young with the life of life, the sunbright Mecca of the desert. And
what a future opens! I feel a new heart beating with love of the
new beauty. I am ready to die out of nature and be born again into
this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West:

Since neither now nor yesterday began
These thoughts, which have ever been, nor yet can
A man be found who their first entrance knew.9

Emerson seems to me an American writer who deeply felt the relevance of
individual experience, how a self is formed by the world into which he or she
comes and then in turn forms that world. This relationship is what Whit-
man, in particular, thematized:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume

In each case, the assumption was that an individual could be representative;
that the narrating "I" could move easily from first person to the third person,
gathering you up on the way, as if each dialogue could open up into a town
meeting, as if the I, the Other, and the Us were coextensive. Both Emerson
and Whitman imagined "genius" as a vision of practical possibility; words
and actions were not severed from each other. For them, the visionary intel-
lect had efficacy as a principal animus; both had the desire to arouse in oth-
ers a sense of the joy of being through the agency of doing, and writing itself
as a prime example of this activity. This is how the essay ends:

We dress our garden, eat our dinner, discuss the household with
our wives, and these things make no impression, are forgotten
next week; but in the solitude to which every man is always return-
ing, he has a sanity and revelations, which in his passage into
new worlds he will carry with him. Never mind the ridicule,
ever mind the defeat; up again, old heart!—it seems to say,—
there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the
world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into
practical power.9

Jesus often raised questions from a literal to a metaphorical
level. His sayings and parables were customarily metaphorical
and without explicit application. Because his parables were told
in figurative language, because the figures could not be taken lit-
erally, because the application of the sayings was left ambiguous,
what he said was difficult to understand, and the disciples often
did not know what he was saying. (Mark made the disciples out
to be stupid, this was one of his particular biases, and it is he who
has Jesus say such things to his disciples as: "Are you as dimwit-
ted as the rest?" But Jesus did not explain. Instead, he gave them
more questions, more stories with unclear references. The an-
swer shifted the decision back onto his listeners. Jesus' style was
to refuse to give straightforward answers.

—Lydia Davis, "Paring Off the Amphibioligisms"10

Above all, Ovid was interested in passion. Or rather, in what
passion feels like to the one possessed by it. Not just ordinary
passion either, but human passion in extremis—passion where it
combusts, or levitates, or mutates into an experience of the
supernatural. The act of metamorphosis, which at some point
touches each of the tales, operates as the symbolic guarantee that
the passion has become mythic, has achieved the unendurable
intensity that lifts the whole episode onto the supernatural or div-
ine plane. Sometimes this happens because mortals tangle with
gods, sometimes because mortal passion makes the breakthrough
by sheer excess, without divine intervention—as in the tale of
Tereus and Philomela. But in every case, to a greater or lesser de-
gree, Ovid locates and captures the particular frisson of that
event, where the all-too-human victim stumbles out into the
mythic arena and is transformed.

—Ted Hughes, Tales from Ovid

I'm sick of love
And I'm in the thick of it.
—Bob Dylan, 'Love Sick'

1. On

the flight back from London to New York I read the new Ted Hughes book, Birthday Letters, a series of poems addressed to Sylvia Plath, his dead wife, recounting their relationship, although "recounting" doesn't quite do it. News of the book had hit the front page of the London Times while I was there—REVEALED: THE MOST TRAGIC LITERARY LOVE STORY OF OUR TIME, read the banner headline—poems were quoted and editorials written, there were pictures of the two young poets, and recitations of the story of their life together, the "literary romance of the century."

The other big literary news in London was the publication of Don DeLillo's Underworld, the vast novel which folds into itself the complex trajectory of Cold War America, threaded together on the fate of a single baseball—our romance with possibility, with fortune's fate—and the huge accumulation of detritus, both material and spiritual, which threatens to wipe all serendipity—of love, or art, or fame—from our lives. DeLillo has written a book that argues for the essential necessity of a fictive imagination by which to rekindle and reconstrue the facts, a book which perceives that the world under the world is our responsibility and the Fiction of the Possible moves parallel to the path of Fate, with her blunt logistics, her gargoyles delight in brute reality, her desire to eradicate Eros and to perpetuate forever the grim threat of annihilation which animated and still animates—if that is the word, which it isn't—the world's psyche.

DeLillo read from his book to a huge audience in the center of London one Tuesday evening.

"There's a word in Italian. Dizetrologia. It means the science of what is behind something. A suspicious event. The science of what is behind an event."

"They need this science. I don't need it."
"I don't need it either. I'm just telling you."
"I'm an American. I go to ball games," he said.
"The science of dark forces. Evidently they feel this science is legitimate enough to require a name."
"People who need this science, I would make an effort to tell them we have real sciences, hard sciences, we don't need imaginary ones."
"I'm just telling you the word. I agree with you, Sims. But the word exists."
"There is always a word. There's probably a museum too. The Museum of Dark Forces. They have ten thousand blurry photographs. Or did the Mafia blow it up?"

As the year turned, I decided to take whim to heart and, on the cool breeze from Time's revolving door, to go on a quick journey, to surprise myself into spontaneity; I wanted to run away from home. I wanted to take transition seriously, to create a literal threshold, wander on into and with the new year, right alongside the new year. I have not yet recovered from the giddy shock of finding myself elsewhere, in another country, another history, another language.

negative content
person/body/body politic/public/publicity
connective tissue/loyalty

I prefer winter. It has real boundaries, not just flimsy lids and thin folds, mesh and vagrant shade, but wide avenues to separate one from another, one from another one. Cold sharpens the shape of things, outlines; the short winter day plunges to sunshine before expiring into the hibernating long dark night. And the sun, in winter, is an estranged event, almost strident, as it comes slanting in across the bedsheets, through the pale green potted leaves of the paperwhites or narcissi, offering transparency's brief gift, not constant companion, not a summer tent's voluminous bower, its ineffable effort to contain the uncontainable. Summer is motion, ease, grace, aptitude, teen love, a season for muscular indentation, cascades of things that get entwined, that slip through, in the season of agility and flight. Summer is halcyon days for the Ad Campaign. Summer, everything wants to lose
distinction, to merge, relent, give in. *O blurt!* Buoyant with excess, it appears to give more than it takes, even as it readies to forget, to vacate. Slow news. Summer has not much need for language, for the effort to make things clear; summer wants dance and sails, not the differentials between a body sitting, a mind sorting, hands, fingers, feelings, all kept apart by the sometimes appalling intercession between being and meaning.

I prefer winter. The internal, the mental, the dream, the book, the obscure, the difficult, the private, the brief, the brilliant, the episode, the event, the quick kiss in frosty air. It has about it the mood of an assignation, the stark rendezvous of Chance with Fate. Winter is urban. The body wears protective garb. Only the face is exposed, eyes alert, mouth pursed, skin dry and thin, parchment frail. You might glimpse a person's soul.

You might stop in your tracks.

To go somewhere in winter is hard. It feels against the grain, against nature. Nature says stay in, tend to the near at hand, do not risk the boundary. All is sharp, nothing is soft, be careful, be slow. The ice sleek but thin. Do not rush.

*There's a certain Slant of light,*  
*Winter Afternoons—*  
*That oppresses, like the Heft*  
*Of Cathedral Tunes—*  

*Heavenly Hurt, it gives us—*  
*We can find no scar, But internal difference, Where the Meanings, are—*  

*None may teach it—Ary—*  
*Tis the Seal Despair—*  
*An imperial affliction*  
*Sent us of the Air—*  

*When it comes, the Landscape listens—*  
*Shadows—hold their breath—*  
*When it goes, 'tis like the Distance*  
*On the look of Death.*

2. Gag

What to do in a world strewn with infidels, every mouth agape, secrets spit out like so many pits, seeds, from the grapevine. Good to know that the American public is less hypocritical than its ambassadors, who clamber up on their High Horse of (Fair) Righteous Indignation and Gallop (Poll) away with Bill's head tucked into their communal saddle bag. Ho heigh! If every celeb in and out of Hollywood's chambers of deceit, if the Departed Princess and the Anointed Heir, can parade ceaselessly before said public their wanton ways, then, pray tell, who is to pass judgment on our own Sixties Boytoy Prez? Our moral codes are in disarray. Perhaps it is time to reconstitute them so that they are more or less aligned, so we can begin to find our way to a life that is not bent out of shape with remorse, guilt, sham secrets, and informant's malice.

Casual and fleeting associations have become central to our careers, displacing the deeper and longer-term relations of old. (Such strong ties—and the paradigmatic strong tie is loyalty—require a degree of personal commitment to which contemporary life gives little support.) Prominent management gurus urge us to avoid "entanglement" in institutional loyalty, and instead cultivate a have-vita-will-travel attitude of versatility: you attain power not by putting down roots but by "networking"... In an age of weakies, of free agency triumphant, the virtues of adhesion can be as fragile as the ozone layer. Awash in authenticity, we shall be true to ourselves until, perhaps, we come to realize that we have no selves worth being true to.

I was talking at lunch with a friend, Tom Dunn, who teaches political science at Amherst College; we were trying to come to grips with some nab or pith. Tom suggested that we have isolated two poles of human experience, the Child and the Father, the figure of Potential and the figure of Authority. Child as sentimental vehicle for recuperation, for beginning again, for the new, and Father as resident lawyer, judge, holder of power. Both these figures are stripped of experience—wisdom of the heart, delight of the senses, delicate web of hope, expectation, and disappointment that informs how it goes on; they are moved almost entirely by codes of permissions and
punishments: Power/Powerlessness is the twirling candy-cane pole, the blinking light at the corner, around which our culture turns.

Authority denuded of Experience; Ignorance deprived of Innocence.

Result: Dads who refuse to grow up; kids who shoot other kids with real guns.

The recurrent triumph of the primitive and mediocre over the civilized serves to point up the idea that qualities like integrity, breeding, decency, sophistication and confidence are redundant in the face of emergent social barbarism. In Amis's books, the thugs tend to win, and not only in the social sphere. Physical decay, the fact of mortality, the inexorability of the coming of death; these are the deep-structural certainties that underpin the various forms of cultural breakdown he documents with such relish and wit.5

At the contagious heart of iteration is a search, not for pattern, not for source, not for a little house at the end of a path wreathed in vine; the search, the picking among the stones for crumbs, is for direction, for purpose, for a reason to go on to the next step, around the next bend, beyond that shadow looming out over the road in the shape of a crow. The track is one of constant erasure, so that, turning back, one cannot see one’s footprints, cannot remember the signs along the way. The track is unmarked because it is so heavily marked. The search is to get from here to there, simply, without reiteration, without rehashing, echoing, mouthing the stale blather of what we know to be the case. It is this already known which keeps proposing itself as new, so that we are worn down with the familiar repetitions of that or response to this or that so-called event. Repetition is a form of hell, isn’t it? A torture, a pornography, especially if it masks itself as something fresh, vital, replete? On this map of recitation our perceptions dull. We begin to feel that we live in a world made of negative content, where all that we care for is turned inside out, emptied, and we are left holding the bag, the empty bag, like an enormous shadow. One sees that the only way through is to attempt to resist the habits by which we proceed, to try to invent a new game, a new procedure, by which we can look back and see all the incredible unused excess that has fallen at the wayside, nuggets and seeds, buttons and ashes, clipplings, threads, morsels. We have to step over and step lightly and step into the fact of our loss. We are at a loss. We do not know what is missing, we do not know why, stuffed, we feel hungry; drunk, we feel sober.

If things were really different: for of course a different history is at stake and one that will make us reread our entire history. No longer the directional and signifying history of a sense that unfolds and redeems itself, but an intermittent history, conjectural and reticulated, traversed by pulsations rather than by flux. No longer the sense of history, but a history of sense—and yet, at the same time, the recasting of an infinite liberation. And this history, our history, our coming of sense, is not coming to conclude a development or extend it further, but, rather, to repeat, to replay the multiple chances of what the other history, occidental history, at once set into motion and dissipated: a permanent excess or absenting of sense. Metaphysics and ontotheology, whatever their surface effects may have been, have never truly attempted to fill up this excessive absence. Rather, they have acknowledged it—in every case, and against their wills, or, rather, against their discursive bodies—to be the transcendental/factual absolute of the world and of existence.6

sense, n. & v.t. 1. Any of the special bodily faculties by which sensation is roused (the five ~, sight, hearing, smell, taste, & touch; sixth or muscular ~, producing sensation of muscular effort; has quick, keen, ~s, a dull ~ of smell); (pl.) person’s parity or ordinary state of mind regarded as secured by possession of these {have you taken leave of, are you out of, your ~?}; are you mad?; he will soon come, we must bring him to his ~s, out of mad folly; frightened out of his ~s, into loss of his faculties; in one’s ~s, sane). 2. Ability to perceive or feel or be conscious of the presence or properties of things, sensitiveness of all or any of the ~s {~ perception, errors of ~, mistakes in perception; the pleasures of ~, those depending on sensation; has a plant ~?}. 3. Consciousness of (a or the ~ of pleasure, pain, gratification, having done well, one’s own importance, shame, responsibility, labouring under a ~of wrong, feeling wronged). 4. Quick or accurate appreciation of, instinct regarding or insight into specified matter or habit of squaring conduct of such instinct (~ of locality, distance, the ridiculous, humour, duty, beauty, gratitude, a keen ~ of honour; the religious, moral, aesthetic, ~). 5. Practical wisdom, judgement, common ~, conformity to these {sound, good, COMMON, ~ a man of ~, sagacious; had not the ~ to do; has plenty of ~; what is the ~ of talking like that?; has more than to do; now you are talking ~}. 6. Meaning, way in which word etc. is to be understood, intelligibility or coherence or possession of a meaning (in what
exact — we shall rise again is doubtful; the ~ of the word is clear; does not make ~, is unintelligible; ~ in the strict, limited, literal, figurative, moral, metaphorical, legal, PICKWICKIAN, proper, fall ~; in a vague, in every, in a ~, provided the statement is taken in a particular way, under limitations as what you say is true in a ~; make ~ out of nonsense). 7. Prevailing sentiment among a number of people (take the ~ of a meeting; ascertain this by putting question etc.). 8. ~body, ~capsule, ~cavity, ~cell, ~center, ~organ, parts of animals concerned in producing sensation; hence ~less (sl.) a. (esp. = foolish; knock ~less, stun). ~lessly adv. ~lessness n. 9. vt. Perceive by ~, (esp.) be vaguely aware of. [ME, f. OF sens or L sensus (sentire sense—feel)]

3. Are

You can see how the body would become a locus for discourse, as if it were a curiosity: its needs, hungers, violations; its tenderness, pain, loneliness; its pleasures, desires, gestures. The body as the site of heat within the context of an indeterminate but pervasive cold. You can see how there would be a constant effort to enthrone (disown) it, to distill it, to rip it from its contingency and hold it: a doll, an effigy, a machine not in relation to other bodies, but to other machines. Just do it! Do what?

The subject of a recent issue of Critical Inquiry: Intimacy.

The absence of contexts for transformation is the defining condition of social existence—nationally and personally—as our politicians so effectively mirror back to us, with intimacy ideologies organizing habituation to low-level discontent so effectively that to chance transformation of any sort will seem patently ridiculous: a guaranteed laugh on a domestic sitcom or a guaranteed cover story in the Star. If adultery dares to stake out a small preserve for wanting something—even temporarily—it manages to do so largely through the always available idiom of sex. But renunciation still rules, the cornerstone of the administered psyche. Citizens are split subjects, marital and nationally, and like spouses who know each other's vulnerabilities all too well, our national institutions—politics, the media—reproduce themselves efficiently by playing the split for all its worth. With renunciation the reaction to thwarted desire, the unfortunate sequel to the entertainment of national scandal is the unctuous strutting of public virtue. Renunciation is supposed to be a cure-all for the dangerous experimentation of a utopian imagination, an organ even politicians apparently find themselves supplied with. The media, as ur-station of the real world, apparently self-appointed, self-regulating, self-regarding, bearers of a lesser fame, feeding off the bottom like fish, not quite celebrities but addicted to celebrity, addicted to power, the Authority Dad and the Ignorant Kid; the media, honne or array of reporters (guns also report, it is a kind of far, somehow annoyed or tired or bored, after the Model Princess had finally really died only to come back as a Doll, an Icon, a Place to Visit on your holidays; the media, that Chorus, got really excited, maybe even a little frenzied, at the snuff of a Big Story, something to pep up the doldrums of the post-holidays, in a time of relative peace, relative prosperity, white sales, a few murders, Winter Olympics on their way, but nothing really worthy of a headline, a three-inchet, something to cross the boundaries of the mere column, to soar out over, to take up the whole unfolded page of the op-eds, to consume the appetite, to focus the attention, to vie with the Super Bowl, to let the pundits enunciate their opinions, something to get the juices rolling, maybe even to bring down another presidency—yes!—which would lead to a lot more films and novels and there he is, Mr. Bob Guccione himself, offering a cool two million to Monica for a few semi-nude shots and her story, and there's Ms. Tripp, the one who would have been a perfect character on that old long-run series—you know, the one with J.R., about the venal eighties—she who actually encouraged Monica to get tapes made, and who called this literary agent—excuse me, just how unsavory and unseemly can it get over there at the hallowed New York Times?—the media, crawling with folks probably a little cynical, a little jealous, wishing there could be something as world-changing, mood-altering as Watergate, or O.J.'s trial, something to have all of us buying more than one paper every day, clicking from channel to channel to find the most up-to-date, most savvy commentary, not really ready for yet another confrontation with Saddam Hussein since the first one was such a bust as wars go, and maybe even a little tired of same old same old Bill, he of the big hug and big smile and big hands, whose character had already been pretty well pilloried within an inch of its life and who still managed to bounce back, still smiling, still glad-handing. Mr. Nice Guy married to a Smart Dame—too smart for
her own good, not up to the role, not good enough in the legs department to be an icon, not like, say, Jackie or Diana, our true heroines, glamorous moms married to really powerful men—

—to Bill Clinton, who represents to many the worst characteristics of the 1960s counterculture: self-indulgent, undisciplined, feckless, irresponsible, disloyal, ambivalent about the trappings of authority, arrogant and facile about change, morally a little shaky, perhaps even mendacious—sex (not!), drugs (not!), rock 'n' roll—

—the media, just by the way, disdains poetry, unless, of course, it has to do with sex, infidelity, suicide, or sanctimonious pronouncements by the sententious caretakers of our national soul—


Column A:

The poems in Birthday Letters show that Hughes, too, has been obsessed by the calamity of his failed marriage. They offer a peculiar affirmation of the power of Plath's art, for they record his own slow awakening to the inner life of a woman as talented as himself. No longer does he resist the role written for him by her work, the role of Fatal Husband. He indicates that the conventional, 1950's style domesticity that he and Plath both idealized was tragic for her. She succeeded in meeting her own expectations only in her extreme emotional and physical isolation from him. Ted Hughes now endows Plath's literary achievement with the laurel of prestigious understanding. It is a big concession. If he has written the last lines in this drama, she remains its author. The formality and awe of his tribute seem exactly right.

Column B:

I understand, and detest, all the patrid smoke surrounding this story. But what I don't understand is the spark of fire that ignited it. I don't understand how someone entrusted with the opportunity to lead this country at such a great time, how someone whose political agenda was so substantively appealing—on issues from abortion to education to the global economy—could risk it all on a dalliance with a White House intern . . . We overlooked Mr. Clinton's past indiscretions—he was hardly the first politician with testosterone overload—on the condition that he postpone his next dalliance until after he left the White House. But he broke the bargain. I knew he was a charming rogue with an appealing agenda, but I didn't think he was a reckless idiot with an appealing agenda.

4. Pen

Make no mistake, Sylvia Plath wanted to be famous, a diva. She wanted to be seen, heard, acknowledged as great, a great poet. This was an absolute, an idea fixe, not to be modulated or modified by experience, not to be made contingent, that is to say, dependent on context, except insofar as experience might feed, nurture, expand. But she grew up in America, in the fifties, and she went to Smith College, where, without doubt, there still obtained the notion that the best way, perhaps the only way, to gain access to power was to marry it marry it marry it. So when she arrived at Cambridge, England, on her Fulbright, she had a keen eye out for a likely consort, someone to hitch her wagon to and help her fulfill her destiny.

I am in the shadow of this, at the far edges of the shadow of it.

When I was an undergraduate, Sylvia Plath was in her first season of fame. After Eliot and Frost, and along with a few other poets—Theodore Roethke, e. e. cummings—the American poets of note in Middle America were the "confessional poets": Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, and Sylvia Plath. Sinners confessing their sins to an absent God, but to a new audience of voyeurs. When I was in college, I was aware of Sylvia Plath, her person as well as her work: I noticed she had graduated from Smith College (from which my sister, mother, and grandmother had graduated); I noticed that her father had died at the same time in her life as my father had died. Sylvia Plath stuck her head in an oven in February 1963, the same year that John F. Kennedy was assassinated. It was my junior year at the University of Wisconsin.

I was rejected from Smith. My SATs were too low, I was too bohemian, too troubled. (By the time I was getting ready to apply to college, my mother...
had fled, my sister was safely ensconced at college, and I was living alone in New York with my younger brother. But that is another story.) To be rejected from Smith in my family was tantamount to a not-so-subtle form of failure, a misstep across the threshold into life.

In my own personal economy it meant simply that I would not be empowered to become a poet.

For reasons, in part, of discretion, the following forfeits the narrating "I" for a fictive “she,” but the real reason is that all that transpired was already a fiction.

1970, London

A crowd had assembled, almost, one might say, a throng. Women in short skirts and high boots, men in flowered ties. There was a hushed milling about in the great hall outside the auditorium; the whole place seemed to have a rapid heartbeat, a rush, anticipation and expectation were colliding in their chest cavities, causing little eruptions, pulse alterations, breathlessness.

That morning, she had awakened feeling a little scared. She lived in a big room in the basement of a house facing Belsize Square. Across the street, a stone church, nestled down for the duration. The room was dank, the cement floor smooth and cold under her bare feet. Outside her room there was a hall; down the hall was a door to the bathroom and another door into another room which faced out into the gardens at the back of the house. Only it wasn’t a garden; it was just a space where a garden might be. There were French doors out onto this ragged plot. She had awakened feeling tense, in that way you do, into the sullenness of the world, its desire to put before you something you do not know how to do. The world greets you with a test.

Lying in bed, she thought she heard something. It sounded like someone sweeping nearby, or something being dragged along the cement floor just beyond her door. It came and went in awkward spasms, this whispery dry sound, almost a kind of dry weeping. She opened the door onto the hall and the sound became nearer but not louder; she was sure someone was just outside, doing something. She moved along the hall in the dim light, listening. The sound now seemed to come from behind the door leading into the empty back room. She stood listening, her heart jamming up into her throat, trying to get out through her open mouth. She opened the door a crack. The shuffling stopped.

The room had cartons and other stuff in it; a broken chair, some stacks of magazines; the things that sit waiting in limbo, between use and waste, the heaven and hell of the material world. The room was in limbo, the people who owned the house did not want to rent it out.

The morning tossed its cool white light into the air outside. She stood in the doorway staring into the room’s uncertainty. Something moved. She jumped, maybe even a sound escaped from her contracted throat.

On the floor, the thing moved again.

Its wings spread on the floor, a pale dusty-colored bird, a little larger than a jay. Sensing her, it flailed on the cement. She entered the room. The bird was still. She did not know what to do; she went to it and stared down into its tiny hard eye. She could see its body pulsating with terror; the bird was terror; no little part of it was telling it to calm down. She tried to tell it not to worry, but the bird did not understand. She opened the door; cold morning air rushed in, but the bird did not fly out. At last, she took an empty carton and lifted the bird gently into it.

Memory also has a muse.

5. Green

When she first saw him, in a large formal room with long windows and pale furniture, a room above a gracefully turning staircase, she felt herself arrested, stopped in her tracks, as if he were a kind of magnetized impediment. Always afterwards she described this by saying that he was like a kind of huge tree, its leafless branches bowed upwards, a basket of arms, under which she wanted to go; she wanted to stand near to the immense gnarled trunk, she wanted to go there.

When Sylvia Plath first met Ted Hughes she bit him on the neck so that he bled.

He had been hidden away, only a few people had caught sight of him.

Now he had written a book of poems with a bird, a crow, as protagonist.

He read into the hushed dark auditorium from Crow.

I think I came out on stage after the reading and said, "The rest is silence." I felt way out of my depth.

In the aftermath, he was surrounded, accosted by eager persons, many of them women, wanting to say; to ask, be near. One woman, in a white shiny miniskirt and high white shiny boots (Courrèges was the rage) announced that she was writing a thesis on Sylvia Plath, and could she possibly write to
him with some questions? He was gentle, agreeable with these inquisitions, these curiosities. She watched from a distance: tangents of desire, flirtations, passes around his figure, as if it were an ancient rite in which someone was about to be entrapped or entrenched, aided by—whom?—Hermes, the Trickster, god of boundaries, uncertainties?

Trickster is a boundary crosser. Every group has its edge, its sense of in and out, and trickster is always there, at the gates of the city and the gates of life, making sure there is commerce. He also attends the internal boundaries by which groups articulate their social life. We constantly distinguish—right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead—and in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction. Trickster is the creative idiot, therefore, the wise fool, the gray-haired baby, the cross-dresser, the speaker of profanities. When someone's sense of honorable behavior has left him unable to act, trickster will appear to suggest an amoral action, something right/wrong that will get life going again. Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox.9

I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.10

She was asked if she would like to accompany him to his sister Obrey's house, for a drink, for a cup of tea, not far from her basement flat in North London. A writer, Marvin Cohen, almost deaf, came along in the car. She sat in the backseat. Marvin shouted. They came to the sister's house, a dark place, the sister a large woman with a gothic wildness in her face. They sat in the parlor, the sister and the poet wanted to do her horoscope; to read her palm. They pored over her outstretched upturned hand, whispering, consulting. There was a sense of some mystical, Celtic shamans, as though Yeats and Madame Blavatsky had left some version, some potent in their wake.

She has no memory of what they said. Perhaps it was noted in a journal.

Eventually, he offered to drive her home. She sat in the front seat, next to him; when they got to her place they passed, the motor idling. He asked her something about herself; she blurted out that she wanted to be a poet. He said he would be pleased to see something of hers, that she could send some poems to

him. She held on to the car door handle, leaning away from the huge wind that pushed her toward him.

Then she remembered the captured bird.

"There's a bird, it was on the floor this morning, it seemed unhurt but unable to fly away."

Something like that.

"How big?"

"Larger than a joy, purdy colored, with wide wings."

"It's a swift," he said. "They need leverage for their wingspan to lift. If you take it outside and toss it upwards it will fly away."

She sent the poet some poems, typed on her portable Olivetti 22. Maybe eight or ten poems. Time passed, one, two weeks, she can't remember. Then he phoned her where she worked, where they had met, and said he would like to meet with her to talk about her poems. He was coming up to London. They met in a pub, on Haverton Hill, not far from her flat. They talked. She cannot remember the talk, she only remembers feeling surprised to be sitting in a pub in North London with this figure, this poet, the husband of the other, dead, American poet. She asked him questions; he told her something T. S. Eliot had told him about being a poet and she remembers feeling that something important, maybe sacred, was being passed to her. He walked her home, it was quite late. She doesn't recall what season it was, maybe early summer. It must have been early summer, or perhaps late summer, because the next morning she went into the little group of shops in Belsize Village and bought some strawberries and cream for their breakfast.

She doesn't think they ever mentioned the dead American poet by name. She tried to understand what had happened between this man, who seemed now to be sad, and private, and lonely, and kind, and the young American poet, now famous for dying, for writing amazing poems right at the edge of death. The poet, Sylvia Plath, had wanted Ted Hughes, the great treelike figure, to protect her, to keep her from her destructive urges, to stand between her and her romance with her other suitor, Death. And now she thought he came to her to hide, to escape, that he wanted, above all, to be protected.

She thought about her own ferocity, the narrative of her life, how she felt invaded by her absent parents, in particular by her own dead father, who seemed to have stolen some essential thing from her, and put her directly in contact with obliteration, with the expectation of sudden catastrophe, what her friend Peter Straub had called a "fatal imagination," a sense of continuous urgency and fear that there was not, there would never be, enough time because somehow her
father had gone off with Time Itself and left her holding something like longing, a longing for someone magical to come along and give it back. It was as if time and death and her father were all part of the same indivisible configuration, merged into a current of lost and found. And she knew, also, that the idea of a normal life which went from this to this to this in a natural course, a logical sequence, was not likely. Life would be a series of beginnings and endings without middles.

She knew that it was in the middle that the habit of trust resided.

6. Tops

Sylvia Plath made for herself a sort of cauldron that did not allow one thing to come after another; her final poems were not written so much to or about the betraying husband, as to death itself, her real Paramour, who had captured her father and had thus tethered her. Plath’s real dialogue was not with the awful English winter or the two small children or the missing husband, but was with this other First Script, which Ted Hughes could not possibly rewrite.

Plath’s letters to her mother, Aurelia, are often fevered and hyperbolic, as if the actual world had to be continuously buttressed, augmented. There is a rampant voraciousness, an exaggerated breathlessness, that consumes her prose.

“The Pursuit” is more in my old style, but larger, influenced a bit by Blake. I think (tiger, tiger), and more powerful than any of my other “metaphysical” poems; read aloud also. It is, of course, a symbol of the terrible beauty of death, and the paradox that the more intensely one lives, the more one burns and consumes oneself; death, here, includes the concept of love, and is larger and richer than mere love, which is part of it [italics mine].

Dearest Mother,

I have not heard from you in several days and wish with all my heart that these times are not trying beyond endurance.

I shall tell you now about something most miraculous and thundering and terrifying and wish you to think on it and share some of it. It is this man, this poet, this Ted Hughes. I have never known anything like it. For the first time in my life I can use all my knowing and laughing and force and writing to the hilt all the time, everything, and you should see him, bear him! . . .

He has a health and hugeness . . . the more he writes poems, the more he writes poems. He knows all about the habits of animals and takes me amid cows and coots. I am writing poems, and they are better than anything I have ever done; here is a small one about one night we went into the moonlight to find owls:

METAMORPHOSIS

Hunched like a faun, he hocked
from grove of moon-glint and fern-frost
until all owls in the twigged forest
flapped black to look and brood
on the call this man made.

No sound but a drunken coot
lurching home along river bank;
stars hung water-sunk, so a rank
of double star-eyes lit
boughs where those owls sat.

An arena of yellow eyes
watched the changing shape he cut,
saw hoof harass from foot, saw sproat
goat horns; heard how god rose
and galloped woodward in that guise.

Daily I am full of poems; my joy whirls in tongues of words. . . . I feel a growing strength. I do not merely idolize, I see right into the core of him. . . . I know myself, in vigor and prime and growing, and know I am strong enough to keep myself whole, no matter what. . . .

His humor is the salt of the earth; I’ve never laughed as hard and long in my life. He tells me fairy stories, and stories of kings and green knights, and has made up a marvelous fable of his own
about a little wizard named Snatchcrazington, who looks like a
stalk of rhubarb. He tells me dreams, marvelous colored dreams,
about certain red foxes... 11

The dead American poet had wanted poetry to intervene, mediate, be-
tween the desire to live in the normal daily real of a bitter winter in a foreign
country with two small children and an absent husband, and her desire to
live in another, permanent, fixed space, the relied space of immortality.
Death was a mere passage, a necessary door, into this firmament. The final
poems of Ariel wage a battle between the living force of language and the
transfiguring force of death.

One time I returned to my flat to find a scrap of paper. On it was written,
"Plenty of warmth but no Anni. A sitting Crow stares." I have it still, tucked
inside his book Wodawo, the triangle of white paper torn from an envelope.

Perhaps Ted Hughes understood, wanted to understand, nature, crea-
tures, forces, better than he understood persons.

Only there is a doorway in the wall—
A black doorway:
The eye's pupil.

Through that doorway came Crow.

Flying from sun to sun, he found his home.12

Writers and their identifications: Ted Hughes with his protagonist Crow;
Sylvia Plath with an immortality that she would have to cross the threshold,
go though Crow's door; to enter; I with all of it, starstruck like a teen groupie. I
was astonished—excited and flattered and scared—to find myself, however
tentatively, swept into the eddies of their self-perpetrated myth. Sylvia Plath
was not the only young woman to suffer from the collision and collusion of
phantom and real; I was not the only young woman, who, wishing something
for herself, was seduced by the allure of an intimacy with power, the aura of
literary fate. As I look back from the stripped edifice of postmodernism, I feel
lucky to have escaped these saturated delusions. And yet, a slight rueful
pause. For what? Not for the hapless romancer, but for an almost indefinable
relation between the potency of desire, the complexities of choice, the sim-
mmering modalities of personal and historical event, the singularity of fact and
the manifold truths of fiction. The eye of the Crow on the cutting-room floor.

7. Possible

I came to see that if I wanted to live my own life, if I wanted to own my life,
I would have to learn to let go, to give something up, in particular the me-
dramatic narcissism that had determined my sense of personal fate. I would
need to begin to unwrite, unravel, revise the initial script. When, many years
later, I did attempt to take my own life, it was because the part of me that
was wedded to this first script and its annihilations became indifferent to the
parts that loved, forgave, grieved, believed. The will, I saw, is amoral, it has
no use for compassion, failure, for the ifs and buts of life's transitive af-
fective grammars. The will pinioned, blinking: oy/yes, off/no. The will, as
Plath understood so well, a Nazi.

What Foucault felt more and more, after the first volume of The
History of Sexuality, was that he was getting locked in power rela-
tions. And it was all very well to invoke points of resistance as
"counterpoints" of loci of power, but where was such resistance
to come from? Foucault wonders how he can cross the line, go
beyond the play of forces in its turn. Or are we condemned to
conversing with Power, irrespective of whether we're wielding it
or being subjected to it? . . . Crossing the line of force, going be-
yond power, involves as it were bending force, making it impinge
on itself rather than on other forces: a "fold," in Foucault's terms,
force playing on itself. It's a question of "doubling" the play of
forces, of a self-relation that allows us to resist, to elude power,
turn life or death against power. This, according to Foucault, is
something the Greeks invented. It's no longer a matter of deter-
minate forms, as with knowledge, or of constraining rules, as with
power: it's a matter of optional rules that make existence a work of
art, rules at once ethical and aesthetic that constitute ways of ex-
isting or styles of life (including even suicide). It's what Nietz-
sche discovered as the will to power operating artistically,
inventing new "possibilities of life."713

It surprises me that many feminists blamed Ted Hughes for the suicide
of Sylvia Plath, that they so readily agreed to the drama of the failed mar-
riage turned into tragic fable of the cruel betraying husband poet and the
innocent victim wife poet. It seems to me that, given the post-sixties turn in consciousness—our bodies, ourselves; the personal is political—there would have been a less romanticized, more culturally contextualized, psychologically nuanced, reading of the forces that doomed her. A woman of such high intensity ambition, talent, would not have been much appreciated in London; the English are not particularly fond of women who take themselves or their work—especially their work—too seriously. Work should reflect other, more contained social ambitions—good deeds, cultural amusements, horticulture, dogs. Gratification in one’s own work is somehow a little vulgar.

There was, as well, the culpability of 1950s American culture, which sent out continuous conflicting images for women, and for what might constitute a woman’s happiness or success.

The youth movement that never quite emerged in the United States before 1940 has, I believe, now come. It is not national in its scope, but it is national in its implications. Although there was precedence for it in the adult world, it was initiated by youth. There are members of the adult community who command the respect of the young in the movement, but less as individuals than as embodiments of an ideal. The commitment of the participants is to an ideal, not to an organization or an individual, and yet the tactics and strategy of the movement demonstrate a pragmatic grasp of political and social realities.14

Sylvia Plath would have benefited immeasurably from the social changes that emerged out of the 1960s; had she been born ten years later, there might have been sufficient support among her peers and the multiple forms of resistance to have given her better mooring. Plath was prey to what the psychoanalyst Karen Horney called “the overvaluation of love”; she could not meet the idealized, internalized demands for perfection in both domestic and public realms. Such women, Horney thought, were caught in a bind between images of domestic compliance (dependency) and self-sufficiency (ambition), a conflict between what Horney called the “real self” and an internalized idealization.

The conflict begins to inform all areas of life: compliance, vindictiveness, helplessness, rage, seductiveness, envy, suffering, ambition, and self-effacement all compete and interact. The result is psychic confusion. “Patients inclined toward this kind of defense often resemble those characters in fairy tales who when pursued turn into fish; if not safe in this guise, they turn into deer; if the hunter catches up with them they fly away as birds.”15

As birds. Dinosaurs, I leaned recently, were not “horrible lizards,” but birds. And poets are not extinct either. Birds fly over the rainbow / Why then, oh why can’t I?