

## The Best Resurrections: Letter from Yaddo: Saratoga Springs, New York, May 2007

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I have broken the rules and sneaked from my cabin at Yaddo—the artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York—into Sylvia Plath's former writer's studio (currently unoccupied): an attic of two rooms at the top of West House's winding third-floor staircase. Plath and her husband Ted Hughes stayed as guests of the colony—founded by Katrina and Spenser Trask—from September tenth until just before Thanksgiving, during the fall of 1959. As Grace Schulman notes in her essay, "Sylvia Plath and Yaddo," the autumnal goings-on at the colony were busy ones for Plath domestically: she "learned she was pregnant (with her first child, Frieda, the girl she was to deliver in England the following April); she celebrated her twenty-seventh birthday with a cake and candles and *vin rosé*; she studied German" (166).

Plath's experience at Yaddo also radically shaped her development as a poet; this residency was the first time in her three years of married life that she was able to work separately from Hughes. Yaddo, though, for Plath, proved a mixed bag: she enjoyed her artistic freedom, but felt pressured by her luxurious accommodations to create works of genius. In *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, she berates herself, asking, "What have you done, what have you done?" (522). Her journal entries from Yaddo are depressed, self-chastising, and pleased by turns.

Plath's Yaddo poems, however, crescendo in their artfulness, their slangier diction, and their rapidly associative images, culminating in the resounding successes of "Poem for a Birthday" and "Mushrooms." Plath, confident in the new poems she wrote at the colony, even restructured her first book, adding new work to the collection that she had been sending out for publication, and even changing the title to *The Colossus and Other Poems*, after a poem she had written at Yaddo. In addition to reading for seven hours a day, according to Schulman, Plath "devised, with her husband, exercises in incantation to change the tone of her earlier descriptive poems (as in 'Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor') to a more immediate diction (as in 'Mushrooms,' which developed from



the incantations)" (166). Diane Middlebrook suggests, in her biography of the Plath/Hughes marriage, *Her Husband*, that the couple's "hypnotizing each other may well have been a ritual by which they marked a need for separation for retreat into their own subjectivities, in order to get their work done" (109). Plath's empowering stint at Yaddo foreshadows the amazingly productive period in late 1962 until her death in February, 1963, when she again worked apart from Hughes (due to the dissolution of their marriage and resulting separation), and wrote most of her *Ariel* poems and other work meant for a third collection, with a fiery, liberating creative spirit.

Like many women poets, I feel strong ties to Plath's poetry. As I poke around her attic, and walk the gothic splendor of the sprawling Yaddo estate, I crave some tangible connection to her past experience here. Since my arrival at the colony, I have revisited Plath's poems and journal entries with a new sensitivity and awareness of Yaddo's landscape and lore, which has turned up surprising revelations.

I gave myself an extreme case of the willies a couple of nights ago when, during a lightning storm, I sat reading Plath in the cavernous second floor parlor of the fifty-five room Trask mansion. (My sliver of a bedroom on the third floor is a former servant's room, and it gets hot and humid when it rains.) The way the lightning flashed across the gilt framed portrait of the Trask children, the Piranesi prints, the yellow velvet cushions, and the carved wooden angels in the dim chamber both unnerved and bemused me. Plath would approve of the mood lighting, no doubt.

I have learned that Plath, whose guest card reads, "Mrs. Ted Hughes," wrote a third of the poems from her first collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, during her stay at the colony. Plath's Yaddo *oeuvre* includes the following works, listed in chronological order: "Yaddo: The Grand Manor," "Medallion," "The Manor Garden," "Blue Moles," "Dark Wood, Dark Water," "Polly's Tree," "The Colossus," "Private Ground," "Poem for a Birthday," "The Burnt-out Spa," and "Mushrooms." Plath's Yaddo poems, a heterogeneous bunch, reflect two important turning points in Plath's poetics: the wryly comic manner with which she portrays the dead father figure in "The Colossus" and her mythic exploration of her recovery from her first suicide attempt in 1953, and the ensuing electroshock therapy she endured at McLean Hospital, in "Poem for a Birthday,"



the seven-part sequence she calls, according to the *Journals*, her "madhouse poems" (521).

From her double-chambered attic at Yaddo, the newly-pregnant Plath suffers from awful nightmares (like the one in which she gives birth to a baby with a "nest of uterus" in his nose), her depressive "fall illness," guilt from being pampered at the colony, and the scathing voice of her inner critic who desired, desperately, to publish short stories in *The New Yorker* and to win the Yale prize for her first book of poems (506). Despite her droll journal entry that groans, "I am not meant for this monastery living," Plath makes a breakthrough in her poetry at Yaddo (523). "In the morning light," Plath muses in mid-September, "all is possible; even becoming a god" (502).

My current vantage point is from Plath's third-floor attic in West House, the slightly smaller Trask uber-mansion located between the main mansion and my quaint blue cabin studio, "Meadow," on the edge of the woods. Like the mansion, West House is adorned with gaudy old portraits, plush carpets, and odd souvenirs from the Trask's European vacations. In a letter to her mother, Plath describes her room as "low-ceilinged, painted white, with a cot, a rug, a huge, heavy dark-wood table that I use as a typing and writing table with piles of room for papers and books" (353). She also mentions its "skylight and four windows on the east side that open out onto a little porch looking over gables and into tall, dense green pines" (353). I can hear the housekeeper's brisk sweeping downstairs in the piano room, and hope she does not hear me creaking around up here. I picture her busting me: "No rhubarb pie for you tonight, girl!"

I peer from the attic's four diamond-paned windows onto West House's rose and slate-colored shingles, its eggshell-blue brick chimney, and the dark line of evergreens that tower over a footpath, rusty orange with fallen pine needles. Plath, too, notices the magical potential of the Yaddo estate: "the pink and blue and lavender slates of the slant roof," and a transformative rain that falls "like a chameleon water," which recalls Keats's famously adaptive "Camelion poet" (512). I can see a splash of lilac, scattered white heather, the head cook's gentle black dog, and a guest holding a coffee thermos as she ambles toward the library to check her email. Inside, the attic's low eaves slope claustrophobically, so that the polka dotted coral armchair seems to take up the room's entire far right corner. The flared bells of two milky glass sconces scallop behind me. I



run my hands over the desk's swirling wood grain, the desk plain except for its four fluted legs. I raise my hands in the air above the desk—wrists bent—to approximate the position of Plath's old typewriter (the space is currently covered by a two-foot wide tear-away notepad of Quill paper—the mother of all post-it notes—ready for the next guest's laptop).

I hear the housekeeper close a door and quiet down, so I tiptoe to the adjacent attic room, currently undergoing renovations and stuffed with extra furniture. I open a fold-out antique writing desk, and yelp as I find a small, black-ink doodle of a witch with a floppy, crossed-hatched hat. Is this caricature Plath's ghastly personage from "Witch Burning"? ("A black-sharded lady keeps me in a parrot cage. / What large eyes the dead have!") (*Collected Poems* 135) After a ruminative squint, I note, with some disappointment, that the work is a decidedly un-Plathian doodle. If Plath happened to vandalize her desk—uncharacteristic, no?—surely she would have rendered the witch's stumpy nose and filled-in lips with greater skill, as evidenced in her meticulous journal sketches of the Yaddo statuary and other opulent Traskian knick-knacks. Better yet, she would have painted in red nail polish a decorative cluster of cartoon hearts, which, according to Hughes, she did at Court Green to accent their furniture. Moving on, I pry open a narrow crawl space to find...an empty pack of Marlboros and a flattened juice box. What does a girl have to do around here to get her hands on a relic?

Last night, six of us (two poets, a composer, a painter, a novelist, and a performance artist) gathered around a rickety circular table with a Ouija board in Plath's dark studio. We lit two candles: a rose-scented one inside votive glass, and an absurd, glittery wax jack-o'lantern someone found near the first aid kit in West House's pantry. Someone wailed in throaty falsetto, like a horror movie's Theremin soundtrack; another woman joked about the nearly full moon being just right for the occasion. Plath and Hughes used Ouija in the past to contact the alleged god Pan as well as the Kolossus, who claimed to be an agent of Prince Otto, her dead father (none of whom made an appearance for us in the attic). Whether or not Plath's spirit urged us to value youth, to love and help each other, and repeatedly stuttered toward the Ouija's cartoonish symbol of a heart, depends on one's personal degree of skepticism. Regardless, I felt that we had held an appropriate vigil—the forbidden candlelit attic, the yellow gibbous moon, the



Ouija, our often giggly addresses to the spirit world. The climate of our tribute intensified as we took turns reading aloud a selection of poems Plath composed at Yaddo.

In "Yaddo: The Grand Manor," Plath describes one of many original pieces of Tiffany glass found in the Trask mansion, the luxurious jewel-toned silk carpets, the ubiquitous diamond-paned windows, and the curious pair of painted sleighs poised like sentinels on either side of the exquisite marble fountain just outside the cocktail room. The sleighs were gifts to Katrina Trask from the Queen of the Netherlands. (Several decades prior to Plath's stint at Yaddo, John Cheever famously absconded with a sleigh and used it to push Mary Heaton Vorse down the royal plush of the grand staircase, as she shouted, "Hooves of fire," waving an imaginary lasso.) The following stanzas evoke Yaddo's dinner atmosphere familiar to Plath, to Cheever, and to today's artists. Each night, guests like me gather for drinks and dinner, and ask one another about our day's work:

Indoors, Tiffany's phoenix rises  
Above the fireplace;  
Two carved sleighs

Rest on orange plush near the newel post.  
Wood stoves burn warm as toast.  
The late guest

Wakens, mornings to a cobalt sky,  
A diamond-paned window,  
Zinc-white snow. (*Collected Poems* 123)

Before dinner each night, as I admire the fireplace's phoenix mosaic, I recall the self-mocking speaker in Plath's "Lady Lazarus," triumphantly—and defiantly—reborn like the phoenix: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (247). Perhaps Plath recalled Yaddo's own phoenix a second time as she composed "Lady Lazarus" three years after conjuring the same mythical beast in "Yaddo: The Grand Manor."

In "The Manor Garden," Plath's speaker walks us through Yaddo's autumnal rose garden and the misty footpaths bordering the four lakes. Each lake at Yaddo is named after a dead Trask child—Alan, Christina, Spenser, and Katrina—the four lost heirs of the estate whom Plath describes:



The fountains are dry and the roses over.  
 Incense of death. Your day approaches.  
 The pears fatten like little buddhas.  
 A blue mist is dragging the lake. (125)

My own walk around the four lakes gave me a start when, after being regaled with other guests' numerous ghost stories (and beset with a swathe of goosebumps), I decided to go on a hike despite the thick mist that nearly swelled the canopy of evergreens shut, like a dark roof. As I veered away from the signs of humanity visible at the adjacent racetrack (the Saratoga Race Track borders one side of Yaddo's forests and may be spied, at times, through gaps in the trees), a deer crossed my path. Instead of bolting, the doe looked at me, and stalked placidly—almost deliberately—down a branching secondary trail. A moment like this is exactly the wrong time to recall the nightmare Plath records in her late-September journal entry: "A dream last night of my father making an iron statue of a deer, which had a flaw in the casting of the metal. The deer came alive and lay with a broken neck. Had to be shot. Blamed father for killing it, through faulty art" (*Journals* 510).

After a rallying throat-clear, I followed the doe for about forty feet before getting spooked. "Plath's ghost-doe is leading me to the Trask graveyard on the hill," I thought, whirling around to continue my hike elsewhere. As I approached the Grimm-like stone tower with its needly spire (the most isolated musician's studio that overlooks a weedy lake), I repeated to myself: "Don't think about ghost stories, don't think about ghosts." A giant blue heron alighted suddenly from a shrub to my right, making a sharp sound like someone's fingernails scraping loudly over corrugated cardboard. This is the last time I would go walking after the rains.

Within the ruinous landscape of "The Colossus," I wonder if Plath subtly evokes the "weedy acres" of the Yaddo estate, which so easily haunts one's psyche. While, according to Hughes, Plath dreamed at Yaddo about trying to piece together the ruins of her father as a fallen Colossus, the manor garden's classically inspired architecture no doubt informs Plath's imagery in "The Colossus":

A blue sky out of the Oresteia  
 Arches above us. O father, all by yourself  
 You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.  
 I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress.



Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered  
In their old anarchy to the horizon-line. (*Collected Poems* 129)

The Yaddo garden's white marble statues and Romanesque columned pergola—commissioned by Spenser Trask for his wife Katrina in 1899—may well be the classically inspired backdrop that urges Plath's bereaved speaker in "The Colossus" from personal tragedy toward her grief's mythical status. In "The Colossus," the father's "fluted bones and acanthine hair" might seem on a first read like gestures of pure surrealism, although they clearly echo imagery unique to the Yaddo landscape, such as the "broken flutings" and "crowns of acanthus" that Plath describes in "The Manor Garden."

Plath wrote to her mother about her impressions of Yaddo's landscape: "I particularly love the scenic beauty of the estate: the rose garden, goldfish pools, marble statuary everywhere, woodland walks, little lakes" (*Letters Home* 354). Who but Plath could impart such searing, gothic verve to someone simply eating lunch on a tree-covered hill, as many of us do here at Yaddo, lugging our lunchboxes under the ancient trees? Plath writes, "We simply eat breakfast, go to our respective studios with a picnic lunch and write, read, and study..." (355). Who knows if Plath walked from the terraced rose garden past the large fountain on the sloping lawn, and, passing the Trasks' gravesite, imagined the eyes of her ruined stone Colossus as "bald, white tumuli"? Also (and this is best done without any stray Saratogians around touring the public gardens), it is great fun to recite, "O father, all by yourself / You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum," as one walks through the stately, open hall of the marble pergola—its greyed, ionic columns flashing by on either side.

"The Colossus," as Schulman points out, "represents a turning point in [Plath's] poems about the father, about the gods in her mythology, and about what she spoke of as her 'death,' the failed suicide attempt of 1953" (174). Plath, too, intuitively grasps the changes in her poems, the "weird" associative power of her images, encouraged, evidently, by her forays into hypnosis:

I tried Ted's "exercises": deep-breathing, concentration on stream-of-conscious objects...and wrote two poems that pleased me. One a poem to Nicholas, and one the old father-worship subject. But different. Weirder. I see a picture, a weather, in these poems. (518)



The Yaddo imagery in "The Colossus" might remain rather speculative if it were not for the clear context of the classical statuary threatened by the season's changing climate in the proceeding poem, "Private Ground," in which Plath depicts imagery unique to the colony:

First frost, and I walk among the rose-fruit, the marble toes  
Of the Greek beauties you brought  
Off Europe's relic heap  
To sweeten your neck of the New York woods.  
Soon each white lady will be boarded up  
Against the cracking climate. (*Collected Poems* 130)

Presumably, Plath addresses either one or both of the Trasks in "Private Ground," writing, "Eleven weeks, and I know your estate so well / I hardly go out at all. / A superhighway seals me off" (130). Daily, I hear the faint rush of the same superhighway Plath mentions from my cabin studio. Incidentally, Plath plucks the following lines from "Private Ground," and reuses them brilliantly in a later poem for *Ariel*: "In here, the grasses / Unload their griefs on my shoes" (130). Two years later, the Yaddo lines resurface with increased metaphorical vigor and self-aggrandizement in "The Moon and the Yew Tree" (1961): "The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God" (172). "The Moon and the Yew Tree" recalls both "Private Ground" and Plath's journal entry in which "all is possible; even becoming a god" (*Journals* 502). Was it here, among the spruce and stone of the Yaddo estate, that Plath first channeled the omnipotent voice of *Ariel*? To what extent, though, does Plath yield to Yaddo's seductive landscape, its lethal blankness, its graceful, pastoral cool?

"Of course I depend on the mirror of the world," Plath acknowledges in her *Journals* (511). Although the mimetic "mirror held up to nature" analogy may aptly describe some of Plath's Yaddo poems, it is not applicable to her better work from the later colony period in late October and November of 1959. In the same journal entry, Plath takes pride in her early Yaddo poem, "Medallion": "I have one poem I am sure of, the snake one" (511). Her evocations of nature in "Medallion," however, have the same noun-heavy, sluggishly faithful attention to detailing landscape that we find in her labored journal descriptions of the Yaddo manor's interior: "White walls, dark wood-framed engravings—ruddy orange carpet—yellow chairs. Fat bellied cherubs carved on



desk—tall candlesticks with holder like ladies leg o'mutton sleeve—glossy green stones set in fine vents—" (505). Observe Plath's descriptions of a dead snake in "Medallion":

By the gate with star and moon  
Worked into the peeled orange wood  
The bronze snake lay in the sun

Inert as a shoelace; dead  
But pliable still, his jaw  
Unhinged and his grin crooked,

Tongue a rose-colored arrow. (*Collected Poems* 124)

Later, on October tenth, Plath records details of the Yaddo landscape, focusing on three aggressively sprouting toadstools outside her lodgings, which she uses as fodder for her poem "Mushrooms":

Big as oranges, rounded battering rams, they fisted themselves through the soil... They were orange-ruddy at the top, as if the color pooled there, with porous yellow, pale lemon stems and virginal white underpleats, the tops tufted also in pale lemon. (516)

In "Mushrooms," the last poem Plath writes at Yaddo (also in *terza rima*), she moves from her static, imagist depictions of nature in "Medallion," and "speaks" for the "meek" yet persistent mushrooms as "we," in her giddily anthropomorphic fable of tenacity:

Overnight, very  
Whitely, discreetly,  
Very quietly

Our toes, our noses  
Take hold on the loam,  
Acquire the air.

Nobody sees us,  
Stops us, betrays us;  
The small grains make room. (*Collected Poems* 139)

In *How Poets See the World: The Art of Description in Contemporary Poetry*, Willard Spiegelman writes that:

[i]t is easy to locate our central tradition in the idea that the things of the world invite us to describe them, in an act of celebration, as though "observation" were compounded of equal parts of watching and participating... But those same things



also look at us, so it requires an active and daring, almost heroic imagination to "brave the landscape's looks," whether as painter, poet or mere onlooker. (9)

Indeed, landscape is anything but a simplistic, ready-made poem-generator, a circumstance of which Plath seems keenly aware. "My sickness," Plath laments, "is when words draw in their horns and the physical world refuses to be ordered, recreated, arranged and selected. I am a victim of it then, not a master" (*Journals* 516). Three days later, Plath admonishes herself for allowing her obsession with prizes and professional achievement to obfuscate her creative impulses at Yaddo: "Must stop this. Grow enamoured of the orange toadstool, the blue mountain, and feel them solid, make something of them" (518). Plath takes her own advice: "Wrote an exercise on mushrooms yesterday which Ted likes. And I do too" (529).

"Central to an American approach to landscape," Spiegelman argues, "is the collective and complex effort to reply to its invitations or temptations by honoring, with or without subduing, it" (13). In "Mushrooms," Plath's ventriloquizing the fungi seems just the right move: a consuming identification—or violent usurpation?—that both aggrandizes and mythologizes an aggressively performative, constructed self, one that is wry, energetic, giddy, and boldly associative. Schulman in fact argues for the emergence of a speaker in "Mushrooms" that "prefigures the liberating voices of *Ariel*":

Here, though, the identification is with a force that is energetic and winning, but frightening and aggressive. The human character of the vegetable mushrooms seems evident in the language: "discreetly," "our toes, our noses," "nudgers and shovers." The poet is writing of a physical universe that is threatening and cold, but the prevailing tone is, again, astonishment. (172)

In *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, Linda Wagner-Martin refers to "Mushrooms" as "the first of her three-line-stanza poems that move rapidly, connected more often by images than by narrative" (166). In addition to Plath's hypnotic focus on objects—what she calls in her *Journals* the "selfhood of things"—and associative image-making while a guest at Yaddo, she also has Theodore Roethke to thank for some of the new images she pursues in her poems (520). Plath's long poem in seven sections, "Poem for a Birthday," which Wagner-Martin considers the best of the Yaddo poems, began as an exercise based on Roethke's sequences, "Words for the Wind" and "Meditations for an Old Woman" (167). Wagner-Martin describes how Plath's ambitious and eclectic "Poem for a Birthday":



combined history, clusters of strong and unexpected images, and haunting phrasing to create an exploration of the whole poetic self. Written in a childlike language reminiscent of Roethke, the poem included many of her dreams as she had recorded them in her journal, as well as images from Jung and Freud, and from Paul Radin's African folktales...It recounts, usually in a surreal manner, details of Plath's childhood, her breakdown, her electroconvulsive shock treatments, her self-doubt, her marriage, and the problems of being female in mid-century America. (168)

In section seven of "Poem for a Birthday," titled "The Stones":

This is the city where men are mended.  
I lie on a great anvil.  
The flat blue sky-circle

Flew off like the hat of a doll.  
When I fell out of the light. I entered  
The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard.

(*Collected Poems* 136)

Yaddo, even amid the surreal machinations of "Poem for a Birthday," is a continuous presence that informs Plath's worlds of metaphor and imagistic palette. Schulman notices how "nearly all" of Plath's Yaddo poems feature images of stones, and how the colony's stone-covered landscape may have reasonably obsessed her poetic imagination:

there are stone fountains; stone pedestals; the fieldstone towers of West House; the turreted sandstone mansion with its stone terrace; the stone arch to a stately rose garden; "the rock garden," in which water streams from a pile of moss-covered black rocks and falls into a pool, enclosed by stones...the gravestones of Spenser Trask and his wife, Katrina...(172)

In "The Stones," we witness Plath's nascent *Ariel* voice, her hospital imagery that later recurs in "Tulips" and "Paralytic," her acute fear of the crippling effects of ennui, as well as several possible allusions to Yaddo's unique array of ghosts. In the stanza below, I wonder if Plath cryptically evokes the Trask children—all four of whom died in early childhood—in addition to their father, Spenser Trask, former master of Yaddo. A staff member of the Yaddo office informed me during my stay that Spenser Trask had only one eye (the other was put out in a car accident a year before his death), and that he would alternate between two false eyes of different colored glass to match the color of his real eye, the shades of which would shift with seasonal light. Since his death in a freak train accident in 1909, Spenser Trask's glass eyeballs are kept inside a safe at Yaddo.



(Each day, I fight my morbid urge to beg to touch the eyes.) Also, in a nightmare Plath recounts in her *Journals*, her mother appears "dead with the Eye Bank having cut her eyes out" (506). Enter Plath's surreal hospital, her "city of spare parts":

On Fridays the little children come

To trade their hooks for hands.

Dead men leave eyes for others. (*Collected Poems* 137)

Such imagery in "The Stones" is unsettling, but it is also a generous Plathian mythos, where annihilation takes on oddly triumphant qualities (as does the rising phoenix-like speaker in "Lady Lazarus," and, in one reading of "Daddy," the indomitable speaker who is "through" with just about everything: fathers, husbands, telephones, self-pity, existence—you name it). In "The Stones," we are left with the hope of hands for the children, and the gift of "eyes for others"—Traskian, or otherwise.

I think every single guest at Yaddo, today and in past generations, feels an awareness of Spenser and Katrina Trask's extreme act of generosity, as well as a bittersweet appreciation for their children who, through their tragic deaths, made possible the grandeur of Yaddo's artistic legacy. I believe Plath's eleven weeks at Yaddo significantly shaped her evolution as a poet, as shown through her impressive body of Yaddo work, her early forays into subjective experience, and the brief flashes of Yaddo-inspired imagery that appear even in later *Ariel* poems. "I wonder about the poems I am doing," Plath writes of the work she produced at the colony. "The absence of a tightly reasoned and rhymed logic bothers me. Yet it frees me" (521). Plath's liberating Yaddo experience leaps from the pages of her poetry and journals, and I am convinced that her former attic studio could not *be* more 'Plathian,' moon included. The "clues" to Plath's literary experience at the colony abound, and will surely delight all writers and would-be poetry detectives. For guests new to Yaddo, like me, and former ones—and Ouija or no Ouija—I think the best resurrections happen in poetry.



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