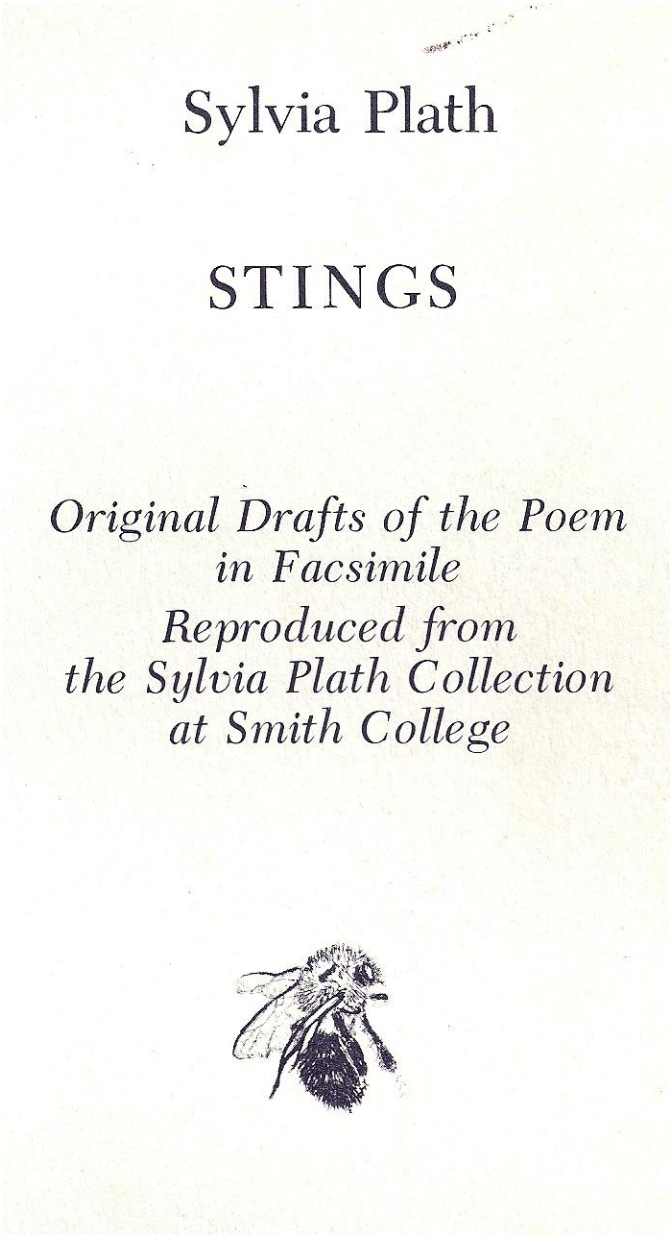
unveiling of Plath's stone. The drapery was removed. There! Plath's words! Prestige in stone!

This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary

Following the unveiling we were treated by the Cathedral and organist James Kennerley to a stupendously uplifting, soul-filling recital; rarely have I been so sumptuously enclosed and transfixed within such powerful sound; both the body and the soul tingled with richness. In my mind I offered up a reverential kiss to the spirit of Sylvia Plath; even now, I lift my hands from the keyboard and blow a kiss across my palms, aiming it toward a high pedestal in my mind. "Thank you, Sylvia Plath," I say. "You have enriched my life tremendously."

There is no promise of a crowning moment to anything, but being present at the induction ceremonies felt like a crowning moment to my decades-long obsession with the poems and the biography of the woman who is my favorite poet; the woman whom I consider to be America's most amazing sculptor of words; the woman whose life I longed to save even though she was long dead before I'd read a single one of her poems.

IV. Doing the Right Thing



Back home on Cape Cod, I wondered what I might do with my Plath treasures: books by her; books about her; the stolen feather; the postcard I'd received from her mother in 1977; the treasured copy of *Stings - Original Drafts of the Poem in Facsimile Reproduced from the Sylvia Plath Collection at Smith College* which had been given to me by the kind librarian who'd greeted me so often at the Rare Book Room in Northampton.

On January 10, 2011, I returned to Northampton. I was happy to see that the librarian on duty was the one who had always been so pleasant and welcoming. I told her that many years earlier I'd stolen a feather from Sylvia Plath's volume of Proust; I now wanted to return it to its proper place.

"You're not the first one who had such a notion," she said. "You wouldn't believe how much stuff people bring in ... mostly library cards with Sylvia's signature. In those days, as you know, you signed a card when you checked out a book."

I also donated my postcard from Aurelia Plath to the library.

The postcard weighed less than an ounce; the feather weighed much less. If my collection of Plath items were measured by weight, I have made but a tiny dent in the disposing of it.

It is, nevertheless, a start.

Works Cited

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