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“Ich weiß nicht,
was soll es bedeuten…”

Uncanny Space in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Abstract

Sylvia Plath's poetry continues to receive considerable attention from a variety of groups and has been the target for such diverse critical approaches as Feminism, Ecocriticism, and Marxism, to name but a few. My paper focuses on a less investigated area of her poems: Space, and more specifically uncanny space in her later poetry. Here, I take a closer look at seven of her poems using as my preferred methods deconstruction and psychoanalytical theory.

Key words: Sylvia Plath, Ariel, Uncanny, Unheimlich, Space, Mythology, Lazarus, Sigmund Freud, Nicholas Royle, Marie-Laure Ryan, Yi-Fu Tuan, Julia Kristeva

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

At the very end of his book *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*, Tim Kendall writes: "We are still learning how to read Plath's later work. Poetry offers few more challenging and unsettling experiences."[1] And Elena Ciobanu, in her excellent study *Sylvia Plath's Poetry: The Metamorphoses of the Poetic Self*, voices a similar concern, adding that all research points to the same revelation: […] that the essence of her poetic being has remained fundamentally unapprehended, that the necessary aesthetics we need in order to understand Plath's poetics has not yet been invented."[2] To me this suggests that much of Plath's poetry remains an enigma waiting to be unlocked and that further research is warranted.

What seems to me to be a largely unresearched area, is the space in which Plath's poetry takes place. The very *loci* of her poems. Certainly these differ a great deal; while "The Bee Meeting" takes place on a bridge and in grove on the countryside, the setting of "Tulips" is a hospital, "Wintering" begins in a cellar and ends in the open spring air, while "The Detective" is a murder mystery that unfolds inside a house. There have been studies made on the subject: Brita Lindberg-Seyersted investigates the "psychic landscapes" in Plath's poetry in her paper with the same name,[3] and there's Jon Rosenblatt's chapter on "Landscapes and Bodyscapes" in his book *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*, in the beginning of which he states that "the landscapes and seascapes merge so completely with the perceiving self that they are converted into extensions of the body, and every external description refers back to the relation between the poet and her own physical existence."[4] This I find very appropriate; it is sometimes almost impossible to separate the speaker from the space around her. Because the relative lack of attention paid to the space and place of Plath's poetry, I decided to have a closer look at it.

[1] Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*, London 2001, p.208
[2] Elena Ciobanu, *Sylvia Plath's Poetry: The Metamorphoses of the Poetic Self*, Iasi 2009, pp 11-12
[3] http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/lindbergseyersted.html
[4] Jon Rosenblatt, *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1979, p. 89

1.1 Purpose of Study

There is a vague quest in Sylvia Plath's letters and journals. In *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Jacqueline Rose refers to it as "a refrain"[5] – call it what you will – the point being is, it is repeated and the repetition is of interest here, for reasons I shall explain later under the heading "The Uncanny – a Brief Background". What I am talking about, is the first line of the poem "Die Lorelei" by Heinrich Heine: "Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten". Plath mentions it in a letter to her mother on July 5, 1958: "What is that lovely song you used to play on the piano & sing to us about the Lorelei? I can't spell the German, but it begins 'Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten… or something to that effect."[6] The quest is repeated in her journals the next day: "[…] Pan[7] 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…(sic)' 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."[8] The fumbling for an answer for something puzzling and eerie seems to have followed Plath throughout her life, it certainly trails her poetry almost to the end with questions like "How did I get here?" ("The Jailor"), "What did I leave untouched on the doorstep?" ("The Other"), "Pure? What does it mean?" ("Fever 103º"), "Who are these people at the bridge to meet me?" "(…) why did nobody tell me?" ("The Bee Meeting") "Why is it so quiet, what are they hiding?" ("Berck-Plage"). This inexplicability and failure to "understand what it means" touches on that, which Freud calls "unheimlich", which translated into English becomes uncanny. The more I read Plath's poetry, the surer I felt that I noticed a pattern of that uncanny. It returns over and over again, in different disguises. It almost seemed like the uncanny ran on a separate track to the poem, sometimes making itself visible, sometimes less so. Thus, I decided to have as my purpose the investigation of uncanny space in seven of Plath's later poems.

[5] Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p.112
[6] Sylvia Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume 2: 1956-1963*, London 2018, pp 259-260
[7] Plath and her husband Hughes were experimenting with a Oujia board at the time.
[8] Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Anchor Books, New York, 2000, p.401

1.2 Previous Research

Much has been written about Sylvia Plath's poetry, and just as much continues to be written. The limited scope of my thesis does not allow me to partake, present, or review more than a fragment of it all. I have been helped by a number of books and papers, I will briefly introduce just a few here.

Of great help has been Jon Rosenblatt's *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*, Rosenblatt focuses on the ritualistic aspect of Plath's poetry, and argues for a "clear and balanced reading of her poems."[9] Pamela Annas' *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*[10] has been useful as well. It has, as the title promises, as its focal point the mirror image in her poetry, but explores other central themes also, such as Plath's boundaries between her Self and the world, and the struggle of rebirth. I have also gleaned a lot of the thematic meanings of Plath's later poetry, especially her concern with rebirth and transcendence, from Judith Kroll's *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*[11]. Helpful, too, has been the study by David Holbrook *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*[12], in which the author uses both psychoanalysis and phenomenology as a base to look at Plath's poetry.

1.3 Sylvia Plath

The American poet Sylvia Plath was born in Boston in 1932. She died in London in 1963. Plath's first book of poetry, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, was published in 1960. Her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* was published in 1963, shortly before her death. Her second book of poetry, *Ariel*, came out posthumously in 1965. Plath had left a spring binder on her desk, containing 40 poems, arranged in such a way that the collection began with the word "Love" (from the poem "Morning Song") and ended with the word "spring" (from the poem "Wintering"). This, however, is not what the 1965 edition of *Ariel* looked like. It wasn't until 2005, when *Ariel: The Restored Edition*[13] was published that the book was organized the way Plath had intended it to be. This is the edition I refer to throughout my paper.

[9] Rosenblatt, p. xii
[10] Pamela Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1988
[11] Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, Harper & Row, New York, 1976
[12] David Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, London: Athlone Press, 1976
[13] *Sylvia Plath, Ariel: The Restored Edition*, First Harper Perennial, 2005

In a chapter of *Winter Pollen Occasional Prose*[14] called "Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*" Ted Hughes looks at the nature of the 1965 version of *Ariel* and traces its lineage. According to him, Plath had painstakingly worked slowly and deliberately for years to finally reach the point of ease and high speed so characteristic for *Ariel*. Much of her early method, apart from consulting dictionary and thesaurus, hinged on making patterns: "One of her most distinctive compulsions was to make patterns – vivid, bold, symmetric patterns."[15] Hughes draws the conclusion that the poems of *Ariel* were the direct result of that arduous effort. He likens the landscapes of these *Ariel* poems to the landscapes of "the Primitive Painters, a burningly luminious (sic) vision of a Paradise. A Paradise which is at the same time eerily frightening, an unalterably spot-lit vision of death."[16]

1.4 The Uncanny - a Brief Background

Sigmund Freud first brought the concept of the uncanny to attention with his slim 1919 essay, the seminal *Das Unheimliche*[17]. In it, he positions the uncanny in the realm of the frightening, but it isn't until he's taken a thorough look at Unheimlich in a German dictionary, that he gives it a more precise definition. It is the dictionary's explanation of the German word for uncanny, that exposes its instability and fragile nature. The opposite of Unheimlich is Heimlich, a word that, according to Freud's dictionary, means, "['belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, dear and intimate, homely etc.']"[18]. However, during the course of several pages, Freud reveals how there are times when Unheimlich takes on the meaning of Heimlich, as if the two proposed antonyms merge with each other and come to stand for the very same thing. "We call that *unheimlich*; you call it *heimlich*," he writes.[19] Pinpointing the exact meaning of the unheimlich is difficult even for Freud, who seems to grasp for something ambivalent in nature that continuously eludes him. To his aid, he uses E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story "The Sandman" as a sample, after which he adds a somewhat random list of what the uncanny or *das Unheimliche*

[14] Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen Occasional Prose*, Picador, USA, 1995
[15] Hughes, p. 161
[16] Ibid.
[17] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, Penguin Books, 2003
[18] Freud, p. 126
[19] Freud, *Uncanny*, p 132

consists of. The list includes areas of intellectual uncertainties[20], doubles (doppelgänger), a bizarre compulsion to repeat (an example of which I mentioned above with the Plath's repeated quest: "Ich weiß nicht was soll es bedeuten"), the return of, or the fear of a return of, something repressed, anything to do with death; such as dead bodies, revenants, ghosts and so on, animism, magic, madness, and the omnipotence of thoughts. Freud explains uncanny as something that we perceive as familiar, but which suddenly turns into something seemingly or potentially threatening. He writes about "the fact that an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes of the full function and significance of what it symbolizes, and so forth."[21] he writes.

Ever since Freud's launch of the uncanny into the world, it has had strong ties to literature. In fact, Freud uses several literary examples in his essay. The uncanny as a concept has, needless to say, developed since 1919. According to Anneleen Masschelein in *The Unconcept*[22], the uncanny found its way into literary criticism first in the 1950's, and continued its trajectory with Jacques Lacan, who tied it to anxiety in a series of lectures held in 1962 – 63[23], after which it passed further to Jacques Derrida's installments of "The Double Session" in Tel Quel in 1970[24], which was also the year that saw the publication of Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Todorov's work, however, focuses mainly on fantastic literature, which is not exactly the same as uncanny.

Most helpful to me has been Nicholas Royle's extensive 2003 *Uncanny*[25], the first book-length study of the uncanny. Royle discusses not only literature and psychoanalysis, but also film, philosophy, queer theory and so forth. He takes a closer look at the death drive (Thanatos) and develops Freud's idea of the compulsion to repeat, for example, and points out how that in itself is a manifestation of the death drive: "Freud himself contends that 'the constant recurrence of the same thing' is a powerful element in many literary texts and is what can help to give them their

[20] Ernst Jentsch mentions disorientation as part of the uncanny in his 1909 essay "The Uncanny", a work which in turn influenced Sigmund Freud's essay. http://art3idea.psu.edu/locus/Jentsch_uncanny.pdf
[21] Freud, The Uncanny, pp 150-151
[22] Anneleen Masschelein, *The Unconcept*, State University of New York, 2011
[23] Masschelein p.53
[24] Masschelein p.15
[25] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny*, Manchester University Press, 2003

uncanny character,"[26] he writes. As I have already implied, repetition is something that recurs with frequency in Plath's later work.

Lastly, Anthony Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny*[27] from 1994, has been an informative aid in that it presents a fascinating revue of uncanny places, spaces, and buildings.
In my paper I use the words unheimlich and uncanny interchangeably.

1.5 Narrative Space

"Space has traditionally been viewed as a backdrop to plot, if only because narrative, by definition, is a temporal art involving the sequencing of events," write Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu in *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet*.[28] Space, the authors argue, can both be the object of representation, as well as, perhaps more commonly, the surroundings in which the narrative develops. It can be static, or it can change rapidly. The authors present different layers of narrative space, the first of which is *spatial frames*, meaning the character's immediate surroundings. These are frames as if in a movie, meaning space can shift from one room to another as the character moves. Another layer is *setting*, which refers to the socio-historico-geographic category of the entire text, for instance the poems discussed and analyzed in my paper all seemingly belong to the academic middle-class, early 1960's England, and take place mostly in the countryside. There is also *story space* and *storyworld*, of which *story space* is the space relevant to the plot, and the *storyworld* is story space and that which the reader fills in with his own imagination. Finally, there's the *narrative universe*, which refers to the world as presented by the text, and all the character's beliefs, wishes, dreams and so on. Because the poems do not form a longer narrative, all these layers do not come into question. The one I have focused on is that first layer, the pinpointing of the *setting* of the poem.

Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*[29] deals primarily with the dreamy nooks and crannies of our childhood homes and looks at how these memories shape the way we think. Bachelard looks at a house vertically and dissects it accordingly. He opens doors to cellars and attics, looks

[26] Royle, p.89
[27] Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1992
[28] Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet*, The Ohio State University, 2016, p. 1
[29] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Penguin Books, New York, New York, 2014

around in every corner and examines it. Bachelard's is a wondrous book, but it does not deal much with the nightmares or the anxiety that the space in Plath's poetry is locked in.

Finally, I have found Yi-Fu Tuan's book *Landscapes of Fear*[30] helpful; it is a look at fearful places throughout history and our ways of responding to them. What is fear? What makes a landscape feel threatening? Fear, writes Tuan, can be created by very real epidemic diseases, but fear can also be created by supernatural visions, of witches, and ghosts.[31] And perhaps, as Plath writes in "The Moon and the Yew Tree": "fumey spirituous mists".

In conclusion, I have looked at Plath's poems from the viewpoint of uncanny and space. I have chosen seven poems, five of which were included in the 1965 edition of *Ariel*: "Tulips", "Elm", "The Moon and the Yew Tree", "The Bee Meeting", and "Wintering". The poems "The Detective" and "The Rabbit Catcher" were both added to the 40 poems in *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. I present them in the order of which they were written, beginning with the hospital poem "Tulips", written on March 18, 1961 and ending with the last poem in the so-called bee sequence, "Wintering", written on October 8 – 9, 1962. For reference, I have amassed the seven poems in their entirety in an Appendix at the end of the paper.

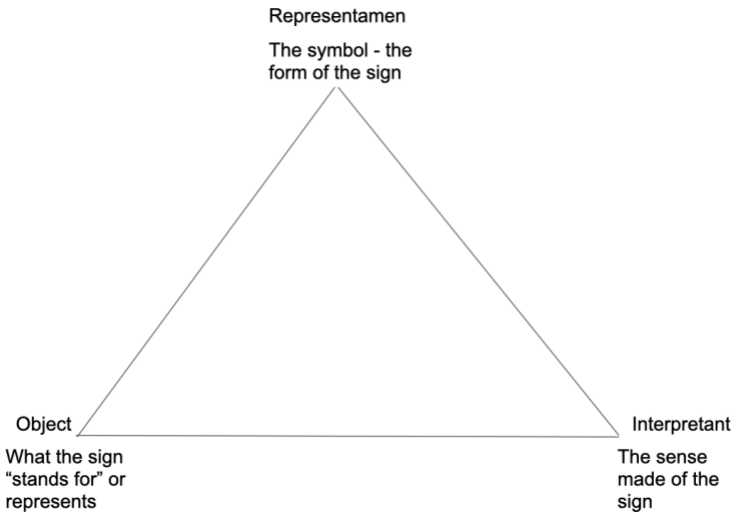
1.6 Method and Selection

I have found a combination of psychoanalytic theory and deconstruction to be my preferred methods, with which to navigate the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Regarding the specific poems featured, I first culled those in which I found space and the uncanny to be predominant, and out of these I let my taste do the final selection. The majority of the poems in my thesis were written in the last year of Plath's life, that peculiar time when her poems, as the critic Al Alvarez states in *Ariel Ascending*, "flowed effortlessly until, at the end, she occasionally produced as many as three a day."[32]

[30] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1979
[31] Tuan, pp. 7 – 8
[32] Paul Alexander, ed., *Ariel Ascending, Writings About Sylvia Plath*, Harper & Row, New York, 1985, p.198

1.7 Peirce's Triadic Sign Model

In some of my analyses I have found using a modified version of Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic sign model[33] practical in explaining my thinking. Peirce (1839 – 1914) was an American scientist, logician, and philosopher, and is considered the founder of American pragmatism. Among many other things, he developed his own model of semiotic signs. As opposed to the dyadic model formulated by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, Peirce offered a three-part model. The model looks like this:



"1. The *representamen*: the form which the sign takes (not necessarily material, though usually interpreted as such – called by some theorists the 'sign vehicle'.
2. An *interpretant*: not an interpreter but rather the sense made of the sign.
3. An *object*: something beyond the sign to which it refers (a referent)."[34]

In one of his explanations of the model, Peirce writes: "I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the later is thereby mediately determined by the former. (EP2, 478)"[35]

[33] Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, Routledge, New York, NY 2005, pp. 29-30, although I turned the triadic around a bit.
[34] Ibid.
[35] https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce-semiotics/#BasSigStr

2 Tulips

In the 1960 poem "Tulips", the setting is a hospital room, as viewed from the speaker, a patient confined to bed. Part of the scaffolding of the piece consists of the juxtaposition of two colors: White and red, common colors in Plath's emblematic color scheme. According to Judith Kroll in *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, white can have several different meanings in Plath's later oeuvre, ranging from birth and newness to death and its various associations (corpses, blankness, sickliness and so on.[36] Red, on the other hand, is a stand-in for "blood, danger, and violence, as well as vitality"[37]. The positioning of red and white - which in "Tulips" signal vitality and blankness respectively - create a sort of magnetic reluctance field, in which the speaker is stuck and unable to pull away. This field, or space, with its ambience of "neither here nor there" is indicative of the intellectual uncertainty of the unheimlich. Nicholas Royle puts it thus in *Uncanny*: "The feeling of uncanniness lies in this uncertainty, an uncertainty that opens onto the space of the demonic and diabolical. It is that strange feeling again."[38]

The poem "Tulips" is set in a room in a hospital, the entirety of the poem takes place there, the speaker does not move, and the setting does not change. By consulting Merriam-Webster for a definition of "hospital" we are informed that it is:

a) A charitable institution for the needy, aged, infirm, or young
b) An institution where the sick or injured are given medical or surgical care - usually used in British English without an article after a preposition
c) A repair shop for specified small objects[39]

Vidler writes about the efforts made to eradicate "myth, suspicion, tyranny, and above all the irrational"[40], and, presumably also the uncanny, from buildings in the 20th century through transparency. The fears and phobias that thrived in the dark would, it was thought, vanish in the "hygienic space" spearheaded by modernists like Le Corbusier[41]. Yet it is the pellucid setting of a hospital that provides "Tulips" with the uncanny environment in which the poem takes place.

[36] Kroll, p.110
[37] Kroll, p.16
[38] Royle, p.90
[39] Retrieved on June 22, 2020: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hospital
[40] Vidler, p.168
[41] Ibid.

The whiteness in the proximities of the convalescing speaker's bed, is immediately juxtaposed with the excitement of the flowers:

> The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.
> Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in.
> I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly

Words such as "winter", "white", "snowed-in", "quiet" and even "peacefulness" are not unusual in combination with "hospital", rather they are nouns and adjectives we would normally use in association with a hospital – so far so good. However, in the next few lines something unsettling enters:

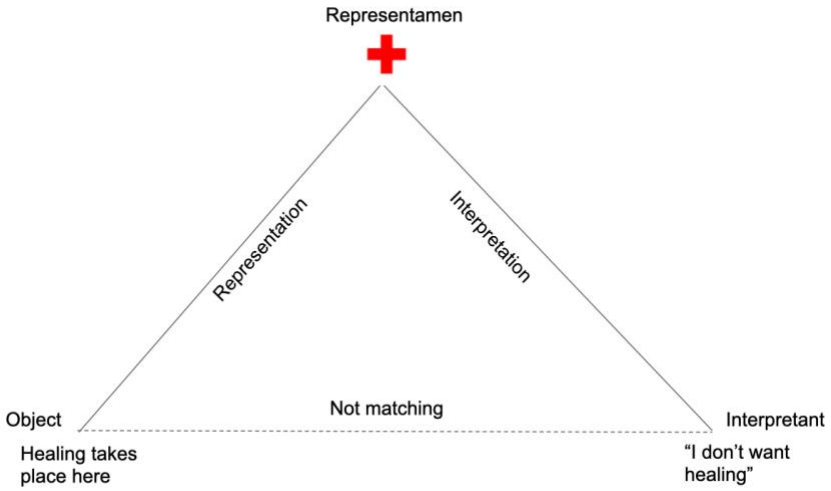
> I am nobody. I have nothing to do with explosions.
> I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
> And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.

The speaker refers to herself as "nobody". She has given her body to surgeons, she says. Meaning she is now no-body, that is body-less. She has given away her name (meaning her identity) and her day-clothes (stand-ins for her belongings). By giving up these tokens she has paid for the body-less, identity-less existence that comes with all the whiteness.

> They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff
> Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.
> Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.
> The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,

The pupil is "stupid", but the nurses are "no trouble", an indication that something else *is*. The trouble refers back to the excitable tulips, the binary to all the whiteness and peacefulness. *They* are the trouble. In stanza nine we are informed that they are red ("The tulips are too red") – hardly a surprise. As mentioned, Judith Kroll identifies red as a color of vitality in Plath's poetry, as well as a color indicating blood and danger. In this poem they represent life. Later on, as the whiteness subsides and the speaker seemingly regains her "body-ness" and accepts life, life is also symbolized by the roaring mouth of an African cat. I would also like to refer back to the middle of the first stanza, where the speaker denies having anything to do with "explosions", this sort of aggression, the danger Kroll so appropriately linked with red, this red aggression/danger seemingly has to do with life. The danger of the red of an open mouth of an African cat and

explosions surely is as close to life and *aliveness* as life can possibly be. Thus one can say that *life* is the true trouble in the poem. I find it helpful to look closer at this poem by using Peirce's triadic sign model, which I described earlier. The uncanny enters when it becomes clear that the effect of the Interpretant (i.e. how the hospital is interpreted by the speaker) is not properly matched with the Object, which in this case is the hospital, and that what the hospital socially and culturally has come to mean:



As mentioned, socially and culturally we think of a hospital as a place "where the sick or injured are given medical or surgical care", not a place where people typically "check in because they *want* to check out". "The hospital imagery of 'Tulips' depicts the persona of the poem as the center of an activity directed toward renewal and health," writes Annas[42]. However, that is the *heimlich* narrative of the poem, the apparent narrative, the *unheimlich* narrative, which runs on a sort of underground parallel, tells another story.

Lisa Narbeshuber notices in *Confessing Cultures: Politics and the Self in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath* that the "flattened, white-washed hospital worlds blanketing and suffocating or gently 'smoothing' away all signs of difference and dimension in her personae (---) the female patient blends into the sterilized, white, homogenous, flat (and patriarchal) surroundings of the hospital, effectively losing her identity and uniqueness."[43]

The nurses, who pass like gulls, bring the speaker "numbness in their bright needles", but given what has already been established – that the speaker is troubled by life itself – we have

[42] Annas, p.118
[43] Lisa Narbeshuber, *Confessing Cultures: Politics and the Self in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, Victoria: ELS Editions, 2009

cause to ponder what kind of numbness the speaker believes will be administered through those needles.

> Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage –
> My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
> (---)
> I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat
> (---)
> They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations
> Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley

The body-less speaker has now rid herself of not only her body, but her baggage as well, she has been swabbed clear, as if prepared for something. The overnight case that looks "like a black pillbox" is a substitute coffin, waiting for the remains of the woman who has given up body and identity, not to mention the objects commonly associated with testaments; tea sets, linen, and books. In anticipation of death they have all been willed away:

> I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books
> Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.
> I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.
> I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
> To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty

Body-less, identity-less, and with her belongings given away, she is now pure as a nun. The pillbox-coffin is not just a signifier of death but becomes also the uncanny signifier for a death *wanted* and perversely prepared for. This flip in meanings is being made even more sinister since the space in which the poem takes place, is a hospital. The swabbing hints at the speaker is "blissfully undergoing the last rites".[44] Now she lies in her hospital bed with her hands turned up and empty as if waiting for Charon's obol to be put into her palm. Charon was the boatman who ferried the soul of the deceased across the river Styx into the underworld, in ancient Greek and Latin literature. The practice was to put a coin, an obol, in the mouth or hand of the deceased to be used to pay Charon.[45]

Plath may well have had an actual image in mind for this. In her journal entry from February 3, 1958 (three years prior to writing the poem), she writes: "After Arvin, art & the sudden surprise

[44] Rosenblatt, p.129
[45] Susan T. Stevens "Charon's Obol and Other Coins in Ancient Funerary Practice" in Phoenix Vol.45, No 3 autumn 1991

– Böcklin's 'Island of the Dead' – "[46] She continues the next day, February 4, 1958: "To continue where my pen fell from my hand & I fell asleep: 'The Island of the Dead' (…) an island, chunks of marble, angular pale stone, set in the pale wash of a sea, and tall, black-dark cypresses rising like steeples of death from the center of the island – a shrouded figure, standing, swaddled from head to foot in white, being rowed just to shore, outined, a white ghostform, against the vibrant darkness of the cypresses. Strange vision. A lonely island – some One buried there (sic)."[47] The painting and the poem share a few similarities: First, there's the image of the boat, in the poem the speaker refers to herself as a "cargo boat" and in the painting there's obviously the boat with Charon, then there's the image of water, of either going under or over it, then there's the color white, which in both seem to indicate blankness and somberness, the white cliffs in Böcklin's painting even resemble the cool, cold structure of a modern hospital, both the poem and Plath's journal entry describe white swaddlings, and, if we continue to think of the patent leather overnight case, the one that looks like a black pillbox, as a stand-in coffin, then there is a coffin in both, there's the image of a person being tended to, in the poem it is the nurses who tend the body "as water tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently" in the painting it is Charon the ferryman, who tends to the dead body, smoothly ferrying it across the river.

"Isle of the Dead" by Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901). Plath wrote about it in her journal on February 4, 1958: "(…) an island, chunks of marble, angular pale stone, set in the pale was of a sea, and tall, black-dark cypresses rising like steeples of death from the center of the island – a shrouded figure, standing, swaddled from head to foot in white, being rowed just shore, outined (sic), a white ghost-form, against the vibrant darkness of the cypresses. Strange visions. A lonely island – some One buried there, or the island of all, invisible, essence of air in the dank caverns of cypress boughs."

[46] Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Anchor Books, New York, 2000, p.322
[47] Ibid.

As the "black pillbox" coffin fades into the background, and the speaker begins to become aware of her heart ("its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me"), the uncanniness of the hospital fades also. The poem finishes with:

> The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea.
> And comes from a country far away as health.

In a paper titled "It Walks: the ambulatory uncanny"[48], Susan Bernstein describes the uncanny as accumulating "around the narrative contact between self and the other, presence and absence," and the spectacle of the self dislocating from itself (1126), and it certainly is as if that is what is happening in "Tulips"; where the speaker dislocates from herself and then, seemingly, connects with that self again, in the final stanzas.

3 The Moon and the Yew Tree

The uncertainty and suspense of the unheimlich is often associated with the experience of standing on a threshold or the border between this and that. One is neither here, nor there, but hovers in between. I would like to continue where I left off, with the paper mentioned above, by Susan Bernstein, in which she presents a number of gothic tales from E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Serapion Brethren*. Here the uncanny takes the shape of a guest, *der Unheimliche Gast*, who appears coming in from the outside with the doors burst open. There he stands on the threshold. It is the very act of this *appearance*, according to Bernstein, that is the uncanny. The appearance "of the uncanny guest is his essence, precisely because the uncanny has no essential core"[49] The threshold is the doorway to the uncanny; it is that gray area of intellectual uncertainty, as proposed by Ernst Jentsch in "On the Psychology of the Uncanny", an uncertainty which in turn makes it an area difficult for a person to navigate and find his way in[50]. Meanwhile, Royle links thresholds with an experience of being on the border of something, part of and separate from, a "peculiar limbo"[51] and Vidler calls the threshold a place of testing.[52]

[48] Susan Bernstein, "It Walks: the ambulatory uncanny", MLN Vol.118, No 5, Comparative Literature Issue (Dec., 2003), JSTOR, p.1126
[49] Bernstein, p.1133
[50] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p.125
[51] Royle, p.vii
[52] Vidler, p.184

"The Moon and the Yew Tree" is such a threshold poem in that it "internalizes the external world"[53] and so sits between this and that. As the authors of *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative* write; "Spatial frames are filled with individual things, and they are defined by the set of objects they contain."[54] The boundaries of the spatial frames, the authors argue, may be clear-cut or fuzzy. This poem opens right in that space of liminality and testing, and follows the speaker's field of vision. It begins by Plath, as Rosenblatt suggests, "redefining the landscape in terms of deathly coldness and alienation"[55]:

> This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary
> The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue.

But the poem *wants* to go further, it wants to test its footing, and takes but a tentative step out of the mind right onto the lawn outside into the anthropomorphized nature, where:

> The grasses unload their griefs (…)
> Prickling my ankles

By footing the grass however, the speaker steps into the uncanny:

> Fumey, spiritous mists inhabit this place
> Separated from my house by a row of headstones.

In *Landscapes of Fear*, Yi-Fu Tuan discusses different cultures' attitudes toward the dead and the spirits of the dead. Spirits are thought to be either benevolent and willing to help their descendants, or capable of spite and vindictive if not being paid attention to. Some spirits, however, are frightening.[56] Some cultures believe ghosts haunt trees and burial grounds, and Tuan writes that they "are known to have hurled people into trees."[57] Tuan writes that "ghosts haunt trees and burial grounds… they can be full of spite."[58] Believing in spirits, angels, and demons is something that's deep-seated in human nature and people in all cultures, past and present, have what Tuan calls "an awareness of the preternatural, however faint and

[53] Rosenblatt, p.95
[54] Ryan, Foote, and Maoz, p.24
[55] Rosenblatt, p.28
[56] Tuan, p. 117
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.

infrequent".[59] It has been well-documented that Plath herself meddled in the suprasensible. Her interests included tarot[60], Ouija[61], as well as bibliomancy.[62]

Stuck between here, "my house", and there, the otherworld with its spirits and the dead underneath their headstone, the speaker hesitates, the next step seems uncertain:

> I simply cannot see where there is to get to.

Then she notices the moon, and states:

> The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,
> White as a knuckle and terribly upset.
> It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet
> With the O-gape of complete despair. I live here.

Rosenblatt does not see the moon as a valid way out, or a path: "The moon indicates that there is nowhere 'to get to'."[63] Holbrook's reading is similar, the "no door" is an image of something being closed off for potential creative openings.[64] I do not agree, I argue that the moon *does* indeed stand for a pathway in the space presented for the speaker in the poem. True, the moon is presented as "no door" but rather a face. However, it can still be read as something open, as a possible pathway somewhere. Its' very O-gape points at it not being shut. The "O" actually indicates clear access, even orally.

Rosenblatt identifies black, white, and blue as the colors making up the landscape in the poem. "Black," he writes, "is the father's color, indicating the silence of the dead, white is the mother's color, indicating despair, and the fear of death; and blue is the Virgin Mary's color, indicating hopefulness."[65] These also make for some of the binary pairs in the poem: the light of the mind and the message of the yew is one such pair, others include church versus pagan belief systems, the sweetness of Mary versus the wildness of the Moon-goddess, the stiffness of the saint versus the wildness of the Moon, and the silence of the yew versus the bong of the church bells.

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[59] Tuan, p.74
[60] Sylvia Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Volume 2 1956-1963*, Faber & Faber, London, 2018, p. 905
[61] Plath, *Journals*, p. 400
[62] Plath, *Letters*, p. 914
[63] Rosenblatt, p. 102
[64] Holbrook, p. 273
[65] Rosenblatt, p. 97

Annas locates the speaker of the poem in a static place, suggesting that "the moon, the church, the yew tree, the speaker of the poem – are fixed in some immovable schema relative to each other".[66] But the place is *not* static, it moves: the grasses *unload*, the moon *drags* and *unloosens* bats and owls from her garments, the bells *startle* and *bong*, clouds *flower*, even the saints, stiff though they may be, manage to *float*. As I have shown, the poem is about standing on a threshold and finding possible ways out. "I simply cannot see where there is to go", hints at the speaker's indecision rather than the place and its possible stasis.

"The Moon and the Yew Tree" is also a threshold poem in the sense that it was written not in the hectic months of fall 1962 with most of the other *Ariel* poems, but a full year before that, in October of 1961. In "Sylvia Plath's Psychic Landscapes", Brita Lindberg-Seyersted refers to it as a poem coming from a "transitional stage" in Plath's career, alluding again to something that has not quite arrived. "The Moon and the Yew Tree" was written before, even, the poem "Elm", which Ted Hughes describes as "the first of the true, full-blooded *Ariel* poems."[67]

Finally, to the tree of the poem. It is a yew and it:

> (…) points up. It has a Gothic shape.

The yew tree is associated with death, according to Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*[68], a notion that is supported by Hal Hartzell in *The Yew Tree: A Thousand Whispers Biography of a Species*.[69] Hartzell discusses the yew as a poetic image, pointing out that allusions to it has been made by poets from Chaucer (who mentions the elm in *Canterbury Tales*) to Eliot (who writes about the yew tree in various poems, for instance "Ash Wednesday" and "Little Gidding"), mentioning the yew's symbolism whether regards to its physical appearance, the poisonous aspect of it, or its use in funeral rites and graveside offerings.[70]Like Tuan, Hartzell connects ghosts to trees, and specifically the yew tree and "its connection with dead bodies buried at its roots, or ghosts meeting at midnight or sounds of voices leaping from the foliage."[71] In Plath's poem, the yew becomes a finger pointing the speaker to the moon, as if that's where her fate lies.

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[66] Annas, p. 126
[67] Hughes, p.474
[68] Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1997, p. 114
[69] Hal Hartzell, *The Yew Tree: A Thousand Whispers: Biography of a Species,* Hulogosi, Eugene, Oregon, 1992
[70] Hartzell, p. 244
[71] Ibid.

The speaker sees the moon and recognizes it as her mother, more so than Mary, who is sweet but incapable of offering any tenderness. The yew takes up surprisingly little real estate in the poem considering its prime position in the title. It is given only two mentions. It is nonetheless the yew that delivers the last, chilling message:

> And the message of the yew tree is blackness – blackness and silence.

It is delivered bluntly without apologies and it offers no comfort.

4 Elm

In *Narrating Space/Spatializing narrative*, Ryan, Foote, and Maoz write about the occasions when space affects the "narrative by taking on a referential function".[72] With this they imply not only travel literature or nature writing, obvious examples of space becoming the focus, but also narratives tied to a particular place, for instance stories inscribed on plaques in certain places of importance, or narratives in which fictional characters visit real-world locations, like Hamlet's castle in Denmark. But what when space and speaker blends into one and the same? When space becomes not merely a referential function, but the thing itself, the narrative *and* the narrator?

The poem "Elm" was first published posthumously in The New Yorker on August 3, 1963[73] as "The Elm Speaks", in an effort to ascertain whence the voice in the poem comes. In "Elm" Plath is using anthropomorphism as a base for experiences but also for a fusion between speaker and the tree. Rosenblatt calls the poem "animate through and through"[74], which in itself adds an element of uncanny to it. In *Totem and Taboo*[75], Freud connects animism to other elements of unheimlich, such as omnipotence of thought[76] and magic. "Animism," he writes, "in the narrower sense is the theory of psychic concepts and in the wider sense, of spiritual beings in

[72] Ryan, p. 4
[73] https://www.sylviaplath.info/thumbsperiodicals.html
[74] Rosenblatt, p. 59
[75] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between psychic lives of savages and neurotics*, Dover Publication, Mineola, NY, 1998
[76] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 64

general."[77] As an example, he gives how human beings have souls capable of breaking away from their place of dwelling and enter into animals, plants, and things.[78]

But animism isn't the only unheimlich element in "Elm"; the poem is in fact comprised of a number of unheimlich components, almost piled on top of each other. Annas points to the rootedness of the tree, it is impossible for it to move, making it a canvas for events read as feelings, which it cannot escape[79]. The elm starts out as a dialogue, a dialogue between the tree itself and the poet, but the two voices blend into one towards the end, as the "you" is dropped. This is made clear in the first stanza, there is a "she" and there is a "you".

> I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root.
> It is what you fear.
> I do not fear it: I have been there.
> (---)
>
> I am terrified by this dark thing
> That sleeps in me;
> All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

The unheimlich fans out from the very opening of the poem by way of fear, which is the topic of discussion between the tree and the poet. The fear of what ghastly power lies beneath and which may surface is more studied in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which is often read as an addendum to and further exploration of *Uncanny*. "People unfamiliar with analysis," Freud writes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, "feel an obscure fear – a dread of rousing something that, so they feel, is better left sleeping – what they are afraid of at bottom is the emergence of this compulsion with its hint of possession by some 'daemonic' power.[80] Plath's poem examines the event of such emergence. It is the very thing which Freud calls "left sleeping" that Plath takes a closer look at and pronounces malign. Psychoanalysis, according to Freud reports back from the psychic underworld of the death drive, and that's what the Elm claims the poet is afraid of.[81] The Elm itself (sexed as a "she") is not, instead it claims it has "been there", it has experience

[77] Omnipotence of thought is explained in *Totem and Taboo* with the example of a person who believes he can conjure up a man by merely thinking about him, and who thinks that by speaking badly of someone he can cause that person to die (73).
[78] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 65
[79] Annas, p. 126
[80] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Dover Publications, Inc, Mineola, New York, 2017, p. 30
[81] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. xlii

and a certain amount of wisdom ("I know... I know") connecting it to the Biblical tree of knowledge.

> Is it the sea you hear in me,
> Its dissatisfactions?
> Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?

The second stanza introduces madness, comparing it to silence or a mouth shut quiet, or the continuously beating sound of the sea. Freud writes that the uncanny effect of madness as well as fits of insanity and epilepsy, share its origins with the idea of hidden, evil powers.[82] Before Freud and his essay, Jentsch pointed out madness as something uncanny, observing that "most mental and nervous illnesses make a quite decidedly uncanny impression of most people".[83] In "Elm", madness expresses itself as a void, the absence of a voice, or perhaps the absence of an answer: The second stanza establishes that the Elm "understands" the poet's "madness" and makes an effort to evaluate it. The third stanza gives a hint:

> Love is a shadow.
> How you lie and cry after it
> Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

Axelrod writes that the tree appears "almost sadistically stimulated by the woman's grief"[84] forcing her to admit her lovesickness, and promising, in the following stanza, to add more pain by:

> (…) I shall gallop thus, impetuously,
> Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,
> Echoing, echoing.

The Elm declares it has the magic powers to metamorphose the poet's head into a stone, which almost leads to an eye rhyme, or a mistake of the eye reading it as "head stone" rather than "head is a stone". At the end of the stanza, the word "echoing" is repeated. Freud calls the tendency to repeat "a compulsion" and it is cemented in his list of unheimlich. In his essay, it is further explained in the introduction as akin to being lost in a wood and making the same "unintentional

[82] Freud, The Uncanny, pp. 149-150
[83] http://art3idea.psu.edu/locus/Jentsch_uncanny.pdf
[84] Axelrod, p. 151

return" to the same spot over and over, creating a sense of helplessness, as if stuck in a loop or a thought pattern, from which there is no way out. It seems as if it is related to the intellectual uncertainty mentioned in "Tulips" and "The Moon and the Yew Tree". It is of course also a form of onomatopoeia; an echo echoes.

Annas writes that the poet fuses with the elm around the fifth stanza, and I agree with her that there is a shift, however I believe it occurs later in the poem.[85] Axelrod highlights the ninth stanza as where this shift occurs, arguing that "the woman's psychic conflicts soon invade and 'possess' the elm's speech, transforming the tree from a detached observer to a subjective double."[86] However prior to the fusion of the tree and the poet, there is a series of flashes of violence:

> I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.
> Scorched to the root
> My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.
>
> Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
> A wind of such violence
> Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.
>
> (---)
> (The moon's) radiance scathes me."

Royle discusses violence as an expression for the uncanny death drive and as a result of madness. In the literary example Freud uses in his essay – the short story "The Sandman" by E.T.A. Hoffmann – the protagonist is first driven mad by a series on uncanny events, and in the end his madness leads to violence not only against himself (he throws himself down a tower) but also against his girlfriend, whom he tries to kill. D.H. Lawrence describes the longing for release that expressed violence can produce in the critical essay "The Reality of Peace": "I want to kill, I want violent sensationalism, I want to break down, I want to put asunder, I want anarchic revolution – it is all the same, the single desire for death".[87] Lawrence's words echo the elm's delirious feelings and intense need to burst out into a shriek and for whom, it is clear, there's a release in the breakdown, during which it splits and flies about uncontrollably. It is as if it is

[85] Annas, p. 126
[86] Axelrod, p. 151
[87] D.H. Lawrence, *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and other essays*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 40

possessed by some maddening force, not unlike the fits of insanity or epilepsy mentioned by Freud. But there's also violence coming from the outside, the tree has been scorched to the root, and stand like a hand of wires. This reads like a reference to Hiroshima and the vicious images of the burnt victims. There's also the moon's radiant scathing.

The last "you" in the poem occurs in the last line of the ninth stanza, almost indicating the fusion:

> How your bad dreams possess and endow me.

Whose bad dreams are possessing and endowing whom here? Possessing again pertaining to the idea of animism, as explained earlier.

By the tenth stanza, the tree and the poet have fused completely – the "you" is completely dropped.

> I am inhabited by a cry.
> Nightly it flaps out
> Looking with its hooks, for something to love.

This longing for love picks up from the third stanza, in which the tree sensed the poet's longing for love and likened lost love with a shadow or a horse taking off. Here it is the poet/tree, fused into one, speaking. The image of a "cry" that "flaps" continues in the next stanza:

> I am terrified by this dark thing
> That sleeps in me;
> All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

This calls to mind the panic bird Plath refers to several times in her journal entries, like on June 20, 1958: "I am now flooded with despair, almost hysteria, as if I were smothering. As if a great muscular owl were sitting on my chest, its talons clenching & constricting my heart"[88] and on December 12, 1958: "to express my hostility (…) frees me from the Panic Bird on my heart".[89] And as is made clear in the following stanza, in which the loss of love continues to be in focus, there is a reference to the heart:

[88] Plath, *Journals*, p. 395
[89] Plath, *Journals*, p. 429

Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?

The poet's "only companion is her double, the tree, an instrument for translating her abysmal, presymbolic 'cry'," [90] writes Axelrod. Doubles, or *doppelgänger*, is in a way another example of repetitions. A double occurs when we look into a mirror or when we see our own shadow. Freud adds that a double is the self "duplicated, divided and interchanged". [91] A double can share our facial features, but not necessarily, what our double can share instead can be our destiny, our misdeeds, or even our names. Otto Rank describes the uncanny double as "clearly an independent and visible cleavage of the ego (shadow, reflection)", in his book on the subject, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic study* [92]. Hating or expressing disgust towards one's double seems like risky business, as that somehow would turn one's self towards one's self. In Freud's theory of the uncanny, the double is a harbinger of death, and if your double dies, you will die also. The concept of the double is close to that of repetition, as mentioned above, but it is also related to that of splitting, and these, according to Royle [93], are the very mechanics of religion, for instance with God splitting into the trinity, and it also applies to Freud's idea of the self's splitting into id, ego and superego.

However, I do not see how Axelrod's logic makes sense, if the tree and the poet have fused, it ought to be the *end* of their doubling, causing a reversal of the split, as mentioned by Royle. I propose the double instead as the very starting point of the poem, and that by the tenth stanza, the tree and the poet fuse into one and the same. This bears semblance to the myth of Daphne [94] and somewhat also to the idea of dryads [95], of which Plath earlier had written the poem "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad".

Plath herself was well versed in the concept of doubles and doublings, much of her writing touch on it (for instance the poems "In Plaster" and "Mirror", the protagonist in her novel *The*

[90] Axelrod, p. 157
[91] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 142
[92] Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*, New York: New American Library, 1979, p. 12
[93] Royle, p. 51
[94] Daphne is the character in Greek mythology who turns into a tree (*Mythology Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* by Edith Hamilton, page 115)
[95] A dryad was a tree nymph or a tree spirit in Greek mythology (Hamilton, 298)

Bell Jar had a double in the character Joan, and Plath's undergraduate thesis dealt with doubles and is titled "The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels"[96]).

In the penultimate stanza, a face appears in the tree:

> What is this, this face
> So murderous in its strangle of branches? –

And continues:

> Its snaky acids hiss

Annas describes this face "medusa-like" and calls it "either a nightmare perceived by the poet or the poet herself and is probably both".[97] Rosenblatt reads it in a similar fashion: "The face is both the speaker's own violent nature projected onto the tree and the tree's own natural 'face.' Nature looks at us as we look at nature."[98] However, the most ingenious reading comes from Axelrod, who sees the face in the tree as "an image of the transformed 'you' superimposed on the tree by the windowpane's reflection. The selves of the poem divided by 'faults,' reunify only in a violence that can 'kill'."[99] This is an intriguing thought, made more so if one reads about the elm tree in Ted Hughes' book *Winter Pollen*: "Two weeks after writing about this Yew Tree she would write about another tree, the Elm Tree of her poem 'Elm'. (---) It is worth marking their actual positions, relative to each other and to the position of the writer inside her house. The Yew Tree, as she saw it from the window above her work table, stood in her sunset, due West. On the opposite side of the house, due East, filling her dawn sky and towering over her as she looked up at it from her back door, stood the Elm."[100]Axelrod's idea of the image of the face in the windowpane's reflection leads me to think of Ariel, the airy spirit imprisoned in a tree in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*[101]. The divided selves in "Elm"; one Self on the "interior" side of the windowpane, the other on the "exterior", meanwhile perhaps being "interior" also, as in a spirit

[96] https://www.worldcat.org/title/magic-mirror-a-study-of-the-double-in-two-of-dostoevskys-novels/oclc/33103818
[97] Annas, p. 126
[98] Rosenblatt, p. 153
[99] Axelrod, p. 221
[100] Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, Picador, New York, 1995, p. 474
[101] William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works,* Leopard Books, London 1995, p. 5

or voice trapped inside the tree, like Ariel, struggling to break free, to "isolate". A possible reference to Shakespeare's Ariel has already been alluded to, obviously, through the very title of Plath's book.

Lastly, I want to draw attention to the last two – the final one in particular – lines of the poem:

> It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
> That kill, that kill, that kill.

Here, again, is the uncanny compulsion to repeat indicating that the poet/tree is stuck in a loop of thinking.

5 The Rabbit Catcher

Tuan writes about the feelings of hostile forces in nature, and how they, before modern scientific ideas caught on, were seen as animate beings, spirits, good and bad. "This deeply ingrained habit of anthropomorphizing nature follows our prior and necessarily far deeper involvement with human beings."[102] However, much we might try to romanticize it, life in the countryside is hard and "Countryfolk live close to violence."[103] Additionally, Tuan points out that humans have "a perverse streak (…) that appreciates cruelty and grotesquerie if they pose no immediate danger to self. People flocked to public executions and ate picnic lunches under the shadow of the gibbet. Life from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century offered abundant spectacles of suffering and pain."[104] Sylvia Plath's "The Rabbit Catcher" shows that that there is still an abundance of spectacles of suffering and pain in the 20th century, if only you have an eye for it. "The Rabbit Catcher" is oftentimes given a feminist reading, one spectacular example is Jacqueline Rose's analysis, which can be found in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. But my focus here is the locality of the poem. The setting for the poem is a windy place by the sea, which then shifts to a path and hollow with rabbit traps in the countryside, the fields of vision change slightly as the speaker moves with the poem. The poem starts from the outside and moves to the inside, as the speaker connects the physical space around her with a private situation. In "The Moon and the Yew Tree", the speaker said:

[102] Tuan, p. 7
[103] Tuan, p. 139
[104] Tuan, p. 10

I simply cannot see where there is to get to,

The speaker in "The Rabbit Catcher" knows the answer to that question, and points it out too:

There was only one place to get to.

The unheimlich landscape is revealed in the first stanza:

It was a place of force –
The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,
Tearing off my voice, and the sea
Blinding me with its lights, the lives of the dead
Unreeling in it, spreading like oil.

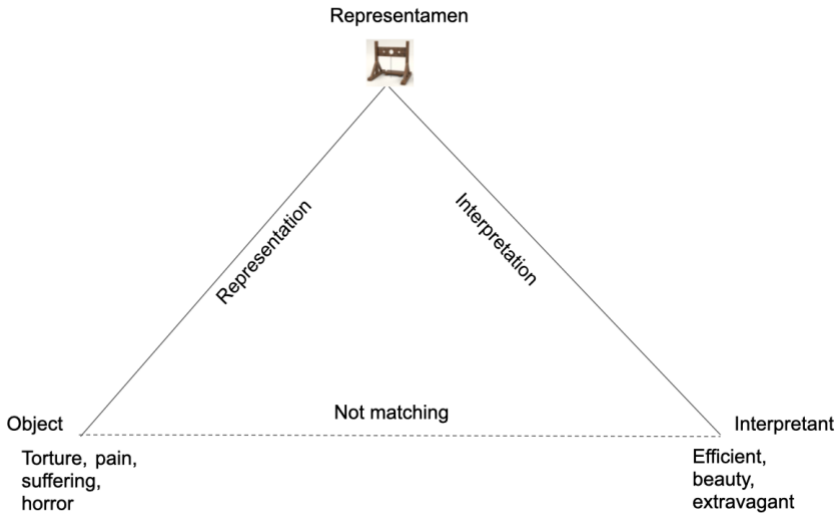
This is clearly a place where human qualities have been attributed to inanimate objects, the wind has the power to "gag" and "tear off" the speaker's voice. The sea, similarly endowed, has the ability to "blind" her with its lights. No matter the threatening quality of these "natural forces", these lines might lean more to being related to prosopopoeia, or personification, than animism or anthropomorphism. The end of the fourth line of that first stanza – "the lives of the dead" – on the other hand, introduces the idea of a return of the dead. The idea that the dead person automatically turns into the enemy of the one still alive is an old one, according to Freud[105], but carries its potency into our modern, science-based society. We fear cemeteries, we fear being near the dead. The dead person, we may *still* feel, wants only to bring the us, the survivor, with him or her into the realm of the dead[106]. Furthermore, the very wording, "lives of the dead", indicate that there's no clear boundary between the living and the dead. The "unreeling" quality, something spreading like oil" adds to the threat, as if there's no stopping the dead from coming after the speaker, they spread like oil on the water, creating the stickiness typical of oil slicks, a trap of sorts. In the second stanza, the violence of the personified nature is further explored and found threatening:

I tasted the malignity of the gorse,
Its black spikes,

[105] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 149
[106] Ibid.

The extreme unction of its yellow candle-flowers.
They had an efficiency, a great beauty,
And were extravagant, like torture.

Even the plants in this "place of force" have evil intent, the thorns on the gorse become spikes and the flowers have the capacity to administer the sacrament of anointing to those about to die, "the extreme unction", furthering the idea of the speaker as in a place of mortal danger. The speaker's surprising response to these threats is just as uncanny; she finds the power of the flowers efficient and calls that efficiency beautiful, extravagant even, which in turn she likens to torture. Royle writes that: "The uncanny can be a matter of something gruesome or terrible, above all death and corpses, cannibalism, live burial, the return of the dead. But it can also be a matter of something strangely beautiful, bordering on ecstasy."[107] I would like to return to the Peircean model here. If we were to feed the image and the words used in the stanza regarding "torture" into that model, the faltering logic would be revealed. The Interpretant does not match up properly with the Object, like so:



The third stanza then:

There was only one place to get to.
Simmering, perfumed,
The paths narrowed into the hollow.
And the snares almost effaced themselves –
Zeroes, shutting on nothing,

[107] Royle, p. 2

The intellectual uncertainty, the hesitancy and the threshold quality of "The Moon and the Yew Tree", has, as mentioned above, dissipated here. The speaker seems driven to the one place there is to get to, however threatening the path there is. The uncanniness is made apparent: The fragrant, simmering path leads to a "hollow", and there are rabbit traps either in the path or in the hollow or both. I want to look closer at "hollow". It is a word that suggests something sunken, carved out, a depression. In either case it is a downward place, rather than something upward. Moving on to the "snares" then, or "zeroes", that shut on "nothing", which is reminiscent of the voice of "nothing" in "Elm", the nothing that was the speaker's own madness. Might it be that same madness that propels the speaker forward in "The Rabbit Catcher"? Writes Rosenblatt: "Parallel symbolic settings are therefore a constant element in the process enacted by the poetry. Whether the poems take place inside a house or in the countryside, the identical metaphorical relationships are established between a vulnerable speaker and a destructive environment."[108] Rosenblatt calls it destructive, and I agree, however the issue is in *how* it is destructive. As in "The Detective", which I presume is the poem "inside a house" that Rosenblatt refers to, and which I will discuss at length later, the destructive environment in "The Rabbit Catcher" is caused by a series of bizarre events unfolding in an environment that appears nothing but uncanny. "The Detective" features a woman who either is immured in her home in the country, or goes up in smoke, or simply disappears, body part by body part, slowly over the years. And in "The Rabbit Catcher", as we see, it is the evil intent of nature and the return of the dead that is out to harm the vulnerable speaker, who nonetheless also chooses this particular path, and even finds beauty in the malignity it presents.

(…)
The absence of shrieks
Made a hole in the hot day, a vacancy.
The glassy light was a clear wall,
The thickets quiet.

Here again is the "absence" of shrieks, the nothing, that is uncanny. It is the curiously non-existing shrieks that poke holes in the hot day, leaving a "vacancy", again a referent to "nothing". The "clear wall" also suggests something transparent and "not there". And the silence runs through to the end: Even the thickets are quiet. In the poem "The Detective", there is a

[108] Rosenblatt, p. 28

reverse of this, the first line of the fourth stanza, where the *presence* of a particular sound is what's uncanny:

> In that valley the train shrieks echo like souls on hooks.
>
> That is the valley of death,

"Moreover, where does the uncanny effect of silence, solitude and darkness come from?"[109] Freud asks himself or us in *The Uncanny*, and answers a few pages later, "(…) all we can say is that these are factors connected with infantile anxiety, something that most of us never wholly overcome."[110] Frieda Hughes wrote about Sylvia Plath's own introductions to her late poems, written for BBC, in the foreword to *Ariel: The Restored Edition*: "These introductions made me smile, they have to be the most understated commentaries imaginable for poems that are pared down to their sharpest points of imagery and delivered with tremendous skill. When I read them I imagine my mother, reluctant to undermine with explanation the concentrated energy she'd poured into her verse, in order to preserve its ability to shock and surprise."[111] Hughes' conclusions coupled with Freud's writings, make me think that perhaps the uncanniness in some of the poems were put there *deliberately* by Plath. She relied on us being shocked by her skewed logic, she relied on us "never wholly" having overcome the infantile anxiety Freud is referring to. As Royle puts it: "'The Uncanny' is a great text about how to do things with silence, as much as 'how to do things with words'."[112] One could say the same about Plath's poetry. The death drive associated with her poems is also lurking in these silences and absences. "(…) if we listen closely, or rather, if we read attentively, we may remark that the very *Stummheit* of the death drive precludes it from ever speaking for itself; it is inevitably dependent on another discourse to be seen or heard. And that discourse, however much it may seek to efface itself before the 'silence' it seeks to articulate, is anything but innocent or neutral. The death drive may be dumb, but its articulation in a theoretical and speculative discourse is not" writes Samuel Weber in *The Legend of Freud: Expanded Edition*.[113]

> I felt a still busyness, an intent.

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[109] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 153
[110] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 159
[111] Plath, *Ariel,* p. xv
[112] Royle, p. 86
[113] Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud: Expanded Edition*, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 168

I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt,
Ringing the white china.
How they awaited him, those little deaths!
They waited like sweethearts. They excited him.

Rosenblatt reads this, the penultimate stanza, thus:

> As the poem continues, we discover that the death prepared for the rabbit is the same as the death prepared for the human speaker. The 'hands' are, of course, the hands of the rabbit catcher, and the tea mug and white china are the round snares with their destructive interior. The domestic world of the speaker and the natural world of the rabbit are here one and the same. Death and birth, rabbit and human, play out identical roles in a death process that binds all beings together.[114]

If that is the case, then it is almost as if the vulnerable rabbit becomes the vulnerable speaker's double. About the link between the doubles, or *Doppelgänger*, Freud writes in *The Uncanny*: "This relationship is intensified by the spontaneous transmission of mental processes from one of these persons to the other – what we call telepathy – so that the one becomes co-owner of the other's knowledge, emotions and experience. Moreover, a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self, or he may substitute the other's self for his own."[115] In the final stanza, the speaker discloses that the threats she has experienced, the traps she has seen and the deaths she "feels" make her think of a personal relationship:

And we, too, had a relationship –
Tight wires between us,
Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring
Sliding shut on some quick thing,
The constriction killing me also.

The mind like a ring is where the speaker feels she's entrapped in, and it will "slide shut" on a quick, meaning alive, thing.

6 The Detective

What was she doing when it blew in
Over the seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountains?

[114] Rosenblatt, pp. 44-45
[115] Freud, *The Uncanny*, pp. 141-142

Was she arranging cups? It's important.
Was she at the window, listening?
In that valley the train shrieks echo like souls on hooks.

(---)

There is the smell of polish, there are plush carpets.
There is the sunlight, playing its blades,

In *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard describes a house thus: "the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."[116] And there are indeed lines in "The Detective" that indicate such domestic bliss-like topophilia: Seven hills, a red furrow, a blue mountain coupled with the cozy familiarity of the clanking sound of teacups coming from the kitchen, the scent of polish, soft carpets, and family photographs. However, Plath's poem makes a mockery of that, which Bachelard describes. This is a poem about domesticity gone awry. What cuts through it, is a chugging train, seemingly on its way to hell, making a shrieking "echo like souls on hooks", an overt hint at the trains transporting victims to the Nazi concentration camps. Menacing trains feature in several of Plath's fall of 1962 poems, "Getting There", for instance, in which the speaker drags her body through the straw of the boxcars of a train that is being pumped ahead "by these pistons, this blood", and "Daddy", where the speaker imagines herself being chuffed off like a Jew via an engine to "Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen." In a much earlier journal entry, from March 29, 1958, Plath mentions her preoccupation with the art of Giorgio de Chirico and "everywhere in Chirico city, the trapped train puffing its cloud in a labyrinth of heavy arches, vaults, arcades"[117] hinting at a fixation with the train as a symbol of terror.

Once the reader has been introduced to the fact that the cozy house described in the poem is de facto a crime scene, the allusion to the death camps extends to include the gas chambers disguised as shower rooms, meaning space disguised as something it is not, not unlike the hospital imagery of the previously discussed "Tulips". Perhaps whatever blew in at the beginning, in the first line of the first stanza, arrives with that train. A nightmare with a name:

That is the valley of death, though the cows thrive
In her garden the lies were shaking out their moist silks

[116] Bachelard, p. 28
[117] Plath, *Journals*, p. 359

These cows are not a pastoral prop, rather they are put there as warning posts that might as well read: Danger ahead![118] Here the most banal and innocent images are menacing, the garden is an evil place where lies, not rugs or clean laundry, are "shaking out their moist silks". "Moist" illustrating something fresh and recent, and the silk pointing at something smooth.

> And the eyes of the killer moving sluglike and sidelong,
> Unable to face the fingers (…)
> The fingers were tamping a woman into a wall

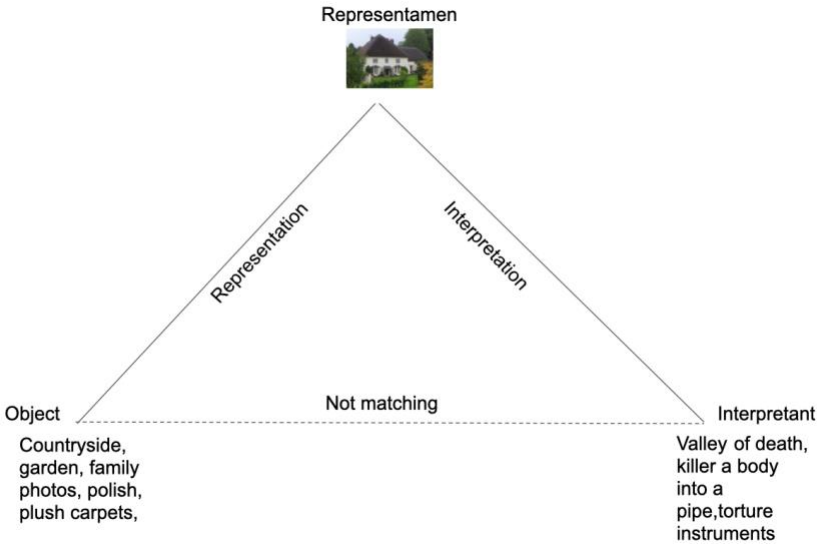
A killer is introduced, and he is being compared to a slug, something destructive to the garden just mentioned, "sidelong" again hints at something has been done "on the side", not straight-up and in the open. The killer is unable to face the crime he has committed. Kendall, who treats the poem like a criminal case, tugging at whatever loose ends he can find in trying to find the party guilty enough to prosecute, refers to the case as that of "abandonment" and calls the surroundings "inconsequential".[119] However, the surroundings, as I have pointed out, are replete with evil intent and loaded with threat. Besides a killer is not a killer unless he has killed someone. There's an implication of immurement in the poem, of burying someone alive by putting them in a confined space with no way out. The idea of being buried alive is a terrifying fantasy which Freud calls the "crown of the uncanny"[120] perhaps because it is, as he explains, not terrifying at all since it is all about a fantasy of going back to life as we all once knew it: Life in the womb, that same enclosure.[121] Royle points out that what in the English translation reads as "intra-uterine existence" is in Freud's original German "Leben im Mutterleib", which literally means "life within the mother's body".[122] If indeed being buried alive can be seen as the uncanny return to the womb, then Plath's poem performs that action two-fold: The vanished woman was *already* stuck in the womb of domesticity before she was tampered into the wall, since the house itself can be viewed as representing the womb in Freud's theory in which a return to the womb is the ultimate goal represented by nostalgia, and, as Vidler puts it in *The Architectural Uncanny* "a true 'homesickness'."[123] Plath herself seems to have been ambivalent regarding family life and

[118] In letters Plath wrote from around the time "The Detective" was composed, "cowlife", "cowdumb", and "cowland" occur and are used to describe country life or country itself as well as a description for mindless living. Plath, *Letters*, pp. 778, 857, 876, 881
[119] Kendall, p. 90
[120] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 150
[121] Ibid.
[122] Royle, p. 143
[123] Vidler, p. 55

all things domestic. In her letters she frequently talks about finding joy in cooking, baking, and caring for her husband and children. However, in the fall of 1962 her feelings had taken a U-turn and little over a week after having written "The Detective", on October 12, 1962, she states in a letter to her mother that she writes better than ever after her husband, who has "behaved like a bastard, a boor, a crook, (…) & deceived us about his feelings"[124], has left her and their children, and that his absence has made her leap in writing possible, as if "domesticity had choked me"[125] Still a few days later, on October 16, she writes "I must not go back to the womb or retreat "[126]. The body is not only immured, it is also stuffed into a pipe, and the smoke rising – again suggesting a Holocaust reference, though the smoke seems to come from the kitchen oven, that mundane domestic witchery:

> A body into a pipe, and the smoke rising.
> This is the smell of years burning, here in the kitchen.

Here again is that disconnect that becomes visible using Peirce's model; the Interpretant does not match up with the Object.



The poet takes for granted that the reader has access to the public memory bank of Holocaust images. There are the various instruments of torture:

[124] Plath, *Letters*, p. 855
[125] Plath, *Letters*, p. 856
[126] Plath, *Letters*, p. 862

Did it come like an arrow, did it come like a knife?
Which of the poisons is it?
Which of the nerve-curlers, the convulsors? Did it electrify?

The speaker positions them inside a house on the countryside: Bodies go up in smoke, or disappear into walls, leaving the crime scene empty but for a trail of smoke.
Jeannine Dobbs in 'Viciousness in the Kitchen': Sylvia Plath's Domestic Poetry, makes a connection between the polished furniture and the dead woman: "There has been a death, but paradoxically 'there is no body in the house at all.' There is no body because the woman has long since ceased to exist as a person. Her functions have been performed, she has kept the furniture polished; but her personhood has been effaced, her sexuality atrophied." [127]
Dobbs is referring to the woman's vaporizing into thin air in mutilated pieces:

The mouth first, its absence reported
(…)
The breasts next.
(…)
Then the dry wood, the gates,
The brown motherly furrows, the whole estate.

There is something uncanny about the various body parts disappearing one at a time, estranged from one another and disconnected from the center, almost like the dismembered limbs Freud found had "something highly uncanny about them."[128] Axelrod points out that "The Detective" is a poem in which "a prevaricating man murders a woman's deep self, while her physical being survives."[129] I find that assessment somewhat limping, after the vaporization of some very physical body parts, even though I appreciate the argument. Kroll hits it better when she argues that the speaker has "been made unreal by a man" and that the man, the husband, is by implication "the killer."[130] A person lacking vital body parts is indeed "unreal".

[127] http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/dobbs.html
[128] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 150
[129] Axelrod, p. 231
[130] Kroll, p. 12

7 The Bee Meeting

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva's interpretation of Freud's unheimlich leads her to conclude that as heimlich ties into unheimlich it comes to signify "'concealed, kept from sight,'" and "'deceitful and malicious'."[131] The familiar and intimate revert into their very own antonyms bringing about "the uncanny strangeness harbored in *unheimlich*".[132] Kristeva writes that Freud "teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves".[133] As already concluded, strangeness *is* part of the uncanny, but in addition, Kristeva points at how encounters with strangers bring the unheimlich, the strange, back to heimlich, the familiar. An encounter with "the other" is at the same time an encounter with our Self. Confronting a stranger means rejecting and identifying with the other at the same time, in turn leading to intellectual uncertainty: "I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container (…), I feel 'lost', 'indistinct', 'hazy'."[134]

In "The Bee Meeting", we are faced with this "uncanny strange". This is a poem about a place in which a strange encounter occurs, but the uncanniness is also part of the landscape itself. Kendall locates the palpable threat[135] not only among the villagers, but also in the "sick and fleshy landscape"[136] as well. The setting seems chaste enough: a bridge and a grove in the country, where a group of people meet up. It is summer, and the countryside is abloom with flowers and shrubs. However, there's a foreboding of something about to take place, a ritual of sorts. The first question of twelve (in an eleven-stanza poem) heralds the intellectual uncertainty to unfold:

> Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are the villagers –

What Annas refers to as "her legitimacy as a member of this community (of beekeepers) is the subject of the poem and much of her ambivalence"[137] is, with Kristeva's logic, proof that she is a stranger among strangers, or, rather, a stranger within herself. The speaker's lack of comprehension and feeling of alienation is underscored by the fact that the villagers are:

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[131] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p. 182
[132] Ibid.
[133] Kristeva, p. 191
[134] Kristeva, p. 187
[135] Kendall, p. 135
[136] Kendall, p. 136
[137] Annas, p. 150

(…) all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?
(---)
I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?

Even as the villagers clothe her in a "white shop smock" does she remain a stranger and an outsider.

Everybody is nodding a square black head, they are knights in visors,
Breastplates of cheesecloth knotted under the armpits.

The above suggests that the villagers all connect in some awful way, as if sharing one big monstrous head. The knight's visors and the breastplates suggest war and violence. And binaries: White against black. One outnumbered by an army.

The flora too shows hostility, with no mercy or sympathy for the speaker's position as outsider/novice: The bean flowers are creamy but "with black eyes and leaves like bored hearts". The red, soon to be edible, flowers brutally remind her of blood clots dragged up on a string and the "barren body of the hawthorn" smells sickly and is equally capable of cruelty as it is "etherizing its children".

In the fifth stanza, the speaker is being outfitted in a black veil, suggestive of the hood put on someone about to be taken to the gallows:

And a black veil that molds to my face, they are making me one of them.
They are leading me to the shorn grove, the circle of hives

Kroll suggests that the putting on of the veil indeed means turning the speaker into one of the villagers[138], but that's an assessment I do not agree with. There is no merging of the speaker (who remains in white till the end of the poem) with the villagers (who, likewise, remain in black) at any time. The stranger in the speaker fails to merge with the stranger in the other, that is the villagers.

The following, sixth, stanza continues with a question that alludes to cruelty:

Is it some operation that is taking place?

[138] Kroll, p. 140

Someone among the villagers – the surgeon? – is gloved, helmeted, and dressed in white. Yet, the speaker cannot escape, she "cannot run, the very space has her captive, as she is "rooted" and "the gorse hurts me, with its yellow purses, its spiky armory". That is, she cannot run away from the strangeness in herself, which is being mirrored in the space itself, with its "strange" plants powered to hurt. In the grove the smoke "rolls and scarves", a reference to the atrocities of the Holocaust, and with it another hint at the alienation/division the speaker experiences between herself and the villagers. The Holocaust returns as a referent in the ninth stanza, with words such as "chambers" and "hunt":

> The villagers open the chambers, they are hunting the queen.

The grove has now become the center stage for the ritual about to be performed. Tuan writes how ritualistic forms of public humiliation, including executions, took place in primitive societies when someone deviated from the norm,[139] that is when someone acted "strange" or like a "stranger" or was a "stranger". Tuan differentiates between fearsome landscapes: "One is fear of the imminent collapse of his world and the approach of death – that final surrender of integrity to chaos. The other is a sense of personalized evil, the feeling that the hostile force, whatever its specific manifestation, possesses will."[140] The habit of anthropomorphizing nature, he explains, is a deeply ingrained one. Nature is seen as "packed with dangerous spirits"[141] and is, in some societies, viewed as the enemy of its population, a place to be mistrusted and feared. Magic in all forms, therefore, is used as a device of defense.[142]

In the penultimate stanza of the poem however, the narrative suddenly takes an abrupt turn. It veers from fear, to accomplishment. We are informed that the old queen is hiding, the duel between her and the new queen will not take place, and, most importantly: "there will be no killing".

The final stanza opens with a repeat confession and the presentation of the new position:

> I am exhausted, I am exhausted –
> Pillar of white in a blackout of knives.

[139] Tuan, p. 175
[140] Tuan, p. 7
[141] Tuan, p. 53
[142] Ibid.

The speaker, a pillar dressed in white, which, as Kroll reminds is the color for birth[143] against the black - the color, meanwhile, for death[144] - is standing as straight as ever, not about to crumble. Next, an explanation for the exhaustion:

> I am the magician's girl who does not flinch.
> The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands.
> Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished, why am I cold.

Kendall's reading of the ending of the poem is that the speaker remains an outsider, is lost in a state of confusion and that the coffin-like box, and "the coldness of the speaker hint at potentially fatal consequences."[145] He reads "magician's girl" as the speaker being nothing but a "prop or spectator."[146] I do not agree. I propose that "girl" may just as well be read as daughter, i.e. magician's daughter, who has a trick or two up her own sleeve. Read that way, "I am exhausted, I am exhausted –" makes more sense as well, implying that the speaker has spent all her resources, all her magic powers, and is tired but remains standing (which after all is the prime function of a "pillar"). She is cold, yes, but is that not just the shivering cold one feels, like the appearance of goosebumps, after having endured an especially frightening or arduous ordeal? In the center of the grove is the "long, white box", an ersatz sacrificial lamb, the stand-in for the speaker, the onlooker who narrowly escaped her fate. The neighbors may give each other a victorious handshake, as they remove their masks, while the speaker mockingly asks herself what they have accomplished. Kendall writes that the speaker does not achieve rebirth in "The Bee Meeting", although she is the one white among the others joint black. I say she does. Yes, the box in the last stanza is a "coffin", perhaps even the same coffin as in "Tulips", having traveled on the shrieking train through the valley of death pictured in "The Detective". However, it has been recycled, re-painted, and repurposed. It is now white, and thus merely a container for rebirth, rather than a Representamen for death. The magician's girl would know how to fake her own death, she knows how to survive terrifying ordeals. The magician's girl *always* pops up alive and well from the magic coffin in which she's been sawn in half, at the end of the show with a triumphant ta-da.

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[143] Kroll, p. 140
[144] Ibid.
[145] Kendall, p. 137
[146] Ibid.

8 Wintering

In *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief,* Ludwig Wittgenstein likens a person's subconscious thoughts to an underworld, a hidden, uncanny secret cellar[147], and Bachelard states that cellars are made up of passages with padlocked doors. "There, secrets are pondered, projects are prepared. And, underneath the earth, action gets under way."[148] He further refers to the cellar as the place one goes to dream and to "(lose) oneself in the distant corridors of an obscure etymology, looking for the treasure that cannot be found in words."[149] Vidler refers to the cellar as something damp, in which bric-a-brac is deposited, and that if it weren't so, our memory would be released from its unhealthy preoccupations and we would be able to live in the present.[150] That, in turn, suggests Freud's idea of something "that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed."[151] There's obviously something deeply unheimlich about a cellar. And it is in a cellar, that "Wintering", the last poem in the so-called bee sequence, takes place. The first stanza confirms the space, and introduces the activity:

> This is the easy time, there is nothing doing.
> I have whirled the midwife's extractor,
> I have my honey,
> Six jars of it,
> Six cat's eyes in the wine cellar,

What is the speaker doing in the cellar to begin with? Is she hiding something? Can she not perform her activity in daylight? The extractor along with the whirling suggest some kind of magic machinery, and magic, along with sorcery, is mentioned in Freud's *The Uncanny* as one of a number of unheimlich factors.[152] In *Totem and Taboo,* he expands on the meaning of magic, and describes it thus: "Magic must serve the most varied purposes. It must subject the process of nature to the will of man, protect the individual against enemies and dangers, and give him the

[147] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, University of California Press, 2007, p. 25
[148] Bachelard, p. 43
[149] Bachelard, p. 166
[150] Vidler, p. 64
[151] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 148
[152] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 149

power to injure his enemies."[153] It also picks up where "The Bee Meeting" left off, with the resourceful magician's girl who does not flinch. There are also the jars of honey, which seem to have a luminous sheen to them, which prompts the speaker to liken them to the eyes of a cat, adding to the sense of magic. For what is magic without a cat? The jars themselves suggest test tubes or beakers, the type of paraphernalia typically found in a chemical laboratory. There's also the fact that the extractor belongs to the midwife, which has an old-fashioned ring to it, something hinting at magical powers, and also of course life and producing life. It is not life per se, but honey, that is being produced here, a Biblical allusion to hope for deliverance, for Exodus 3:8 mentions how the Israelites will be delivered out of the hand of the Egyptians and be brought to the land "flowing with milk and honey".

> Wintering in a dark without window
> At the heart of the house
> Next to the last tenant's rancid jam
> And the bottles of empty glitters –
> Sir So-and-so's gin.

The second stanza confirms the sense of a confined space at the center of something, "the heart of the house", as if it the poem takes place in the realm of life and death. The sweetness of the honey and its symbol of hope has been replaced with old jam, "rancid", implying something contaminated or musty, very much like the idea of the cellar itself. Something old and stale. Here no cat's eyes shine, rather the glitter of old gin bottles.

> This is the room I have never been in.
> This is the room I could never breathe in.
> The black bunched in there like a bat,
> No light

Holbrook recognizes the cellar as the same cellar in which Esther Greenwood in Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* tries to kill herself, which was an autobiographical recount of Plath's own suicide attempt, which took place in the cellar of her family home.[154] The cellar, viewed with that knowledge, becomes a space filled with anxiety and despair: "The room is like one that can recur in dreams – the room of the self that one fears is empty, decayed, deathly – the room which

[153] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 67
[154] Holbrook, p. 227

symbolises the fear of the internal breakdown,"[155] Holbrook goes on to write. I believe that the poem also intimates that the cellar is a coffin, which yet again brings about the idea of being buried alive – "dark without a window", "the room I have never been in", "the room I could never breathe in" for instance, are good examples – bolstered with such graveyard effects as cats and bats. Suddenly we are far from the promise of the land of flowing honey and all suggestions of life have evaporated, as the very basic activity of someone alive, that of breathing, is no longer possible. Interestingly though, the title of the poem suggests not death necessarily, but hibernation (the bees in the poem hibernate), or something akin to holding one's breath, patience perhaps. Meanwhile there's the image of something "black bunched in there like a bat", recalling the panic bird of "Elm", that dark alien thing the speaker feels inside:

> I am inhabited by a cry.
> Nightly it flaps out
> (…)
>
> I am terrified by this dark thing
> That sleeps in me;
> All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

If we are to read "Wintering" in a similar vein, it brings us back to Holbrook's idea of the cellar as the room of the *self*, rather than a physical space outside of the self. That would position the "black bunched in there like a bat" *inside* the speaker, as anxiety – perhaps – amongst other feelings, "honey" for real hope, "rancid old jam" for, as it says in "Elm": "the isolate, slow faults" that the speaker cannot seem to overcome, the false hope of the "glitter" of the gin bottles that belong to somebody else.

> No light
> But the torch and its faint
>
> Chinese yellow on appalling objects –
> Black asininity. Decay.
> Possession.
> It is they who own me.
> Neither cruel nor indifferent.

[155] Holbrook, p. 228

There's light, however vague and disappointing. The light is yellow, a color which value is difficult to decipher in Plath's poetry. In an earlier poem, "In Plaster", yellow stands for something old and ugly, but in later poetry that does not necessarily hold true. However, here the faint light falls on appalling objects: "Black asininity", "decay", "possession". It is fairly obvious now, that the focus has shifted from the cellar as a space *outside* the speaker, to the speaker's secret innermost core, the faint light illuminating her faults. Holbrook argues that there is paranoia in the word "asininity": "it is as if she fears an animal predator in the dark, which she projects from her inner world – as Mahler does when he sees (and hears) the howling ape of existential nothingness in *Das Lied von der Erde*."[156] That nothingness, again, is a continuation from the maddening "voice of nothing" that the tree in "Elm" detects in the poet. Holbrook, however, seems to indicate that the predator is projected from the speaker's *inner* world onto her *outer* world, while I suggest the cellar *is* her inner world. The speaker cannot get out of herself, she cannot command her anxieties to go away, it is they "who own (her)". She calls that ownership neither cruel nor indifferent, only, as we see in the first line of the following stanza, "ignorant":

> Only ignorant.
> This is the time of hanging on for the bees – the bees
> (…)
> Filing like soldiers
> To the syrup tin

I read the "hanging on" as further evidence that this is not death, not a complete "burial alive" scenario, but instead a kind of hibernation. It seems also as if the speaker identifies with the bees, like them she is in for a long season, a "wintering", when there is nothing much – the "nothing doing" of the first stanza - but waiting to do. A season for slowing down, for hanging on, something to endure.

The whirling activity taking place in the dark, the turning of one thing into something else (extracting honey from the honeycomb) may also very well suggest a metamorphosis not unlike that of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly, which in this case would suggest the cellar space, whether mental or physical in nature, as a version of the dark encasement of a cocoon. "Filing like soldiers" also lends itself to the idea of "hanging on", as in "soldier on". That this is a season

[156] Holbrook, p. 228

in suspension gets even clearer in the sixth stanza, where the speaker reveals that the syrup tin the bees crowd to, is just that, an ersatz for the real sweetness they cannot have:

> To make up for the honey I've taken.
> Tate and Lyle keeps them going,
> (…)
> It is Tate and Lyle they live on, instead of flowers.
> They take it. The cold sets in.

The next stanzas offer a shift, the binary couple "black" and "white" is introduced. The bees balling in a black mass, which the speaker likens to a "mind", against the whiteness of the "smiling" snow. The poem goes through a shift here, the "I" was dropped already in the sixth stanza, and the next lines seem to want to break out of the physical as well as mental space of the cellar into the open. It takes on a new path; from the dark and damp, from the black balled mass of the mind to the outside, and the white snow, and – eventually - up in the air.

> Now they ball in a mass,
> Black
> Mind against all that white
> The smile of the snow is white
> It spreads itself out, a mile-long body of Meissen
>
> Into which, on warm days,
> They can only carry their dead.
> The bees are all women,
> Maids and the long royal lady
> They have got rid of the men,
>
> The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors
> Winter is for women –
> The woman, still at her knitting,
> At the cradle of Spanish walnut,
> Her body a bulb in the cold and too dumb to think.

The resourcefulness of the women has made survivors of them – like the bees themselves – it is the women alone who survive the hard season. But what of the speaker? What happens to her? Since the "I" was dropped, she must have merged her identity with that of the bees, and the women, for whom the winter season is. Thus, the speaker too is a survivor of the cold season. The trick for this survival is patience, to "hang on", to quietly be doing "hanging on" activities such as whirling honey, knitting, watching the baby in the cradle, being still like a bulb in the

snow, making do with substitute sweetness, waiting for spring, not thinking. The speaker, like the bees, is ready to break out of the cellar, the cocoon of both physical and mental space.

> Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas
> Succeed in banking their fires
> To enter another year?
> What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?
> The bees are flying. They taste the spring.

The theme of rebirth was one well used by Plath, especially through exploring the Biblical story about Lazarus[157], the dead man who was brought back to life by Jesus. She had used it as a theme for "Poem for a Birthday" already in 1959, and then, in the fall of 1962, she revived it in the poem "Lady Lazarus". Earlier journal excerpts show that her fascination with the story began as early as 1956[158] and one particular entry, from June 15, 1959, points to her thinking of Lazarus as a theme for short stories and possibly even her novel *The Bell Jar*: "MENTAL HOSPITAL STORIES: Lazarus theme. Come back from the dead. Kicking off thermometers. Violent ward. LAZARUS MY LOVE."[159]

The trajectory of "Wintering", starting in the dark cellar and ending with the flying bees tasting spring, very much suggests the Lazarus theme, which, translated into unheimlich, might read "the return of the dead".

> Let us take first the uncanny effects associated with the omnipotence of thoughts, instantaneous wish-fulfilment, secret harmful forces and the return of the dead. There is no mistaking the conditions under which the sense of the uncanny arises here. We (…) once regarded such things as real possibilities (…) Today we no longer believe them, having *surmounted* such modes of thought. Yet we do not feel entirely secure in these new convictions; the old ones live on in us, on the look-out for confirmation. Now, as soon as something happens in our lives that seems to confirm these old, discarded beliefs, we experience a sense of the uncanny, and this may be reinforced by judgements like the following: 'So it's true, then, that you can kill another man just by wishing him dead, that the dead really go on living and manifest themselves at the scene of their former activities', and so on.[160]

One may of course push the Lazarus envelope even further and argue that it is the Jesus story itself that "Wintering" blooms out of. While Lazarus was brought out of the grave, Jesus *rose* and *ascended* into Heaven. There are a few clues in the poem that points to this. Apart from the

[157] John 11:1-4
[158] Plath, *Journals*, p 199: "I feel like Lazarus: that story has such fascination. Being dead, I rose up again"
[159] Plath, *Journals*, p. 497
[160] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 154

movement from the grave to the sky, which I just discussed, there's the bees "flying", suggesting a further upward ascent, not just a departure from the grave, and the reference to the Christmas roses[161], blooming in the snow, the reference to Christ and the play on the word "rose" as in both the flower and the past tense of "rise". Christ and Mary figure quite a bit in Plath's later poetry. In the poem "Years", written about a month after "Wintering", she writes:

> Is it a tiger this year, this roar at the door?
> Is it a Christus
> The awful
>
> God-bit in him
> Dying to fly and be *done with* it? (my italics)

While these particular lines suggest a desire to die, rather than a hope for spring and renewed life, it is of interest to demonstrate the idea of Christ and flying. I found, quite by chance and quite uncannily, a reference in Royle's *Uncanny* that speaks to the stanza above. It is written regarding the death drive in the poetry of T.S. Eliot but might as well have been written about the death drive in the poetry of Plath: "T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is one of innumerable literary texts that provide correspondences with Freud's theory. Pervasively characterized by articulations of the desire to be *still*, to have it all over and *done with*."[162] The italics, again, are mine.

9 Conclusion

The purpose of my thesis has been to explore uncanny space in a handful of poems by Sylvia Plath, according to Freud's concept of the *unheimlich* and what has evolved from it. I have analyzed seven of Plath's poems from the restored edition of her poetry collection *Ariel*. I have investigated several uncanny factors as they appear in the poems, with the help of a number of books on Plath and her poetry, narrative space and topophilia, books on the uncanny and related material, and to support my findings I have also used Plath's letters and journal entries.

I have taken a closer look at these poems according to the dates they were written, by doing so I may have suggested a unity or a sense of continuity that does not necessarily exist or has no real bearing. Plath's poetry hinges a great deal on suspense, shock, and fear. She utilizes almost

[161] https://www.britannica.com/plant/Christmas-rose
[162] Royle, p. 98

all the concepts that Freud files as “uncanny”, except for “castration complex” and maybe one or two more. The physical space in which Plath’s poetry unfolds is sometimes uncanny by nature, by that I mean that it takes place near a graveyard at night (“The Moon and the Yew Tree”), in a dark cellar suggesting something repressed or possibly a grave (“Wintering”), or in an empty house following a bizarre, violent “murder” (“The Detective”). At other times the space is *made* uncanny by way of referral, such as in “Tulips”, where a regular hospital visit becomes the eerie backdrop for a sick slide towards Hades, or in “Elm” where a tree has the ability not only to talk, but to shriek. In other poems, elements in nature provide the setting with uncanny threats, such as the wind and the sea in “The Rabbit Catcher”, or the hawthorn, which in “The Bee Meeting”, “etherizes its children”. Space is made uncanny at times by the use of repetition and questions (for instance the last line in “Elm” and the many questions raised in “The Bee Meeting”), suggesting a spiral of thoughts from which the speaker cannot exit, an omnipotence of thought as well as a sense of intellectual uncertainty. There is also the uncanniness of the word play of heimlich/unheimlich, the familiar versus the strange in “The Bee Meeting”, which I highlighted with the help of Julia Kristeva’s take on Freud’s concept and the detection of foreignness in ourselves (as well as others).

I have illustrated, by using a modified version of Peirce’s triadic sign model, that the interpretation of an object, be it a hospital, a house in the country, or a tool of torture, does not quite make sense, it does not add up, and therefore creates a deceptive logic. This may well be a deliberate approach, again to secure a particular intensity and anxiety. However, it also connects to that, which Hughes talks about in *Winter Pollen*, when he mentions Plath’s compulsive interest in making patterns and the *Ariel* poems being the result of that effort (see 1.3 Sylvia Plath). By utilizing Peirce’s model, I have illuminated one such set of patterns.

Another discovery I made is that some of Plath’s poems have a trajectory moving from a dark, underground, or low space, upwards. In “Tulips” what that means, is the speaker moving from the attraction of Hades and death up and back to life. In “The Detective”, the poem starts out in the “valley of death”, suggesting something “sunken”, and ending with the image of the moon in the sky and a crow in a tree. Finally, in “Wintering”, the setting of the poem shifts from cellar to the open air, creating a Lazarus-effect.

Plath’s poetry is puzzling, and her imagery not easily untangled. It relies on the reader being knowledgeable about history and psychoanalysis, even mythology. It plays on emotions that trigger the uncanny; it touches that spot in us that is vulnerable to primitive emotions such as the

fear of what our thoughts can do, fear of the dead, and of death and dying. It talks to us about what it is like to not know where we are, about intellectual uncertainty and what it feels like to be stuck in a loop – all of which are fairly common human emotions. One almost gets the sense that Plath is using the uncanny as one of her patterns, in order to, as Frieda Hughes put it, "shock and surprise"[163] us. Unraveled, Plath's poetry remains a mystery, exposing almost as many questions as it answers: Is the uncanny planted there or is it a result of something else? Can it be called a "technique"? How come it is there in plain sight in some poems, while in others it takes more of an effort to expose?

In the beginning of my paper, I presented Sylvia Plath's repeated quest "Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten", as a starting point of what became *my* quest for the uncanny space in her poetry. Heine's line snakes its way through Plath's poetry, it is almost as if it functions as a piston, propelling her forward to explore her various themes, looking for that elusive answer, or perhaps a *different* answer altogether. Over and over again, she recycles these themes as if the "soll" – or "should" – of the poem does not quite end up where she expects it to. However, in the pursuit of this answer – the "soll" or "should" answer – *another* answer is revealed. The hospital in "Tulips" s*hould* mean something but is revealed to mean something quite different and the pleasant house in the country in "The Detective" s*hould* indicate blissful topophilia but instead indicates the opposite. In Plath's poetry the innocuous is filled with terror: a meeting with other villagers in "The Bee Meeting", which s*hould* imply a neighborly gathering, but instead turns into a macabre ritual, the making of honey in the basement in "Wintering" becomes a question of survival. Enter the uncanny. Like Susan Bernstein writes in "It Walks: the ambulatory uncanny", suddenly and unexpectedly it stands in our doorway. What Plath does in her poetry is paving its way.

[163] Plath, *Ariel,* p. xv

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11 Appendix

“Tulips”

The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.
Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls this bed, these hands.
I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff
Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.
Stupid, it has to take everything in.
The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,
They pass the way gulls inland in their white caps,
Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another,
So it is impossible to tell how many there are.

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.
They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep.
Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage —
My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

I have let thing slip, a thirty-year old cargo boat
Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.
They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.
Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley
I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.
I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

I didn’t want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How free it is, you have no idea how free —
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.

They are subtle; they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color,
A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.

Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.
The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me
Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,
And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
Between the eye of the sun and the eye of the tulips,
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.
The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.

Before they came the air was calm enough,
Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.
Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise.
Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river
Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.
They concentrate my attention, that was happy
Playing and resting without committing itself.

The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves.
The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,
And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country far away as health.

"The Moon and the Yew Tree"

This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary.
The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue.
The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God,
Prickling my ankles and murmuring of their humility.
Fumey, spirituous mists inhabit this place
Separated from my house by a row of headstones.
I simply cannot see where there is to get to.

The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,
White as a knuckle and terribly upset.
It drags the sea after it like a dark crime, it is quiet
With the O-gape of complete despair. I live here.
Twice on Sunday, the bells startle the sky —
Eight great tongues affirming the Resurrection.
At the end, they soberly bong out their names.

The yew tree points up. It has a Gothic shape.

The eyes lift after it and find the moon.
The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.
How I would like to believe in tenderness —
The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,
Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes.

I have fallen a long way. Clouds are flowering
Blue and mystical over the face of the stars.
Inside the church, the saint will be all blue,
Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,
Their hands and faces stiff with holiness.
The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild.
And the message of the yew tree is blackness — blackness and silence.

"Elm"

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
It is what you fear.
I do not fear it: I have been there.

Is it the sea you hear in me,
Its dissatisfactions?
or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?

Love is a shadow.
How you lie and cry after it
Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,
Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf.
Echoing, echoing.

Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?
This is the rain now, this big hush.
Ant this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic.

I have suffered the atrocity of sunset.
Scorched to the root.
My red filaments burn and stand, a hand or wires.

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
A wind of such violence
Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.

The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me
Cruelly, being barren.

Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.

I let her go. I let her go
Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.
How your bad dreams possess and endow me.

I am inhabited by a cry.
Nightly it flaps out
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?

I am incapable of more knowledge.
What is this, this face
So murderous in its strangle of branches? —

Its snaky acids hiss.
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
That kill, that kill, that kill.

"The Rabbit Catcher"

It was a place of force –-
The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,
Tearing off my voice, and the sea
Blinding me with its lights, the lives of the dead
Unreeling in it, spreading like oil.

I tasted the malignity of the gorse,
Its black spikes,
The extreme unction of its yellow candle-flowers.
They had an efficiency, a great beauty,
And were extravagant, like torture.

There was only one place to get to.
Simmering, perfumed,
The path narrowed into the hollow.
And the snares almost effaces themselves —
Zeroes, shutting on nothing.

Set close, like birth pangs.

The absence of shrieks
Made a hoe in the hot day, a vacancy.
The glassy light was a clear wall,
The thickets quiet.

I felt a busyness, an intent.
I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt,
Ringing with white china
How they awaited him, those little deaths!
They waited like sweethearts. They excited him.

And we, too, had a relationship –-
Tight wires between us,
Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring
Sliding shut on some quick thing.
The constriction killing me also.

"The Detective"

What was she doing when it blew in
Over the seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountain?
Was she arranging cups? It is important.
Was she at the window, listening?
In that valley the train shrieks echo like souls on hooks.

That is the valley of death, though the cows thrive.
In her garden the lies were shaking out their moist silks
And the eyes of the killer moving sluglike and sidelong,
Unable to face the fingers, those egotists.
The fingers were tamping a woman into a wall.

A body into a pipe, and the smoke rising.
This is the smell of years burning, here in the kitchen,
These are the deceits, tacked up like family photographs,
And this is a man, look at his smile,
The death weapon? No-one is dead.

There is no body in the house at all.
There is the smell of polish, there are push carpets.
There is the sunlight, playing its blades,
Bored hoodlum in a red room
Where the wireless talks to itself like an elderly relative.

Did it come like an arrow, did it come like a knife?
Which of the poisons is it?
Which of the nerve-curler, the convulsors? Did it electrify?
This is a case without a body.

The body does not come into it at all.
The mouth first, its absence reported
In the second year. It had been insatiable
And in punishment was hung out like brown fruit
To wrinkle and dry.

The breasts next.
They were harder, two white stones.
The milk came yellow, then blue and sweet like water.
There was no absence of lips, there were two children,
But their bones showed, and the moon smiled.

Then the dry wood, the gate,
The brown motherly furrows, the whole estate.
We walk on air, Watson.
There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus.
There is only a crow in a tree. Make notes.

"The Bee Meeting"

Who are these people at the bridge to meet me They are the villagers —
The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees.
In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection,
And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?
They are smiling and taking out veils tacked to ancient hats.

I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?
Yes, here is the secretary of bees with her white shop smock,
Buttoning the cuffs at my wrists and the slit form my neck to my knees.
Now I am milkweed silk, the bees will not notice.
They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear.

Which is the rector now, is it that man in black?
Which is the midwife, is that her blue coat?
Everybody is nodding a square black head, they are knights in visors,
Breastplates of cheesecloth knotted under the armpits.
Their smiles and their voices are changing. I am lead through a beanfield.

Strips of tinfoil winking like people,
Feather dusters fanning their hands in a sea of bean flowers,
Creamy bean flowers with black eyes and leaves like bored hearts.
Is it blood clots the tendrils are dragging up that string?
No, no, it is scarlet flowers that will one day be edible.

Now they are giving me a fashionable white straw Italian hat
And a black veil that molds to my face, they are making me on of them.
They are leading me to the shorn grove, the circle of hives.

Is it the hawthorn that smells so sick?
The barren body of hawthorn, etherizing its children.

Is it some operation that is taking place?
Is it the surgeon my neighbors are waiting for,
This apparition in a green helmet,
Shining gloves and white suit.
Is it the butcher, the grocer, the postman, someone I know?

I cannot run, I am rooted, and the gorse hurts me
With its yellow purses, its spiky armory.
I could not run without having to run forever.
The white hive is snug as a virgin.
Sealing off her brood cells, her honey, and quietly humming.

Smoke rolls and scarves in the grove.
The mind of the hive thinks this is the end of everything.
Here they come, the outriders, on their hysterical elastics.
If I stand very still, they will think I am cow parsley,
A gullible head untouched by their animosity.

Not even nodding, a personage in a hedgerow.
The villagers open the chambers, they are hunting the queen.
Is she hiding, is she eating honey? She is very clever.
She is old, old, old, she must live another year, and she knows it.
While in their fingerjoint cells the new virgins

Dream of a duel they will win inevitably,
A curtain of wax dividing them from the bride flight,
The upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her.
The villagers are moving the virgins, there will be no killing.
The old queen does not show herself, is she so ungrateful?

I am exhausted, I am exhausted —
Pillar of white in a blackout of knives.
I am the magician's girl who does not flinch.
The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands.
Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished,
why am I cold.

"Wintering"

This is the easy time, there is nothing doing.
I have whirled the midwife's extractor,
I have my honey,
Six jars of it,
Six cat's eyes in the wine cellar,

Wintering in a dark without a window
At the heart of the house
Next to the last tenant's rancid jam
And the bottles of empty glitters —
Sir So-and-so's gin.

This is the room I have never been in.
This is the room I could never breathe in.
The black bunched in there like a bat.
No light
But the torch and its faint

Chinese yellow on appalling objects —
Black asininity. Decay.
Possession.
It is they who own me.
Neither cruel nor indifferent,

Only ignorant.
This is the time of hanging on for the bees — the bees
So slow I hardly know them,
Filing like soldiers
To the syrup tin

To make up for the honey I've taken.
Tate and Lyle keeps them going,
The refined snow.
It is Tate and Lyle they live on, instead of flowers.
They take it. The cold sets in.

Now they ball in a mass,
Black
Mind against all that white,
The smile of the snow is white.
It spreads itself out, a mile-long body of Meissen,

Into which, on warm days,
They can only carry their dead.
The bees are all women,
Maids and the long royal lady.
They have got rid of the men,

The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors.
Winter is for women —
The woman, still at her knitting,
At the cradle of Spanish walnut,
Her body a bulb in the cold and too dumb to think.

Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas
Succeed in banking their fires
To enter another year?
What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?
The bees are flying. They taste the spring.