



Sylvia's Darlings *with Commentary*

Floyd Cheung

To cite this article: Floyd Cheung (2023) Sylvia's Darlings *with Commentary*, Amerasia Journal, 49:1-2, 55-84, DOI: [10.1080/00447471.2023.2295441](https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2023.2295441)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2023.2295441>



Published online: 02 Jan 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 35



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Sylvia's Darlings with Commentary

Floyd Cheung

Department of English, Smith College, Northampton, MA, USA

ABSTRACT

"Sylvia's Darlings with commentary" selectively recovers Sylvia Plath's "darlings" that she left behind or strike-outs that she created on the way to writing *Ariel*. Interspersed with poetic arrangements of these fragments are Floyd Cheung's reflections on his process and reactions, all the while asking, "What does it mean for a male Chinese American immigrant English professor to engage with these traces of a famous female white American poet?"

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 August 2022
Accepted 12 December 2023

KEYWORDS

Sylvia Plath; immigration; teaching; equity and inclusion; Asian Americans in media

A birthday present

vinegar in a tin?

snare that eye
loops of metal, ankle-high

absence that turned

What does it mean to recover Sylvia Plath's "darlings," strike-outs she made while drafting poems for her book Ariel? What does it mean for a male Chinese American immigrant English professor to arrange them selectively to create a new poem?

Chiwan Choi says that editing is sometimes erasure, while immigration is always erasure.

To recover can mean to bring back from obscurity or to obscure again.

CONTACT Floyd Cheung  fcheung@smith.edu  Department of English, Smith College, Northampton, MA 01063, USA

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2023 The Regents of the University of California

teeth that hurt
sin that cries
through the cracked glass

have a look
maybe too shy?

Recovering words from a manuscript feels like snatching pages from a fire or stealing from one of those open shelves in the British Museum.

D. W. Griffith's silent film, Broken Blossoms, features a Chinese immigrant man who saves an abused white woman. Sui Sin Far's "The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese" tells a similar tale. Both were written more than one hundred years ago. Both end in tragedy.

Am I locked in a tragic embrace with Plath?

small hours
leave me at the same address
blooming

managed well

There's always a mob and executioner

a couple of horses & a wheel

Chinese Americans in the old West managed their desires. Some remained bachelors, some turned to each other, some were like Tinman Wong in The Ballad of Little Jo. A white woman disguised as a man, Little Jo, saves Wong from being lynched for "taking white men's jobs." Eventually, she finds him in a creek washing his long, unbraided queue.

Like Plath, Julia Chang Lin '51 studied English at Smith College. The two overlapped for a year. Plath once said, "I want to be important. By being different. And these girls are all the same." Eventually, Lin became famous for bringing modern Chinese women's poetry to the attention of the West. I wonder what Plath and Lin thought of each other.

It may take an hour, it may take a week
for me to rise
 poultice
we are not done with each other

tulips too red

 palm lines
cracks the sun shrieks through

In Carlos Bulosan's America Is in the Heart, the protagonist accesses kindness and learning via white women, both in the Philippines and the United States.

My high-school English teacher, an Italian American woman, taught me translated Chinese classics, Shakespeare, and Dracula. A tattoo of a bat graces her ankle.

Whenever I'm back in my hometown, I call up my now-retired teacher and take her to lunch at her favorite Mexican restaurant.

wake from the red & blue that knocks

 dark funnel
 dreams of
international oysters.

O little whetstones!

I am only myself, & that is not enough

my head an unbeautiful cabbage
into which fevers trickle & sour.

Bulosan's character experiences his greatest epiphanies on his sickbed. At his lowest points, he has the most faith in the promise of America.

His final book, The Cry and the Dedication, however, is about Filipino resistance to the U.S. occupation.

These gray, greasy walls!
These mindless walls!
 no lock, no key.
The sky is a bootsole.

Skulls winter like bulbs on the hill
The least air stirs and unsettles its bareness

My parents feared America so much that my dad paved a concrete path in our backyard for my brother and me to ride our bikes. They worked so hard to get us to America. They worked so hard for us to live in middle-class style.

erin Khuê Ninh says that the first generation sacrifices and then loads a debt onto the second generation that they can never repay. The model minority is not a reality but is nevertheless an aspiration according to her.

Terry-cloth-lined, white leather Reeboks were cool for a few years. My brother and I had them.

The night is a blue pool. beautiful.
 alive

light shudders

far as a star
 swallowed

virtue can't fly fast enough

Our rummaging

Outside of our backyard, as kids, my brother and I only went to school and Boy Scout events.

The latter taught us some useful skills, dominant ideologies, and an appreciation for Van Halen, our senior patrol leader's favorite rock band.

Plath's darlings reside in every draft of Ariel from handwritten copies to typescripts with edits. So many choices.

Universals are plunging out of the blue north

Clouds tear through her fingers wild with
ideas
She exhales

A saintly phosphor of narcissi
kindly perfections
no small thing

It is in me to make

Boy Scout Eagle projects usually result in a material accomplishment – a storage shed or trailhead, for instance. I recruited my troop and friends to put on A Christmas Carol and a holiday music concert at several local senior centers.

Sylvia Plath started out as a visual artist and became a poet. The word poet derives from the Greek word for one who makes.

the point
And you, also, are wanting
Have I not watched your breath distill itself
Have I not watched your breath construct a jungle of ice

dispersal of the heart, dispersal of faces.

the agony of the irretrievable

One cannot lose what one never possessed, but loss can be inherited.

My parents gave up so much. What did they pass on to my brother and me?

drink the dawn hour

held in place by another I may never really touch
I scratch on the glass: the eyes within avert themselves

paralyze the heart.

In Hong Kong, my father taught Chinese literature to students so grateful they made pilgrimages to America to pay him respect.

I now understand that he saw our family as political refugees, leaving what would become part of Communist China.

He gave up teaching and became a cook in America. He did not predict that I would become a professor. I've been teaching for more than twenty years now, and in all this time, he has never offered me advice.

breaking no rules
unmolested

years ago
hanging
there was no tree anywhere

Crude mover whom I move and learn to love
Pivot
Open

In The Woman Warrior, Brave Orchid admonishes her child, saying that straight As cannot be eaten. Yet she still expects them.

My mother's twenty-something-year-old brother came to UNLV to study hospitality management. He drove a white 1980s Mustang and taught me how to drive with one hand on the wheel.

Stop! I rise
I am I am
I rise with the arrow, the dew that flies

Hands, hearts, peel off—
Old dead hands, dead stringencies!

I am

In a season of dying,
A season of burning
On fire

A full scholarship takes me to a college in California. It is here that I discover that I am Asian American. After studying African American and Jewish American literature, I ask my professor to teach me Asian American literature. He says no. He doesn't feel qualified.

I've been eating A's all my life. Sublimation in the face of racism and loneliness. Could I shift from sublimation to transmutation?

cold as Christmas roses

in the market
 offer
a cigarette
the corkscrew
gloves brilliantine

 white satin
Vanities

Cellophane I cannot hack through

Education happens not only in classrooms but also over dinners at the president's and faculty masters' houses. So many forks and glasses! So much conversation!

Most family dinners were quiet except for the sound of wooden chopsticks scraping rice from a ceramic bowl.

Plath's darlings are gifts partially buried in the snow. After brushing them off, how do I decide which words to save?

her face,
The sun finds beauty

the world
Is not falling through darkness

big white & yellow paper strips instead of doors
looped up with bows
cats screech
the possible

manic
sparks of blue

My God, your eyes are blue!

Critics find the portrayal of Long Duk Dong in Sixteen Candles racist. He's a student from China staying with the family that includes the character played by Molly Ringwald. A gong sounds every time he appears on screen.

He gets what he needs.

In graduate school, I learn from experts on Dreiser, Welty, and Zukofsky, and I begin my journey as an Asian American literature specialist with a mission to recover lost and forgotten writers.

your breast, your vest, your haunch, your paunch—
snail furl of heart
a twig
That might just hold

The white, decorous hearse
will roll forever

colorless as carbon monoxide

Sylvia Plath and I walked the same paths, sat in some of the same classrooms, and read some of the same copies of books – she over four years, and I over twenty-three and counting. The English Department taught us both.

She was a perfect fit for Smith. Now, as vice president for equity and inclusion, I've been charged with making it a better fit for those whom its founders never conceived.

the eyes
discs behind, the grooves running
broken & aged
tiger heads
go round without sound

dull cold hang
what am I doing here!

coming and going
They flash & flash like knives
In a piranha vision round my toes

No colleges this old were designed for the diverse students, staff, and faculty that now study and work in them.

Audre Lorde tells us that the system never meant for us to survive, much less thrive.

Why do I believe that I can make a difference?

Cries free themselves from the trees & float off
burnt yellow heartless
flesh of leaf

The flowers tragical women
contract no hurry
angels folded

an assemblage
fresh unction that molts with the procession

This dovey moaning

Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, Eleanor Bumpurs. Intellectually, I can connect them to Harriet Jacobs and other overpoliced Black women, but that would be too abstract.

Knowledge, even empathetic knowledge, falls short.

delicate this singular distillation

in which I admire myself
valuable wise round

in Lilliput
arranging
cool, cool

out of the
Mechanical heirloom

 revolving

When I was director of teaching and learning, I wanted my colleagues to encourage half-formed thoughts, to guide discussions in which students could think out loud.

Plath's darlings reveal that she thought out loud on the page, sometimes furiously scratching out a word or phrase and replacing it with another and another. She did this over several drafts per poem. I imagine she thought out loud when talking as well.

They wear me away
They eat me away!

shall not swallow me!
I refuse

nothing I want to be in touch with

That loony pivot!
That stellar jelly-head!

After learning the concept of microaggressions, I started to notice them and became depressed.

Years later, I learn the concept of microresistance. Examples of small-scale resistance include being prepared with verbal responses (“I’m curious. What was your intention when you said that?”) and making eye contact with an ally across the table (“yes, that did just happen”).

a million little
words of air I shall unloose
All day, I evolve
a poem
 among tin cups & crockery

Sylvia Plath is known as a “confessional poet,” though she never used the term herself.

The word confess suggests that one merely needs to open a vein and let words flow. No, Plath’s revisions provide clear evidence of craft.

Her subjects may have been taboo for her time, but we now understand them to be essential.

curtains of frost arrive
my laburnums
How I love them like much-told history
I have saved them
their terrible gold

no great surprise
drifts of dazzle

every cage
A little bubble

Nikki Giovanni maintains, "If you wrote from experience, you'd get maybe one book, maybe three poems."

Yet many audiences and book publishers expect writers of color to write about "their communities" by fictionalizing their own life stories. Recall, for instance, Frederick Douglass, Jade Snow Wong, and Richard Rodriguez. The genre is autoethnography: a means to enter the literary marketplace but also a gilded cage.

poison in the light
damps my breathing like a piano

deadening vibrations
muted

washed, signifying a grace
skyline lozenges
innocence the sea has crystallized
blessing the face of infinity

Social science researchers have found that in a large yard without a fence, children stay close to the play structure. When there is a fence, they explore the entire area. This finding suggests that boundaries enable freedom. Yet under what conditions does a restrictive cage function as a liberating fence?

I have both salvaged darlings to create a source text and erased some to create a new text.

For an erasure poet, a source text sets the boundaries. Rules govern what we can do within these boundaries. For example, we cannot change order or add words, but we can steal a letter from another word and introduce new punctuation. We call these rules constraints. Erasure can short-circuit confession, maybe even autoethnography. Truong Tran taught me this during a reading he gave at an Oakland bookstore that I watched on YouTube.

over the oil-green pool
images warp & bend
fingernail-delicate shells

cupped sighs
The ones that wear yellow
not large

They do not belong to me

Paisley Rekdal's Nightingale juxtaposes poetry and commentary. Her poems about rape in Ovid and Shakespeare stand on their own, but her glosses – personal and scholarly – lay us low. She is simultaneously on the playground and above it.

Rekdal discovered that in John Keats's copy of Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus, the Romantic poet struck out lines spoken by Lavinia's rapists. They had violated her and cut out her tongue. Keats used his pen to silence their speech.

Her book is about transformation. We are not always in control of the facts, but we can affect so much more. Might I as a professor help to transform a canon and as an administrator help to transform an institution?

agonies attenuate
where fire cauterizes the tendrils of summer

motes among bells

feed the air

wet pink soul kiss
a forgetful century
sisters wear no pieta
Pulse by pulse by

Some of Plath's darlings assert themselves. Some I coax into resonating with nearby sounds and images. If she struck out something twice, I felt free to create repetition.

What are the stories we tell about who belongs? We must expand "we."

the bride shall unloose
words
great crystal bowsprits

I love them like they are a part of me

Every time I taught ENG199: Methods in Literary Study to potential English majors, I took them to the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College. There, curator Karen Kukil talked to us about Plath's life, showed us pictures, and played audio recordings of her reciting poetry for the BBC. Karen also held pages of Plath's manuscript against the window, showing us how daylight could reveal hidden strike-outs.

Paisley Rekdal advises that we ask not "if" and "how" of an appropriation but "why" and "what for."

no great surprise
quite breathable

In a cage of stars

day night day night
hardly pure

you I fly

Shedding
Radiate

Over the years, Plath's strike-outs began to haunt me until I found myself stealing away to the rare book room for twenty or thirty minutes once per week.

Why did I do this? What for?

instruments which
must be a million
Growling alarms

I shall not be set upon
afraid

soon enough

clear corpses from the doorsill

What is the difference between a trap and a constraint?

The model minority myth is a trap. The black-white racial binary is a trap.

A good marriage is a constraint. Tenure is a constraint.

Tang Dynasty writer and diplomat Han Yu maintained that to write within a set of rules is to “dance in chains.”

Who watches & helps
the world that grew under

clear glass glitter dew
Sweet sweet sweet
let them taste

Dear Sylvia, Beloved Canon, Smith College, thank you for the honor of this dance.

Notes on contributor

Floyd Cheung teaches in the Department of English and American Studies Program at Smith College, where he is currently serving as the Vice President for Equity and Inclusion. His scholarship focuses on the recovery of lesser-known Asian American literature including *The Literature of Japanese American Incarceration* (Penguin, 2024), co-edited with Frank Abe. Cheung is author of the poetry chapbook *Jazz at Manzanar* (Finishing Line, 2014).