Chapter 1

Life

In the opening line of her engaging essay on Sylvia Plath, critic Sandra M. Gilbert explains, 'Though I never met Sylvia Plath, I can honestly say that I have known her most of my life.'[1] The familiarity that Gilbert reports is one that many readers of Plath share. The bare facts of her life come to us from multiple sources – from her *Journals* and *Letters Home*, her stories and prose essays, her novel, *The Bell Jar*, and of course from the poems themselves. Beyond this, we pick up clues and information from biographies and memoirs, from critical commentaries and, of late, from other people's poems (notably Ted Hughes's 1998 *Birthday Letters*) or fiction (Kate Moses's 2003 *Wintering*) or film (Christine Jeffs's 2003 *Sylvia*). From these fragments we construct what we believe to be the biographical truth. We learn something, too, from the broader cultural, historical and ideological circumstances in which Plath lived and wrote; as Stan Smith puts it, 'For Sylvia Plath . . . identity itself is the primary historical datum: the self is a secretion of history.'[2]

Plath's life, then, seems overdetermined. It is told to us over and over again (indeed, she tells it to herself over and over again, rehearsing certain moments in multiple genres) in so many overlapping layers that it seems, finally, to form a kind of carapace – a papier-mâché shell which masks a gap. Biographical accounts of Plath's life have, as Chapters 6 and 7 will show, been bitterly contested. Nevertheless, it is useful to begin by at least sketching the bare bones of Plath's life and times in order the better to situate her work in its personal, literary and historical contexts. This also helps us to understand the pressures which brought it into being and which have shaped its reception.

Family

Plath described herself as first-generation American on her father's side and third-generation on that of her mother (*PS* 169). Her father, Otto Emil Plath,

was born in around 1885 in Grabow, a town on the Polish/German border (or in the Polish Corridor, as it was then known). His parents were German, but one of his grandmothers was said to have been Polish. As a child, he developed a fascination for bees. He excelled at school and when his grandparents, who had emigrated to the USA earlier in the nineteenth century, learnt of his promise, they sent for him to join them. Otto Plath travelled to the USA in 1901 at the age of 16. He worked in New York for a year, earning a living in his uncle's grocery store and sitting in on lessons in a local school in order to learn English (*LH* 8). His grandparents had settled on a farm in Wisconsin and were determined that their grandson should earn a place at the state's Northwestern College. They had aspirations for Otto to train for the Lutheran ministry but he did not share their ambitions. At the Lutheran seminary he became disenchanted with his fellow students and was dismayed to find that the works of Charles Darwin were banned (*LH* 9). He was subsequently cut off from his family. After studying at several universities throughout the USA, he became a university professor and an expert in entomology, specialising in the study of bees. His doctoral thesis, *Bumblebees and their Ways*, was submitted to Harvard University in 1928 and eventually published in 1934.[3]

It was while working as a professor at Boston University that Otto met Aurelia Schober. Aurelia was the daughter of a German-speaking Austrian family who had emigrated to the USA earlier in the nineteenth century. She was his junior by two decades and a graduate student in his Middle High German class. Aurelia's family had expected their daughter to acquire a vocational education and she obeyed by following a business curriculum at the Boston University of Practical Arts and Letters, though she also fitted in additional courses in literature and history and worked simultaneously in secretarial, library and other roles. On graduation Aurelia worked for several years as a teacher and then returned to university to study for an MA. There she met Otto Plath and in January 1932, after a two-year courtship during which Aurelia taught high school English and German, they married. Otto had first to seek a divorce from his previous wife, Lydia, from whom he had separated some thirteen years earlier. Comments made by Aurelia in the memoir with which she opens *Letters Home* (the selection of Plath's letters which she edited for publication in 1976) indicate a mismatch between her expectations of married life and those of her husband. She was a generation younger than him and was accustomed to a degree of independence. His expectations, she intimates, were that she would play a more passive and domestic role (*LH* 5–10).

The Plath's first child, Sylvia, was born at the Robinson Memorial Hospital, Boston, on 27 October 1932. Their second, Warren, was born exactly two and a half years later.[4] At this time the Plaths were living in Jamaica Plains, a suburb

of Boston. In preparation for Warren's birth, Sylvia was sent to her maternal grandparents' home at Point Shirley on the Massachusetts coast. She recalls this experience in the prose memoir 'Ocean 1212-W' (*JP* 117–24). In 1936 the family moved to the coastal suburb of Winthrop, close to the Schober grandparents at Point Shirley (*LH* 13–18). Warren was often ill as a young child, thus Sylvia spent much time at the Point Shirley home. The short story 'Among the Bumblebees' looks back to this period, albeit with a fictionalised subject, Alice, and the rather telling conflation of father and grandfather figure (*JP* 259ff; see also *CP* 110). Shortly after Warren's birth, Otto's health began to decline. Apparently fearing that he had cancer, Otto refused to consult medical experts until a minor accident in the home in August 1940 forced him to seek advice. He was diagnosed with advanced diabetes which required urgent amputation of one leg. However, the operation did not halt the progression of the disease and in November of that year he died (*LH* 22–4). Sylvia was eight. A number of poems (most famously 'Daddy', 'The Colossus' and 'Full Fathom Five') reflect on this time as do entries in Plath's *Journal* – for example, one of 15 June 1951 where Plath ponders the biological, emotional and intellectual legacy of her father's death (*J* 64–5). Subsequent entries, particularly those which record her psychotherapy sessions with Dr Ruth Barnhouse Beuscher in late 1958, analyse the trauma of this period in rather more detail and with acerbic frankness (*J* 429–30). In recalling her relationship with her father, Plath inevitably also assesses her complicated relationship with her mother. Aurelia was, by all accounts, devoted to her children and to giving them every possible opportunity, even if this came at the price of her own exhaustive labours and personal sacrifice. The debt Sylvia owed to her mother and to subsequent mentors was one she felt acutely and referenced on numerous occasions.

In 1942 the family moved to a small 'white frame' house in Wellesley, a suburb west of Boston which promised good schools, lower taxes and the possibility in time to come of a scholarship for Sylvia at the highly regarded Wellesley College. Money was a pressing issue for the family. As Sylvia was later to note, her father did not have a pension – a source of deep bitterness to her mother – and the costs of his illness and funeral had exhausted any spare savings (*LH* 29). The critic Louis Simpson has suggested that their new home was an inauspicious place for a poet to begin to write: 'a white frame house is particularly dispiriting, antiseptic and antipoetic'.[5] However, as we will see later, Plath and others of her peers (Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin, for instance) were to put this peculiar suburban and domestic locale to good use in their work, creating in Plath's case a compelling, if sometimes dystopian, view of modern life.

Sylvia was a high-achieving A-grade student throughout her school career, first at the Marshall Livingston Grammar School and then at the Gamaliel

Bradford Senior High. Simpson reports that one of her teachers remembered her as 'the kind of student who turns up wanting to know why she has received an "A minus" instead of an "A." '[6] In addition to her wide-ranging academic strengths, she was an accomplished artist (at one time she considered art as her future career and her poetry is often influenced by painting and sculpture), a burgeoning poet and novelist and an inveterate diarist (*LH* 30–1). Her earliest childhood publications are poems published in the early 1940s – in the *Boston Herald* of 10 August 1941 and the *Phillipian* (the newspaper of the local Phillips Academy, Andover) in 1945 and 1946. Sylvia also co-edited her high school newspaper, *The Bradford* (*Bib* 102–3). She achieved her first major publication in August 1950 when after countless rejections her first story, 'And Summer Will Not Come Again', was published in *Seventeen* magazine. Her persistence in sending out manuscripts in spite of rejections (her mother mentions forty-five from *Seventeen* before its first acceptance) is one of her hallmarks, as is a willingness, perhaps born of this experience, to research her markets carefully and to tailor her submissions appropriately (*LH* 35).[7] The summers of Sylvia's high school and college years were spent in various temporary jobs including waitressing, babysitting and farm work, and in frantic dating. These were all experiences that Sylvia relished because they provided settings, plots and characters which she could use in her writing – 'dismembered or otherwise' as Aurelia recalls her daughter commenting (*LH* 37).

In 1950 Sylvia won a place at the prestigious Smith College, Northampton. This was a fraught time for her; it represented the achievement of her own and her mother's dreams (in her early letters home from Smith, she repeatedly declares her shock and delight at becoming a 'Smith girl' (*LH* 46, 48)), yet it also heralded a prolonged period of anxious self-examination. Fellow student Nancy Hunter Steiner describes the 'almost savage industriousness – a clenched-teeth determination to succeed' – that characterised the Smith students.[8] Sylvia may have felt this pressure more than most because her studies were funded by a package of grants and awards which included a contribution from Olive Higgins Prouty, a well-known novelist of the time (she emerges as Philomena Guinea in *The Bell Jar*). She was intensely hardworking and intensely concerned about her ability to make an academic and social success of her Smith years. Her *Journal* entries indicate that she made huge demands of herself, was involved in energy-sapping extracurricular activities, worried about her grades in the Sciences (which threatened her 'A' averages) and about her emotional and financial obligations.

In trying to understand Plath's experience as a young woman at Smith, we need to be alert both to the specific and personal pressures she was under and to the ideologies of the period, in particular how these defined success as a student

and as a young woman. She was ambivalent about her relationships with the succession of boys she dated, probably the most significant of which were Dick Norton, a model for Buddy Willard in *The Bell Jar*, and Gordon Lameyer, a student of English at nearby Amherst College.[9] Her letters and entries in the *Journals* from throughout this period trace the pressure on young women to date but to remain chaste, to study hard and to play hard (*LH* 45, 49, 52; *J* 28). Robin Peel suggests that during her years at Smith, Plath's immediate and 'constant' goal was one of 'self-improvement'. As he says, 'the focus on self-development and achievement itself reflects the dominant American ideology of the period. Plath imbibed this so deeply that "success or death" became the rhetorical options to which this ideology was reduced.'[10] We will return to these broader cultural pressures in the next chapter. For now, though, it is useful to point out the peculiar contradictions of life for bright young women in 1950s America.

This was immediately before the rise of what became known as 'second wave' feminism (and a decade before the publication of Betty Friedan's groundbreaking *The Feminist Mystique* (1963)). Women were faced with contradictory and seemingly irreconcilable demands to be both clever and attractive, confident and submissive; to be high achievers yet to recognise that their greatest achievements would be marriage, children and home. Aurelia notes that during her daughter's high school years, she (Sylvia) was aware of 'the prejudice boys built up among themselves about "brainy" girls' (*LH* 38). Plath returns to and wrestles with these expectations again and again in her *Journals* and in *The Bell Jar*, where the impossibility of the choices available to women such as her heroine Esther Greenwood are exposed to dreadful effect. A friend from Plath's later years in Cambridge recalls that after her secret marriage to Ted Hughes, she exclaimed, ' "Jane, you can't imagine what a relief it is to be free of that dreadful social pressure." '[11]

Throughout her early years at Smith College, Sylvia continued to write and to take on editorial responsibilities, for example, the editorship of the *Smith Review* (*LH* 100). She won a $500 prize in 1952 in *Mademoiselle* magazine's national college fiction competition (*J* 108, 679) and in the following year was awarded one of twenty prestigious guest editorships for the college issue of the magazine. In June 1953 she travelled to New York and, with the other guest editors, experienced a month-long internship. Laurie Levy's memoir 'Outside the Bell Jar' captures something of the excitement and the intensity of this adventure for the young women involved:

> By plane and train, from coastal cities and dusty inland towns, we crossed the Rockies, the Mason-Dixon, and the Mississippi.

> Twenty – count 'em, twenty – from urban universities and the towers of academia and many a Babbittville campus thick with the rotting lilacs of that fruitful May . . . we marched twenty abreast from the hotel for women on glamorous Lexington to the office on glamorous Madison. We whispered in awesome places atop pastel carpets thick as cream cheese, our palms and upper lips sodden: each too self-immobilized to involve herself in the others' worlds, yet eager to submerge identity by joining the group.[12]

The experience and its aftermath are fictionalised in *The Bell Jar*. On her return home to Wellesley from this month in New York, Sylvia was met with the news that she had been unsuccessful in her application for a place on a high-level creative writing course, run by the short story writer Frank O'Connor. According to her mother, Sylvia blanched visibly at the news (*LH* 123). This, coupled with emotional and physical exhaustion, and the prospect of a long and fruitless summer at home in the Boston suburbs, seems to have been the final catalyst for a psychological breakdown. The few journal entries for this period (only two for July 1953) record Sylvia's sense of confusion, frustration and horror at what she seems to have recognised as an incipient mental crisis (*J* 185–6). In August she attempted suicide by taking an overdose of pills. Alex Beam glosses the situation thus:

> Trapped at home . . . drained of energy, she began to contemplate suicide. After a half-serious attempt to drown herself, Plath hid in a crawl space underneath her family's house and swallowed an overdose of sleeping pills. She very nearly died. ("BEAUTIFUL SMITH GIRL MISSING AT WELLESLEY" and "TOP RANKING STUDENT AT SMITH MISSING FROM WELLESLEY HOME" were two of the front-page headlines in the Boston papers.)[13]

Sylvia was hospitalised at McLean Hospital, on the edge of Boston (subsequently regarded as the 'hospital of choice' for creative artists; Robert Lowell and Sexton were to follow Plath in spending time there). Beam explains that she was under the care of Dr Ruth Beuscher – the Dr Nolan of *The Bell Jar* – who, after conventional therapies such as the prescription of Thorazine failed to make any improvement, proposed ECT (electroconvulsive or 'shock' therapy). This was applied in December 1953 and by the New Year she had shown sufficient improvement to be able to return to college in time to register for the second semester of that academic year. Back at Smith she began reading for her honors thesis, 'The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels', which she was to submit the following year. Alongside Dostoevsky, Sylvia was reading Erich Fromm, Karl Jung, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx,

Henry James, Sherwood Anderson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Theodore Dreiser and others.[14] During this time, she developed a relationship with a Yale student, Richard Sassoon.[15]

On her graduation in 1955, Sylvia travelled on a Fulbright Scholarship to Newnham College, Cambridge University. There she studied philosophy, attended lectures on modern literature and immersed herself in student activities, taking part in several plays and modelling the season's fashions for the May 1956 edition of *Varsity* (*LH* 183–203). Her Cambridge tutor, Dorothea Krook, speaks warmly of Sylvia's engagement with the works of Plato – the subject of their regular tutorials.[16] Fellow American student Jane Kopp describes the cultural confusions which arose (and which Sylvia, she suggests, provoked) during their early weeks in England. The differences between English and American habits, tastes and social manners were to become a recurring concern to Plath (see, for example, the poems 'Eavesdropper', 'Tour' and 'Leaving Early' and the sketch 'Snow Blitz' (*JP* 125–33)). During her first Christmas break from university, she travelled to Paris and the South of France with Richard Sassoon, who was then studying at the Sorbonne.[17]

Marriage

It was in February 1956 at the launch party for a short-lived literary magazine, the *St Botolph's Review*, that Sylvia met her future husband, the poet Ted Hughes. Her detailed entries in the *Journals* (*J* 211ff), several poems (for example 'Pursuit') and Hughes's poem 'St Botolph's' (*BL* 14) evoke this period. Hughes was born in Yorkshire in 1930, educated at Mexborough Grammar School and then Pembroke College, Cambridge. He had graduated from Cambridge two years before meeting Sylvia and was working as a reader for a film company in London, though he returned to Cambridge frequently to meet friends and fellow writers.[18] Plath and Hughes married in London just four months later on 16 June 1956 (the 'Bloomsday' of James Joyce's *Ulysses*), then honeymooned in Benidorm (see the poems 'Fiesta Melons' and 'The Goring' and the story 'That Widow Mangada') before returning to Cambridge and London to study and write. The marriage had, at first, to be kept secret from Cambridge and Fulbright authorities as Sylvia feared losing her scholarship if it became known. When news did leak out, the authorities proved willing to give special dispensation.[19] Sylvia then left college accommodation and the couple rented a flat in Eltisley Road, Cambridge. During the late summer of 1956, they made brief visits to Hughes's family in Yorkshire. The growing influence of an English literary tradition, stimulated in part by these visits, is recorded in

poems such as 'Wuthering Heights' and 'Hardcastle Crags'. From 1956 to 1957 Sylvia continued her Fulbright scholarship while Ted taught in a local school. Both poets were successful in publishing stories and poems (since 1954, Plath had been placing poems and stories in major publications such as *Harper's Magazine* and *Atlantic Monthly*). In the spring of 1957 – to Plath's particular delight, for it was she who had sent out the manuscript for consideration – Hughes learnt that his first book of poems, *The Hawk in the Rain*, had been awarded the New York Poetry Center Award and publishing contracts with Faber and Faber and Harper & Row (*LH* 297).

Later that year, they sailed for the USA and after a brief holiday on Cape Cod, settled down to a year of writing and teaching (Plath back at Smith College and Hughes at the University of Massachusetts). Plath's *Journals* indicate a degree of ambivalence about this new role. On the one hand, it was an honour to be included among the faculty of such an esteemed institution, on the other, Plath had no female role models who could persuade her of the feasibility in these circumstances of reconciling all her other aspirations. The Smith faculty were largely single (and apparently less than enthusiastic about their star pupil's hurried marriage) and dedicated to their academic lives. Plath wanted, as her *Journal*s repeatedly make clear, to write, to teach and to be a fulfilled wife and mother. This route, she feared, might be closed to her in the path she had taken. Kopp recalls a letter from Plath which confirms the apparent impossibility of her position. The letter emphasised

> how odd she felt returning to Smith campus, like 'a rather antique and fallen angel.' It seemed tinged with rue and suggested that she found it difficult to write while buried under academic chores, although there was also a sense of coming of age and a genuine delight in teaching 'very intelligent' and 'eager' girls, especially in such an ideal setting.[20]

Plath did indeed find the contradictory demands of the roles of teacher and creative writer exhausting; by 1958, the couple had taken the decision to resign from their academic posts and try for one year to succeed as writers, earning a living from prizes, reviewing and royalties. They rented a flat on Boston's Beacon Hill and to supplement their earnings from writing, Plath worked part-time in various clerical roles, including one at the Massachusetts General Hospital (the title story of *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* originated there). She also audited Robert Lowell's Boston University poetry class alongside Sexton, Kumin and George Starbuck (*J* 471). Although this group met for only a few months, it proved of lasting mutual influence. Plath was later to credit Sexton with showing her how to break through to the 'taboo' subjects of her own

experience (*PS* 167–8). In an affectionate memoir Sexton recalls the group's routine of participating in the workshop and then adjourning to the Ritz Hotel for cocktails and conversation: 'Often, very often, Sylvia and I would talk at length about our first suicides; at length, in detail and in depth between the free potato chips.'[21] Plath's recollections of these episodes are less enthusiastic. Sexton and Starbuck had entered into an affair, and the former's apparent success both as a poet and as a seductive woman seems to have hit Plath hard at a time when she was trying to revise some of her own poems for submission to the publisher which had just accepted Sexton's first volume. She complained that Sexton was ahead of her: 'with her lover GS writing New Yorker odes to her and both of them together: felt our triple martini afternoons at the Ritz breaking up' (*J* 480; see also *J* 498).

During this period, Plath reentered therapy with her McLean doctor, Ruth Beuscher. She was reading widely in psychoanalytical literature at the same time, and her *Journals* show her working hard to forge a meaningful narrative from difficult childhood experiences and complex adult relationships (*J* 429 ff). In spring 1959 she visited her father's grave at Winthrop cemetery for the first time (*J* 473), an experience which was to inform the poem 'Electra on Azalea Path', completed two weeks after her visit, and to reemerge in fictionalised form in *The Bell Jar*. The early summer was a productive one for Plath: she wrote a number of stories and some of the poems which were later to form the bulk of *The Colossus* (*J* 486) and she also seems to have begun work on a novel, *Falcon Yard*. But there were also disappointments and rejections.[22] Throughout this period, she was trying to become pregnant and this preoccupation underpins much of her writing at this time (*J* 500). Later that summer, Plath and Hughes travelled across the USA, visiting California and Yellowstone National Park, among other places. The story 'The Fifty-Ninth Bear' (*JP* 94–105) dramatises one incident from this expedition (Plath's letter to her mother describes the same scene (*LH* 349–50)). Tracy Brain uses this incident as an example of some of the limitations of biography, establishing that contrary to subsequent accounts of the episode which inspired the story, 'there was no human fatality from any bear in Yellowstone Park in 1959'.[23] The autumn of 1959 was spent at the Yaddo Writers' Colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, where many of the poems from Plath's first book, *The Colossus*, were conceived. By this time, Plath knew that she was pregnant at last. Grace Schulman (a writer who stayed at Yaddo in the early 1970s) regards Plath's time at Yaddo as a period for recuperation and rebirth and sees this process reflected in poems such as 'The Stones' (the closing poem in the 'Poem for a Birthday' sequence). Here, she says, 'the speaker is one who has lived in fragments and is now reborn.'[24]

England

The couple left the USA that winter in order to return to England in anticipation of the birth of their first child. Back in London in the spring of 1960, Plath secured a British publisher for *The Colossus*. This was her first collection of poems, one she had been working on intermittently for at least four years (*J* 294). The move to Britain had given her the impetus to start seeking a home for the collection once more. An editor at the London publisher Heinemann had seen some of Plath's poems in the *London Magazine* and invited her to submit a manuscript – a gesture that Plath read as an omen of great things to come: 'England offers new comforts', as she exclaimed in her diary (*J* 521). The book was published later that year, in October. In April, Plath gave birth to her first baby, Frieda (*LH* 373). Just a few weeks afterwards, she and Hughes met T. S. Eliot at a Faber and Faber reception and attended one of the first Aldermaston 'Ban the Bomb' marches (*LH* 379, 378). The Faber and Faber event is indicative of Plath's proud sense that she was forging links with an important literary tradition; her *Letters Home* of this period recall her acquaintance with a number of influential critics, editors and writers. Witnessing the 'Ban the Bomb' march (with Frieda in a carry-cot) as it entered London indicates her increasing concerns about politics and the environment. As the marchers came into view, she expresses pride that her daughter's 'first real adventure should be as a protest against the insanity of world-annihilation' (*LH* 378). Both poets continued to write – for magazines and journals, for the BBC and for their next collections of poems – juggling space in their cramped London flat, and negotiating time away from domestic and childcare duties as best they could. Al Alvarez, an acquaintance at the time and later responsible for publishing some of Plath's late poems in the immediate aftermath of her death, recalls the scene: 'A typewriter stood on a little table by the window, and they took turns at it, each working shifts while the other minded the baby. At night they cleared it away to make room for the child's cot.'[25]

Plath became pregnant again in early 1961, but in February the pregnancy miscarried and she was subsequently hospitalised for appendicitis (see *J* 599ff and the poems 'Parliament Hill Fields', 'In Plaster' and 'Tulips'). In the months after her operation, she worked on the first draft of *The Bell Jar* (though the germ of the plot is recorded in a notebook entry of 28 December 1958 (*J* 452)). Later that year, desperate for more room and for a break from the financial pressures of living in London and for time to write, she and Hughes bought a large dilapidated thatched house in the Devon village of North Tawton (*LTH* 515–24). They moved in at the very end of August 1961. Plath gave birth there at the beginning of 1962 to her second child, Nicholas. Her *Letters Home*,