**The Letters of Sylvia Plath**

**Volume II: 1956 – 1963**

**Edited by Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil**

**Faber & Faber, £35, 1024pp**

**Review by Erica Wagner**

The second volume of Sylvia Plath’s collected letters begins in October 1956, the day after her 24th birthday, just a few months after she married Ted Hughes -- the companion, as she saw him then, of her heart and mind and soul. “What a lovely birthday I had!” she wrote to her mother Aurelia from Cambridge, where Plath was a Fulbright Scholar at Newnham College. She thanks her mother effusively for a “warm plaid brown jacket”, describes other gifts ($5, a handkerchief) and praises her husband. “Ted is so magnificent,” she gushes. His birthday gift to her was a pack of Tarot cards: “so after the obligations of this term are over your daughter shall start to see her way on the road to becoming a seeress.” [3-4]

But she did not foresee what would come. The end of this volume is more often than not a howl of rage and despair as she delineates, in letter after letter addressed to her mother, her brother, to friends and to her American psychiatrist, Dr Ruth Beuscher, the breakup of her marriage and her struggle to survive in the aftermath. That struggle proved too much for her, and she killed herself on February 11, 1963: one week after the final letter, written to Dr Beuscher. “Now the babies are crying,” runs its very last line, reference to Frieda and Nicholas, the couple’s tiny children, left in her care. “I must take them out to tea.” [969]

There are hundreds of letters in this book, but it is the fourteen letters to Beuscher which are the subject of Frieda Hughes’ moving – and distressing – foreword. Frieda herself did not know the letters existed until late in 2016; then, in the spring of 2017, they came up for sale, with some of the contents revealed online: Frieda Hughes had not seen them in full. “I felt excluded from my own mother’s personal feelings,” she writes, “feelings other people – strangers – had already pored over.” [xv] Frieda Hughes must, by now, be too well accustomed to strangers poring over both her parents’ feelings: yet when she finally was able to read these letters, “I simply wept over the contents.” [xvii] They are naked as only letters between patient and psychiatrist can be, describing in graphic detail Ted Hughes’s aggression, deceit, violence. Frieda Hughes knew she was in a bind: were the letters to remain unpublished “the sensationalist phrases that had already leaked into the public domain would remain without context or explanation, warped and distorted by the views and impositions of other people’s agendas and theses.” [xxiv] So it was the devil or the deep blue sea.

But Frieda writes of how, on reading these letters, she was “struck by the sensation of standing in the room with my mother”. It is a sensation that the reader of this volume – which runs to over a thousand pages – will share. Since the publication of *Letters Home*, the edited selection of letters to her family published by Aurelia Plath in 1975, Plath’s admirers have had access to at least a version of her epistolary persona. But Aurelia redacted much that showed her daughter (or herself) in an unflattering light; over the decades a fuller portrait has emerged, with the publication of Plath’s journals in 1982 and now these two volumes of letters. On photographic plates in this volume are images of Aurelia Plath’s heavy black crossings-out: Photoshop has revealed the poet’s words still hiding underneath.

To be blunt: at the end, Ted Hughes comes across as a monster, no doubt about it, leaving his wife in the middle of nowhere, as she saw it, in a huge and freezing house in Devon with two small children and frightening financial responsibilities, while he waltzed off with “this ad-agency girl” – Assia Wevill, who herself committed suicide in 1969. Hughes, she tells Beuscher, “beat me up physically” days before she miscarried; the same letter describes how he let his infant son fall out of a pushchair: “He could have had concussion or broken his spine.” [830] She vents her fury to her other correspondents too, and much of the force of this volume comes from repetition, letter after letting building into a fugue of sorrow and anger.

As always, Plath’s end threatens to overwhelm her beginning – one of hard work and hope, of painting furniture and making poems, of delicious dinners cooked and tempting cakes baked. (I will shortly try the recipe for sponge cake to be found on page 324.) “The doors are open,” she writes in the spring of 1957. “One only has to slave & work & live for the art of writing as well as living with the utmost integrity and & emotional sympathy.”

That is always how Sylvia Plath endeavoured to live; this final volume of her letters offers further proof of that, if such proof were actually needed. How vital she was, how hungry for love and life and art. And – it should hardy need saying – what an artist. Two-thirds of the way through comes “Tulips”, the poem she wrote after having her appendix out; sent in a 1961 letter to Theodore Roethke. Here is her mature poet’s voice, shocking at every encounter. “The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,/ And comes from a country far away as health.” [605]