

Close Reading on Poems Sylvia Plath Wrote on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963, in Yeats's House

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Abstract

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Creative Writing

In 1962, Sylvia Plath divorced Ted Hughes after six years of marriage. Not long after the finalization of their divorce, Sylvia moved from their infamous home at Court Green to the former childhood home of W.B. Yeats—one of Sylvia's favorite poets—at 23 Fitzroy Road. For this reason, she connected—with her new phase as a divorcée, single-parent, and full-time poetess—her lease at 23 Fitzroy Road signaled a promising beginning for Sylvia's personal and literary life. Sylvia formally moved into 23 Fitzroy Road in December 1962, and after a brutal winter and horrid flu, she wrote thirteen poems as a tenant of Yeats's home. On February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963, Sylvia produced three original poems; the most poems she wrote in a single day, since moving to 23 Fitzroy Road. This thesis is a very straightforward close reading of the meaning and poetics of the three poems Sylvia Plath wrote on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963—ten days before she died by suicide in the very same house. These poems were titled “Mystic”, “Kindness”, and “Words”.

*Setting—*

In January 1963, the city of London survived one of its most brutal winters, today remembered as “the Big Freeze of 1963”. Although she and Ted Hughes lived on Primrose Hill from 1960 to 1961, Sylvia Plath launched her new life as a full-time writer, single mother, and new divorcée at 23 Fitzroy Road without the hindsight of winter weather—she couldn’t have known moving into that house would mark the final weeks of her life. The house was, after all, formerly Yeats’s childhood home, and it was spaciouly promising with three upstairs bedrooms, a lounge with “oriental” interior decor, and a balcony garden; Sylvia set up her writing desk firmly centered inside 23 Fitzroy Road. At the scene of her death, Sylvia left a carefully arranged manuscript for *Ariel*, which was packaged in a black three-hole binder, on top of this desk.

A common misconception by Plathian fans is that Sylvia wrote most of *Ariel* at 23 Fitzroy Road—the macabre myth that poems such as “Lady Lazarus” or “Daddy” would’ve *had* to have been composed inside the same address where Sylvia stuck her head in the oven. But this is, in fact, inaccurate: Sylvia finished *Ariel* at her and Ted’s home in Devon, referred to infamously as Court Green. 23 Fitzroy Road served the primary function of situating Sylvia near London’s literary circle, where she presented the *Ariel* poems to the likes of the BBC and *London Magazine*. Sylvia spent the last weeks of her life inside that house nursing her feverish children, trying to thaw frozen pipes, and arranging housekeepers without a working phone. When she was sick, Sylvia trudged through snowdrifts and ice to meet with publishers and record readings for radio programs.

In total: Sylvia only wrote thirteen poems as 23 Fitzroy Road’s tenant. None of these thirteen poems were included in the *Ariel* binder.<sup>1</sup> Renovating 23 Fitzroy Road, the Big Freeze, and childcare incurred a poetic drought at this point in Sylvia’s life. She waited over a month to revise “Sheep in Fog” on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1963—then, on the same day, she followed “Sheep in Fog” with three new

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Ted included all thirteen of the 23 Fitzroy Road poems in the 1965 *Ariel* edition, but in Sylvia’s lifetime, she considered these poems separate from *Ariel*’s manuscript

poems. After January 28<sup>th</sup>, Sylvia produced a new poem almost every day—a creative burst left uninterrupted for over a week. Her subjects focused on ordinary items such as balloons, mannequins, and hallways; she also often wrote of children. Compared to the *Ariel* poems, these final poems carry a sense of distance, defamiliarization, and observations of the speaker’s surroundings, which often come across as eerie, sterile, or claustrophobic.

February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963 saw the most poems completed in a single day with three finished poems: “Mystic”, “Kindness”, and “Words”. I do not know what transpired on this day in Sylvia’s life, but I am struck by a shift in tone with these three poems. “The snow has no voice” in “The Munich Mannequins”, the oysters of “Gigolo” “shriek in the sea,” and “Paralytic”’s speaker’s wife is “dead and flat, in 1920 furs”—in a Plathian poem, the snow, the oysters, the sea, and the aesthetic of 1920 furs have the power to harm. Prior to February 1<sup>st</sup>, death is depicted by Sylvia as an abrupt, but anticipated resolution to the discomforts the speakers endure—after February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963, Sylvia’s poems become open to the idea of death, perhaps, not marking the end of existence. This continuation of life is also not depicted as a dreadful event, as “the heart has not stopped” for the searching speaker of “Mystic”, “Kindness” declares to readers that “the blood jet is poetry,” and “Words” follows this declaration through with the celebration of words’ immortality.

Although I know Sylvia will die ten days after writing these poems, I am drawn to the defiance and thoughtfulness of their speakers. The confidence of “I eat men like air” feels reached by the speakers of the February 1<sup>st</sup> poems; they don’t read as idealized versions of Sylvia, but as entities who possess a degree of certainty and strength that I imagine Sylvia might’ve sought to rekindle in herself. The Yeats house was her “castle in the air,” a positive omen for an ambitious writer, and Sylvia saw an opportunity to rediscover herself inside that house—in comparison to the other ten poems, the optimism in “Mystic”, “Kindness”, and “Words”, is starkly beaming. The body of these poems holds so much hope for the speakers—for Sylvia’s—future; it is both remarkable and tragic

to realize this optimism in these readings, separated from or considerate of their biographical context.

*Mystic—*

In the autobiographies of female mystics, women like Julian of Norwich, Christiana of Markyate, and Margery Kempe wrote of endurance in their cruel environments. Much like Jesus Christ, they've obtained spiritual empowerment from trials of pain, devotion, and stark contemplation, awarding them as martyrs to a world that undermines their emotional and physical needs. Until a catalyst for this empowerment occurs, they spend their lives incapable of obtaining respite from their earthly troubles until God or Jesus (either those two typically) can divinely intervene, protect these women from marriage, loneliness, or illness, and equip them with enlightenment and spiritual intimacy.

Like these women, the speaker of "Mystic" is trapped in an inconsiderate setting. There is a lot of pain, discomfort, and violence involved in this place, which the speaker implies, is at the mercy of; she cannot smell, touch, or see without pain. From the very first line: Sylvia describes this place as an obscure environment with air that pricks and flies that bite.

The air is a mill of hooks—  
 Questions without answers,  
 Glittering and drunk as flies  
 Whose kiss stings unbearably  
 In the fetid wombs of black air under pines in summer.

For the air to be "a mill of hooks" implies that to breathe would mean to be punctured (I evoke a very specific image of deflating lungs); for there to be flies with "unbearable" kisses increases the "stinging" of this scene. Pain is perceived by the speaker as indiscriminate, unavoidable, and *everywhere*. Her perturbed voice gives the impression of a speaker who gave up swatting the flies away long ago.

What the “Questions without answer,” refers to isn’t specified, but one can infer the speaker seeks to find logic in her pain, as in the question relating to the speaker’s condition—why it *must* be this way, how *is* it this way? Not to mention: the clarification that the speaker exists in the summertime, and the pines (tall, prickly trees) are described as if they were a barrier (like a camp’s fence?) If the space within the pines is as secluded as a womb, then I sympathize with how difficult the speaker must find it to escape it—a space she has only known but is also a space that hurts her very much. To leave, must confront the unknown, but to stay is hardly tolerable. For such an uncomfortable irony: “fetid” would be an accurate description.

The speaker further elaborates on the macabre quality of her surroundings; she speaks of cabin, sails, and sheets as proof of the cruelty in the world:

I remember  
The dead smell of sun on wood cabins,  
The stiffness of sails, the long salt winding sheets.

Sensory (the kissing flies, the dead smell, other macabre imagery) in “Mystic” makes it known that it isn’t intended to be enjoyed, but if sails and wooden cabins are common fixtures in this fetid womb, then I have to infer the implied setting to be waterside, maybe with a marina. (Marinas are best noted for its exuding of a “dead [fishy?] smell” on a hot day.) I think of “long... winding sheets” from the buggy, putrid air of an East Coast summer, especially the detail: the sheets are covered in *salt*, as if by a sea. The more time I spend on the first and second stanzas, the more I lean to an interpretation that “Mystic” is based in someplace that would be idyllic to many—like a vacation destination; there isn’t an inherent threat in flies, kisses, pines, and stiff sails. Whatever joy or value those around the speaker find in these subjects, they are devoid of meaning to the speaker.

The sun, in particular, is villainized by the speaker. The sun is the reason for the bad smells and bad, glittering air (even if “the glittering” is because of flies, like fireflies, the air would have a “glitter”) as if to cement that there is no respite from this hostile place. The premature line break in

the sentence, “I remember / The dead smell...” could be heard as the speaker choking on her words.

I do not know what questions she seeks answers to, or rather, the “questions without *answer*” (notice: there is only *one* answer), but the second stanza does present us with “Mystic”’s first question, “Once one has seen God, *what is the remedy?*”

Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?  
Once one has been seized up

Asking for the remedy, but then asking for a remedy for “be[ing] seized up” implies that the initial remedy was for some “original problem.” The problem must’ve been overwhelming enough that only God might provide an adequate response for it; it might come across as the speaker being cursed, or incurable of her troubles. Sylvia herself once wrote of her mental health, “My motto here might as well be ‘My spirits, as in a dream, are all bound up’ ... It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents, joyous positive and despairing negative... [underline added by me]”<sup>2</sup>—this is to not recommend the speaker to be Sylvia Plath, but to suggest that Sylvia, who struggled to treat her depressive episodes, would relate to the speaker’s confusion and incompatibility with her existence. After all, doesn’t depression also have the power to *paralyze* or *negate*? Would seeing a God for a remedy be a “joyous positive” current for the speaker, and to be separated from that experience would result in “despairing negative”?

Without a part left over,  
Not a toe, not a finger, and used,  
Used utterly, in the sun’s conflagrations, the stains  
That lengthen from ancient cathedrals  
What is the remedy?

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<sup>2</sup> *The Journals*; June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1958, page 395

The speaker herself is not a mystic like Margery Kempe or Christina of Markyate—her interaction with God is either *only* a metaphor or, at most, an implied event (occurring off-poem). Unlike the mystics, this event has not cured the speaker of her ailments or revealed anything new to her—nothing that the speaker would consider “a remedy”—in fact, the event might’ve reinforced the speaker’s cynical existence. Being apart from the experience without guidance or improvement makes the speaker admit, in the third stanza, of feeling “used, / Used utterly”. She further separates herself from the world by portraying herself as disembodied “without a part leftover, / Not a toe, not a finger”—now the speaker lacks identity (without *a* part), or normalcy.

The poem’s pacing grows more intense as the speaker’s voice falls into a languished rhythm: “Not a... / not a... / used, Used... the sun... the stains.../ What is...?” To add to the intensity, the speaker reminds us the sun *can* destroy—it’s burning (“the stains”) the cathedrals; now there’s the standard that not even worship is exempt from this decay. The decay itself is “lengthen[ed],” or spreading, enhancing the overwhelming personality of the speaker. The music of the second stanza is pained by this question, “What is the remedy?”

The pill of the Communion tablet,  
The walking beside still water? Memory?

The elaboration on these tried and exhausted remedies, potentially tried by the speaker, and the rest of her vent is listed in an even wearier, desperate voice. The list is spoken with a hint of agitation; the progression is depressive, spiraling, and exhausting: “The pill.. the Communion tablet... / The walking... water? Memory? / Or picking up... / of rodents, / The tame flower... the ones /... so low they are... / ...small, washed... / Is there no great love? only tenderness? / Does... / upon it?” I can clearly hear the speaker process her fear in these anxious, fragmented sentences; I notice interrogative pitches at the beginning of each line (“The,” “The,” “Or,” “of”) of a speaker who, in the depths of her pain, still searches for answers.

A divine force has always followed the speaker since the beginning of “Mystic,” especially through the intensity of the sun, but also in the repeated association with death and endurance. The speaker inquires about the method of “walking beside still water,” which isn’t strictly walking *on* water, but parallel to its body.

God is brought up in the second stanza, but Christ is not mentioned until the fourth. God in the second stanza is postured as a distant, possibly doubtable presence, but the speaker speaks of Christ as if he is a certain, present being in “the bright pieces / Of Christ in the faces of rodents”.

Or picking up the bright pieces  
Of Christ in the faces of rodents,  
The tame flower-nibbles, the ones

Christ’s presence is certainly less foreboding than God’s negligent personality (“Used utterly”); Christ isn’t in the sun’s conflagrations, but in “tame flower-nibbles”—a creature as small, harmless, and mindful as a common rodent. Notably, it is the exact shift in the poem—the flower-nibbles mark the first positive being in the speaker’s world; they are “tame,” likely gentle, and certainly are not harming the reader in any way.

I notice the beginning of a “cool down” in “Mystic”’s body. After seeing the bright pieces of Christ, the speaker seems to let herself become centered. Sentences calm to a slower pace, the speaker stays on images for longer beats, and eventually, they flow from the humpback and his small cottage, spokes of clematis<sup>3</sup> (versus the mill of hooks), a sea remembering its walker (intimacy—shared relationship with something greater in the world). I love the vulnerability that arrives in the question, “Is there no great love, only tenderness?”

Whose hopes are so low they are comfortable—  
The humpback in his small, washed cottage  
Under the spokes of the clematis.

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<sup>3</sup> A purple buttercup flower from Japan and China.

Is there no great love, only tenderness?  
Does the sea

Remember the walker upon it?

I see the shift reach the end of its dynamic—at the beginning, the speaker is under assault, barely surviving; at the end, the speaker settles into the world again, and the sun is just the sun.

Meaning leaks from the molecules.  
The chimneys of the city breathe, the window sweats,  
The children leap in their cots.  
The sun blooms, it is a geranium.

I can only picture “meaning [leaking] from the molecules” as a new, more sterilized framing of the smell of air. When the speaker views chimneys as the city’s lungs, there is no added remark of the blackness of that smoke; the window “sweats” but the sweat is not dead, drunk, or stinging. The sudden end-stopped lines might have a reader assume the children are leaping in their cots out of fear, a reaction to pain happening, but, following the children’s reactions, “the sun blooms, [and] it is a geranium.<sup>4</sup>” These flowers the speaker compares her world to—clematis, a purple flower, and geranium, a magenta flower—introduces color into a poem that only evoked black or plainness; they are as all-powerful and influential as the hot sun. The speaker’s surroundings are neutralized, or more adequately defined as *domesticated*; by the last three stanzas of “Mystic,” we are no longer bearing the sights of the stiff sails and scorched cathedrals but are now firmly planted within the bustling activity of a city.

The speaker, whose pain and thoughts overwhelmed the poem, fades into the background. Spiritually, when one moves to a city, one should expect to blend in with something greater; the speaker’s voice, fear, or any hint of her journey disappears with the leaking molecules. If discovering Christ in the rodents’ faces granted a sense of comfort and intimacy between the speaker and their

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<sup>4</sup> Flowers also known as “Crane’s Bill”

surroundings, then it would explain how such an isolated consciousness would allow themselves to be absorbed into the world. After spending “Mystic” reconciling the power of greater beings, she settles with the certainty of life’s continuing discomforts.

The last line closes the poem with a neutral observation—an awareness from the speaker of the world continuing, maybe, here, adjusting to a new practice of keeping her hopes “so low [*she* is] comfortable,” and settling under the mercy of mills or spokes. The threat remains—the potential for pain certainly isn’t absent—but the speaker reassures herself of her existence, and the strength she can scavenge from its bleak nature:

The heart has not stopped.

*Kindness*—

“Kindness” is written in this “staged” formality, as if I was watching a contained play with actors blocking and abiding by a script. The poem immediately launches into the character of “Dame Kindness” who is an energetic force gliding around the speaker. I don’t read the speaker as a figure who follows Dame Kindness, or the other characters who appear in this poem; the speaker is situated as a static, unmovable weight—things are brought to her; she needs to be cared for by others. The speaker seems aware of her needs requiring care, or *mothering*; the acknowledgment is limited to compliments, trying to meet the positivity of others’ care: “Dame Kindness... is so nice!”

Kindness glides about my house.  
 Dame Kindness, she is so nice!  
 The blue and red jewels of her rings smoke

For me, I picture Dame Kindness as the speaker’s mother—a mother would know her way around a house; a mother’s taste of fashion would involve colorful rocks and bright rings. The colors blue and red are commonly combined for contrast; the implication of these colors together

may be to incite visual irritation or communicate an exuberance about Dame Kindness to the reader. Like the sun and the cathedral of “Mystic”, Dame Kindness’s jewels can smoke the windows too. This is to state that Dame Kindness has her powers and influences. Within the poem itself, I see this detail about Dame Kindness’s smoking jewels as a means of reinforcing our impression of her as jarring (think of the colors and the light bouncing off her rings) or “tacky” (because think of a happy-go-lucky older woman wearing a lot of colors and gliding around your slumped form).

I wouldn’t be so bold to claim Dame Kindness is Aurelia, but within her lifetime, Sylvia could rely on a rotation of female friends, hired help, and true maternal figures (Aurelia, Mrs. Olive Prouty) to come to her aid; clean the house, watch the kids, or accompany Sylvia on errands and appointments. Dame Kindness could be an amalgamation of the examples of caretakers Sylvia encountered in her life—including the example of Sylvia herself, as a mother to her own children. If Dame Kindness can so effortlessly float through the speaker’s home, then what does it mean for the speaker to be so confined and fearful in her seat?

In the windows, the mirrors  
Are filling with smiles.

The speaker is a very passive character in “Kindness”—Dame Kindness behaves seemingly unaware of the inner violence ongoing in the speaker’s head, as if Dame Kindness innocently assumes the speaker needs to be helped through a minor issue; after all, Dame Kindness makes these household tasks seem to easy. Dame Kindness is being very sweet to the speaker, but the mirrors are filling with smiles; the surreality of this image would be unsettling to notice; the speaker keeps this observation to herself, and does not seem to hint at the depths of her discomfort. Dame Kindness decides the speaker should try remedying herself with sugar, as the speaker decides a rabbit’s cry is as real and wilder than a child’s but, unlike a child, a rabbit is lacking in a soul. The speaker’s issues are more complex than Dame Kindness might be able to grasp.

What is so real as the cry of a child?  
 A rabbit's cry may be wilder  
 But it has no soul.

These meditations on a rabbit's soul occur in its own stanza, in the poem's second stanza. The first stanza observes Dame Kindness's productive spirit, and the second stanza returns readers to the introspective existentialism of usual Plathian speakers. The discord between "Dame Kindness, she is so nice!" and "What is so real as the cry of a child?" is dramatic, ironic, and funny to me how quickly "Kindness" switches into a moodier tone. Read as a whole, I hear: "[but] What is so real as the of a child? / A rabbit's cry may be wilder [pause] / But it has no soul." I do not think the speaker directs any bitterness for Dame Kindness, but the speaker is being sardonic and witty—

Sugar can cure everything, so Kindness say.  
 Sugar is a necessary fluid,

Its crystals a little poultice.

A "poultice" is a soft, moist mass of plant material or flour that can be applied as relief from soreness and inflammation. Sugar considered a "necessary fluid" sounds clinical to me, Dame Kindness is too upbeat about the (potentially misconstrued) health benefits of sugar; I sense irony in this line, maybe poking fun at the tendency for maternal personalities to quickly grow overbearing ("so Kindness says"). Using sugar to "crystal" poultice might be suggested by Dame Kindness to draw out infections—this is typically accomplished with salt, but sugar appears the poem instead.

In the lines of the third stanza, the speaker observes her Japanese silks from her position. Dame Kindness picks up pieces from a distance away from the speaker; in "Mystic," pieces are bright and part of Christ, but "Kindness" leaves the significance of these pieces undefined. The pieces served a metaphorical function for "Mystic"'s speaker's search for remedy; here, the pieces

may be part of reality, possibly the pieces of something that was broken either by Dame Kindness, the speaker, or another entity within the house. “Kindness”’s speaker believes her “desperate butterflies” would be pinned and anesthetized at any minute, and the line makes a comical image of these dainty butterflies needing to be tackled and drugged, but the speaker judges her butterflies would be desperate enough to show force, and others would do anything to contain them. Outwardly, the speaker only responds to Dame Kindness with a, “O kindness, kindness”—between the women, the speaker could be sweet, appreciative, and gracious; but the speaker, consumed with her nervousness over the smiles and the butterflies, could be speaking through her teeth. Readers might empathize with how the speaker must withhold her bitterness over Dame Kindness’s easy presence for the sake of politeness.

O kindness, kindness  
 Sweetly picking up pieces!  
 My Japanese silks, desperate butterflies,  
 May be pinned any minute, anesthetized.

The inclusion of Dame Kindness’s opinions about sugar adds to a “feminine aesthetic” about “Kindness”—jewels, mirrors, rabbits, sugar, crystal, Japanese silk, and butterflies; broken pieces on the floor evoke some underlying fragility to the speaker’s experience (maybe she is static in the poem as a cautionary measure). Even if the butterflies can withstand physical force, they are delicate—fragile—creatures. The speaker’s thoughts escalate into fearing this violent scenario; in five lines, the speaker commends Dame Kindness’s generosity and braces for an eventual confrontation. It may seem that even with Dame Kindness’s help, the speaker cannot resist her nervousness.

The final stanza of “Kindness” interrupts the speaker and Dame Kindness. A “you” is introduced—they come to the speaker (still immobile) to give her a cup of tea; the speaker observes the tea is “wreathed in steam.”

And here you come, with a cup of tea

Wreathed in steam.

Literally speaking, there is a “halo-like” shape surrounding the tea, signaling something honest and pure about the tea—is Plath putting us in the position to trust the tea, and the benefits it could offer? One may add sugar to sweeten the tea, and Dame Kindness’s best quality is her sweetness; “Sugar can cure everything... / Sugar is... necessary”.

But the speaker does not accept the tea; in fact, I don’t believe the “you” is Dame Kindness. The “you” is introduced as an afterthought, with a tone of exasperation: “And here you come.” Dame Kindness might “cool” the speaker down, and actively seeks to soothe the speaker’s “inflammations” (physical or mental, as the poultice’s appearance might imply), but the “you” arrives to “Kindness” bearing something scalding and irritating.

A departure from the comfy setting of silk and silly sugar advice: the speaker, still presumably in the same, locked position she began “Kindness” in, props up her guard and practically spits back in the poem, a sharp address to the “you” and to us:

The blood jet is poetry,  
There is no stopping it.

The speaker inflicts the bloodiness of poetry like a curse word: “*is* poetry”—she swears “there is no stopping it.” The blood jet is, as one would assume, a pressurized spillage of blood; the blood itself would need to spill from a source. The speaker implies that the blood yet would spill from her—and that it can because she is still wounded, and always had been in spite of Dame Kindness’s forced positivity around her home.

You hand me two children, two roses.

Two children might only burden the speaker with more responsibilities—now she must nurse herself to health, and protect the children, gifts from “you”—and the two roses are such a cliché;

compared to the other feminine objects introduced or referred to throughout “Kindness,” the “you”’s gift of roses comes off as forced, a last-minute attempt at thoughtfulness; the speaker wishes to reject these responsibilities, but the poem leaves the speaker’s decision open and ominous. Is it best to ask such a bitter speaker to care for two children?

In this poem, I imagine the speaker of “Kindness” facing her “you” in its final scene, and I think she was better off at the beginning of the poem, than how she is left in its ending.

*Words—*

The final poem from February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963 is “Words.” “Mystic” features the searching, existential speaker and “Kindness” contains the speaker who is burdened and nervous. “Mystic” concerns itself with greater powers—legacy, continuation, spirituality—the poem guides readers through natural and urban landscapes to fully appreciate the scope of the world. “Kindness” is domestic and perceives poetry as a product of the speaker’s body, particularly romanticizing the blood of her body; in a meta-contextual sense: yes—poetry is the product from somewhere within the writer. On February 1<sup>st</sup>, Sylvia completed “Kindness” with “the blood jet” line, then, chronologically, moved on to “Words”.

“Words” begins with axes—axes, swung in great strength, carving into trees. The scene’s only hint of humanity would be the arms swinging the axe, but this person is entirely omitted from the process that is occurring in nature. The axe is depicted as a disembodied instrument. By opening with a single-word line of, “Axes,” the instrument is awarded its echo-like quality—the body of the poem will react to the vexing accent of the word, just as the world in the poem would hear the chopping of the tool. Just as the readers’s eyes move from the line break, the second line reverberates the echo of “Axes” with the detail, “the wood rings, And... *echoes!*”

Axes

After whose stroke the wood rings,  
And the echoes!

The echoes are enormous—they travel like horses, as in plural, which would surely play a *stampede* of echoes, a thundering noise that would be challenging to ignore. This effect is teased out in the last sounds of each subsequent line: “rings,” “echoes,” “traveling” (the line breaks where you are forced to imagine these rings moving through the air), “horses.” Every last word pushes forward “Words”’s momentum and makes it believable that an axe’s “echo” could surpass distance and time.

Echoes traveling  
Off from the center like horses.

The poem pulls us back to the scene of the crime, where the axe cut into the bark. Plath continues “Words” in monosyllabic lines that give the stanzas a “choppiness” to its rhythm. This voice can evoke a sense of *awe*—*awe* for the scope of its sound—or a desensitization from the speaker, a sort of, *This happens every day*, attitude about the tree’s death. A tree earns a ring after every new year in its life, and for “Word”’s tree to boast enough bark to echo would suggest it was an aged, mature specimen. Yet, this tree’s fall is not indicated to move the speaker, the user of the axe, or even the tree itself.

The poem spends its first two stanzas clinically lingering on the impact left on the severed stump. What life is left from the stump pours out as sap—its “blood”—which wells at the site of the injury until it spills over a nearby rock. The speaker describes this as the act of “re-establish[ing] its mirror,” as if such reflections belong to skulls. The poem does not specify if this re-establishment suggests the mirrors can only be accessed by man-made action (a tree must be artificially or prematurely felled), or if nature is lacking in these mirrors because human activity disturbs its slow processes.

In the midst of the violence and the morbidity of a bleached skull, the water perseveres—it “strives / To re-establish its mirror” (note: the water has ownership of the mirror, perhaps as the

producer of the mirror or offers the mirror to the world). The emergence of the sap is born from hurt—as many real-life words are composed from—but a degree of agency remains in the aftermath. The detail that the skull sits, bleached by nature, for years, suggests a timelessness in these events.

The sap  
 Wells like tears, like the  
 Water striving  
 To re-establish its mirror  
 Over the rock

That drops and turns,  
 A white skull,  
 Eaten by weedy greens.

The timelessness of these events suits the words’ “indefatigable” character well. Within the third stanza, “Words” makes an unceremonious transition from the woods to a road. Whether this road is the exact location the felled tree isn’t clarified. It is made clear that it is years later when the speaker is traveling, passing through this road, and she comes across the “Words dry and riderless” (or “*writer-less*” for the sake of wordplay).

Years later I  
 Encounter them on the road—  
  
 Words dry and riderless,  
 The indefatigable hoof-taps.

I do consider the final stanza as providing the poem’s most sympathetic lines, at least toward the subject of “words.” The poem does not specify what the words are meant to stand for—if they are literal embodiments of letters, if the words are bound in a book—but the “riderless” (writer-less) description communicates an *abandonment* of the words; discarded or aimless on the road for a drawn out time until they are stumbled upon by coincidence. The speaker herself doesn’t elaborate

on what the find evokes in her but notices the “indefatigable hoof-taps” as part of the words. After the axing of the tree, the words echoed “from the center like horses”—the road is where the words are physically exhausted, but their indefatigable spirit sustains their existence, long enough for the speaker to discover them.

Their “riderless” status indicates the words are meant to be loved, used, and possessed by another being, but their occurrence on the road is too akin to how roadkill or litter is treated. The speaker does not explicitly admit in the poem if she can relate to this mistreatment, but I think it speaks upon the speaker’s character for her to appreciate their enduring hoof-taps. The speaker remembers her encounter with the words like a hunter recalls encountering an animal in the woods; a moment unexpected, but “Word”’s depiction of the encounter may imply the speaker has not fully comprehended the significance of the words. While the readers reach the last stanza, aware of the words’ long journey, there remains an air of mystery about them.

In stark contrast to the words’ withered forms, the final lines of the poem ascend. The ascension occurs simultaneous to the speaker and words’ encounter (“The indefatigable hoof-taps. / *While* / From the bottom...”); we are guided from the sight of hoof-taps to a reflection from the bottom of the pool—a *mirror*, such as one comprised of sap. Considering the poem’s earlier events of the water striving to reestablish its mirror, “Word”’s final lines holds more impact as it reveals the mirror reflects the fixed stars (consider the distance between the bottom of the pool to the atmosphere). The poem ends with the note, “fixed stars / Govern a life.”

While  
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars  
Govern a life.

Curiously, “Mystic” and “Kindness” showed their speakers petrified by larger entities such as God, Christ, poetry, and the sun. The speaker of “Words” digests the governance of fixed stars; she

states this power as fact, plainly stating how divinity occurs in such a commonplace (a pool, a body of water). Using the verb, “govern,” may even imply the stars can *watch*, but the speaker does not specify if the stars *intervene*—given the stark difference in form and space: us, as mere human beings, cannot consent to the stars’ governance. This certainly sets the fixed stars apart from the sun in “Mystic” which scalds anything below it, or “Kindness”’s smoke in the windows; “Words” establishes the fixed stars as an all-knowing presence in the nighttime sky. The night does not offer the speaker respite from these cosmic forces.

“Words” is a relatively straightforward poem compared to the existential crisis of “Mystic” and the strained scene with the speaker, Dame Kindness, and the “you” in “Kindness.” One might argue “nothing happens” in “Words”—the stanzas are image-heavy and the subjects are cryptic; the poem itself is quite interconnected with its environment, compared to the sensory overload “Mystic”’s speaker endures, and does not painfully desire to escape it. Personification is granted to the items of:

- The axe
- The wood
- The echoes
- The sap
- The rock
- The skull
- The weedy greens
- The words
- The pool
- & the fixed stars

“Words” intimately detail their individual journey throughout the poem, enough, for me, I consider these subjects their own characters in this narrative. In tracing the catalyst of the axe, to the sap dripping onto the skull, the water establishing its mirror, the endurance of the words’ hoof-taps, and the mirror’s revelation of the fixed stars—the poem draws a common denominator of these

objects, which is violence; the initial felling of the tree. The fell connects with the overwhelming power of the stars, and, as the speaker does in “Mystic” and “Kindness”, the speaker has no choice but to accept her place in this hierarchy.

Again, I have not figured out what the words are in the poem. The words begin as echoes from the axe, flies with horsepower, and the speaker discovers their bodies on a road; their role in “Words” might be considered innocent, just beings playing their role in mysterious processes, and I would’ve been interested to understand the exact reason Sylvia Plath chose to personify words this way. I like to imagine Sylvia finishing writing poems on February 1<sup>st</sup> with the last stanza—the stanza is a gorgeous image, very ethereal and promising. I appreciate how unafraid the poem is of the sky; that even though the words cannot go any further, that at least they’ve been noticed by the speaker. The actions and events described in “Words” are quite well-intended by the subjects; the poem’s world is strikingly kind and forgiving. After “the blood jet is poetry,” it’s especially interesting to me for such a peaceful poem to be titled “Words”.

*Closing—*

On February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963, Sylvia used her poetry to decide:

- “The heart has not stopped”
- “A rabbit’s cry may be wilder / But it has no soul,”
- “The sun blooms, it is a geranium.”
- “The blood jet is poetry”

In writing these poems, Sylvia admired that words—even when “dry and riderless,” abandoned and forgotten—can indefatigably withstand their condition. I theorize between the promise of this creative burst and writing of “Mystic” and “Kindness”, Sylvia recognized some power about poetry, rekindled some fulfillment writing offers her. The speakers of these poems search for answers to their questions through black and stinging air; they contemplate their condition in the company of a

buzzing caretaker and the two red roses, the two children; and nature follows its own parallel existence beyond the inner conflict from within the speaker.

Compared to the other sets of 23 Fitzroy Road poems, the February 1<sup>st</sup> poems are dynamic in their explored moods, their settings and sensory details, and the topics they explore: religion, domesticity, and legacy. “Mystic” and “Words” settle on resolution, a way of peace, whereas “Kindness” dares to confront the speaker’s difficult questions and complicated relationships. All three of the speakers struggle until they realize certainty about their situation, and they each resolve to move forward and live. Their images are harsh and uncomfortable; they do not always argue in favor of survival. Sylvia describes them bluntly to the reader: “Mystic” describes a great deal of physical pain committed against its speaker, “Kindness”’s voice grows morbid at the thought of crying rabbits and anesthetized butterflies, and the tree is wounded and “bleeding” in “Words”. Much like other Plathian poems, the February 1<sup>st</sup> poems continue to recognize an innate cruelty about the world, and the harm that is done to those who live in it—and yet, Sylvia wrote “Words”, and in “Words”, welcomed the potential for legacy, to *live on* for as long as one could. This was the resolution Sylvia made that day.

“Edge” was written four days later on February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1963. The poem begins: “The woman is perfected. / Her dead // Body wears the smile of accomplishment.” “Edge” is the last poem Sylvia wrote. She lived for six more days.

During those last six days, Sylvia was plagued by insomnia and side effects from medications she took for sleep and depression. By the night of February 10<sup>th</sup>, Sylvia’s physician, Dr. Horder, urgently arranged to admit Sylvia to a hospital; the earliest bed that could be reserved was for Monday, February 11<sup>th</sup>. If Sylvia went, she expected a long in-patient stay, so Sylvia spent the entire night deep cleaning 23 Fitzroy Road.

Between the hours of five a.m. and seven a.m. on February 11<sup>th</sup>, Sylvia decided she would die. She calculated the time it’d take for her oven to kill her, how long its gas had before filling the entire

flat, and how this would take place before Dr. Horder's nurse arrived to escort her in the morning—in theory, to get the kids safely out of the house. To confine Frieda and Nicolas upstairs, Sylvia stocked their bedroom with bread, butter, and two baby bottles; opened their windows, and sealed the edges of their door with tape, clothes, and towels. She sealed the kitchen too and turned her kitchen's gas taps on; resting her head on a soft cloth atop the oven door. A nurse, Myra Norris, arrived at 23 Fitzroy Road around eleven a.m., and by then Sylvia had been dead for four hours.

Ted moved into 23 Fitzroy Road that evening, after identifying Sylvia's body. He eventually discovered the *Ariel* manuscript with every poem Sylvia wrote after their divorce, at her desk. Two years after Sylvia's death, Ted published the first edition of *Ariel*, which contained forty-three poems. This version is considered an "unfaithful" version, given Ted rearranged Sylvia's original manuscript; omitted poems from the original manuscript such as "Death & Co." and "Purdah", and added new poems, including some of the thirteen 23 Fitzroy Road poems.

Of the February 1<sup>st</sup> poems, Ted selected "Kindness"<sup>5</sup> and "Words".<sup>6</sup> "Kindness" is the fortieth poem, set between "Poppies in July" and "Contusion". Although "Edge" was Sylvia's last known poem, it is arranged second to last of the collection—Ted chose to end *Ariel* on "Words".

This would mean, within Ted's lifetime,<sup>7</sup> a reader would finish *Ariel* with a transition—a final uplift in the arc of the collection—from "The moon has nothing to be sad about, / Staring from her hood of bone" to "From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars / Govern a life." Up until the publication of the restored 2004 edition, a reader might read *Ariel* with full awareness of its context and how *Ariel* came to be; they might read the entirety of *Ariel* as Sylvia Plath's "death poems,"

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<sup>5</sup> It's interesting to me Ted was okay publishing "Kindness", but omitted "The Jailer" and "The Rabbit Catcher" in the 1965 *Ariel*.

<sup>6</sup> In the Restored 2004 edition, they are cut altogether.

<sup>7</sup> Ted Hughes died in 1998. The restored version of *Ariel* was released in 2004, with the intention of publishing *Ariel* as Sylvia Plath original intended. (Frieda also wrote a preface for this edition.)

which the inclusion of “Edge” satisfies. But her “death poems” still end with “Words”, which wants to marvel at life, where the speaker allows her existence to continue—rather than stop completely.

## Works Cited

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## Mystic

The air is a mill of hooks—  
 Questions without answer,  
 Glittering and drunk as flies  
 Whose kiss stings unbearably  
 In the fetid wombs of black air under pines in summer.

I remember  
 The dead smell of sun on wood cabins,  
 The stiffness of sails, the long salt winding sheets.  
 Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?  
 Once one has been seized up

Without a part left over,  
 Not a toe, not a finger, and used,  
 Used utterly, in the sun's conflagrations, the stains  
 That lengthen from ancient cathedrals  
 What is the remedy?

The pill of the Communion tablet,  
 The walking beside still water? Memory?  
 Or picking up the bright pieces  
 Of Christ in the faces of rodents,  
 The tame flower-nibbles, the ones

Whose hopes are so low they are comfortable—  
 The humpback in his small, washed cottage  
 Under the spokes of the clematis.  
 Is there no great love, only tenderness?  
 Does the sea

Remember the walker upon it?  
 Meaning leaks from the molecules.  
 The chimneys of the city breathe, the window sweats,  
 The children leap in their cots.  
 The sun blooms, it is a geranium.

The heart has not stopped.

## Kindness

Kindness glides about my house.  
Dame Kindness, she is so nice!  
The blue and red jewels of her rings smoke  
In the windows, the mirrors  
Are filling with smiles.

What is so real as the cry of a child?  
A rabbit's cry may be wilder  
But it has no soul.  
Sugar can cure everything, so Kindness say.  
Sugar is a necessary fluid,

Its crystals a little poultice.  
O kindness, kindness  
Sweetly picking up pieces!  
My Japanese silks, desperate butterflies,  
May be pinned any minute, anesthetized.

And here you come, with a cup of tea  
Wreathed in steam.  
The blood jet is poetry,  
There is no stopping it.  
You hand me two children, two roses.

## Words

Axes

After whose stroke the wood rings,

And the echoes!

Echoes traveling

Off from the center like horses.

The sap

Wells like tears, like the

Water striving

To re-establish its mirror

Over the rock

That drops and turns,

A white skull,

Eaten by weedy greens.

Years later I

Encounter them on the road—

Words dry and riderless,

The indefatigable hoof-taps.

While

From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars

Govern a life.