

Seeing Sylvia Plath

A new movie rekindles curiosity about the poet's life, love and suicide at age 30 ~ BY ROBERT F. HOWE

THE PARTY WAS IN FULL SWING. As many as 100 guests, most of them students, crowded the second-floor hall of the Women's Union at England's University of Cambridge the night of February 25, 1956. A jazz band played, some couples swirling to the combo's rhythms while other revelers mingled, sipped brandy, flirted—and quoted verse.

A half-dozen friends had just published the first, and what was fated to become the last, issue of their literary magazine, *St. Botolph's Review*, named after the rectory where some of the contributors lodged. Co-publisher Lucas Myers, an American then studying in England, was dancing with his date, Valerie, when a young American woman in red shoes and wearing a lot of lipstick approached and introduced herself as Sylvia Plath. “My girlfriend retreated, and Sylvia began to quote some of my poems, which had appeared in the review,” says Myers, 72, a retired civil servant who now lives in Sewanee, Tennessee. “I was surprised by the directness of her approach, and flattered but quizzical about her reciting my poems.”

Then, Myers says, Plath asked which of the other young poets was Ted Hughes; she said she admired his work. In her journal, Plath recalled the moment differently: “That big, dark, hunky boy . . . whose name I had asked the minute I had come into the room . . . came over and was looking hard in my eyes and it was Ted Hughes.” Either way, says Myers, “This party was full of noise, music, people drinking. It wasn't a tea party. And it had *consequences*.”

Two lives and perhaps the course of contemporary poetry were forever altered. Plath recounted in her journals that she and Hughes slid away into a remote alcove where “he kissed me bang smash on the mouth,” then ripped off her red hair band and silver earrings, declaring, “Hah, I shall keep [these].” When he moved his lips to her neck, she wrote, she bit him, hard, on the cheek, drawing blood.

Shortly afterward, an overwrought Plath wrote her mother, Aurelia, describing Hughes as a brilliant poet and a “large,

hulking, healthy Adam, half French half Irish, with a voice like the thunder of God.” But having fallen so completely, she also felt destined for “great hurt.”

Just four months after the party, Hughes and Plath were wed, bringing together what would become two of the most influential forces in 20th-century English-language poetry. In homage to such collected works as *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Crow*, books in which Hughes characteristically explored the mythic powers of nature, he was named poet laureate of England in 1984. In her best book of poems, the posthumous *Ariel*, and her one novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), Plath broke through barriers of traditional form and symbolism, and unleashed personal demons with a chilling candor rarely seen before or since. By doing inner battle with the expectations and limitations of her times and her gender (“My tragedy is to have been born a woman,” she once wrote) and by taking her own life in 1963 at age 30, Plath also became a symbol of a changing time when women's voices would finally and truly be heard.

Even today, a full 40 years after Plath committed suicide, students, writers, scholars and biographers remain fascinated with Plath and Hughes. *Her Husband*, a book by Diane Wood Middlebrook that uses material from the Hughes archives at Emory University to explore their marriage, is due out this fall, as is his *Collected Poems*. And a movie, *Sylvia*, starring Gwyneth Paltrow as Plath and British actor Daniel Craig as Hughes and directed by New Zealand's Christine Jeffs, premiered last month. Just as Nicole Kidman's 2002 film *The Hours* boosted Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* onto the best-seller list almost 80 years after its first printing, *Sylvia* will likely spark renewed curiosity in—and debate about—the work and fates of Plath and Hughes.

The film draws upon *Birthday Letters*, a book of poems published in 1998 by Hughes, who died of cancer at age 68 just months after its publication. Hughes was terribly private and often defensive about his relationship with Plath. It is widely assumed that only because he knew his end was near

did he allow publication of the poems, which exhibit an introspective honesty more commonly associated with Plath. In them, the poet speaks directly to his late wife. In “St. Botolph’s,” he recalls their meeting:

*I see you there, clearer, more real
Than in any of the years in its shadow—
As if I saw you that once, then never again.*

“I had always just thought them unpublishably raw and unguarded, simply too vulnerable,” Hughes once wrote to a colleague. But Al Alvarez, a poet and friend to both Plath and Hughes, saw through to the heart of the matter, explaining that Hughes may have lost Plath when she died, but he still had a powerful connection to her. “They were love poems,” Alvarez says. “Thirty years later, it was still happening—the ‘face in the window’ hadn’t gone away.” Indeed, as much as the story of Hughes and Plath is one of surpassing artistry, it is also one of the 20th century’s most searing love stories.

BORN IN 1930, Hughes grew up in England’s rural West Yorkshire, the youngest of three children of Edith and William Hughes. Hughes’ father was a carpenter and World War I veteran who had witnessed the wholesale slaughter of his comrades in battle; his mother was a homemaker. Hughes would later recall the landscape of his youth as a place where its residents lived in a constant state of mourning over the war to end all wars and where “disaster seems to hang around in the air.” “This was where the division of body and soul, for me, began,” he wrote in a 1963 magazine piece.

His family later moved to Mexborough, a small town in South Yorkshire, where they purchased a tobacco and newspaper shop. The son began writing in his teens; he was a tireless reader of Shakespeare, Blake, Lawrence and other British literary icons, as well as a devoted hunter and fisherman. He did well enough in school to qualify for Cambridge and, after a required two-year stint in the military, as a radio technician, he enrolled with the idea that he would study literature. As it turned out, he loathed deconstructing works he had no interest in. At least a recreational believer in shamans and dark forces, he claimed to have had a dream one night in which a burned and blackened fox materialized, placed a charred paw on an essay Hughes had written and said, “Stop this—you are destroying us.” He immediately switched to anthropology, learning the mythology of such creatures as the crow, owl and snake, which would later populate his works. His first poem, “The Little Boys and the Seasons,” was published just after he graduated in 1954 in the literary magazine *Granta*. In the year and a half before he met Plath, he worked on his writing and took odd jobs, even as a rose gardener and zookeeper, to support his very modest lifestyle.

Sylvia Plath and her younger brother Warren were raised in the Massachusetts coastal town of Winthrop. Her strong-willed father, Otto Emil Plath, had come to the United States

from Prussia at the age of 16 and had earned a doctorate in entomology from Harvard. He was particularly dedicated to the study of bees, an interest his daughter would later share and images of which would surface prominently in poems collected in *Ariel*. Otto met Plath’s mother, the daughter of Austrian immigrants, at Boston University, where he taught German. Aurelia had great ambitions for herself as an educator, but set them aside to play the dutiful wife and to raise her children.

Plath’s perception of Aurelia as controlling and demanding is well known to those who have read the largely autobiographical *Bell Jar*. As is her father’s death at age 55, when Plath was 8. Otto, who suffered from diabetes, reviled doctors so thoroughly that he refused treatment until he banged his toe on a dresser and his leg became infected; although the leg was amputated, it was too late. Plath was distraught over his death. Caught between an exacting mother and a feeling of abandonment by a father she adored, she set out on a consuming quest for perfection—as daughter, student, lover and wife. And as a writer.

The impossibility of her mission may have contributed to her first suicide attempt. A model student at Smith College, she was selected as a guest editor at *Mademoiselle* magazine in New York City, where she worked during the summer after her junior year, in 1953. She was elated, having been obsessed with writing since her first published verse about crickets and fireflies appeared in the Boston *Herald* when she was 8 years old. Even while in high school, she had gotten small pieces into such prominent publications as *Seventeen* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. But rather than being exhilarated by Manhattan, she claimed to have been enervated. “I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo,” wrote her fictionalized counterpart Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*. Shortly after Plath returned home, she collapsed from depression. She was briefly institutionalized and given electroshock therapy. Later, she crawled into a dark, dirty space underneath her mother’s house, where she swallowed pills in an effort to kill herself.

She recovered sufficiently to graduate with honors in English and win a Fulbright scholarship to Cambridge to study literature. When she set out in the fall of 1955 for England, she hoped not only to polish her writing and perhaps begin work on a PhD, but also to find a man. *The man*. “My God, I’d love to cook and make a house, and surge force into a man’s dreams, and write,” she confided in her journals not long after her arrival in England.

A few weeks later, she bought a just-printed copy of *St. Botolph’s Review*. In that slim volume, she discovered some particularly potent poems by a writer named Ted Hughes:

*... he meant to stand naked
Awake in the pitch dark where the animal runs,
Where the insects couple as they murder each other.*

Hughes, she thought, might be worthy—or so he seemed on paper. When she saw him at the party, she felt she had found her mate. With his manly brow, angular jaw and unruly hair, Hughes cut a handsome figure—as he well understood. “He was a predator, compulsive. He liked women, let’s put it that way,” says Alvarez. “Women tended to throw themselves at him. He had that dark, handsome, Jack Palance gunfighter air about him.” Alvarez claims to have known a woman, a psychoanalyst, who was so overcome by the sight of Hughes that she excused herself to the bathroom and vomited.

Perhaps the bite to Hughes’ cheek was Plath’s equivalent reflex. After the party, Hughes returned to London for a job as a script reader for a film company. Plath was disappointed, wishing he would visit her before she set off on a spring break trip to Paris. Hughes did, though at first she didn’t know it. In the dead of night, Hughes and Myers sneaked behind Plath’s residence, tossed mud at what they thought was her window and called out “Shirley” (mistaking Plath’s name). When she found out what happened, Plath was horrified—sort of. On March 23, the night before she departed for the Continent, Plath turned up at Hughes’ flat in London. She didn’t leave until morning.

From the outset, her emotions ran high—perhaps impossibly high. With friends, Plath shared her concerns that Hughes was a womanizer. But she was determined to tame and possess him, even making a list in her journal of things she should or shouldn’t do to keep him: “. . . never accuse or nag—let him run, reap, rip—and glory in the temporary sun of his ruthless force.” Hughes may not have felt quite the same level of commitment. Still, says Elaine Feinstein, author of *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet*, in Plath “he saw many things he wanted: animation, a whole American culture. . . . And, of course, he recognized a first-class intelligence, even genius.”

On June 16, 1956, they were wed. He was 25; she 23. Their marriage would prove in time to be deeply flawed, but when it was healthy it was also remarkably productive. They read, and admired, each other’s work. He suggested subjects for her poems; she edited his prose and acted as literary agent for the two of them. His works—which she placed in *Poetry*, the *Nation*, the *Atlantic Monthly* and other magazines—met with increasing success. The couple entertained modestly and cultivated friends—most especially poet W. S. Merwin and his wife, Dido, who would become godparents to their first child, Frieda—in notable academic and literary circles in London and New England. But they also spent a great deal of time alone together. Chronic and serious money problems dogged them, and they spent hour upon hour cleaning, painting and decorating to make their often tiny and shoddy accommodations homey. And though Hughes would be criticized for relegating the greater share of household duties to Plath, he was, says *Her Husband* author Diane Wood Middlebrook, relatively egalitarian for the era: “He recognized that the demands of her writing were exactly the same as the demands of his, and the two of them worked out a way of life that afforded them both time for their work and, later, for

their children.”

But it was as early as their honeymoon in Spain that Plath first voiced second thoughts. While one journal entry boasted that she and Hughes were “fantastically matched,” requiring the identical amount of sleep and sharing a kind of “anti-social” preference for their own company, another entry warned, “The world has grown crooked and sour as a lemon overnight.” Her gloom apparently arose when they rented a small house and Hughes left Plath to do most of the chores.

For the first time, Plath confronted what it meant to be a wife in the 1950s. In her journal, she had written that she wanted not a career but a life of “babies and bed and brilliant friends and a magnificent stimulating home,” plus a man to whom she would give “this colossal reservoir of faith and love for him to swim in daily.” She embraced convention and showered her mother with letters about her happiness. But as much as she coveted the societal norm, she also sought perfection in her writing. It was a tension that would define most of her married life; there was simply not often time for both.

It was with some relief that Plath, who quietly longed for a steady source of income and a tidy, stylish home, received an offer in April 1957 to return to Smith the following fall to teach freshman English. She had often considered teaching and, given their educational backgrounds, Plath and Hughes could easily have fashioned stable, well-paying careers to fund their writing. That summer they sailed for America, where Aurelia greeted the young couple with a welcome home party and the gift of a rented cottage on Cape Cod for their summer break. But what was intended to be an idyllic time of rejuvenation was completely undone by a pregnancy scare that, in retrospect, highlighted Plath’s priorities. In her ideal world there were babies galore, but in reality, they were hard-pressed to make a living even with Hughes’ increasing success. She now saw pregnancy as a debilitating blight: “. . . clang, clang, clang, one door after another banged shut with the overhanging terror which, I now know, would end me, probably Ted, and our writing and our possible impregnable togetherness.” Then, happily, she got her period.

Teaching, perhaps predictably, was a disaster. Plath’s crystalline ideal of academia was quickly blemished by petty squabbles among professors, a crushing workload and her own characteristic sense that she was not as good a teacher as she should be. She barely managed to complete the first year of her two-year commitment when she resigned. Wanting to celebrate, she asked Hughes to join her on campus on her last day. He was late. Searching for him, she spied him coming up a road wearing “a broad, intense smile, eyes [looking] into the uplifted doe eyes of a strange girl with brownish hair, a large lipsticked grin, and bare thick legs in khaki Bermuda shorts.” On seeing Plath, the girl fled. Plath was blind with rage, and no explanation could calm her. While the girl was a student of Hughes’ and the encounter may have been by chance, Plath felt that Hughes had betrayed her trust and made a mockery of her sacrifices.

Late that same year, 1958, the couple moved to Boston and, at his urging, attempted to live solely off their writing. But she could not muffle the inner voice that insisted they needed a steady paycheck and so finally took a part-time job as a receptionist in the psychiatric clinic at Massachusetts General Hospital—the same clinic where she had been a patient in 1953. By the end of 1958, she had resumed therapy, wrestling mostly with unresolved issues about her parents.

The next year marked a turning point for Plath the writer as well as for Plath the mature woman. She sat in on a workshop at Boston University with poet Robert Lowell, where she befriended Anne Sexton, a suburban housewife who successfully celebrated in poetry a woman's experience. From Lowell, whose book of poems *Life Studies* persuaded her that it was acceptable to write about one's mental illness, Plath learned she could give voice to her darkest inner fears. And by reading Sexton's work and becoming her friend, Plath was emboldened to embrace such quintessentially female themes as motherhood, a subject rarely handled in poetry. Later in the year, on a cross-country vacation, Plath became pregnant. This time she felt ready.

Weary of America, the couple returned to London, arriving in January 1960. They found a grim little flat near Regent's Park, which Plath transformed into a passing semblance of American-style comfort. Shortly afterward, she submitted a collection of poetry to British publisher William Heinemann Ltd. and was rewarded in just a week with a contract for her first book, *Colossus and Other Poems*. She was elated. And having endured a pregnancy that had thoroughly drained her strength and spirits, a fact she hid from even her closest friends, Plath gave birth April 1 to her first child, Frieda. "I have never been so happy in my life," Plath told her mother.

To her many roles, she now added the part of the perfect mother. Hughes helped with cleaning, shopping and child care, but most of the domestic chores still fell to Plath, who weathered cycles of exhaustion, illness and depression. "The baby's feedings and keeping the house clean, cooking, and taking care of Ted's voluminous mail, plus my own, have driven me so I care only for carving out hours where I can start on my own writing," she wrote ten weeks after childbirth.

In early 1961, strained by the demands of motherhood and chronic money woes, Plath once again revealed a streak of scorching jealousy. Hughes had met with a woman at the BBC to discuss producing children's programming. Plath had spoken to the woman on the phone and mistakenly assumed that she was quite young. When Hughes returned to the flat, he found that Plath had burned drafts of his latest work. For a writer, it was the ultimate violation—as Plath surely knew. Shortly afterward, she miscarried what would have been her second child.

Yet in the midst of these personal crises, Plath began to produce poems of greater emotional depth. She also began mining the woman's perspective in ways that she previously had not, a perspective that would grow more dominant as

her work evolved. In "Morning Song," for instance, she celebrated new motherhood:

*The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.*

She also made real progress on *The Bell Jar*. Writing the longer prose work gave her a comforting sense of continuity. She and Hughes took turns using a small study lent them by W. S. Merwin, Plath taking the morning hours and Hughes the afternoon. As cooperative an arrangement as it was, it was hardly ideal, and in the summer of 1961, wanting more privacy, Hughes and Plath sublet their apartment to David Wevill, a young Canadian poet, and his wife, Assia, and bought their first home, what might generously be called a fixer-upper, in Devon, about 200 miles from London. Plath particularly loved the house's yard, where she gardened and established a bee colony, and the couple luxuriated in a serenity they were certain would also foster creativity.

But the pastoral peace was soon broken. After the birth of their son, Nicholas, on January 17, 1962, Plath was felled by postpartum depression. And the worst was yet to come.

That spring, having recently completed a draft of *The Bell Jar*, Plath welcomed David and Assia Wevill to Devon for a visit. Clouds quickly gathered. Plath thought she saw something in the way Hughes spoke to Assia that betrayed his interest. Months later, on July 9, while Aurelia was visiting, Plath's darkest suspicions were confirmed when she intercepted a phone call for Hughes from Assia, who attempted to disguise her voice. According to Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, Plath ripped the phone wires out of the wall, gathered up baby Nicholas (leaving Frieda with Aurelia) and drove to a friend's home, where she spent the night. The following day she returned to Devon, collected a stack of Hughes' work, plus the manuscript of what was to be her second novel—an adoring paean to her husband—took the papers outside and set them ablaze.

The next several months were a mix of success and tension. *Colossus* had been released in America (though scarcely reviewed then, it is now praised for its craftsmanship), *The Bell Jar* had been accepted for publication and several of Plath's poems were appearing in prominent literary reviews. To those who didn't know them, Plath and Hughes presented a picture of unity. In actuality, Plath was feeling that she must have been somehow flawed for Hughes to make off with another woman. She also resented that her hard work to help him gain fame had made him only that much more alluring. The split finally came October 11—he moved out.

Plath was disconsolate. Her role as ideal wife had been shattered. Increasingly desperate, she turned to her source of greatest solace: her writing. In the early fall, she began a new novel, one that she would later tell Alvarez would far surpass *The Bell Jar*. She began to churn out poems—sharp-edged, brutally honest, fiery works—some of which were published in the *New Yorker* and the *Observer* newspaper. It

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was as if, creatively at least, she had emerged from the chrysalis of her anguish and found purpose, hope and her truest voice. “She wanted an idyllic life—books and babies and beef stews—she wanted to have it all as a woman and as an artist,” says Kate Moses, author of *Wintering*, a 2003 fictionalized account of Plath’s last year or so. “But artistically she needed to be standing more at the edge of an abyss in order to work. So she may have needed a huge emotional shakedown to get to another level artistically. And the shakedown was the end of her marriage.” In “Event,” Plath refers to her marriage at about the time that Hughes left with Assia:

*A groove of old faults, deep and bitter.
Love cannot come here.*

Some feel that the poems written during this time, examining man’s cruelty, loss and betrayal, trace an emotional descent to an inevitable suicide. But at the same time, there are signs that Plath is fully prepared to battle the fates. In a letter to her mother, she asks for financial help, but conveys an unusually acute confidence and an almost eager outlook: “I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life. . . .”

To be nearer her friends and the literary sources she hoped would buoy her, Plath returned to London and rented a flat (oddly, around the corner from Assia) just in time for the worst English winter in well over a century. The apartment lost power and water routinely, and she and her children succumbed to a series of fevers. Hughes, who was living nearby, dropped in regularly, often bringing small gifts, but his visits gave Plath little comfort. Alvarez visited her on Christmas Eve and found the usually orderly mother unkempt and the apartment spare and cold. He sensed that she was in trouble, but failed to act. “I could have helped much more than I did,” says Alvarez, who once attempted suicide himself. “I was one of the people she could talk to, and I kind of backed out at the last minute.”

Eight years later Alvarez would enrage his still-devastated friend Hughes by publishing, first in the *Observer* and then in his book *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*, an account of what he believes happened the morning of February 11, 1963. A few hours before a newly hired au pair was scheduled to arrive, Plath went upstairs to her children’s room, set down two mugs of milk and a plate with bread and butter, and returned to the kitchen. Sealing the door and window with towels, she opened the oven, laid her head on a cloth and turned on the gas.

HUGHES HAD PUBLISHED more work and to better reviews than Plath, but her suicide spawned a virtual cottage

industry of analysis, criticism and biography; in death, Plath began to eclipse him. It was as if every learned observer wanted to solve the riddle of why Plath, so talented and so young, took her life. Many were quick to point accusing fingers at Hughes. To feminists, Plath became a kind of martyr, a victim of an era—and of a domineering man. (As a measure of how high passions ran, Plath’s gravestone was repeatedly defaced, her married name, Hughes, chipped off.)

The attack on Hughes sharpened six years later when Assia killed herself and 4-year-old Shura, the daughter she had had with Hughes, by putting their heads in a gas oven in seeming solidarity with Plath. Hughes’ old friend Lucas Myers says that Hughes felt powerless to prevent Plath’s suicide, but believed he could have saved Assia. “During those six years between Sylvia’s death and Assia’s death, Ted could not, did not, get his life so arranged so that he and Assia could establish a household,” says Myers. But time, further research and the publication in the past 20 years of Plath’s journals and Hughes’ letters suggest to some that Hughes may simply have been a convenient, or politically expedient, scapegoat.

Alvarez is one of the very few who postulates that Plath probably expected to be rescued: “She set things up to be saved. But she was beyond caring.” Late the night before, according to Alvarez, she knocked on a downstairs neighbor’s door, ostensibly to borrow stamps. She questioned him pointedly about what time he got up in the morning. She also knew that the au pair was scheduled to show up relatively early. Alvarez suggests that she was counting on the neighbor to smell the gas or the baby sitter to open the door to save her. But the au pair had no key, and the neighbor was himself knocked unconscious by gas that seeped downstairs.

Wintering author Kate Moses believes that Plath displayed the symptoms of bipolar disorder, which may have been aggravated by a severe form of premenstrual syndrome. Moses adds that Plath may also have learned that Assia was pregnant.

Plath herself had become acutely concerned about her mental health. Realizing that she was exhibiting symptoms similar to those she experienced before her suicide attempt years earlier, she had sought psychiatric help. A doctor, John Horder, who was arranging therapy sessions for Plath, first prescribed an antidepressant. Hughes later surmised that the psychoactive drug was itself the culprit, noting (as did Horder) that such a drug can pull a patient out of the doldrums just enough to provide the energy and will to carry out a suicide.

Hughes was also condemned by detractors for destroying Plath’s last journal, or parts of it; among varying responses, he said that its contents would simply have been too painful to her family, especially their children. No trace

of the novel she had supposedly begun was ever found. Some suggest that Hughes had simply eradicated documents that portrayed him in an unkind light, a conclusion that even he conceded was inevitable. “I saw quite clearly from the first day that I am the only person in this business who cannot be believed by all who need to find me guilty,” Hughes wrote to Anne Stevenson, shortly after her controversial Plath biography, *Bitter Fame*, was published in 1989. For her part, Middlebrook defends Hughes: “Anyone who criticizes him isn’t giving enough weight to the crushing guilt that followed from Plath’s death and his own horrible situation afterward. It took him a while to get his feet down, probably ten years.”

Hughes, in fact, must be credited with making sure that Plath’s work would be read. She had spent a great deal of time arranging the order of the *Ariel* poems. But when a publisher turned the manuscript down, Hughes agreed to revise the organization, and the book was published in England in 1965 and the United States in 1966. Author Kate Moses notes, however, that Plath’s version of *Ariel* was “fragile but hopeful,” while Hughes’ reorganization turned the poems into a “long, slow, painful, furious ‘suicide note.’” Says Moses, “*This* is why we think of Sylvia Plath as we do—because of how *Ariel* was published and what it seemed to tell us about her.”

Hughes also arranged for the publication, in 1981, of Plath’s *Collected Poems* and, later, her journals. It is especially sad, says Karen Kukil, associate curator of rare books at Smith and editor of the journals, that Hughes got to know his wife better after her death. “In reading her journals, he wrote a lot of his *Birthday* poems,” says Kukil. “In a way he learned a great deal about her and what she was thinking by reading her journals after she died.”

EVEN BEFORE *Sylvia* was released, the film had found one very vocal critic: Frieda Hughes, now 43, Plath and Hughes’ daughter and a poet in her own right. “Why would I want to be involved in moments of my childhood which I never want to return to?” Frieda asked when invited by the BBC to collaborate on the film. Indeed, she wrote a poem in protest, which at one point scorns the “peanut eaters, entertained / At my mother’s death.”

In “Lady Lazarus,” one of Plath’s best-known poems from *Ariel*, the “peanut-crunching crowd” gawks at Plath who entertains the masses by barely surviving accidents and her early suicide attempt. There is a kind of sarcasm in what is one of the poem’s most quoted lines, but beneath its flippant veneer lay a terrible truth:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

