

Our Life in Six Lyrical Poems: Sylvia Plath

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The Philoctetes Center

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Braziller: Michael Braziller
Muske-Dukes: Carol Muske-Dukes

Levy: Good evening. I'm Francis Levy, Co-Director of the Philoctetes Center, and welcome to the penultimate edition of our course, *Our Life in Six Lyrical Poems*. It's really been a very exciting and, for me at least, a moving year, which Mike Braziller has presided over. As many of you know, Mike Braziller is a very old friend of mine who is really responsible for teaching me about poetry forty years ago. So I am very pleased to present Mike Braziller to you. He will introduce our distinguished guest tonight and afterwards you may go to the back and purchase any books you want. Thank you very much.

Braziller: Thanks, Frank. Tonight we have Carol Muske-Dukes. She's the author of seven books of poetry, including *Sparrow*, which was a National Book Award finalist, and *An Octave Above Thunder: New and Selected Poems*. Her novels are *Life After Death*, *Saving St. Germ*, *Dear Digby* and, forthcoming this fall, *Channeling Mark Twain*. She is Professor of English and Creative Writing and founding Director of the new PhD Program in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Southern California. So, welcome.

Muske-Dukes: Thank you.

Braziller: She will begin with a brief biographical overview before we get into the poems, a little history or information on Sylvia Plath. Then the first poem we'll be looking at is "Daddy."

Muske-Dukes: It's funny, I was coming up here on the subway and was sitting next to a young woman and I looked over at her. She was reading a poetry anthology and she was reading a poem by Ted Hughes. I'm sure there was a poem by Sylvia in the anthology somewhere, too.

I'm going to give a very brief biography of Sylvia Plath. Most of you do know, I think, her life story. Though, I think, unfortunately many of you, and many of us, are subject to the great sensationalism that surrounds Sylvia Plath's life. Unfortunately, you can't avoid talking about some of the events of her life that tend to be a little more tabloid-esque because they connect as real events to her poetry so powerfully. So I wouldn't describe her, as many do, as a confessional poet; I'd describe her as an oracular poet. She transformed every fact, every autobiographical fact, in her poetry.

She was born in 1932. She lived just outside of Boston. Her parents were Otto and Aurelia Plath. Her father was German. This is very significant, actually. He was a Professor of Biology and a beekeeper—a specialist on bees—and this figures very strongly in her poems. Her mother Aurelia also figures very strongly in her poems.

Sylvia Plath was a *wunderkind*, an incredible student almost from the beginning, showered with prizes and honors, but always troubled. Her father died when she was eight years old, in 1940, and that was a significant event in her life and it figures again in her poems. He died of diabetes. She attended Smith College in 1950 on a full scholarship from the woman who wrote *Stella Dallas*, Olive Prouty. In fact, the summer of her junior year, she was the *Mademoiselle* editor. *Mademoiselle* used to be quite literary and they had a fiction editor every year—a college fiction editor—and she was the college fiction editor. She came home after that great honor and tried to kill herself by swallowing pills. A fictionalized account of that attempt on her life is in her book, *The Bell Jar*, which you probably also know, which was published after her death, under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas.

She received electroshock therapy. Psychotherapy also figures in her poems. She recovered, graduated from Smith with honors, and then went on to receive a Fullbright and went to Cambridge, Newnham College. In 1956 she married the English poet Ted Hughes. In 1960, when she was twenty-eight, she published *The Colossus*—or *The Colossus* was published in England—her first book of poems. It's a very formal book. Plath was a master of the formal. I mean, really a poet of immense measurable craft. Some of the poems in *The Colossus*, like "Night Shift," prefigure the profound lyricism and power of the poems in *Ariel*. In 1957, she and Hughes return to America. She taught at Smith. They go back to England in 1959. They live in Devon. Their first child Frieda Rebecca was born in 1960; the second, Nicholas Farrar, in 1962. Her children also figure very strongly in her poems.

Around this time, Hughes has an affair with a woman named Assia Gutmann Wevill, who was married to the Canadian poet David Wevill, and they separate. Plath takes the children and goes to London, actually gets a flat in the building where William Butler Yeats once lived, and experiences, in the winter of 1962-3, one of the coldest winters on record in centuries. Plath struggles with isolation and despair, although the poems that she writes to her children—or about her children—during this time are filled with joy and wonder. And this is kind of the split, or *the* split always in Plath, or one of the splits—desire for death, desire for life. The original order of *Ariel* reflects this joy and this darkness and ends with a joyful poem. If you look at Plath's original version, on the right, it reflects the way that Plath wanted *Ariel* to be ordered before her death. It ends with "Wintering," which is a poem of great contentment, and ends with, "The bees are flying. They taste the spring," or something like that. So it ends on a very positive note. On the left is the order that Hughes created after her death. I'm not a Hughes-hater; it's not a question of "let's all villainize Hughes," but what he did was actually create the persona, in a way, that we think of as the very powerfully self-destructive image that became the inevitable "Suicide Sylvia Plath." The inevitability of that suicide is underscored by the final poem, "Words," which ends with, "fixed stars/Govern a life," as in the astrological inevitability of our fate. "Fixed stars/Govern a life." A beautiful poem, but it ends very differently from "Wintering," which for her ended with "The bees are flying. They taste the spring."

Plath said at one point, "It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous-positive, and despairing-negative; whichever is running at the moment dominates my life." We might describe this, obviously, as manic-depression, or the more recent bi-polar disorder, but for Plath the extreme poles of experience fuel the imagination and powered her poems. She committed suicide on February 11, 1963. She placed her two young children in their bedroom,

put milk and bread beside their pillows, stuffed rags under the door, went back into the kitchen, turned on the gas, and put her head in the oven, and died. *Ariel* was published in 1965, two years after her death, to spectacular acclaim, and Plath entered the pantheon of major poets of the twentieth century. And that's sort of where we are. We're going to talk about six poems from *Ariel*.

Braziller: One biographical question. "Edge" and "Words"—not only do they not end the book but they were not in her version.

Muske-Dukes: I don't think "Edge" and "Words" were in there. No.

Braziller: I don't see them.

A: It looks to me like there were other poems that weren't in there as well.

Braziller: Well, the list on the left is much longer.

Muske-Dukes: "Edge" is a poem we're going to talk about. We'll talk about it. But it really is powerfully indicative of suicide and also the death of children, right? I mean, the book that Hughes put together is a powerful book. There's no question about it. It's just that I wanted to note that, again, the inevitability of the *story*, of the persona, is very different from what she had put together on the right. Many more poems about the children, and many more poems that were critical of Hughes, by the way, that were taken out, interestingly.

Braziller: Do you feel like reading "Daddy?"

Muske-Dukes: I'll read "Daddy." Sure. There's a quote from George Steiner that I love. It's on the back of *Ariel*, on the old *Ariel*. He says, "Your poems are proof of the capacity of poetry to give to reality the greater permanence of the imagined." I love that because we tend to think of what we imagine as ephemeral and temporary, but he talks about the permanence of the imagined.

"Daddy" is kind of a workhorse of a poem; I wrote a little about it in a book of essays I did called *Women in Poetry*. But I'll read it first.

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off the beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine,
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,

The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two—
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

Well, she was in fifth gear. And that's not a typical poem. In fact, if it's okay, I just would like to say very briefly that this is a poem that is not her best poem, but it's probably her most famous poem. This is, again, because I think there is this image of Plath as being the sort of—you know, the "Lady Lazarus" is the name of one of her poems—the killer of man, the destroyer of all that is conceived of as poet who is well-mannered. One thing she does—and this is very controversial—she calls herself a Jew. This, to some degree, exploits the idea of the Holocaust. And this had been very controversial about her. However, I'm reading from a book I wrote called

Women in Poetry, and here's the thing about this poem: "We feel manipulated, but we are conscious of the intent to manipulate. In fact, this crudely expressed, childish intent is emphatically part of the pathos and persona of the poem. 'Daddy' is a self-indulgent, hand-cranked catharsis, not even close to her later visionary work, in my opinion." But here's the difference between her poem and just a little snippet from Sharon Olds' poem and the question of Hitler and Daddy and so on. And I love Sharon Olds; she's a friend and I think her poetry is good, but this is from "The Takers":

Hitler entered Paris
The way my sister entered
My room at night,
Sat astride me,
Squeezed me with her knees,
Held her thumbnails to the skin of my wrist,
And peed on me.

And, you know, it goes from there. So Plath's poem, obviously, is of a different—there's a very flat, journalistic tone to Olds's poem. Plath's poem is transformative. It takes off. It makes fun of itself, in a way. It becomes ironical. It's a childhood, playground, and nursery rhyme kind of theme.

Braziller: Isn't that one of the unusual, one of the great strengths, is that nursery rhyme and that repetition, that beautiful repetition of "you do," in dealing with the subject matter. In other words, there's something—

Muske-Dukes: It's the child.

Braziller: It is the child, but dealing with absolutely horrifying feelings of tremendous resentment and anger, and somehow the nursery rhyme quality somehow just seems to work. I mean, in a way, I've never read anything like it.

Muske-Dukes: Yes. I think it does work. And I think for just those reasons. Again, Sharon's poem doesn't work because it doesn't do what Plath's poem does, which is create that effect of the lyric, the child's sing-song nursery rhyme effect. I mean, Daddy gets kind of a bad deal—he died when she was eight; he never was a Nazi. But that's all part of her delivering herself of these childhoods great resentments.

Braziller: In looking at the poem today, one of my old professors used to have this expression, "initial pressure." A poem has "initial pressure"—something has happened which has brought this about. And I'm going to raise this as a question to you: the poem is very much about her husband; it shifts—

Muske-Dukes: Right, to the vampire at the end.

Braziller: They're both vampires, but I think—"I had to replace you," she says. And I can go to the stanzas towards the end where she—

Muske-Dukes: She talks about him with “seven years.”

Braziller: “Seven years”—right. But what could cause such intense hatred? What brings it about? What is the initial pressure of the poem? Does it begin with the breakup? I’m not even asking biographically, but—I guess I am drifting into biography.

Muske-Dukes: I would really like to avoid—when you have a poet of this stature and the language of the poetry is so astonishing and the poems are so astonishing, I think the biography is the least interesting aspect of it.

Braziller: I agree, but the poem—

Muske-Dukes: And she’s been over-biographized. I mean, that’s what’s happened to her.

Braziller: I understand that, but this is within the poem, that she shifts from the father to the husband.

Muske-Dukes: Right. It’s obvious. I don’t think it could be any more obvious. She says it—the poem is obvious and she wants it to be stunningly obvious, and it is. It’s like being hit over the head with a brick. I mean, she’s an incredibly subtle poet as you see in the other poems, but this is not one of her subtle poems. I mean we all hate our fathers. We all hate our parents, and we love them at the same time, but this is the totemic kind of feeling that’s inescapable. But that is not, to me, as interesting as what she does with the language.

Braziller: Yes, but the language is aimed at the husband. What I was sort of asking is whether it’s just a question of what the initial pressure of the poem was. I’m not talking biographically; I’m talking within the poem. It just out of the blue starts talking about her father; it doesn’t say sort of why, or what has happened.

Muske-Dukes: Well, you don’t want to say why. Poems don’t say why, they only ask questions. I mean, I wrote a whole book about why autobiography is annoying.

Braziller: No, I’m not talking about biography. But poems will often—

Muske-Dukes: I can’t psychoanalyze—

Braziller: —begin with something that happened and then respond to it.

Muske-Dukes: You got me.

Braziller: Okay. Well, I’m asking.

Muske-Dukes: I mean, I don’t want to psychoanalyze her poetry. I really, really don’t.

Audience: Unless you're insisting that we only talk about language as language, I think one of the things here—if there is a point of pressure or initial pressure—may be that we're reading in 2007. We're all used to this.

Muske-Dukes: Unfortunately.

Audience: We're all used to this intensity. We can't stop the time.

Muske-Dukes: Well, time has nothing to do with it. Poetry is timeless and poetry takes place outside of the realm of biography. It simply does.

Audience: But I think that the initial pressure is also—

Muske-Dukes: I don't know what "initial pressure" means. It sounds like some kind of—

Braziller: Wait a second. No. It would mean—

Muske-Dukes: Let somebody else talk about it.

Braziller: Well, you asked, so I'll answer you.

Muske-Dukes: Okay. Go.

Braziller: It would mean the occasion for the poem, as simple as that. In other words—

Muske-Dukes: But we can't guess at what the occasion for this poem was. I don't know what value there would be in trying—

Braziller: Wait, wait. I don't think you understand what I'm saying. I'm asking whether within the poem, whether there's something within the success of the poem, and within the characters of the poem, which shows that the second part of the poem, which deals with the husband, has a relationship to the first part, which deals with the father. And she makes that connection herself.

Muske-Dukes: I think she makes a connection for us. I don't know what else—we could guess at things.

Audience: I'm coming from a musical background, so I find it marvelous what she does with the music.

Muske-Dukes: Yes.

Braziller: Yes, absolutely.

Audience: If you look at "Brute heart of a brute like you"—if you listen to that, it goes, duh, duh, duh, ta, duh, duh, duh—

Muske-Dukes: Yes. Amazing, isn't it?

Audience: It's drumming out something. I'm wondering what is she drumming out and what happens in the poems after this that makes it apparent that she's drummed something out of her life and something new has come to replace it. Because that really has some kind of military cadence.

Muske-Dukes: Yes. I mean, we were describing it as a kind of nursery rhyme kind of playground—

Audience: Sort of, but you can hear military drums—bum, bum, bum, ba, da, dum, bum, bum.

Muske-Dukes: Yes. It's part of her craft.

Braziller: But she brings in military things, too. Her father—she refers to him as a “panzer-man,” and I think that's an interesting observation.

Muske-Dukes: Yes, that's because she's a great lyric poet. Music in Plath is always astonishing. It's just heart-stopping. It really can create an incredible effect. And there's a leitmotif, obviously. There's this refrain running through it.

Audience: I don't know enough about her—I'm curious about how the music changes after this poem. Is this an early poem in her oeuvre and after that it becomes somehow—

Muske-Dukes: To me it's a kind of poem that she needed to write to kind of exorcise these terrible feelings about her father.

Braziller: What does she mean by “I'm through?” I read it as she's quitting, but she mentions it twice towards the end and of course at the very end she says, “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.” I'm just curious how you see that.

Muske-Dukes: I see it as the music, primarily. She's looking for a rhyme always. She'll use colloquialisms all the time that really interest me—idiomatic language. The moon is one of her great motifs and when she talks about the moon, it's always frightening and really a negative force, the moon. She will say things like the moon has—something like, is “knuckle-white” and “terribly upset.” So the “terribly upset” sounds like a tonal intrusion on the rest of the tone or the rest of the music, but she does it on purpose. She'll drop something that sounds very colloquial or very idiomatic or very sort of ordinary speech-oriented into the music just to work against it. I mean, this is a sign of a really powerfully gifted poet. And I think “Daddy, I'm through,” is one of those things because she's going for the rhyme. It's such a colloquialism to say, “Yes, I'm done. I'm through. The problem's over. And so are you. Fuck you.” You know? It's over.

Braziller: Well, maybe that's the only way.

Audience: But part of it is that she's not through with the obsession.

Braziller: Well, I think somewhere in between. I differ slightly—I don't think you're really just saying that it's a nice rhyme or it's beautiful music, which it is and that's what makes it great, but there's a meaning somewhere.

Muske-Dukes: Well, of course there's a meaning.

Braziller: And it might be ambiguous. I ask the question because I do read it as she's saying that the only way to get away from him is through death.

Muske-Dukes: The thing I resent as a poet is when people put meaning in poems that isn't there.

Braziller: I resent that, too, Carol.

Muske-Dukes: If I could just finish—her meaning is obvious here, I think. It's pretty clear what this poem is about. She is writing about Daddy and everything that Daddy represents and how this works. But it is, after all, a poem. And I don't think—we can't read things into poems. We can't impose meaning on poems. I think we can—

Braziller: I agree completely with that.

Audience: I disagree.

Audience: I disagree, too.

Muske-Dukes: I'm a poet. I'm a poet and I can tell you that poets—

Audience: She could write it in French—

Muske-Dukes: Excuse me, if I could just say—you know, you paint a painting and you have an idea of what you want to say in the painting or what you want it to mean. I seem to be offending you in some way. I'm sorry.

Audience: Not personally, it's just that you talk about works in language from different points of view. The language is one point, the meaning is another.

Muske-Dukes: Yes, but this is not meaning. The meaning is what Plath gave us. She gave us what she meant to say. It's in the poem. I think that you can take it anywhere you want. You can take a bus to Fresno. I mean, you can go anywhere you want with a poem. You can say that this is a poem about Salvador Dali. You can say whatever you want to say. But Plath has said what she wanted to say. And as a poet—because words are our medium, this is our paint—we put the only thing we wanted on the canvas. Everything that's there is there. Poems don't need explanation. I mean, I'm a critic and I write pieces of poetry, but this is important to honor what the poet has said.

Braziller: You're assuming that we are not doing that and we are trying very hard to do that.

Muske-Dukes: To stay with what she said. Yes.

Braziller: And when somebody said, “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through,” I’m trying to hear what she’s saying. I’m not imposing anything, nor do I think you are.

Muske-Dukes: You can do whatever you want. But you have to let me think what I think, too.

Braziller: But wait a sec. Let’s do it civilly and cordially. That’s all. In a good spirit—

Audience: What were the words that you said work against the music? I don’t really get that.

Muske-Dukes: Sure. I was talking about when she does something—it’s sort of her signature—often she’ll write something very musical and then she’ll drop something that’s just an ordinary phrase in. Like, it’s sort of a colloquialism to say “I’m through. I’ve had it.” So she does that a lot in her poems. She’ll set up a kind of musical cadence—it’s still musical in this case, she’s still rhyming, but she’s dropping in something that is very ordinary in terms of speech. And that’s a tactic. It’s a stylistic tactic.

Audience: Could that concept be applied to an artist or an actor as well?

Muske-Dukes: Sure. My late husband was an actor and I know that that’s a common technique. With language in poetry, and certainly in poetry on the stage, it grounds things in a way, which is really important, I think. It works really well.

Braziller: I love the way she does that. She does that several times here and elsewhere, too, where she just throws out a very simple colloquial and direct phrase, or line. I think it’s something she does well. Okay. I’m going to read one and then we can discuss that.

Muske-Dukes: Did you want to say something?

Audience: I was just struck by the—

Braziller: Excuse me one second. I’ll let you go ahead, but let’s try to look for places where she does that. I found three or four in other poems, and I think it’s fabulous, where she drifts into a very simple, very direct and colloquial—we’ll look for that.

Audience: One tiny comment. This is just astounding—I’m just astonished and struck by the dominance of the “oo” sound in all the rhymes, all the way through.

Muske-Dukes: It’s amazing, isn’t it?

Audience: You, do, through, do—I mean it’s just amazing when you really start hearing it.

Muske-Dukes: You know, when you were talking about the music—her ear was phenomenal, like D.H. Lawrence’s ear. Perfect pitch.

Audience: I just never really come across a poem that does this one sound—

Muske-Dukes: Yes. It's breathtaking.

Braziller: And in other poems she'll do very different things, too. It's amazing that she can do all of them. I have "Elm" coming next. Is that all right?

Muske-Dukes: Sure.

Braziller: I'll read that one. This comes earlier in the book. Bear with me one second while I look for my notes on the poem.

"Elm"

for Ruth Fainlight

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 rain now, the big hush.
And this is the fruit of it: tin white, like arsenic.

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

Do you read the poem as—is the tree talking to the speaker, is that how—the tree is talking to the speaker? “I know the bottom, she says, I know it with—” Is “she” the speaker of the poem?

Muske-Dukes: The elm is the persona of—it’s the speaker. I mean, yes, the poet is—

Braziller: Does it seem to shift somewhere within the poem? “I am terrified by this dark thing”—I’ve always read the poem that somewhere it begins to almost sound less like a tree and more like a person, but that could just be suggested within the poem or it could be a wrong reading. Have you ever read it like that?

Muske-Dukes: No. I read it as a tree all the way through, but it’s obviously the poet, as well. It’s both. As you say, the speaker, but the poet-speaker and the tree I think are meant to be one here. Or meant to at least identify with each other very strongly.

This is an astonishing poem, I think. It’s one of the ones I selected because I can’t ever really fathom it quite. I mean, you can talk about the form of the poem and the content of the poem. The form is very straightforward, although if you’ll notice, there are long lines and short lines, long lines and short lines. What that does is alter the sense of flow in the poem. You know, it gives us a sense of hesitancy and yet flows toward something. For a poem that is about a tree which is rooted and obviously powerfully rooted—its tap root goes way down to the bottom—it moves. Here again it’s amazing. It’s a poem, which is static like a tree—it’s still—and yet the

tree is moving. The tree even says at one point, “I gallop,” meaning when the wind takes it, it gallops. And it has in the second page, toward the end, that creature that’s in its branches is moving, but that’s an owl. Often Plath will use the owl, or Athena’s favorite, the owl. “I am inhabited by a cry./Nightly it flaps out/Looking with its hooks, for something to love.” Instead of kill, she says love, so she’s conflating the two, obviously, as she usually does. “I’m terrified by this dark thing/That sleeps in me,” and so on.

Braziller: I very much agree with you. “I’m terrified by the dark thing”—it seems so intimate. It seems like the poet talking directly, but it could be the poet and the tree, in a way.

Muske-Dukes: That’s what I’m saying, yes. She obviously identifies with—she and the tree are one. The moon is, as always in Plath, a figure of terror and absolute indifference. And maybe more than that—cruelty. Merciless, she says. “Her radiance scathes me,” but later, I’m not sure, but I think that towards the end, when she talks about the face “so murderous in its strangle of branches,” I think that’s the moon again. It could be the owl, but it could be the moon. But unless you read it differently, I read it as the moon. It’s that terrifying face and the “strangle, strangle of branches.” Again, the diction of the poem, the word choice, is heart-stopping. I mean, in poetry every word has to count, obviously, and every word counts here. Every word is carrying a pay load, you know, and it detonates.

If you think of the poet’s consciousness as rooted in death or stopped by death, or still as the tree rooted in death, but alive and moving—I think that’s the operative metaphor, extending the metaphor of the tree.

Audience: What is the “fruit of rain?” I’m not asking as if there were an answer, but I’m just saying we cannot visualize—what is “tin-white like arsenic?” It’s not an elm tree.

Muske-Dukes: I know. It’s so great.

Audience: It’s not the moon, it’s not the wind, it’s not the sea. It’s mercury that the poet has put in motion here.

Muske-Dukes: Yes. What did you say—it’s what?

Audience: I said it’s some mercury that the poet has put—

Muske-Dukes: Are you thinking of the god Mercury, or the actual element?

Audience: No, it’s not anything. I’m just saying it’s absolutely an atmosphere of unreality.

Muske-Dukes: Yes. And yet, you can say, first of all, that rain is “a big hush,” that’s so great because rain sounds—the sonic power—

Audience: The fruit of it—the fruit of rain.

Muske-Dukes: The fruit of rain is the water in the tree. I think it's supposed to be just the drops of rain that are left in the tree—you know, the fruit of the rain. So it looks “tin-white” maybe in the light, as you see it in the moon, right? It turns “tin-white like arsenic.” I don't know what color arsenic is, but maybe—is it white?

Audience: I think so.

Muske-Dukes: Perfect. She sounds surreal sometimes and she is surreal sometimes, but I think often there is a literal reference. So I can see the big hush of the rain and then the rain passes, that huge hush, and the fruit is the drops in the tree turning white in the moon's light. But she says “like arsenic,” and this poem is about poisoning, too—the tap root is in poison, remember, just as we, or the poet's consciousness, is rooted in death. Something is poisoning the tree and she brings up arsenic, she brings up poison several times—“the snaky acids kiss.” It's as if the tree is in a swamp or a fen or bad water or something, some kind of poison or acid. Being poisoned by what's giving it life, interestingly—the ground, the dark pool of poison. That's the theme that runs throughout the poem.

Audience: I'm going to say that's probably a theme that runs through much of her work. She does it in another poem, but I don't know if it's in here.

Muske-Dukes: She does it in several poems, yes.

Audience: Like, if she starts to address something that you would ordinarily go with as a life affirmation or a life force—there is an irony here, of course, all through. The fruit being like arsenic—something that nourishes, but something that's poison.

Muske-Dukes: Well, you know, there are the poems to her children. As I said, those poems are life affirming. And then there is this—as she said, the two currents—there is this other, the death poems. “Edge” would be one of them. But then there are these poems in between, in which the life image like the tree is also rooted in death. So it goes both ways. I hate to reduce it to just her sense of these two currents running through her life, but you see it in the book. I don't know, again, if you would have seen it in her original order so strongly, but you see it here. There are the poems to her children—life poems—and then there are these obvious poems of thanatopsis, just mortuarial almost. And then there are these other poems that are both, where she'll flip something that should be life and it'll suddenly be death—it'll be poison.

Audience: Who's Ruth Fainlight?

Muske-Dukes: Ruth Fainlight—I'm glad you asked. She's a wonderful British poet and was a friend of Plath's.

Audience: So friendly that they exchanged a lot of poems?

Muske-Dukes: They exchanged letters and work, yes. And she's a wonderful poet, Fainlight.

Audience: It doesn't take away from the poems and it doesn't really have to do with the specifics of the biography, but that her mental state, the state of her emotions, are very much colored in these poems. The first one, it seems to me, is almost a state of agitation. In fact, everybody got a little agitated with that poem. Perhaps it was the music. As you said, it's like military music—

Muske-Dukes: We have Daddy visiting us.

Audience: The mind is going very rapidly and fast and coming up with these rhymes, but this other poem is much more—it's depressing. It's quieter.

Muske-Dukes: It's more cerebral.

Audience: Yes.

Muske-Dukes: Well, yes, her mental state—it's like anybody.

Braziller: Well, wait. Can I comment? The tone of this is much more resigned, I think, quieter, and I think perhaps sadder, more tragic. In "Daddy" she is fighting back with a lot of anger and that's why even the final line, "I'm through," could imply "I'm through with you." I've noticed in a lot of her things that there are very few people. Lots of times there isn't even a direct experience, it's just like a projection of an emotion, a projection of something she's going through, period.

Muske-Dukes: I think there are people in her poems.

Braziller: No, I'm not saying there are not. I'm saying there are very few and when I asked about the initial pressure before—let me finish, please. When I asked about the initial pressure before, I meant—I think it's a strength of hers, I don't think it's a weakness—that often she will write about a tree or a graveyard and she will be very, very responsive. The poems are very much projections of her mood, of her state, as much poetry is. But hers in a very direct way. Then you can get into how you characterize the state and I think that's staying within the poem. I think to characterize the state of "Elm" would be to say that she feels very small. Part of the tragedy is the feeling of an absence of self or a certain absence, a certain missing of something. The tragedy is feeling small against sometimes great forces, where those forces are internal—if they're destructive forces, if they're things that are out of her control—or external. I think that is very much within the poem and with what she's dealing with, and at least what I as a reader respond to, what makes these poems unlike any others, is that they are poems of an extreme emotional state.

Muske-Dukes: Yes. I disagree. I mean, I think this is a very big poem and I think that it's not just about a tree. It's about—

Braziller: So, wait, wait. Don't—

Muske-Dukes: You said sometimes she just projects, something will just be about a tree—

Braziller: No.

Muske-Dukes: Let me finish now.

Braziller: I didn't say—

Muske-Dukes: If I could just—

Braziller: Okay, okay.

Muske-Dukes: Please calm down. I was going to say there's another poem that we're going to talk about, "The Moon and The Yew Tree"—I hope we can not necessarily agree with each other all the time. I have a different opinion than you.

Braziller: I agree completely. I know. Okay, okay. Well, it's like Fox News—

Muske-Dukes: I hope it's not like Fox News.

Braziller: Well, okay, but you know what I'm talking about.

Muske-Dukes: Jesus Christ Almighty.

Braziller: I mean—

Muske-Dukes: Anyway, what I was saying is I think this is an enormous poem. She doesn't feel small. To talk about a tap root going down to the bottom of all consciousness is not a small poem.

Braziller: But how would you—

Muske-Dukes: If I could just finish. It's actually a poem of huge proportions and "The Moon and The Yew Tree" is a kind of companion poem, as I see it.

Braziller: I didn't say it was a small poem. I think it's a very deep and powerful poem. I'm saying the state of the speaker, the emotion that's being dealt with—

Muske-Dukes: Right. Nobody would disagree with that. That's really clear.

Braziller: Okay. That's all that I'm saying.

Audience: At the end of the poem, do we have an image of the moon as a face seeing through the branches of the tree? Is the face transformed into Medusa's face with snakes—

Muske-Dukes: Yes, I think so. And that's why I think it's the moon, as I was saying. I think it is Medusa's face. And she talks about Medusa in other poems, too. Her themes run throughout the

poems and we've talked about poison and Medusa, the moon. Colors are really important—blue, black, red, white, the absence of color. But yes, I think that's a Medusa reference.

Audience: Do you find any allusions to her relationship with her mother in these poems?

Muske-Dukes: Oh yes. The mother turns up regularly in the poems. I mean, again, I don't like to say it's just the mother, but her own maternity and her mothering by her mother—the idea of motherhood is always very vexed and ambivalent. And I think "Edge" really takes the maternal and the notion of death and pits them against each other.

Audience: I did notice that in "Elm" she switches her address from. We think the tree is talking—"I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root." Then she says, "It is what you fear/I do not fear it: I have been there." I realized that there is a back and forth going on there. I didn't pick it up. I read the poem very differently the first time.

Muske-Dukes: You know, I think it's the tree talking the whole way. I used to think it was a back and forth, but I think that's the tree speaking the whole time. The tree says, "I know it with my great tap root and what I know is that it is what you fear," meaning you, the speaker of the poem. "I don't fear it: I've been there. I've got my tap root in it." I think it's the tree speaking.

Audience: Oh, yes. You mean the tree is addressing the speaker.

Braziller: Yes. We were talking about that.

Audience: Yes, but what is so spooky about the quality of it is that I think we feel—or at least I do—a sense of being both the tree and the—maybe this is what you meant before—it's almost like you put yourself inside the tree.

Muske-Dukes: Yes. She and the tree—that's why I said they're identified.

Braziller: It's even compounded by saying it's for Ruth Fainlight because that's yet another woman, so there are three, and at the very least, Plath throws you off—trees don't ordinarily talk. So when you begin the poem, it's a little confusing, and that's definitely for a reason because you can read almost either way. But in a practical basis, you were saying it is the tree talking throughout.

Muske-Dukes: No, but I said very clearly in the beginning that I meant the poet's consciousness is the tap root, so they're twinned in this, and the conversation in a way is really talking to one's own consciousness.

Audience: Right. There's another word to use for all of this, which would be ventriloquism.

Muske-Dukes: Yes.

Audience: That's what's happening. That's the process.

Muske-Dukes: She's projecting her voice, in a way. You were going to say something. We talked about the persona, right?

Audience: What did you say?

Audience: Personification.

Audience: Well, that's something slightly different. Ventriloquism is actually holding Charlie McCarthy in your lap and—

Muske-Dukes: But she's personifying—

Audience: It's obviously slightly deformed. It bounces back. It's a dialectical process. But it all comes together in that one line, "I am inhabited by a cry." It's obviously the poet who's inhabited by a tree.

Muske-Dukes: But the tree also has a huge bird in its branches. You know, the thing is that when we talk about persona, when we talk about personification in poetry, it means that the tree comes to life and speaks. Somebody over here was going to talk.

Audience: Well, I just think that the use of the image of the tree is very powerful because what's interesting to me in the poem is that it's acted upon by nature in all these violent ways—

Muske-Dukes: Yes. It's very violent, this poem.

Audience: The moon is merciless as well as the sunsets are merciless—the "atrocities of sunsets"—but the tree consistently fights back and I love the way it shakes its clubs, it shrieks.

Muske-Dukes: I must shriek, she says. This is a violent poem.

Audience: The use of the elm in this way of depicting the struggle of being in nature and being acted upon and then reacting—I think it's just brilliant.

Muske-Dukes: I think so, too. I think it's astonishing how that conflict is embodied in this.

Braziller: We have to move ahead.

Audience: It's interesting to remember that Ariel was trapped in a tree before Prospero released her.

Braziller: That's right.

Muske-Dukes: And also in Ovid, in *Metamorphosis*—well, in myths in general—people are turned into trees, and that's another theme in Plath, regularly. She appropriates the myths.

Audience: I think what ended up creating fear or a sense of helplessness within me is the line “I am incapable of more knowledge.”

Muske-Dukes: Incapable, right.

Audience: It’s like, she’s reached the end of what she can know and things start to be mysterious and terrifying to her. Like, the tree can only go so far in its understanding.

Muske-Dukes: Absolutely. As we can only go to the extent of our consciousness. That’s so moving and tragic and frightening, as you said.

Audience: There are things in its realm that it can’t—

Muske-Dukes: It can’t comprehend or get close to, literally.

Audience: But it’s the poet who’s the poisoner. She is.

Muske-Dukes: Whatever. Were you going to say something?

Audience: I was going to say something similar to the gentleman in the back. The tree is observing—everything it observes in the environment was considered harmful and negative and, going past that, the helplessness and the hopelessness. And then you think a tree is grounded and it’s absolutely immovable; it cannot move. At the end, with words like acid and petrified and kill—it’s already in the death process. It’s recognized it’s in the death process.

Muske-Dukes: And the poison.

Audience: I didn’t think the tin-white arsenic—you keep mentioning the moon—I almost think it’s like little droplets that are inflected by the moon.

Muske-Dukes: That’s what I was saying.

Audience: Oh, did you say that?

Muske-Dukes: Yes. I said that the fruit was the drops of the rain after the rain passes, the big hush, and then the moon hits them and they turn white.

Audience: Okay. It’s an astounding poem.

Muske-Dukes: It is an astounding poem. This is kind of a companion poem, “The Moon and the Yew Tree.”

Braziller: That’s right.

Muske-Dukes: And if you think of Ovid and *Metamorphosis* and the myths of human beings turning into trees, it really is important. In this case the moon is fore-grounded along with the tree.

“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.
Fumy, spiritous 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 saints 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

Braziller: It is a companion. It’s useful to approach it like that and that’s part of the point I was trying to make—in many of the poems, something that is unique, and that she’s very good at, is that there’s not a specific experience or specific thing that has happened or a specific initial pressure. The tone is very important and the poem seems to begin and end where she is alone with a tree or with nature in some way. And then at the end we have a sort of projection of an inner state. And we’ve talked about her breaking into a colloquial—I love the line, “I simply cannot see where there is to get to.” I mean, that’s a brilliant description—what is she, wandering in a graveyard? That’s how I read the poem, that she’s literally physically walking around in a

graveyard near where she's living, presumably. And then she says, "I simply cannot see where there is to go."

Audience: "Where there is to get to."

Braziller: "Where there is to get to," that's it. Which is a heartfelt and rending—

Audience: It's like saying "I'm through."

Braziller: It rhymes with it.

Muske-Dukes: But it's also one of those ordinary types of sayings. That, along with where she says "terribly upset" in the next stanza. "I simply cannot see where there is to get to." I can't see where I'm going; I can't see where there is to get to. And then the moon is "white as a knuckle and terribly upset"—there again, it sounds like a tonal intrusion but it's not.

Actually, she's not wandering in a graveyard. This again is biographical fact, but when she and Hughes lived in Devon, in the country, there was actually a wall of graves—a stone wall where there had been some graves implanted—that was on their property line. She would refer to it quite a lot when she was out walking, just that wall. She calls it "a row of headstones." The yew tree I think also was on their property. But I think she is, again, the tree and obviously the moon here, too. As you were saying, two of her stand-bys from nature are really the focus of the poem. I think this is one of the best beginnings of any poem: "This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary." And "the trees of the mind are black." There's this sense of wanting to get out of one's own consciousness, of wanting to go beyond what one can—I think that the remark about the tree was very apt. The tree is rooted, the tree can only—there's a sense of that beyond which the tree can't go. Its knowledge is incomplete; it can't go further, just as our consciousness is incomplete. And there's a terrible straining here and a longing to know beyond what we can know. And that is indeed heartbreaking.

Audience: You talk about the biographical a lot, but what I love about this actually is that there is no gender.

Muske-Dukes: There is no what?

Audience: Gender.

Muske-Dukes: No. Right. Exactly.

Audience: The speaker is coming from the position that allows me, as the reader, to then really feel what is being portrayed. So by the time I get to the second or third stanza, I am embodied in the "I" in some way and it's pulling me into the poem to really try to experience what's going on.

Muske-Dukes: Yes. I think the imagination is androgynous. Or it doesn't matter, gender. She does refer to the mother and talks about her as—she gives the moon a gender, but gender is

irrelevant to this, really, I think. The idea of the mother is much more powerful. The idea of the maternal.

Audience: I'm not completely sure about dates, but was she influenced by Wallace Stevens? These first two lines—he could have written them.

Muske-Dukes: Yes. You're absolutely right. That is a Stevens-esque line: "This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary." It sounds like "The Planet on The Table" or one of the poems from—

Audience: *The Palm at the End of the Mind*.

Muske-Dukes: *The Palm at the End of the Mind* or from *The Auroras of Autumn*. It has a Stevens-esque feel to it. She was very influenced by Theodore Roethke, oddly—interestingly, actually. Maybe not oddly, but interestingly. But yes, Stevens was sort of a contemporary. She wouldn't have been quite as influenced, but certainly would have known his poems. She read voraciously; she knew poetry of all the centuries. But that's a Stevens-esque line, I agree.

Braziller: It doesn't matter if it's man or woman, as you were saying. Again, she's dealing a very troubling feeling and she does it brilliantly. I love, later on, where she says, "The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary." That is almost child-like—a child would talk like that—"she is not sweet like Mary." And later she says, "How I would like to believe in tenderness." And, for me, those lines are an expression—I mean without departing from the poem—of not being free of something. "How I would like to believe in tenderness"—she feels locked out of certain universal feelings. That is the state, the extreme state in "how I would like to believe in tenderness." She's so absorbed in something and it's so extreme that she has difficulty with tenderness and with love. And in "Daddy" you could say the same thing, too. She's so consumed with the hatred and the anger that there's no way through.

Audience: There is a cry for it. She would like to be able to—

Braziller: In her poems that's sort of the problem, that's sort of the speaker's problem, that there continues to be—why is she thinking about it at all? Why is she thinking about her parents? To get back to "Daddy," what I call the initial pressure—what caused the poem, why is she thinking of one's father? What might have happened? But she says later on, "I can't stop thinking about it." I forget which poem it is. "I can't turn off these thoughts." She can't stop thinking of her mother and her father and the wall that they were to her. Again, I'm really looking within the poems.

Muske-Dukes: You don't have to worry about that, but I think someone has a question.

Audience: I have a question. I love the line, "It drags the sea after it like a dark crime." But I don't understand what she means by "O-gape."

Muske-Dukes: Well, that's a really interesting construction because it almost sounds like "agape," the Greek word—

Audience: Greek for love.

Muske-Dukes: It's with an "A"—A-G-A-P-E—for love. But this is an O-gape, which again, spins around the idea of love. And an O-gape is like—I see someone at death, when the mouth is open, or a cry for help which is the O. You know, this is an extreme idea of loss in the O-gape. Complete despair, she says.

Audience: So it could also be like O-gasp.

Muske-Dukes: Yes, exactly. That feeling of Oh—and that feeling of despair, which is that O, that emptiness.

If you look at the form of the poem, these are seven-line stanzas. This is a very formal poem. It has pretty much ten syllables per line, which gives the feeling of unrhymed iambic pentameter, which means basically blank verse. That means that it has the authority of conversation and the speaking voice. She wants this to be very clear and very expository, but what she's saying is hard to follow. And yet, if we stay with it, she's giving us a canvas—she's painting a canvas here. And she gives us the colors. Notice the colors. She points them out for us: she says the trees of the mind are black, and whenever black occurs, you have this sense of despair. But the light is blue and that is the light of the mind. So the light is blue. So the trees of the mind—again, it's like the yew tree or the elm—are the rooted trees. These inevitabilities of consciousness, those are black. As far as you can go.

Audience: Blue is kind of a cold light.

Muske-Dukes: Well, blue is typically reflective, and this is cerebral, right? This is like the mind trying to rise above or encircle its knowledge to understand the black trees. And then of course, as you pointed out, the sea is a dark crime. But then, later, blue comes in again and again, with "She's not sweet like Mary. Her blue garments." Further down: "Clouds are flowering/blue and mystical/Inside the church, the saints will be all blue." It's blue—it's almost flooding like blood from a vein and saturating the poem, the color blue. But then it ends with blackness. She gives up or whatever—I don't know. "The message of the yew tree"—she doesn't give up, I don't think. But she says, "The moon sees nothing of this" and "The message of the yew tree is blackness—blackness and silence," which means, I think, the limits of consciousness. The limits of where we can go.

Audience: It is also maybe about a fall from religion because it's a lot about the comforts of religion.

Muske-Dukes: She was never very religious, but I think we have to read it in terms of—because she will use religious motifs throughout. She describes her child at one point as sort like a lamb that the world will kill and eat—the Pascal lamb. And she will use occasionally crucifixion. But she was not a religious poet.

Braziller: I don't really think in a way she could be. Again, I don't even know the biography. I don't think she could be because she couldn't find redemption in a way, in my opinion. And she can't find tenderness and love.

Muske-Dukes: Well, her poems for her children are very tender and very loving and redemptive.

Braziller: Yes, they are. I agree.

Audience: I think within this poem, though, it begins with a wish for the comfort of religion and institutions and moves away from that.

Muske-Dukes: Really? I don't agree with that, either.

Audience: The part about Mary—it conjures up the image we have of Mary as comforting.

Muske-Dukes: The symbol, yes.

Audience: But what I get out of this is it's mostly about her mother. I mean, she states at one point, "The moon is my mother." And then all the images of the mother—I think of the moon as her mother. It's remote, it's in darkness, you can't reach it, it's not nourishing. It moves the sea twice a day; it gives nothing. Unlike the sun, which nurtures and gives, the moon is spare in its emission. And it's almost like the moon is—you can't save it. It might be new moon, but it's always there, and it's like an authority figure that is just cold and cruel.

Muske-Dukes: And if you notice throughout the poems the moon is like that. There's not a single poem in which the moon is not like that. So the maternal figure of the moon—and it usually is cast, or is often cast, as a maternal figure, an old woman. But it's definitely female and maternal; it's always in an unsympathetic role.

Audience: There's a contrast about moon as a mother with Mary as just an icon.

Muske-Dukes: An icon, yes. Absolutely. I think what she was trying to do with the poem—I was going to say that Hughes described her in a way as a kind of zealot, but he meant someone like a Sufi, taken up into a kind of trance or ecstasy, that sort of notion. But not institutionally.

Braziller: Can we do one more question and then I'll read "The Arrival of the Beebox." Did you have a question?

Audience: I just wondered about the yew tree and I just wondered if it was a pun. I know it's probably sacrilegious to think of a pun.

Muske-Dukes: Well, no. Puns are wonderful, if used properly.

Audience: The yew tree is the mother and in the end, the yew tree is "blackness—blackness and silence." And not being able to reach this mother is—is the yew tree the search?

Muske-Dukes: It could be a play on words, yes. That is the yew. Remember, too, in “Elm,” the tree talks to her as “you.” It says, “you don’t know.”

Audience: Also, the whole thing is black and blue like a bruise.

Muske-Dukes: Very good. Yes.

Audience: But yew trees are usually planted in cemeteries.

Muske-Dukes: They are, right. She had a yew tree on her property and there is a cemetery wall, that’s right. Yew trees are healing trees, too, aren’t they? Isn’t the yew used—the bark—for healing?

Braziller: They have to do with mourning, don’t they?

Muske-Dukes: Isn’t that great—really? Oh, that’s wonderful. It’s also poison. Healing and poison. That’s Plath. I didn’t know that.

Braziller: I think they’re supposed to do with mourning. Well, that’s why they’re in graveyards.

Muske-Dukes: Like cypress, yes.

Audience: I’m a little confused about the use or the misuse of biography. You started out, it seemed to me, by saying you don’t have to look at biography.

Muske-Dukes: No, I don’t mean you don’t have to look at. I think that, unfortunately in Plath’s case, it’s been the central focus and it’s a very sensationalistic biography because she killed herself and her husband ran off with somebody and blah, blah, blah. There’s a poem that we’re going to read, I think, “Edge,” that makes it sound as if she would have killed her children, too. There’s all this sensationalistic stuff and unfortunately Plath has become more her biography, unfortunately—not to everyone. Critics know that she’s an extraordinary poet, it’s true, but I think that the biography in the public mind often overtakes who she was as a poet. At her grave, every time they put the name Hughes back on, people come and scrape it off. They just hate him. For a while he couldn’t read any work—Ted Hughes—because somebody in the audience would shout out, “Murderer! Murderer!” And throw blood at him or something. So she’s really been taken up—it’s almost like she’s been Marilyn Monroe-ized. That’s what I meant. That’s a disservice to a great poet because she is a great poet.

Braziller: But oddly—

Muske-Dukes: People can read her poems. Everything she wants you to know is there, I think. But I think that she does the psychoanalyzing for you.

Braziller: Excuse me. I was going to say one thing and then it’s your turn. In the poem “Daddy,” she says, “I was married seven years,” so there’s a seven-year reference. I can’t think of other examples now, but there is an example of, unless you knew outside the poem—

Muske-Dukes: But you don't have to know that in order to know that the poem is a great poem. You don't have to know that seven years—

Braziller: I didn't say that you did, but to say that "I was married for seven years" or "I replaced you for seven years"—it sort of invites autobiography a little bit.

Muske-Dukes: It's a hard thing because we have poems—Byron writes poems about the Crimean War—and you could think of a million examples of this—we can't really find those references today, but they don't matter because the poem will stand. Let's say a poem like "The Battle at Sennacherib": "The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,/And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold." We don't remember that battle, but the poem stands on its own.

Braziller: This is the last question because we have two or three other poems to do, but go ahead.

Audience: In the paragraph about how she's sweet like Mary and then says, "The base of the effigy, gentled by candles,/bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes," is she thinking of the Madonna?

Muske-Dukes: Yes.

Audience: The effigy?

Muske-Dukes: Right, the effigy is just—we think of it as a negative thing, burning an effigy, but an effigy is simply an image or a figure.

Audience: About the seven years: it was about her daddy, but we could almost talk in psychological terms about transference—the dad, the husband, and it goes on and on. So I think that's all it really meant.

Muske-Dukes: It doesn't work.

Audience: The whole Daddy thing is—

Muske-Dukes: Defining.

Audience: Right.

Braziller: Of course a poem must rise and fall by itself and the seven-year thing either works without knowing it or not, but it does seem curious and in a way it helps to know what the heck she's talking about—

Audience: She's telling you a story in the poem. It doesn't matter whether she's married seven years or seventeen years, it's still disappointing.

Braziller: Okay, we have to move on. I'm going to read "The Arrival of the Bee Box." I'll just preface it by saying that this is a poem that seems to be about something that she ordered, but it's almost like a metaphor. It's almost like a graveyard scene or standing outside or talking to an elm tree. She says she ordered the bee box, but it's almost as if again she leaps right into an internal state or landscape of her emotions—what's pressing, what she feels urgently she has to say.

"The Arrival of the Bee Box"

I ordered this, clean wood box
Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift.
I would say it was the coffin of a midget
Or a square baby
Were there not such a din in it.

The box is locked, it is dangerous.
I have to live with it overnight
And I can't keep away from it.
There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there.
There is only a little grid, no exit.

I put my eye to the grid.
It is dark, dark,
With the swarmy feeling of African hands
Minute and shrunk for export,
Black on black, angrily clambering.

How can I let them out?
It is the noise that appalls me most of all,
The unintelligible syllables.
It is like a Roman mob,
Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!

I lay my ear to furious Latin.
I am not a Caesar.
I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.
They can be sent back.
They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner.

I wonder how hungry they are.
I wonder if they would forget me
If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.
There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,
And the petticoats of the cherry.

They might ignore me immediately
In my moon suit and funeral veil.

I am no source of honey
So why should they turn on me?
Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.

The box is only temporary.

There is an obvious fear of death, a fascination with this thing that she brought right next to her and that she spends the night with. And like “Elm” and some of the other poems we’ve been looking at, you could say that these natural forces, in this case these bees, in a way have the potential for harm and are very frightening or dangerous or something. Again, there’s something within, a violence and a harm that’s terrifying within her, and that’s obvious, I think, in the whole sequence.

Audience: That’s something that really does bother me about the poetry, actually. The poetry almost gets in the way of the poetry. It’s almost in love with itself. She’s almost too good. I mean, I would say Pound would have problems with this poem. Look at this imagery: box of maniacs, Roman mob, African hands. It’s an essay of histrionics. I love it. I’m in love with it the way I’m in love with certain kinds of music—popular music that I want to hear again and again, but I don’t admire. I don’t admire the structure of the music. It’s like cake.

Audience: But I think this poem is about her writing process.

Muske-Dukes: It’s about her writing process, yes. Remember this is part of a group.

Audience: It’s about the syllables in her mind and how she needs to get them out of her—

Muske-Dukes: Yes, I agree.

Audience: I think in terms of the images—I do think that they are far out there, but I think when you’re writing, it’s a lot like that.

Muske-Dukes: Yes, of course. It’s a lot like that.

Audience: I’m reminded of Joyce’s definition of melodrama, which is unearned emotion. There are two poems going on in a lot of these poems—she introduces this again and again. It’s a poem of her language and there’s the situation of the poem—I don’t mean autobiographical—but the situation of the poem perpetrates.

Muske-Dukes: I’d just like to remind everybody that this is one of a series in “The Bee Poems,” as they’re called. For those of you who have the list, there are one, two, three, four, five bee poems that all come together at the end of the manuscript, or the book as she saw it. It’s kind of hard to talk about them separately, but I agree with you—I think it’s just ingenious that you thought of this—it’s the writing process. It’s trying to get those bees in your mind out and get them on paper, those buzzing syllables.

Audience: That you ordered.

Muske-Dukes: That you ordered, right.

Audience: She ordered them; they're the thing that she wants.

Muske-Dukes: That's a pun, too. Right? I mean, she plays on words.

Audience: A bee box: how to be.

Muske-Dukes: Be box. Oh, we could go on forever. This is meant to be a funny poem, too. It is. She's sending up the idea of the Roman mob and obviously the box of maniacs, you know. I mean, it's hilarious. It's like, what have I got in here, a bunch of little Charlie Chaplins trying to get out. The box is locked and it's dangerous, but it's also comical, in a very darkly comic way. She's talking about death, too, of course—that is her subject. It's a coffin as well. But this time she's kind of shaking up the idea of death and what we try to do when we write is to stop death, to stop time. She says, "I'm going to let them out. I'm going to let them live. I'm going to be that sweet God," which is a wonderful notion, to be the deity. I don't know if you have the other bee poems, but I mentioned that she intended to end the book with "Wintering," which talks about the bees in a way that is really benign and almost—I hate to use the word with her—extremely hopeful. "Wintering" now is somewhere in the middle. I don't know where it is, but—

A: I finally figured this out—he takes her last section and makes it the penultimate section, and he inserts a list of old poems that don't exist in her original—

Muske-Dukes: Yes, they were unpublished and she had chosen not to put them into the manuscript. He either found them from earlier work or the *Ariel* work and put them back in.

Audience: Because other than that, there are only two others that are not in this entire list.

Muske-Dukes: That's right. Fascinating, isn't it? It's stunning, yes. I agree.

Audience: The bees with a beekeeper father. She wants it, she wants to open it up, and she doesn't want to open it up. She wants them to come to her and she wants to set them free. So that conflict between love and hate.

Muske-Dukes: I agree. You know, I'm going to bring up her biography again. This is important—there are biographical facts, I think, that really help us understand. I agree with that. I read somewhere about her thinking about her father as kind of a god when he was working with the bees because she would see him dressed in that suit and she describes the bee meeting of people dressed in those sort of strange hats, those bee hats, and moving ghost-like. He would actually pick bees out of the air and they wouldn't sting him and she thought he was some kind of god. It turns out he knew which ones were the males and the males apparently don't sting because there's some point at which they're flying and they're already going to die, when they've delivered the honey. So he knew enough to pick out the males. Interesting that they were the males, that she understood that. There are other poems in which she describes the males as

just those “stumbling bumblebees.” It’s the queen and the women who run the hive. So anyway, yes, love and hate.

Audience: So really the box is almost her own self—

Muske-Dukes: Yes, the consciousness.

Audience: Because I really think that the ending is amazing in this and that she’s going to set these words free to be out there on their own, that the box is temporary because she will die.

Muske-Dukes: Yes, the box is temporary. That’s exactly right. That’s a great reading. “And I’m no source of honey,” she says.

Audience: For me anyway, these images are not just merely creative; they’re very painful. The noise appalls her; it torments her. I think of Woolf.

Muske-Dukes: Oh, Virginia Woolf. Oh yes.

Audience: She can’t stand the sound and yet that is bound up with the creative act, so then when she was writing her—I guess these were her last poems?

Muske-Dukes: Yes, the poems in *Ariel*. Yes.

A: So she was both saying, “I’m writing the poems of my life,” but she was writing her way to her death.

Muske-Dukes: I hate to make this literal, but she had more life poems in her version of the book. There were a lot of other poems. I shouldn’t say the poems in *Ariel* were the only poems she was writing at the end of her life because she wrote many other things that he—Ted Hughes—published posthumously after she died. But these were selected as a representation of her last poems. That’s why it’s so key to look at the two different takes on it, you know? But I agree—the creative process is kind of a life and death in one. But that’s the ecstasy of it in a way, the destruction of it. I quoted one of the things on the back of the book—this old copy of the book—George Steiner saying she could not return from those poems. He says, “She could not return from them.” I don’t know if you all know that she wrote them at like four o’clock in the morning. She had those two babies and she would get up and she was alone in this London flat where it was freezing outside. She would get up at four in the morning, before the children woke up, and she would just write. She wouldn’t sleep; she was in this incredible state of creative flow—I don’t know what to call it, it was like a cataract, it was like a waterfall. She described it that way. She said, “I can’t stop it.” These poems keep coming. She wrote an incredible number of poems in about maybe a month. She wrote to her mother, “I’m a genius of a poet. These poems will make my name.” So she knew. But she was not arrogant in that way; she wouldn’t have said that before in her life. She knew the way Keats knew; he said, “I’ll be among the English poets.”

I don't want to go into the melodramatic statement of "she could not return from them," but I think when you go that far, in a way you have to know the cost. I'm not arguing, like Hughes, that her death was the cost, it's just that it's tremendously destructive sometimes.

Audience: Yes, she was being asked to live a so-called normal life, whatever that means, but at home, with two babies. Abandoned. It couldn't have worked for long.

Audience: Are there any notes indicating where it is edited, or if she just wrote them and moved on?

Muske-Dukes: The drafts are really interesting. There is actually a book of the drafts that was published by her daughter Frieda, who's written a book of poems of her own, and Frieda has put together an original manuscript with a publisher—I think it was Harper Collins. And you can see that there was very little—it was like white lightning. The poems just came right through her. She was a meticulous reviser and kept very careful drafts of her poems and numbered them and so forth. You don't see it so much with these poems.

Audience: I just want to hear from the psychology people in the room about something like a manic episode. Manic-depressives and people often commit suicide—is that how this has been seen? Because I feel like this rush of work is a sort of hyperactive state—

Muske-Dukes: Well, that's how people have looked at it. But I think anybody here in the room who is a writer or an artist knows that when you start working like that, you get caught up like that. It could be described that way, but you know that it's something else, too. It's the reason you live—to create.

Braziller: To make sure we have time at the end, could you kindly read "Edge"?

Muske-Dukes: Sure. I think this is one of the ones that were not in the original manuscript.

Audience: One more question.

Muske-Dukes: Sure.

Audience: Are the bees ideas? Is that what this means?

Muske-Dukes: Well, words. You were saying syllables or words and I think that's a very good reading of it.

Audience: The other thing—you mentioned all these references—I'm thinking of Pandora's Box and opening it up.

Muske-Dukes: Well, that too, yes. I would say so because everything must erupt and it's like history wanting to come out, too.

"Edge"

The woman is perfected
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag.

She once described perfection as “stasis.” That was when you stopped. She said, “I’m in love with the piston. I’m in love with the powering of movement.” She also said somewhere else, “Perfection is terrible. It can have no children.” Meaning, I guess, it stops; it’s stasis; it can engender nothing. So this idea of perfection is absolute cessation. To stop. To die.

Braziller: She’s imagining her own death.

Muske-Dukes: And also to be perfected in the sense obviously of a Greek statue or a Greek frieze. This horrible triptych of the mother and obviously the two children. The “little pitchers” I think are the breasts folded in, folded like flowers back into garden.

Braziller: It’s like an anti-birth. They go back into her. Amazing.

Muske-Dukes: Yes.

Audience: She has the right to draw them back in. That's what she said. The temptation to draw them back into herself. She gave them life and creativity, the same thing she does with the words, reducing them to one or two on a line. It seems avaricious that she had the right to do that, to move like the moon. It's the natural organic movement also to draw back.

Muske-Dukes: If you notice the stanzas are only two lines. It's as if, again, something is being carved in stone. It's lapidary until the end, where we have just two words on a line—always the sign of dramatic emphasis. That's what she's trying to do obviously. The enjambment from "her dead" to "her dead/body"—the enjambment of the eye moving from one line to the next is brilliant and powerful. Same thing with "her bare/feet."

Braziller: Is this another one of those great colloquial lines, where she says in stanza four, "Her bare/feet seem to be saying: we have come so far, it is over." It's a brilliant—it seems more intimate or more colloquial than some of the other more chiseled, more descriptive diction that she's using throughout the poem. It's a very moving departure from that.

Audience: I'm sort of stumped by the final line.

Audience: Yes.

Muske-Dukes: I've always puzzled over that line, but I now think it's perfect because it's the only thing moving at the end of the poem. "Her blacks," I think, are just her shadows, her darkneses. I guess you could think of it as her "familiar" in a way, if you think of her as a kind of sorceress.

Braziller: Yes, because the moon has seen it all and the moon continues. The moon has seen it all before and the moon moves forward; she doesn't.

Muske-Dukes: Right. The moon is—

Audience: If it crackles it has to be hard; it couldn't possibly be this generous. It could be like dried blood on the moon—

Muske-Dukes: But it is also like the tides. The blacks are pulling the tides, they're dragging the tides. And the crackling, I think, is just the sound of the trees moving and the leaves moving like the moon she's positioned so often against the trees or in the trees.

Audience: The music is great.

Muske-Dukes: The music is good.

Audience: The assonance in that line is great.

Muske-Dukes: Assonance, right. Exactly. Isn't that wonderful? "Her blacks crackle and drag." You know, she's such a sonic, such a sound poet. We talked about "Daddy" and the ou-ou-ou. Often she'll use "oh" sounds. But here she's got "the blacks cackle and drag," and the "a"

sounds. It's frightening. It's almost like "a-ha," right? She's cackling. Because "crackle" is so close to "cackle."

Audience: Right. You even said "cackle."

Muske-Dukes: I always do, every time.

Audience: Also "blacks"—I don't know if they're actually referred to that way, but weeds, widows' weeds.

Muske-Dukes: Good point. Yes. "Her blacks." Right. I agree.

Audience: Who's the widow here?

Audience: The moon.

Audience: The person with the dead children.

Audience: She's being widowed.

Braziller: The moon.

Muske-Dukes: I don't know. I think it's just the sense of the female and the sense of moving away from what we define as love.

Audience: Right. There's disintegration, even in the language. There's disintegration. Except the poems as a whole, and even those you could argue about who meant what to be with what. Now her daughter's bringing out another version.

Muske-Dukes: Well, she's trying to—she published the original way that Plath wanted.

Audience: Right. But she could never be Plath, this speaker. She could never find the right—as a person trying to live in that house or any house, she couldn't feel integrated. Everything fell apart. Its voice is coming out, but when it come out or the children come out, then she wants to bring them back in, but it's a process that can't be resolved.

Muske-Dukes: I hate this word "cinematic," but it's almost like it starts with a camera view of the dead woman and, again, it's a sculpture obviously and it's in stone, but it then gets more wordy. It starts out very minimal, very few words, and then it's as if it pulls back into conversation and, by the end, the moon has taken over again. And the moon is quite chatty. The moon "has nothing to be sad about." The moon is carrying on.

Audience: I saw some study once at a psychiatrist's office. He had done a book of pictures of dead women—according to him, women who had killed themselves out of a wish to escape and women who had killed themselves out of vengeance.

Braziller: Out of what?

Audience: Out of vengeance of some sort. Yes. But the pictures of the faces were stunning. The ones that he had picked who were committing suicide out of a sense of escape had the most peaceful smile. The smile of accomplishment. I was stunned. It was really beautiful.

Muske-Dukes: I was going to say, I think almost any suicide, people want to escape. But, I don't know. I don't want to go there because the idea—

Audience: No, but I was thinking of the faces.

Muske-Dukes: Well, I think she's looking for that—maybe not that—but that sense of, again, a canvas or a sculpture. The completion.

Audience: Is this related to Medea who killed her kids?

Muske-Dukes: Yes, I think. We haven't even talked about it, but she was very myth-aware, obviously, and she read something by Frazer called *The Golden Bough*. You all know it, I think. And of course many poets do. But she really, in a way, absorbed it differently than other poets. And other myths, too, they became—I mean, people have argued in the many, many, many things written about her that she made myth of everything. I don't know that that's necessarily true; I believe she transformed everything. And in a sense she kept the mythic properties but transformed in a sense to a kind of miraculous language, as if she were the oracle.

Braziller: Let me interrupt a second. I'll read the final poem. We can talk about that, and then we can continue as long as the lights are on. The lights are going off, right? Okay.

“Words”

Axes

After whose stroke the wood rings,
And the echoes!
Echoes traveling
Off from the centre like horses.

The sap

Wells like tears, like the
Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock

That drops and turns,

A white skull,
Eaten by weedy greens.
Years later I
Encounter them on the road—

Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life.

I'll get the ball rolling. I think with "The Arrival of the Bee Box" there are multiple, sometimes dual interpretations, but I'll throw out one here that works for me and I obviously think she intended. I'm just going to take a chance at it and you'll all throw tomatoes at me if you don't agree.

Audience: Words.

Muske-Dukes: Words.

Braziller: Words are hurtful. She's a writer; she works with words and naturally you think words are the words of her poetry, and that may lead to another interpretation and I want to hear about that. But I'll throw out one that words can be hurtful. We've read five of her other poems, poems like "Daddy," poems about her mother and her father and about her husband, and we can look at this as her hearing of painful words, of a scar that was delivered, of something hurtful that might have been said to her. Or words that might have delivered some very painful news to her of something. It's a truly confessional poem, and she's talking about the way these harsh or damning words have made her feel. Perhaps she's saying that there are certain things she can't hold up to. Obviously, there were certain things she couldn't hold up to. As I said, words are part of the creative process, too, and she uses them magnificently.

Muske-Dukes: There's a wonderful essay by Seamus Heaney in a book called *The Government of the Tongue*. Many of you may know it. It's a collection of essays about contemporary poetry. He has a wonderful essay on Plath and he focuses a lot on this poem, "Words," and what it's about. I think it's just about language. It's about how language in a sense is outdistanced by life, by the extraordinary struggle to express what we feel. This is an amazing beginning: "Axes/After whose stroke the wood rings." She's talking about words and describing them as axes after whose stroke the wood rings—the reverberative effect of words. They can take us, as she says, "echoes traveling off from the centre like horses." This book is called *Ariel*, remember. Her horse was named Ariel, since we're talking about biography. But Ariel is of course the spirit, as you know, in Shakespeare's "The Tempest," the spirit who is doing the will of Prospero. But the echoes travel out from the word. "The sap/wells like tears, like the/water striving/to re-establish its mirror/over the rock." In terms of what she's doing here with figurative language, it's just genius. This is a high degree of poetic intelligence in operation, here. But she's admitting, in a sense, finally, that the words are "dry and riderless." She sees them later on the road. I don't want to read this as a sob story, with her saying that "I'm fucked and words can't save me," and all the rest of it. But the fact is she ends up with this idea of destiny, the "fixed stars," so that she is pitting the creative act—our incredible ability as human beings to make language and the extraordinary ability to make poetry, the highest form of language—against that notion of fate. And she leaves it at that. There's the riderless horse, which is also an image of

death, obviously—the funeral cortege. But the fixed stars are there at the bottom of the pool. And remember the tap root of the elm goes down to the bottom of the pool.

By the way, Ted Hughes, just before he died, published a last book of his own poems called *The Birthday Present* and he argues in many of those poems that she was fated to die. And this is why I think he put this poem at the end, obviously. But he said her argument is always between the inevitability of our fate or death and the power of the creative.

Audience: So this is all about her words?

Muske-Dukes: Oh, no. I think it can be universal and it is. I think it can be both. I think she's often talking about the emotional underpinnings of her life and also talking about the creative act and how they come together. The act of using language is going to be based on emotion, but she leaves it behind. The axe hits, the word has its affect whether it's good or bad, whatever. And then this movement outward, like when you throw a stone in a pool, the concentric circles still reverberate for a while.

Braziller: We've talked a great deal about her magnificent music. Enough can't be said about the stunning imagery throughout these poems. I mean, "The sap wells like tears"; the water is trying to re-establish its mirror over the rock drops.

Audience: The brilliance in a lot of these is that they cover so much of her career and life, not only her artistic life, but her creative life as a mother and a person. I even think "Edge" is about the creative process, as well.

Muske-Dukes: I think so, too.

Audience: Or maybe in that her creative process has dried up.

Muske-Dukes: She's said it all, right. I mean, she got things on paper—I can't believe some of the things she managed to get on paper about the creative life.

Audience: This poem reminds me of another way of looking at the words. What words do. It can be words that have been penned by her or others, but I still think they are the words that are her art. It's still the words that she creates later on that—

Muske-Dukes: On the riderless horse, right. The words become images and then they continue to move. Poems move through space.

Braziller: How many more questions? I'm sorry.

Muske-Dukes: I have to go.

Braziller: You have to go?

Muske-Dukes: I have to go in a minute but I'd love—

Audience: Are you going to read one of your poems?

Muske-Dukes: I don't know if there's time.

Braziller: Yes there is! We insist. And it's a good place to break and let's do it.

Muske-Dukes: I'll read a short poem. Actually, you had asked me to read a poem that was reminiscent of Plath and I could never begin to write like Plath, so I won't pretend that this is remotely like her genius. This is a collection of elegies, this book *Sparrow*, for my late husband, who was an actor, speaking of death and life. But this poem happens to be about someone else who died, a friend, a woman who died. Her name was Valli.

“Valli”

As she died she became more beautiful.

That afternoon I saw her, near the end
of summer—she looked re-made, a pure echo
of herself, a voice thrown back from a great

distance within, but clear, resonant. She wanted
to live. Her hair had grown back in a shining
curve and her face reveals nothing of her suffering—
she looked young, expectant. But then, how else was

she supposed to appear, what else was she supposed to say
—drifting shyly into a silly party, every gaze on her?
That she was dying and afraid to die, that her life had been
made of leave-takings, that her breasts had been stripped away,

that her very name meant farewell? Now, when I dream of her,
she is speaking openly, enunciating, but without sound, like
the stray dogs she kept and loved. So many of them, barking
soundlessly, their voices extracted so that no one would complain,

no one would say that they were a nuisance. Now I wonder how
she found those creatures, how she tracked them down
in their illness and fear—coaxing them out of hiding,
persuading them to follow her into that silent animated world—

where she presided, first as savior, then as one of them, after the knife.

Braziller: Thank you.