For Sivvy

Tony Cockayne

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On October 22nd, 2011, I was visiting Cambridge with a dual interest. To see the Vermeer exhibition and the work of other 17th century Dutch Masters, depicting women, work and interiors and to attend an intimate concert played by John Greaves, Peter Blegvad and Chris Cutler, for a small audience at Pembroke College. Judith, my friend and a Cambridge resident had organised my ticket.

After visiting the Fitzwilliam Museum and the many delights of the exhibition, I walked back into Cambridge and remember a resonating chord as I saw the sign saying St. Botolphs, paused and thought little more of it. After walking across fenland, unable to make contact with my friend Judith, I took up a position on the Silver Street Bridge, leaning there, gazing into the very bright October sun that flooded the surrounding scene. On my left The Anchor Pub, already replete with mid stage lunchers and drinkers, sitting on the verandah, watching the punters negotiate their departure from the bank. The fifteen or so minutes here, lost in a kind of reverie, I believe was very important, to what was to follow.

Eventually, mobile contact was made with my friend and I was taken to the Eagle Pub, where the musicians, their friends and families, were gathered, for lunch. A sociable and engaging hour was spent before we dispersed, into the mid afternoon. Unbeknown to me, at this time, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath had celebrated here, with cider, ham and salad, the news of *Hawk in the Rain*, being accepted for publication, Hughes' first book of poetry. And when I had languished on the Lutyens bridge earlier, whilst not knowing then, I must have been very close to the spot, where Plath received the flier,for the *St.Botolph's Review*.

The following day, a Sunday, I returned to London on the train and read *The Observer*'s colour supplement article by Frieda Hughes, on the forthcoming exhibition of her Mother's drawings, at The Mayor Gallery, in London. Interested in the illustrated reproductions, I was very keen to visit. Arrriving in front of these meticulous little sketches in pen and ink, was revelatory. They are confident studies, with an exactness of line, rendered with an architect's precision, never dull and made fascinating by her concept of design and the mark making ability, shown within the composition. The feeling for her subject, was very evident. I had engaged with Plath's art and vowed there, to find out more about her than I already knew.

A deep immersion in her life and work followed.

The painting itself was created on February 10, 2012 and completed in that one day. My intention, as it was Sylvia Plath's last full day. Five days prior, on the 5th, I was drive by my friend and neighbor Runilla in the snow to 23 Fitzroy Road and placed a red rose, on the doorstep, a painting was far from my mind. The desire to take the rose, to her last home, was an uprush, a sort of confluence of emotion, time, place, the weather and my deep engagement, at that time with *The Journals*, *Letters Home* and her poetry, of course. It was snowing here. As I knelt on the steps, the door opened and a young man emerged and for a brief time, I saw into the hallway, where Plath kept the pram. The young man seemed to be perfectly understanding of my action. I walked through the snow, to Chalcot Square, returning several minutes later, to see the rose had gone. I would like to think, it went into the house.

"For Sivvy" was hung for a short period of time around February 10, 2013, at The French House, Dean Street, Soho, formerly the York Minster, where Plath, signed on the bar, the publishing deal, for *The Colossus*. At the time I made the painting, I did not know that February 10th (1960) was the day she signed the deal.

During October 2012, a single red rose bloomed from a plant in a garden tub which was viewable from my kitchen window and was in fine colour, over her birthday. The final stage of that rose-head, is still visible, with one new bud apparent. Quite unusual for an English Winter and the duration of its flowering. Recently, I came across the reference to Plath being presented with a red rose, upon her first day's work, in Manhattan, in her editorial role. She burst into tears, it seems. That day, was June 1, 1953. On that same day, in the Midlands of England, I was celebrating my first birthday.