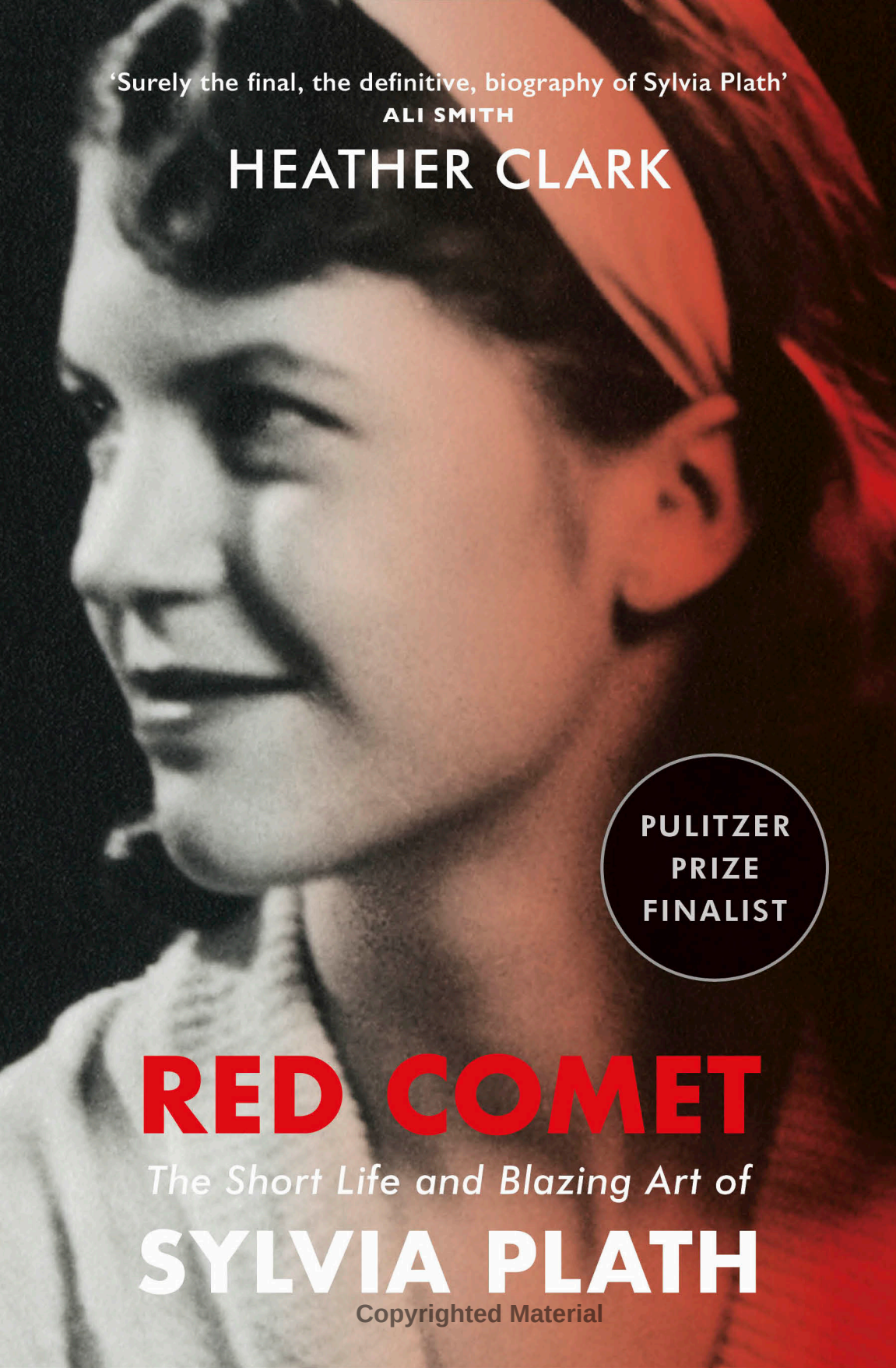

HEATHER CLARK

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ALSO BY HEATHER CLARK

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The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962–1972

Red Comet

The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath

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For Nathan, Isabel, and Liam

and

In Memory of Jon Stallworthy

. . . everyday, one has to earn the name of "writer" over again, with much wrestling.

—*Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath, October 2, 1956*

They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her—
The mausoleum, the wax house.

—*Sylvia Plath*, "Stings"

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Prologue

In December 1962, Sylvia Plath moved into William Butler Yeats's old house. Yeats was one of Plath's greatest literary heroes, and she had been thrilled to discover the vacant townhouse in London's Primrose Hill after the breakdown of her marriage. She was starting over, and she felt the move to Yeats's house was propitious. "My work should be blessed," she wrote her mother.[1] She offered a year's rent to secure the two-story maisonette—nearly all the money she had. Three months before, she and her husband, Ted Hughes, had traveled from their home in Devon to the west coast of Ireland, where they had collected apples from Yeats's garden at Thoor Ballylee and climbed the famous winding staircase to his tower's roof. Plath threw coins in the stream below for luck. The couple hoped that the trip to Ireland and the pilgrimage to Yeats's sacred tower would rekindle their marriage. But Plath returned to Devon alone. There, and in Yeats's house, she would write some of the finest poems of the twentieth century.

One of Sylvia Plath's favorite short stories was Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle." The story concerns a man, John Marcher, who spends his life waiting for an extreme experience—"*the* thing"—which he likens to a beast crouching in the jungle. It will be, he says, "natural" and "unmistakable." It may be "violent," a "catastrophe." Only too late does Marcher realize he has lived a passionless existence awaiting *the* thing. He has instead become the man to "whom nothing on earth was to have happened." The story ends as he flings himself at the tomb of the woman he should have loved. "When the possibilities themselves had accordingly turned stale, when the secret of the gods had grown faint, had perhaps even quite evaporated, that, and that only, was failure," James wrote. "It wouldn't have been failure to be bankrupt, dishonoured, pilloried, hanged; it was failure not to be anything."[2]

Sylvia Plath dreaded the prospect of such failure. In 1955, before setting off for England and Cambridge University, she wrote to her boyfriend

Gordon Lameyer, "the horror, to be jamesian [*sic*], is to find there are plenty of beasts in the jungle but somehow to have missed all the potshots at them. I am always afraid of letting 'life' slip by unobtrusively and waking up some 'fine morning' to wail windgrieved around my tombstone."[3] Modernist visions of human paralysis terrified her. T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and James Joyce's "The Dead" became personal admonitions. "NEUTRALITY, BOREDOM become worse sins than murder, worse than illicit love affairs," she told her Smith College students in 1958. "BE RIGHT OR WRONG, don't be indifferent, don't be NOTHING."[4] Plath's appetite for food was legendary—she once emptied a host's refrigerator before a dinner party—but she was equally hungry for experience. She was determined to live as fully as possible—to write, to travel, to cook, to draw, to love as much and as often as she could. She was, in the words of a close friend, "operatic" in her desires, a "Renaissance woman" molded as much by Romantic sublimity as New England stoicism.[5] She was as fluent in Nietzsche as she was in Emerson; as much in thrall to Yeats's gongs and gyres as Frost's silences and snow.

Sylvia Plath took herself and her desires seriously in a world that often refused to do so. She published her first poem at age eight and later vowed to become "The Poetess of America."[6] In the years that followed, Plath pursued her literary vocation with a fierce, tireless determination. She hoped to be a writer, wife, and mother, but she was raised in a culture that openly derided female artistic ambition. Such derision is clear in the speech Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson gave at Plath's 1955 Smith commencement, titled, "A Purpose for Modern Woman." The best way these brilliant graduates could contribute to their nation, Stevenson said, was to embrace "the humble role of housewife, which, statistically, is what most of you are going to be whether you like the idea or not just now—and you'll like it!" Stevenson, the liberal darling of his day, went on:

> This assignment for you, as wives and mothers, has great advantages. In the first place, it is home work—you can do it in the living room with a baby in your lap, or in the kitchen with a can opener in your hands. If you're really clever, maybe you can even practice your saving arts on that unsuspecting man while he's watching television.

Stevenson acknowledged "the sense of contraction, the lost horizons" these women would feel in their new domestic roles. "Once they wrote poetry," he mused. "Now it's the laundry list. . . . They had hoped to play their part in the crisis of the age. But what they do is wash diapers." He hoped this view was not "too depressing" but concluded that "women 'never had it so good' as you do."[7]

Plath was determined to play her part, but, as Stevenson's speech suggests, the odds were against her. She lived in a shamelessly discriminatory age when it was almost impossible for a woman to get a mortgage, loan, or credit card; when newspapers divided their employment ads between men and women ("Attractive Please!"); the word "pregnant" was banned from network television; and popular magazines encouraged wives to remain quiet because, as one advice columnist put it, "his topics of conversation are more important than yours."[8] Government, finance, law, media, academia, medicine, technology, science—nearly all the professions were controlled by men. Some women made inroads, but the costs were high. As one of Plath's Cambridge contemporaries wrote, women in the 1950s had "internalized from a lifetime of messages that achievement and autonomy were simply incompatible with love and family," and that "independence equaled loneliness."[9] Still, Plath thought a different fate from the one Stevenson had predicted for her might be possible. Like her Joycean hero Stephen Dedalus, she was filled with "Icarian lust": she would seek out her destiny abroad, collect experience for her art, and stay in motion.[10] Anything to evade the life not lived, the poem not written, the love not realized. Plath spread her wings, over and over, at a time when women were not supposed to fly.

The Oxford professor Hermione Lee, Virginia Woolf's biographer, has written, "Women writers whose lives involved abuse, mental-illness, self-harm, suicide, have often been treated, biographically, as victims or psychological case-histories first and as professional writers second."[11] This is especially true of Sylvia Plath, who has become cultural shorthand for female hysteria. When we see a female character reading *The Bell Jar* in a movie, we know she will make trouble. As the critic Maggie Nelson reminds us, "to be called the Sylvia Plath of anything is *a bad thing*."[12] Nelson reminds us, too, that a woman who explores depression in her art isn't perceived as "a shamanistic voyager to the dark side, but a 'madwoman in the attic,' an abject spectacle."[13] Perhaps this is why Woody Allen teased Diane Keaton for reading Plath's seminal collection *Ariel* in *Annie Hall*. In the 1980s, a prominent reviewer noted that a Plath "backlash" had resulted in some "grisly" jokes in college newspapers. "'Why did SP cross the road?' 'To be struck by an oncoming vehicle.'"[14] Male writers who kill themselves are rarely subject to such black humor: there are no dinner-party jokes about David Foster Wallace. In a 2017 article that went viral, Claire Dederer argued that Plath had become the culture's ultimate "female monster" for committing suicide and "abandoning" her children.[15] As the critic Carolyn Heilbrun noted, "If you admire Auden, that's good taste. If you admire Sylvia Plath, it's a cult. . . . It is the

usual no-win situation: either a woman author isn't studied, or studying her is reduced to an act of misplaced religious fanaticism."[16]

Since her suicide in 1963, Sylvia Plath has become a paradoxical symbol of female power and helplessness whose life has been subsumed by her afterlife. Caught in the limbo between icon and cliché, she has been mythologized and pathologized in movies, television, and biographies as a high priestess of poetry, obsessed with death. These distortions gained momentum in the 1960s when *Ariel* was published. Most reviewers didn't know what to make of the burning, pulsating metaphors in poems like "Lady Lazarus" or the chilly imagery of "Edge." *Time* called the book a "jet of flame from a literary dragon who in the last months of her life breathed a burning river of bale across the literary landscape."[17] *The Washington Post* dubbed Plath a "snake lady of misery" in an article entitled "The Cult of Plath."[18] Robert Lowell, in his introduction to *Ariel*, characterized Plath as Medea, hurtling toward her own destruction. Even Plath's closest reader, her husband Ted Hughes, often portrayed her as a passive vessel through which a dangerous muse spoke.

Recent scholarship has deepened our understanding of Plath as a master of performance and irony.[19] Yet the critical work done on Plath has not sufficiently altered her popular, clichéd image as the Marilyn Monroe of the literati. Melodramatic portraits of Plath as a crazed poetic priestess are still with us. A recent biographer called her "a sorceress who had the power to attract men with a flash of her intense eyes, a tortured soul whose only destiny was death by her own hand." He wrote that she "aspired to transform herself into a psychotic deity."[20] These caricatures have calcified over time into the popular, reductive version of Sylvia Plath we all know: the suicidal writer of *The Bell Jar* whose cultish devotees are black-clad young women. ("Sylvia Plath: The Muse of Teen Angst," reads the title of a 2003 article in *Psychology Today*.)[21] Plath thought herself a different kind of "sorceress": "I am a damn good high priestess of the intellect," she wrote her friend Mel Woody in July 1954.[22]

Many of Plath's friends have grown impatient with these distorted versions of her. Plath's close friend Phil McCurdy does not recognize the "literary psycho" he encounters in biographies that fail to capture her ebullient, brainy essence. "We were crazy, but it was crazy about Kafka," he said.[23] Plath's Smith confidante Ellie Friedman Klein is tired of her brilliant friend being chained to "the death machine," her suicide sensationalized.[24] That Plath is now identified with the clichés she examined ironically in her work is part of her tragedy.

Elizabeth Hardwick once wrote of Sylvia Plath, "when the curtain goes down, it is her own dead body there on the stage, sacrificed to her own plot."[25] Yet to suggest that Plath's suicide was some sort of grand finale only

perpetuates the Plath myth that simplifies our understanding of her work and her life. Previous biographies have focused on the trajectory of Plath's suicide, as if her every act, from childhood on, was predetermined to bring her closer to a fate she deserved for flying too close to the sun. This book will trace Plath's literary and intellectual development rather than her undoing.

This is the first full biography of Sylvia Plath to incorporate all of her surviving letters—including fourteen newly discovered letters she sent to her psychiatrist in 1960–63 and several important unpublished letters—and to draw extensively on Plath's unpublished diaries, calendars, and creative work in addition to her published writings. Because the Plath and Hughes estates allowed me to scan Plath's and Hughes's published and unpublished papers throughout this project, I have been able to quote directly from sources rather than hastily scribbled archival notes. This is also the first Plath biography to delve deeply into Plath's family history, including her father's FBI investigation and her grandmother's institutionalization; to feature a surviving portion of Plath's lost novel, *Falcon Yard*, which I discovered misfiled in an archive; to make use of previously unexamined police, court, and hospital records; to offer new interpretations and insights into Plath's life based on the testimony and archival holdings of more than fifty contemporaries; to put forward new information that changes our understanding of Plath's last week; and to draw on the entirety of Ted Hughes's archives at Emory University and the British Library, which hold many unpublished poems and journal entries by Hughes about Plath. Lastly, this is the first biography of Plath to incorporate material from the Harriet Rosenstein archive at Emory University, which opened in 2020. Rosenstein interviewed scores of Plath's contemporaries in the early 1970s while she was working on a Plath biography, which she never finished. These spectral voices from the past shed new light on Plath's relationships, her medical treatment, and her writing.

This book is by no means the last word on Sylvia Plath. Over time, new material will surface and new questions will emerge. But it is, I hope, a richer, more accurate, and less pathological portrait of Sylvia Plath's life than what now exists. By sifting through Plath's poems, prose, sketches, journals, and letters, as well as the transatlantic archives of her husband and contemporaries—and listening to the testimony of dozens of friends, many on record for the first time—I have tried to recover what Plath gave to us rather than what she gave up. I hope to free Plath from the cultural baggage of the past fifty years and reposition her as one of the most important American writers of the twentieth century. Plath's best poetry is as aesthetically accomplished, groundbreaking, and reflective of its historical moment as the poetry of her idols, W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot. She ought to be remembered for her transcendent, trailblazing poems, not for gassing herself in her kitchen.

Of course, what makes Sylvia Plath's life compelling to so many readers is its tragedy. Her life, her fame, and her art will always be tied to her suicide—there is no changing that. But the most famous woman poet of the twentieth century was neither fragile ingénue nor femme fatale. She was no Medea, no Eurydice, no Electra. Rather, she was a highly disciplined craftswoman whose singular voice helped transform American and British literature, and whose innovative work gave new energy to the burgeoning literary and cultural revolutions of her time. The goal, then, is to recover Sylvia Plath from cliché—to offer an alternative narrative to the Plath myth, to debunk the sensational and melodramatic rhetoric that surrounds her, and, finally, to examine her life through her commitment not to death, but to art.

Sylvia Plath was one of the most highly educated women of her generation, an academic superstar and perennial prizewinner. Even after a suicide attempt and several months at McLean Hospital, she still managed to graduate from Smith College summa cum laude. She was accepted to graduate programs in English at Columbia, Oxford, and Radcliffe and won a Fulbright Fellowship to Cambridge, where she graduated with high honors. She was so brilliant that Smith asked her to return to teach in their English department without a PhD. Her mastery of English literature's past and present intimidated her students and even her fellow poets. In Robert Lowell's 1959 creative writing seminar, Plath's peers remembered how easily she picked up on obscure literary allusions. "'It reminds me of Empson,' Sylvia would say. . . . 'It reminds me of Herbert.' 'Perhaps the early Marianne Moore?'"[26] Later, Plath made small talk with T. S. Eliot and Stephen Spender at London cocktail parties, where she was the model of wit and decorum.

Very few friends realized that she struggled with depression, which revealed itself episodically. In college, she aced her exams, drank in moderation, dressed sharply, and dated men from Yale and Amherst. She struck most as the proverbial golden girl. But when severe depression struck, she saw no way out. In 1953, a depressive episode led to botched electroshock therapy sessions at a notorious asylum. Plath told her friend Ellie Friedman that she had been led to the shock room and "electrocuted." "She told me that it was like being murdered, it was the most horrific thing in the world for her. She said, 'If this should ever happen to me again, I *will* kill myself.'"[27] Plath attempted suicide rather than endure further tortures.

In 1963, the stressors were different. A looming divorce, single motherhood, loneliness, illness, and a brutally cold winter fueled the final depression that would take her life. Plath had been a victim of psychiatric misman-

agement and negligence at age twenty, and she was terrified of depression's "cures," as she wrote in her last letter to her psychiatrist—shock treatment, insulin injections, institutionalization, "a mental hospital, lobotomies."[28] It is no accident that Plath killed herself on the day she was supposed to enter a British psychiatric ward.

Sylvia Plath did not think of herself as a depressive. She considered herself strong, passionate, intelligent, determined, and brave, like a character in a D. H. Lawrence novel. She was tough-minded and filled her journal with exhortations to work harder—evidence, others have said, of her pathological, neurotic perfectionism. Another interpretation is that she was—like many male writers—simply ambitious, eager to make her mark on the world. She knew that depression was her greatest adversary, the one thing that could hold her back. She distrusted psychiatry—especially male psychiatrists—and tried to understand her own depression intellectually through the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, Erich Fromm, and others. Self-medication, for Plath, meant analyzing the idea of a schizoid self in her honors thesis on *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Bitter experience taught her how to accommodate depression—exploit it, even—in her art. "There is an increasing market for mental-hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don't relive, or recreate it," she wrote in her journal.[29] The remark sounds trite, but her writing on depression was profound. Her own immigrant family background and experience at McLean Hospital gave her insight into the lives of the outcast. Elizabeth Hardwick's claim that Plath had "nothing of the social revolutionary in her" is simply not true.[30] Plath would fill her late work, sometimes controversially, with the disenfranchised—women, the mentally ill, refugees, political dissidents, Jews, prisoners, divorcées, mothers. As she matured, she became more determined to speak out on their behalf. In *The Bell Jar*, one of the greatest protest novels of the twentieth century, she probed the link between insanity and repression. Plath set *The Bell Jar* in 1953, but she wrote it in 1961, when she was moving in left-wing circles in London and becoming interested in the anti-psychiatry movement of R. D. Laing. *The Bell Jar*, like Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, exposed a repressive Cold War America that could drive even the "best minds" of a generation crazy. Are you really sick, Plath asks, or has your society made you so? She never romanticized depression and death; she did not swoon into darkness. Rather, she delineated the cold, blank atmospherics of depression, without flinching. Plath's ability to resurface after her depressive episodes gave her courage to explore, as Ted Hughes put it, "psychological depth, very lucidly focused and lit."[31] The themes of rebirth and renewal are as central to her poems as depression, rage, and destruction.

"What happens to a dream deferred?" Langston Hughes asked in his

poem "Harlem." Did it "crust and sugar over— / like a syrupy sweet?"[32] For most women of Plath's generation, it did. But Plath was determined to follow her literary vocation. She dreaded the condescending label of "lady poet," and she had no intention of remaining unmarried and childless like Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop. She wanted to be a wife, mother, and poet—a "triple-threat woman," as she put it to a friend.[33] These spheres hardly ever overlapped in the sexist era in which she was trapped, but for a time, she achieved all three goals.

Then, in the autumn of 1962, her marriage ended. The edifice fell, but the poetry came fast and strong. Alone with her two young children in a cold thatched manor home in rural England, she began writing the poems that would, as she predicted, make her name. While her early, formally intricate poems helped her achieve modest success, these *Ariel* poems—with their speed, daring, and bravado, and their rage against personal and historical oppressions—sounded a new note in postwar poetry. Plath died just eight days before Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published, but her work broke through a literary glass ceiling. Poems like "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" seethe at the sexist prescriptions of Plath's society, while "Edge" concedes with a cool, horrific irony that only a dead woman is "perfected." She seemed to have scored the emerging women's liberation movement to poetry.

More than fifty years later, Plath's poems now seem locked in a fixed context: "confessional," "feminist." Yet she wrote her poems before these terms entered the cultural imagination. While she learned much from Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, whom she met in the late fifties, her aesthetic impulse was more surrealist than confessional. Indeed, she treated the "confessional" impulse ironically in poems like "Lady Lazarus," where the heroine performs a striptease for the "peanut-crunching crowd" that has come to watch her bare all and attempt another suicide. (The poem practically predicts reality television.) And while Plath looked to female writers like Virginia Woolf, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Sara Teasdale, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edith Sitwell, and Anne Sexton for models, her education was grounded in male modernism. The psychological and anthropological writings of Carl Jung, Robert Graves, and James Frazer, as well as the poetry and prose of W. B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Robert Lowell, and Ted Hughes himself, were the bedrock on which she built her scaffolding. The psychoanalytic approaches that have dominated previous Plath biographies ignore this "impersonal" literary tradition in which she was steeped and out of which her work grew. Jane Baltzell Kopp, who knew Plath and Hughes well at Cambridge, spoke of "the old, High Culture" that permeated their student existence: "that tradi-

tion had everything to do with the way we in those days all saw ourselves, each other, and our lives." Anyone seriously interested in understanding Sylvia Plath's poetry, Kopp suggested, would learn more by studying her English Tripos exam at Cambridge than her relationship with her dead father. "The amount—and range—of reading implied by those questions tells the tale."[34]

Plath mastered this body of work, from Chaucer to Eliot. Her literary expertise may not be immediately apparent in a poem like "Daddy," with its stuttering lines and nursery rhyme cadences. But the poem is the product of a long apprenticeship; it is Picasso on the verge of Cubism. Plath had to master her tradition in order to create something new. Her *Ariel* poems explore family trauma, marital problems, and sexual jealousy, yes, but they also interrogate history, war, totalitarianism, and a male literary tradition that had shut women out. The allusions in "Daddy" to T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" are easy to miss amid the poem's many controversies. Likewise, "Edge" responds to W. B. Yeats, Robert Graves, and Shakespeare. *The Bell Jar* uses James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a template, while "Ariel" argues with Ted Hughes's "The Thought-Fox" about the sources of creative inspiration. Plath redefined the elegy in "The Colossus" and "Daddy," making space for anger as well as love and pathos. She pioneered the poetry of motherhood and challenged the male Romantic notion that the moorland outside her door was more sublime than her baby's nursery. She is one of the first poets in English to write about miscarriage, abortion, and postpartum anxiety. Her poems about depression's ravages—"Tulips," "Elm," "The Moon and the Yew Tree," "Sheep in Fog," "Edge"—are some of the finest in the language. They, and Plath herself, deserve a dispassionate reappraisal.

As does her marriage to Ted Hughes. The sensational nature of their first meeting—Plath famously bit Hughes's cheek when he kissed her at a raucous party—has obscured the literary context that brought them together. Their relationship was, from its first theatrical moments, soldered on the work of Lawrence, Yeats, and Thomas.[35] On the night they met in 1956, both were searching for a new idiom, eager to smash false poetic idols. For all their outward differences, they were, as a BBC commentator perceptively suggested, "two of a kind."[36] Their best poetry would be incantatory and unflinching; original, yet rooted in tradition; composed as much for the ear as for the eye. During the happy years of their marriage, Plath and Hughes dedicated themselves to writing a new kind of poetry, something "unliterary," as Plath put it, which would break from the "Elegant Academicians."[37] "Such unbelievable making of words do physical things—the words seem to *be* the things," the artist Barrie Cooke said of Hughes's poems in 1962.[38] The same is true of *Ariel*.

Plath and Hughes were not only husband and wife, they were also aes-

thetic collaborators: "If SP and I managed to get through it all, it was because for crucial years we defended each other, we were a sufficient world to each other: our poetic folie à deux saved us from being isolated, surrounded and eliminated," Hughes said.[39] "I see now that when we met, my writing, like hers, left its old path and started to circle and search."[40] Though the marriage did not last, its legacy reverberates still in the cadences of postwar fiction and poetry: *The Colossus*, *The Bell Jar*, *Ariel*, *The Hawk in the Rain*, and *Lupercal*, five of the most important works of the postwar period, were all largely written during the years of Plath and Hughes's marriage. Plath's confidence in their future had been prescient. As she wrote to Hughes in October 1956, "Darling, be scrupulous and date your letters. When we are old and spent, they will come asking for our letters; and we will have them dove-tailable."[41]

Hughes has been vilified for his behavior toward Plath, whom he left for Assia Wevill in 1962. At the height of the women's movement, protesters disrupted his American readings; Plath fans still vandalize the name "Hughes" on Plath's gravestone in Yorkshire. An American poet, Robin Morgan, accused Hughes in a poem of murdering Plath. "He was being haunted and tormented in the name of feminism," the American poet Ruth Fainlight, who was close to Plath and Hughes in the early 1960s, remembered.[42] Hughes's mishandling of Plath's papers and his rearrangement of her original *Ariel* manuscript did little to reassure Plath's readers that he was a responsible steward; he claimed that he destroyed her last 1963 journal, and, under his watch, her 1960–62 journals and 1962–63 unpublished novel disappeared.[43] Still, the venom baffled him. To him, Plath was " 'Laurentian,' not 'women's lib' "—that is, a disciple of D. H. Lawrence's sexually liberated, creative philosophy, not a campaigner for women's rights.[44] Hughes thought she would have resented the feminist label, as his friend Doris Lessing did, for Plath had often expressed contempt for "career women" who disdained homemaking and child-rearing. (Plath's psychiatrist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher, also felt that "Sylvia was not a feminist.")[45] Hughes did not recognize that Lawrence's novels offered Plath a template for equality and autonomy before the advent of second-wave feminism. Hughes retreated, and he let his sister Olwyn handle the Plath estate. But the two women, who met only six times, were bitter enemies; Olwyn once called Sylvia, in a published interview, "a complete bitch."[46] Olwyn portrayed Plath as selfish and unhinged in *Bitter Fame*, the controversial 1989 biography she coauthored with Anne Stevenson, and over the years she denied many feminist critics permission to quote Plath's work. As Edward Lucie-Smith said, Olwyn "made no bones about the fact that she detested Sylvia."[47]

The end of Plath and Hughes's marriage was indeed terrible and destructive. There was violence in the relationship—Hughes admitted to sometimes

slapping Plath when she was in a rage, while Plath once wrote in her journal of bloody scratches, sprained thumbs, and broken crockery. After the couple separated, Plath told Dr. Beuscher that Hughes had hit her in February 1961 when he returned home from an appointment and found her tearing up his manuscripts. Plath told Dr. Beuscher it was an "aberration," and there is evidence that Hughes deeply regretted this act for the rest of his life.[48] Violence was itself part of Plath and Hughes's shared mythology, something they explored in the bedroom and on the page. They felt British poetry was at a low point, full of a destructive gentility, and they were determined to shock it out of submission. Writing forcefully about the horrors of humanity and nature became part of their joint project—one that gave both much happiness before, as Plath wrote in an early poem, "the play turned tragic."[49]

Despite its bitter end, Plath and Hughes's experimental, creative marriage was progressive for its time. In the mid-fifties, most women abandoned professional aspirations when they married. Yet Hughes prodded Plath, sometimes to exhaustion, to become a better poet. He created exercises for her, made elaborate charts, hypnotized her, exhorted her to concentrate—all to access the inner depths of consciousness where he thought the raw poetic material was buried. Plath, too, constantly prodded Hughes to be more productive. He published very little at Cambridge University before he met Plath; after graduation he drifted, worked odd jobs, and hardly qualified as a minor poet. Plath changed that. She acted as his agent, sending out his manuscripts and entering contests for him. Within a year of their meeting, he was on his way to becoming the most famous young poet in England. He later acknowledged that he owed his literary career to her. She would have gone on writing and publishing if they had never met; he might not have. Without Plath's ambition at his back, as he wrote in a late poem, "I'd be fishing off a rock / In Western Australia."[50]

Plath and Hughes were eager to support each other's writing and ambitions during the early years of their marriage, but both eventually came to regret the time they spent tending to the other. Plath was furious about the precious, wasted hours she had spent advancing Hughes's career—typing his manuscripts, sending out his poetry, keeping track of his rejections and acceptances, pasting his reviews in scrapbooks, and managing his finances. Hughes complained that he had spent too long attending to what he called Plath's "helplessness" and "impending thunderstorm" moods.[51] He wrote to his close friend Luke Myers in 1987, "Poor old Sylvia! If only I hadn't humoured her, & nursed her like a patient, & coddled her like a child—if only I'd had the guts to carry on just as I was, instead of wrapping my life up in a cupboard, while I tended her. Then maybe she'd have emerged in better shape. And me too."[52] But still he felt that the marriage had been produc-

tive, despite what the public wanted to hear. When Myers sent him a draft of a memoir about their early years at Cambridge in which he discussed the couple's poetic dialogue, Hughes asked him to remove the entire section:

> No doubt Sylvia & I plundered each other merrily—but if you say it, in my words—God, what new theses of accusation, what Job-loads of righteous wrath! If you say that, our generous readers will multiply it by ten. Your balancing statement, that she profited a little from me, will be reduced to one tenth. That's the biological 1st law of human malice in action. It's no good for me to say I designed prototypes, which she put into full Germanic production—though there's truth in it. I would never be believed. But to say I stole from her—that would be an instant religion of verification, & my wretched undated efforts would reveal the new gospel, under compulsion.[53]

To suggest that Plath borrowed from Hughes or that Hughes borrowed from Plath does not diminish their individual achievements; on the contrary, reading these poets side by side (indeed, they often wrote literally back to back) reveals how deeply each influenced the other. But the strains of mutual ambition would become hard for both to bear. As the couple's friend Al Alvarez wrote,

> it was a question not of differences but of intolerable similarities. When two genuinely original, ambitious, full-time poets join in one marriage, and both are productive, every poem one writes probably feels to the other as though it had been dug out of his, or her, own skull. At a certain pitch of creative intensity it must be more unbearable for the Muse to be unfaithful to you with your partner than for him, or her, to betray you with a whole army of seducers.[54]

This is the first biography of Sylvia Plath to examine those "intolerable similarities" in depth, and to take Plath and Hughes's literary dialogue—and rivalry—seriously.

Hughes's coaching would eventually upset Plath; in 1959, three years after they met, she vowed to stop showing him her work. But he could hardly help himself, for he never doubted her genius. When the prestigious *Poetry* magazine accepted six of Plath's poems in 1956, Hughes wrote to her, "Joy, Joy as the hyena cried. Now you are set. I never read six poems of anyone all together in Poetry. It means the wonderful thing. It will spellbind every Editor in America. It will also be a standing bottomless battery to charge what you write from now on, because you are almost certain to sell nearly every-

thing you write now. . . . Joy, Joy."[55] They split their days: he watched their children for five hours every morning while Plath wrote; she cared for them during the afternoons. This was an unusual arrangement in the early 1960s. Although Plath bore the brunt of the domestic load in general, Plath's London friend Suzette Macedo was "amazed at his [Hughes's] readiness to help with cooking and other household chores, including nappy changing. . . . Astonishing at that period."[56]

Hughes took Plath's talent as seriously as she did and encouraged her to move beyond the sometimes stilted, thesaurus-heavy verse of her apprentice years; she, in turn, helped introduce him to contemporary American poetry that then left its mark on his own work. In 1962, when a Devon neighbor came round for tea and asked, "Does Sylvia write poetry, too?" Hughes responded, "No, she *is* a poet."[57] He had dared her to choose the artistic life she truly wanted over the comfortable bourgeois life her mother had carefully planned. Plath, always eager to show she had "guts," took the gamble. Together, Plath thought, they would fly close to the sun: "no precocious hushed literary circles for us: we write, read, talk plain and straight and produce from the fiber of our hearts and bones."[58] She knew she was breaking new ground in her own creative marriage as writer rather than muse. In her journal she wrote, "there are no rules for this kind of wifeliness—I must make them up as I go along & will do so."[59] But those rules would be harder to make up than she realized.

Plath's desire for reinvention was American, but her transformation could not occur in the United States. In late 1959, she left America for England with Hughes, never to return. Her flight was cloaked in respectability. By then Hughes was on his way to becoming the most famous young poet in England. In London, they could support themselves doing freelance work for the BBC, while British editors seemed more impressed than her own countrymen with Plath's dark wit. She became a prodigal daughter, brazenly forgoing a comfortable life as a doctor's wife for a peripatetic, jobless poet. Even Hughes would wonder if he had led Plath astray, far from her shining Cape Cod beaches into a world of gloom and fog. He once called Plath a "pioneer / In the wrong direction."[60] But England offered her a freer intellectual life; as an expatriate, she could make up her own rules. Ruth Fainlight felt that by moving to England, Plath "was defending her poetic self." Fainlight thought the distance from home was as liberating for Plath as it was for her. "It's a great advantage being a foreigner . . . you're not expected to know what you should be conforming to."[61] In England, with her mid-Atlantic accent, Plath escaped the class snobbery she had experienced in Massachusetts. English friends simply assumed that she was a rich American. Plath delighted in English eccentricity; in America, she told friends, peculiarity was suspect.

She would write her best works, *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel*, in England, far from the homilies of her mother and the *Ladies' Home Journal*. Yet autonomy came at a cost. As she was separated from her husband and cut off from her family and close friends, a brutal loneliness would descend on her. In the months before her February 11, 1963, suicide, she asked her American psychiatrist if she should come home. Dr. Beuscher told her to stay.

It was on a less notorious early February day that I prefer to think of Sylvia Plath as I have come to know her during the eight years I spent writing this book. On February 10, 1960—three years to the day before she died—she signed her first book contract, for *The Colossus*, in a London pub. She was dressed in a black wool maternity suit, a cashmere coat, and fine Parisian calfskin gloves. She was seven months pregnant with her first child, newly installed in sunny Chalcot Square with her cherished husband, and free, finally, from the watchful eyes of the benefactors who had always paid her way. She had just signed with D. H. Lawrence's publishers; it was the high-water mark of her professional life. She exulted in her triumph; in a letter to her mother she called herself "resplendent."[62] She rarely complimented herself, for she was relentlessly self-critical. No sooner had she scaled one "Annapurna," as she called her literary goals, than she mounted another expedition. But not that day. That afternoon, in the waning winter light, she celebrated. Ted Hughes brought champagne and the *Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence* to mark the occasion.

Sylvia Plath would not see major literary success in her lifetime. *The Colossus* would barely make an impact on the Anglo-American poetry world. But after years of tirelessly pursuing her vocation in a profession hostile to women, she had cracked the door open—and not just for herself, but for the scores of women poets who came after her. Plath's second collection, *Ariel*, became a best seller, as did her 1963 novel *The Bell Jar*, which would go on to sell more than four million copies. She would win a posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 1982 for her *Collected Poems* and is now widely considered one of the most innovative, accomplished, and influential poets of the twentieth century. Sipping champagne with Ted Hughes in 1960, she may not have foreseen how famous she would become, but she knew she was taking flight.

Her life was about to become more difficult—two babies, a miscarriage, enmities, infidelities. Certainties would start to crumble like the masonry in Thoor Ballylee. She herself would become closed in, the key turned. But writing, even then, was her salvation; it was not her undoing. Ensconced in Yeats's childhood home at the end of her life, this beekeeper's daughter

would have understood Yeats's famous entreaty to reconstruct in the halls of ruin:

> The bees build in the crevices
> Of loosening masonry, and there
> The mother birds bring grubs and flies.
> My wall is loosening; honey-bees,
> Come build in the empty house of the stare.[63]

In fact, she had built. There on her desk when she died was "*the* thing," the carefully calibrated counterweight to destruction: her new book of poems, the manuscript neatly bound, awaiting its revelation.

Part I

1

The Beekeeper's Daughter

Prussia, Austria, America, 1850–1932

Like Sylvia Plath herself, Plath's parents, Otto and Aurelia, have had to bear a difficult posthumous burden. Plath used her parents, like so many others in her life, as material for her writing. They existed as real people whose praise she craved and, at the same time, a deep fictional resource. They were of her, but not her—a looking glass that reflected the possibility of what might or might not be, and she could not resist plumbing their depths as she sought to understand her own. She came to feel that in her parents lay the root of her anxieties, and, encouraged by her psychiatrist in the late fifties, she began to lash out at them in her journals and, later, her poems. Plath would express rage toward her parents—at her father for abandoning her, at her mother for hovering too close. They remain distorted caricatures, stuck in amber. In Plath's most famous poem, "Daddy," Otto—who died when she was eight—is a patriarchal tyrant, a Nazi "bastard." Aurelia, skewered in *The Bell Jar*, is a menacing martyr who demands perfection from her daughter. But if Plath inherited anxiety and depression from her parents, she also inherited intelligence, discipline, and ambition. They stand Janus-faced, curse and blessing, at the beginning and end of Sylvia Plath's story.

In Otto Plath's case, myth has overshadowed truth in the popular imagination. For many readers of Sylvia Plath, Otto Plath *is* "Daddy": Aryan, fascist, Nazi. In fact, Otto Plath was a committed pacifist who renounced his German citizenship in 1926 and watched Hitler's rise with trepidation. He held himself to rigid moral standards and expected others to do the same. In a photograph taken when he was a college student in Wisconsin, around 1910, he gives the impression of a man who does not suffer fools gladly. He sits unsmiling in the front row surrounded by drunken peers, laughing and holding steins. This is the serious, driven young man who would not com-

promise his ideals, even if that meant severing ties with his family—a decision that would have a profound impact on his daughter.

At least three generations of the Plath family lived in Posen Province, West Prussia, before coming to America. Today Posen (Poznan) is part of Poland, in the area known as the "Polish Corridor" when it was transferred from the German empire to Poland after the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Like the Alsace-Lorraine region, it became a disputed territory, where tensions between ethnic Poles and Germans ran high. Despite the fact that the majority of those living in this area were Poles, Hitler attempted to annex it in 1939—one of the early acts of aggression that spurred France, Britain, and other Commonwealth nations to declare war on Germany. Though Otto Plath left Posen in 1900, well before both world wars, his daughter would eventually portray him as an embodiment of German imperialist aggression in "Daddy."

Posen, whose population comprised Germans, Poles, and Jews who lived in separate ethnic enclaves, was perhaps the poorest region in Prussia.[1] By the late 1800s, ethnic Germans, lured by the booming industrial economy in the Rhine and Ruhr regions, as well as free land in America, began leaving the region en masse in the *Ostflucht*, or "flight from the east." More than two million had left by the early 1900s, including Sylvia Plath's paternal great-grandparents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and father. Her great-grandfather, Johann Plath, was an illiterate farmer, but his grandson Otto would eventually become a Harvard-educated professor, and his great-granddaughter a trailblazing poet and novelist. Sylvia's "perfectionism," often derided as neurotic or pathological, needs to be understood within the historical and sociological context of the American immigrant experience, which framed her life. Her desire to excel on all fronts has its roots in the Germanic aspirational work ethic that was her inheritance.

Otto Plath's German provenance was important to his daughter. Sylvia wrote that she felt her "German background very strongly," and talked up her German-Austrian roots to her German pen pal, Hans-Joachim Neupert, in high school.[2] "I feel a strong kinship for anything German," she told him in 1949. "I think that it is the most beautiful language in the world, and whenever I meet anyone with a German name or German traits, I have a sudden secret warmth."[3] She felt "patriotic pride" when she read German authors such as Thomas Mann and spoke lovingly of her grandmother's hearty Austrian cooking.[4] She was well aware of the dazzling artistic and intellectual achievements of German musicians, writers, and philosophers; she listened to Bach and Beethoven, and read Nietzsche and Goethe with her mother. But hers was a dual inheritance, for she had also heard how her mother's family was harassed during the First World War by Irish and

Italian neighbors in Winthrop, Massachusetts. Sylvia may have been picked on for similar reasons during the Second World War and possibly nervous that members of her family would be sent to a domestic detention camp for German Americans. (Her father was, in fact, detained by the FBI for alleged pro-German sympathies in 1918.) In December 1958, she described a short-story plot in her journal—which eventually became "The Shadow"—about a young German American girl who is treated suspiciously by her neighbors during the Second World War:

> My present theme seems to be the awareness of a complicated guilt system whereby Germans in a Jewish and Catholic community are made to feel, in a scapegoat fashion, the pain, psychically, the Jews are made to feel in Germany by Germans without religion. The child can't understand the larger framework. How does her father come into this? How is she guilty for her father's deportation to a detention camp? As this is how I think the story must end?[5]

These questions suggest that Sylvia understood from a young age that the German identity she shared with her father was somehow dangerous—a secret source of shame.

Plath's journals are full of frustration about her inability to master the German language. In January 1953 she regrets not having taken more German in college; in February 1956 she wants to "revive German again," declaring, "I haven't really worked at learning it"; she vows to spend the summer of 1957 studying the language; in 1958 she berates herself for "wasting my German hours" and writes, "to learn that would be a great triumph for me."[6] In 1960, exhausted and homesick in London, she was comforted by her German-speaking friend Helga Huws, whose German cooking made her weep. As late as 1962, she listened to German linguaphone records and tuned into a BBC German radio program.[7] She hired a German-speaking au pair shortly before her death in 1963.

Sylvia was the daughter of a German immigrant and a first-generation Austrian who had studied German language and literature and knew Middle High German. Her mother's parents, the Schobers, with whom she lived in Wellesley, spoke German at home.[8] Despite her exposure to the language—and the fact that she excelled at every other academic subject—German did not come easily to her. In her 1962 poem "Daddy," the German language itself becomes the "barb wire snare" and "the language obscene," "An engine, an engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew" to the death camps. Plath's notorious metaphorical appropriation of Jewishness may not have been a fantasy of victimization, but rather a fantasy of purgation and purity: only by aligning

her speaker with the enemy of the Germans could she reject her own Germanness, which, in the wake of the Holocaust, seemed like a curse.

Previous biographers have stated that the Plath name was originally "Platt," and that it was anglicized on entry to America. According to a family member, the family name in Germany was von Plath.[9] Sylvia's paternal great-grandparents, John (Johann) von Plath and Caroline (Katrina) Katzsezmadek, were born in the Posen region in 1829 and 1826, respectively. John was German and Lutheran, Caroline Polish and Catholic, but the couple overcame the religious divide to marry in the 1850s. They raised their children as Lutherans, though there was religious tension within the marriage.[10] Both spoke Polish and German; in later years, Otto would list both languages as his mother tongue.[11] The couple settled in the small town of Budsin, now Budzyn, in Posen Province.[12] They had eight children, of whom Otto's father, Theodore (b. 1850), was the eldest.[13] The six children who survived into adulthood—Emil, Augusta, Mathilde, Mary, Emilie, and Theodore—all immigrated to America between 1882 and 1901 and settled across the West and Midwest in North Dakota, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Oregon.

The fact that all of John and Caroline's children emigrated suggests that the family did not prosper in Posen. In America they became blacksmiths and seamstresses, their spouses railroad laborers and meat cutters. Mary Plath endured a particularly dark fate. According to a family story, she fell in love with a young man from Cando, a neighboring town in North Dakota, while she was visiting her relatives in Maza. She became pregnant by him, but he left her for another woman in Cando. Jilted and alone, she ran away to a boardinghouse in St. Paul, Minnesota, where she died in childbirth. Mary's lonely death speaks to the cost of veering from traditional Lutheran codes of behavior. (Later, one of Mary's nieces expressed guilt over her aunt's sad fate.)[14] Otto, too, would be cast out after his peregrinations from the faith.

In their fifties and sixties, John and Caroline decided to follow their children across the Atlantic, and they immigrated to the Lincoln–Fall Creek area of Wisconsin, where they had Posen connections, in the 1880s.[15] Immigration officials struck the "von" from the Plath surname when John landed in New York. When he protested that the prefix was a matter of "family pride," the immigration official replied, "there is no aristocracy in America!"[16]

John and Caroline were uneducated: neither could read, write, nor speak fluent English even after living in America for two decades.[17] "They were poor people when they came to Fall Creek," a resident said.[18] Yet by farming and taking in boarders such as the local public school teacher, they were able

to buy a house and eventually help their grandson Otto come to America. Caroline, who had "deep-set intense eyes," died in Fall Creek in November 1913.[19] John died two years later, in June 1915, the year his grandson Otto turned thirty. They were hearty people who lived into their eighties at a time when life expectancy was much shorter. An undated photograph shows John and Caroline seated on stools outdoors, probably in their yard, while a young Otto and his aunt Emilie stand stiffly behind. Otto, with his jacket, vest, tie, and neatly combed hair, embodies the grandson made good. John, however, wears a dark, rumpled suit, while Caroline and Emilie are in plain, faded housedresses. The grandparents' stern, weathered faces look straight out of *American Gothic*.

John and Caroline's eldest child, Theodore Friedrich Plath, married Ernestine Kottke (b. 1853) in a Protestant church in Posen Province in 1882. He was thirty-two, and she was twenty-nine—a rather late marriage for the time.[20] Ernestine was Otto's mother and Sylvia Plath's grandmother. Otto remembered his mother as "a rather melancholy person . . . weighed down with the care of six children and an ulcer on her leg that never wholly healed." He described Theodore, however, as "energetic, jovial, inventive."[21] Ernestine and Theodore had six children: Otto, Paul, Max Theodore, Hugo, Martha, and Frieda, all born between 1885 and 1896.[22] Another child, born when Ernestine was just nineteen and possibly out of wedlock, died. Ernestine raised the children on her own for long stretches of time while her husband sold equipment for the McCormick company in Germany, Poland, France, and Russia. Theodore picked up several languages during his travels and was able to converse easily with his clients; his son Otto would inherit his linguistic talents.

Theodore's job in Germany was steady and well paid, but around the turn of the century McCormick was restructured, and family members later speculated that Theodore had been laid off or was unhappy with the changes in the company.[23] Theodore left Hamburg on March 3, 1901, on the *Batavia* and arrived in New York sixteen days later. He listed his occupation in the ship's log as "master blacksmith." At fifty, he was the last of the Plath siblings to emigrate. He arrived with $125, no contract of employment, and plans to stay with his sister Mathilde and her husband in Chicago. Ernestine sailed from Liverpool to St. John, Canada, on the RMS *Lake Ontario* in December 1901 with five of her six young children.[24] She moved first to Maza, North Dakota, where Theodore's brother Emil worked as a blacksmith, and where at some point she reunited with her husband. They lived in Maza until 1906 or 1907.[25] By 1907, the couple was living in Harney, Oregon, and by 1912, Oregon City. Theodore worked as a blacksmith and farmer.

From this time on Ernestine vanishes both from the general record and

from family anecdote. Sylvia's mother Aurelia said that after Sylvia's suicide attempt in 1953, Otto's sister Frieda wrote to her confiding that their mother Ernestine had been hospitalized for depression, and that a sister and niece had also suffered from the illness. According to Frieda, they had "all made some sort of recovery."[26] Yet this was not quite true. Ernestine Plath died in September 1919 at the Oregon Hospital for the Insane.

Theodore had committed her to the Salem asylum in October 1916. She was sixty-three. According to the admission form he filled out, her physical and mental health had been "normal" until 1905, when she suffered her first episode of "insanity" in North Dakota. The symptoms then had consisted of "head-ache, sleep and appetite loss, and anxious as persecution [*sic*]." Theodore stated that Ernestine had received treatment for this condition in Jamestown, North Dakota, in 1905, but that the same symptoms had recently reappeared. His wife had no previous history of suicidal thoughts or attempts, he wrote—no seizures or fits, no history of alcohol or drug abuse, and no hint of violent temperament. Her general disposition was, according to court records, "Good when well."

The admitting doctor found Ernestine reluctant to speak with him, and "much depressed & fearful. . . . Appears to be hallucinated but will not converse." The admitting nurse further noted that she was "well nourished, clean but helpless." She was also, the nurse thought, depressed. Another set of hospital admission notes observed that the brown-haired, blue-eyed, five-foot-five-inch, 130-pound woman "Gets out of bed at unreasonable periods . . . Thinks someone might kill her, begs to stay with us. Worrys [*sic*] for fear we will send her away." The admitting doctor's provisional diagnosis was "senile dementia."

Ernestine Plath's fear may have been pathological. Or it could have been a terrified reaction to an involuntary commitment to a mental hospital whose decrepit wards were later used as the film set for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. By January 1918, fourteen months after her admission, her notes read that she was "old, very quiet, causes no trouble, has to be cared for, physical health good, appetite fair, sleeps well." Another doctor wrote that month that she was "depressed. Refuses to converse tho she comprehends fairly well what was said." By September 1919, after steady weight loss, she was down to eighty-six pounds. She died of tuberculosis on September 28.

After Sylvia's suicide in 1963, her mother told a friend, "Sylvia's tendency to depression was experienced by members of her father's family, stretching to three generations."[27] Indeed, in 1988 Otto's great-niece Anita Helle confirmed that "Plath was not the only woman in her family to have undergone shock treatments, institutionalization, or prolonged and apparent bouts of depression."[28] Aurelia never told her daughter that depression ran in Otto's

family, because Sylvia "so revered her father's memory."[29] But the medical records suggest that Ernestine probably suffered from age-related dementia rather than severe, debilitating depression. She was not a threat to herself or others, and was, apart from some memory loss, coherent, "tidy," quiet, and—after her initial admission—cooperative. She did not enter the asylum—or remain there—in a state of raving lunacy. A doctor reiterated her initial diagnosis in October 1918: "This old lady a case of senile dementia."[30] Theodore may just not have had the means or the will to take care of her.

Ernestine Plath was cremated at the asylum in 1919, and her ashes were stored on a dark basement shelf in a copper canister for nearly a century. None of her six children ever retrieved her remains. Otto's great-niece claimed that Ernestine had emotionally abandoned her family long before she ended up in an Oregon psychiatric hospital. She had "reluctantly followed her husband westward . . . her reaction was long-term silence, the communication to her children of exactly nothing in the last thirty years of her life." Otto's "hard-bitten anguish" over his mother's neglect remained "well hidden," Helle wrote, from his wife and children.[31] Silence would also mark Ernestine's afterlife. Sylvia Plath, one of the twentieth century's greatest chroniclers of mental illness, never knew that her grandmother died forgotten and abandoned in an insane asylum.

BORN IN GRABOWO, Posen Province, Germany, on April 13, 1885, Otto Emil Plath was the oldest of Ernestine and Theodore Plath's children. Otto later moved with his family to Budsin. From an early age, Otto exhibited a rarefied intelligence. He earned extremely high grades in school and was an amateur entomologist, studying the habits of local honeybees. When Otto's grandparents in Wisconsin heard of his academic success, they offered to pay his tuition at both the Northwestern Preparatory School and Northwestern College, the latter a small Wisconsin college that prepared Lutheran ministers. Before he immigrated to the United States, his parish held a going-away party for him; the members of his community agreed that he was likely to go far in America.[32] They were not wrong: he would eventually earn a doctorate at Harvard and become a full professor at Boston University.

In 1900, at age fifteen, Otto arrived in Manhattan, where he worked in a relation's shop and learned English by auditing local classes. In just one year, he progressed through eight grade levels, mastering the language.[33] After joining his Plath grandparents in Wisconsin, he spent 1903–1906 at the Northwestern Preparatory School and then entered Northwestern College in Watertown in late August 1906. There, one friend remembered him as a

"clean-cut, neat, well-dressed young man" who played tennis, played clarinet in the school band, and took piano lessons.[34]

Many of the professors during Otto's time had earned their PhDs in Germany. Some had worked formerly as missionaries, and, indeed, the college prepared German American farm boys for the Wisconsin Synod with missionary zeal. Northwestern offered reduced tuition to those who intended to join the Lutheran clergy or teach in a religious school. These special terms allowed John and Caroline to send their bright grandson to college—an unlikely prospect in Posen. The college's civic and religious mission was to give its students "moral stamina and nobleness of character and prepare them for the higher and better ideals of life."[35] Though Otto would never enter the ministry, he would remain committed to the idea of "moral stamina"—a vow that may have cost him his life.

Northwestern's curriculum was conservative, with an emphasis on Latin, Greek, religion, and history rather than math and science.[36] Instruction was modeled on the German *Gymnasium* system and delivered in both German and English. Otto would have read the standard canon in his English classes: Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Bacon, Wordsworth, Dickens, Macaulay, and Burke. American literature was given short shrift, however. Only a "brief outline" was offered at the end of senior year: Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The Blithedale Romance*.[37] Hawthorne, with his intense interest in sin, probably seemed a safe choice, though an observant reader would also find a dark reflection of the puritanism Northwestern avowed. It was a message perhaps not lost on Otto Plath, who began to doubt the religious path laid out for him midway through his college years. He later told Aurelia that in 1907 he wrestled for six months with questions about his own faith, "miserable months of agonizing doubt and self-evaluation."[38] He graduated with an honors BA in classical languages in 1910 and reluctantly began his studies at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Milwaukee that fall.

Otto had always shown an interest in science, particularly entomology; as a young boy in Germany he had spent much of his free time observing the habits of bumblebees. At Northwestern, he read Darwin, whose work increased his passion for biology. Darwin became his "hero" in college, and he was upset to find that the biologist's work had been banned at the seminary.[39] He eventually came to the conclusion that he did not have a calling and left the seminary shortly before Christmas in 1910, "without the consent of the faculty," as the registrar noted.[40] He would preach not the gospel of Luther, but of secular humanism. He would become a college professor—a profession he felt was nearly as respectable as the ministry. His grandparents, however, were crushed, and threatened to disown him. In the end, he did not

bow to pressure from his family, teachers, or his small, midwestern, German Lutheran community. He would follow his vocation, whatever the cost. His daughter would do the same. Otto enrolled in a master of arts program in German at the University of Washington, and his grandparents struck his name from the family Bible.

John and Caroline's actions shocked Otto, but he remained resolved. "He was on his own for the rest of his life," Aurelia later wrote.[41] His father died at the age of sixty-eight in November 1918 from an abscess on the lung; Ernestine died eleven months later at the asylum. Otto visited infrequently with his parents and siblings after they had settled in America, and by the time he married Aurelia in 1932 he seems to have severed most family connections—though Aurelia would later become friendly with his sister Frieda Plath Heinrichs in California, and Otto's niece (Martha Plath Johnson's daughter), June Helle. He would cut all ties with the Lutheran Church, too. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood described her father, based on Otto: "My father had been a Lutheran in Wisconsin, but they were out of style in New England, so he had become a lapsed Lutheran and then, my mother said, a bitter atheist."[42] Otto eventually became a member of the Society for Ethical Culture in Boston.[43]

One of Otto's closest friends at Northwestern was Hans Gaebler, the only other student in Otto's year who did not become a Lutheran minister.[44] This friendship may have played a key role in Otto's decision to pursue academia rather than the ministry, for after graduation Gaebler decamped to the University of Washington in Seattle, where Otto followed. There he served as an assistant instructor while studying German literature, in which he earned an MA in 1912. He was active in the German Club and performed in at least one play, the eighteenth-century comedy *Minna von Barnhelm*, put on by the group in April 1911.[45] He wrote his thesis in German on the influence of Washington Irving (author of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle") on Wilhelm Hauff, a nineteenth-century southern German poet and novelist.[46] Hauff, who died at twenty-five, was a contemporary of Goethe's and part of the German Romantic movement. Otto was drawn, like his daughter, to dark Romanticism.

On August 7, 1912, in Spokane, Washington, Otto married Lydia Clara Bartz, a second-generation German American born in Fall Creek in 1889 and the sister of Otto's Wisconsin friend Rupert Bartz. The marriage was short-lived; the childless couple separated after two years and never saw each other again.[47] They finally divorced on January 4, 1932, in Ormsby County, Nevada, on the grounds that they had not cohabitated in more than five years. Lydia, represented by an attorney, was not present. Lydia never remarried, and she worked as a nurse at various midwestern hospitals

until her retirement. She died in Fall Creek on February 22, 1988. Aurelia describes this mysterious first wife as nothing more than a footnote in Otto's young life. But she was part of the fabric of his close-knit German American community.

After graduating from the University of Washington, Otto taught German at the nearby University Heights School in Seattle before moving to Berkeley, California. There, he worked as a research assistant for a professor in UC Berkeley's German department, Dr. Schilling, and was a teaching fellow and PhD candidate in German from 1912 to 1914.[48] Lydia lived with him during these years and was registered as a "special student" at Berkeley's College of Social Sciences from 1913 to 1914. The marriage deteriorated—Otto lost a large sum of his wife's money in land speculation, and she refused to allow his ill brother to live with them in Berkeley. By this time, Otto's professional reputation was such that when he visited relatives in Reno, Nevada, in September 1914, his presence was reported in the "Comings and Goings" section of the local newspaper.[49] But when the First World War began, he was passed over for a permanent instructorship at Berkeley—on account of his German background, he suspected.[50] In August 1914, the *Oakland Tribune* reported that many German professors at the university would be forced to return to Germany; Otto was mentioned as one of the instructors whose status was in doubt.[51] While some German professors did decide to return to Germany to fight, many, including Otto, wanted to stay in America. The university later passed an edict barring German citizens from the faculty during the war.

Otto headed east, telling Lydia he would send for her when she finished her degree at Berkeley. An angry Lydia instead moved back to Fall Creek; Otto never sent for her. A Fall Creek resident remembered older people in town telling her that Otto had thought Lydia, though "very pretty," was "not good enough" for him because she was uneducated.[52] In 1914–15 he spent a year as the Carl Schurz Fellow at Columbia University, where he began, but abandoned, a PhD in German Language and Literature; he then taught modern languages at MIT from 1915 to 1918 before considering changing his field of studies altogether.

When the United States entered the war in 1917, teaching German was no longer a practical or even safe way to make a living. By the fall semester of 1918, Otto was back at UC Berkeley, now taking biology classes. He lived in a boarding house, worked part-time at a local market during the day, and ran an elevator at night.[53] His German citizenship barred him from the lectern, and he did not receive any financial help from his father, who died that year in an Oregon City hospital. Cemetery records reveal there was no

money for a headstone for Theodore Plath, who was buried in a pauper's lot.[54] At least two of Otto's siblings had also fallen on hard times by 1917: draft records show that Max Theodore was an unemployed auto mechanic in Oregon City, while Paul worked as a mechanic in San Francisco. He eventually returned to Oregon and died relatively young, at age forty-six. Otto had been lucky to receive a college education.

More challenges lay ahead. Otto was reported to the FBI by one Mr. McCay, who stated in his initial FBI report that Otto "seems to have assumed a rather pro-German attitude towards the War on account of losing his positions."[55] McCay also claimed that Otto had told him he would return to Germany when the war was over. The investigator, Armin Nix, questioned the young academic. When Nix showed up at Otto's listed address, his suspicions were roused, for Otto no longer lived at that address and had not reported the change to the police as required by all enemy aliens. Nix stopped by Otto's employer, Sills Grocery Store, and was told that Otto had been fired for "refusing to buy Liberty Bonds."[56]

Otto got word that the FBI wanted a meeting, and he called at the FBI office on the morning of October 22, 1918. He gave Nix a short summary of his life to date, including his various residences and degrees. When Nix questioned him about his opinion regarding Germany's involvement in the war, he noted that Otto "assumed a rather indifferent attitude."[57] But Otto denied that he had ever told McCay he wanted to return to Germany. In fact, he told Nix, he "would never dream of going back to Germany," though he had considered going to South America. He also explained that he had not been fired from Sills Grocery, and that he had not bought Liberty Bonds because he was "$1400 in debt on which he was paying 5 and 6% interest, and that he was attempting to earn a living and do work at the University at the same time and did not feel that he could afford to do so." He denied having corresponded with anyone in Germany since he had left in 1900.

Otto said that his parents left Germany for a better life in America because "some things are rotten in Germany, but not all; that the German people and their character is not altogether rotten, but that they are misled." He told Nix that he hadn't read a single newspaper between 1903 and 1910—the years he was a student at Northwestern Prep and College—and had no idea that he was required to report his change of address to the police. He had signed a Loyalty Pledge when he registered at Berkeley, but admitted to Nix that "he took several weeks to think it over to make absolutely sure, as he believes that Roosevelt's saying that a man cannot be 50-50 now—must either be 100% American or not American at all, and this he believes is true." This was a dangerous but honest admission. Otto also told Nix that

he had lost his chance at an instructorship in biology at Berkeley because of his enemy alien status, and that "he is being persecuted without just cause."

Nix then interviewed Otto's references at the university, one of whom, Dr. Cort, told him Otto was an excellent scientist but a poor teacher—"very nervous and not being able to interest students." Cort admitted, however, that the university had passed a rule forbidding the employment of Germans on the faculty, and that this rule was partly to blame for Otto's failure to land the instructorship. Dr. Schilling, a professor in the German department who had worked with Otto before the war, told Nix that Otto felt "slighted" when he was passed over for a permanent position. He believed that Otto was loyal but that "his main trouble is not being a good sport and being able to take hard luck the way a man should take it." At this point Otto knew all about hard luck: though he had taught in university classrooms since 1911, he now found himself working menial jobs stacking groceries and operating elevators for twenty cents an hour because he was German.

The next day Otto reported his change of address to the Berkeley police, which seemed to satisfy Nix. He closed the case, and ended his eight-page report on Otto:

> I could not find any further evidence against this man, and as he seemed to be a man who makes no friends, and with whom no one is really well acquainted, was not able to locate any one knowing him intimately. . . . The indiscreet remarks he has probably made at times, and the indifference he seems to have towards the War, are due in my opinion to his being interested in a very narrow field, and to his very nervous and morbid disposition.

Otto filed naturalization papers in 1921.[58] He renounced Germany and Poland, and became an American citizen in 1926, a move that may have protected him from similar suspicion in the late 1930s.[59]

Otto was one of thousands of German aliens who were questioned—and in some cases arrested and sent to detention camps in Utah and Georgia—during the First World War. In June 1917, during his Flag Day speech, President Woodrow Wilson emboldened Americans to root out "vicious spies and conspirators" in "unsuspecting communities"; the following year, a German coal miner, Robert Prager, was lynched by a mob of two hundred.[60] Otto's German background would have made him a target of constant harassment, and he shrank from socializing. Already someone had reported him to the FBI on false pretenses. Under normal circumstances, Otto could be personable and warm. George Fulton, a former graduate student of Otto's who eventually became the chair of the Boston University biology department,

remembered him as a "friendly and very talkative person." He described Otto as a "kind" mentor to him and his other graduate students, whom he treated to convivial faculty lunches.[61] In 1966, after an article on Sylvia Plath appeared in *Time*, another of Otto's former students, Thomas Clohesy, wrote to Aurelia to express his frustration with how Otto had been portrayed by both his daughter and the media:

> Otto was not the fearful Teuton which Sylvia apparently thought him to be. I remember Otto Plath with great fondness, having first met him in 1939 when I became a student of German at Boston University. Another friend and I thought him a very unusual man, and we respected his political opinions even though they did not prevail at that time. Much of what he has predicted has since come to pass, and I have often felt that his analysis of Germany's position in the world was a correct one. Were he with us today, I am sure he would feel vindicated in many of his beliefs. He was certainly not the "ogre" that the poem thinks he was. I shall never forget his kindness to me when he suggested that I might tutor a student of his who was having difficulties in German. At that time jobs were extremely scarce, and his kindness will never be forgotten.[62]

Far from being a Nazi sympathizer, it seems Otto saw through Hitler's rhetoric and surmised the horror that awaited Europe at a time when Neville Chamberlain was still proclaiming he had secured "Peace for Our Time." Aurelia, too, thought "Daddy" a betrayal, and would later write to the poetry critic Helen Vendler (whose mother Aurelia had befriended in the 1930s) that Sylvia's "barbed writing" was a way of finding "catharsis" by "lashing out in poetic form," often using "exaggerations" to make her point: "Her father never had any affiliation with the Nazi party and was utterly revolted by any departure from 'reverence for life.' "[63] Sylvia's childhood friend Ruth Freeman Geissler, who knew Otto, claimed that the Nazi figure in "Daddy" was "very much a fantasy."[64] Aurelia told a close friend that Otto would never have let Sylvia join the Girl Scouts, had he lived, because he so abhorred militaristic uniforms.[65]

After his FBI interrogation, Otto again left the West Coast. He took up an assistant in zoology post at Johns Hopkins; then, in 1921, he began his studies in biology at Harvard, where he earned a master of science in 1925 and a doctorate of science in 1928.

Otto was forty when he began working on his Harvard doctorate, but he seemed even older to the eleven young graduate students he lived with at Harvard's Bussey Mansion, near the Bussey Institution.[66] One thought of him as a "permanent Bussey fixture."[67] Acquaintances from the Harvard

years remembered Otto as a "sentimental" dreamer fascinated by what he called the "wonders of nature."[68] George Salt, who lived with Otto at the Bussey Mansion for four years, recalled, somewhat condescendingly, "He was a German teacher with biology interests. He cared not for Science but for bumblebees, rather like a clergyman with a butterfly collection."[69] While Prof. W. M. Wheeler's students discussed the exciting new field of genetics, Otto seemed to care only about his bees. His "blinkers" became a running joke in the biology department, though his cohorts remember that he applied himself rigorously to his work.[70] The only other passion Otto's Bussey housemates recognized was his love for the German language. One night a housemate was having trouble translating a German word and asked Otto, who still spoke with a slight German accent, for help. Otto became a different person before his eyes: "he rolled the idiom off his tongue as though relishing it and read the German words with intense and longing pleasure."[71] Another housemate remembered that Otto was "very meticulous, even fussy, in his use of words. I recall that one evening he came to my room and debated for a long time the question of whether he should entitle a forthcoming research paper 'The Bee-eating Propensities of the Skunk' or 'The Bee-eating Proclivities of the Skunk.'"[72]

Some of the "Bussey Boys," as they called themselves, thought Otto "awkward," a "timid outsider," as he tried to join their conversations in the sitting room each evening. Most of them never really got to know the "slight, thin, gentle man who smiled at the edges of their dinnertime conversation."[73] When Germany's role in the First World War came up at these communal meals, Otto vacillated between defending Germany and criticizing it.[74] His lack of conviction was unusual for a Harvard scientist. But being questioned by the FBI and losing his position at Berkeley likely made Otto wary of speaking his mind and forming close friendships. It was better to agree than to raise suspicions; better to keep a distance than to share intimacy. It is perhaps no accident that both of Otto's wives spoke German, or that once he had children he sought to keep them, Aurelia remembered, "absolutely isolated"—he did not want them even to attend dance classes.[75]

Bussey contemporaries remembered that he always seemed to have a cold (a predisposition Sylvia inherited) and had little luck with women. His experience with Lydia left him bitter about marriage: one housemate said that Otto was "consumed with hate for his ex-wife, whose faults . . . he extended to the entire sex."[76] He spoke of himself as "a romantic" and said his first wife was "cold."[77] Being older than the other graduate students, he fancied himself an expert on sex and would sometimes tell "salacious" stories on the subject.[78] Others remembered his special diets and food fads, his neat

clothes, his honesty, his frugal nature, and his passion for his work. A housemate recalled that, like his daughter, "He frequently worked to the point of extreme fatigue."[79]

Otto's closest friend at the Bussey Mansion, Philip Darlington, felt that there were a few students who were disliked, "but Otto was not one of these. He was a bit obtuse and a bit too literal; we teased him a little but not too much; and we accepted him and liked him. . . . he was neither domineering nor high-handed with us."[80] Some of the Bussey Boys remembered his speaking angrily about religion and the years he had wasted in the seminary, but they generally found him "gentle by nature," "serious, but with a sense of humor," "over-sensitive," "not an aggressive person," and certainly not violent.[81]

Otto was "seldom jovial," but one friend remembered him "relaxed and happy" while making "home brew" in the Bussey Mansion basement. Otto claimed to have a specialist's knowledge of beer brewing and took pride in his batch's high alcohol content. The Bussey Boys spent a sunny day outside at the Arboretum drinking Otto's beer. "I had never seen Plath so sociable nor such amity between him and the others," one recalled.[82] Ralph Singleton, who "knew Otto rather well and liked him very much," said he was generous—Otto frequently lent him money to tide him over.[83] Clyde Keeler, the illustrator of Otto's groundbreaking book, *Bumblebees and Their Ways*, recalled his close friend's compassion: one rainy night, Otto welcomed a stray cat, crying pitifully outside, into the mansion. He even constructed a box with a cushion for her. This same friend remembered Otto's insecurity—he put off his oral doctorate exam for years on account of nerves. Keeler finally convinced him to go through with it. "Otto went to the exam with his knees shaking. When he returned there was a grin on his face. 'It was easy,' said Otto."[84] A Bussey housemate who went on to become the president of the University of Hawaii stated, "To many he seemed cold, distant, and arrogant, but in reality he was a warm-hearted rather shy person."[85] They found it hard to reconcile the quiet, gentle man they knew with the Nazi father in Plath's poem "Daddy."

After the 1934 publication of Otto's monograph, *Bumblebees and Their Ways*, based on his Harvard doctoral thesis, he became a highly respected entomologist. He was appointed a full professor at Boston University, where he taught from 1922 until his death in 1940, and published in journals such as *The American Naturalist*, the *Biological Bulletin of the American Naturalist*, the *Annals of the Entomological Society of America*, and the *Handbook of Social Psychology*, among others. Some of his findings even made their way into the popular press, where he was cited as an authority on bee stings and insect

behavior.[86] A former graduate student described him as being "ahead of his time" in his research and suggested that he would now be called an expert in behavioral biology.[87]

At Boston University, Otto seems to have been a conscientious and thorough teacher, though, as one former student remembered him, somewhat inflexible.[88] Another student remembered him as a "good teacher . . . very considerate to students," who had "a sense of humor." (Otto liked to tell students about the time the Bussey Boys, experimenting with concepts of taste, ate rat stew for dinner—a sight which made Otto vomit.)[89] Seniors at BU wrote of him warmly in their yearbooks, referring to him as the *Bienen-König*—the bee king. In the 1929 BU yearbook he was described as a professor who "makes subjects interesting. If you don't believe it, watch the crowds which flock into his classes in Ornithology, Entomology, and even German! If you want to spend an interesting half-hour just get him to talking about birds and insects. You'll not consider it time wasted, we assure you."

In the introduction to *Bumblebees and Their Ways*, Otto discusses the origins of his interest in bees and beekeeping. Part of this passage is worth quoting at length, for it offers a rare chance to hear Sylvia Plath's father discoursing passionately in his own words. After discussing how he transferred several bee colonies to his backyard while a young boy in Germany, he writes,

> My interest in bumblebees constantly grew, and when I found that even my teacher in natural history knew very little about the complex life of these fascinating Social Hymenoptera, I decided to write a short treatise on their life-history and habits. This youthful ambition was interrupted rather suddenly, however, when I was sent to live with some relatives in New York City, and it was not until the summer of 1920, that—due to the accidental discovery of two bumblebee colonies at Berkeley, California—my former interest was again awakened. On June 15 of the following year, I began to make detailed observations on the New England species at the Bussey Institution. The facilities which this school of research and the adjoining Arnold Arboretum offer for the study of bumblebees are probably not surpassed anywhere in the world. On the approximately three hundred acres belonging to these two departments of Harvard University, I have taken thirteen of the seventeen bumblebee species recorded from the New England States. During the past thirteen years there were also discovered more than 250 bumblebee colonies on, or near, the grounds of these two institutions. Of this large number of colonies . . . about 200 were transferred to nest-boxes for further study.

> In addition, I have made extensive observations on the activities of these industrious insects out in the fields. This work has resulted in the disclosure of many new and significant facts.[90]

The missionary impulse has been applied to science rather than religion; the book is as close as Otto would ever come to spiritual autobiography.

Bumblebees and Their Ways was Otto's life work and was all that remained of the man after his death. Sylvia, who was only eight when he died, would eventually write a celebrated series of poems about bumblebees. She often discussed her father's bee studies in letters to others, and in 1962 she raised bees herself in Devon. While Aurelia Plath is often blamed for pressuring her daughter to scale increasingly perilous heights of achievement, the legacy of Otto, the Harvard-educated professor, may have exerted its own pressure. Indeed, Sylvia later told her psychiatrist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher, that Otto was "a brilliant professor who would have expected them to be outstanding."[91] *Bumblebees and Their Ways* was evidence that her father was a "great man" whose insights had moved his scientific field forward, but it also laid the groundwork for the portrait of Otto in "Daddy"—a pedant who looms "at the blackboard" with his "Aryan eye," always ready to correct or punish. It is not just Otto's German heritage that connects him to Nazism in "Daddy," but his role as a professor and scientist. These were occupations Sylvia respected when she was young, but, as her resentment toward her father and her husband grew in the early sixties, they appeared more sinister. By then, her father's occupation had become an embodiment of patriarchal authority. *Bumblebees and Their Ways* unwittingly laid the groundwork not only for Plath's bee poems, but also for "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus." The respected entomologist who kept, as he wrote, "more than fifty colonies under observation . . . on boards on the shady side of a partly covered, abandoned cellar," would become the model for Plath's "Herr Doktor," who tortures defenseless creatures.[92]

Bees were always connected to the memory of the father Sylvia loved—she would suggest as much in her poem "The Beekeeper's Daughter"—but who she felt had abandoned her. In the uplifting "Wintering," which was supposed to be the last poem in *Ariel*, Plath chose her father's totem as a talisman of recovery and resilience during her own bleak winter:

> Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas
> Succeed in banking their fires
> To enter another year?
> What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?
> The bees are flying. They taste the spring.

This literary evolution suggests that near the end of her life Sylvia had perhaps begun reconciling with her father's ghost. Although Ted Hughes changed the order of the *Ariel* poems after her death, Plath was adamant that her book end on a note of hope and renewal with the word "spring." And, indeed, we are far from the red-hot anger of "Daddy" in "Wintering." We cannot know for sure whether Plath's original order in *Ariel* was meant to suggest a narrative of recovery from anger, depression, and self-punishment. But her placement of "Wintering" at the collection's end hints that she believed she was becoming more resilient, and that she may have begun, before her own death, to forgive her father for dying.

IN THE POPULAR IMAGINATION it is Otto, the absent father, who haunts and torments his daughter. The roots of this phenomenon go back to the first sentence of the first biography of Sylvia Plath, Edward Butscher's 1976 *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness:* "For Sylvia Plath, as even the most casual reading of her poetry demonstrates, the central obsession from the beginning to the end of her life and career was her father, Professor Otto Emile [*sic*] Plath." Butscher suggested that Plath would not have become a poet had her father not died. "A situation was needed," he wrote, "a plot ripe with secret tension and geared towards a climax of destruction, betrayal, a re-enactment of an ancient tragedy to forge the tragic poet."[93] Plath's poem "Daddy"—and Ted Hughes's 1998 collection, *Birthday Letters*—have strengthened the common assumption that Otto's ghost lay at the source of Sylvia's genius and her "madness," and that her suicidal drive was in part an effort, as she writes in "Daddy," to "get back, back, back" to him.

Yet it was Sylvia's mother, Aurelia, who had the more lasting and significant impact on her daughter. Sylvia and her mother had a close, complicated, and often difficult relationship, especially after Otto's death. Sylvia shared a bedroom with her for most of her late childhood and adolescence. Aurelia recognized the relationship's mixed blessings, noting, "Between Sylvia and me there existed—as between my own mother and me—a sort of psychic osmosis which, at times, was very wonderful and comforting; at other times, an unwelcome invasion of privacy."[94]

Aurelia was her daughter's confidante, sounding board, model of womanhood, and moral guide. She also embodied the demure, submissive self that blocked access to the deeper, subversive poet-self. Aurelia stood for a particular aesthetic that, from the late fifties on, seemed to Sylvia a vestige of her own early, meticulously crafted, safe verse. Both Plath and Hughes wanted to infuse a more Lawrentian aesthetic into contemporary Anglo-

American poetry. Their joint project meant exploring an alternative moral structure—self-expansion rather than self-sacrifice—of which Aurelia would have disapproved. Where Plath sought originality, her mother valued conformity. When Sylvia famously told Dr. Beuscher, in 1958, that she hated her mother, she was also expressing her disgust with the self that had sought her mother's approval for so many years, and the self that had written the kind of poetry that would appeal to her mother's parochial taste. When Marianne Moore criticized the sexual imagery in Hughes's *The Hawk in the Rain*, Plath saw a mirror of her mother's attitude. Moore's grumbles strengthened Plath's determination to write a bolder, less decorous poetry.

Aurelia has been portrayed in biographies, movies, the media, criticism, and Plath's own writing as a meddler—someone who was wary of Ted Hughes; whose visits to her daughter's British household provoked anxiety; and whose epistolary platitudes Sylvia grimly endured in an endless stream of letters. She is the devil whispering in Sylvia's ear that she is not sufficiently demure, popular, modest, or wealthy. Aurelia, the story goes, put so much pressure on her daughter to excel that Sylvia felt the only way to win her mother's love was to outperform herself again and again; because she could not sustain this cycle, she had no choice but to give up. The main source of this narrative is Plath's own novel, *The Bell Jar*, in which Esther Greenwood's icy, critical mother seems partly to blame for her daughter's breakdown and suicide attempt. The novel was a source of unending grievance to Aurelia.

Whether or not Aurelia's high expectations damaged her daughter will always be a matter of debate. Sylvia's childhood and college friends defend Aurelia fiercely. Sylvia's closest Wellesley confidante, Betsy Powley Wallingford, said, "Aurelia certainly was aware of all her daughter's gifts and made darn sure those gifts were properly used and encouraged, which can be seen as being pushy." But she insisted this was not the case, and was upset that many thought Sylvia had a "nasty relationship with her mother. . . . Whatever Aurelia did was for Sylvia's benefit. She sacrificed her whole self for her children." Betsy felt that Aurelia had become a "scapegoat" who was unfairly vilified in order to give others "a reason" for Plath's suicide and "a feeling of power over the story."[95] Sylvia's Wellesley friend Phil McCurdy called Aurelia a kind, "hardworking widow," while other friends like Janet Salter Rosenberg and Ellie Friedman Klein also described her as quiet and generous, formal but warm.[96] Perry Norton, another close Wellesley friend, remembered Aurelia as "somewhat shy," a "very sweet, decent, hardworking person. Domineering does not apply." Perry's father was a history professor at Boston University, and the two families had gotten to know each other through faculty social events when Otto was still alive. Perry felt that both his and Sylvia's parents expected their children to succeed, but that these

kinds of expectations were typical in their professorial milieu. Academic success, rather than material wealth, was the currency such families valued: they were "decent people who had done their best and tried their hardest" to pass on their humanistic, intellectual values to their children.[97] Sylvia's brother, Warren, did not believe that his mother pushed his sister to excel. In 1975 he told a biographer, "Sylvia didn't need any pushing."[98]

As with Sylvia herself, there seems to be only one version of Aurelia in the popular imagination. Yet Aurelia's own letters and writings present a more complicated portrait of a woman whose intellectual and creative aspirations were thwarted by a culture that derided female ambition. Like Otto, Aurelia inherited an intense work ethic, which she passed down to her daughter. Aurelia's father, Francis, or Frank, Schober (b. 1881), was one of thirteen children, born in Bad Aussee, Austria. His mother, who came from a wealthy family, died when he was only ten, leaving him, her favorite child, a fortune that his father quickly spent on a Viennese showgirl. The family's finances became so precarious that Frank was forced to leave home at fourteen.

After brief stints in Italy and Paris, Frank found his way to England; by the time he was twenty, he spoke four languages and worked as a servant in Westgate-on-Sea, Kent.[99] He arrived in Boston on June 1, 1902, at the age of twenty-one, to join a friend he had made in England, Josef Grünwald.[100] Frank helped Josef run a boarding house he had opened in South Boston. Josef brought over his two sisters, Aurelia (senior) and Annie, from Vienna, their hometown, in April 1904.[101] Frank welcomed the anxious teenagers inside the boarding house—Aurelia, Sylvia's future grandmother, was just sixteen—and reassured them that all would be well in America. He married Aurelia a little over a year later and became an American citizen in 1909.[102] Two more Grünwald siblings, Ernst and Otto, came to America in 1905. Ernst, who lived to be 101, settled in Jamaica Plain, where Sylvia visited him as a child.

All the Grünwalds changed their surnames to Greenwood upon arriving in America. (Plath would eventually choose this surname for Esther, the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*.) While anglicizing foreign names was not unusual, the family may have wanted to distinguish themselves from the many Jewish Grünwalds pouring into America from Austria and Hungary at this time. As for Plath's identifying herself with Jewish Holocaust victims ("I may be a bit of a Jew"), the Grünwald name and the speed at which it was abandoned may have caused her to wonder whether there had in fact been a Jewish relative in her maternal line.[103] In her brief introduction of "Daddy" for a 1962 BBC program, she wrote that the poem's speaker's mother was "very possibly part Jewish."[104] Indeed, Aurelia said that her maternal Viennese grandmother, Barbara Meyer, was an orphan, and possibly Jewish.[105]

Frank Schober married Aurelia Greenwood in July 1905, a week after her eighteenth birthday. A daughter, Aurelia Frances, was born on April 26, 1906. In the decades that followed, Aurelia Sr. ran the home while Frank worked as a waiter and, later, as an accountant for the Dorothy Muriel Company. By 1920, he had earned enough to move his young family from the Boston suburb of Jamaica Plain into a three-bedroom, two-thousand-square-foot rented house at 892 Shirley Street, on Point Shirley in Winthrop. The house, built in 1900, provided plenty of space for three children—Aurelia Frances, Dorothy, and Frank Jr. Uncle Ernst, his American wife Pauline, and their two sons lived nearby in Jamaica Plain.

Winthrop, a coastal suburb north of Boston, was then populated by working- and middle-class Catholics of mainly Irish and Italian descent, with smaller pockets of Protestants and Jews. While many of its homes faced the Atlantic, the lots were small and the neighbors close. Flanked by Boston's main airport to the west and Deer Island Prison to the south, Winthrop would never develop into an affluent town like nearby Marblehead. But it was safe, clean, and unpretentious. The Schober house, perched between the beach and Boston Harbor, had a spectacular view of the sea that would leave an indelible impression on the young Aurelia Schober and, eventually, her daughter. Before Logan Airport became a busy international hub, Winthrop was quiet and the seawater clean enough for swimming. On Point Shirley, Sylvia lived with her grandparents during Otto's illness and began her love affair with the sea.

Aurelia writes in her memoir that she grew up in a "peaceful, loving home," but her childhood was marked by moments of crisis. She entered school as a native German speaker with no English, and recalled "how isolated I felt at recess as I stood by myself in a corner of the schoolyard." From this time on, the family spoke English at home, but the family's Austrian heritage meant that neighbors regarded them suspiciously during the First World War. Despite the fact that the Schobers were American citizens, Aurelia said she was "ostracized by the neighborhood 'gang,' called 'spy-face,' and . . . pushed off the school bus steps and dumped on the ground, while the busdriver, keeping his eyes straight ahead, drove off." (Plath would later draw on this story when writing "The Shadow" and "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit.") More than sixty years later, these incidents still upset Aurelia: "I felt this prejudice was completely unjust for my parents' sake as well as my own, for they were ardent converts to American democracy."[106] Aurelia was eight when the First World War began and twelve when it ended—formative years to come of age as an "other" who was unfairly bullied. This dislocating experience helps explain her reluctance to cause trouble later in life, or to question the dominant certainties of her age. Aurelia's embrace of

mainstream American values and her frequent suppression of anger—habits that would grate mightily on her daughter—grew partly out of her experience as an ostracized Austrian American girl during the First World War.

On account of disastrous investments in the stock market, Frank Schober brought the family close to financial ruin during the 1920s. When he was laid off from his accounting job in the late 1930s, Aurelia's mother demanded control of the family's finances—a move that broke Frank's spirit.[107] He had to scramble for work and was lucky to find a position as the maître d'hôtel at the elite Brookline Country Club in 1940. Aurelia remembered that she and her two younger siblings "grew up in a matriarchy"—just as Sylvia would after her father's death. Aurelia, the good girl and peacemaker, took pride in her high marks and the pleasure they brought her parents, who made her education a top priority: "Support at home compensated for outside unpleasantness, as well as did success in the classroom." She was allowed to skip the second grade, "a great boon for me."[108] The same cycle—praise from parents and teachers making up for "outside unpleasantness"—would again play itself out between Aurelia and her daughter years later.

Aurelia forged her identity around her intellect from an early age. When she was not playing with her siblings, going to museums, or visiting her uncle's family in Jamaica Plain, she spent most of her free time reading Horatio Alger, Harold Bell Wright, and Gene Stratton-Porter. Her favorite book was, notably, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. She preferred novels in which "the poor and the virtuous always ultimately triumphed," perhaps because of her own battles with the neighborhood gang some years before. Later, she devoured "all the romantic historical novels I could find in the public library." She took pains, in her memoir, to portray herself as a reader:

> Emily Dickinson's poetry became my new bible; the novels of Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, the Brontës, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, Galsworthy, Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and Henry James—in fact, the world of American and English prose and poetry burst upon me, filling me with the urgency to read, read. I lived in a dream world, a book tucked under every mattress of the beds it was my chore to make up daily; a book in the bathroom hamper, and the family's stock answer to "What's RiRi [my nickname] doing?" was "Oh, she's reading *again*."[109]

Aurelia suggests in this memoir that Sylvia inherited her literary precociousness, and perhaps even her literary talent, from her. Indeed, when Aurelia later gave Sylvia books by Friedrich Nietzsche and James Frazer at Christmas, she reaffirmed the sense that they shared an intellectual bond. But Sylvia was the voyager; Aurelia could only wave from the shore with

a mix of envy and pride. Aurelia once told an interviewer, "I had hoped to become a writer once, but I didn't feel that I could expose my children to the uncertainty of a writer's success or failure."[110]

Aurelia graduated salutatorian of her 1924 high school class. She wanted to study at Wellesley College, but the cost was prohibitive.[111] She later regretted not applying for a scholarship and made sure her daughter did not repeat the same mistake. She settled on a liberal arts degree from Boston University to prepare for a career teaching English. Her father, however, had other plans for her. "I was to be a 'business woman.' "[112] In the end, they compromised: after Aurelia finished the two-year vocational course, she completed two more years at the university studying the humanities. There, she served as the president of the German Club and participated in student government, the English Club, and the Writers' Club.[113] She graduated valedictorian of her college class in 1928.

Aurelia then pursued a master's degree in English and German at Boston University, where her "most memorable" class was "The Philosophy of Faust," taught by Marshall Perrin.[114] She met Otto, the professor of her Middle High German class, in 1929. She thought him "a very fine-looking gentleman . . . with extraordinarily vivid blue eyes, and a fair, ruddy complexion." On the last day of class, as Aurelia said good-bye to him, he shyly invited her to a picnic at a friend's farm the next weekend. "It was a bolt out of the blue," Aurelia wrote. That weekend, she learned that Otto "could be spontaneous, jolly, and certainly was confiding." He told her he admired her thesis on the Renaissance physician and alchemist Paracelsus, which he had read and which, he said, "proved we had much in common." He "astounded" her by revealing that he had a wife from whom he had been separated for thirteen years, but that he would get a divorce were he "to form a serious relationship with a young woman now."[115] This was perhaps the real "bolt out of the blue": Otto was already thinking about marrying Aurelia on their first date.

The couple separated for the summer while Aurelia worked as an office manager at a camp in Pine Bush, New York. The two corresponded throughout July and August, then began dating in earnest in the fall of 1930. Aurelia's recollection of their courtship recalls the early promise of the marriage:

> From the fall of 1930 on, our friendship developed and deepened. Weekends found us hiking through the Blue Hills, the Arnold Arboretum, or the Fells Reservation. The worlds of ornithology and entomology were opening for me, and we dreamed of projects, jointly shared, involving nature study, travel, and writing. "The Evolution of Parental Care in the Animal Kingdom" was our most ambitious vision, planned to be

> embarked upon after we had achieved some lesser goals and had established our family of at least two children. I succeeded in interesting Otto at that time in the fine productions then given at the Boston Repertory Theatre—Ibsen, Shaw, and modern plays of that era—as well as sharing my enthusiasm for literature.[116]

In 1932 they traveled to Nevada so that Otto could obtain a formal divorce from his first wife. Divorces were difficult to obtain, and the whole affair contained a whiff of scandal. Otto and Aurelia married on the same day the divorce was granted, January 4, in a rushed civil ceremony that probably disappointed the bride, who had a deeply sentimental side. (Both of Aurelia's siblings eventually married in festive, family-centered ceremonies.)

After the wedding, Otto asked Aurelia to give up a promising career as a teacher of English and German at Brookline High School, one of the state's best public schools, to become, as she put it, "a full-time homemaker."[117] Otto's request reflected the mores of the time: before the Second World War, twenty-six states had laws prohibiting married women from working.[118] Otto respected Aurelia's intellect enough to ask her to ghostwrite sections of his scientific work, but, as a college professor, he saw no need for her to remain in the workforce. Indeed, a "working wife" in the 1930s carried a stigma.

Aurelia claimed that the first year of her marriage was almost exclusively devoted to "THE BOOK"—*Bumblebees and Their Ways*. "After Sylvia was born," she wrote, "it was 'THE CHAPTER.' "[119] This was a chapter on "Insect Societies" that Otto was preparing for *The Handbook of Social Psychology*. Aurelia said she wrote the entire first draft of this chapter from Otto's notes. In this respect, Otto and Aurelia's marriage bears some resemblance to Sylvia's marriage to Ted Hughes. Both marriages began in academic settings, and both women were initially content to put their own ambitions aside to help their foreign husbands. The two highly educated couples embarked on their relationships in a collaborative spirit: Ted and Sylvia sought to become the most important poets of their generation, while Otto and Aurelia also saw themselves as partners in a joint intellectual and scientific endeavor. Sylvia's friend Ruth Freeman Geissler picked up on this connection: "Sylvia helped Ted many times . . . the same as Aurelia had helped Otto a generation before."[120]

Aurelia's transition from professional to housewife was bittersweet. She may have thought life with Otto would be like the evenings she had once spent with a bachelor professor at MIT for whom she did German-English translation work during her junior year at Boston University. The two often dined together, and, she wrote, "It was during these meals that I listened,

fascinated, to his accounts of travel and colorful adventures, fully realizing that I was in the presence of a true genius in both the arts and sciences. I came away with my notebook filled with reading lists that led me to Greek drama, Russian literature, the works of Herman Hesse, the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, as well as the writings of great world philosophers."[121] She later confided to Sylvia's daughter, Frieda, that this man had made her feel "transfigured, beautiful . . . I felt I spilled joy from every pore." But in 1927 he left her to work abroad, and she never saw him again. Crushed, she felt her world diminish and her possibilities narrow. She told Frieda, "I don't want to recall the hurt that remained in lessening degrees until your mother was born."[122] Otto courted her while she was nursing her broken heart.

Marriage, Aurelia soon learned, was not the endless dinner party she had once imagined. Indeed, Otto's earlier life as an immigrant bachelor was poor preparation for the negotiations and compromises of married life. Aurelia explained:

> Despite the fact that he was only sixteen when he arrived in the United States, the Germanic theory that the man should be *der Herr des Hauses* (head of the house) persisted, contrary to Otto's earlier claims that the then modern aim of "fifty-fifty" appealed to him. . . . The age difference between us (twenty-one years), Otto's superior education, his long years of living in college dormitories or rooming by himself, our former student-teacher relationship, all made this sudden change to home and family difficult for him, and led to an attitude of "rightful" dominance on his part. . . . At the end of my first year of marriage, I realized that if I wanted a peaceful home—and I did—I would simply have to become more submissive, although it was not in my nature to do so.[123]

After "Daddy," Aurelia challenged the public perception of Otto Plath as a tyrannical husband. Yet she chafed under his patriarchal assumptions and could not quite bring herself to absolve him. She resented the fact that he commandeered the dining room table as his desk for a year while he was writing "Insect Societies," not allowing anyone to move a single book or paper. On the rare evenings when he went out to teach an evening class at Harvard, Aurelia invited friends over for dinner. She drew a diagram of his papers' arrangement and carefully placed everything back in its original position before he returned.[124] Aurelia later told Dr. Beuscher she was "not happily married," especially as Otto grew more ill and "emotionally unbalanced."[125] A Boston University colleague who met Aurelia a few times recalled a frostiness between husband and wife, though it was quite clear Otto "had deep affection for his little daughter."[126]

Like her mother, Sylvia, as wife to a "genius" husband, masked what was smoldering inside with perfect deportment. She would embrace the role of housewife to her friends and correspondents, and then seethe in her journal about the injustices of that role. Her mother had paid the high price of personal autonomy to keep a "peaceful" household; even after Otto's death, she remained faithful, promising Sylvia she would never marry again. But Sylvia had no wish to become a martyr. To her, alone with her children in those dark winter days of 1963, it seemed that for all her achievements she had simply become her mother.[127] Plath's 1948 poem "Recognition" nearly predicts this circular domestic fate. The speaker, trying to outrun her memories, moves into a new home—only to realize it is all too "familiar":

> And when I realized that the paint
> Had camouflaged an ancient door,
> And that beneath the smooth shellac
> There lay a trampled hardwood floor,
> I looked about through angry tears.
>
> For that remodeled house was all
> That I could ever own. And while
> I gazed around the shadowed hall
> My mouth curved in a bitter smile:
> I knew I had lived there before.[128]

2

Do Not Mourn

Winthrop, 1932–1940

Nineteen thirty-two was hardly an auspicious year for a new baby. America was three years into the Great Depression, and a mood of pessimism had settled over the country. National unemployment had skyrocketed to an unprecedented 25 percent. Waves of migrants began their hopeless journeys from farm to city, where they found not jobs but squalid shantytowns. Hungry citizens sold apples from urban sidewalks and mobs began to loot supermarkets. That summer, J. P. Morgan decided to keep his yacht, the *Corsair*, in dry dock on the grounds that it was "wiser and kinder not to flaunt such luxuriant amusement."[1] The Ku Klux Klan enjoyed a resurgence, and ranchers from Oklahoma threatened revolution.[2] President Hoover still insisted that Americans would pull themselves up by their bootstraps as they always had. Yet the nation was teetering on the brink of collapse. Apocalyptic scenes became common. One woman knew that everything had changed in 1931 the day she saw fifty men, all "American citizens," fighting "like animals" for garbage scraps behind a restaurant.[3] The New Deal and its modest measures of relief were still years away, but the need was desperate. An unemployed man expressed the situation succinctly when he wrote to the president, "Can you not find a quicker way of Executing us than to starve us to death."[4]

Otto and Aurelia's marriage was a gesture of optimism in the face of national calamity, but there were practical reasons to wed. Otto, at forty-seven, had a secure teaching position at a time when school enrollments were contracting and departments downsizing. Given the unemployment rate, Aurelia would have considered him a very eligible bachelor. And both, perhaps, found solace in their mutual Germanic heritage at a time when anti-

German sentiment was on the rise. They knew that the American Dream could suddenly collapse around them as it had for so many others.

They conceived within a month of their wedding day on January 4, 1932. The couple had a progressive approach to child-rearing, and read works by Friedrich Fröbel and Maria Montessori. Otto had unpleasant recollections of his own mother's rigid parenting and, Aurelia claimed, "believed in the natural unfolding of an infant's development."[5] Both thought their baby should be fed on demand and picked up when crying—methods then frowned upon by pediatricians, who expected new mothers to follow strict feeding schedules. But Aurelia was reluctant to expose herself as a nonconformist: "I would never confess to it in front of my contemporaries."[6]

Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, three weeks early, at 2:10 p.m. at Robinson Memorial Hospital in Boston's South End. She weighed eight pounds, eleven ounces and was twenty-two inches long. The birth of a healthy baby girl, announced on a prim, pink-ribbon-trimmed card, brought Otto and Aurelia closer to their idyllic vision of bourgeois family life.[7] Aurelia later said she and Otto chose the name Sylvia for its connotations of "the herb salvia and the poetic adjective sylvan."[8] The name married Otto and Aurelia's interests—botany and poetry—and bestowed a beneficent blessing on their daughter.[9]

They brought their baby home to the ground-floor apartment at 24 Prince Street in Jamaica Plain, a large arts-and-crafts-style house with an elegant front porch and an upstairs balcony. The new house was a step up from the shabby student dwellings of Otto's past. Though the yard was tiny, their proximity to Harvard's Arnold Arboretum and Jamaica Pond allowed the small family to spend much of their time outdoors in the warmer months. A photograph shows a happy outing at the arboretum in July 1933. The family poses in relaxed contentment: Aurelia, in pearls and a fur stole, holds her blond infant while Otto, shirtsleeves rolled up, reclines in the grass next to his daughter. Another early photograph of Sylvia, in March 1933, at five months old, shows her sitting happily on Aurelia's lap. Mother holds daughter tenderly and smiles while Sylvia, dressed in a matching crocheted dress and cap, returns her gaze. Yet another photograph shows Sylvia at nine months smiling brightly in the August sun. (In the margin, Aurelia wrote, "Sylvia is always merry!") Aurelia would later become friendly with another young mother in the neighborhood named Helen Hennessy, whose infant daughter, the future Helen Hennessy Vendler, would eventually become the most influential poetry critic in America. As a toddler, Sylvia used to "dance around" the two mothers as they walked. Little did she know the baby in the carriage would become a renowned Harvard professor who would one day champion her poetry.[10]

Aurelia loved her daughter, but she resented giving up a professional career in teaching and education administration, itself a downsized ambition from her true goal of writing fiction. She was caught between two conflicting sets of ambitions—career and motherhood—which in 1932 were still poles apart. She had thought combining both might be possible when she married Otto, who had claimed to believe in equal parenting. Yet his progressive attitude dissolved when their first child was born. Aurelia, a college valedictorian with a master's degree, had little choice but to sacrifice her own intellectual aspirations for the sake of domestic harmony. She poured her intelligence and ambition into the only outlet she could: her child.

At fifteen, Sylvia told Aurelia, "'When I am a mother I want to bring up my children just as you have us.'"[11] Aurelia later wrote that this was the remark she "treasured most" from her daughter. She was determined that Sylvia would have the scholarly and literary opportunities she did not; yet she wanted Sylvia, the daughter and granddaughter of Germanic immigrants on the eve of another war with Germany, to be a good American. This meant abiding by the sexist mores of the time and behaving like a lady. Aurelia's own mother reaffirmed such values when, on the eve of Sylvia's departure for Cambridge University in 1955, she said, "I don't mind her understanding artists; I don't mind her working like an artist, just so long as she doesn't live like one!"[12] Yet in her daughter, Aurelia saw a reflection of her own artistic ambition. Sylvia understood, and even sympathized. Later in life she encouraged Aurelia to write stories for women's magazines, and offered to be her editor. But Sylvia, her mother's double in so many ways, would long to separate herself from this hovering shadow of dreams deferred.

Aurelia sensed this desire for separation, and was sometimes embittered by it. Her memory of Sylvia's disdain for her wardrobe suggests a charged mother-daughter dynamic:

> In the eyes of my Smith girl my hair was not properly "styled"; my suits (bought at cooperative sales, some good Davidow suits, but, of course, not new) were too conservative, and my inevitable white blouses "did nothing for me." I had expected it; I was amused, and refrained from uttering my thought, "I dress this way the better to provide for you, my dear."[13]

Aurelia also remembered that when she revealed to her daughter that she had been asked to model in the spring of 1928 for the Boston Home Beautiful Exposition, Sylvia responded, "Standards must have been very different in your day."[14]

When Aurelia was offered a position as dean of women at Northeastern University in 1947, Sylvia, age fifteen, yelled, "For your self-agrandizement [*sic*] you would make us complete orphans!" Aurelia turned down the position. "Later she reproached me for my negative decision, saying, 'You didn't have the guts to make the break!' An element of truth was there, I suppose, or I wouldn't have remembered it verbatim."[15] These stories, in the draft of Aurelia's memoir, were eventually omitted from the published version. The public would not be privy to mother-daughter score settling. The roots of the painful, competitive relationship that would propel and repel Sylvia all her life might be traced back to the day Aurelia turned her back on her professional ambitions and embraced, instead, her newborn daughter.

AURELIA RECORDED every detail of her infant's progress in her baby book.[16] This remarkable square pink album provides a glimpse of her parenting style, which, depending on one's perspective, was either hands-on or hovering. Aurelia was a playful and engaged mother in an era when well-behaved children were still generally seen and not heard. But her precise recordings betray an anxiety about whether her daughter's growth and development conformed to normal patterns. A typical entry regarding Sylvia's teething activity in 1933, for example, reads: "July 10, upper left central incisor—small appetite; Oct. 5, upper left lateral incisor (restless at night); Dec. 11—upper right molar (No lower left teeth to match right side!)." Aurelia was concerned throughout Sylvia's infancy that she was a "small eater." From June 1933 on, she wrote down her daughter's weekly weight. Her anxieties help explain Sylvia's detailed reports about food in her letters from summer camps, which are filled with reassurances that she is gaining weight.

Sylvia's baby gifts—silver spoons, silk bonnets, a gold locket—suggest a solidly middle-class social circle comprising university families. None of Otto's relatives appears to have sent a gift; there was little communication between the two families apart from Aurelia's correspondence with Otto's sister, Frieda Plath Heinrichs, who lived in California. Sylvia would always remain intensely curious, in the manner of an orphan, about her lost Plath relatives. She would eventually name her daughter after her paternal aunt Frieda, whom she barely knew. Otto himself did not feature in Aurelia's description of Sylvia's first Christmas. She rarely mentions him at all in the baby book apart from a short note about Christmas 1933, when he gave Sylvia her favorite gift—a stuffed Pekinese dog that she "loved to death."[17]

Sylvia was verbally precocious and spoke her first words at eight months.

Aurelia's list of her speech milestones provide an intimate glimpse of family life in the Plath and Schober homes during the early 1930s:

> Eight months: Mama, dad, bye-bye, tick-tick ("bye bye" was spoken consciously, but the other words were accidents)
> Sept. 1 Ragman passed calling "Rags" and Sylvia called "Ags!"
> Oct. 1 "Ow gaw" (all gone!—means bottle is empty)
> Oct. 20 "Birdie!"
> Nov. 1 "I tee" (I see!) and "haw" (for hot), ba for bath and baw for ball
> Dec. 19 Daddy! (said specially when someone shakes the furnace!)
> Sounds are made for the dog, the duck, the cow, horse, wind, sheep; she says "car" whenever she hears an auto pass. She has been making replies to such queries as: What does the sheep say? "Ba," etc. for 2 months. She imitates grandpa's puffing on his pipe to the query "What does grandpa do?"[18]

When Aurelia told Sylvia they were going to the arboretum, she would jump up and down, "squealing with glee. It's a treat to take her out now, for she notices everything: birds, squirrels, chipmunks, horses, automobiles—and, best of all to her little mind, other babies. She wants to touch other babies, and stretches out her arms to them, shouting with excitement." Even as a toddler, Sylvia was deeply stirred by her senses. "She gets excited about plants and flowers and wants to smell them immediately," Aurelia wrote in February 1934. From about mid-May of 1933, Aurelia gave Sylvia sunbaths for an hour each morning and afternoon, which she felt was important for her baby's health. Sunbathing would become Sylvia's lifelong habit.

On September 14, 1933, Aurelia's baby girl took her first steps, into Otto's arms. By December she was walking unaided. Her first birthday was a small but "bright and festive" affair. Aurelia expressed disbelief that her infant was already a year old: "It is hard to imagine that my baby is emerging from her state of precious babyhood! She looks so grown-up in the knitted suit and beret which I recently bought her! . . . Well her daddy and I agree that the whole world doesn't hold another one-year old so wonderful—and so sweet!—at least it doesn't for us!" When it came time to blow out the candle on the sponge cake Grammy Schober had made, Aurelia wrote, "We wanted Sylvia to 'poof' out her candle but she eagerly reached toward the flame, becoming vocally indignant when not allowed to grasp it!"

Aurelia soon taught Sylvia to hold out her hand in greeting and say, "How do you do?" But at fifteen months, Sylvia was testing her limits: "If Sylvia wants attention, she announces, 'ga-ga' (which means 'nasty' and 'forbid-

den'). She may then go determinedly to the fireplace and lick the bricks with her tongue or pop some microscopic speck of thread or dust into her mouth. It is done in good humor, and the rush for the 'ga-ga' on the part of either parent is met by giggles from Sylvia. Her end is then achieved!"

Sylvia's baby book suggests that Aurelia was a woman who cared about precision and control even as she extolled the virtues of freedom and play. Although she was sometimes critical of the status quo, she rarely veered from it; when she did, she kept her small rebellions to herself. Conformist values kept her moored in a world veering wildly off course, where families lost their homes and fortunes every day. The Plaths never went without food, clothing, or shelter during the Depression. Not all immigrant families were so lucky.

DURING THE FIRST YEAR of Sylvia's life, Aurelia collaborated with Otto on "Insect Societies" while her parents helped mind the new baby. Aurelia's parents lived with the young family in Jamaica Plain during the summers, when they rented out their Winthrop house for extra money. The living quarters were tight, but Aurelia appreciated her parents' support, writing that their "humor, love, and laughter" lightened "what would otherwise have been too academic an atmosphere."[19] During this period Frank Schober would often take his granddaughter for walks to the arboretum while Aurelia and Otto worked. Over time, an especially tight bond formed between Sylvia and her grandfather. He swam with her in the summer and amused her with games indoors. Plath remembered, in her 1963 Winthrop memoir "Ocean 1212-W," how one day, after a spanking, "grandfather extracted me from the domestic furies for a long beachcoming [*sic*] stroll over mountains of rattling and cranking purple stones." When Aurelia was in the hospital giving birth to Warren, her grandfather's "lyrical whistle beckoned me to adventure and forgetting." Sylvia's uncle Frank also distracted the children by taking them out on the water to fish for mackerel and cod in his new sailboat, which he built himself. He rigged up a beach swing that propelled them into the water at high tide. In the evenings the family feasted on Grammy Schober's homemade seafood chowder, steamers, and lobster gathered from the Schobers' own lobster pots. Sylvia always shielded her eyes when her grandmother threw the live lobsters into the boiling pot: "I felt the awful scald of the water too keenly on my skin."[20]

Sylvia's younger brother, Warren, was born on April 27, 1935, two and a half years to the day after her birth. Afflicted throughout toddlerhood with asthma and bronchial pneumonia, Warren required near constant attention

from Aurelia. Sylvia was often sent to her grandparents' home in Winthrop while her mother tended to her sickly infant son; when she was home, Sylvia sought out Otto's attention in an attempt to become his "pet," just as she believed Warren was Aurelia's.

While Aurelia was nursing Warren, Sylvia occupied herself by finding capital letters in newspapers and reciting them to her mother. She read her first word (a Stop sign, which she read as "pots") at three and displayed artistic talent early. Otto was excited when one day he found her quietly outlining the Taj Mahal on a bath mat with small mosaic tiles—"to us a definite sign of visual memory developing at an early age."[21] Aurelia remembered, "My husband wouldn't let me vacuum clean. He had that down for weeks."[22] Otto took special pleasure in teaching and observing his daughter, who could recite on command the Latin names of the insects he was studying. "Bombiculanus!" she would exclaim when she saw a bee. Aurelia recounted that one night, while gazing down at his sleeping children, Otto said, "All parents *think* their children are wonderful. We *know*!"[23] A family friend said that Otto spoke to Sylvia as if she were his intellectual peer; she was, for him, "the recipient, the chosen one."[24] Otto may have been a loving father, but he was not playful. He seemed most interested in Sylvia when she excelled. Aurelia recalled, "She never played with Daddy, she never went out with Daddy, never went on the beach with Daddy except in the evenings she would play piano. And then when he was ill she dressed up in a nurse's uniform and brought him drinks and so forth."[25]

Aurelia and the children spent most of the hot summer of 1936 with the Schobers in Winthrop while Otto taught summer school at Boston University. She commuted back to Jamaica Plain weekly to do housekeeping and spend time with Otto, who had begun to complain about increasingly alarming symptoms: "constantly tired; develops chronic cough; sleeps poorly," Aurelia recorded.[26] She worried that what at first seemed like fatigue from a long commute by railway, boat, and subway into Boston was something more serious. But Otto stubbornly refused to see a doctor. In fact, wrote Aurelia, he had "no personal physician and boasted that he had never been to a doctor in his life."[27] Otto had seen a friend die from lung cancer after several operations, and he was determined to avoid the same fate. "I know what my ailment is, and I'm not going to submit to any butchering," he told Aurelia.[28] He decided he was terminally ill. Otto's self-diagnosis and deeply pessimistic refusal to seek medical help, as well as his reclusive domestic habits, suggest that he may have been suffering from depression. "Why me?" he would ask despondently.[29]

That fall, Aurelia kept the children in Winthrop with her parents while she nursed Otto in Jamaica Plain. The Plaths soon moved to their own

seven-room stucco house in Winthrop at 92 Johnson Avenue, only two miles from the Schober house on Point Shirley. Aurelia called it "spacious."[30] Sylvia would have felt the bracing wind of the sea from her earliest days: only one house stood between the new Plath home and the ocean. She would have seen light change as it refracted off the ocean over the course of an afternoon, "full of red sun and sea lights," as she later wrote.[31] She would have heard the sound of gulls constantly. It was here that she chose to sanctify her earliest memories, here that she began an infatuation with the sea that would become a touchstone throughout her life.

She learned to swim three months before her fifth birthday; photographs from this time show her at the beach, wading in the water or standing against a sea wall looking happy and tan.[32] She beams for the camera as she stands in her swimsuit on the bow of Uncle Frank's sailboat, holding a six-and-a-half-pound cod. Aurelia remembered her "roaming over the 'flats' at low tide, gathering shells or digging in the coarse sand," exploring "shallow pools teeming with miniature sea life," and climbing rocks.[33] Later, in her 1940s scrapbook, Sylvia described her relationship with the ocean:

> I gradually developed a love for the stormy, turbulent ocean that few people can understand. I enjoyed lying for hours in the bright, white sand, gazing at the sparkling blue-green waves bounding in on the west beach, and the silvery seagulls dipping for fish on the crest of a frothy white-cap before it broke and washed among the pebbles. I speak so much of the ocean, because it was an important part of my heritage and environment, and my love for it is hard to explain.[34]

Parts of her early short story "The Green Rock," written in 1949 when she was sixteen or seventeen, seem to come straight out of her scrapbook:

> Something within her soared at the sight of the cloudless sky and the waves washing on the shore with a scalloped fringe of foam. . . . As she stared out at the ocean, she wondered if she could ever explain to anyone how she felt about the sea. It was part of her, and she wanted to reach out, out, until she encompassed the horizon within the circle of her arms.[35]

In her memoir "Ocean 1212-W," Plath wrote, "I sometimes think my vision of the sea is the clearest thing I own." "Ocean 1212-W" was Plath's attempt to write her own creation myth. When Aurelia first set her down on the beach, Sylvia "crawled straight for the coming wave and was just through the wall of green when she caught my heels." Later, she claimed she taught herself to swim: "I should, according to mother, have sunk like a stone, but

I didn't." The sea protected her, and brought her a "sign of election and specialness" when Aurelia was in the hospital giving birth to Warren: "I was not forever to be cast out."[36] Sylvia's childhood friend Ruth Freeman Geissler remembered that Otto, too, loved the sea—he "sat in the sun at the beach every day" in the summer. When Ruth's father saw Otto at the beach, Otto would say, in his German accent, "I'm storing up health vor the vinter."[37]

Plath described with particular relish the "sulphurous afternoon" when the deadly hurricane of '38 struck, "the sea molten, steely-slick, heaving at its leash like a broody animal." She and Warren watched the destruction that night out their window: "Nothing could be seen. The only sound was a howl, jazzed up by the bangs, slams, groans and splinterings of objects tossed like crockery in a giant's quarrel." (Aurelia remembered that her young daughter always found storms "exciting and dramatic.")[38] The morning after the hurricane, Sylvia remembered seeing upended telephone poles and fallen trees, even small cottages floating out at sea. It was, she wrote, "all one could wish." Her grandmother's Winthrop house survived the storm intact, despite nature's best attempt to send it out to sea: "My grandfather's seawall had saved it, neighbors said. . . . a dead shark filled what had been the geranium bed, but my grandmother had her broom out, it would soon be right."[39] Plath identified equally with the raging sea and the Germanic stoicism that held its destructions at bay.

At night Aurelia read to the children in the brightly decorated upstairs playroom equipped with an art easel, paint, clay, and a record player on which she played classical and children's music. She put money toward a "book fund" and built up a "respectable" library for the children, augmented by Otto's two thousand scientific books and her own collection of German, English, and American literature.[40] She read the children Robert Louis Stevenson, Eugene Field, A. A. Milne, Dr. Seuss, and J. R. R. Tolkien. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Wind in the Willows* were favorites. She also made up stories about a teddy bear named Mixie Blackshort and read the children poems from an anthology called *Sung Under the Silver Umbrella*. They, in turn, composed their own poems. Aurelia read poetry to both children from the time they were born, for she "believed that even babies responded to the cadence of poetry." In addition to children's verse, she recited "John Donne, Browning, Yeats, Tennyson, Coleridge, Rupert Brooke, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sara Teasdale, T. S. Eliot and many others."[41] Sylvia's toddlerhood was intensely literary.

Aurelia referred to the work of Emily Dickinson as her "bible," but Plath remembered that her first literary frisson was Matthew Arnold's "The Forsaken Merman."[42] She loved the rhyme and cadences:

Sand-strewn caverns, cool and deep,
Where the winds are all asleep;
Where the spent lights quiver and gleam;
Where the salt weed sways in the stream;
Where the sea beasts rang'd all round
Feed in the ooze of their pasture-ground; . . .

The poem tells of a human wife who abandons her merman husband and children to pray at the village church on Easter Sunday. Despite the family's pleas, she never returns to the sea. "Children's voices should be dear / (Call once more) to a mother's ear; / Children's voices, wild with pain. / Surely she will come again." But she does not come—she remains on land, committed to God. "Come away, children, call no more," says the merman.

Sylvia, a young child, felt "gooseflesh" on her skin after Aurelia read her the poem. "I did not know what made it. I was not cold. Had a ghost passed over? No, it was the poetry. A spark flew off Arnold and shook me, like a chill. I wanted to cry; I felt very odd. I had fallen into a new way of being happy."[43] Plath would later use ocean imagery to explore the themes of parental abandonment and childhood grief in her 1958 poem "Full Fathom Five," in which the landlocked daughter is forsaken by her sea-dwelling, changeling father: "I walk dry on your kingdom's border / Exiled to no good. // Your shelled bed I remember. / Father, this thick air is murderous. / I would breathe water." The poem owes an obvious debt to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but its dramatic trajectory also suggests Arnold's "The Forsaken Merman."

Aurelia's ambitious reading program quickly yielded dividends. In 1937, at only five years old, Sylvia was reading and writing. She wrote her first poem, the two-lined "Thoughts," in December 1937: "When Christmas comes, smiles creep into my heart. / I'm always happiest when I'm singing a song or skipping along."[44] Inspired by the progressive ideas of Montessori and Fröbel, who eschewed rote learning, Aurelia enrolled Sylvia at a local progressive preschool, the Sunshine School. There, Sylvia made a lifelong friend in Ruth Freeman. Marion Freeman, Ruth's mother, became Aurelia's closest friend at this time; Sylvia later wrote that she became "a sort of 'second mother' to me."[45] Aurelia remembered that the "children practically lived together in one home or the other" and called the "relaxed, cheerful" Freeman home "a refuge in inclement weather when Otto was at home." (Ruth would eventually live with the Plaths for some months when Marion was hospitalized for a nervous breakdown.) Sylvia also became friendly with Ruth's brother David, who inspired the character of Ben in her short story "The Day Mr. Prescott Died." David, Ruth, and Sylvia spent hours playing at the beach, where Sylvia made up "romantic tales of far-fetched adventure."

Otto seemed to David "a stern, severe person" who preferred Sylvia to Warren. (Otto would purr "Seeel-vya" and bark "Wrn!") Another neighborhood playmate, William Sterling, remembered long afternoons sitting on the shore with Sylvia, half-watching the construction of Logan Airport as they hunted for horseshoe crabs and searched for shells. He remembered that at age eight or nine, he, along with Sylvia and a few other children, sneaked into the Reynolds Funeral Home, near their church, after choir practice. Inside, they saw a cadaver, which terrified them.[46] Most of the neighborhood kids, William said, were rough. Sylvia did not make any close friends besides himself and the Freemans—all bookish types.

Another regular visitor to the Plath household was Max Gaebler, the son of Otto's old friend Hans Gaebler. When Max entered college in Boston in 1937, Otto took him under his wing: he treated Max to lunch and joined him for walks around Faneuil Hall, initiating him "into the mysteries of academic life." Otto offered Max a "standing invitation" to come to Winthrop, and the Plath home became his refuge in the late 1930s and early '40s. The family seemed warm and loving to Max; he never forgot the sumptuous Thanksgiving feasts Aurelia and her mother prepared. He remembered Sylvia as "bright and sunny and eager" and was impressed by her vivid imagination and skillful drawings. During the hurricane of '38, he slept, slightly terrified, on the Plaths' sun porch, which faced the ocean. The next morning he walked around the neighborhood with Sylvia, Warren, Aurelia, Uncle Frank, Marion Freeman, and her children to take stock of the destruction. He photographed a delighted Sylvia climbing and playing on the fallen trees.

Otto frequently complained to Max about his health. In 1937–38, he "attributed it to age," but closer to 1940 "he decided he had cancer."[47] The rambunctious young children were not allowed to play in the house while Otto was working. Aurelia's short record of the 1938–39 year suggests tension: "Warren developed many allergies to foods, pollens, dust, etc. . . . he suffered two serious bouts with bronchial pneumonia and began having asthmatic attacks. Otto was steadily losing weight; his health continued to deteriorate. . . . I seldom knew an unbroken night's sleep."[48]

By 1938, Aurelia realized that her husband was seriously ill. Day after day, Otto came home from work so exhausted he could barely walk; he corrected papers and planned his classes while reclined on the den sofa, where he also ate when he was too weak to sit at the dinner table. Aurelia's attempts to persuade him to seek a doctor's opinion "brought on explosive outbursts of anger." Undeterred, she consulted a doctor in Winthrop about Otto's worsening condition, but the doctor refused to see him, saying it would be "both unwise and unethical" to do so without her husband's consent.[49] Aurelia did not have much choice but to watch helplessly as the tragedy unfolded. A call

from a husband about a stubborn sick wife would have yielded a completely different outcome, of course. Otto's despondent arrogance and Germanic stoicism may have inspired Plath's Nazi comparison in "Daddy."

Aurelia shepherded the children out of the house when Otto was home and allowed them only a few minutes each night with their father before bedtime. She called theirs an "upstairs-downstairs" household—by separating the children from Otto she ensured that they would not bother him with "noisy play and squabbling."[50] Nor would his painful moans, caused by leg cramps, frighten them. The children ate apart from their mother and father at their own table upstairs in the playroom, for Otto found it "more restful" to eat without them. After dinner, the children came downstairs to perform for their father. This half hour, Aurelia recalled, was "the one time of the day we were together as a family for the last four years of my husband's life."[51] Sylvia, then, had no real spontaneous interaction with her father for four years. She would play the piano, draw, and recite poems she had memorized or written herself. Sometimes she would leave poems under his napkin at dinner. Her dying father was her first audience.

Aurelia endured the daily torment of watching her husband grow closer—as they now both assumed—to death. Meanwhile, she had to care for her young asthmatic son. In the age before the mass production of penicillin, the pneumonia he suffered from was one of the leading causes of death in children. Aurelia, possibly on the brink of losing both her husband and her son, tried to keep up appearances for her young daughter's sake. When the strain became too great, she would send Sylvia to the Schobers' house at Point Shirley. There, she mailed her six-year-old daughter letters praising her for good behavior and high marks, while trying to convey the gravity of the situation: "You are a lucky girl to be with grandmother. She takes better care of you than I could now. You see, Warren is still in bed and needs me all the time."[52] Aurelia's letters give the impression that she was writing from a great distance rather than two miles away. There are vague promises of reunion: "When he [Warren] is well, we shall all be together again. Then what happy times we shall have. When the weather gets warm, we shall play on the beach together"; "I love you, sweetheart, and I am looking forward to Easter Sunday. Probably we shall all be well together on that happy day."[53] The equivocal "probably" must have disappointed Sylvia. But caring for Warren and Otto took a heavy physical and emotional toll on Aurelia. She was treated for an ulcer not long after Otto's death.

Aurelia sent Sylvia poems and illustrated stories to cheer her up. One poem, about a doll named Rebecca, attempted to make Sylvia understand the demands and sacrifices of mothering:

I have a doll, Rebecca,
She's quite a little care
I have to press her ribbons
And comb her fluffy hair.

I keep her clothes all mended,
And wash her hands and face,
And make her frocks and aprons,
All trimmed in frills and lace.

I have to cook her breakfast,
And pet her when she's ill;
And telephone the doctor
When Rebecca has a chill.

Rebecca doesn't like that,
And says she's well and strong;
And says she'll try—oh! Very hard,
To be good all day long.

But when night comes, she's nodding;
So into bed we creep
And snuggle up together
And soon are fast asleep.

I have no other dolly,
For you can plainly see,
In caring for Rebecca,
I'm busy as can be![54]

When Sylvia herself became a mother, she would try to emulate this vision of "the angel in the house." But she would rail against it as an artist.

An April 1939 letter shows Aurelia straddling the fine line between pressure and encouragement. She congratulated Sylvia for receiving all A's on her report card, something that made her "a proud and happy mother." She explained the concept of clay modeling and asked if Sylvia could find curves in pictures at her grandmother's house: "In grandmother's living room is the black and white picture of an old lady sitting in a chair. She is the mother of the man who made the picture. He made such wonderful pictures that he was called an artist. He loved his mother so much, that he made this picture of

her."[55] Aurelia had unwittingly defined the concept of art as parental homage, an idea Plath later mocked in poems such as "The Disquieting Muses," "Medusa," "The Colossus," and "Daddy." Aurelia encouraged her daughter's artistic leanings, but she could be prescriptive. Though she often wrote poems and drew pictures for Sylvia to color, sometimes her letters contained specific directives: "I am so proud of the fine coloring you are doing. Try to write as nicely as you color. Try to write words instead of printing them."[56]

Sylvia's own early letters from this time display a precocious ability with words and spelling; at age seven, she was writing in cursive and using correct grammar. Though her sentences are short, they possess a pleasing cadence that suggests an ear already tuned to lyricism. In late February 1940, she tried to make her father laugh, writing to him about a seagull that sat on an ice-cake: "Isn't that funny (Ha Ha)." She reassured him that she was coming home soon, and asked, "Are you glad as I am?" But the bulk of this letter is about writing itself. She told her father that she got ink on her fingers that "never comes of! [*sic*]."[57] Already she described the medium of writing as something that was *of* her, something permanent, but also a stain. A few months later, she sent Otto a Father's Day card—his last—whose cover read, "My Heart Belongs to Daddy." Inside, Sylvia wrote, "Happy Father's Day" and "Raining Happiness" in neat cursive next to her drawing of an umbrella in the rain.[58] The card was mailed from the Schobers' house; Sylvia was away from home yet again.

A few early poems from this period survive. "My Mother and I," "Snow," "Pearls of Dew," and probably "A-a-choo" and "Dover" date from 1940. Plath copied them, along with their dates of composition, into an illustrated notebook now held at the Morgan Library.[59] She likely wrote them before her father's death. At only seven and eight, she already understood the basic techniques of rhyme and iambic meter. "Dover," for example, shows an assured use of the limerick form:

> There was a young lady from Dover
> Who happened to sit on some clover
> The clover said, "Ow!"
> She made it a bow, this queer young lady of Dover.

"A-a-choo" also draws on the limerick form. The poem is intriguing for its use of the phrase "achoo," which would provide a baseline rhyme in "Daddy" many years later ("Barely daring to breathe or Achoo"). Critics have discussed the nursery rhyme cadences of "Daddy," but Plath may have drawn on this earlier, half-remembered rhyme:

I saw a lady with a muff.
Her face was red as a powder puff.
She carried a big, big box of snuff.
That was made of every kind of stuff.
A-a-choo

Though these early poems are nonsensical, they show the young Sylvia delighting in formal rhyme and meter—and "queer" women.

Other poems from 1940 in the same notebook show similar experiments with rhyme and meter. In "My Mother and I," Plath writes, "I love my mother / My mother loves me / And that is the way / That happy we be." In the second stanza the poet claims that she would prefer "A hug or kiss" from her mother, rather than candy, as a reward for her good behavior. The poem consists of two quatrains with an *a-b-c-b* rhyme, and shows Plath discovering iambic and dactylic meter. "Pearls of Dew (Chant)," in its variations and assured use of caesurae, achieves a relative sophistication that Plath's other 1940 poems lack:

In the early morning
When the dawn is breaking,
Lacy cobweb scarves lie
Strewn amongst the grass,
Jeweled with pearly dew;
Fairies must have used them
Dancing 'neath the moon.

The influence of children's fairy tales is obvious here, but the voice of William Butler Yeats, whom Aurelia had read to Sylvia as a toddler, is also present. "Pearls of Dew" and other juvenilia show that Plath had begun assimilating Yeats's influence very early.

Another of the 1940 notebook poems is simply titled "Snow." Three different versions of this poem exist in early notebooks, suggesting that at an extremely young age Plath was beginning to experiment with revision. The first stanza of the earliest version reads:

Snow, Snow sifting down
Sifting quietly 'round the town
Sending it a blanket of cold white
To keep it warm every night.
Snow, Snow
Sifting down
Sifting quietly 'round the town.

"Snow" is sentimental in the manner of a Currier and Ives print, yet its evocation of a town muffled within cold white depths is not strictly childlike; it suggests a familiar mournful element present in Plath's later works that depict white, frozen imagery. As in the famous ending of James Joyce's "The Dead," the snow both protects and entombs. The precocious young poet likely delighted in her paradoxical imagery—the blanket of cold snow keeping the town warm—as well as her use of repetition to achieve perfect trochaic tetrameter in the first stanza's last line. She had not yet learned formal metric terms and rules, but they came to her naturally.

Biographers have used the trope of addiction to describe Plath's literary ambition, writing that she was "addicted to achievement in the same way an alcoholic is hooked on booze." Or that her "competitive drive" was "pathological" and stemmed from "interior hollowness."[60] Such rhetoric trivializes Plath's commitment to her academic success and her literary vocation. (Male ambition is rarely described in this way.) These very early poems, and perhaps many others that have not survived, suggest that the origins of her art were not rooted in trauma or supplication, but in confidence, pleasure, and self-satisfaction. Writing was not something Sylvia did to please others, but to please herself—as necessary as breathing, as she would later remark in a 1962 interview.

ON A SUMMER MORNING in 1940, Otto stubbed his toe on his dresser while getting ready to teach. By the time he arrived home late that afternoon, it had turned black. Aurelia invited a doctor into the house on the pretext of examining the children.[61] The doctor surreptitiously examined Otto's urine, which revealed he did not have lung cancer but diabetes—a condition that could have been managed with insulin treatments had it been caught in time. But it had not been caught in time, and Otto Plath died less than three months later.

Plath has written about feeling "sealed off" from her childhood when her family left Winthrop for Wellesley, but she was also sealed off, at her grandparents' house, from her father's illness and her mother's struggles. Sylvia sensed the severity of the crisis during the late summer of 1940, when she asked to remain at home to help care for her father alongside the visiting nurse. As Aurelia recalled, "the friendly nurse cut down an old uniform for her and called Sylvia her 'assistant,' who could bring Daddy fruit or cool drinks now and then, along with the drawings she made for him, which gave him some cheer."[62] A photograph from this time shows Sylvia outside in her nurse's uniform, complete with apron and hat, smiling as she tends a baby

doll. She later pasted this photo in her scrapbook. In her 1959 poem "The Colossus," a lonely, exiled daughter—half nun, half nurse—remains a caretaker to her father's monumental corpus statue.

Plath rendered this time in her autobiographical story "Among the Bumblebees," written during the fall of 1954. The protagonist, Alice Denway, describes her entomologist father as "proud and arrogant," a Nietzschean demi-god. Alice's mother, based on Aurelia, is "tender and soft like the Madonna pictures in Sunday school." Alice does not want to be tender and soft; she wants to be "strong and superior" like her father, who "did not like anyone to cry." Unlike her little brother, Warren (Plath used her brother's real name in the story), who is asthmatic and coddled, Alice is full of vitality and strength, able to withstand the full brunt of the sun that burns Warren's skin. Alice and her father make up the strong team, her mother and brother the weak one.

> Alice learned to sing the thunder song with her father: "Thor is angry. Thor is angry. Boom, boom, boom! Boom, boom, boom! We don't care. We don't care. Boom, boom, boom!" And above the resonant resounding baritone of her father's voice, the thunder rumbled harmless as a tame lion. . . . The swollen purple and black clouds broke open with blinding flashes of light, and the thunderclaps made the house shudder to the root of its foundations. But with her father's strong arms around her and the steady reassuring beat of his heart in her ears, Alice believed that he was somehow connected with the miracle of fury beyond the windows, and that through him, she could face the doomsday of the world in perfect safety.[63]

In truth, it was Aurelia who sang the "thunder song" to the children and soothed them during the hurricane of '38.[64] Yet in the story, it is the ghostly father who protects, who would always embody the Gothic sublimity of raging storms.

As Otto's health deteriorated, he became too weak to teach effectively. Aurelia hired someone to help with household chores during the day, then spent her evenings reading through Otto's biology and entomology books, "abstracting material to update his lectures, correcting German quizzes, and attending to his correspondence."[65] The Germanic values of order, stoicism, obedience, and hard work had morphed, in extremity, into a coping mechanism akin to denial; self-pity was a weakness not to be tolerated. Plath's later fetishization of health, strength, and vigor were likely rooted in her parents' conspiratorial denial of illness, which she witnessed as a girl.

But the time came when the truth could no longer be ignored. Soon after

receiving his diabetes diagnosis, Otto contracted pneumonia and spent two weeks in the hospital. He returned home with a full-time nurse, an expense that added to the growing pile of medical bills (he had no health insurance). On the nurse's first day off, he suggested that Aurelia take the children to the beach for the afternoon. She did so, reluctantly, and returned to find her husband collapsed on the stairs. He was, according to Aurelia, "a fanatical gardener" and had mustered all his strength to plant bulbs in his yard.[66] Another doctor was summoned, Dr. Loder, who declared Otto's foot gangrened; the whole leg would have to be amputated. As the doctor left, he muttered, "How could such a brilliant man be so stupid."[67]

The amputation was performed on October 12, 1940, about two weeks before Sylvia's eighth birthday. The Boston University community rallied to lift Otto's spirits: colleagues covered his classes, former students donated blood, and the university president wrote, "We'd rather have you back at your desk with one leg than any other man with two."[68] But Otto fell into a depression after the surgery and refused to discuss learning to walk with a prosthesis. At 9:35 p.m. on November 5, 1940, shortly after Aurelia returned home from the hospital, he died of an embolism in the lung. The official cause of death was listed as diabetes mellitus and bronchial pneumonia, due to gangrene in the left foot.[69] During his last few hours alive, Otto said to Aurelia, "I don't mind the thought of death at all, but I would like to see how the children grow up."[70]

In *Letters Home*, Aurelia's story of Otto's illness is determinedly straightforward; duty and sacrifice animate the memoir rather than unseemly feelings of anger, guilt, or grief. Only once does Aurelia hint at her agony:

> In the middle of the night he called me and I found him feverish, shaking from head to foot with chills, his bed clothes soaked with perspiration. All the rest of that night I kept changing sheets, sponging his face, and holding his trembling hands. At one point he caught my hands, and holding on, said hoarsely, "God knows, why I have been so cussed!" As tears streamed down my face, I could only think, "All this needn't have happened; it needn't have happened."[71]

If Aurelia had disobeyed her husband and found a doctor willing to treat the reluctant patient, Otto might have lived. Later, Sylvia would secretly blame Aurelia for standing by while Otto committed what she saw as his slow suicide. Otto became, as Sylvia's college boyfriend Richard Sassoon remembered, "a highly charged legend for her."[72]

AURELIA WAITED UNTIL the morning to tell the children that Otto had died. She found Sylvia already awake and reading in her bed. "She looked at me sternly for a moment, then said woodenly, 'I'll never speak to God again!' I told her that she did not need to attend school that day if she'd rather stay at home. From under the blanket she had pulled over her head came her muffled voice, 'I *want* to go to school.'"[73] Sylvia's reaction demonstrated equal measures of rebellion and conformity—the very traits that continued to drive her behavior throughout the rest of her life. In the young girl's rejection of God, there is an echo of the bold, assertive *Ariel* voice that would later mock patriarchal ideologies and symbols of power. That voice dates to this moment of rupture. Yet, in a pivot that would become increasingly habitual, she composed herself for her schoolfellows, perhaps seeking solace and connection in the ordinary. But it was a difficult day for Sylvia, who came home from school crying and upset. There were playground taunts about the prospect of a stepfather. That afternoon Sylvia made Aurelia sign a note promising she would never remarry, which for years she kept folded in the back of her diary. Aurelia kept her promise, though she later assured her daughter the decision had nothing to do with her vow.

On the afternoon of November 9, Otto was buried on Azalea Path in Winthrop's town cemetery. Aurelia and her family, as well as friends and colleagues from Boston University, attended his funeral at Winthrop's United Methodist Church. Aurelia kept the children home. A brief obituary ran in the *Winthrop Review* and *The Boston Globe*. Otto's colleagues at Boston University published a moving tribute to him in the university magazine, citing the international impact of *Bumblebees and Their Ways* and recalling his "loyalty to the highest ideals of science, his genuine frankness in discussion of any subject, and the sincerity of his beliefs. . . . His generous, sincere, and energetic nature won him a lasting place in the affection and regard of those privileged to work with him." The university had lost "a worthy teacher and a great scholar."[74] Otto's gravestone, number 1123, was a modest slab laid flat on the ground. Years later, when Sylvia finally visited the grave, she would have difficulty locating it. The small stone angered her, but Aurelia insisted that Otto would have wanted something unassuming. Besides, he did not have a pension, and most of his small life insurance policy of $5,000 went to medical bills and funeral costs. There was no money for a larger memorial.

Aurelia's stoicism in the face of Otto's death implied that personal tragedy was not something to be indulged. One had to move on; one could not yield. In *The Bell Jar*, Plath wrote of Esther Greenwood,

> Then I remembered I had never cried for my father's death.
>
> My mother hadn't cried either. She had just smiled and said what

> a merciful thing it was for him he had died, because if he had lived he would have been crippled and an invalid for life, and he couldn't have stood that, he would rather have died than had that happen.[75]

Aurelia claimed that concern for her children's fragile emotional state caused her to hide her grief, and keep them away from their father's funeral.

> What I intended as an exercise in courage for the sake of my children was interpreted years later by my daughter as indifference. "My mother never had time to mourn my father's death." I had vividly remembered a time when I was a little child, seeing my mother weep in my presence and feeling that my whole personal world was collapsing. *Mother*, the tower of strength, my one refuge, *crying*! It was this recollection that compelled me to withhold my tears until I was alone in bed at night.[76]

As a Wellesley neighbor and family friend remembered, "There was no dwelling upon its effects. . . . If the going was difficult at home, there was no complaining."[77]

Aurelia was the sole breadwinner now. "Here I was, a widow with two young children to support. I had a man's responsibilities, but I was making a single woman's salary."[78] She began substitute teaching for $25 a week at Braintree High School, where she taught three German classes and two Spanish classes each day; her commute necessitated a predawn departure. Aurelia's parents moved in to help with child care. Resolutely pragmatic, Aurelia tried to make the best of a tragedy. Her parents were "healthy, optimistic, strong in their faith, and loved the children dearly. My young brother, only thirteen years Sylvia's senior, and my sister would be close to us—the children would have a sense of family and be surrounded with care and love."[79] But Otto's death was financially and emotionally devastating for the small family. Sylvia later told Dr. Beuscher that from then on Aurelia was a "beaten down woman constantly emphasizing poverty and sacrifice for intellect."[80]

Plath's unpublished journals from the 1940s do not contain a single mention of Otto. She later wrote that after he died, "those first nine years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle—beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth."[81] She never discussed her father with her best friend, Betsy Powley, with whom she shared everything throughout the 1940s.[82] Betsy eventually asked how Otto had died and received a vague response about how he had lost a leg to tuberculosis. She never asked again, and Sylvia never offered more details.[83] One of Sylvia's Smith College friends remembered her saying only that she had loved Otto, that he had

been a "wonderful father," and that he had died.[84] But Plath wrote about him, many times, starting with "Dirge," later retitled "Lament," when she was a student at Smith. It is the first surviving elegy she wrote for her father:

> The sting of bees took away my father
> who walked in a swarming shroud of wings
> and scorned the tick of the falling weather.
> . . . . . .
> He counted the guns of god a bother,
> laughed at the ambush of angels' tongues,
> and scorned the tick of the falling weather.
>
> O ransack the four winds and find another
> man who can mangle the grin of kings:
> the sting of bees took away my father
> who scorned the tick of the falling weather.[85]

In this villanelle, Plath attempts to bring technical order to chaotic loss. The speaker mythologizes her father as all-powerful, arrogant, and proud—yet he is "taken away" by a bee sting. The image is emasculating; the father's arrogance is punished, just as Otto Plath's was in real life. Sylvia may have been justified in thinking that it was not diabetes that killed her father, but arrogance—his false belief that his own self-diagnosis was more accurate than a doctor's. The tender, elegiac music of "Lament" contains a subtext of anger. "The Colossus" and "Daddy," too, would contain competing voices, one lacerating and scornful, the other grief-stricken.

Otto's death did not set Sylvia on poetry's path, but it may have exacerbated her chances of suicide. The most significant recent study on the effect of parental death on children, which followed nearly 200,000 bereaved Scandinavian children for forty years, found that "Parental death in childhood is, irrespective of cause, associated with an increased long-term risk of suicide."[86] Bereaved children's vulnerability to suicide remained high for twenty-five years after the parent's death.[87] Ted Hughes's intuitive sense that Otto's ghost lay behind his wife's depression and eventual suicide may have been partly correct. In another study on the subject, the authors found that the more severe repercussions of sudden parental loss could be mitigated by therapy and counseling during a "critical window of intervention" that occurred shortly after the parent's death.[88] When Max Gaebler joined the family for Thanksgiving just a few weeks after Otto's death, he found the family "muted," yet the feast proceeded as usual.[89] Aurelia's strategy of protecting her children from grief and mourning may have been counterproductive.

Sylvia's English friend Elizabeth Compton Sigmund, whose father left her family when she was a small child, speculated that she and Sylvia both "felt a burden of responsibility for our mother's well-being."[90] The young Sylvia wanted to assuage her mother's grief by being a good daughter. Academic success came easily to her, and winning prizes and publishing poetry was a sure way to win approval. But Plath was at heart an iconoclast who longed for personal and political freedom. The debt she owed her mother clashed with her instinct for self-individuation. Sylvia would struggle all her life to reconcile these dueling instincts, which sometimes made her feel, as she put it, schizophrenic.

By 1961, when Plath wrote *The Bell Jar*, with its merciless portrait of Aurelia, the mother-daughter dynamic had morphed into something more destructive. Letters of mutual reassurance across the Atlantic took on the character of an arms race. A Smith friend recalled that Aurelia seemed like a "stage mother" who pushed her daughter to fulfill her own unrealized creative longings.[91] Another friend who knew Sylvia in London at the end of her life, Suzette Macedo, said that Sylvia always referred extravagantly to Aurelia as her "demon mother."[92] Suzette was astonished and disturbed by the deference Sylvia showed Aurelia in her letters, when they were published. She could not understand how the same person who had railed against her mother so bitterly could have written those sweet, cheerful notes. Ted Hughes thought he understood. In an unpublished poem about *The Bell Jar*, he suggested that his wife's emotional conflicts were forged in the crucible of grief:

> Her mother said: what is past—is past.
> Her mother said: do not mourn: onward.
> Life is for living, Earth is beautiful.
> Do not be unhappy. For you
> There is only happiness: look:
> I will show you happiness because
> I cannot bear you to be unhappy
> Because I love you so much.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> And the I stood, the pale girl stood there
> And could not bear to see her mother unhappy
> She loved her so much. So she obeyed.
> When her mother laughed, she too laughed.
> When her mother said "work," she worked so hard

Her schoolmates were alarmed.
When her mother said: This is the perfect
Way to be, she was so perfect that—
All exclaimed: this girl is exceptional.
This is how she kept her mother happy.

And she said to her brother: we must never
Let Mummy be unhappy: unhappiness
Is the feeling none of us must feel
Because it is the abyss, where Daddy lies.
Let us do everything to keep her happy
And never speak of Daddy & never be sad.[93]

3

The Shadow

Wellesley, 1940–1945

Sylvia Plath came of age during a harrowing decade marked by the twin apocalyptic horrors of world war and genocide. When she was twelve, a six-page spread of Nazi atrocities appeared in the May 7, 1945, issue of *Life* magazine; three months later, she learned with all the world that nuclear bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Although she filled her diaries with schoolgirl descriptions of middle-class comforts, the decade's horror left its mark on her strongest work: her *Ariel* poems are seared with the imagery of the Holocaust and the bomb.

Plath's childhood friend William Sterling remembered that coastal Winthrop "was like an armed camp" in 1940. There were three forts, and the shoreline was blacked out at night. He and Sylvia used to sit on a sea-wall at Point Shirley and watch the Navy convoys form in the afternoon. There were air-raid drills and military target practices. Sometimes house windows shattered from the great guns' reverberations. The atmosphere was one of danger and anticipation.[1]

Aurelia wrote that the period after the United States entered the Second World War was a "tense time" for the family because of their Germanic heritage.[2] Only one generation removed from the hardships of old-world poverty and new-world discrimination, the shadow of persecution was never far behind Plath. Two of her short stories, set in Winthrop at the beginning of the Second World War—"The Shadow" (1959) and "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit" (1955)—capture the mood of fear and apprehension within the Plath-Schober household in the early 1940s. "The threat of war was seeping in everywhere," Plath wrote. "There was no escape. It invaded our radio programs and our games."[3] It invaded school, too: in "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit," crying children are herded into a dark

basement of "cold black stone" during air raid drills, where they are told to put pencils between their teeth "so the bombs wouldn't make us bite our tongues by mistake."[4] In both stories, neighborhood children bully young female narrators on account of their Germanic backgrounds. Meanwhile, torture scenes from a newsreel about Japanese prison camps replay over and over in the girls' nightmares. They begin to fear that they or members of their family will be sent away to a prison camp. What happened to Japanese Americans during the war is well known, but more than eleven thousand Germans and German Americans—including American citizens—were also detained during World War II. As U-boat activity increased along the Atlantic corridor, those living on the East Coast were most vulnerable. A detention center in East Boston, which bordered Winthrop, was eventually filled beyond capacity with German detainees.

Sadie, the young protagonist of "The Shadow," struggles to comprehend such xenophobia in language that evokes the plight of Jews in Germany in the 1930s and '40s, as well as the McCarthy witch hunts that were in full swing when Plath wrote the story in 1959:

> I had an ingrained sense of the powers of good protecting me: my parents, the police, the F. B. I., the President, the American Armed Forces, even those symbolic champions of Good from a cloudier hinterland—the Shadow, Superman, and the rest. Not to mention God himself. Surely, with these ranked around me, circle after concentric circle, reaching to infinity, I had nothing to fear. Yet I was afraid. Clearly, in spite of my assiduous study of the world, there was something I had not been told; some piece of the puzzle I did not have in hand.[5]

The "mystery" is solved by a neighborhood child who blurts out, "it's because your father's German." Soon after, Sadie's German father prepares to depart for a detention camp "out West."[6] Plath's fantasy of Jewishness in "Daddy" may be partly based on her family's experiences of being singled out, questioned, scapegoated, and shunned in wartime America. As she wrote in her 1958 notes for "The Shadow," "Look up German concentration, I mean American detention camps."[7]

Aurelia worried about her children's welfare in working-class Winthrop amid rising anti-German sentiment. David Freeman remembered that there were not many families of German or Austrian descent in Winthrop; the only such family he knew had a swastika flag raised on their flagpole by "neighborhood kids."[8] Aurelia was also concerned that Winthrop's damp climate was exacerbating Warren's bronchial ailments. Determined to improve her family's prospects, she devoted herself to finding more stable employment

that would fund a move. After teaching Spanish and German as a substitute at Braintree High School, in 1941 she finally earned a full-time position at Winthrop Junior High School. There she taught ninth-grade English and managed most of the school's finances. Although she now had a $1,600 yearly salary and a coveted state pension, she was exhausted by her teaching and administrative duties—when she left, her job had to be shared by three men. Her ulcer worsened.

Aurelia's luck changed in the summer of 1942, when she accepted an instructorship at the Boston University College of Practical Arts and Letters, her alma mater, teaching medical secretarial procedures. Betsy Powley Wallingford, who knew Aurelia then, felt that she "could have had a better job . . . she was capable of more than that."[9] Yet at the time Aurelia thought the offer was "providential." Though the new job did not then include a pension, it was a step up in money and prestige. She vowed to make the course "fascinating" and took biology classes at the Harvard Extension School to strengthen her credentials. Her salary allowed her to buy a foothold in a more affluent suburb.[10]

Aurelia chose Wellesley. The Nortons, another Boston University family, already lived there and would provide a warm welcome, while Aurelia's sister Dot lived in neighboring Weston. With its top-rated public schools, bucolic parks, easy proximity to Boston, and town-funded scholarships to Wellesley College, it was an obvious—if ambitious—choice. Above all, Wellesley held the promise of civility. There, Aurelia hoped, her children would not be called "spy-face" and pushed off the school bus.

By merging households, Aurelia and her parents soon realized they could save money and provide a more stable life for the children. Grammy Schober would handle child care, housekeeping, cooking, and driving, while Grampy supplemented Aurelia's income by waiting tables at the Brookline Country Club, where he boarded during the week. Aurelia sold the Winthrop house at a loss in the fall of 1942 and bought a six-room colonial at 26 Elmwood Road, a "modest" section of Wellesley just a short distance from the town center.[11] The street was lined with small, well-kept colonials, a Baptist church, and acres of woods. The Plaths' white clapboard house had black shutters, a garage, a breezeway, and a quarter-acre yard. It was smaller than the Winthrop house, but its corner lot gave the setting a more expansive feel.[12] On the first floor there was a living room, dining room, kitchen, screened-in porch, and a bedroom for Warren; upstairs, a bathroom, a bedroom for the Schobers, and another bedroom that Sylvia shared with her mother. Sylvia would spend many afternoons reading high in the backyard's apple tree, the next best thing to a room of her own. She called the new house "cosy" and "felt mingled regrets and anticipation as we bade good-by to the Freeman's

[*sic*]."[13] They left Winthrop on October 26, one day before her tenth birthday. Later, Plath spoke of the move with sadness, saying that it sealed her off from her father and the sea. But it also provided a fresh start, and welcome respite from schoolyard whispers about a dead parent.

Although Sylvia had been enrolled in the sixth grade in Winthrop, Aurelia decided to keep her back a year when they moved. Wellesley's school system was more rigorous, and Aurelia felt that her daughter would be challenged by the new curriculum. During her first day of school, Sylvia sat across the aisle from a girl with thick braids, just like hers. Her name was Betsy Powley, and from that day through high school, the two were inseparable. Sylvia also made new friends through Girl Scouts, and still saw Ruth Freeman regularly. If she missed her old life, she sensed the privileges of the new: supportive teachers, hardworking peers, a well-stocked town library, top-notch recreation programs, and the possibility of a scholarship to Wellesley College. Sylvia was hungry for all that the town of Wellesley had to offer; but, through the years, she would feel increasingly constricted by its culture of gentility.

BY THE TIME the family moved, Sylvia had been writing poems for about five years. She began sending out her work for publication at age eight, an act that has struck some as an early sign of a "pathological" obsession with achievement.[14] Yet the Brontë sisters and Virginia Woolf, among others, began "publishing" their work as children in homemade newspapers. Plath simply sent her work to the children's page of an actual newspaper. Later, she would try to sell her writing and artwork in order to avoid the cleaning and babysitting jobs she relied on for spending money. When she wrote in her 1944 diary of her attempt to win an art contest sponsored by the *Boston Herald*, she noted that the $2 prize was twenty times her weekly allowance of ten cents.

Sylvia did not have to wait long for public recognition. On August 10, 1941, nine months after her father's death, she published her first poem (titled, simply, "Poem") on the "Good Sport" page of the Sunday *Boston Herald*. Plath began her submission with a note to the editor, which was published with the poem: "Dear Editor, I have written a short poem about what I see and hear on hot summer nights":

> Hear the crickets chirping
> In the dewy grass
> Bright little fireflies
> Twinkle as they pass.[15]

Not yet nine, Sylvia was already able to write in near-perfect trochaic trimeter. She was proud of her achievement and later pasted the newspaper clipping in her high school scrapbook. That year, she expanded "Poem" into a longer verse, which she titled "My House." The stanza she added at the beginning shows dexterity with iambic meter: "I have a little house / Between two trees / And there the birdies always sing / Among the whispering leaves."[16] The Yeatsian image of "whispering leaves" seems a purposeful, slightly unsettling counterweight to the cheerful singing birds. Her ear was already tuned to the darker cadences of Romanticism.[17]

In March 1943, Aurelia left her family for a short stay in the hospital on account of her increasingly troublesome ulcer. Sylvia sent her mother highly graded schoolwork and several short poems—many about fairies. Fairies played an important role in Sylvia's young imagination. In the mid-1940s she began working on a fairy story that was supposed to be her first novel. She planned the book out in chapters and frequently returned to it over the years as the project, which had several different titles, grew in scope. (By 1946 it comprised nine chapters and twenty-six typed pages.) In the first chapter of the first version of the novel, which Plath subsequently titled *Stardust*, the heroine, Nancy, is a Messiah figure chosen by fairies:

> "I am Star," she began. "Once, in every generation, my Queen chooses one child on earth who has the strongest belief in fairy magic, and then selects one out of her band of fairies to show this child that magic, good magic, still exists in the world today. I am the fairy who has been given the power to take you on many travels to places that most humans are sure do not exist. But first I must clear away the invisible film over your eyes that prevents you from seeing the fairy miracles that happen each day!" Thereupon the fairy passed her tiny gold wand across Nancy's forehead. Before Nancy could utter a word, Star gave her a smiling nod, and faded away in the air.[18]

The fairy's act recalls Plato's Allegory of the Cave, which the young Sylvia might have known. She was discovering her talent, learning that her ability to create art gave her imaginative access to other worlds.

In a 1943 letter to Aurelia, Sylvia described a book she had recently read, *A Fairy to Stay* (1929), by Margaret Beatrice Lodge. The book is about a motherless young girl raised by her two strict aunts while her father is away in East Africa. In Plath's synopsis, she calls it "the nicest book I have ever read" and displays an emerging fascination with the themes of exile, revenge, rebellion, purity, and the supernatural. Her description is worth quoting, as it is the earliest surviving example of Plath's literary criticism. She describes

the plot of a girl who gets into trouble when her strict aunts find her reading a book about fairies. She cuts off her braids in protest:

> When the aunts came in her room and found out they were horrified and told her to look in the mirror. Her hair was all straight and long on one side and short on the other for punishment she would have to go like that for one week. Sending her out in the garden they decided that disipline [*sic*] was the best thing they could do. Out side the little girl rubbed her eyes and looked about what did she see but a fairy! The fairy asked her what was the matter, Pamela (for that was her name) poured out her story. The fairy told her to shut her eyes and she would dry clean her, she touched Pamelas [*sic*] hair, it began to curl, she touched her dirty tear-stained face it grew pink and clean she touched her wrinkled dress, it grew clean and white. . . . The whole book is about the fairy and the little girl trying (comicly [*sic*]) to disipline [*sic*] the aunts.[19]

The young heroine of *A Fairy to Stay*, like Sylvia, has lost a parent and is being raised by extended family members. Sylvia suggests that the book is a comic tale, yet her summary focuses on Pamela's loneliness, her rebellious reading, and her shocking decision to chop off her hair in an effort to subvert her aunts' authority. Embedded within this seemingly innocent children's story is a blueprint for feminist rebellion that resonated with Plath.

Plath's 1943 poem "Angelic Girls," written when she was ten or eleven, also uses the image of disheveled hair to emphasize girls' rebellious nature:

> O we're two little girls
> We never comb our tangled curls,
> We disobey our mothers
> And tease our younger brothers,
> O we're angelic little girls.[20]

This is perhaps the earliest poetic example of Plath's "other" voice: the seething, private, caustic voice—so at odds with idealized feminine decorousness—that would eventually draw millions of readers to *The Bell Jar* and the *Ariel* poems. In her real life, however, Sylvia was a dutiful and diligent daughter. In a January 1943 letter to Aurelia, written during one of her hospital stays, Sylvia reported that she had been "very good" with "no mishaps": "In music I did the fingering just like you told me to. And I kept saying to myself, 'This is what mother would want me to do' so I got along very well."[21]

In July 1943, Aurelia was again in the hospital because of another gastric

hemorrhage. Though Sylvia was just ten, her mother felt she was ready for sleep-away camp, which would give Grammy Schober a break from full-time child care and distract Sylvia from her mother's illness. Before Sylvia left for camp, she stayed with her aunt Dot and uncle Joe in nearby Weston for a few days. While there, she found thirty cents and bought herself paper doll books of Rita Hayworth and Hedy Lamarr, though she vowed to spend the rest "on a defense stamp."[22] She then traveled by train to Moultonville, New Hampshire, where she began the last leg to Camp Weetamoe on Lake Ossipee.

Camp Weetamoe was founded in 1934 as a Girl Scout camp that catered to middle- and upper-class girls from Cambridge and Boston.[23] It operated in typical Girl Scout fashion—there were bugle calls in the morning, swimming, arts and crafts, hayrides, blueberry picking, hikes, and campfires after dinner. Sylvia was put into the "Oehda" unit, and was pleased to have a view of both Lake Ossipee and the mountains from her tent. Though she told her mother she was having fun, she did not quite understand what was happening: "Am I going to camp for a month?" she wrote home.[24]

In her letters, she stressed her happiness, and her appetite. "For breakfast I had 1 orange, a bowl of rice krispies, a cup of milk, and a cup of cocoa. . . . For lunch I had two helpings of corn, ham and beans a glass of water and the biggest helping of raspberry jello. . . . For supper I had 2 pieces of bread with chopped beef, salad, prunes and milk."[25] Sylvia's long, descriptive menus, sent from summer camp from 1943 through 1946, suggest that she was trying hard to gain weight and to reassure an anxious mother in the midst of wartime rationing. (Betsy Powley Wallingford said Sylvia simply had an enormous appetite and "a fabulous metabolism.")[26] After the hardships of the 1930s and 1940s, curves were in. To look thin was to look like one of the "refugees" in Europe Sylvia sometimes spoke of in her diary; she longed to "fill out." Five months into her seventh-grade year, for example, she made herself an apron at school with a wide girth and long belt. She showed it to her teacher, who said, "My dear! You'll never grow that fat." Sylvia drew a plump picture of herself on the page with the caption "How I'd love to be able to wear it."[27]

Most of the girls at Camp Weetamoe came from more affluent families. Sylvia, whose grandfather waited tables at a country club, would have felt her own class difference keenly. In one postcard, she reported that the girls in her tent were, despite their relative privilege, "not well brought up. . . . The new girls say 'ain't' 'youse' kids, 'guys' 'horsebackin.' It just hurts my ears. I long for my familys [*sic*] soft, sweet talk."[28] Her snobbish remarks about her tentmates may have been her way of preempting whispers about her own background. She felt that Camp Weetamoe had matured her, as she told her mother: "When I come home you will see a great difference in my caracter [*sic*]."[29]

Sylvia began her sixth-grade year in September 1943. Her homeroom teacher, Miss Norris, recognized her intelligence early on; when Sylvia did not raise her hand to answer a difficult question, Miss Norris would gently chide her, for she knew she was "smart."[30] She read the *Odyssey* to the class and introduced them to the opera *Aida*. (This was not the only opera Sylvia heard that year: she received an introduction to Wagner when her mother gave her *Der Ring des Nibelungen* as an early birthday gift, and she also spent time listening to *Carmen*.)[31] When Sylvia asked for more work, her teacher cheerfully obliged: "After arithmetic I went up to Miss Norris and said, 'I'm going to make you give me a book report right this minute.' So she did."[32]

That Christmas, Sylvia's uncle Frank, who was in the Army, came all the way from Spokane, Washington, with his wife Louise and his Army buddy Gibby Wyer. Sylvia found Wyer's stories fascinating and wrote about them in her only diary entry from the week after Christmas 1943:

> He was in the Medical Corp in Algeria and has traveled through Egypt, he was in Tripoli when it fell and was in the campaign to chase Rommel out of Africa. He was with Montgomery's 8th army. They went from El-Almein to Tunis. He also brought many things that he found there such as a German bayonet, a German pistol, a German camera, a German belt, a German helmet, some German binoculars.[33]

Sylvia had an uncle in the forces and relatives in Germany and Poland. For her, the war was not a distant distraction. Sometimes, it landed on her doorstep.

Sylvia began 1944 with a "special resolution to be nice to everyone and make people think I am not stuck up."[34] Yet there is only one diary entry that year that hints at ostracization. In October 1944 at Sunday school, she reported, "The girls were an ordeal they were so rude but mother took care of them and put them in their place. After she went home I rode around on my bike and gave my knee a hard bang. I have had a hard day—tired."[35] In general, though, Sylvia's diary does not give the impression of someone who suffered, as her biographer Anne Stevenson has written, from "social isolation" as a girl.[36] Quite the opposite: in the mid-1940s she had a solid set of girlfriends—Betsy Powley, Marcia Egan, Prissy Steele, and Barbara McKay—with whom she spent almost every afternoon.

Sylvia also became close to Perry Norton, who lived in nearby Wellesley Hills and has said that he and Sylvia "were like siblings without attendant rivalry."[37] He and his brother Dick would play formative roles in Sylvia's life and art. There were three Norton boys in all: Perry, who was Sylvia's age; Dick, two years older; and David, born in 1944.[38] Sylvia attended several

dances with Perry in junior high and high school, but she nearly married Dick, who inspired the character of Buddy Willard in *The Bell Jar*. Their mother, Mildred, had been a student in Otto's German class before she graduated with a BA from Boston University in 1925. In 1927 she married William Norton, who completed a PhD in history at Yale while she finished her MA in English at Radcliffe. When William joined Boston University's history department, Mildred and Aurelia got to know each other through the Faculty Wives' Club; William recalled meeting Sylvia when she was two or three at a faculty Christmas party. The two families shared similar values centered on intellectual achievement and service to others rather than material wealth.[39] William Norton called his an "incorrigibly 'egghead' and 'square' family" and said that his three boys were raised to "study hard and earn their way through college by scholarships and term-time and summer jobs, then go after some kind of graduate or professional degree."[40] (All three Norton boys obliged—Perry and Dick received MDs and David a PhD.) Both families attended the Unitarian church in Wellesley Hills, where Aurelia and William taught Sunday school. After Otto's death, when Aurelia decided to relocate to Wellesley, it was partly because the Nortons lived there; she could depend on Mildred Norton—like her, an educated woman with a master's degree in English—for support and friendship.

Mildred, who did not believe women should work outside the home, took charge of the domestic front.[41] She could be more confrontational than her husband, who was quiet and reserved.[42] Plath ridiculed Mrs. Norton's conservatism in *The Bell Jar*, but in the 1940s she enjoyed spending time with her after school as she waited for Perry, who later speculated that Sylvia may have been attracted to the stability of his home because there was a mother present, which was not the case at 26 Elmwood Road.[43] Over time, the Nortons and the Plaths grew so close that the children began to think of themselves as "cousins," and they addressed each other's mothers as "aunt." Though Mildred Norton encouraged Sylvia to date Perry, she instead fell in love with Dick, a move that would have great consequences both for her art and for the Norton family.[44]

Perry, who eventually became a doctor and a practicing Quaker, was bright and intellectually curious. He remembered the first time he met Sylvia at her home in Wellesley, where they played a board game together and she complimented him on his winning strategy. "Right off the bat it cemented a mutual fondness," he said. Sylvia attended dancing lessons with him and often stopped by his house after school to talk. "I was a little bit overawed by her," he remembered, "so I didn't fancy ever being somebody who would be her suitor." He feigned "disgust" when others played kissing games at parties

they attended, and Sylvia admired his haughty remove.[45] In February 1946 he took her to a dance at the Unitarian church, where they deflected emotion with talk of "comets and planets."[46]

Betsy Powley was Sylvia's closest friend during most of her adolescence. "She lived half the time at my house and I lived half the time at her house," said Betsy. "We built tree huts in the woods and wrote poetry together."[47] Betsy, who lived just a short walk from Elmwood Road, came from a more affluent family; her father worked for an oil company, and they vacationed at a country farmhouse in East Colrain, Massachusetts, near the Vermont border. But Sylvia never felt judged by the Powleys. Her extraordinary intelligence might have made her a target of envious teasing in the schoolyard, but her friendship with Betsy was free from competition; together they enjoyed all the regular adolescent rites—movies, snowball fights, Girl Scout camp, dances, Spin the Bottle, Truth or Dare. Sylvia was happiest with Betsy on winter days when they spent hours making snow forts and sledding. "Coasting" was pure exhilaration: "The hill rose shining, white and vacant. We flew down and the stinging wind brought tears to our eyes. It was glorious!!"[48] She taught herself to ski at Betsy's farm, where she often spent her February vacations. Skiing, with its possibilities of flight and fall, became an important metaphor in *The Bell Jar*, in which Esther feels "saintly and thin and essential as the blade of a knife" while she barrels down a ski slope before breaking her leg.[49] Betsy helped make this feeling of transcendence possible, for she was connected to Sylvia's love of nature, physical activity, humor, and mischief.

Betsy also encouraged Sylvia to indulge her innate but suppressed cynicism. (As Sylvia wrote one day after Girl Scouts, "I tried so hard to be serene, quiet, etc but, as usual, didn't succeed.")[50] The two shared "convulsions of laughter" in church as they quietly mocked their pastor, and "laughed silently" behind their art teacher's back.[51] Sylvia was already developing the skepticism of institutional authority that later marked her work; she and Betsy read poems to each other "overexpressively and overgegesturingly" [*sic*] and decided that their favorite word was "fuzzbuttons."[52] (Nearly twenty years later, Plath described falling into fits of laughter with a female friend after reading her poem "Daddy" aloud.)

Sylvia thrived in one-on-one relationships with girls who appreciated, as her friend Pat O'Neil Pratson later put it, her "tremendous hunger and love for life" and her desire "to expand in everything."[53] Later, at Smith, Plath's intense studying habits and competitive nature made it harder for her to cultivate close friendships, and she often put up a protective front. Her sense of inhabiting two selves—one interior, one exterior—would deepen there. Her old Wellesley friend Frank Irish recalled feeling disoriented on a date

with Sylvia while she was at Smith: "she had become an urbane sophisticate that she was not when she was in high school."[54] Sylvia needed female confidantes like Betsy and Ruth who could bring her out of herself and, at the same time, allow her to *be* herself, insecurities and all. Without such a connection, her mental health would suffer. As she wrote to a Smith friend who transferred to a new college in January 1951, "I need so to love a person—be it girl or boy, friend or enemy. And without being able to, I sort of dry up."[55]

Sylvia would at times feel pressure to neutralize her passionate personality to avoid alienating potential friends and dates. At Smith she was ridiculed for studying on Saturday nights, while at Cambridge she suspected that other girls gossiped about her academic intensity. Years later, in her radio play *Three Women*, she wrote in the voice of a mother speaking to her newborn: "I do not will him to be exceptional. / It is the exception that interests the devil." Plath's spectacular intelligence may have felt like a burden at times, especially for a young woman who wanted to fit in during an age that prized conformity. As America moved into the McCarthy era, the words "artist" and "communist" were not infrequently linked. By the mid-fifties, when Sylvia graduated from Smith, there was even less tolerance for subversive artistic expression—especially from women. The opening lines of *The Bell Jar*, which conjure up the specter of the Rosenbergs' electrocution during the summer of 1953, leave little doubt as to Plath's view of this suffocating time. Her search for artistic freedom would finally take her away from America altogether, to England, where she found a husband who was deeply contemptuous of American materialism and "normality."

SYLVIA'S FORMULAIC DIARY ENTRIES for 1944, her sixth-grade year, bear almost no resemblance to the vivid, literary entries of her 1950s journals. She thrived on her routines and was unhappy when she was sick and had to stay home from school.[56] (On her first day back at school after the Christmas holiday she admitted, "I really like it more than vacation sometimes.")[57] She often recounted her after-school activities, usually Girl Scouts or outdoor play with her friends: "In the afternoon I went over to Marcia's with Betsy to cut out cartoons for our red cross badge in Scouts."[58]

"Playing Army" was a frequent pastime, as snowballs could serve as grenades. When it was too cold to play outside, she read in bed or played cards and dolls with her girlfriends. In the warmer weather she rode her bike, walked through the woods, and swam at Morses Pond and Winthrop beaches. There were large family dinners, shopping trips with her mother and aunts, outings to the Arnold Arboretum, the Museum of Natural His-

tory, and the movies. But what dominates Sylvia's 1944 diary is her record of academic achievement. A student at Boston University's School of Education administered the Stanford-Binet IQ test to students at Plath's school during her sixth-grade year and remembered that Sylvia received a score of "about 160," which she classified as "genius" range.[59]

Sylvia enjoyed taking the test, and she probably learned of her high IQ. She was eager to earn the small black-and-white certificates awarded by the Massachusetts Department of Education for reading five books at a time; her goal was to earn the coveted Honor Certificate given only to those who had read twenty-four books in a year—a goal she achieved easily.[60] She read, on average, three books a week, most of them from the Wellesley Public Library. Reading for pleasure in her bedroom, on her porch, or up in the apple tree was a form of meditation akin to her languorous afternoons in the sun. In her 1944 poem "Enchantment," written in the language of biblical redemption, books provide a gateway to a rarefied life:

> No wall will bar this land of joy;
> No sign will keep the poor away.
> A book may lead each girl and boy
> From darkest night to brilliant day.[61]

Though she felt she could not afford to buy books at the Hathaway bookshop in Wellesley Square, she managed to amass an impressive book collection for an eleven-year-old: in April she received her one hundredth book and wrote, "I am in a reverie of happiness for I love books."[62]

On March 10, 1944, *The Wellesley Townsman* published Plath's first story: "Troop 5 Valentine Party." She wrote in her diary that she felt "very proud."[63] She continued writing poems and prose steadily, sometimes stumbling on a theme that would resurface years later. "In the Corner of My Garden" (also titled "The Home of Straying Blossoms") is a two-stanza poem about the relationship between the domestic and the wild:

> In the corner of my garden
> There is a favorite spot,
> Which sun and rain tend faithfully
> And which I planted not.
>
> Here is the haven of wild flowers,
> The kingdom of birds and bees;
> Here in the silvery moonlight
> Sprites dance 'neath singing trees.[64]

Plath's budding Romantic sensibilities are on full display—the area free from human cultivation is a Yeatsian "haven" inhabited by wildflowers and sprites dancing in moonlight. She is already a poet of the moor rather than the country garden.

At night she listened to *Silver Theatre*, *The Jack Benny Program*, *The Great Gildersleeve*, *Superman*, *Quiz Kids*, *Terry and the Pirates*, and *The Lone Ranger* on the radio. She was supposed to go to bed at eight p.m., but she frequently stayed up late reading and writing in her diary, "unknown to mummy."[65] She saw several movies with friends: *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *Love Crazy*, *Madame Curie* ("sad but beautiful"), *Jane Eyre*, *Greenwich Village*, *Holiday Inn*, *Night of Adventure*, *Riding High*, and *What a Woman!*, as well as the war films *Up in Arms*, *Passport to Destiny*, and *Destination Tokyo*.[66] Some of these films were a little mature for Sylvia, who brought her dolls to the movies and wrote that she was shocked when she heard "swears" on-screen.[67] But the sultry glamour of Hollywood starlets spoke to her; she enjoyed playing with her Rita Hayworth paper dolls and pasting magazine photographs of movie stars in her scrapbook. She was thrilled to get Bette Davis's autograph from a Girl Scout friend who was Davis's niece. Around this time she began reading magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *The American Girl*, and *Calling All Girls*, which she read "cover to cover" when it arrived.[68] The magazines imprinted on her notions of femininity that both attracted and troubled her, and inspired her to satire later on.

There was occasional talk of boys. She listed four in the back of her 1944 diary under the heading "Boys I like": William Moore (the future president of her high school class), Betsy's brother Mark, Jack Duffin, Sanford Frazier. But her interest in boys was mostly competitive. She was excited when she beat them on tests, especially in math.[69] In April, after getting 100 on a social studies test, she wrote, "I am even with Donald Cheney!!!"[70] She frequently wrote about being chased and taunted by groups of boys. By early 1944, she began to fight back. In February she "gave the boys a good lecture and now they won't take my hat," while a month later she noted that she and another girlfriend formed a "2 girl army" to "attack" the boys, one of whom, William Moore, she nicknamed "Hercules."[71] She had already formed the habit of giving larger-than-life characteristics and nicknames to her crushes, as in her 1945 poem "King of the Ice":

> A streak of red, a flash of silver.
> My heroe [*sic*] on skates speeds by!
> As an arrow fleet
> With wings on his feet
> He races the wind on high.

The onlookers cry, "A goal! A goal!"
My heroe [*sic*] would win at any price,
'Twould be a feat
In hockey to beat
A star like my King of the Ice.[72]

Here, Plath transforms a schoolgirl crush into a "hero," "king," "arrow," and "star." She compares him to the Greek god Hermes. Dick Norton would be a blond god, Mallory Wober Hercules, Ted Hughes Adam. Even as a young girl, she was inspired by the male muses around her.

After another stint at Camp Weetamoe in July 1944, Sylvia spent the rest of her summer in Wellesley, sitting by the brook, picking dandelions, and trying to catch dragonflies with her cat, Mowgli. She swam, played with friends, and enjoyed long, leisurely dinners with her family. Aurelia was proud that Sylvia managed to save up $15 to buy herself a bike at the end of August. Her summer respite ended when she began her seventh-grade year at the Alice L. Phillips Junior High School in September.[73] She shuffled dutifully through math, gym, chorus, English, lunch, utility, orchestra, social studies, music, and health. She looked forward to slumber parties at Betsy's house, where the girls told each other ghost stories late into the night.

Girl Scouts was Sylvia's most time-consuming after-school activity that year. Founded in 1912 by Juliette Gordon Low and modeled on the British Girl Guides, Girl Scouts had one million members by 1944. Girl Scouts embodied a nonthreatening, almost Victorian ideal of womanhood that emphasized virtue, charity, and service. But it also taught girls strength and self-reliance. Unlike most female civic activities in American life, Girl Scout camps gave young women the freedom to leave the confines of domesticity, if only for a few weeks, and behave like boys. At camp, they too wore uniforms, woke up to bugle calls, made fires, rowed boats, hiked, swam, and learned archery.

Sylvia spent parts of six summers, 1943–1948, at Girl Scout–affiliated camps. She enjoyed the physical and outdoor camp activities more than her weekly after-school sessions, which revolved around earning badges and community service drives. In May 1944 at her local Girl Scouts award ceremony, she received an attendance star and ten badges—Birdfinder, World Knowledge, Group Music, Childcare, Readers, Scribe, Campcraft, Foot Traveler, Boating, and Weaving. Amassing these badges was not always pleasant. "Good riddance to that," she wrote after she finished working on her "Scribe" badge that March.[74]

Girl Scouts required its young charges to adopt military standards of precision and neatness. When hands were inspected for cleanliness at afternoon

meetings, Sylvia was proud that hers were "the neatest."[75] She was equally cheered after winning weekly tent inspections at summer camp. But she also sensed a darker side to such inspections. In her eighth-grade year, she wrote that during her school physical she "stood shivering (stripped to the waist) in a room with open windows and cold drafts" waiting for a doctor—"an old codger, shaking all over"—to examine her.[76] Her language suggests that she was already attuned to the situation's disturbing power dynamics; the scene evokes "Herr Doktor" of "Daddy." Another teacher that year advised her to walk with perfect posture if she ever hoped to command authority.[77] At the time, slovenliness in women was often equated with madness; appearance and mental health were linked in a way that did not allow for the relaxation of what Sylvia, at age twelve, called "gruesome" beauty practices.[78] Plath later came to understand how obsession with cleanliness and purity could lead, in extremis, to genocide. In her late poems, she ruthlessly mocked the idea of "purity" with "gruesome" heroines. Lady Lazarus reeks of ash and sour breath; the speaker of "Cut" enjoys being a "Dirty girl"; the heroine of "Fever 103°" asks defiantly, "Pure? What does it mean?" before transcending her "old whore petticoats" to a paradise free of repression. Male doctors, especially in *The Bell Jar*, are agents of torture rather than healing. Plath occasionally foreshadows such moments in her adolescent diary, as in her 1944 school physical entry, and, later, in an entry about a school nurse who "almost asphyxiated" her while swabbing alcohol on her rash.[79]

Sylvia celebrated her twelfth birthday in October 1944 over dinner with girlfriends, including Ruth Freeman, who slept over. She noted somewhat forlornly that she was now "too old" to go trick-or-treating for Halloween. Instead she wrote "Halloween," a catchy ditty that displayed her ability to alternate smoothly between iambic tetrameter and trimeter:

> A little wind is whistling by,
> Bright leaves are whirling 'round,
> The harvest moon is hanging low
> O'er corn shocks dry and browned.
> The witches are about tonight,
> Above the ground they fly,
> On magic broomsticks with their cats
> They sail across the sky.[80]

Though she was leaving girlhood behind, she was gaining confidence in her burgeoning adolescent identity. In October she was asked to write for the school newspaper, the *Phillipian*, an early ratification of her calling. The invitation probably came through her seventh-grade English teacher, Miss

Raguse, who often praised Sylvia's work and who told her, "'You have a gift in that and should build it up.'"[81] By late November, Sylvia was so anxious to please Miss Raguse that she wrote ten book reports in three days. She sensed that her teacher was a kindred spirit and, in at least one instance, was impressed by her resistance to jingoism and propaganda. When Sylvia risked reading a Japanese poem aloud in English class in April 1945, she wrote that Miss Raguse "gave me an understanding sort of wink as if to say, 'It's beautiful, Japanese or not!'"[82]

On November 7, 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt was reelected president. In her diary Sylvia wrote "Dewey" all over the page—likely a reflection of her family's politics—though the next day she happily reported, "Roosevelt's president!" The family celebrated a traditional Christmas Eve that year with caroling and a "hearty supper," after which Sylvia and Warren "went out and sat in the apple tree and listened and looked up at the moon, covered now and then by passing clouds."[83] Sylvia received another new journal (in which Aurelia wrote, "Rule: Not to be written in after 8 pm"), clothes, books—including an etiquette book—art supplies, mittens, candy, and pencils. Three days after Christmas, Sylvia wrote about a sledding excursion in language that looks forward to the flight and fall of "Ariel": "I traveled around quite a bit before I found the perfect hill. I was alone in an ice glittering world. Down the steep slopes I flew! The wind whistled through me. It was better than a mountain in fairyland. I was brought to earth by sunset."[84]

ON NEW YEAR'S DAY, 1945, Sylvia awoke early and balanced her budget, pleased to end the year with $2.55. Even at age twelve, she had a strong aversion to debt. Her eagerness to set her accounts right at the start of the new year points to an often overlooked aspect of Plath's young life: class.

Sylvia never complained to friends like Betsy or Pat about sharing a room with Aurelia in the merged Plath-Schober household, and many contemporaries remembered Sylvia's affectionate relationship with Grammy Schober. Nevertheless, Sylvia resented being raised in a matriarchy. While Aurelia was grateful for her parents' help, the situation had the potential to become infantilizing, and there were probably unspoken tensions in the home over authority. Plath wrote to Dr. Beuscher in 1962, "She was always a child while my grandmother was alive—cooked for, fed, her babies minded while she had a job. I hated this."[85] There would be no reprieve for Frank Schober, either, who lived and worked at the Brookline Country Club during the week—and often through the weekends—to help support the family. Those who came to know the Plath-Schobers in Wellesley, like Sylvia's friend Pat

O'Neil, described a warm, close-knit unit. But Pat saw Aurelia as "a bridge" between the conservative, old-world sensibilities of her Austrian parents and the modern ambitions of her American children. "It was very lonely for her," Pat said.[86]

Sylvia's Smith roommate Marcia Brown characterized Aurelia as "someone struggling every minute of every day of every year to pay the bills and to keep herself together—just holding on for dear life."[87] Friends like Ruth Freeman Geissler, Perry Norton, and Phil McCurdy went so far as to use the word "poor" to describe the Plath family.[88] The label seems an exaggeration given all that Aurelia was able to provide for her children. Indeed, several college friends later noted that while Sylvia was not wealthy by Smith standards, she appeared much better off than most of the other scholarship students in her year. Yet in affluent, "insular" Wellesley, Sylvia felt her class difference, describing her household as "middle-middle class."[89] Phil McCurdy, Sylvia's Wellesley friend, was also raised by a single mother in precarious financial circumstances. "Aurelia and Sylvia lived in the Fells. It was nearing Natick, which was poverty level. . . . I think both of us picked up easily that we were not second-class citizens, but we were a different cut from the average Wellesley crew. . . . We were poor people, relatively, in Wellesley, and worried a lot about money." They knew from a young age that they would have to earn scholarships to attend college—Sylvia to Smith, Phil to Harvard. He always felt that money was the "clue" to understanding *The Bell Jar*. "It's a big part of it. You can't romanticize it away."[90] Louise Giesey White, who knew Sylvia throughout her Wellesley and Smith years, said, "I did not think of her as 'poor.' But her mother worked. None of our mothers worked. . . . She was probably more vulnerable than people knew. Vulnerable about class, and those distinctions."[91] As Betsy put it, "It was just very evident that Aurelia either worked or starved."[92]

Some of Sylvia's friends lived in mansions with servants; she was particularly impressed after a visit to Nancy Wiggins's "gigantic and beautiful house," where she was "served a delicious luncheon by a 'Ritzy' maid."[93] Her own house was small and low-ceilinged, and the Plath-Schobers rarely had household help. Aurelia once said she had released Sylvia from her chores so she could focus on her reading, writing, painting, and music. "Sylvia required the most consideration, the most time, the most money. . . . We all adored her and catered to our 'prima donna,' as we teasingly called her."[94] But in her diary Plath wrote about doing housework: "What a job-beds-dishes-dusting-steps-I am worn out."[95] She shoveled the driveway when it snowed, which gave her backaches, and she babysat often. When Mildred Norton was ill, Sylvia helped her with household chores. In a thank-you note to Aurelia,

Mildred demurred that her sons were too "busy" to clean the kitchen, which was a "struggle" for them. Sylvia had performed her role, Mildred noted, with ladylike "cheerfulness of spirit."[96]

When Sylvia began seventh grade, she got a job dusting the school offices. She was unsure of her status—student or custodial staff?—and hesitant to dust when the offices were in use: "I rushed through my two dusting jobs and just got back to my homeroom before the last bell. In my first English study period I was called to the office and Miss Bahnor said 'You didn't dust the counter on the principal's desk this morning. Please do it now!' I could have cried and I did apologize about five times. (I never had dared to do the Principal's desk while he was sitting at it!)"[97] Word got around that she was available for housecleaning. At least one neighborhood woman took advantage of her:

> Mrs. Chapman called me up and asked if I would go to her house for a few hours and help her. I could not refuse so—first she had me shake and sweep by broom all of the rugs in the house. . . . She handed me a basin of soapy water and a cloth. . . . I set to work scrubbing the floors of her lengthy and wide drawing rooms, livingroom, sunporch, and kitchen (backboards too!) . . . and waxed all the floors by hand (on my knees too) and polished them. . . . I received a dollar for my work which I felt (or rather my body felt) was not too much for all that work![98]

Sylvia was not greedy—that winter she refused a dollar from a neighbor after she helped shovel her driveway—but she knew when she was being exploited. She probably also knew that Mrs. Chapman would not have summoned her school friend Nancy Wiggins, who lived in a mansion, or Arden Tapley, whose father was a violinist in the Boston Symphony Orchestra, to do her cleaning. The day after Sylvia cleaned for Mrs. Chapman, Aurelia took her daughter into Boston, where they spent the afternoon at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum viewing John Singer Sargent's *The Dancer* and listening to the Gordon String Quartet. Sylvia, deeply moved, summed up the experience in her diary with a single word: "Magnificent!" This day of high culture made up for the previous day of hard labor. Plath's entry, full of exclamation points, is among the happiest in her 1945 diary.

Sylvia became adept at moving between classes—donning her red velvet dress, "real pearls," and white gloves for an elegant wedding after an unpleasant morning spent babysitting two toddlers.[99] It was a skill that would serve her well as a Smith scholarship student. A 1944 drawing suggests that Sylvia, already attuned to the soft undertones of hypocrisy, saw beyond Wellesley's

gentility to something darker. Her sketch shows two well-dressed matrons conversing in front of a grand house with a white picket fence. In the background, one boy is beating another with a baseball bat as blood spurts from his head. "Oh, Junior has always been a poor loser," says his mother.[100] A story from the mid-1940s, "Mary Jane's Passport," also explores class issues in its portrayal of an unlikely friendship between an affluent but sickly teenage girl, Mary Jane, and a poor orphan, Judy, from the wrong side of town. Plath reverses the usual class hierarchy so that it is the rich girl who yearns to enter the poor one's world. Mary Jane eventually takes on a babysitting job—her "passport" into the working class—in hopes that she will meet Judy, also a babysitter, in the park.[101] Both characters have attributes of Sylvia herself—Mary Jane has an overprotective mother, while Judy lives with a widow who must work to support her family.

Sylvia understood that summer camp, in particular, was a luxury. In a handmade birthday card to her mother in April 1946, she enfolded $7 to help defray camp costs. She attempted to mitigate the complicated implications of her gift, which seemed to embarrass both mother and daughter. On the card's front flap she wrote, "I'll give my money to you / (That was supposed to be for your present) / For you to send in for my joy. / (Doesn't seem very pleasant.)" She drew a picture of herself at camp, with the caption, "Your present, your money." Inside the card she wrote, "But, 'Your joy is my joy,' to me you say / So it's joy for you in the end—When your daughter comes home healthy / Plumper (no taller) and tanned!" On the back of the card, she drew a daffodil and wrote, as if apologizing, "love, I love you, and Love, not money."[102] Sylvia had to keep up the façade that money did not matter, yet she understood quite well that it did.

IN EARLY 1945, Sylvia began to complain of fatigue. There were more instances of highs and lows in her diary than in the previous year. ("I have an iron-tong feeling of excitement coming on! As though ice cold iron tongs are thrust in me to make me tense, and, when everything's over, taken out fast!")[103] She was overscheduled (piano, viola) but fiercely disciplined. As she wrote in early January, "I came home to my homework . . . with a right good will."[104] After Betsy "dragged" her to see *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, a patriotic war film, she "rushed home on the 5:20 bus, remorseful on how I wasted the afternoon but I got all my piano, viola and homework done and got to bed early for once."[105] Her home and school were always chilly, and she came down with several colds that winter. She longed for spring and wrote a poem

called "Dreams" in which the poet fantasizes about "blossoming boughs": "Softly will the petals go, / Drifting earthward as now—the snow."[106] But there was little rest for the weary: her mother brought home Sunday school tests for her to do while she convalesced in bed.[107]

That January, she saw her first play in Boston—Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—and sat next to a handsome sailor on the train ride home. She marked the occasion as a rite of passage:

> Today is the biggest day of my life. I had a dreamless sleep and woke as fresh as dew on spring buttercups. All day I was in another world, far better than this. I took the bus to Boston with mother and Warrie to see Shakespeare's "The Tempest" at the Colonial Theatre. It was too perfect for words. I am keeping the program for a souvenir. We took the train to Wellesley and there were only separate seats. I sat next to a young sensitive boy from the navy. He had blond wavy hair and blue eyes. In all my life I have never loved anyone as I did him. Our talk was of travel, life, of Shakespeare.[108]

She drew scenes from the play in this diary entry and wrote, in capital letters, "THE TEMPEST MY IDEAL." Her hyperbole sounds like trivial schoolgirl sentiment, but she is nonetheless describing a creative epiphany. This *was* one of the "biggest days" of her life as an artist. *The Tempest* was a major influence on Plath's poetry, providing her with metaphors and imagery she would associate with her own lost father in "The Colossus" and "Full Fathom Five"; it also supplied the title for her final book of poetry, *Ariel*. The play unlocked something within her, and her experience colored her encounter with the handsome Navy sailor. Sexual longing and creative exuberance already existed in Lawrentian tandem.

Boys, in fact, were an increasing distraction, as were sports. Unlike other entries about music lessons and oral reports, which are filled with anxiety and self-doubt—"I <u>almost</u> fainted when I saw that I got all As and S's (in effort) on my report card"—Sylvia's descriptions of basketball, gymnastics, sledding, and biking are always spirited and confident.[109] That spring, she wrote frequently about gardening, which, like exercise, prompted meditation rather than anxiety:

> I got up before anybody else and went out in the dewy, early morning and transplanted violets and lilies-of-the-valley into my garden. . . . [After lunch] I went outside and examined every bud of the forsythia and apple tree, begging them to open. I worked on my Spring Booklet and illus-

> trated many of my poems. . . . I watered my plants and now my garden looks lovely as it is full of sprouting green leaves and sweet smelling, fresh, overturned earth.[110]

As spring progressed, she enjoyed walking in the woods picking "loads and loads" of violets and identifying trilliums, bellwort, fringed milkwort, violets, anemones, ladyslippers, and marsh marigolds.[111] It was warm enough in mid-April for her to sunbathe with Betsy in the afternoon before going on after-school "missions" to find flowers to press, an activity that soon became an "obsession" for the two girls.[112] The theme of triumphant rebirth after wintering already exerted a powerful influence on her young imagination, and Sylvia finally achieved her goal of publishing three spring poems in the *Phillipian* in April and June: "The Spring Parade" ("Bud and leaf have now uncurled, / Daffodils their gold unfurled"), "Rain," and "March," the least sentimental of the three.[113] With its violent imagery of predators and wind, "March" brings to mind later Plath poems such as "Pursuit" and "The Snowman on the Moor," and suggests an early affinity for the types of wild, natural scenes that later captivated her poet-husband Ted Hughes:

> The wind-wolves are prowling about today,
> They're chasing the cloud lambs that carelessly stray
> While majestic skies loom vast and gray
> The powerful Mastero [*sic*] of March holds sway.
> . . . . . .
> And as over earth the planets swing
> I hear at last the Song of Spring![114]

Spring arrived, but the war lagged on. It had become a part of daily life, both in school and at home. In gym class, Sylvia performed so many drilling marches that she felt she could march in her sleep. When Uncle Frank and his wife Louise came for a February visit, they talked for hours after dinner about Frank's experiences in the Army as Sylvia listened, "enthralled."[115] A soldier spoke in a school assembly a week later about his sixty-four missions while Sylvia again listened intently. For someone longing for "experience," stories about war and Army life provided a vicarious thrill. Despite her earlier enthusiasm for Dewey, she grieved Roosevelt's death, on April 12, writing "ROOSEVELT DIES" in her diary next to a picture of herself crying and praying with eyes closed. She drew a casket surrounded by flowers and an American flag. The European war's end finally came on May 8. At school, she listened to President Truman proclaim VE Day. She wrote in her diary, "We had an assembly program that was very fitting and then went back to

our regular classes for, as Truman said this morning, 'To show the appreciation of our victory in Europe we must do work, work, work and more work and still remember that there is a war to be won in the East.' "

Despite the gee-whiz tone of her 1940s diaries, there were occasional glimpses of a more subversive spirit. In April, she wrote about a happy afternoon swinging from her apple tree: "Soon I may grow wings (not angels)."[116] In May, she cut her finger with a knife while fiddling with a roll of tape, and wrote that it "bled until it filled a bandage, hankie and sink."[117] She drew a close-up of her bleeding finger next to another of herself with a knife. She finished off the tableau with a dark circle she captioned "my blood." The drawings recall the poem "Cut," with its fascinated description of a nearly severed thumb. In June, she read the "thrilling" novel *She* by H. Rider Haggard, whose queen Ayesha, an African femme fatale, may have been an early model for Lady Lazarus—at the novel's end, Ayesha declares, "I die not. I will come again."

As spring turned to summer, Sylvia read *Treasure Island* and *Anne of Green Gables* up in her apple tree. She was relieved that the school year was nearing its end. The *Phillipian* had invited her to join its staff the next year, a triumph that earned her a hug from Miss Raguse, who said, "Be sure to tell your mother."[118] She won the Wellesley Award for the highest academic achievement in the seventh grade and a unique award for "excellence in English Expression." The next day in class Miss Raguse presented her with two more "commendation cards." One was for scholarly excellence; the other for "unusual creative work," an award that pleased Sylvia greatly.[119] She also received an award for her efforts selling war stamps. Miss Raguse, one in a long line of supportive English teachers, had given Sylvia reason to take her writing seriously; her teacher's congratulations, she said, "really meant more than anyone else's."[120] She ended the school year on a high note with seven A's on her report card, marred only by a B in music. She was "swamped with requests for autographs."[121] Sylvia was learning that achievement brought admiration, not just from her teacher and mother, but from her peers as well.

In early July, the Powleys drove Sylvia and Betsy to Camp Helen Storrow, a Girl Scout camp in the coastal town of Plymouth, Massachusetts. The girls were both housed in the same cabin in the "Ridge" unit for two "joyous weeks."[122] Sylvia filled her letters home with the usual details about starchy menus and third helpings. In her diary, however, there is not a single mention of food. One night, she and other girls performed in blackface in a minstrel show—such was the casual racism of the era.[123]

She advanced in swimming, built an outdoor kitchen, and wrote of the landscape in her diary. She described how she watched the "tawny-red ball of

sun sink slowly out of sight in the west" and wrote repeatedly of the ocean, how "The pure white sand gleamed through its crystal, pale, blue-green depths."[124] The highlight of the summer was a five-mile hike to Fisherman's Cove, where there was a long sandbar, sand dunes, and sea cliffs inhabited by kingfishers. Privately she wrote that the hike exhausted her, but she showed more bravado in a letter to her grandparents: "I had to laugh at some of the girls because I was the only one who dared to go in first for the waves were strong and cold until you ducked."[125] As in "Ocean 1212-W," she cast herself as the sea's elect.

Back in Wellesley, she played the piano, drew Rhine maidens and German castles, and held hands with Betsy as they jumped off the raft at Morses Pond. Her book collection became so large that Aurelia had to clear out a bigger bookcase for her.

In late July, the family journeyed by train and bus to Welchville, Maine, near Lewiston, where they stayed with Aurelia's friends the Loungways until August 8. The Loungways' property, named Innisfree, consisted of a "big house" and a smaller cabin, where Sylvia, Aurelia, and Warren slept. Sylvia was amazed by the clarity of the night sky in Maine; she saw her first shooting star and called the Milky Way "a gossamer scarf flung across the sky."[126] During thunderstorms, the children stayed inside and played Murder in the darkened living room, a game Sylvia found "terribly exciting."[127] She became fast friends with thirteen-year-old Margot Loungway, with whom she took long walks and attended Bible school. Like Sylvia, Margot was creative and cerebral; she eventually earned a doctorate in history at Harvard and founded the Social Thought and Institutions program at Stanford. Sylvia was competitive with Margot, and they sometimes quarreled. Sylvia dealt with her own anger through writing: she simply "went off alone in back of the house and made up a seventeen line poem titled 'the Wind.'"[128] But they spent most days in easy camaraderie, fishing, sketching, sunbathing, and writing in their "secret place"—a bed of pine needles in a field surrounded by trees.

Margot, a precocious young writer, was the first of Sylvia's "doppelgängers"—girls who shared her interests and talent but who often became targets in her fiction and journal. The two would remain close in the coming years. Instead of playing outside in the woods, as Sylvia did with Betsy, they stayed indoors and wrote when they were together. "Somehow, at her home I feel I could write my best stories," Sylvia wrote in her diary in 1947.[129] When Sylvia slept over, they "tortured each other by reading aloud our stories." During one weekend with Margot in May 1946, Sylvia wrote two new stories: "The Mummy's Tomb," which she called a "frightful murder-mystery"; and "On the Penthouse Roof," "a smuggler's story."[130] In "The Mummy's Tomb," a young woman working on a history project decides to spend the

night in the Egyptian section of a museum after she smells decaying flesh in one of the mummy's coffins. She awakens to find the museum janitor about to torture a young kidnapped girl by scooping out her eyes and pushing spikes into her body. He sees the narrator and lurches toward her: "'Ha!' he leered. 'You got away yesterday, but you won't now. I'll muffle your screams of anguish and let you die from loss of blood and in terrible pain.'"[131] The academic heroine, however, knocks him unconscious with her umbrella and frees the kidnapped girl. Though the plot is ridiculous, the story is more vivid and well paced than Plath's other prose pieces from this period.[132]

The only other surviving story from 1946 that approaches the success of "The Mummy's Tomb" is "Victory," which describes the attempted murder of a young woman, Judith, on a dark country road during a storm: "The girl stood paralyzed with fright as she heard the labored breathing of her pursuer. He loomed tall beside her. The next moment she felt his fingers close about her neck, choking the cry of terror that had risen to her throat."[133] At the story's end, however, Plath reveals that Judith is an actress who has successfully completed her first movie scene. In both stories, Plath indulges the darker, Gothic side of her imagination with considerable skill. She would return to the theme of torture—of women by crazed men—in several poems during the 1960s.

SYLVIA'S SUMMER IDYLL ENDED on August 8 when the Plaths left Innisfree and emerged into a dark new age:

> At Portland we had a few minutes between trains and so we bought a newspaper. We learned that the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan and that it destroyed 60% of Hiroshima! This bomb, it is said by President Truman, can be used for constructive as well as destructive purposes. For instance, the same power may be used to cultivate and save food so that there will be no worry of the loss of crops or of starvation. Also, Russia has at last declared war on Japan (the latter nation may capitulate within a few months many people hope).[134]

A few days later she recorded Japan's surrender in similar newsreel cadences: "The news today is: Japs Offer to Quit!"[135] When Truman declared peace on August 14, Plath's neighborhood erupted in shouts and firecrackers. She had difficulty writing about war in her own voice, but not peace: "The sky put on its rainbow colors as thanks for peace. Pale pink cloud streamers hung across the azure sky. The west was a golden red-yellow glow and hazy

white clouds floated here and there, but, best of all, there was a bright blue crescent moon in the heavens."[136]

Sylvia spent the rest of the summer making a book of her poems from 1937 to the present, copying them out in her apple tree. She painted her bicycle "geranium red," a color that would have special resonance in her later work.[137] When Betsy returned home from a trip to New York, the two quickly fell into their old patterns of building forts in the woods and playing with their handmade paper dolls, for which Sylvia designed her own stunning dresses. In late August, however, she grimly submitted to the hairdresser's scissors: her hair was cut, and she sported a shoulder-length bob. Though Betsy had already cut her long hair earlier in the summer, Sylvia was upset. "I miss my braids," she wrote in her diary.[138]

Her initiation into this new feminine world was unpleasant. She spent a sleepless night on her hair curlers and noted that the task of washing and setting her hair, performed by her mother, was "gruesome." After her curlers were removed, she thought she looked like Medusa.[139] Braids lent themselves to days spent swinging upside down in trees and biking down hills, but her new hairstyle required maintenance and deportment. Sylvia seemed to sense, as in *A Fairy to Stay*, that the haircut was "discipline" of a sort. "To My Sylvia," a poetic homily Aurelia wrote for her daughter on her thirteenth birthday, reinforced the message that the playful whimsy of girlhood must now give way to the responsibilities of womanhood:

Oh, dear, my head's awhirl!
Today, my darling,
You're my teen-age girl!

Your life's been happy?
You wish no change?
Why, my sweetheart,
That isn't strange.

But now Life opens
So many doors
To friends and knowledge—
All can be yours.

To keep on growing
In mind and soul,
To serve and learn
Must be your goal.[140]

"To serve and learn" were not necessarily the goals Sylvia had in mind as she began to plot an ambitious literary career. But it was what American culture expected of well-behaved young ladies.

In eighth grade, Sylvia was elected president of her homeroom and secretary of her English class. She kept herself busy with the *Phillipian*, Girl Scouts, viola, piano, and dancing lessons, the Art Club, the Recreational Club, orchestra, and the Stamp Club. (In Maine, Margot Loungway had introduced her to stamp collecting, and it had become a minor obsession.) She still dusted the school offices for money; her supervisor was so impressed with her work that she told Sylvia she would someday "make a good wife."[141] When she did something for pleasure, such as reading "a trashy Nancy Drew mystery," she chastised herself for wasting time. When she slept late on weekends, she immediately wrote to-do lists and began working. But she still found time to play cards with Betsy, debate philosophical issues with Perry, and read several books by Caroline Snedeker. She took long walks with her family during fall afternoons, which she described in luxurious language: "The sun was hanging low in the west and shining through the graceful milkweed parachutes still clinging to the stalk, in a silver glow."[142]

The war had been over for almost two months, but meat and butter lines still formed before the grocery shops opened in Wellesley; a local newspaper captured a photograph of Sylvia and her grandmother waiting in one such line. Sylvia sat through endless school assemblies "with a multitude of speakers on war,"[143] on one occasion debating the merits of the draft, which she was firmly against.[144] She did not mention the horror of the Holocaust in her adolescent diary, but there were oblique references to the misery in Europe. With her friends, she played Refugee, a game that involved dressing in rags and going from door to door to beg for food ("fortunately . . . no one was home)."[145] She wrote of a captivating social studies class about the atomic bomb, and a lecture on Jewishness in her Unitarian Sunday school from a Wellesley College student: "She spoke to us about the Jewish customs, beliefs and ways. It was very interesting. She promised to take us to a Jewish Synagogue in the future. I had a beautiful time listening to her."[146] Miss Wyneberg kept her word and hosted the group at her temple in Boston early the next year. Sylvia recorded the visit in detail; it was likely her first real introduction to Judaism. That fall she published another poem in the *Phillipian*—"My Garden"—which she called "no good."[147] Her grandfather's praise—and his gift of a dollar—provided incentive to keep publishing, but the drive to make art came from inside. She published regularly in the *Phillipian* until she left junior high, thirteen poems in all, as well as four articles and four prose pieces.

December 1945 brought an eclipse of the moon—"a gray shadow spread-

ing over it till only a pale ball of faint light hung in the sky," she wrote in her diary.[148] Sylvia found the December blizzards, with their "driving" winds and "howling" snow, exhilarating. The family spent their "big Christmas" at Aunt Dot's house. (Grampy was working at the Brookline Country Club.) Sylvia faithfully recorded her gifts as usual: mittens, a nightgown, money, slippers, clothes, jewelry, a pocketbook, stamps (she now had more than 8,500), and a new diary. Writing in her diary was becoming essential to her well-being: "Dear Diary You're one of the 'musts' for peace of mind."[149] All her friends were away, and her obligations were on hold, and the lull seems to have unnerved her. Unusual physical symptoms appeared; a few days after Christmas she vomited and fainted, hitting her head on a table as she fell. She stayed in bed and did not dress for three straight days. She channeled her unease into Gothic iambs:

> The night is crouched in wait outside
> Stealthy, catlike, dark and wide,
> The night wind moans and plays a game
> Of rattling every window frame—
> My tiny, flick'ring lamp shines bright—
> Small proof against the fearful night.
> The hordes of darkness start their dance—
> Retreat, advance; retreat, advance.
> The night it lurks in wait outside
> Hollow, hungry, dark and wide.
> It waits to pounce into my room
> And swallow it within the gloom.[150]

On New Year's Eve, still in bed, she felt "very funny (peculiar) and lonely."[151] She had turned thirteen only two months before and seemed aware of an impending, nebulous shadow on the horizon. Like her mother, she tried to banish the bad with the good and end the year on a high note. She was "sort of optimistic" about the New Year and hoped that she would "succeed in my viola and piano and dancing and school and sports."[152] The war was over, just as she had hoped in her 1944 poem "Wish Upon A Star": "I wish that all the wars would end; / Their homeward way the soldiers wend."[153] Her own struggles with depression were just beginning, however. In the coming years, she would fight an increasingly sinister opponent as she matured into a world that seemed to reflect the dark paranoia of her worst sleepless nights. Both Plath and the nation were moving toward a different kind of war, one in which the enemy was hidden, out of reach, but armed with an arsenal of annihilation.

4

My Thoughts to Shining Fame Aspire

Wellesley, 1946–1947

In January 1946, Sylvia received a fountain pen from her grandfather with her name inscribed in gold. She treasured the gift the way other teenage girls treasured silk dresses and pearl necklaces. When the pen was stolen five months later, she wrote that it was among the worst days of her life: "I felt ill all day and know now how much I loved it. . . . My whole world has turned gray and black."[1] Aurelia replaced it two months later with "an exact duplicate," which pleased Sylvia enormously.[2] This unusual extravagance suggests that Aurelia understood how much her daughter had come to see the gleaming, monogrammed pen as an embodiment of her calling.

Plath put her pen to good use in 1946. Although most of her poems from this time are sentimental, they provide a glimpse of her developing thematic interests. Almost every poem Plath wrote during junior high school described a natural landscape. In "The Lake," which dates from 16 July 1946, the water "is really / the earth's clear eye, / Where are mirrored the moods / Of the wind and the sky."[3] Plath's titles reflect her preoccupations: "Awake," "Rain," "The Spring Parade," "March," "The Lake," "The Wind," "Mornings of Mist," "A Winter Sunset," "Steely-Blue Crags," "May," "October." These nature poems conveyed emotional truth within safe, impersonal parameters.

Plath began to explore darker images in early 1946. "A Winter Sunset," written in her diary on January 16 and sent to her grandfather, reads:

> Over the earth's dark rim
> The daylight softly fades,
> The sky from orange to gold
> And then to copen shades.

The moon hangs, a globe of iridescent light,
In a frosty winter sky,
While against the western glow one sees
The bare, black skeleton of the trees.

The stars come out and one by one
Survey the world with lofty stare;
But, from the last turn in the road
A cosy home beckons to me there.[4]

The first sound of Plath's mature poetic voice is audible here. The middle stanza, suffused with the language of dark Romanticism, is the emotional heart of the poem. It contains several tropes that would reappear in Plath's later work: a cold moon, liminal evening light, winter frost, and black, menacing trees. The stark vision nearly overwhelms the thirteen-year-old poet, who retreats to home and safety as if frightened of her own descriptive powers. Sylvia soon realized that the sentimental image of the "cosy home" weakened an otherwise powerful Gothic portrait; notably, she omitted the final stanza when she published the poem in the *Phillipian* in February 1946. This sound aesthetic decision suggests a shift away from sentimentality toward sublimity.

The same voice sounds again in other poems from 1946. Sylvia dedicated "To Miss Cox," published in the *Phillipian* in November 1946, to a beloved schoolteacher who had passed away. It was Plath's first public elegy. The somber poem considers the fleeting nature of life and hints at the consoling promise of an afterlife. The final stanza is the most powerful, though Plath again tempers her dark imagery with a cheerful ending:

The winter skies are leaden,
The flying snowflakes sting;
But behind the cold white stillness
There's the promise of a spring.[5]

Leaden skies and "cold white stillness" are familiar elements of Plath's mature poetic universe, while "the promise of a spring" would remain a resilient theme in her work. She never abandoned the idea of resurrection.

WHILE SYLVIA'S FRIENDSHIPS with Ruth Freeman, Margot Loungway, Perry Norton, Betsy Powley, Prissy Steele, and others[6] flourished through-

out her eighth-grade year, school was beginning to feel more like a "prison."[7] Missing school had once made Sylvia upset; now she cherished the "luxury" of lying in bed on weekends and lamented how quickly Monday came. She continued to earn straight A's on her report cards, and was pleased when her English teacher, Mrs. Warren, told her that she was writing at near-college level and should apply for a college scholarship.[8] But she counted down the days until her next vacation. That spring, her grandmother had to drive her to school because she was lugging ten pounds' worth of books.[9] She was stressed and overwhelmed, and admitted as much when she finally quit piano lessons in March.

She began to fall ill more frequently as her anxiety levels rose. Some of these illnesses may have been psychosomatic, as sickness seemed the only acceptable way to give herself a break. Days in bed gave her time to read and write for pleasure. In April 1946, for example, she was "itching" to read two books by Adele DeLeeuw but complained that she wouldn't have time with all her schoolwork. Two days later she was conveniently home sick and "devoured" both books.[10] Illness became her only respite from the pressures of schoolwork and extracurricular activities, and Aurelia was surprisingly lenient about letting her stay home. This was a pattern that would continue throughout Sylvia's life. (It is possible that Plath's breakdown in August 1953, which was partly brought on by the prospect of writing her senior thesis on James Joyce's *Ulysses*, was an extreme version of the illness patterns that had developed in girlhood.)

Sometimes even a day off could not quell her anxiety. "I went to bed with a spinning brain," she wrote in March 1946 after a day sick at home.[11] When she returned to school, she complained of her "eyes spinning and the black and white flashes grew worse in my study periods so that I couldn't even read or work."[12] After resting in the nurse's office for an hour she felt better, though the mysterious condition went undiagnosed. In May, after a hard day at school and a wet walk home in the rain, she was "angry with the world"; the following day, too, was "very raw and discouraging."[13] She began to have "gruesome" nightmares and did not sleep well.[14] In a notebook dating from junior high, she described one of these nightmares in language reminiscent of Poe:

> All there was overhead, below and on either hand was damp, suffocating, slimy, clinging blackness. Things padded silently, stealthily close by, but even though their presence could be sensed they were unknown things. They were made all the more terrifying by being unseen and yet <u>there</u>, because the imagination has the power to create monstrosities out of the vague unknown more horrible than the creations of nature itself. There

> was no feeling or seeing—only consciousness. Suddenly a spot of light appeared. It shaped itself deftly into a woman's head. Beautiful and yet frightening. The skin was blue-white as marble. The nose finely modeled, the mouth vividly red, and the eyebrows were thin black arches. Her hair, black also, dissolved into the living darkness. But where her eyes should have been there were two gaping holes from which issued licking red tongues of fire. The face began to glow and, little by little, the blackness was forced back.[15]

Sylvia was excited by gruesome scenes elsewhere, as when she narrated a performance of "Horatius at the Bridge" in English class: "I reveled in those bloody lines." After reading *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, a book about the French Revolution that she called "thrilling" and "rather bloody," she drew a blood-stained guillotine surrounded by decapitated heads in her diary.[16] She was again excited by blood—this time her own—when she scraped her knee during a basketball game that May: "To my delight it bled all over the bus and drew pitying attention and sighs."[17] When a fire struck a neighbor's garage that spring, she wrote, "thrill, thrill" as she watched the "screaming engines" rush to put it out.[18] Her Romantic mind seized on violence as it did hurricanes and winter storms—as a sublime force that brought her closer to an unveiling, an edge. When she heard Sibelius's *Finlandia* in Boston's Symphony Hall that May, she praised its stormy rhythms: "marvelous! It sounded like waves pounding on the wet beach, tossing up mists of spray with the theme of lightning and thunder rising through the powerful melody."[19] *Finlandia* inspired her to write a poem, "Sea Symphony," in which she described "The boom of the breakers on sharp, black rocks, / The scream of the gulls as they dip and soar" and the "pale green light / Of stormy, blustering afternoons."[20] The Gothic romance and moorland setting of *Jane Eyre*—which made her "estatically happy" [*sic*]—moved her more than the drawing room dramas of *Pride and Prejudice*, which she read in June: "I enjoy it greatly. Of course the artificial speeches they made in those days are rather boring."[21]

In mid-June she won the school spelling bee and a special Wellesley pennant for her academic achievement, but she longed for the final weeks of school, when the workload lightened. She was the only eighth grader to receive a fourth "letter" for academic success, and when school let out she was up in her apple tree voraciously reading Adele DeLeeuw books "about girls beginning their life work": "she writes about many different careers in very professional language."[22] Sylvia also resumed work on her novella *Stardust*, based on the Nancy-Star sequence she had begun in the mid-1940s. She was pleased to see that after typing out her longhand, her second chapter took up seven pages.[23]

At June's end the Powleys drove Sylvia up to Camp Helen Storrow for her second summer. She was again in the same tent with Betsy; Ruth Freeman soon joined them. (Sylvia was pleased that Ruth entered the cabin as she was washing the windows: "What a good impression that must have made.")[24] Back in Wellesley later in the summer, she studied Eleanor Gates's play *The Poor Little Rich Girl* for ideas about plot and structure that she could use in her own stories.[25] She also became more serious about painting. Aurelia bought her a set of oil paints and four canvasses that July, which gave her a "thrill."[26] She painted birch trees and zinnias and began typing lessons in August. She loved the speed tests and looked forward to the day when she could type her own stories quickly.[27]

Betsy and Ruth often came for weekends, and they enjoyed convivial family suppers with Sylvia's grandparents, aunts, uncles, and young cousins. The three friends played cards, often with Betsy's parents, and swam. Sylvia mastered the diving board at the Morses Pond bathing beach. "It is such fun to cut the water like a knife," she wrote. "I am just bursting glad that I'm learning how to dive!"[28] She still noted days that summer when she felt "queer" and "off," "yawny, miserable" days when she retreated to bed.[29] Yet it was in bed that she often did some of her best creative work. In late August she wrote four poems while she recuperated from a sore throat, writing, "I picked these thoughts out of the air when they came flying by on winds."[30] Lounging in bed also gave her time to catch up on current events through the radio. Sometimes the implications were disturbing: "I listened to the news—about the troubles with Palestine, Jugoslavia [*sic*], and Russia. Boy! If only there isn't another war in this world! I do so want peace."[31] She wished that she "could run things for a while."[32]

Sylvia spent the last two weeks of August lounging on the sun porch, where she drew "bathing beauties" in sultry poses, and read *Wuthering Heights*. She found the book "rather dark and morbid" but enjoyed it.[33] Aurelia, meanwhile, gave her *Triumph Clear*, a book about a young girl crippled by polio. After the high drama of *Wuthering Heights*, the novel's moral message was a letdown: "The books [*sic*] lesson is, I guess, that we never know how much we appreciate something until we loose [*sic*] it."[34] In Sylvia's diary, Aurelia stands in the background of all this activity as a source of comfort. One night Sylvia left Betsy's house late, and feared riding home in the dark. "As I started on the dark bike ride home, I saw a familiar figure ahead. Mother had come to meet me. Was relieved and happy."[35]

Sylvia started the ninth grade, her last year of junior high, in September 1946. She added Latin, Ancient History, and Algebra to her usual roster of subjects. She was in an honors-level English class taught by Helen Lawson, who remembered that, though Plath was at the top of the class, she had

"the complete respect of her fellow pupils—not that of a 'grind.'"[36] Sylvia began Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* the first week of September and called it "the most wonderful, magnificent book I've ever read!"[37] She soon began *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist*, and declared her love for Dickens in her diary.[38]

She loved, too, the clear blue skies, tawny leaves, and bracing winds of autumn. It was now too cold to read in the apple tree, so she camped out in her grandmother's room, which was sun filled and "airy," reading *The Count of Monte Cristo* and letters from her Belgian pen pal Claudine Dufrane, which her grandfather helped translate from French.[39] After drawing pictures of starlets in her diary that month, she wrote, "Some old nagging thing inside me prompts me to waste such nice paper. . . . From now on I won't let the weak side of my character hold sway."[40]

She attended her first school dance with Perry Norton that October in a yellow evening dress with velvet black bows; she happily recorded that she danced with seven boys. Her fourteenth birthday soon followed (her favorite present was an avocado from her grandfather), but she did not greet it with the usual enthusiasm. She felt she was growing old, and seemed despondent about the passage of time.

She discovered Sara Teasdale's poetry in November and copied several of Teasdale's nature poems into her diary, writing, "What I wouldn't give to be able to write like this!"[41] The poems she copied—"Late October," "Full Moon," "The Fountain," "Autumn Dusk," "Mountain Water," "There Will Be Stars," and "Beautiful, Proud Sea"—are similar in tone to the kind of lyric nature poetry she was then writing. In "Late October," for example, Teasdale writes:

> Listen, the damp leaves on the walks are blowing
> With a ghost of sound;
> Is it fog or is it rain dripping
> From the low trees to the ground?[42]

Sylvia transcribed these lines in her diary and wrote, "they express my thoughts beautifully."[43] The Teasdale poem that seems to have had the most influence on her was "The Crystal Gazer," whose first four lines she transcribed in her diary that November:

> I shall gather myself into myself again,
> I shall take my scattered selves and make them one
> Fusing them into a polished crystal ball
> Where I can see the moon and flashing sun.[44]