# Portrait of a poet on fire

How do we tell the story of Sylvia Plath?

*By Anna Leszkiewicz*

Sylvia Plath is standing in her vegetable garden. It's a warm summer evening in Devon. In her arms she holds a great bundle of loose papers. At her feet, a bonfire blazes. While her mother and her daughter watch from the kitchen, she tears up page after page of writing. Leaning over the bonfire, she sets the papers alight and watches them burn.

As far as we know, this really did happen – in July of 1962, the year that Plath wrote many of her most famous poems. But the details are hazy. Depending on who you believe, the papers she held in her arms that day were either: love letters between Plath's husband Ted Hughes and another woman; drafts of Hughes's poems; bits of Hughes's hair and skin scraped from his office desk; all of Plath's letters from her mother; the entire manuscript of an unpublished Plath novel – or a combination of all the above.

Biographers argue over whether the burning was an act of jealous hurt, vindictive rage, mourning, or even witchcraft. For some, it is little more than a colourful anecdote, a footnote in one of Plath's minor poems. For others, this is the turning point of the Plath-Hughes marriage, the moment when it went up in flames.

**Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath**
Heather Clark

*Jonathan Cape, 1,152pp, £30*

The fundamental question of biography is one of material. Claire Tomalin based much of her biography of Nelly Ternan, an actress and Charles Dickens's mistress, on Dickens's one surviving diary – a "very small booklet – 10 x 5½ centimetres", which scholars have squeezed "like a tiny sponge for every drop of information it can yield". Virginia Woolf had the opposite problem: when she sat down to write the life of Roger Fry, she was dismayed by the "thick hedge" of his letters: "three large brown boxes of Fry" and "a whole room full more". In the case of Sylvia Plath, the question of material is particularly fraught. Though the amount of Plath's work published in her lifetime was small, far more has become available in the decades since her death: poems, prose, letters and journals. Even more remains unpublished.

When writing about Plath, there is an overwhelming amount of personal, compelling archive material to draw on – but even more provocative are the absences. In his foreword to the 1982 *Journals*, Ted Hughes explained (in a telling use of the third person) that although Plath wrote two more journals, covering the last three years of her life, "the second of these two books her husband destroyed, because he did not want her children to have to read it... The earlier one disappeared more recently (and may, presumably, still turn up)". The missing journals, with their promise of insight into Plath's state of mind in the months before her death, haunt the imaginations of her readers. But the ghosts of other documents stand alongside them – the suicide note she may or may not have written; her unfinished novel, perhaps burned that night in July; and yet more missing letters, manuscripts and papers.

This would be enough to make any biographical work of Plath contentious and tantalising; but the scandal of Plath's literary estate complicates the picture further. After Plath died intestate, custody of her work fell to Hughes, then her estranged husband; he appointed his sister Olwyn – who had repeatedly and dramatically clashed with Plath while she was alive – agent to the estate. Olwyn became Ted's fiercest protector.

The Plath scholars Lois Ames and Harriet Rosenstein both began, but never completed, biographies of her. Edward Butscher, Plath's first published biographer, bemoaned "the malevolent spread of the subterranean battles raging over Plath's golden remains" and described Olwyn as "a veritable Cerebus unleashed". Linda Wagner-Martin, whose 1988 biography was vehemently opposed by the estate, claims Olwyn and Ted pressured her to change her perspective, sending her a list of changes "that filled fifteen pages and would have meant a deletion of more than 15,000 words". In a letter, Ted Hughes wrote Wagner-Martin was "so insensitive that she's evidently escaped the usual effects of undertaking this particular job – ie, mental breakdown, neurotic collapse, domestic catastrophe".

Most notorious of all is Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* (1989). Having at first secured the Plath estate's enthusiastic cooperation, Stevenson then had a falling out with ▶

NAJEEBAH AL-GHADBAN/CONTRASTO/EYEVINE

▶ Olwyn, which culminated with Stevenson writing pleading, self-pitying letters to her: "Please respect me as the author of this book and cease to persecute me with unpleasant references to my 'vapours'." The book was eventually published with a note describing Olwyn's contributions as so great as to have "made it almost a work of dual authorship" – reviewers described its attitude to Plath as "vengeful" and "harsh and reductive".

The controversy is documented in detail in Janet Malcolm's blistering work on Plath biographies, *The Silent Woman*, republished by Granta in April, which secured the infamy of the Plath estate. Broadly sympathetic to Hughes, *The Silent Woman* is also an attack on the idea of biography, which Malcolm sees as "voyeurism and busybodyism"; the biographer a "professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain the jewellery and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away".

Apparently undeterred, half a dozen more biographers followed, mostly unauthorised. Most recently, Jonathan Bate eventually subtitled his 2015 Ted Hughes biography "The Unauthorised Life", after the poet's widow, Carol Orchard, withdrew the estate's cooperation.

Now, into this thorny landscape, comes Heather Clark's 1,000-page *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*. Sold by the publisher as "balanced, comprehensive and definitive", it, too, is a reaction against the patronising and pathologising biographies that came before it. Clark entices us with the impossible: an "unbiased", authorised biography of Sylvia Plath.

> There are rare, shimmering moments where Clark succeeds in capturing Sylvia Plath. But she flickers

The events of Plath's life will be familiar to many. She was born in Massachusetts in 1932 to an American mother, Aurelia, and a German father, Otto, who died when she was eight. Having excelled at school, she went on to attend the elite Smith College on scholarship, but, in 1953, had to take time out after a depressive episode that culminated in a suicide attempt. Plath was hospitalised for six months and received a traumatic course of electroshock therapy, before returning to Smith. She was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study at Cambridge, where she met and married Ted Hughes, and began a dedicated effort to get their poetry published in the UK. Plath's first collection of poetry, *The Colossus*, was released in 1960. She had two children with Hughes; their marriage ended in the summer of 1962. By October, Plath was writing the *Ariel* poems – including her best known works, such as "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" – at incredible speed. Fame came posthumously: she died in February 1963, having gassed herself in her London flat. This one, final fact overwhelms narratives of her life. The biographer Hermione Lee has said that women writers with mental health problems are "treated, biographically, as victims or psychological case-histories first and as professional writers second". This is never more true than in the case of Sylvia Plath.

Plath supposedly built that bonfire in 1962 as her marriage was deteriorating. As this is the period covered by the missing journals, no record of it exists in her own words. Except, that is, for "Burning the Letters", the only poem Plath wrote in August of that year. It opens with a speaker admitting: "I made a fire; being tired/Of the white fists of old/Letters and their death rattle." Plath describes "spry hooks that bend and cringe" – in his biography, Jonathan Bate sees this as a reference to "the distinctive loops and jags of Ted's handwriting". The letters burn. "With the butt of a rake," the speaker says, "I flake up papers that breathe like people".

Plath and Hughes's poems are often read as being in dialogue with one another. They are in conversation on the page, too: many of Plath's drafts were written on the reverse of Hughes's own drafts. "Burning the Letters" was composed on the back of, among others, "The Thought-Fox", in which Hughes explores how an imaginary fox might be forever preserved in poetry. At the end of "Burning the Letters", a fox is ripped to shreds by dogs. As it dies, the poem ends on a bitterly ironic note: its last howls are spent, "Telling the particles of the clouds, the leaves, the water/What immortality is. That it is immortal." If Plath's dying fox is Hughes's thought-fox, "Burning the Letters" is about Plath's destruction of Hughes's work in more ways than one: it's possible to read "Burning the Letters" as the beginning of Plath's poetic as well as romantic breakaway from Hughes.

The story of Plath's bonfire features in most of her biographies. Like people, they argue over the details. In *Method and Madness*, Butscher – who describes Plath's late poetic voice in bluntly misogynistic terms – sees this as the moment when "the bitch goddess begins to emerge". Linda Wagner-Martin, the first biographer to see Plath as a victim, writes that Plath was burning her own unfinished novel, "the book about her great love for Ted". In *Bitter Fame*, Stevenson reverses the narrative again. Drawing heavily on the account of Plath's friend Clarissa Roche, Stevenson writes that Plath "invaded" Ted's study, stole his work, and "performed whatever rite of witchcraft she thought appropriate", before a fragment of paper floated out from the flames bearing the name of Hughes's mistress, Assia, revealing the truth of his affair.

The image of Plath performing "witchcraft" has proved too colourful to resist. Paul Alexander, in his sensational, novelistic *Rough Magic* writes that as Plath "threw handfuls of letters onto the flames, she began to dance around the bonfire". Ronald Hayman's *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* sees the bonfire as the moment that set Plath on the path to her death: "In lighting the bonfire she lit a fuse that would burn slowly towards... suicide." In the 2004 film *Sylvia*, a stony-faced Gwyneth Paltrow tends the fire in a woollen jumper, throwing on to it a thick hardback and Hughes's tweed jacket.

The film, like several biographies, seems to conflate the bonfire and another act of destruction. In February 1961, Plath (supposedly suspecting Hughes of a different, earlier affair) tore his manuscripts and his treasured *Complete Works of Shakespeare* to shreds. Jonathan Bate writes that Hughes's "reaction on this occasion is not recorded, but long after Sylvia's death he admitted to his American editor, Fran McCullough, that sometimes when Sylvia was in a blind rage, all he could do was slap her... A few days later, Sylvia miscarried her second baby."

In her book *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Jacqueline Rose writes, "Like the child caught up in a hideous divorce case between its parents, the writing of the life of Sylvia Plath... forces you – and makes it impossible for you – to take sides." With *Red Comet*, Heather Clark hopes to break out of this dynamic. In her prologue, she insists that Plath was "neither fragile ingénue nor femme fatale... Rather, she was a highly disciplined craftswoman." Clark sets out "to recover Sylvia Plath from cliché".

*Red Comet* is the kind of serious literary biography Plath has long deserved but, until now, not received. By drawing on an enormous body of research (including Harriet

**Marriage of minds: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath photographed in 1957**

Rosenstein's recently rediscovered work, and a fragmentary draft of an unfinished novel discovered by Clark), and layering frequently contradictory accounts, Clark assembles a fuller and more complicated picture of Plath than any biographer, placing her in context, "in the sexist era in which she was trapped". She avoids diagnosing Plath in detail, but does make persuasive new suggestions that Plath may have suffered from postpartum psychosis, and an unpredictable combination of medications, in the weeks before she died. Clark rejects the reductively psychoanalytic readings of Plath as the product of her parents and her marriage, and offers a more sensitive portrait of a woman shaped by a number of significant relationships (in particular with her high school teacher Wilbury Crockett, her patron Olive Higgins Prouty, and her therapist Ruth Beuscher). Her literary influences, too, are explored in far greater depth.

Clark takes Plath's juvenilia far more seriously than her predecessors. One poem Plath wrote at 15 about a pastel drawing her grandmother accidentally smudged, gravely titled "I Thought That I Could Not Be Hurt", is usually singled out for ridicule; for Clark, it "stands out as a creative experiment and an artistic turning point". Crucially, she sees the poetry, letters and journals as literary projects in their own right, and notes that, in her final months, Plath's "poetic and epistolary voices had begun to reflect each other". The role Hughes (and, later, the *Observer* poetry editor Al Alvarez) had on her work is investigated with similar care. Clark portrays the Plath-Hughes marriage as one between "aesthetic collaborators", shifting from dialogue to rivalry.

The blurb suggests that Clark is the first feminist biographer to have "clear-eyed sympathy for Hughes". She is certainly extremely cautious about drawing conclusions from some of her most damning material. This is the first full biography to have been written since the publication of volume two of the *Letters*, in which Plath writes to her therapist that, in February 1961, two days before her miscarriage, "Ted beat me up physically" and, after Hughes's affair, that her husband "was furious I didn't commit suicide" and "told me openly he wished me dead".

On this, Clark equivocates: "The couple was now at war." She awkwardly links the incident to "the couple's erotics of violence". (Plath bit Hughes when they first met; their work has an understanding of the sexual frisson of violence.) Refusing to take on the role of the child caught up in a divorce, Clark instead passes the opportunity for judgement over to Plath and Hughes's daughter Frieda Hughes, quoting from her introduction to the second volume of *Letters*. The first time Frieda read Plath's accusation, she found it "intensely painful". But Plath's admission that "I had given him some cause, I had torn up some of his papers in half" provides context that "is vital, and it confirmed in my mind that my father was not the wife-beater that some would wish to imagine he was". For Frieda, the destruction of "the thing they both knew was most precious – typescripts of their own work" was a crucial mitigating factor. She concludes, understandably, that her parents are "both flawed and impassioned human beings and I love them more for this".

The image of Plath ripping and burning manuscripts is so vivid, and so unacceptable, that it fundamentally disturbs our understanding of her. It can transform her from a woman to a witch; a victim to a villain. It haunts us: Hughes, in his poem "Last Letter", published posthumously in the *New Statesman* in 2010, writes that his final memory of Plath is of her burning a letter: "My last sight of you alive./Burning your letter to me, in the ashtray,/With that strange smile." Her suicide on 11 February 1963 has a similar hold on our imagination. But Clark hopes we can hold other images of Plath in mind, too.

"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," Clark writes. She goes on to describe Plath on 10 February 1960, drinking champagne as she signed her first book contract in a London pub, dressed in a black wool maternity suit, a cashmere coat and calfskin gloves. She was, she wrote to her mother, "resplendent". Other images stand out, too. Fourteen-year-old Plath copying out poems while sat in an apple tree. Plath wearing gloves at her typewriter in her Cambridge bedroom, barely able to move her fingers, ice forming on the windows. Plath on her 24th birthday, in a sleeveless velvet dress, eating smoked salmon and duck, drinking Chablis, and receiving a pack of tarot cards as a present. Plath and Hughes, strolling around London Zoo with Frieda in a pram.

In the last months of her life, Plath wrote for the *New Statesman* as a freelance critic. She reviewed a handful of biographies, including one of Isabella II of Spain, which she described as "a sustained barrage of broad facts, potted personalities and headline events, under which, like a sleight-of-hand phantom, Isabella flickers and fades". Plath is vivid to us in her letters and journals; Frieda Hughes, on reading the letters, claims: "I was struck by the sensation of standing in the room with my mother; I could almost smell her." But in biography, like a phantom, Plath can fade: always present, but never really there.

There are rare, shimmering moments where Clark succeeds in capturing Sylvia Plath. But she flickers. It's only in Plath's own work that we really see her; her presence radiating from the page, uneclipsed by her own myth. "Some girl a hundred years ago lived as I do. And she is dead," Plath wrote, aged 17, in one of her earliest journal entries. "I am the present, but I know I, too, will pass. The high moment, the burning flash, come and are gone, continuous quicksand. And I don't want to die." ●

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