

Plath's Plague

by M. Barns

Before my mother died, she developed an unhealthy relationship with Sylvia Plath. Under the faded florescent lights of the university they would speak to each other, as I quietly did my homework. I was only seven, but I knew something was the matter. I now know the insanity of Plath's final words spoke to my mother's depression. I know she loved me, but the calling of her distant friend was more powerful than the maternal instincts she chose to ignore.

We buried her in December, along with all of her books. She didn't have many, she didn't believe in buying them. She thought books should be public property. *Art should not be jailed*, she'd whisper as she twirled through the children's section, her long, silk skirt catching the edge of a faded, cloth-bound book. *See Melinda*, she'd say, picking up the book. *There is magic, this is magic*. Slowly she'd put the book to her nose, and gently flip through the pages. *You can smell the magic*. She'd smile.

That was before she got sick, before she met Plath. After they developed their relationship, she stopped seeing magic, she stopped smelling books. She would erase the notes that other people wrote in library books, and fill them with her own. She was sick and she didn't even realize it.

When I cleared out the house after my father passed, I found all of her old notes and among them, her library card. Each side was decorated with smudged grey ink, yet you could still make out one of the words, *Plath*. Enraged that this woman was able to steal my mother, I went to the university that my mother used to teach at. I drove through the night and was greeted by moist North Carolina air when I walked towards the building.

I need to see all of your Plath books, I told the librarian. She looked at me comically and pointed towards a module of computers. *You can look for them over there, it's fairly simple*. Frantically I wrote down the call numbers of over a dozen books and

hurried up the stairs towards the general collection. Sitting on the floor, I laid the books around me and discovered a familiar book.

The binding was broken, and the cloth was peeling, yet as I flipped through the pages, I noticed my mother's familiar handwriting. Below the dedication in a collection of poems my mother wrote a call number that I didn't recognize.

It's the childrens' section, the librarian said. And there, among the brightly colored novels of my childhood was a brown leather covered book, with the call number written carefully on the spine. No author was listed, and you could tell that it was hand-bound.

I opened the first page, careful not to crack the spine. *For Melinda*, it read. *Magic exists all around you— don't shut yourself away from it.*

And for the first time since my mother's death, I cried.

