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Lady Lazarus Has Wheels

You should have known
the rough beast
would make you
turn on the gas;

and answered the ad
of an Anna Blume
(Cylinders Farm
is crowless:

no kunst
to bother you,
but a barn
full of Merz).

Turn blue spokes
red, go Deutsch
shelling yellow
phonemes

into the dusk.
What say the people?
Lady Lazarus
has wheels!

A Note on Sources:

I wrote this poem some years ago out of my great love for the work of Kurt Schwitters, Sylvia Plath and W.B. Yeats.¹ It came to me suddenly and rapidly and now it exists and is I believe its own explanation (Billie Holiday's 'Hush now, don't explain' is my motto). On 14 August 2015 I performed a series of poems at Inverleith House, Edinburgh in response to *Ritzfrolic*, an exhibition of the sculptures of John Chamberlain.² I included 'Lady Lazarus Has Wheels', and in another poem in that set, 'INFOPO (GONDOLA GONDOLA: WORDS ON WORDS)³', I made succinct reference to the hinterland of 'Lady Lazarus Has Wheels':

2. Kurt Merz Schwitters, the 20th century's greatest assemblage artist and poet, was an acknowledged inspiration to John Chamberlain. Kurt Merz Schwitters spent his final years in poverty and obscurity on a farm in the English lake district where he died in 1948.

3. The poet Sylvia Plath was also a collagist. The London flat in which she killed herself was once occupied by the poet W.B. Yeats.

However, Cole Collins has asked me to say a little more about how I arrived at this poem encouraging Plath's *Lady Lazarus* to turn from Yeats' rough beast to Schwitters' *Anna Blume*. Here are my retrospective reflections on the convergence of interests that I now come to see probably helped shape it.

My father, Robert Vincent Goldman (1931-1998), a visual artist, introduced me to Schwitters' art and poetry when I was very young, and I recall being shown the outside of *Cylinders Farm Barn* in Ambleside by him in the early 1960s on a walking holiday in the Lake District. My mother, Joy Goldman (nee Sinclair, 1928-2018), also a visual artist, introduced me to Plath's poetry when I was a teenager but I knew nothing of Plath's visual art until the 1990s. I was a student at Edinburgh University when I got to know and love the poetry of Yeats under the brilliant tutelage of Professor Paul Edwards. A few years later, one of my own students there, Claire Brennan, who went on to undertake a PhD on Plath under the supervision of Professor Philip Hobsbaum, in turn got me interested in Plath's visual art. I enjoyed instructive conversations with them both on how Plath's visual collage might cause us to rethink received critical views of her lyricism and symbolism, and to read her poetry more productively alongside that of Schwitters.

Not least I saw how her *Collage of Cold War images* assembled in 1960,⁴ now hailed as Plath's 'political art masterpiece',⁵ spoke to Schwitters' *Anna Blume* works. This collage of newspaper and magazine images and texts in monochrome and red tones, depicts a flight of military jets crossing the brow of a card dealing Eisenhower with 'SLEEP' pasted on his lapel (Nixon and the red stripes of the American flag pasted over his shoulder). The jets are aimed to pierce the abdomen of a reclining woman in swim-wear. The numerous cuttings include 'It's "HIS and HER Time" all over America', top left, and 'FATIGUE BUILD-UP ... America's growing health hazard', bottom right. The latter text appears at the stilettoed feet of a woman in formal dress whose head and shoulders

seem bowed under the weight of the hawkish patriarchal edifice arrayed above her. It is an indictment of the era's Military Industrial Complex and the gender politics underpinning it, and seems to me in dialogue too with the British artist, Richard Hamilton's famous pop art collage, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956), which was first exhibited in London in 1956 and widely circulated as a poster image. And Schwitters' Anna Blume series of course precedes both. Hamilton went on to play a key role in arranging for the removal of Schwitters' Merz Barn Wall from Cylinders for installation at the Hatton Gallery, Newcastle in 1966. It was happy chance for my father as we were living just north of Newcastle at this time. It became a familial site of MERZ pilgrimage.

Meanwhile, in December 1962, having left her husband, Ted Hughes, Plath moved herself and their two children to 23 Fitzroy Road, Primrose Hill, London, which had been Yeats' childhood home, which Plath declared '*the street and the house ... where I've always wanted to live ... It is WB Yeats' house – with a blue plaque over the door, saying he lived there.*' It was in this house that the thirty-year old Plath killed herself in December 1963.

While pregnant with my daughter Robbie in the summer of 1999, a year on from my father's death, I made a return visit to the Merz Barn Wall in Newcastle where recordings of Schwitters performing his poetry were playing. I of course got hold of the CD and continued regularly to play Schwitters to my child before her birth and long after. 'Lady Lazarus Has Wheels' is a love poem to the vitally restorative and sustaining powers I have found in this particular constellation of visual/verbal collage works, 'brain-openers' which are always on my Menu.⁶

¹ See Jane Goldman, 'Six Poems', *The International Literary Quarterly*: 10 (February 2010) http://interlitq.org/glasgowvoices/jane_goldman/job.php

² https://www.mixcloud.com/Inverleith_House/ritzfrolic-an-evening-of-poetry-and-discussion-inspired-by-the-work-of-john-chamberlain/

³ Jane Goldman, 'INFOPO (GONDOLA GONDOLA: WORDS ON WORDS)', *Raum* 4 (2017)

⁴ Sylvia Plath Collection (Artwork), Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College; Plate 37, in *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*, ed. Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (Madison, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2002), pp. 57-61; Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago Press, 1991), pp.9-10.

⁵ Kathleen Connors, 'Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath', *Eye Rhymes*, ed. Connors and Bayley, p. 35.

⁶ Kurt Schwitters and Raoul Hausmann, 'Menu', *PIN* (London: Gaberbocchus Press, 1962; rep. 1986), pp. 53, 63, 52, 62.