

The Unabridged Journals of
SYLVIA PLATH

1950-1962

TRANSCRIBED
FROM THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPTS
AT SMITH COLLEGE

EDITED BY KAREN V. KUKIL



ANCHOR BOOKS
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York

FIRST ANCHOR BOOKS EDITION, OCTOBER 2000

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Plath, Sylvia.

[Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962]

The unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962 / edited by
Karen V. Kukil. — 1st Anchor Books ed.

p. cm.

"Transcribed from the original manuscripts at Smith College."
Originally published: Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962. London :
Faber and Faber, 2000.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-385-72025-4

1. Plath, Sylvia—Diaries. 2. Poets, American—20th century—Diaries.
I. Kukil, Karen V.

II. Title.

PS3566.L27 Z469 2000

818'.5403—dc21

[B]

00-042024

www.anchorbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

fools, or the sky will crumble and the forty-day rains begin, falling relentless from the angry heavens. And your car will not save you, nor your tardy repentance. Hush, hush your vile talk, he is being won from you.

And the world goes by creaking at the joints. You, dear, think you are in love with me. Yet you are not lost. There will be a million women. I am glad to be the first, tacking the gay standard as high as I can reach. You can match it, go beyond it someday, Bobby.

Hell, you deserve more than being in the Ladies' Home Journal. If only I could get you in the Atlantic: "The Kid Colossus." I will aim at the highest, too. A plot. Like "Knife-like, Flower-like," only different. To prove what. To begin where, to end where – from what point of view. Oh, I will brood this year to find the form for the content.

Val said: visualize, emotionalize, afterwards. Beginning writers work from the sense impressions, forget cold realistic organization. First get the cold objective plot scene set. Rigid. Then write the damn thing after lying on the couch and visualizing, whipping it to white heat, to life again, the life of the art, the form, not longer formless without frame of reference.

The wind continues by and by, and tomorrow there will be packing and tentative fare wells and Bob and Chuck and Dick – and rest and sleep. Packing, going, sad, glad, lonely for past: moving through so much continuous loveliness, proud to face present uprooting and stoic study program. Eager always still for the promising future which, even if twenty years are gone, is not the final word, nor the stiffening of old uncreative age. Always the promise, the hope, the dream, amid whatever poverty, war, disease and adversity – always persists the credulous human vision, of something better than that which is.

September 4 – 11:30 p.m. Science study program

(149) The first day of rigor being over, I am torn between a multitude of conflicting emotions and insights. There is the grim pleasure that I managed to complete my page quota. There is the hysteric and persistent fear that I do not understand all I read, that my water-level of comprehension is a good deal lower than it would be if I were taking the course slowly, step by step, under the guidance of a competent instructor.

There is the urge to procrastinate, to escape from the rigid cage of study routine I have made for myself. It lures me by a multitude of enchanting distractions; it beckons in the form of magazines, gay colorful stories and pictures; it seeks to simulate hunger, calling me to lose myself in the rationalization of continuous and nervous eating; it comes over the telephone,

through young male voices, asking me, (unknowingly) to come and do delightful things. Everywhere I turn, distraction beckons. It whispers: "How easy, to give up: excuses, you have good excuses. You were working, you were sick. Take a gut, plan to waste 6 hours per week next year. Forget about Phy. Sci. 193" and enjoy these last three weeks before the busy delightful whirl of college again begins."

To hell with you, I say. I have begun to work. My skin is broken out from subconscious anxiety and tension, self-induced. Nothing is more difficult than lashing a vagrant mind suddenly into long self-imposed stints of concentration. But I will learn a few things from this mass of material. I will read and ponder over my 70 page quota per day. That should take 10 days, approximately. I will then allow 5 days for writing, meditating and typing. It shouldn't be as hard as I make it seem, once I get accustomed to the discipline I myself invented. A few evenings a week I will allow myself a date, providing I get my quota done in due schedule.

Today would be an absorbing study if I were good at stream-of-consciousness. My mind tried every trick to elude the prosaic task at hand. I got ideas for stories; the burning desire to revise recent poems and send them out flared bright; I suddenly decided in a spurt of clairvoyance that I would of course marry the other brother, and spent a good deal of time reasoning out pros and cons of one vs. the other. I picked up a magazine, hurtled into a story, rushed through, and came up for air feeling slightly sick and very naughty, getting an almost perverse pleasure when I realized 20 precious minutes were gone. The phone rang and I actually fell downstairs in my eagerness to answer it – symbolically running away from my duties – glad for any reasonably valid excuse.

And so, now, it is almost midnight of the first day, and I have broken my resolution to go to bed early – postponing sleep, and thereby the inevitable waking up in tomorrow. Another device of escape –. It seems that every year I wince and grovel through an obstacle course that looks quite formidable. Remember how tense I was last fall about the driver's license? The Smith Club tea speech? To be sure, I can always sneak out of this, but I won't let myself. It is an absorbing test of will-power – and of the conflicting wills that make up my psyche.

(150) As for the husband: how cold, how material and objective I am. Also, how hypothetical! The hypothesis being that I could have either if I chose: and I actually believe I could convince either! I began with the youngest: a time of tender idealism, serious conversation. I believe I have kissed him

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should start writing it in November. Among other penetrating observations, Pan said I should write on the poem-subject 'Lorelei' because they are my 'Own Kin'. So today, for fun, I did so, remembering the plaintive German song mother used to play & sing to us beginning "Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedenten . . ." "The subject appealed to me doubly (or triply): the German legend of the Rhine sirens, the Sea-Childhood symbol, and the death-wish involved in the song's beauty. The poem devoured my day, but I feel it is a book poem & am pleased with it. Must agonizingly begin prose – an irony, this paralysis, while day by day I do poems – and also other reading – or I will be unable to speak human speech, lost as I am in my inner wordless Sargasso.

Monday: July 7: I am evidently going through a stage in beginning writing similar to my two months of hysteria in beginning teaching last fall. A sickness, frenzy of resentment at everything, but myself at the bottom. I lie wakeful at night, wake exhausted with that sense of razor-shaved nerves. I must be my own doctor. I must cure this very destructive paralysis & ruinous brooding & daydreaming. If I want to write, this is hardly the way to behave – in horror of it, frozen by it. The ghost of the unborn novel is a Medusa-head. Witty or simply observant character notes come to me. But I have no idea how to begin. I shall, perhaps, just begin. I am somewhere in me sure I should write a good 'book poem' a day – but that is nonsense – I go wild when I spend a day writing a bad twelve lines – as I did yesterday. My danger, partly, I think, is becoming too dependent on Ted. He is didactic, fanatic – this last I see most when we are with other people who can judge him in a more balanced way than I – such as Leonard Baskin, for example. It is as if I were sucked into a tempting but disastrous whirlpool. Between us there are no barriers – it is rather as if neither of us – or especially myself – had any skin, or one skin between us & kept bumping into and abrading each other. I enjoy it when Ted is off for a bit. I can build up my own inner life, my own thoughts, without his continuous 'What are you thinking? What are you going to do now?' which makes me promptly & recalcitrantly stop thinking and doing. We are amazingly compatible. But I must be myself – make myself & not let myself be made by him. He gives orders – mutually exclusive: read ballads an hour, read Shakespeare an hour, read history an hour, think an hour & then 'you read nothing in hour-bits, read things straight through'. His fanaticism & complete lack of balance & moderation is illustrated by his stiff neck got from his 'exercises' – which evidently are strenuous enough to disable him.

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Also several on "The Return". Use Baskin. Ho ho. Everyone here. Aaron's cocktail party. S———, James & Joan triangle. From whose point of view? Think, Think. Study sympathy point of view – emotional center –

Saturday: July 12: I feel a change in my life: of rhythm & expectancy, and now, at 11 in the morning, tired, very, yet steady after our great talk last night. A change has come: will it tell, a month from now, a year from now? It is, I think, not a false start. But a revision of an old, crippling delusion into a sturdy-shoed, slow-plodding common sense program. Yesterday was the nadir. All day I had been sitting at an abstract poem about mirrors & identity which I hated, felt chilled, desperate, about, my month's momentum (over 10 poems in that time) run down, a rejection from The Kenyon sealing hopelessness. I began, realizing poetry was an excuse & escape from writing prose. I looked at my sentence notes for stories, much like the notes jotted here on the opposite page: I picked the most 'promising' subject – the secretary returning on the ship from Europe, her dreams tested & shattered. She was not gorgeous, wealthy, but small, almost stodgy, with few good features & a poor temperament. The slicks leaned over me: demanding romance, romance – should she be gorgeous? Should Mrs. Aldrich, so normal & plodding & good with her seven children, have an affair with young, sweet Mr. Cruikshank" across the street? I ran through my experience for ready-made 'big' themes: there were none: E—'s abortion? Marty's lack of a child? Sue Weller's weepy courtship with Whitney? All paled, palled – a glassy coverlid getting in the way of my touching them. Too undramatic. Or was my outlook too undramatic? Where was life? It dissipated, vanished into thin air, & my life stood weighed & found wanting because it had no ready-made novel plot, because I couldn't simply sit down at the typewriter & by sheer genius & will power begin a novel dense & fascinating today & finish next month. Where, how, with what & for what to begin? No incident in my life seemed ready to stand up for even a 20 page story. I sat paralyzed, feeling no person in the world to speak to, but off totally from humanity in a self-induced vacuum. I felt sicker & sicker. I couldn't happily be anything but a writer & I couldn't be a writer: I couldn't even set down one sentence: I was paralyzed with fear, with deadly hysteria. I sat in the hot kitchen, unable to blame lack of time, the sultry July weather, anything but myself. The white hardboiled egg, the green head of lettuce, the two suave pink veal chops dared me to do anything with them, to make a meal out of them, to alter their single, leaden identity into a digestible meal. I had been living in an idle dream of being a writer. And here stupid housewives & people with

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polio were getting their stories into the Satevepost. I went into Ted, utterly shattered, & asked him to tackle the veal chops. And burst into tears. Useless, goodfornothing. We talked it out, analyzed it. I felt the lead tons of the world lift. I have been spoiled, so spoiled by my early success with Seventeen, with Harper's & Mademoiselle, I figured if I ever worked over a story & it didn't sell, or wrote a piece for practise & couldn't market it, something was wrong. I was gifted, talented – oh, all the editors said so – so why couldn't I expect big returns for every minute of writing. A cracking good story a week? I demanded a 20-page plot about a top-of-the-head subject that didn't engage me. Now, every day, I am writing 5 pages, about 1,500 words on a small vignette, a scene charged with emotion, conflict & that is that: to make these small bits of life, which I discarded as trivial, not serious 'plot material'. I cannot correct faults in rhythm, in realization – in thin air. I spend 3 hours & shall from now on, in writing, not letting a bad or slight subject engulf the day. I began with a woman menaced by a dog this morning. I bite off what I can chew. The first try is awkward, gets little mood, but it begins. Nora Marple is the sort of woman dogs growl at. Here life begins. Out of 30 exercises, perhaps a character: out of 100, perhaps the seed of a story. I shall doggedly work, wait & expect the minimum.

Thursday: June 17:" After two days of no-schedule, disrupted by our seeing Baskins, Rodman" & the intolerable stuffy lazy Clark's with their mean, mealy-mouthed Quakerism, I sit down on a clear cold sunny day with nothing to beef at except the slick sick feeling which won't leave. It comes & goes. I feel I could crack open mines of life – in my daily writing sketches, in my reading & planning, if only I could get rid of my absolutist panic. I have, continually, the sense that this time is invaluable, & the opposite sense that I am paralyzed to use it: or will use it wastefully & blindly. I have all the world's reading on my back, instead of a possible book a day. I must discipline myself to concentrate on certain authors, certain fields, lest I welter, knowing nothing and everything. Across the street there is the chink, chunk of hammers on nails, the tap of hammers on wood. Men are on the scaffolding. I am neither a no-nothing nor a bohemian, but I find myself wishing, wishing, to have a corner of my own: something I can know about, write about well. All I have ever read thins and vanishes: I do not amass, remember. I shall this year work for steady small growth, nothing spectacular, & the ridding of this panic. The windows shake in their sockets from some unheard detonation. Ted says they are breaking the sound barrier. Somewhere I have a vision, not of thwarting, of meanness, but of fulness, of a