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by Aurelia Schober Plath



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Letters Home
by Sylvia Plath

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Introduction

In answer to the avalanche of inquiries that has descended upon me ever since the publication of Sylvia's poems in *Ariel* and her novel, *The Bell Jar*, I am releasing a section of her intimate correspondence with her family from the time she entered Smith College.

It may seem extraordinary that someone who died when she was only thirty years old left behind 696 letters written to her family between the beginning of her college years in 1950 and her death early in February 1963. We could not afford long-distance telephoning, though, and Sylvia loved to write—so much so that she went through three typewriters in that same time.

Throughout these years I had the dream of one day handing Sylvia the huge packet of letters. I felt she could make use of them in stories, in a novel, and through them meet herself at the varied stages in her own development and taste again the moments of joy and triumph and more clearly evaluate those of sorrow and fear.

Along with the letters written to her brother, Warren, and to me, I have included correspondence with the late Olive Higgins Prouty (the novelist), for between Mrs. Prouty and Sylvia there existed a very special bond. Mrs. Prouty was not only the benefactress whose fund made Sylvia's education at Smith possible, she also was Sylvia's friend and came to her rescue when Sylvia suffered a breakdown in 1953. They found each other mutually fascinating as their relationship developed. After her marriage and the establishment of her writing career, Sylvia spoke of Mrs. Prouty as her "literary mother," in whom she could confide with complete trust and freedom.

Throughout her prose and poetry, Sylvia fused parts of my life with hers from time to time, and so I feel it is important to lead into an account of her early years by first describing the crucial decisions and ruling forces in my own life. As is often the case in a family having European roots (ours were Austrian), my father made the important decisions during my childhood and early girlhood. However, in the early 1920's, when financial catastrophe overtook our family as a result of unwise stock market investments, my father, broken in spirit and blaming himself most unjustly for his very human error, handed over the reins of management to my mother to the extent that my five-years-younger sister and my thirteen-years-younger brother grew up in a matriarchy. Nevertheless, ours was a

peaceful, loving home, and I assumed that all marriages were like that of my parents.

Both my children were always asking me to "tell us about the olden days when you were a little girl," and I shared with them the unforgettable memory of my first day in school. Although my father spoke four languages and had lived in England two years before migrating to the United States, he and my mother spoke German at home. There were no children nearby to play with, so I too spoke only German. I told my children how isolated I felt at recess as I stood by myself in a corner of the schoolyard, listening intently to what the children were shouting to each other. The two words I heard most frequently were "Shut up!" so when I went home at the end of the school day and met my father, I answered his greeting proudly and loudly with "Shut up!" I still remember how his face reddened. He took me across his knee and spanked me. Weeping loudly over that injustice, I sobbed out, "*Aber was bedeutet das, Papa? Was bedeutet das?*" (What does that mean?) Then he realized I had not understood what the words meant; he was sorry, hugged me, and asked me to forgive him. It was my first and last spanking.

From that time on we always spoke English at home; my parents bought me all the books we used in school; father was our teacher, and mother and I studied together. By the end of the school term in June, I was given a "double promotion," moving from the first to the third grade—a great boon for me, for I left behind those who had made such sport of my early mispronunciations.

Perhaps I aroused Sylvia's interest in minority groups by my account of my early childhood in a primarily Italian-Irish neighborhood in Winthrop, Massachusetts, during World War I. Even though my father became an American citizen as soon as that privilege was possible, our name Schober, with its German sound, resulted in my being ostracized by the neighborhood "gang," called "spy-face," and at one time being pushed off the school bus steps and dumped on the ground, while the bus driver, keeping his eyes straight ahead, drove off.

I felt this prejudice was completely unjust for my parents' sake as well as my own, for they were ardent converts to American democracy. They believed every word their idol, Theodore Roosevelt, ever wrote or uttered and, because of him, voted the Republican ticket all their lives. Support at home compensated me for outside unpleasantness, as well as did success in the classroom; and family games, walks, visits on Sunday to the Museum of Fine Arts or to my paternal

uncle's family in Jamaica Plain were the sweeteners of my childhood.

Then, too, I found my complete escape in the sugar-coated fiction of the day, wherein the poor and the virtuous always ultimately triumphed. I still possess one of Louisa May Alcott's own annotated copies of *Little Women* (given my father for me by a descendant of the Alcott family), worn to tatters, much of which I knew by heart. I read every one of Horatio Alger's stories, the novels of Harold Bell Wright, Gene Stratton Porter, and all the romantic historical novels I could find in the public library.

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

Fortunately, my mother was most sympathetic and when I was in college read my literature books too, saying cheerily, "More than one person can get a college education on one tuition." (I remembered that vividly when my daughter went to Smith and I, through her, broadened my horizons further in modern literature and art.) I completely identified with the characters in a poem or story, and my ever-growing wish became to open to other young people this wonder of multiple living through vicarious experience—to teach.

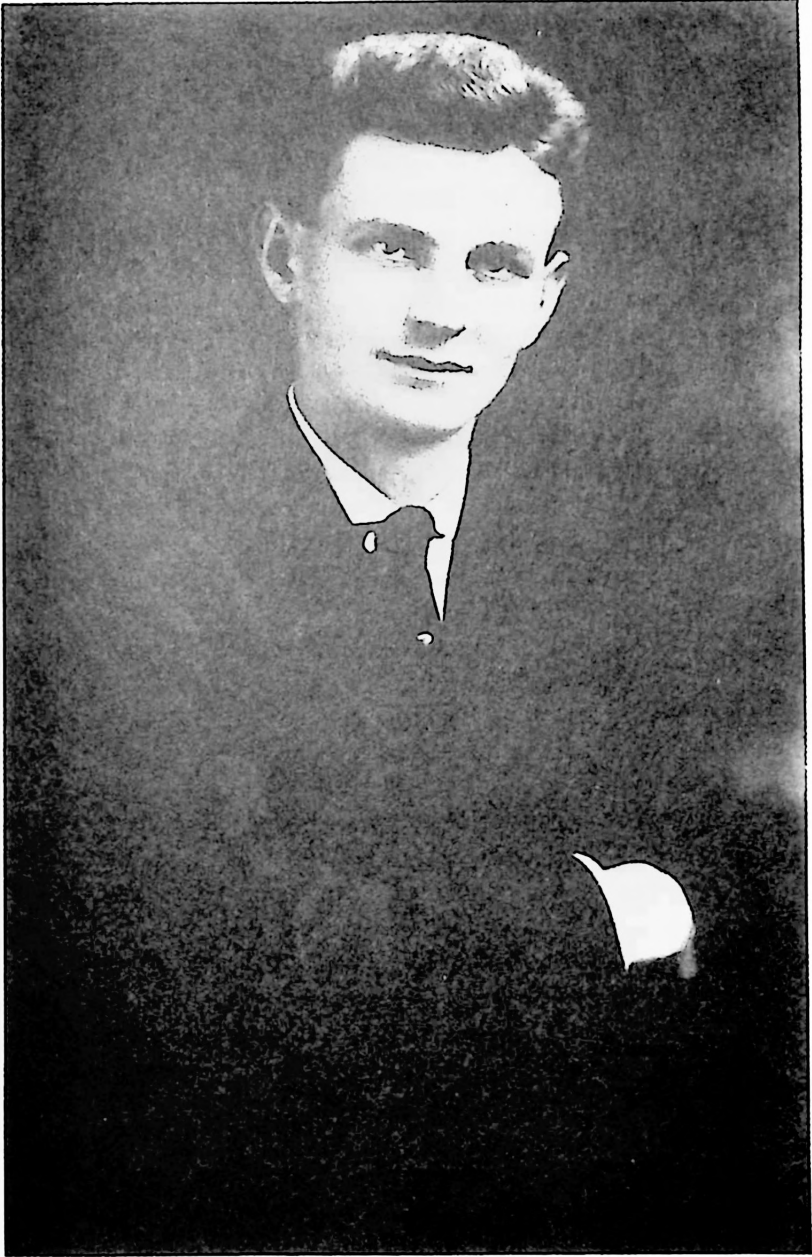
It never occurred to me to question my father's decision as to the type of education I should receive. I was to be a "business woman." Obediently, I signed up for a two-year course in the Boston University College of Practical Arts and Letters, doggedly applying myself to the vocational subjects, delighting in history, English composition and literature, as well as the courses in German language, literature and drama. I took on any part-time job I could get, for even the small tuition of that day was hard come by. I had worked in the public library since the age of fourteen and had my first full-time job the summer after high school in an insurance company, typing dull form letters eight hours a day five and a half days a week from wax dictation cylinders—a grim experience I vowed no child of mine would ever have to endure.

As soon as I had completed my two years of combined academic and vocational studies, I persuaded my father to allow me to sign up for two more years in order to prepare myself for teaching English and German, along with vocational subjects, on the high school level.

I now sought out more interesting summer positions, working at the close of my junior year (1927) for a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He had a handwritten manuscript in German dealing with new principles of soil mechanics. As he had a publication deadline to meet, I usually worked into the early evening, so we often had dinner together before I left Boston for home. It was during these meals that I listened, fascinated, to his accounts of travel and colorful adventures, fully realizing that I was in the presence of a true genius in both the arts and sciences. I came away with my notebook filled with reading lists that led me to Greek drama, Russian literature, the works of Hermann Hesse, the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, as well as the writings of great world philosophers. That experience was to affect me the rest of my life, for I realized how narrow my world had been and that self-education could be and should be an exciting lifelong adventure. It was the beginning of my dream for the ideal education of the children I hoped some day to have.

In 1929, after teaching English in Melrose (Massachusetts) High School for the year following my graduation from Boston University, I decided I would return to the university to earn a Master of Arts degree in English and German. In making out my graduate schedule, I learned that Dr. Otto Emil Plath taught the course in Middle High German that I wished to take. I had met Professor Plath briefly at one of the meetings of the German Club in the past and had learned that while his chief interest lay in biology and allied sciences, he was a gifted linguist and the only member of the faculty in the College of Liberal Arts to give this particular course. Dr. Plath greeted me cordially—a very fine-looking gentleman, I thought, with extraordinarily vivid blue eyes and a fair, ruddy complexion. When I brought up the subject of Middle High German, he said that he would enjoy conducting the class but would have to be assured that a minimum of ten students would sign up for it. I told him I would make it my responsibility to talk with all the students I knew who were interested in German, and by the beginning of the fall semester fifteen students had registered for the course.

I remember the last day of classes at the university very clearly, because when I went to say good-bye to my professors, Professor



An early photo of Otto Plath

Plath, who was alone in the German office at the time, played about with a pen on his desk for a bit, then, without looking at me, said that Professor Joseph Haskell and his wife, Josephine (both of whom had been my teachers in undergraduate courses) had invited him to spend the next weekend at their farm and had urged him to bring a friend along. Should I care to join him, he would appreciate it. It was a bolt out of the blue, but Mrs. Haskell was by that time a dear friend; I was ready for some fun and this promised to be interesting, at least.

I learned much about Otto Plath that weekend. He could be spontaneous, jolly, and certainly was confiding. He astounded me by telling me that he had married over fourteen years before. He and his wife had soon separated, and he had not seen her for thirteen years. Were he to form a serious relationship with a young woman now, of course he would obtain a divorce. He thought my A.M. thesis proved we had much in common and he said he would like to know me better. In response to this I told him that I had accepted a position as manager of the business office of twin camps for underprivileged children in Pine Bush, New York, for the summer, but added I would be happy to correspond with him and see him in the fall. In the voluminous correspondence that followed, he wrote me a brief story of his life, which I recall as follows:

Otto Plath grew up in the country town of Grabow, Germany (Polish Corridor territory), speaking German and Polish, and learning French in school. His citizenship papers indicate his nationality was uncertain. He told me his parents were German but that one grandmother was Polish.

His father was a skilled mechanic and worked at the trade of blacksmith. (I was told that when his father, years after his son's arrival here, came to the United States and took on a homestead grant in Oregon, he worked on some refinements of the McCormick reaper which were put to use.) As a young boy in Germany, Otto's "sweet tooth" and his inability to obtain money to purchase candy to satisfy it; led him to observe the nesting sites of bumblebees. These, he discovered, were usually built in the deserted nest of some rodent. At first, running the risk of being stung, he used to watch the bees emerge on a sunny morning from a particular spot in a field—easier to detect after hay had been cut in that area. Once they had left, he would insert a long, hollow straw into the nest below the ground surface and suck out the "wild" honey. Later, he dared to transfer such bumblebee colonies to cigar boxes and keep them in the family garden, thus having access to a constant supply of honey. His skill

won him the name of *Bienenkönig* (bee king) from his contemporaries. Thus was born a lifelong interest in entomology.

Otto's grandparents, after emigrating to the United States, had settled on a small farm in Watertown, Wisconsin. Upon learning that this grandson was a top student in all his classes, they offered to send him to Northwestern College, Wisconsin, provided he would promise to prepare himself afterward for the Lutheran ministry. The opportunity appeared dazzling. Not only would he have the higher education which in Germany would be unobtainable for a boy in his circumstances, but he would escape military service, the thought of which he dreaded, for he was already a confirmed pacifist. At sixteen he arrived in New York, where an uncle owned and managed a combination food and liquor store. Otto lived with this family for a year, obtaining permission to audit classes in a grade school in order to learn to speak English in all subjects. He sat at the back of each classroom, making voluminous notes, talking with the children and the teachers after school. He promoted himself as soon as he felt he had mastered the vocabulary of that grade and within a year had progressed through all eight grades, all the while working for his uncle after school hours. The result was that he spoke English without a trace of foreign accent.

Because Otto refused to sell a certain kind of wine that cost more in one bottle of a particular shape than it did in a plainer bottle, his uncle wrote to the boy's grandparents, when his nephew was about to leave for Wisconsin, that "Otto is a good boy, but a poor businessman."

Otto's A-B record (majoring in classical languages) at Northwestern pleased his grandparents, but they did not realize what his extracurricular reading was doing to form his philosophy. Darwin had become his hero and when Otto entered the Lutheran seminary (Missouri Synod), he was shocked to find all Darwin's writings among the proscribed books. Worse still, this comparatively naïve newcomer to the land of the free discovered that most of the candidates for the ministry had never actually been verbally "called" or visibly given a "sign" from God that they had been "chosen" to preach His gospel. Instead, the students gathered in one of the dormitory rooms and discussed the varied and interesting ways each would announce he had been divinely informed. For six months, "miserable months of agonizing doubt and self-evaluation," he told me, Otto tried his best to conform, but succeeded only outwardly and that was not enough. He then decided that the ministry was not for him, but,

with a flash of joy and hope that he could make it right with his grandparents, chose teaching for his profession. In this work he felt he could serve and hold to his integrity, be his own man.

However, another shock lay in store for him. His grandparents did not share his point of view; in their eyes he had broken his promise. If he adhered to this infamous decision, he would no longer be a part of the family; his name would be stricken from the family Bible. And so it was done. He was on his own for the rest of his life. When his parents and his three brothers and two sisters came to America, he visited with them only briefly, and by the time of our marriage, his parents were dead and all sibling connections severed. (His youngest sister, Frieda Heinrichs, however, for whom Sylvia's daughter is named, wrote me right after our marriage, and we two corresponded regularly until her death in 1966.)

From the fall of 1930 on, our friendship developed and deepened. Weekends found us hiking through the Blue Hills, the Arnold Arboretum, or the Fells Reservation. The worlds of ornithology and entomology were opening for me, and we dreamed of projects, jointly shared, involving nature study, travel, and writing. "The Evolution of Parental Care in the Animal Kingdom" was our most ambitious vision, planned to be embarked upon after we had achieved some lesser goals and had established our family of at least two children. I succeeded in interesting Otto at that time in the fine productions then given at the Boston Repertory Theatre—Ibsen, Shaw, and modern plays of that era—as well as sharing my enthusiasm for literature. I enjoyed teaching German and English in Brookline High School until January 1932, when Otto and I were married in Carson City, Nevada. Then I yielded to my husband's wish that I become a full-time homemaker.

Otto and I wanted to start our family as soon as possible, he hoping our first child would be a daughter. "Little girls are usually more affectionate," he said. As soon as I was certain I was pregnant, I began reading books related to the rearing of children. I was totally imbued with the desire to be a good wife and mother. At mealtimes we discussed the varying, and often conflicting, theories of child rearing. Had I been inclined to rigidity in the early training of my children, my husband, who believed in the natural unfolding of an infant's development, would have strongly opposed me. He constantly voiced his recollections of his mother's type of child care (he was the oldest of six children). I quietly followed the "demand feeding" accepted as modern today and labeled old-fashioned in the



Aurelia Plath, 1930, when she was teaching in Brookline, Mass.

1930's, though I would never confess to it in front of my contemporaries, who conscientiously followed the typed instructions of their children's pediatricians. Both my babies were rocked, cuddled, sung to, recited to, and picked up when they cried.

Sylvia was born October 27, 1932, a healthy eight-and-a-half-pound baby. At a luncheon that day, her father told his colleagues, "I hope for one more thing in life—a son, two and a half years from now." Warren was born April 27, 1935, only two hours off schedule, and Otto was greeted by his colleagues as "the man who gets what he wants when he wants it."

Otto thoroughly enjoyed observing the development of his daughter, both as a father and as a scientist. When he held her at the age of six months against a rope fastened vertically to a bamboo shade on the porch, he was delighted by the fact that her feet grasped the rope in the same manner as her hands—to him proof of man's evolutionary process as well as the gradual loss of flexibility when man started to wear shoes and used his feet only for walking.

The first year and a half of our marriage saw the expansion of my husband's doctoral thesis into book form. It was published in 1934 by the Macmillan Company, under the title *Bumblebees and Their Ways*. In 1933 Otto was invited to write a treatise on "Insect Societies," which appeared as Chapter IV in *A Handbook of Social Psychology*.^{*} We worked together on this; my husband outlined the sections, listing authors and their texts to be used as reference (there were sixty-nine authors), and I did the reading and note-taking along the lines he indicated, writing the first draft. After that he took over, rewriting and adding his own notes. Then he handed the manuscript to me to put into final form for the printer. By this time I felt I had had an intensive and fascinating course in entomology.

Otto soon found the study he set up for himself in our apartment too gloomy as it faced north, so he moved all the materials he needed for the writing of "Insect Societies" into the dining room, where they remained for nearly a year. The seventy-plus reference books were arranged on top of the long sideboard; the dining table became his desk. No paper or book was to be moved! I drew a plan of the arrangement and managed to have friends in occasionally for dinner the one evening a week that my husband gave a course at Harvard night school, always replacing every item correctly before his return.

Social life was almost nil for us as a married couple. My dreams of

^{*} Clark University Press, Worcester, Massachusetts, 1935.

"open house" for students and the frequent entertaining of good friends among the faculty were not realized. During the first year of our married life, all had to be given up for THE BOOK. After Sylvia was born, it was THE CHAPTER. Fortunately my family was welcome, and during the summer months preceding Sylvia's birth and the one following, they lived with us while renting their house in Winthrop.

Sylvia attached herself to "Grampy" at once and was his greatest delight. He wheeled her out into the Arnold Arboretum while Otto and I worked on "Insect Societies," and both Dad and Mother added their humor, love, and laughter to what would otherwise have been too academic an atmosphere. Sylvia was a healthy, merry child—the center of attention most of her waking time.

Otto insisted on handling all finances, even to the purchasing of meat, fish, and vegetables at the Faneuil Hall Market once a week, knowing that there he could get the best food at the lowest prices. Despite the fact that he was only sixteen when he arrived in the United States, the Germanic theory that the man should be *der Herr des Hauses* (head of the house) persisted, contrary to Otto's earlier claims that the then modern aim of "fifty-fifty" appealed to him. This attitude, no doubt, was inherent and reflected his own home life, where his mother, a rather melancholy person as he described her, was weighed down with the care of six children and an ulcer on her leg that never wholly healed (I did not understand the significance of that problem until the summer of 1940). His father, I was told, was energetic, jovial, inventive.

The age difference between us (twenty-one years), Otto's superior education, his long years of living in college dormitories or rooming by himself, our former teacher-student relationship, all made this sudden change to home and family difficult for him, and led to an attitude of "rightful" dominance on his part. He had never known the free flow of communication that characterized my relationship with my family, and talking things out and reasoning together just didn't operate. At the end of my first year of marriage, I realized that if I wanted a peaceful home—and I did—I would simply have to become more submissive, although it was not my nature to be so.

When I was pregnant in the winter of 1934–35, I told Sylvia that she was going to have a brother or sister (a Warren or an Evelyn) and that I wanted her to help me get ready for the baby. The project fascinated her, and once as she laid her ear against my side when the baby was moving, the thrust must have been audible to her, for her



Sylvia in Winthrop, Mass., 1936



Sylvia, 1937

face lit up as she cried, "I can *hear* him! He is saying, 'Hó da! Hó da!' That means 'I love you; I love you!'"

I spent a week with Sylvia in my mother's home before the baby's birth in order to get Sylvia thoroughly established there with the grandparents she knew and loved so well. I left her on April 27, the day of Warren's birth. When told she had a brother, Sylvia pulled a wry face and pouted. "I wanted an Evelyn, *not* a Warren."

When we were reunited as a family, the one difficult period was when I nursed the baby; it was always then that Sylvia wanted to get into my lap. Fortunately, around this time she discovered the alphabet from the capital letters on packaged goods on the pantry shelves. With great rapidity she learned the names of the letters and I taught her the separate sounds of each. From then on, each time I nursed Warren, she would get a newspaper, sit on the floor in front of me and pick out all the capital letters to "read." In her baby book, I found the note that it was in July (at the age of two years and nine months), as we waited to cross the street to enter the Arboretum with Warren in the carriage, that Sylvia stared at the big STOP sign with fascination. "Look, Mummy," she cried, pointing to the sign, "Look! P-O-T-S. It says 'pots,' Mummy; it says 'pots!'"

Sylvia treasured a collection of small mosaic tile squares that had been given her and spent much time arranging them in designs. One Saturday, while I was baking in the kitchen, she was unusually quiet as she played with these in the living room. My husband went in there to see what she was up to, then called to me very excitedly. I stared in amazement for she had reproduced unmistakably the simplified outline of the Taj Mahal, the picture of which was woven into a mat in our bathroom. There were the four minarets terminating in domes like that of the center building—it was art without perspective, of course, but to us a definite sign of visual memory developing at an early age.

While Otto did not take an active part in tending to or playing with his children, he loved them dearly and took great pride in their attractiveness and progress. Once, as we looked in upon our sleeping two, he remarked softly, "All parents *think* their children are wonderful. We *know*!"

The year after Warren's birth, Otto began to draw more and more into himself and into his fears concerning his own health. There was ample reason. He was losing weight, had a chronic cough and sinusitis, was continually weary, and easily upset by trifles. He continued



Otto Plath, 1930

teaching—even in the summer—but the effort exhausted him, and he did his class preparation and correcting lying on the couch in his den. He steadily refused to consult a physician, pushing aside all such suggestions and pleas from me, my family, and his colleagues. He told me he had diagnosed his own case and that he would never submit to surgery. I understood the significance of what he said, for he had recently lost a friend who had succumbed after several operations to lung cancer.

I even telephoned my friendly family doctor in Winthrop, the town to which we moved in 1936, and asked him to drop in for a visit, but he said that in view of Otto's attitude it would be both unwise and unethical to do this. I sensed Otto's unspoken diagnosis: lung cancer.

Our move from Jamaica Plain in the fall of 1936 to Johnson Avenue, Winthrop Center, Massachusetts, had been a completely happy one for the children. They enjoyed living close to a beach and near their grandparents' home at Point Shirley, only a few miles away. The children enjoyed roaming over the "flats" at low tide, gathering shells or digging in the coarse sand. Warren was still a toddler and kept close to me, but Sylvia wandered off to explore shallow pools teeming with miniature sea life, and finding sizable rocks to climb.

From this time on, however, it was heartbreaking to watch a once-handsome, powerfully built man lose his vigor and deteriorate physically and emotionally. Appealing to him to get medical diagnosis and help only brought on explosive outbursts of anger. I kept an "upstairs-downstairs" household when both Otto and the children were indoors, partly so their noisy play and squabbling would not upset him, but mostly so that he would not frighten them, for he now occasionally suffered intense cramping spasms in his leg muscles, which would cause him to moan in pain. I had a local girl several mornings in the week take care of the ironing and general housework while I cooked, mended and did what work I had on hand for my husband—abstracting material to update his lectures, correcting German quizzes, and attending to his correspondence.

Otto was determined to keep on teaching and, apparently, kept himself functioning and controlled throughout these working sessions. However, his nerves paid the price when he came home, for on his return he often collapsed on the couch in his study, and many times I served him dinner there.

On the days Otto was home, he lived in this large study, and it was then I took the children to the beach so that they could run and shout

and join their playmates, David and Ruth Freeman, whose mother, Marion, had become my closest and very understanding friend. Mr. and Mrs. Freeman, with their two children, David, six months Sylvia's senior, and Ruth, a year her junior, had moved into the neighborhood in the spring of 1937, and our two families became fast friends. The four children practically lived together in one home or the other—the relaxed, cheerful atmosphere of the Freeman home becoming a refuge in inclement weather when Otto was at home. Warren struggled hard to keep pace with the three older children, who were often impatient with him, but as time went on, the discrepancy diminished due to the youngest one's determination.

The largest bedroom upstairs in our home was made into a playroom. Here I invented the bedtime stories centered on Warren's favorite teddy bear, "The Adventures of Mixie Blackshort," which ran into nightly installments for several years. The children had their supper in this room, sitting at a little maple table by a large window, from where we once watched the thrilling progress of an eclipse of the moon. It was here that I read to them poems by Eugene Field, Robert Louis Stevenson, A. A. Milne, and over and over again from the children's favorite anthology, "Sung Under the Silver Umbrella." This reading progressed through Dr. Seuss's hilarious *Horton Hatches an Egg* to such books as Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Both children made up their own rhymes and limericks, patterned on those I read to them.

After supper and their bath, they amused themselves in the playroom while their father and I had dinner. Then they would come down into the living room for about a half hour to be with us both before going to bed. This was the time Sylvia played piano for her father or improvised dances; both children would show him their drawings and recite the poems they remembered or the rhymes they had made up.

Sylvia's exuberant monopolizing of the luncheon conversation after each school session prompted Warren (then two and a half years old) to invent his "Other Side of the Moon" adventures (referred to years later in one of Sylvia's unpublished stories). The first tale beginning with "On the other side of the moon, where I was *nine* years old and lived before I met you, Mother," completely captured even Sylvia's attention.

At this time, Warren developed many allergies to foods, pollens, dust, etc. In the winter of 1938-39 he suffered two serious bouts with bronchial pneumonia and began having asthmatic attacks. Otto was



Sylvia & Warren - Aug. 1940
 + The boat time with the 0000.
 Warren holds a 6 1/2 lb cod.

Sylvia and Warren Plath at the beach in Winthrop, Mass., 1940



Sylvia's latest ambition - Sept '40

September, 1940: Sylvia dressed to help the nurse who was caring for her father, who died shortly after this picture was taken

steadily losing weight; his health continued to deteriorate, and between attending to him and Warren, I seldom knew an unbroken night's sleep. This was a period when my parents took care of Sylvia whenever Warren was ill. Her attachment to Grampy deepened, for he not only played games with her but took her swimming with him, an event she later described as a memorable experience with "daddy." It was the beginning of her fusion of characters that occurred periodically in her writing. The first example of this takes place in an unpublished story, "Among the Bumblebees," where the fusion of father and grandfather occurs several times, the story ending with her recollection of her father in his final illness. The swimming episodes with her grandfather are here attributed to her father:

First father would go for a swim himself, leaving her on the shore. . . .

After a while she would call to him, and he would turn and begin swimming shoreward, carving a line of foam . . . cleaving the water ahead with the powerful propellers of his arms. He would come to her and lift her onto his back, where she clung, her arms locked about his neck, and go swimming out again. In an ecstasy of terror, she would hold to him, her soft cheek prickling where she laid her face against the back of his neck, her legs and slender body trailing out behind her, moving effortlessly along in her father's energetic wake.

One morning in mid-August 1940, while preparing to leave home for summer school teaching, Otto stubbed his little toe against the base of his bureau. When he returned home, limping, that afternoon, I asked to see his foot. To our dismay, the toes were black and red streaks ran up his ankle. There was no protest this time as I rushed to telephone my doctor, who came to the house within an hour. He was very grave about the situation, ordered my husband to keep his foot elevated and not to leave his bed for any reason. The doctor took blood and urine samples back to his laboratory, calling me later to report a far-advanced state of diabetes mellitus. The announcement burst upon me like a clap of thunder—so this was his illness—not cancer at all, but an illness which, treated in time with insulin and diet, could be lived with and controlled. I began to hope wildly—the only question was did we have *time*?

From that day on life was an alternation of hope and fear; crises were interspersed with amazing recoveries only to give way to crises again. Otto developed pneumonia, was rushed to the Winthrop hospital, returned home after two weeks with a practical nurse. I sent Warren to his grandparents' home, where his young Uncle Frank took

him sailing and fishing. Sylvia wanted to remain with us, so the friendly nurse cut down an old uniform for her and called Sylvia her "assistant," who could bring Daddy fruit or cool drinks now and then, along with the drawings she made for him, which gave him some cheer.

On the nurse's first day off, Otto suggested that I get out into the sun with Sylvia for an hour; he had all his needs supplied on the table next to his bed. She and I ran along the beach together for only about a half hour, because I felt uneasy about having left my husband. I then took Sylvia over to the Freemans' house, where she was invited to remain for supper. On my return home I found Otto collapsed on the staircase. He had left his bed to go downstairs into the garden to look at his flowers. Somehow I half dragged, half carried him to his bed. It was a Wednesday and the doctor could not be reached. I gave Otto his insulin injection; he was so exhausted he could eat very little supper. In the middle of the night he called me and I found him feverish, shaking from head to foot with chills, his bed clothes soaked with perspiration. All the rest of that night I kept changing sheets, sponging his face, and holding his trembling hands. At one point he caught my hands, and holding on, said hoarsely, "God knows, why have I been so cussed!" As tears streamed down my face, I could only think, "All this needn't have happened; it needn't have happened."

The next day the doctor came with the renowned diabetic surgeon, Dr. Harvey Loder, from the New England Deaconess Hospital. Dr. Loder listened carefully to my account of the past years of deteriorating health and the events of the day before. He made a careful examination and as he came out of the room, he told me that amputation from the thigh of the gangrened foot and leg would be necessary to save Otto's life.

As I handed Dr. Loder his hat, he murmured, "How could such a brilliant man be so stupid."

On October 12 the amputation was performed in the New England Deaconess Hospital. I had arranged for a private room and nurse. The report was very favorable, and I attended some lectures to learn about the care of diabetics. We began making plans for the future which would have to be prefaced by Otto's getting adjusted to a prosthesis and learning how to walk with it. Dr. Daniel Marsh, then president of Boston University, wrote my husband, "We'd rather have you back at your desk with one leg than any other man with two." Students volunteered in great numbers to donate blood; everyone was encour-

aging and helpful. The late Dr. Irving Johnson, and Otto's former graduate student and friend Carl Ludwig, carried on my husband's teaching assignments, refusing to accept any remuneration.

The children were going to school regularly, and my mother or Marion Freeman cared for them during the hours I spent with Otto in the hospital. Marion advised me to explain the operation to Sylvia and Warren, for she had heard children in the neighborhood talking about the amputation; therefore, it seemed best for me to prepare them. I emphasized the fact that we hoped that after this Daddy would be well. Warren accepted the news very quietly, perhaps not sensing the reality of it; Sylvia, wide-eyed, asked, "When he buys shoes, will he have to buy a *pair*, Mummy?"

I had talked with the doctors concerning the type of help a wife must give to restore confidence to a husband who has been mutilated by surgery and I understood the compelling necessity to make him feel a "whole man" and completely acceptable to me. As the days went by, however, Otto avoided any discussion about coming home or trying the prosthesis. The reality of his operation depressed him, and I realized the road ahead would be long and would require much patience.

On November 5, when I left Otto after finding him much weakened, I was told that his condition was serious. My telephone was ringing when I returned home; it was Dr. Loder, who informed me that an embolus had struck in a lung and caused my husband's death as he slept.

I waited until the next morning to tell the children. It was a school day, and I went into Warren's room first. As I looked at the sleeping little boy, only five and a half years old, I thought of both children now having to live the rest of their lives with but one parent. I knew that I would have to earn a living, and my mind leapt to the offer my generous parents had made me. "Should Otto not recover," they had said, "we will come to live with you so that you can return to teaching and the children will be cared for when you are away." My parents were very young to be grandparents; my mother only eighteen years my senior. They were healthy, optimistic, strong in their faith, and loved the children dearly. My young brother, only thirteen years Sylvia's senior, and my sister would be close to us—the children would have a sense of family and be surrounded with care and love. This much I could be sure of. All this passed through my mind before Warren, of his own accord, awoke. I told him as quietly as I could that Daddy's sufferings had ended, that he had died in his sleep and

was at rest. Warren sat up, hugged me tightly, crying out, "Oh, Mummy, I'm so glad *you* are young and healthy!"

Then I faced the more difficult task, telling Sylvia, who was already reading in her bed. She looked at me sternly for a moment, then said woodenly, "I'll never speak to God again!" I told her that she did not need to attend school that day if she'd rather stay at home. From under the blanket which she had pulled over her head came her muffled voice, "*I want to go to school.*"

After school, she came to me, red-eyed, and handed me a piece of paper, which told me there had been troubling comments from her classmates regarding the possibility of a stepfather. On the paper, in shaky printing, stood these words: I PROMISE NEVER TO MARRY AGAIN. Signed:_____. I signed at once, hugged her and gave her a glass of milk with some cookies. She pushed a kitchen chair against the one I was sitting on, sighed as if relieved and, leaning against my arm, ate and drank with relish. That done, she rose briskly, saying matter-of-factly, "I'm going to find David and Ruth."

I looked at the rumpled "document" I had just signed, which Sylvia had left on the kitchen table, apparently without further thought or doubt, and knew that I never should marry again unless, in years to come, I would have the opportunity to marry a man I respected, loved, and trusted to be a good father to my children and *whom the children wanted to have for their father*. This was the explanation I gave Sylvia when, as a college student, she had come to know a classmate whose once-widowed mother had remarried very happily for herself and her children. "That document never *kept* you from marrying again, did it?" she queried anxiously. I assured her that it had not.

At the request of Dr. Loder, I permitted an autopsy to be performed when he assured me that Otto could still be given the "normal" funeral that he had once stated was his wish. When I viewed Otto at the funeral parlor, he bore no resemblance to the husband I knew, but looked like a fashionable store manikin. The children would never recognize their father, I felt, so I did not take them to the funeral, but placed them in the kind, understanding care of Marion Freeman for that afternoon. What I intended as an exercise in courage for the sake of my children was interpreted years later by my daughter as indifference. "My mother never had time to mourn my father's death." I had vividly remembered a time when I was a little child, seeing my mother weep in my presence and feeling that my whole personal world was collapsing. *Mother*, the tower of strength,



This picture was taken by mother in our back yard. It is in about July, and the flowers are beginning to appear in their full glory. They are the ones that daddy planted, and many artists come to paint them. My hair has turned brown, and I wear it in long braids. I am dressed

in the uniform that daddy's nurse gave me after he died. Just as I began the sixth grade in Winthrop, mother took a better job - training medical secretaries in Boston University (B.U.) And we sold our house and moved to a cosy white house in Wellesley. We felt mingled regrets and anticipation as we bade good-bye to the Freemans.



We are now happily settled in our little white house on Elmwood Road in Wellesley. I have made many new friends and also a place for myself. This picture was taken in a new living room by Betsy Rowley, one of my closest friends. It was taken just before beginning the 9th grade. I have cut

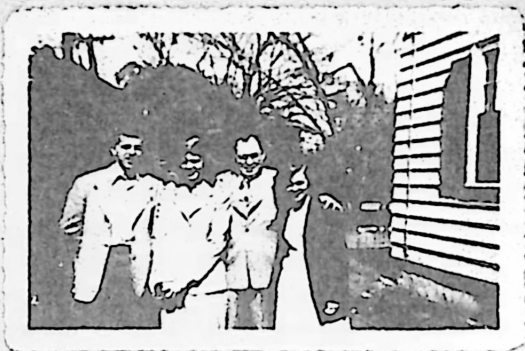
my hair much shorter, now. For the past three years I have been going to scout camp. The first two summers to West Ames, N.H. and this summer Betsy and I both went to camp Stonewon Cape Cod (near the ocean) and had a perfect super two weeks there.



This is a picture of me sitting on our front doorstep in Wellesley, holding my favorite whisky jug. I have taken piano lessons for five years, but have dropped them in order to practice viola so I can be in the school orchestra. I also have acquired an

1946 extraordinary cat that came disguised as a common Tiger alley cat. I call him Mowg.

Excerpts from a scrapbook autobiography Sylvia made in high school



And so there comes a time in your senior year at high school when, because you like the ocean and the wind and sand, someone grins and drives you down to the sea; and because you like poetry, someone gives you a poetry anthology for graduation; and because that someone is collegiate and quite lovely, you invite him to your senior prom and write to him every day for a whole summer long fat letters with little colored pictures in the margins. And no matter how you change or grow up, there was a time when someone was really important.



my one refuge, *crying!* It was this recollection that compelled me to withhold my tears until I was alone in bed at night.

The week after Otto's death both children came down with measles, Warren having the added complication of pneumonia and Sylvia developing sinusitis. My father, who had been cost accountant for the Dorothy Muriel Company, lost that position at this time, along with all its other employees, when the company changed ownership. He was beginning to have serious difficulty with his eyesight, and the ophthalmologist informed me that progressive macular degeneration was the cause—a grim prognosis lay in the near future for him.

The whole family, including my brother and sister, were together for Christmas, making that event a joyous one for the children.

In January, through the kind efforts of a former classmate, I obtained a \$25-a-week substitute teaching position in Braintree High School, teaching three classes of German and two of Spanish daily. I left home at five thirty each morning, commuted to Jamaica Plain to my friend's house, then she drove me to Braintree High School, where she held a full-time teaching post. Three times a week I took private lessons in Spanish from a young teacher in Emmanuel College in Boston. Few teaching positions were available and by the end of the spring term I was very grateful to accept an opening in the Junior High School in Winthrop for the coming September.

The following school year I began having difficulty with a duodenal ulcer I had developed during the last two years of my husband's illness. At the Winthrop Junior High School, in addition to a full teaching program, I was put in charge of all the monies in the entire school: the weekly banking by the pupils (in the second term this was expanded to the purchase of war stamps and bonds by the pupils and teachers), the class and athletic dues. The responsibility of handling and accounting for other people's money weighed heavily upon me. Along with the air raid drills that occurred frequently after December 7, 1941, and our entry into World War II, this was a tense time.

In the summer of 1942, I was invited by the dean of the Boston University College of Practical Arts and Letters to develop a course in Medical Secretarial Procedures. I looked upon the appointment as providential, for it would enable us to leave Winthrop and move as far west of Boston as was possible for a person who had to commute to the city daily. Warren's frequent bouts with bronchitis and Sylvia's sinusitis, we thought, might have been aggravated by their proximity to the sea.

It was a serious step to take, for I was leaving the security of a

good state pension and starting at the small salary of \$1,800 a year (which was not increased for three years) and carried no benefits at this time, but I felt that the children's health was more important than my financial future. I vowed that I would make the course interesting, yes, fascinating, by presenting the stenographic skills as only the first step up a ladder. I wrote to my sister-in-law's husband, Walter Heinrichs, M.D., who outlined for me a basic course upon which I was to build: nomenclature of disease, basic anatomy and physiology, record keeping and account keeping in a medical office, applied psychology, pertinent problem solving. I added a brief history of the evolution of medicine itself as it emerged from witchcraft, superstition, and religious practices (my A.M. thesis gave me some insight into this as I had written about the personality and work of Paracelsus from sources in English and German literature). I took a course at Harvard Evening School in biology, as well as a general course given for medical secretaries, borrowed medical journals, extracted case histories from these and made up a collection of medical correspondence and records.

By October 26, 1942 (the day before Sylvia's tenth birthday), I had sold the Winthrop house and purchased a small, six-room, white frame house in Wellesley. There were many reasons why I selected Wellesley. Our new home was in a modest section of the town; then the real-estate evaluation and taxes were low. The school system had a fine rating, and Wellesley College, which admitted outstanding students on a town scholarship, might in the future hold opportunity for Sylvia. As my husband had no pension and his \$5,000 life insurance had to be used to pay his medical and funeral expenses and for part of the down payment of our new home—the Winthrop house having been sold at a loss—we were operating on a tight margin and had to plan very carefully.

Our proximity to my sister's home in Weston delighted us all, and my father, who was by now employed in the Brookline Country Club as maître d'hôtel—a position he could manage even with his restricted vision—was able to join us on weekends. As a car was essential in this suburb, we were grateful that Grammy possessed a second-hand one and, when necessary, was a willing chauffeur.

In Winthrop Sylvia had been promoted to the sixth grade, but when I discovered that all the children in that grade in Wellesley were nearly two years older than she, I asked the principal to place Sylvia in the fifth grade. She was very understanding and agreed with my multiple reasons for the request, adding, "It is the first time in my



Sylvia wearing a Girl Scout uniform in her Wellesley home, 1946

teaching experience that a mother has requested an all-A pupil be put back a grade." However, it worked out well, for the texts and methods differed completely from those in Winthrop. Sylvia made forty book reports that year for her own enjoyment; became an enthusiastic Girl Scout along with the others in that grade, and continued to take piano lessons, which she had begun at the age of seven.

Sylvia's 1944 and 1945 diaries—I always slipped a diary into her Christmas stocking—are full of accounts of school events, shared activities with her friends, especially with Betsy Powley, whose family always had the latchstring out for Sylvia. There were weekend visits in Winthrop with the Freemans and in the summer, camping, swimming, and sailing. Sylvia was writing rhymes constantly and making sketches to accompany them, which she hid under my napkin to surprise me when I came home from teaching. At this time she thought of possibly becoming an illustrator, a dress designer, a writer. Her original illustrated cards with her own verses for occasions of family celebration were a delight for the recipient and have been carefully preserved, as have the original paper dolls for which she made exquisite costumes.

Grampy was so proud of the special-occasion cards she made for him and the poems she had published in the school paper that he carried them in his billfold until they wore out, proudly showing them to his friend, the author William Dana Orcutt, who was interested in Sylvia's progress.

The junior high school years (1944-47) were the "awkward years" for Sylvia, physically. At fifteen years of age, she attained her full height of five feet nine inches, but it was not until her sixteenth year that she began adding curves to her tall frame. Years later, she said she was glad she had not been "pretty" at this time, or rushed to go steady, for it was in junior high that she developed work habits and skill in her favorite fields of endeavor, art and writing, winning prizes from the "scholastic awards" competitions each year.

My pack-rat tendencies led to recovery of an old theater program, the first play I took the children to. Sylvia was twelve, Warren, nine and a half. The play was Margaret Webster's production of *The Tempest*. I told the children I would buy good tickets for us all, including Grammy, of course, if they read the play and could tell me the story of it. I gave Sylvia my copy of Shakespeare's complete works and handed Warren Charles and Mary Lamb's version, feeling he was a bit young for Shakespeare. He was indignant and read the play in the original.

The diary for 1945—the end of the war—was the last *dated* diary. Sylvia now asked me to give her each Christmas an undated journal, because, "When the big moments come, one page is not enough."

These were the days when we still were together enough to enjoy long talks about books, music, paintings—how they made us feel. We were critical of our verbal and written expression, for we shared a love of words and considered them as a tool used to achieve precise expression, a necessity for accuracy in describing our emotions, as well as for mutual understanding.

As soon as my children were old enough to comprehend it, I shared with them the belief my husband and I had held concerning the importance of aiming and directing one's life toward an idealistic goal in order to build a strong inner life.

I explained to them that their father, who felt regret when he accidentally stepped on an ant, had told me he could never bear arms. He would do any type of menial work to fulfill compelled military service, but he could never take another's life.

Back in our Winthrop days I had read Matthew Arnold's "The

Forsaken Merman," to the children, which Sylvia recalled in a published reminiscence years later, noting the impact of the lines as she wrote:

A spark flew off Arnold and shook me, like a chill. I wanted to cry; I felt very odd. I had fallen into a new way of being happy.

Together she and I read Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Renascent," and Sylvia was particularly moved by the lines

A man was starving in Capri;
He moved his eyes and looked at me;
I felt his gaze, I heard his moan,
And knew his hunger as my own.

Between Sylvia and me there existed—as between my own mother and me—a sort of psychic osmosis which, at times, was very wonderful and comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy. Understanding this, I learned, as she grew older, not to refer to previous voluntary confidences on her part.

Both Sylvia and I were more at ease in *writing* words of appreciation, admiration, and love than in expressing these emotions verbally and, thank goodness, write them to each other we did! (I held off because as she entered her late teens, her response to my spoken praise would be, "Oh, *you* think I'm wonderful [or look lovely] because you're my *mother*!")

Sylvia read almost all the books I collected while I was in college, used them as her own, underlining passages that held particular significance for her. In *A Short History of Women* by Langdon-Davies, among the several sections underscored by her are these two: the first from the section of Contents;* the second from the Epilogue, "The Future."†

Life began without sex; animals simply divided in two and went their way. What advantage did the life-force gain by the evolution of sex? . . .

Sex is the result of specialism in performing the labour of living. . . .

Thus the possession of two sexes gives an animal or a plant a start in the race for evolution. Thus sex is seen to be three things, rejuvenation, division of labour, *increased ability for variation*.

. . . for once both sexes use their reason equally, and have no unequal penalty awaiting the exercise of their emotions, then women cannot fail to dominate. Theirs is the stronger sex once nature and art cease their cruel combination against them, because it possesses a greater singleness of pur-

* John Langdon-Davies, *A Short History of Women* (New York: Viking Press, 1927), p. ix.

† *Ibid.*, pp. 381-382.

pose and a greater fund of imagination, for those are the two properties which all men must forfeit under the institutions and necessities of our industrial civilizations. . . .

. . . perhaps the world will be happier in the new régime. But all this is of only partial value as speculation on the future; for men and women are purely relative terms, and long before the tendencies of our times work to their logical conclusions, men and women, as we know them, will have ceased to exist; and human nature will have forgotten the "he and she." According to our own personal feelings we may regret that we shall not live to see that time, or congratulate ourselves on living at a time which antedates it.

I was very grateful for the flow of communication that existed between Sylvia and me, especially during the years of her adolescence; yet I fully expected this to change as she grew more mature and felt that her intimate confidences would then be shared with selected members from among her peers.

The following poem, written at the age of fourteen, was inspired by the accidental blurring of a pastel still-life Sylvia had just completed and stood up on the porch table to show us. As Warren, Grammy, and I were admiring it, the doorbell rang. Grammy took off her apron, tossed it on the table, and went to answer the call, her apron brushing against the pastel, blurring part of it. Grammy was grieved. Sylvia, however, said lightly, "Don't worry; I can patch it up." That night she wrote her first poem containing tragic undertones.

I THOUGHT THAT I COULD NOT BE HURT

I thought that I could not be hurt;
I thought that I must surely be
impervious to suffering—
immune to mental pain
or agony.

My world was warm with April sun
my thoughts were spangled green and gold;
my soul filled up with joy, yet felt
the sharp, sweet pain that only joy
can hold.

My spirit soared above the gulls
that, swooping breathlessly so high
o'erhead, now seem to brush their whir-
ring wings against the blue roof of
the sky.

(How frail the human heart must be—
a throbbing pulse, a trembling thing—
a fragile, shining instrument
of crystal, which can either weep,
or sing.)

Then, suddenly my world turned gray,
and darkness wiped aside my joy.
A dull and aching void was left
where careless hands had reached out to
destroy

my silver web of happiness.
The hands then stopped in wonderment,
for, loving me, they wept to see
the tattered ruins of my firmament.

(How frail the human heart must be—
a mirrored pool of thought. So deep
and tremulous an instrument
of glass that it can either sing,
or weep.)

Her English teacher, Mr. Crockett, showed this to a colleague, who said, "Incredible that one so young could have experienced anything so devastating." When I repeated Mr. Crockett's account of this conversation to me, Sylvia smiled impishly, saying, "Once a poem is made available to the public, the right of interpretation belongs to the reader."

In her diary, however, she wrote:

Today I brought a group of original poems to Mr. Crockett. . . . In class he read aloud four of them, commenting mainly favorably. He liked "I Thought That I Could Not Be Hurt" above the rest and encouraged me greatly by remarking that I had a lyric gift beyond the ordinary.

I was overjoyed, and although I am doubtful about poetry's effect on the little strategy of "popularity" that I have been slowly building up, I am confident of admiration from Mr. C!

In the poems written between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, there is a long one that explains her somewhat, ending,

You ask me why I spend my life writing?
Do I find entertainment?
Is it worthwhile?
Above all, does it pay?
If not, then, is there a reason? . . .

I write only because
There is a voice within me
That will not be still.
(1948)

Sylvia had begun writing for the "It's All Yours" section in the magazine *Seventeen*. Margot Macdonald, then editor of this section, wrote personal notes on several of the forty-five rejection slips Sylvia received. The editor made the comment that although Sylvia's writing held promise and present merit, she still had to learn to "slant" her subject matter and treatment toward the requirements of the particular publication from which she hoped acceptance. She advised Sylvia to go to the library and read every *Seventeen* issue she could find and discover the "trend." This Sylvia did, and in August 1950 she had her first story published, "And Summer Will Not Come Again," for which she was paid \$15. In November of the same year, *Seventeen* published her poem, "Ode on a Bitten Plum."

As she critically surveyed her long list of rejections and the short, but growing, one of acceptances, Sylvia discovered that her exuberant, joyous outbursts in both poetry and prose brought rejection slips, while the story or poem with pathetic twist was found more acceptable. More people would identify with the plain heroine beset



Sylvia, summer 1949

with doubts and difficulties. The old adage to "get your hero up a tree, throw stones at him, then let him extricate himself" still held true at this time. Advice and experience in regard to writing led her now into an examination and analysis of the darker recesses of self.

The beginning of the appeal of the tragic muse is heard in a poem written in the spring of 1949:

TO ARIADNE
(deserted by Theseus)

Oh, fury, equalled only by the shrieking wind—
The lashing of the waves against the shore,
You rage in vain, waist deep into the sea,
Betrayed, deceived, forsaken ever more.

Your cries are lost, your curses are unheard by him
That treads his winged way above the cloud.
The honeyed words upon your lips are brine;
The bitter salt wind sings off-key and loud.

Oh, scream in vain for vengeance now, and beat your hands
In vain against the dull impassive stone.
The cold waves break and shatter at your feet;
The sky is mean—and you bereft, alone.

The white-hot rage abates, and then—futility.
You lean exhausted on the rock. The sea
Begins to calm, and the retreating storm
But grumbles faintly, while the black clouds flee.

And now the small waves break like green glass, frilled with foam;
The fickle sun sends darts of light to land.
Why do you stand and listen only to
The sobbing of the wind along the sand?

Similarly, Sylvia discovered that the "problem" story sold well. In "The Perfect Setup" (*Seventeen*, October 1952), she handled the problem of religious discrimination (WASP withdrawal from a Jewish neighbor). Her heroine, a baby-sitter, Lisa, reluctantly obeys the WASP mother's orders to keep her children away from those cared for by Lisa's newly made Jewish friend, working for a Jewish family. Lisa goes through the difficult task of explaining the WASP mother's attitude to her friend and ends with a feeling of self-loathing for having allowed herself to become allied with this narrow, hypocritical attitude:

You know how sometimes you could slap yourself for a stupid remark you made or a big chance you missed to do the best you could? Well, right then

I wanted to worm my way down into that sand until I was covered all over and couldn't see the lines of foam Ruth was making out there in the water. I just sat there with the whole summer turning sour in my mouth.

As Sylvia herself explained in the personal note at the close of her prize story in *Mademoiselle* (August 1952), her summer jobs provided her with an amazing variety of characters "who manage to turn up dismembered, or otherwise, in stories." This is a keynote to be remembered in connection with much of her writing.

While I considered my children *good* children, I accepted sibling teasing and rivalry as natural processes in development. There was the usual loyalty to each other against outsiders, but there were many times when each made the other miserable; and Sylvia, as the older, was the more dominant and the more culpable. In my notes about my children, there is this statement made by Warren at the early age of four, "saying scathingly to his sister, 'You're the *most* person who doesn't know any better!'" Sylvia's diary entry at fourteen, contains this observation: "It's so nice to know long words! I'm trying to make them a part of my vocabulary—they're so-o-o handy. *Exempli gratia*: This morning I told Warren that he was 'ostentatiously, obnoxiously superfluous,' and he hadn't the slightest idea of what I meant."

Throughout her high school years, Sylvia was very uncritical of me. The remark I treasured most and wrote in my journal was made by Sylvia when she was fifteen. "When I am a mother I want to bring up my children just as you have us." (This charitable attitude, however, was not to last, and I was vividly reminded of my own hypercritical judgment of my parents throughout *my* undergraduate years at college!)

Between Sylvia and Warren there were often arguments just for the sake of discussion. While she was still an incorrigible tease, they nevertheless experienced periods of very close sharing, too. In her diary, 1947, Sylvia wrote: "Warren and I spent a pleasant evening—he writing poems for his 'Spring Booklet,' and I drawing pictures for each page while we both listened to 'The Fat Man,' 'The Thin Man,' and 'People Are Funny' [radio programs]."

When in 1949 Warren went to Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire on a four-year scholarship, the children's relationship changed completely. In that year Warren grew six inches, generously topping Sylvia's height, to her great delight. As he won distinction in subjects she herself did not study, she now came to respect and admire him. His appreciation of all her writing and art work, as well

as his growing understanding of her as a person, resulted in an ever-deepening concern for each other's welfare and a friendship that endured.

Sylvia was naturally drawn to people who were interested in literature and in creative writing. Time after time, however, such relationships became strained when Sylvia won a prize or had something published. To outsiders it seemed as though she won so easily; they did not know what constant practice and effort it took. (I remember mailing for her three different "volumes" of poetry and dozens of stories that were all rejected.) We came to realize that it is the rare friend who genuinely rejoices in another's success.

She was soon to become wary of dating boys who "wanted to write." Invariably, no matter how able they were in other areas, her appearance in print would inject a sour note in the relationship. Sylvia was conscious of the prejudice boys built up among themselves about "brainy" girls. By the time she was a senior in high school, she had learned to hide behind a façade of light-hearted wit when in a mixed group and, after a triple date, was exultant as she reported to me, "Rod asked me what grades I got. I said airily, 'All A's, of course.' 'Yeah,' he replied, grinning, as he led me out to the dance floor, 'You *look* like a greasy grind!' Oh, Mummy, they didn't believe me; they didn't believe me!"

The high school years were such fun. The sharing meant so much, for Warren had gone to Exeter and I missed him terribly. When Sylvia would come home from a dance, I could tell by the way she ascended the stairs how the evening had gone. If she came up slowly and started to get ready for bed, the event had not been "special," but if her step was a running one and she'd hurry into my bedroom, whispering excitedly, "Mummy, are you awake?" ah, then she'd picture the evening for me, and I'd taste her enjoyment as if it had been my own.

In Sylvia's scrapbook-journal, the entries illustrated with snapshots, clippings, and various memorabilia, there is her account of the summer of 1950, when she and her brother took a farm job together.

And so there are summers every year, but the one which brought my first job is unique. Warren and I went up to Lookout Farm [in Dover, Mass.] right after I graduated. . . . Every day we biked up together early in the morning, left our bikes at Wellesley College usually and hitched a ride with one of the other hands. I can never go back to those days spent in the fields, in sun and rain, talking with the negroes and the hired hands. I can only remember how it was and go on living where I am.

But the companionship with my favorite brother is something that was

worth more than all the previous summers put together . . . this Farm Summer will always be The First Job and the sweetest.

This summer of farm work was the beginning of her interest in botany and it was then she found deep satisfaction in working with growing plants and the sweet-smelling earth. In one of her unpublished manuscripts she referred to this summer's experience:

I am now firmly convinced that farm work is one of the best jobs for getting to know people as they really are. As you work side by side in the rows, your hands move automatically among the leaves and your thoughts are free to wander at will. What, then, is more natural than to drift into conversation with your neighbor? It is really amazing what a receptive ear can do by way of encouraging confidences. . . .

The farm episode produced a poem, "Bitter Strawberries," and an article, "The Rewards of a New England Summer," both published in *The Christian Science Monitor*.

In the poem, a discussion between the strawberry pickers dealt with the impending threat of war, the act of human destruction figuratively suggested in the last lines:

We reached among the leaves
With quick, practiced hands,
Cupping the berry protectively before
Snapping off the stem
Between thumb and forefinger.

It was rewarding, at last, to receive not only notice of the acceptance of her poem and article, but the added comment from Herbert E. Thorson, Editor, Family Features Page: "We hope that you will try us again soon with articles and essays for these columns."

Her article closed with these words:

When you see me pause and stare a bit wistfully at nothing in particular, you'll know that I am deep at the roots of memory, back on the Farm, hearing once more the languid, sleepy drone of bees in the orange squash blossoms, feeling the hot, golden fingers of sun on my skin, and smelling the unforgettable spicy tang of apples which is, to me, forever New England.

A few closely written, stapled sheets, entitled "Diary Supplement" could have been titled "Reflections of a Seventeen-Year-Old," and are dated November 13, 1949.

As of today I have decided to keep a diary again—just a place where I can write my thoughts and opinions when I have a moment. Somehow I have to keep and hold the rapture of being seventeen. Every day is so precious I feel infinitely sad at the thought of all this time melting farther and farther away from me as I grow older. *Now, now* is the perfect time of my life.

In reflecting back upon these last sixteen years, I can see tragedies and

happiness, all relative—all unimportant now—fit only to smile upon a bit mistily.

I still do not know myself. Perhaps I never will. But I feel free—unbound by responsibility, I still can come up to my own private room, with my drawings hanging on the walls . . . and pictures pinned up over my bureau. It is a room suited to me—tailored, uncluttered and peaceful. . . . I love the quiet lines of the furniture, the two bookcases filled with poetry books and fairy tales saved from childhood.

At the present moment I am very happy, sitting at my desk, looking out at the bare trees around the house across the street. . . . Always I want to be an observer. I want to be affected by life deeply, but never so blinded that I cannot see my share of existence in a wry, humorous light and mock myself as I mock others.

I am afraid of getting older. I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day—spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free—free to know people and their backgrounds—free to move to different parts of the world so I may learn that there are other morals and standards besides my own. I want, I think, to be omniscient . . . I think I would like to call myself "The girl who wanted to be God." Yet if I were not in this body, where *would* I be—perhaps I am *destined* to be classified and qualified. But, oh, I cry out against it. I am I—I am powerful—but to what extent? I am I.

Sometimes I try to put myself in another's place, and I am frightened when I find I am almost succeeding. How awful to be anyone but I. I have a terrible egotism. I love my flesh, my face, my limbs with overwhelming devotion. I know that I am "too tall" and have a fat nose, and yet I pose and prink before the mirror, seeing more and more how lovely I am . . . I have erected in my mind an image of myself—idealistic and beautiful. Is not that image, free from blemish, the true self—the true perfection? Am I wrong when this image insinuates itself between me and the merciless mirror? (Oh, even now I glance back on what I have just written—how foolish it sounds, how overdramatic.)

Never, never, never will I reach the perfection I long for with all my soul—my paintings, my poems, my stories—all poor, poor reflections . . . for I have been too thoroughly conditioned to the conventional surroundings of this community . . . my vanity desires luxuries which I can never have. . . .

I am continually more aware of the power which chance plays in my life. . . . There will come a time when I must face myself at last. Even now I dread the big choices which loom up in my life—what college? What career? I am afraid. I feel uncertain. What is best for me? What do I want? I do not know. I love freedom. I deplore constrictions and limitations. . . . I am not as wise as I have thought. I can now see, as from a valley, the roads lying open for me, but I cannot see the end—the consequences. . . .

Oh, I love *now*, with all my fears and forebodings, for *now* I still am not completely molded. My life is still just beginning. I am strong. I long for a cause to devote my energies to. . . .

Just now I don't care where I end
up at college. I have a new formal,
a row of dates with a fine, sensi-
tive boy, an eye for color and
form in the springtime, and two
nicely-shaped legs to pedal my
bike to school. Art & writing are
always with me. I love people. And
a few of them love me back. I am
the one who creates part of my fate,
and I'll fight destiny all the way. So!

A fragment from Sylvia's high school diary