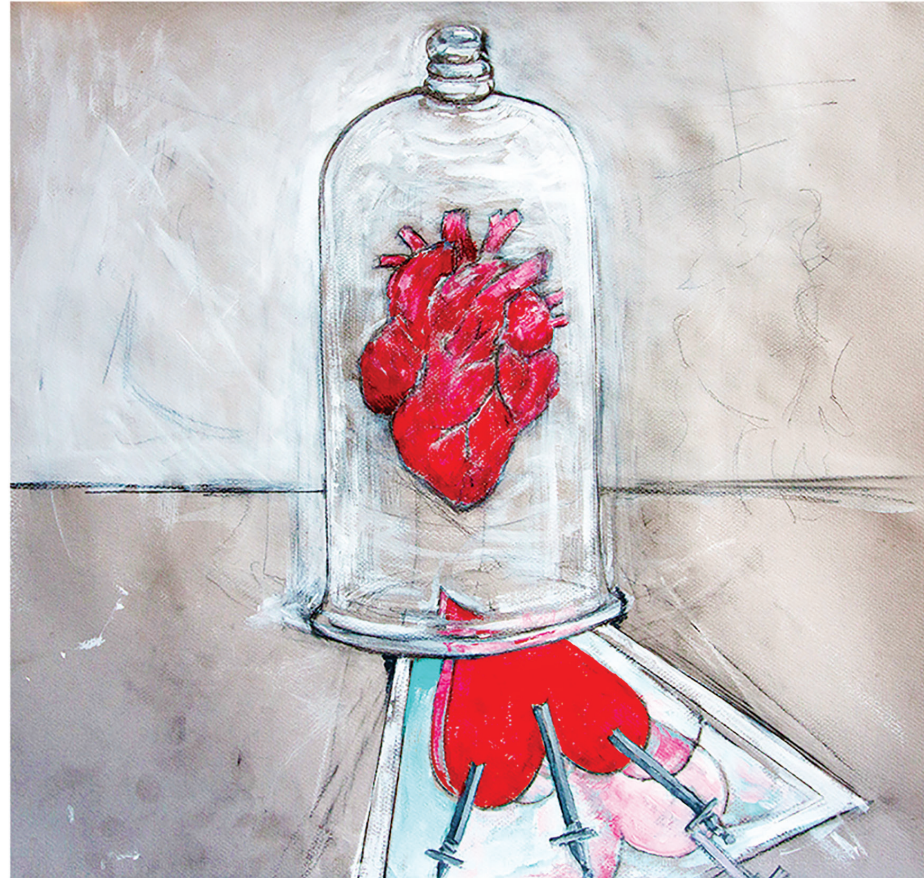


JENNY OLIVIA JOHNSON



SYLVIA SONGS

JENNY OLIVIA JOHNSON

four songs and three interludes offered in homage to sylvia plath, and four places in which she lived and worked

## SYLVIA SONGS

- 1 New York 7:36
- 2 Glass Heart: Interlude 1 6:09
- 3 Boston 4:45
- 4 Glass Heart: Interlude 2 6:36
- 5 Devonshire (The 8th Bell Jar Smashed on the Full Moon in Scorpio) 3:04
- 6 Glass Heart: Interlude 3 5:41
- 7 Wellesley 11:38

— 45:31 —



© Jenny Olivia Johnson. All Rights Reserved, 2018.  
innova<sup>®</sup> Recordings is the label of the  
American Composers Forum.  
[www.innova.mu](http://www.innova.mu) [www.JennyOliviaJohnson.com](http://www.JennyOliviaJohnson.com)



"You are twenty. You are not dead, although you were dead. The girl who died. And was resurrected....Recall, remember: please do not die again."

-Sylvia Plath

I began composing these songs for Sylvia Plath in Fall 2012, when I was living in the North End of Boston. I finished them in Summer 2017, in my faculty apartment at Wellesley College. Each of these four songs—interspersed with three interludes recorded from my sound installation "Glass Heart: Bells for Sylvia Plath"—is inspired by a city or town in which Sylvia had a significant life event take place: New York City, Boston, Devonshire, and Wellesley. In this elegiac collection, I attempt to weave my own stories about and relationships to each of these places with those of Sylvia's, resulting in a kaleidoscopic tapestry of fragmented feelings, images, and fantasies.

NEW YORK - Sylvia spent the summer of 1953 in New York as an intern at Mademoiselle magazine, and returned home to Boston/Wellesley in August 1953 exhausted and deflated. I spent the years between 1996 and 2009 in New York as a music student, and moved to Boston/Wellesley in August 2009 terrified and lonely. This opening song imagines both of our New Yorks — Sylvia's and mine — as unobtainable fantasies, as lost lovers, and, in my case, as a dreamy setting fueled by memories of seeing New York in 80s movies and TV shows. I also, in this music, meditate on a description of Sylvia I read in Elizabeth Winder's biography "Pain, Parties, Work," quoted above: "she is always thirty." I decided to use a hypnotic repetition of the word "always" in this song as both a representation of a frozen-in-time fantasy of being forever young and in love in New York, and also as a foreshadowing of the repeated word "never" that will eventually close the fourth and final song — a word Ted Hughes chillingly employs when describing his reaction to his estranged wife's suicide in "Birthday Letters."

You are / Coming / Home

To New York / Always

You are always thirty / You are always coming home

To New York / You are always / On my mind

I'll see you in New York

BOSTON - This movement is a short and haunted meditation on Sylvia's cryptic note to her mother — "I am going for a long walk" — which she apparently wrote the day she disappeared from her home in Wellesley in August 1953 and first attempted suicide. I thought of this "long walk" many times during my own long walks on the Boston waterfront in the frigid winter of 2012-13, and attempted to craft a soundscape that would emulate the hypnotic feverishness of a suicidal overdose, as well as the repetitious, rhythmic heartbeat of Plath's famous quote from "The Bell Jar": "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart: I am, I am, I am."

I am going for a long walk.

DEVONSHIRE (The 8th Bell Jar Smashed on the Full Moon in Scorpio) - In this brief choral fantasy — inspired by early religious polyphony — I imagine the church near Plath and Hughes's home in Devonshire, UK, where Plath wrote her poem "The Moon and the Yew Tree" in 1961. I became fascinated by the church as Plath describes it in this poem ("Twice on Sunday, the bells startle the sky — Eight great tongues affirming the Resurrection") because she notes that its bell tower contains eight bells. Coincidentally, my sound sculpture "Glass Heart (Bells

"Sylvia Plath committed suicide with cooking gas. She was thirty, and she will always be thirty."

—Elizabeth Winder

for Sylvia Plath)," which I installed at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in June 2017, also contains eight bell jars, a decision that was made before I ever read this poem. This coincidence became even more fascinating to me in May 2017, when the eighth bell jar for my exhibition was accidentally shattered on the full moon in Scorpio (Plath's astrological sign). I attempt in this music to reconcile this shattering, which devastated me, as a crucial reminder that Plath found the bell jar oppressive — a metaphor for the attenuation of her feelings that occurred as a result of the treatments she was given for clinical depression (electroshock therapy and lithium). In this music you will hear someone continuously and aimlessly scraping and sifting through piles of shattered glass, perhaps trying to find any last remnants of their once-vibrant emotions, or their former sense of identity or personhood.

WELLESLEY - The final song in this cycle returns us to Plath's childhood town of Wellesley, Massachusetts, where I now live and work, and uses as its repeated lyrical content a fragmented quotation from one of Plath's earliest poems, "I Thought I Could Not Be Hurt": "how frail the human heart must be." The music's hypnotic repetitions are performative of trying to remember and trying to forget. After a sprawling series of Lydian-mode cycles (purposefully composed in a mode that I synaesthetically perceive as the color purple, and therefore representative of the mixture of red and blue veins and arteries of the human heart that comprise my sound sculpture for Sylvia), we find ourselves immersed in a hollow musical landscape inspired by the words of Ted Hughes,

Plath's estranged husband, who writes of her suicide: "What happened that night, inside your hours, is as unknown as if it never happened." To express what I can only imagine was Hughes's harrowing desire to be able to reverse events — to make this tragic thing that happened into something that never happened — I use the remaining moments of this music to obsess over the word "never"..."never"....."never"....(which is, of course, also a nod to the plaintive fantasy of the first movement: "always"...."always"..."always...")

— Jenny Olivia Johnson, Wellesley, MA, February 2018

"Liquors seep to me...in this glass capsule..."

"I thought I could not be hurt..."

"How frail the human heart must be..."

"Enclosed in a wall of glass..."

"What happened that night, inside your hours,  
is as unknown as if it never happened"

Never happened

Never

Never

— TEXTS BY THE COMPOSER;  
FRAGMENTS BY SYLVIA PLATH AND TED HUGHES

Composed and produced by Jenny Olivia Johnson, inspired by fragmented quotations by Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes

All tracks mixed and mastered by Ryan Streber at Oktaven Audio, August-November 2017

MUSICIANS: P. Lucy McVeigh, vocals; Lavena Johanson, cello; David Russell, cello; Isabelle O'Connell, piano; Jenny Tang, piano; Eiko Akahori, synthesizer; Lisa Liu, electric guitar; Nicholas Knouf, analog synthesizer and reel-to-reel tape delay; Jenny Olivia Johnson, digital synthesizers, percussion, and cassette tape noise

Album cover art by Jacqueline Kras Pinson

THANK YOU, ALWAYS: To my incredible collaborators (Lucy, Izzy, Lavena, Lisa, Nick, Eiko, David, Jenny T., Jacqueline/JQ, Ryan, and Jess); Mom, Dad, Gina, Harold, Freddie, and all my Kauai family; Laura and Elizabeth; Sue; Daniela; Gilbert; Ashley; Marty; Jeannine, Elite Scholars of China, and Wellesley College; Lisa, Elaine, and the Davis Museum; Dorothy, Alex, Grant, Kyle, and the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery; Nikki, Mike, Dave, and Thomas; Dr. JRG; Lamia; and, of course, Sylvia.

Innova Director: Philip Blackburn

Operations Director: Chris Campbell

Publicist: Tim Igel

Innova is supported by an endowment from the McKnight Foundation.





(O Sylvia, Sylvia,  
 where did you go  
 after you wrote me  
 from Devonshire  
 about raising potatoes  
 and keeping bees?)

the one we talked of so often each time  
 we downed three extra-dry martinis in Boston,

