



Jane Bowles, 1949



Sylvia Plath, 1961

# Jane and Sylvia

— RUTH FAINLIGHT

**T**he months I spent in Tangier, from early June 1962 to February 1963, were the same months during which Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes's marriage failed and she left their house in Devon for the flat in Fitzroy Road where she killed herself. In that same period of time, my friendship with Jane Bowles flourished. Not until now have I linked these two facts, nor understood that—though quite unconsciously—by returning to Morocco rather than remaining in London, I made a crucial choice between the two women.

To all appearances I had much more in common with Sylvia than with Jane. Sylvia and I were almost the same age, two Americans in England married to men from what was labelled a working class background in the north of the country, though in fact there was little similarity between their families or childhoods. Both of them—Ted and Alan Sillitoe, my husband—were successful young writers, in the public eye, while Sylvia and I were more or less unknown poets when we met. But there were significant differences. *The Colossus* was already published and had been well received, whereas my

first collection, *Cages*, would not appear for three more years. She was ahead of me also in that she had one child and was expecting another.

Jane was fifteen years older, demanding, eccentric and charming, a flirt, a tease and a wit—although I soon learned that her famous sense of humour was corroded by anxiety and depression. Like me, from the same East European stock, she was “small, trim, not especially sturdy or slender,” as I described myself in my poem “My Position in the History of the Twentieth Century,” but with a gamine cast to her features I do not share. Also like me, she was a New Yorker and a Jew who had “married out”; “out” in this case having taken her much further from the starting point than my simple defiance of social and religious taboos.

Jane’s marriage was quite different from mine, or Sylvia’s, or that of anyone else I knew. In contrast to his quite ordinary middle-class background and the extreme subjects of his writing, Paul Bowles cultivated the urbane manner and elegant, slightly anachronistic appearance of a junior diplomat or member of an old New England family. Jane told me that they had been very much in love and at the start of their marriage had a passionate sexual relationship, and they obviously still cared about each other deeply. But from the first days, they were never simply a couple—other people were always involved in their lives, and after a year or two, earlier predilections reasserted themselves, and their subsequent love affairs were homosexual. When I met her, Jane’s entire existence seemed to centre around Paul—his clothes, food, room, birds—and a quote from a letter soon after I returned to London will give an idea of how obsessive this could become (Paul had taken a house for the summer in Arcila, on the Atlantic coast):

*Darling Ruth, .... My life has turned into a veritable farce; schlepping between Arcila and Tangier as I do. If I did not find it humorous I would weep.... I can't remember what Paul's letter said because the Arcila dance had already begun, and I never get anything straightened with Paul, nor do I remember anything that isn't written down. My mind is full of food that has to be taken to Arcila because there is nothing there to eat at all except some tomatoes and some giant sized string beans and sometimes fish is caught that Paul considers edible. Otherwise everything must be taken there in great baskets and burlap bags. You can imagine the lists that have to be made which is particularly difficult because Paul can never remember what there is left in the house when he comes here so that I am almost obliged to go there myself to see.*

In one sense, she was the perfect wife—I teased her that they might have served as the models for a nineteenth-century marriage manual. Sylvia exhibited this same streak of obsessive domesticity. And I recognised it in myself. Regardless of all else, we were the product of the culture of the United States of America in the first half of the twentieth century, good examples of then-current ideas of femininity; also perhaps, we shared profounder self-destructive traits. Jane glorified in what she termed ‘feminine wiles.’ She was a shrewd and delighted observer of women in action, and a very successful player of those games. Sylvia tormented herself with impossible goals of domestic achievement. “Whether the artist can be a young woman/ is the first question”—not, please note, whether a young woman can be an artist—was the theme of much of my early poetry (and the first lines of a weaker example). The three of us struggled with the dichotomy of being writers’ wives as well as writers, and were maimed in our separate ways.

A broken leg followed by tuberculosis of the bone had stiffened one of Jane’s knees, and the after-effects of a stroke crippled her further. But in spite of the need for a walking stick, she indulged in all the activities of expatriate society. Whether as a result of that stroke and the heavy drinking which might have induced it, or, for more complicated reasons, after early recognition and praise for her novel *Two Serious Ladies*, and a Broadway production for her play, *In the Summer House*, she had written very little and not published anything for years—which was clearly the cause of much distress. Paul encouraged her to start writing again, but I wondered if, as his work became better known, it was more difficult for her to continue with an activity which she feared might be interpreted by him, by others, or even by herself as directly competitive. Later, in one of her first letters after I left Tangier, she wrote:

*I haven't written anything for so long, that I'm afraid that I will forget how to use the typewriter (sic), if this keeps up. I have not read anything either. I haven't the energy to read since it's always a bit difficult for me because of the hemynopia trouble resulting from the stroke which you know about and which, although it is a thousand times improved, slows down my reading so much that I fall asleep with the light on. I managed to stay awake for one week reading a book called 'Plain Girl', a book for children with large print.*

I have no idea whether Jane ever considered having a child. After concluding, a few years before, that the moment had arrived to think about children, I was forced to learn the

lesson that what one wants does not automatically follow. Three pregnancies had ended in miscarriage and when Sylvia and I first met, I was in the early stages of a fourth, which successfully reached full term in the birth of my son. Sylvia projected an impression of great confidence as a mother—though perhaps I was deceived by a fierce need to assure herself, even more than to convince me, that she could play this particular role as well as everything else she set out to do.

But I was quite certain about my own discomfort with the part. Alone, or at home with Alan, I could just about manage to function in this novel and demanding situation, but I shrank from comparisons, and certainly did not want anyone else's opinions or advice. It now seems plausible that one of my strongest motives in agreeing to leave England just then was to escape the company of other mothers and babies. What I remember best is a tremendous sense of relief as we crossed the Channel, drove through France and Spain—a journey which included stops on the way to visit friends and an unscheduled delay of several days in darkest Andalusia while a new clutch was fitted to the car—and ended up, almost two weeks later, at the Hotel Atlas in Tangier.



*Ruth Fainlight, Spring 1962*

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It was the hotel Paul always recommended to friends, although it would have been hard to find a more unsuitable place to stay with a baby not yet three months old—there was no kitchen or dining room on the premises, and only intermittent hot water. As soon as Jane heard where we were staying, she laughed at yet one more instance of masculine impracticality, and insisted we come to her apartment every evening for dinner. And for the next few weeks, as twilight first drained the sky of colour and then darkened it behind the gentle, subtle line of the hills surrounding the town, we would set out for Calle Campoamor and the Edificio Itesa, where Jane and Paul had neighboring apartments, and where we also had lived, two years before.

Jane's entourage consisted of Cherifa, the Berber market woman she had fallen in love with almost as soon as arriving in Morocco and who now lived with her—a lean, swarthy figure more likely to be walking around the apartment wearing a cotton singlet and pair of baggy navy-blue boxer shorts than traditional dress, and with a cigarette stuck in the corner of her mouth like a truck-driver in a Marcel Carné film from the 1930s; Ángel, a frumpish Spanish woman in her early thirties who accompanied Jane on errands and visits and made

herself generally useful; and Aisha, the talkative maid of all work. Each evening as we arrived, the first sounds we heard would be Jane's, Ángel's and Aisha's voices in earnest confabulation about the meal under way in the kitchen, in counter-point to the burbling calls and high shrieks of Paul's exotic birds peering through the wire frames of cages standing around the room and on the terrace outside. Meanwhile, Cherifa wandered between the kitchen and the dimly-lit living room where Paul and, more often than not, a few friends and admirers, teachers from the French lycée or the American school, would be sprawled on the low cushioned banquette that ran around the walls, their murmuring conversation another strand in the complex sound pattern of the apartment—while Alan, pipe in mouth and probably bent over a book or a map, and I with

David in my arms, sleepy after his feed, sat in contented silence. Sometimes Cherifa would follow me into Jane's room—she had taken to referring to me as "Baby" in her deep, heavily accented voice—where I withdrew to feed him, to appraise my turgid bosom and gaze admiringly over my shoulder into David's blue eyes. "He's as fat and white as a turnip!" she commented approvingly.

Tennessee Williams was in Tangier with his friend Fred, and Jane had extended the same invitation to them as to us—she liked to have a lot of people to cook for. Perhaps because of the unlikely presence of a small baby in these surroundings, Tennessee would sometimes talk, with much tenderness, about his nieces and nephews, and one evening asked if he could hold David for a few minutes. I have a vivid mental image of the stocky middle-aged man, for that moment not slumped against the pillows behind, but leaning forward, head bent with fascinated interest towards the baby on his lap, who looked back with equal absorption.

Those first weeks, I sometimes saw Paul during the day, as well as our regular evening meeting, in spite of his preferred habit of keeping those hours for writing. He was very helpful in our search for more permanent accommodation, introducing us to people who might have, or know of, places to let. And it was one of those friends, widow of the war artist James MacBey, from whom we rented 'The Gazebo,' a large cottage beautifully furnished in Moroccan style, which stood in the garden of her villa half-way up the slopes of Mount Washington to the west of the town. Single-storied with the exception of a small tower room above the kitchen (perhaps intended for a servant—though, apart from the week or two

when my brother Harry came to stay, Alan used it for his study), it was set behind a deep, wide terrace. I spent hours sitting in the shade of a blue and white striped beach umbrella, gazing at the constantly shifting colours of sea and sky over the Straits of Gibraltar and, if visibility was good, at Tarifa on the Spanish coast twelve miles away. I was surprised, and relieved, that motherhood did not stop me from writing. I knew I was very lucky—Fatima, the strong-willed maid Jane had found for me, washed David’s diapers, did the housework and prepared vegetables for the evening meal before she left at midday. Otherwise, it would not have been so easy to sit there admiring my vigorously nursing child while pondering metrics and metaphors.

That summer Paul was recording tribal music from the Atlas and Anti-Atlas mountains for the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. Sometimes he would play excerpts of these harsh or plangent sounds for us. His photographs and stories about the Berbers fascinated me, and one evening he mentioned that on midsummer eve, the night of the summer solstice, there would be a Berber festival at a pre-Islamic holy site in the foothills several miles south of Tangier, which was now the shrine of a local saint. He intended to go with some friends, and I was thrilled when he invited us to join them.

Of the four men in the large old Mercedes that came to collect us, Paul—lean, blond and blue-eyed as a Victorian traveller—was the only one wearing Moroccan dress: a fine camel-hair djellaba. The road narrowed to a dusty track as the car climbed upwards; then it stopped on a wide plateau ringed by hills barely visible in the darkness, and we stepped out into a crowd of hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of white-robed men. I could see small fires with more men seated around them, and waiters carrying metal trays of mint tea from thorn-built temporary booths in the shadows. We sat at one of the low round tables, and Paul leaned forward to murmur that I should look carefully at the dancer who approached. A supple body undulated beneath the shiny, gold-braided robes and rows of heavy necklaces, but at close quarters, the broad young face dripping with sweat was definitely more boyish than feminine. The alert, kohl-rimmed eyes soon decided there were better prospects elsewhere, and a few twirls of skirt and stamps of ankleted bare feet carried him to a more appreciative table, where the seated men began to compete with each other in pressing large dirham notes onto his wet forehead—which he peeled off and slid into the neck of his robe while smiling enticingly at the next potential donor.

The festival was dedicated to Sidi Kacem, and the branches of his sacred tree, shading the only well for miles around, were always swathed with rags and strips of cloth tied

on by women anxious to become pregnant or men who wanted riches or revenge—a practice which long predated the arrival of Islam. But the throbbing rhythm of drums and pipe coming from the centre of a large crowd was trance music of the A’ssaoui, who claim Jesus as one of their saints—although, according to Murray’s description of their self-immolating activities in his *Handbook to the Mediterranean*, 1890, “few persons would care about witnessing an A’ssaoui fête a second time.” I noticed how many armed soldiers were among the crowd, and nothing was happening now which might have elicited this comment. We seemed to be the only Europeans there.

We were walking through an area of tents, softly illuminated by oil-lamps or candles, shadows playing across their thin cloth walls as the occupants, mostly women and children, moved around inside. With the approach of dawn, the sky overhead darkened, as if the night were distilling into a smaller and smaller space, while from the horizon, pure turquoise light surged upwards. We had become part of a movement toward the crest of the dunes and the Atlantic beaches. By now the sky reflected every nacreous colour of the sand and the line of surf below that stretched as far as the eye could see. A rapidly increasing crowd of young men in white robes was running forward, and long-maned horses with riders on their unsaddled backs headed toward the sea. The scale was immense, like a grand Renaissance painting. The sun rose behind our backs, our shadows stretched before us—we looked westward, across empty ocean from Africa to America. I felt sure that for this moment I was seeing it all through Paul’s eyes, and knew why he and Jane had stayed in Morocco for so long.

Later in the year, things began to change. Alan was invited to visit the USSR by the Union of Writers, and began conversation lessons with a middle-aged Russian woman who lived down in the town. We had let our London flat to American friends, and now a letter arrived to tell us they had decided to go back home. I did not like the idea of staying in the Gazebo alone with a baby less than a year old, and in any case, our tenancy was coming to an end. But most important of all, I was excited by the prospect of seeing Sylvia, and sure she would be very glad to know I was in London. Nevertheless, I felt that Tangier had become my base. Jane’s new interest was to help me find an apartment which, I imagined, would be easy to reserve for our return in a few months. Although she refused to enter an elevator, she was prepared to stomp up any number of flights of stairs, her stiff leg apparently no impediment. Jane and Ángel and I devoted many hours to this activity, while Alan stayed up the hill at the Gazebo, busy at his desk.

Between our first stay in 1960, when it was a free port and International zone, and the present year of 1962, Tangier had been incorporated into the Kingdom of Morocco. Now every aspect of life was different. Fewer foreigners visited or lived in the town. Entrepreneurs had moved on, an alarming number of businesses had failed, and unemployed men, smoking morosely, clustered in silent groups around café tables. But while this was happening, I had been absorbed into a milky and poetic world, rarely descending from my ‘magic mountain’ with its terraced garden and panoramic views, except to visit Jane. It was not even necessary to cross the centre of town to reach the Edificio Itesa. Months passed before I began to emerge from a post-natal stupor and realise how changed everything was. Block after block of tall apartment buildings, many built by Italian architects to the highest specifications and using top quality materials, stood almost empty. Their marble bathrooms and kitchens and fine hardwood fittings were coated with dust or bloomed with the first mildew-film. During rainy late-autumn afternoons, it felt almost eerie to choose a key from the bunch an estate agent had eagerly pressed into my hands, enter a silent building and open the front door of one apartment after another, smell the different odours left by previous tenants or the original builders if it had never been occupied, and try to imagine living in any of them. There was such an abundance of choice that it became impossible to make a decision, and with barely any discussion between Alan and myself, the project was abandoned. It would be easy enough to find somewhere to live when we returned. But in spite of that conviction, and the fact that we left many possessions, books and clothes, in storage (most of which were lost), we did not return to Morocco, and I never saw Jane again after our last high-spirited ‘Au revoir.’

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Although Sylvia and I had acknowledged each other as ‘sister-spirits’ from our first encounter, circumstances did not allow us much time together. The meeting had been an almost too-exemplary literary occasion: the presentation of the previous year’s Hawthornden Award by its current holder, Alan Sillitoe, to the chosen new recipient, Ted Hughes. I had read and admired poems by him and Sylvia and was aware of his position as the ‘young favourite,’ but she was an unknown factor. My first impression was of a burningly ambitious and intelligent young woman trying to look like a conventional, devoted wife but not quite succeeding. There was something almost excessive about that disguise. I retain a clear mental image of a small hat pressed onto elaborately dressed hair, and a tight-bodied, full-skirted dark green shiny dress, the sort of costume one of my New York aunts might have worn for a cocktail party.

The four of us took to each other at once and, in spite of the distractions of their imminent move to Court Green (a large old house whose garden backed onto the churchyard in a Devonshire village), before their departure we shared a few meals at our small flat at Notting Hill or in the disorder of their half-dismantled even smaller one at Primrose Hill. They both were far too large-scale and long-limbed for the small crowded rooms—Sylvia chatting brightly as she cleared a corner of the rickety gate-legged table for plates and cutlery, Ted tenderly stooping towards their little daughter or stepping gingerly around heaps of books and papers—like two delicate and awkward jungle creatures trapped in a totally unsuitable environment. I have often read descriptions of Ted’s massive, looming presence, but although we were contemporaries, they seemed equally, and touchingly, youthful.

It was galling to have met such a congenial pair just before they left London—but there was the occasional opportunity to see Sylvia when she came to town for reasons connected to work. For two nights she stayed at our flat, to receive a Guinness Award while Ted remained in Devon with the little girl. She had written (well in advance—the award ceremony was not until the end of October) on September 29:

*I should arrive at Waterloo at about 3:30 pm & come straight to you. Then leave just before 6 for the Guinness thing, then have supper with my publisher & come in early, I’ll probably shop a bit the next morning and take an afternoon train home that day. I most miss good movies. I can barely stand to read the reviews of them, I get so movie-mad. It will be terrific seeing you both. –*

and added:

*A small note to say you are an angel for the terrific apple recipes. I am desperate for apple recipes. Let me know the lot. Have you anything for Stinging Nettles? Surely they have some nutritive value!*

and then a further message, dated only ‘Thursday’

*Dear Ruth, A small note to ask if I could possibly cadge a second night with you—Wednesday. I’m treating myself to a ticket at the Royal Court that night on the grim principle that you never know which fling is your last. At least I don’t know when I shall be seeing the beloved crapulous face of my dear London again, so I am trying to cram all that is possible into my brief time.*

On October 6th (I must have told her about a threatened miscarriage):

*Dear Ruth, — how I hope you are all right. It's difficult & in a way impertinent to tell you how very much I am wishing things to go well for you, because no-one can ever really identify deeply enough with someone else's special predicament to make the words 'I know how you feel' carry their full weight. But our sad & confusing experience of losing a baby last winter has made me feel much closer to the difficulties and apprehensions of childbearing & much more profoundly involved with them. Please tell me if I am descending on you at a lousy time if you'd rather be left in peace. I'd love to see you in any case & will come as planned unless you tell me best not. We are liking our place more & more. When you are able you & Alan must come for a bucolic country weekend & live on apples and fat cream. Lots of love, Sylvia*



Sylvia with Nicholas at Court Green, 1962

After that stay, she wrote on November 14:

*It is with some shock I see two weeks have scattered past. I don't know what I would have done without you and Alan in London. ... We now have a wood fire in the living room every night and got our One upholstered smashing Victorian chair (in shabby genteel black horse-hair) for 5 bob at an auction in town. So I sit in comfort for the first time in months, padded all about. Life here is very pleasant in spite of absolutely black weather & huge winds. Had a hunt meet the other day in the Square: sulphur-yellow spotted hounds, red jackets, brass buttons, lecherous-faced whipholders drinking whisky neat on horseback. A toot, & they galloped off. The fox was nowhere. .... Both of us send love. We are counting on you coming to us at least by spring. Daffodil-time. xxx Sylvia.*

The correspondence continued although (as we were both in the later stages of pregnancy) at a slower rate, and there are few letters until the following March:

*Dear Ruth, I've been writing to you in my head for weeks but as a result of post-baby lethargy have been absolutely mum. We have a boy baby (his sex a great surprise to us both) named Nicholas Farrar Hughes, born on January 17th at 5 minutes to midnight. ... I am so eager to hear your news. Please be better than me & drop one little note about your baby—sex, name, date, poundage, oh you know. We are both hoping you won't*

*give up the idea of visiting us this spring ... only 4 hours from Waterloo by carrycot. Do come. We are a baby-farm with every convenience. I am very happy with Court Green, my study, the babies, but mad for someone to talk to & woefully self-pitying about our just discovering you & Alan & then moving off. The women here are much worse than the men, who at least have their work. It's like a cattery. I never knew what "provincial" meant before. Ted joins in sending love. Please say you may come—Mayish? Lots of love & good luck. Do write me—it's so good to get your letters. Sylvia.*

Then on April 16, 1962:

*Dear Ruth & Alan, We are so delighted to hear about the arrival of David! Baby boys are wonderful beings & he and Nicholas should be able to coo & gurgle at each other companionably when you come down. .... How I loved Ruth's poem in Encounter! It is a real White Goddess poem, and a voice on its weird fearsome own. I think it is a rare thing. O please do say you can come...*

And there was the one long weekend (how could we know it would be our last meeting?), about a month after David was born and a few weeks before leaving for Tangier, when we made the eight-hour drive—those pre-motorway days—down the old coach road west to Devon, to inspect the new house and each other's babies. The house had all the necessary etceteras of the ideal poetic country retreat, and

Sylvia had already begun painting hearts and flowers on the backs of wooden chairs and cupboard doors, which gave it a slightly more New rather than an Old England feel. There is a two and a half month difference in age between the boys, and to my inexperienced eyes, Nicky appeared alarmingly advanced. Sylvia and I sat in her workroom one afternoon, nursing them while she read me her latest poems—one of which was “Elm.” On May 12th, she wrote:

*It was heavenly having you and Alan and David here, and like a vacation for me. Ted who usually claims I am killing him by offering him a potato now daily urges me to make scalloped potatoes just like yours because that is the way he loves them best. .... Could I dedicate my elm tree poem to Ruth Fainlight? (Or would you prefer your maternal & wifely self, Ruth Sillitoe? I had thought of the poet-self first).*

I think I was slightly disconcerted by the suggestion that the dedication be to the ‘wifely self’; we were two poets, Sylvia Plath and Ruth Fainlight, not Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Sillitoe, and our friendship was centred on this crucial reality. Now I wonder if it is evidence of the strain in her marriage at the time. Several times during the visit, I noticed that she and Ted avoided looking at or addressing each other directly when they thought it would not be too obvious, and there was a palpable tension between them.

It must have been a very late spring that year because, although Shakespeare wrote about daffodils that they “come before the swallow dares, and take the winds of March with beauty,” the hour or two we spent gathering heaps and bunches of them from the further reaches of the garden remain a vivid memory. To earn extra money, Sylvia had made an arrangement with a local wholesaler and, regardless of visitors, the flowers must be picked before they withered, and the contract fulfilled. It was sunny and windy and chilly as we crouched in the long grass on the sloping bank where many were still in bud (“Better to pick them like that,” she instructed me), cutting them rapidly, one after another, by the hundreds, and laying them carefully into open cardboard boxes. I stared down the papery sulphur-yellow or cream-coloured trumpets at the powdery stamens and black anthers of those already open—and suddenly could not bear this soulless repetition of reproductive equipment. The longer I looked at them, the

more malevolently eye-like the black dots became. It gave me the horrors. Sylvia laughed, but I hurried back into the house.

The next letter I have from her was sent to Tangier, and is dated September 8th. She wrote hopefully of Ted’s plan to “set them up” in Spain for the winter, and asked many practical questions about travelling with a baby. But only weeks later, on October 22, after two paragraphs about her riding teacher and the acceptance of “Elm” by *The New Yorker*, it was not too much of a surprise to read:

*Dearest Ruth, — My next news may make you sit down. I am getting a divorce from Ted. I write to you in confidence, and as a sister-mother-muse-friend. I know you & Alan must have all sorts of wonderful and famous friends, but to me you are the dearest couple I know in England.*

*You can imagine, Ruth, after our talk about less-famous, or even infamous wives of famous husbands, how I automatically assume that all “our” friends will now of course be just Ted’s friends. I hope that with us it is not so. I am very happy about the divorce, it is as if life were being restored to me. The details, however, are very unsavoury. .... A week after I almost died of influenza this summer Ted took the opportunity of telling me he had never had the courage to say he didn’t want children, that the house in the country (his*

*“dream,” for which he got me to leave the life in London I loved) was a sort of hoax, and bye-bye. .... I am living like a Spartan, writing through huge fevers and producing free stuff I had locked in me for years. I feel astounded and very lucky. I kept telling myself I was the sort that could only write when peaceful at heart, but that is not so, the muse has come to live here, now Ted has gone...*

A month later, although she is still based in Devon, the tone of her letter is one of high excitement as she tells me about finding a flat to rent in the very house where Yeats had lived on Fitzroy Road off Primrose Hill, and how, after arriving back home at Court Green and opening a book of Yeats’ plays in the hope of receiving a message from him, she had shut her eyes and pointed to the lines: “Get wine and food to give you strength and courage, and I will get the house ready.”

My last letter from Sylvia is dated Boxing Day—December 26th, 1962:

“...we were two poets, Sylvia Plath and Ruth Fainlight, not Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Sillitoe, and our friendship was centred on this crucial reality.”

## ELM

For Ruth Fainlight

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great  
tap root:

It is what you fear.

I do not fear it: I have been there.

Is it the sea you hear in me,

Its dissatisfactions?

Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?

Love is a shadow.

How you lie and cry after it.

Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,  
Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,  
Echoing, echoing.

Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?

This is rain now, this big hush.

And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic.

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.

Scorched to the root

My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.

A wind of such violence

Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.

The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me  
Cruelly, being barren.

Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.

I let her go. I let her go

Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.

How your bad dreams possess and endow me.

I am inhabited by a cry.

Nightly it flaps out

Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing

That sleeps in me;

All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

Clouds pass and disperse.

Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?

Is it for such that I agitate my heart?

I am incapable of more knowledge.

What is this, this face

So murderous in its strangle of branches?—

Its snaky acids kiss.

It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults

That kill, that kill, that kill.

—Sylvia Plath

From *Ariel* (Harper & Row, 1965)

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## SAPPHIC MOON

Seared, scarred, sealed by the Sapphic moon

Who advanced through the wavering glass

Between slats of shutters tamped

With the dry, frail dust of summer streets:

Outmoded and romantic defenses

Against the cold malignancy of the cat-goddess,

Who rips a barrier of mosquito-net contemptuously,

Passes like X-ray through lovers' caresses and arms,

Enters the womb like an instrument

Or the ice-hot hands of guilt and obsession,

Then sows bright mercury seeds of death

To blossom out through my future days

With that pure force of life characterizing her;

Like blue flowers from the ash of Peace Square.

—Ruth Fainlight

Published in *Encounter* (Spring 1962)

Note: Peace Square was what the flattened, vaporized center of Hiroshima had been named after World War II.

## THE GHOST

A ghost woke me last night, eve of the Feast of the Dead,

Rainy night in June, here on the African coast.

Rattling shutters, fireworks, shots or thunder—

Something broke into a blurred dream of myrtle,

Blue-washed plaster, headstones and white robes.

Defeated by neon the ghost faded;

While rain, unconfined in its ancient courses,

Unseasonable on the scrubby, stippled hills,

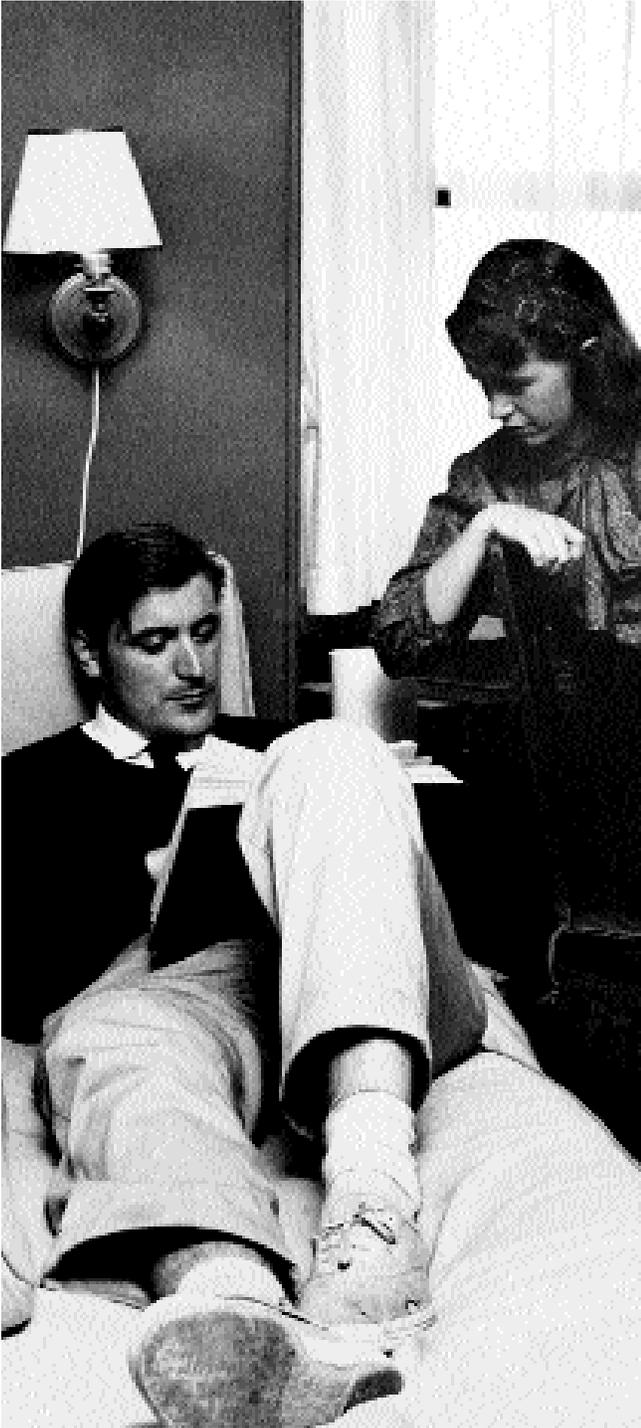
Fell over the whole country, wet me

As I stood on the terrace, rushed into her grave.

—Ruth Fainlight

From *Cages* (Macmillan, London, 1966)

*Christmas was a bit of a large gap & I was very glad to get rid of it ... How I look forward to your return at the end of February! It is my plan to return to Court Green in spring, Aprilish...Please plan on coming back to Devon with me! It would be such fun to open the place up in spring there with you ... Love to all & very eager for your return!*



*Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath in Boston, 1958*

It was precisely so that I would be able to drive our car while in Devon with Sylvia that I can still recite parts of the Highway Code in Spanish—and why my first driving license was Moroccan; and it was so that we would have someone to look after the three small children—Frieda, Nicky and David—that after much bureaucratic delay, Alan obtained a passport for Fatima, our Moroccan maid. Ever since then, I have wondered whether, if I had been there when Sylvia moved back to London, everything might have been different.

I had sent Sylvia the date of our arrival and promised to telephone as soon as we were in London. We decided that, rather than drive for several days across Spain and France, it would be easier to put ourselves and the car onto a P & O liner for the final stage of its voyage which had begun in Australia five weeks before. There were still a few days to wait before the boat was due in Gibraltar and we could join her, and Alan had gone into the town to do some shopping. He arrived back at the house with the previous Sunday's papers—as usual, several days late—and I snatched the Observer from the basket and turned at once to the review section. I could not understand why there was a photograph of Sylvia and some accompanying text surrounded by a heavy black line at the top of the books page. It was hard to take in what I read, I had to go back to the beginning two or three times until the fact that this was an announcement of Sylvia's death began to penetrate, and even more time was needed before I had absorbed the details of Al Alvarez's carefully worded piece. I burst into tears and flung myself onto Fatima's comforting bosom. Alan hurried in, alarmed by the sound of noisy weeping.

I cannot remember exactly what happened next. Between that moment and boarding the ferry to Gibraltar I must have eaten, listened to the radio, read books and papers, fed and cared for David, finished the packing—all the necessary activities of daily life and preparations for departure. I must have told Jane what had happened. I must have slept. Whether the dreams in which Sylvia appeared began then or later, has vanished from my memory. Once we were back in our London flat, I had to organise life with a baby, and had the added responsibility of Fatima. I had brought her to England for the specific purpose of looking after the three children while Sylvia and I went for walks or drove around the lanes of Devon, talking about poetry. Instead, she needed a great deal of help and attention herself. In Tangier, after the shock of learning about Sylvia's death, the arrangements for Fatima to accompany us to England seemed too far advanced to cancel—even if I had been capable of thinking clearly enough to realise that it might be a good idea.

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P.O. Box 1032,  
Tangier, Morocco.

January 12. 1963

Sylvia dear:

I'm so glad you're in your flat, back in Society, and off the blasted heath. Every time I hear the news on the radio about the weather conditions on Dartmoor I feel a pang of horror, then a wash of relief, as I remember you're not there any more. The awful weather has meant three weeks of monsoon rain here. In Tangier we're O.K., but it's been, and still is, a disaster for Morocco. About 50,000 people are homeless, (crops washed away, flocks drowned), and no village halls for them to go into. The rain still continues. It seems to soak into the spirit and make life seem besieged and unnatural. I can't believe that January is half over, as nothing but the rain has been happening since Christmas.

David seems to thrive on the weather though. He's really enormous. He adores our maid and I can't imagine parting them. I'm even considering bringing her up to England with me - when + if I come. Our plans are very very unsettled - the only fixed point being Alan's departure in April. He wants to come back to Tangier afterwards, but not to this house we're in now, which is not at all convenient. We're looking around for another but don't seem to find anything; every house or flat has something wrong with it if one thinks about it long enough. In the meantime, the days pass. Our flat in London is a problem: what shall we do with it? Will David be too disturbed by a move to another house here before a move to England? Once I get back to England will I want to move again? It's all very confusing. London, from here, seems a great, exciting, busy, fine-consuming, expensive, and stimulating pleasure-trap. All of my friends are in London - you are there now. And yet, thinking about the people whom I call my friends there, the people I used to see, I remember meetings that left me despondent and unsatisfied. There never seemed to be time to talk to anyone - the meeting I imagined never took place. That, of course, must be something in me - not in

London; and yet the fact of the city itself seemed to be destructive. Here I know no-one - there is only one person I could say was a friend in any way. It is the argument of maximum versus minimum stimulation; which is best for work? I feel sometimes that only by isolation, slowness, and solitude, will I be able to get in touch with whatever it is that I call myself - then I flip, and feel that these same conditions will finally smother and muffle me into a lethargic neuroticism.

I'm not working much - but I feel as if I haven't even yet had time to settle down. And when I momentarily do <sup>sense</sup> what being settled down will be like, I usually panic. In London I seemed to be pregnant all the time - so that was the reason I gave myself for not working. And when I was well, I seemed to go out. I don't know. I just hope that within the next month my ideas will clarify themselves; that we either will or will not find somewhere else to live here; and that I shall be able to escape from this exhausting + time-consuming obsession.

How do you think North Tawton will react to a veiled Moroccan woman?

Will you send me a copy of your secret novel? I shan't breathe a word of who wrote it - but I'm longing to read it, so do let me see it, please.

In spite of everything I've said on the previous pages, I'm looking forward very much to being in London and, as you say, going to the theatres and movies together with you, and talking and talking and talking.

Have you got an au-pair yet? I hope you're all well. Kiss Freida + Nick for me.

(It makes me sad, selfishly that is, thinking of you on Fitzroy Road. When you were in Chalcot Sq. we nearly bought no. 30. Do you remember? The thing fell through; I've often regretted it - now especially.)

All my love,  
Ruth.

We got in touch with Ted within a day or two, because Alan wanted to see him before leaving for Russia. I dreaded the meeting. He arrived accompanied by a strikingly beautiful woman—Assia Wevill (nee Guttman), the supposed cause of Ted and Sylvia’s separation. I saw two extraordinarily handsome human beings in the prime of their lives—but that glamour was overshadowed by the cringing posture and bowed head, the appalled, averted gaze and devastated expression of Adam and Eve just expelled from Paradise. They might have been battling against a swirling wind storm—as if, although only a few feet away, they were in another universe. I felt a combination of pity and rage when I looked at Ted, and hated Assia at first sight. They did not stay long, and the next time we met, a few days later, was at the flat where Sylvia had died. The children had to be cared for, so Ted and Assia had moved in. All four of them appeared to be in shock. The baby, barely more than a year old, face glistening with mucus and tears, moaned miserably from his cot for the duration of our visit. The little girl clung to Ted’s legs and would not let go. It was almost unbearable. Ted and Assia seemed overwhelmed, even more accursed and guilty than at our previous meeting. Now all I could feel was pity—for both of them.

It helped to write to Jane and think of other things as I tried to decipher her difficult handwriting, even when she said:

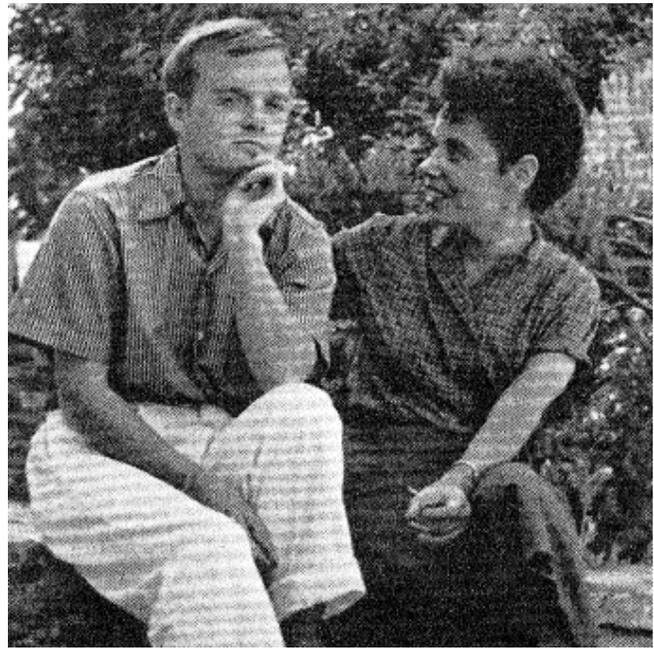
*Dearest Ruth, This is just to let you know that I think of you all the time and wonder whether or not you will come back. ... Things are going badly for me. My work has come to a standstill, although I tried again this morning to start off on a new tack. I did not scrap everything I had written but typed up the first eighteen pages of which I showed Paul ten. Paul was pleased and said that it sounded like myself and not someone else but he would have liked to see more. I would like to see more myself but I seem to have come to a dead end. ... I get more and more discouraged and therefore it is difficult for me to write.*

Or:

*... you may come to dread these tortured letters about tiny decisions. I am famous for them or I was when I was famous, with a few friends (most of whom are dead.)*

But she understood my grief about Sylvia’s death, and asked:

*Tell me how you feel about London now after your sad return, because of your friend.*



*Jane Bowles with Truman Capote (Tangier, August 1949)*

How did I feel? Haunted. For months I dreamed of Sylvia. Often these dreams were nightmares, and she was a soil-stained, snail-encrusted revenant, intent on dragging me back to lie in the coffin with her, like a character from a story by Edgar Allan Poe. My tragically dead friend was not yet “Sylvia Plath,” had not yet become a literary ikon. But her power was already manifest to me, during those months after my return to England, when she drove me almost crazy.

Could I have saved Sylvia? Perhaps—at least for that particular moment of crisis. But how long until the next? Years afterwards, a mutual friend told me that Assia—whom over the next few years I came to know and understand and then to love (and whom Ted later anathematised in a poem included in *Birthday Letters* as the alien, demon-woman who lured him away from Sylvia)—had confided that it was only my Xmas invitation to her and Shura, her three year old daughter, which had stopped her from killing them both during the empty days of that endless, dead-of-winter northern festival. But the remission was short-lived. Within a few months she had succumbed to her despair at Ted’s seeming indifference (or to the final spurt of gleeful vengeance from Sylvia’s ghost, as some preferred to see it); using Sylvia’s same method—though lifting the act to a higher level of horror: first sedating her child and herself, then sealing the doors and windows, lying down with Shura on the kitchen floor and opening every tap on the gas oven.

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