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Anne Sexton: 09-10-1973

Anne Sexton

William Heyen

Al Poulin Jr.

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SEXTON: "From a friend in Japan, who has since deceased. I introduce it by saying for my friend Ruth, who urges me to make an appointment for the Sacrament of Confession.

The title is "With Mercy for the Greedy".

Concerning your letter in which you ask
me to call a priest and in which you ask
me to wear The Cross that you enclose;
your own cross,
your dog-bitten cross,
no larger than a thumb,
small and wooden, no thorns, this rose --

I pray to its shadow,
that gray place
where it lies on your letter... deep, deep.
I detest my sins and I try to believe
in The Cross. I touch its tender hips, its dark jawed face,
its solid neck, its brown sleep.

True. There is
a beautiful Jesus.
He is frozen to his bones like a chunk of beef.
How desperately he wanted to pull his arms in!
How desperately I touch his vertical and horizontal axes!
But I can't. Need is not quite belief.

All morning long
I have worn
your cross, hung with package string around my throat.
It tapped me lightly as a child's heart might,
tapping secondhand, softly waiting to be born.
Ruth, I cherish the letter you wrote.

My friend, my friend, I was born
doing reference work in sin, and born
confessing it. This is what poems are:
with mercy
for the greedy,
they are the tongue's wrangle,
the world's pottage, the rat's star.

I better keep it up or you might ask me something.

VOICE: "Brockport Writer's Forum, in a continuing series of discussions with leading literary figures, presents "The Poetry of Anne Sexton". Author of a number of books of her own poetry, including, "Live or Die", for which she received the 1966 Pulitzer Prize, and recipient of many other literary awards, Anne Sexton is currently teaching at Boston University. Discussing Miss Sexton's works are William Heyen, author of "Depth of Field", a collection of poems, and of many essays on contemporary American poets, and a member of the Brockport English Department. And the host for today's Writer's Forum, A. Poulin Junior, author of the book of poems entitled, "In Advent", editor of the anthology "Contemporary American Poetry", and current director of The Writer's Forum."

POULIN: "Anne Sexton, welcome to The Writer's Forum. Bill."

HEYEN: "Pleased to be here."

POULIN: "Welcome."

HEYEN: "Thank you."

SEXTON: "Very nice to be here. Say, we, under the heat and the lights, and the early morning."

POULIN: "The early morning, especially. Yes. The poem that you just read, always moves me a great deal. And especially the line, 'I was born doing reference work in sin and born confessing it.' Do you still feel that poetry is confession?"

SEXTON: "Well, for a while, for a long while, or perhaps even now, I'm called a confessional poet. And for quite a while I resented it. You know, I thought, why am I in this bag? And then, I kind of looked around and I thought, look Anne, you're the only confessional poet around. I mean, I don't see anyone else quite doing this sort of thing. And then, as years go by, I get into new themes, etcetera, etcetera. And I really don't think about what I am. You know, it shifts, anyway."

POULIN: "If it is confession, what are you confessing?"

SEXTON: "Well, I got to say, it's not exactly. I mean, it's a difficult label, confession. Because I will often confess to things that never happened. As I once said to someone, if I did all the things I confessed to, there would be no time to write a poem. So, you know, I'll often assume the first person, and it's someone else's story. It's just very amenable to me to kind of climb into that persona and tell their story."

POULIN: "Were the early poems in "Live or Die", not "Live or Die" but "All My Pretty Ones", and from "Bedlam". The poems about madness, were they real poems about madness? Or were they poems about real madness?"

SEXTON: "I don't think I was ever really mad. I mean, in, if you. But then again, of course, perhaps I was. But it depends on the clinical evaluation, really. 'Mad' is an open term. But they were about my... They were confession, I'll just put it that way. I mean, they were my experiences, some. I mean, some of my experiences about feelings, disorientation, mental hospitals, whatever. And I got that label very early, the mad poet and all of that. At one point, just a short while ago, I said, "I shall never again, write about a psychiatrist, a mad house, or anything to do with those themes." But you know, of course, you really can't predict. You just make these little predictions and."

HEYEN: "Someone said that no one in the history of our poetry has ever reported, I think was the word, as much of the self as has Anne Sexton. And I think when we look back, that it really is true. That there's so much of yourself coming out into "Bedlam" and into the later books. We never really did have anything like this in English poetry, before. How did that come about? James Wright said about "To Bedlam and Part Way Back" Al, the book is a work of genius. It signifies a moment of major importance to American literature. And I think it does. We've really not had that kind of poetry, ever before. Where did this, how did this breakthrough come about, that you could sit down and write these sorts of poems?"

SEXTON: "I will tell you, as exactly as I can, the fact is, I couldn't help it. It's just natural to me. I was told over and over, you can't write personal poems. I mean, you can't write about madness, you can't do this. Anybody, I mean, everyone, who I might consult, would say, nix. You don't write about, that's not a theme. Or... And I remember, which I never understood, one of my first teachers, John Holmes [assumed spelling] saying, and I'm going to get this wrong, so forgive a misquote, "Richard Wilbur said poetry is a," I may have this wrong and you probably will know it, "a window, not a door." And apparently, I guess I was the door, or something. But I thought, well, I'm sorry. I can only do what I can do, and it, you know, was just natural. It was not a planned thing to come into English poetry, which I didn't even quite know I was, you know, I was just writing. And what I was writing was what I was feeling. And that's what I needed to write."

HEYEN: "The first book..."

SEXTON: "But I want to go on a little bit, to say that I have a new little theory. Now, I may be, you know, change in a month or something. But this theory is, if you could document in some, I don't mean document, because it's not altogether a documentary, of course. But document the imagination, oh, everything. Experiences, even some wit, or whatever. Various. Of one life, one life, however long it may or may not last, or you know, whatever. It might be of some value to someone, someday, just to say, well, this human being lived from 1928 to whenever. And this is what she had to say about her life."

HEYEN: "Yeah."

SEXTON: "And that's really all I know. I don't know anything more cosmic, anyway. So, I might as well stick with what I..."

HEYEN: "Would you take that a step further and not only say that, maybe, people will look back and say, here is one life and what we can learn from it? But that, here is one life that also speaks about our own life. You see, that would, that would be in the [inaudible]."

SEXTON: "Well, that's the, that's what the idea. I mean, the attempt. But I mean, it's not a very conscious attempt. It's you know, rather, it's a conscious attempt, a conscious thought or rationale for what is only natural and I can't help doing, anyway, so what the hell? I mean, one formulates something that has nothing, really, to do with the fact that one has to write that way, and so."

HEYEN: "This is a much-asked question, too. But to what extent are you fictionalizing Anne Sexton as you write some of these poems? Could you say anything about that shaky ground?"

SEXTON: "Well, there's enough fiction, so that it's totally confusion, if one were. I remember Ralph Mills talking about my dead brother, who I'd written about. And I said, met Ralph, and I said, "Ralph", and this

was in book form that he'd written about, critical essay. And I said, "I had no brother. But then, didn't we all have brothers who died in that war?" which was the second World War, which was a long, few wars ago. But didn't we all, somehow, have brothers? But I write, "my brother", you know, and of course, he believes it. I mean, why not? Why shouldn't he? But I was just telling them, incidentally, there was no a brother. So, that's kind of, you know, I should say, "Excuse me, folks, but no brother." But that would kind of ruin the poem, so."

POULIN: "This is part of that fine line between life, between life or reality and art, anyway. Isn't it? All the time."

SEXTON: "Yes."

POULIN: "That you're extending in the discussion on writing about your own experiences. Always reminds me of the line from Stevens: 'The comedian has the letter C, where he speaks of to make his fate an instance of all fate.' Which is what you were trying to. What you were saying, a little while ago."

SEXTON: "Only he was saying it better."

HEYEN: "The trouble, sometimes, is that they so-called confessional poet seems to want to draw us in and say, here I am, and I'm making myself bare, here. And I want to tell you about myself. Then, on the other hand, maybe Anne Sexton writes a poem about her brother, and we feel sort of foolish when we find out, well, this is that kind of brother, the archetypal brother. And everyone's brother, rather than the real brother. It sort of makes us nervous, because we like to have our feet on the ground."

SEXTON: "Yeah."

HEYEN: "At the same time."

SEXTON: "Yeah. I understand, reality is always important. And, if you don't know where you are... I think it rather pleases me, in a quizzical fashion, to do this. Because then, I don't have to really admit to anything. You know, I mean, I can."

HEYEN: "And it leaves--"

SEXTON: "You know, it leaves me --"

HEYEN: "The reader [inaudible] a poem."

SEXTON: "It leaves me room to say any damn thing. And say, well, I'm not actually lying about it, for instance, you know, to someone. But I mean, to the general reader, you know."

HEYEN: "It leaves the reader with the poem, too, which is probably where he should be."

SEXTON: "Yeah."

HEYEN: "And not in some biographical account."

SEXTON: "Yeah."

POULIN: "I'd like to go back a couple of steps. When you first started writing and when people were telling you, well, you can't write that way, who's one of the people that did tell you, you could write that way?"

SEXTON: "All right. I can tell you, exactly. They did, first I read it, I mean, well, I'll try to explain more clearly. I'm writing away, and I'm getting acceptances, and I'm getting a book, oh, about three quarters finished. And you know, the general. Magazines have accepted things. And despite all this adverse criticism. And in read in an anthology, W.D. Snodgrass's "Heart's Needle", and I think that's it. And at that moment my daughter was not living at home. She was living with my mother-in-law, because it was felt I was not well enough to take care of two of them, or it was kind of a power struggle. I won't go into. But I ran up and get my daughter. I said, "I must have my daughter. I've just read this poem about the loss of a daughter," and etcetera. And I wrote, at that time, "Unknown Girl in a Maternity Ward", which is a mast, in other words, I never. I think that's the title of it. It's about having an illegitimate child and giving it away. In other words, about the loss of a daughter. And as a matter of fact, I had met a girl in the mental hospital, who had done just this. And I was projecting, I was fictionalizing. But of course, I mean, so-called confessing. Anyway, I wrote that poem, got my daughter. And what could be more beautiful than a poem to move you to action? I mean, of such a type. And I thought, this is the thing. This is, I like this. This is for me. Bored, etcetera. And so, I kind of nosed around and found that Snodgrass would be at a writers' conference. It was a five day one, or something, at Antioch. And did go out there and he definitely encouraged me. And read that poem about the loss of the daughter, though kind of fictionalized, or whatever you want to call it. And he said, "Why don't you tell the real story?" Because you know, he drew me out of my life. And so, I spent about the next seven months writing "The Double Image", which is all about many varied themes. About madness, loss of daughter, mother's cancer, loss of mother, and regaining of daughter, and it's a long narrative piece. Written in very tight form."

HEYEN: "Yeah. A lot of poets point to Snodgrass as someone who showed the way, to a large extent. His poem is written in very tight."

SEXTON: "Yes. I don't think mine is quite that tight. But."

HEYEN: "You know, later on in his next book, he would write poems about his daughter. And he would say something like, "We go about our business. I have turned my back." Now, you wouldn't. See, that's why I'm a little nervous when you say, isn't it wonderful to have a poem move you to that sort of action? Because then, speaking logically, you'd have to read his next book, and then like turn your back on your daughter."

SEXTON: " Oh no, well, it would be only action that is ready to be born in you."

HEYEN: "I see."

SEXTON: "You know. It's right there, and yet, the poem lets it rise and brings you forth, and out you go. I mean."

HEYEN: "Yeah."

POULIN: "I wonder if you'd. Would you mind reading the "Unknown Girl" poem?"

SEXTON: "I suppose I could I could read it, yeah. If I can find it, here. Oh, thank you. As I don't feel it's. I worry that it's not too well written. It's an early, early poem. But we'll skip that and read it.

"Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward."

Child, the current of your breath is six days long.
You lie, a small knuckle on my white bed;
lie, fistled like a snail, so small and strong
at my breast. Your lips are animals; you are fed
with love. At first hunger is not wrong.
The nurses nod their caps; you are shepherded
down starch halls with the other unnested throng
in wheeling baskets. You tip like a cup; your head
moving to my touch. You sense the way we belong.
But this is an institution bed.
You will not know me very long.

The doctors are enamel. They want to know
the facts. They guess about the man who left me,
some pendulum soul, going the way men go
and leave you full of child. But our case history
stays blank. All I did was let you grow.
Now we are here for all the ward to see.
They thought I was strange, although
I never spoke a word. I burst empty of you,
letting you see how the air is so.
The doctors chart the riddle they ask of me
and I turn my head away. I do not know.

Yours is the only face I recognize.
Bone at my bone, you drink my answers in.
Six times a day I prize
your need, the animals of your lips, your skin
growing warm and plump. I see your eyes
lifting their tents. They are blue stones, they begin
to outgrow their moss. You blink in surprise
and I wonder what you can see, my funny kin,
as you trouble my silence. I am a shelter of lies.
Should I learn to speak again, or hopeless in
such sanity will I touch some face I recognize?

Down the hall the baskets start back. My arms
fit you like a sleeve, they hold
catkins of your willows, the wild bee farms
of your nerves, each muscle and fold
of your first days. Your old man's face disarms
the nurses. But the doctors return to scold
me. I speak. It is you my silence harms.
I should have known; I should have told

them something to write down. My voice alarms
my throat. 'Name of father-none.' I hold
you and name you bastard in my arms.

And now that's that. There is nothing more
that I can say or lose.
Others have traded life before
and could not speak. I tighten to refuse
your owling eyes, my fragile visitor.
I touch your cheeks, like flowers. You bruise
against me. We unlearn. I am a shore
rocking you off. You break from me. I choose
your only way, my small inheritor
and hand you off, trembling the selves we lose.
Go child, who is my sin and nothing more.

POULIN: "That's a very moving poem. Strikes me about that is the..."

SEXTON: "I'm sorry, I lost the page."

POULIN: "No, it isn't that. The poem threw me. The poem is very tightly structured."

SEXTON: "Yes."

POULIN: "And many of your early poems are."

SEXTON: "Yes."

POULIN: "In rather traditional form."

SEXTON: "Well, I wouldn't put it that way."

POULIN: "Well, what I mean is--"

SEXTON: "Form."

POULIN: "Yes."

SEXTON: "But usually, not traditional. If I could explain, or at least I think. Or at least I thought, when I was writing these poems and form, that it was my form. You know, I made it up, of course. That's, you know, probably impossible. But somehow, it was mine. It was not a sonnet, or you know. I mean, it's strange, as I was reading it, I was thinking, gee, you did something very strange, here. If you actually look at the end lines, I mean, it goes, it ends. The first line of the stanza is, or maybe the first two. I don't actually remember. It goes long bed, strong fed, wrong shepherded, throng head, belong bed, long. As it started out with long bed. And that follows through."

POULIN: "Yeah."

SEXTON: "Just a funny little thing I did. I don't know. I think, actually I mean, actually, I used to. I found then, the more difficult the subject, then the easier it was to do in some difficult form. And I had a theory, but I have no idea if it's true. That I, not in this poem, because that is not that complex. But if I

had something that I felt was impossible to say, or I didn't quite realize or, you know, I didn't know. I'd make up some strange thing. I mean, I'd write the first, I'd begin, say, with rhyme. And then, I'd count it out syllabically, maybe, and then I was stuck with it. And I often broke it and cheated, and all of that, and didn't care. Because I didn't want anyone to know I'd used such a foul trick. Because what I was trying to get out, you know, the honest, the truth. But it kind of took over. This is my theory, and I would never discuss it with a psychiatrist or anything. And I just call it that. It may be totally erroneous, but it took over the superego function. In other words, there's something saying, you can't do this, so don't worry about it. I mean, it's impossible. So, that took over that problem. And then, there was just, you know. And so, it could come forth."

HEYEN: "Now, the superego took over what problem? The?"

SEXTON: "'I can't say this, I can't find the truth, I don't know, you know, what I'm about to reveal or say or do or.' And I don't, you're probably not following me, because it's a little hazy, probably."

HEYEN: "Well, I think it should be, hazy."

SEXTON: "Yeah."

HEYEN: "You know? I mean."

SEXTON: "Well, I don't want to be too hazy. I'd like to have some clarity."

HEYEN: "But you probably feel that in a poem, like the poem takes you where it sort of has to go."

SEXTON: "Yeah."

HEYEN: "You don't feel critically conscious, one step ahead of."

SEXTON: "Well, I never do, anyway. But."

HEYEN: "You once said that you considered your poems primitive, rather than intellectual. What?"

SEXTON: "That's because people have told me that, and I thought it sounded so nice that I'd go along with it."

HEYEN: "Yeah, yeah."

SEXTON: "First of all, I'm not an intellectual, you know, of any sort, that I know. I have many friends who are intellectuals and whatever that word means, exactly. But a primitive, yes. Because I didn't know a damn thing about poetry. Nothing. I had never gone to college. I absolutely, was a flunkout in any schooling I had. I laughed my way through exams. I, you know, I was, you know, they just kind of passed me on. But you know, nothing came through. I don't know the multiplication table. Can't spell, can't punctuate. And until I started at 27, hadn't done much reading. Oh, yes, well, of course, some, but not, not. And certainly, not in poetry. So, I just. I mean, one would say a primitive. And unfortunately, bad for me. I wasn't reading enough. I was writing, too much. You know, I mean, if I just said, now put this typewriter away for a while and read up, you know, see what's going on."

POULIN: "Do you struggle over poems? Or do they?"

SEXTON: "Some."

POULIN: "Depends on what the poem is?"

SEXTON: "Yeah. I mean, we all have, you know the term, the given poem. I mean, that happens once in a great while, and one says, 'Thank you, thank you. How nice of you.' But I'm afraid I'm getting, I don't know, lazy or I don't know what it is."

HEYEN: "The poems seem to be fewer and further between?"

SEXTON: "No, no. Increasing at a great rate."

SEXTON: "Oh, I see. Yeah. Yeah. Well, someone said about Wallace Stevens at the end of his life, that he found what a Wallace Stevens poem was supposed to sound like and he sort of went ahead and wrote them out. So, maybe that's just."

SEXTON: "Well, I don't know. I don't have any feeling like that. As a matter of fact, I'm always trying to write something that doesn't, you know, it's that isn't."

HEYEN: "Yeah."

SEXTON: "Or I don't even know what an Anne Sexton poem sounds like. Unless I should read some sort of imitation, I might kind of catch on. But I don't know, really, what I'm doing or what I sound like. I guess the only thing I really do know, is I have a great feeling for imagery. I mean, it to me, is the heart of the poem. And without it."

HEYEN: "These questions about when do you write and how much do you write and how much work is it? They all sound trite, but they're very interesting to me, because it seems to me that one can be very happy when he or she manages to write. You know, like Henry Miller wrote a book called "To Paint Is To Love Again". So, I'd like to find some way to be able to write a great deal. But I'm very crotchety, myself."

SEXTON: "Well, [inaudible]."

HEYEN: "Al, you go through long dry periods."

SEXTON: "Yeah, but everyone does."

HEYEN: "So, if you could find some way to write a lot, like William Stafford."

SEXTON: "No, but I've been through a long dry period. And then, since then it's just been "Brumm"."

HEYEN: "Yeah, we hear that William Stafford writes five poems during a lunch hour, you know."

SEXTON: "Well, it's nothing like that."

HEYEN: "So, you say how about a cup of coffee? And he says, "No, I have five poems to write." That would."

SEXTON: "Well, well."

HEYEN: "I mean, that is, that's happiness."

SEXTON: "That's fascinating. I did do one strange thing, but it's for a future... two books away from now. But a book called, I think will be called, "The Awful Rowing Toward God". And I wrote it in two and a half weeks."

POULIN: "The whole book?"

SEXTON: "Yes. But I didn't know how to. I didn't know, really, this was a strange experience, because I was, write a poem, and then, rewrite, and you know, work and ask somebody, or you know. Until I think well, here it is. And stick it in, you know, final copy, and stick it in a notebook. But there was no time at this just strange moment in my life. Which was a great pressure, emotionally. Here were these poems coming, five, six, seven, or whatever they were, a day. And I happened to talk to John Brinnon [assumed spelling], who's on the faculty at BU with me. And he said, "Oh, let them come. You can always fix them up, later." Well, I'm in a hell of a lot of trouble, now, because I've never operated that way. I don't quite know what to do with these things, you know. It's like rewriting someone else's work or something."

HEYEN: "Yeah."

SEXTON: "But I haven't faced it, yet."

HEYEN: "So, you don't know quite whether —"

SEXTON: "I mean, this is just a rare occasion. I've never done anything like that, before. And it's ridiculous, to say you can write a book in two and a half weeks. That's a big laugh. So, the rewrite, who knows how long that will take?"

HEYEN: "Yeah, yeah."

POULIN: "Were those poems, some of them appeared in the [inaudible]?"

SEXTON: "They have appeared nowhere."

POULIN: "Oh, they haven't appeared?"

SEXTON: "No, no. They are unfinished. I mean, like that's, you know, no one has. Few people have seen them. But they're not ready for any publication. Because, you know, they're first, you know, there are flaws all over the place. I've done a little work on them. But preliminary work."

POULIN: "What got you interested in doing the "Transformations"?"

SEXTON: "Well, I just had a play off Broadway, which I wasted about one year writing. And another year going through rewrites and hanging around New York and going through that. And I don't quite remember the reviews, but they were kind. I think Walter Kerr might have pointed out I didn't know how to write a play, but I could certainly write. Or something like that. It was very, you know, it was all right. And there was a dreadful interview in the New York Times theater section. I mean, it came out on my birthday. My husband was away hunting. I was down anyway, and here is this ghastly thing. Now, I can't say it's a lie, but I will say I was drunk as hell. Someone was plying me very cutely. And I thought she was going to write about the play. But, uh-uh. Just any bit of gossip she could gather in, which I thought, well of course, this won't be useful. That's how you learn your lessons. And anyway, it soured me on the whole play. Just turned the whole thing off. And I will, I mean, people write me or might be

doing some work on me, or something, a paper or something. We must get a hold of Mercy Street, I say. You can't, because it ain't."

HEYEN: "Hasn't been printed."

SEXTON: "It will not be printed. But one of the major reasons for that, is that I've covered every theme that was covered in the play, in my poetry. And I think perhaps, better. I did, as a matter of fact, send Walter Kerr "The Death Notebooks", which are coming out next February, I guess. And "The Awful Rowing Toward God". Because I had read that he and his wife liked to read poetry aloud. And Jean Kerr, herself, had come to the play with Walter to see it. Which is very unusual, I was told. She doesn't go to off Broadway things. And I just thought, well, he might, you know, I don't know. But I got a very, very, I mean, oh, you know, very nice letter, etcetera, etcetera. I've forgotten why I started to say this."

HEYEN: "We were moving toward Transformations."

SEXTON: "Oh, oh. Well, I don't know how I got off on that. But I guess I was saying. Oh, I said to Walter Kerr, "I ain't no playwright. I'm a poet." And I did say, "Of course, I don't know if you like my type of poetry. I read you read poetry." And, well, his son, and they all seemed to like my poetry. And so, they were very, you know, happy. But then, there was this huge blank period, dead, dead. I mean, after this thing comes out in the New York Times. And a friend of mine, Maxine Kumin, is writing a poem about her daughter. And we talk over, all the time, our poems. Workshop them, you know, on the phone or wherever. She lives close to me. And I don't remember if I led her to the theme of Snow White or she did. I don't really recall. But she said, "I've forgotten." And so, I called my daughter Linda on the phone. I said, "Honey, will you read Snow White to Maxine?" So, she does. And I think, wow. Wow. Wow. And I had read the Grimm's stories, since I could read, which at whatever age that was. At least, I did learn to read. And type. The only things, I kind of type. Only things I got out of school, at all. And I read them until I was about 15. At that point, someone like Maxine was reading Dostoevsky, but I'm reading the Brothers Grimm, over and over and over, obsessively. So, I hear this and the little sparks go, and I think, I wonder if there's something in might. I don't know, I was very vague and I try a little introductory poem and then, I try another, and I still don't know what I'm doing. But then, I think, oh, and I've written about three, say. And I said, well, I don't know what I'm doing. But if you could do Snow White, Anne, after Disney and all that, and make it something that's, you know, yours and Snow White's, and the queen's and the cast. Then, you've got it licked. And I think I accomplished that. And so, but what I would do, my daughter would. I've forgotten her age at the time. She might have been 17, I don't really remember. I mean, I could count back, but I think about 17 or 16, anyway. She'd say, "Why don't you try", because she, also, obsessively, read these tales. Not as long, but it was her book I worked from, modern library edition. You know, I don't know what edition I had as a child, but."

HEYEN: "I like those poems very much, the Rumpelstiltskin poem."

SEXTON: "Yeah."

HEYEN: "They're a lot of fun and they're also scary at the same time. And the Frog Prince, [inaudible]."

SEXTON: "What my real joy was, was to read. Sometimes, my daughter would suggest read this or that, or try this one or something. I'm, you know, some I might have forgotten or something. And if I got, as I was reading it, some unconscious message that I had something to say, what I had fun with were the prefatory things. I mean, that's where I got my great kicks. Oh, kicks, or you know, where I expressed

whatever it evoked in me. And it had to evoke something in me, or I couldn't do it. Now, they all came rather quickly, except for "Sleeping Beauty", which took me three months. I mean, there was a break and I couldn't, I just couldn't. Of course, that's a very kind of serious somber."

POULIN: "Yeah. And you went out beyond the fairy tales, also, didn't you? Because "The Little Peasant", for example."

SEXTON: "'The Little Peasant" is right in there. That's a Grimm's Fairy Tale."

POULIN: "Is it?"

SEXTON: "Well, I talked to a German..."

POULIN: "I thought it was from Chaucer."

SEXTON: "Well, you know, things float around. But it was in that book. I mean, if one can believe, and of course, one can. So, believe what they read. It was in the Grimm's."

POULIN: "But you, did you embellish it?"

SEXTON: "I've forgotten which poem we're talking about."

POULIN: "'The Little Peasant'."

SEXTON: "'The Little Peasant'. Oh, yes, I embellished it. Oh, indeed. It wasn't that way."

POULIN: "Yeah, it's no longer a child's story."

SEXTON: "None of them are children's stories."

POULIN: "I suppose we should ask you to read that one, since we —"

SEXTON: "It takes a while."

POULIN: "Talked about it, before."

SEXTON: "And if you'd like, I would be glad to."

POULIN: "Sure, sure. Yeah, that's a fun one, also."

SEXTON: "Yeah. It's an unfamiliar one. Most people don't know it. But, it's got a long kind of prefatory thing. And I'll tell you when I begin the story, the way I happen to retell it, which is with a few added features.

"The Little Peasant."

Oh how the women
grip and stretch
fainting on the horn.

The men and women
cry to each other.
Touch me,
my pancake,

and make me young.
And thus
like many of us,
the parson
and the miller's wife
lie down in sin.

The women cry,
Come, my fox,
heal me.
I am chalk white
with middle age
so wear me threadbare,
wear me down,
wear me out.
Lick me clean,
as clean as an almond.

The men cry,
Come, my lily,
my fringy queen,
my gaudy dear,
salt me a bird
and be its noose.
Bounce me off
like a shuttlecock.
Dance me dingo-sweet
for I am your lizard,
your sly thing.

Now starts the story.

Long ago
there was a peasant
who was poor but crafty.
He was not yet a voyeur.
He had yet to find
the miller's wife
at her game.
Now he had not enough
cabbage for supper
nor clover for his one cow.
So he slaughtered the cow
and took the skin
to town.

It was worth no more
than a dead fly
but he hoped for profit.

On his way
he came upon a raven
with damaged wings.
It lay as crumpled as
a wet washcloth.
He said, Come little fellow,
you're part of my booty.

On his way
there was a fierce storm.
Hail jabbed the little peasant's cheeks
like toothpicks.
So he sought shelter at the miller's house.
The miller's wife gave him only
a hunk of stale bread
and let him lie down on some straw.
The peasant wrapped himself and the raven
in the cowhide
and pretended to fall asleep.

When he lay
as still as a sausage
the miller's wife
let in the parson, saying,
My husband is out
so we shall have a feast.
Roast meat, salad, cakes and wine.
The parson,
his eyes as black as caviar,
said, Come, my lily,
my fringy queen.
The miller's wife,
her lips as red as pimientos,
said, Touch me, my pancake,
and wake me up.
And thus they ate.
And thus
they dingoed-sweet.

Then the miller
was heard stomping on the doorstep
and the miller's wife

hid the food about the house
and the parson in the cupboard.

The miller asked, upon entering,
What is that dead cow doing in the corner?

The peasant spoke up.

It is me.

I sought shelter from the storm.

You are welcome, said the miller,

but my stomach is as empty as a flour sack.

His wife told him she had no food

but bread and cheese.

So be it, the miller said,

and the three of them ate.

The miller looked once more
at the cowskin

and asked its purpose.

The peasant answered,

I hide my soothsayer in it.

He knows five things about you

but the fifth he keeps to himself.

The peasant pinched the raven's head

and it croaked, Grr. Grr.

That means, translated the peasant,

there is wine under the pillow.

And there it sat

as warm as a specimen.

Grr. Grr.

They found the roast meat under the stove.

It lay there like an old dog.

Grr. Grr.

They found the salad in the bed

and the cakes under it.

Grr. Grr.

Because of all this
the miller burned to know the fifth thing.

How much? he asked,

little caring he was being milked.

They settled on a large sum

and the soothsayer said,

The devil is in the cupboard.

And the miller unlocked it.

Grr. Grr.

There stood the parson,
rigid for a moment,
as real as a soup can
and then he took off like a fire
with the wind at its back.
I have tricked the devil,
cried the miller with delight,
and I have tweaked his chin whiskers.
I will be as famous as the king.

The miller's wife
smiled to herself.
Though never again to dingo-sweet
her secret was as safe
as a fly in an outhouse.

The sly little peasant
strode home the next morning,
a soothsayer over his shoulder
and gold pieces knocking like marbles
in his deep pants pocket.
Grr. Grr.

POULIN: "We have only a limited amount of time to talk about all sorts of things. I wanted to ask the question. It seems to me that in the progression from your first book to your later books, including your forthcoming "Death Notebooks". That you move increasingly away from sin and madness toward love and God. Is that a fair estimate?"

SEXTON: "Just about. But I wouldn't leave sin alone, because. I would say one could have a great sense of sin and reach for God, I mean, quite typically."

HEYEN: "This is a Pandora's box."

SEXTON: "I maybe didn't answer that, but."

HEYEN: "This is something, on the same subject, that I almost hate to ask, because you've been asked it so often, I'm sure. And also, because it's so difficult. I've always said that we can never, of course, dictate what a poet ought to write about. I mean, that would be absolutely foolish. At the same time, it was just a couple of weeks ago that I finally read Sylvia Plath's, "The Bell Jar". And for years, I've been reading Berryman's "The Dream Songs", that allegoric genius of his. And I've read Anne Sexton for a long time. An awful lot of pain and death and a preponderance of darkness in the early books. And all the critics have complained about it, again and again. Saying... James Wright, not talking about you, but talking about himself said, "Boy, I look at myself and I don't know," he says, "there's something also to be said for the light." How do you react when critics say something like, boy, I wish she'd look out, further? You know, Richard Wilbur has a poem on Sylvia Plath, and."

SEXTON: "I do believe I've read it."

HEYEN: "And he says that she had this sound, her brilliant negative, in poems free and helpless and unjust. See, the last word is unjust."

SEXTON: "Yeah."

HEYEN: "And he said at a reading that well, there's a sense in which, as much as he cared for Sylvia Plath, there's a sense in which she's being somewhat unjust to the world. And speaking honestly, sometimes I read your early poems, and it seems that all the women in the early poems have sagging breasts. And all the old men are unhappy. And I think of that word by Wilbur, "unjust". And I wondered, does poetry have to come out of a sense of pain and a sense of darkness? Or?"

SEXTON: "Absolutely, not."

HEYEN: "Yeah."

SEXTON: "Comes out of wherever you are."

HEYEN: "Yeah."

SEXTON: "I mean, you've got to go forward and read more recent books."

HEYEN: "Sure. I love, there are some poems that end."

SEXTON: "I mean, certainly, that what I just read was not the pit of darkness."

HEYEN: "No. It—"

SEXTON: "Or despair."

HEYEN: "No. The "Transformations" poems are a lot of fun."

SEXTON: "Yes."

HEYEN: "And there are others in earlier books that were written while crossing Long Island Sound, that ends with that nice surreal image of the loons flying away, saying good news, good news."

SEXTON: "And then, there's a whole book of love poems and there is a bit of joy in that."

HEYEN: "Yeah."

SEXTON: "I'd say."

HEYEN: "Yeah. Yeah."

SEXTON: "I mean, lightness."

HEYEN: "Yeah. This is a very difficult subject, and I never would have found myself five years ago, saying what I would say now."

SEXTON: "Well, maybe you only can do that because I have... You know, after all, one does grow, change, evolve."

HEYEN: "Sure."

SEXTON: "And you know, it..."

HEYEN: "Yeah. Let me read one harsh statement."

SEXTON: "Okay."

HEYEN: "About 'Live or Die', to you. This was a review by a fellow in The Southern Review, talking about 'Live or Die', which won the Pulitzer Prize. He says, and he gets angry and he says, 'They are not poems. They are documents of modern psychiatry, and their publication is the result of confusion of critical standards in the general mind.' He says that the poems finally, are embarrassing and irritating. How do you react to something like that?"

SEXTON: "I'd say, 'Please, put my book down and don't bother with it.'"

HEYEN: "Don't bother."

SEXTON: "It's for someone else."

HEYEN: "Yeah. Yeah."

SEXTON: "I mean, there are many."

HEYEN: "He says. 'confusion of critical standards.'"

SEXTON: "Well, I can't do much about it, you know. And so, all right, that's your critical evaluation. I respect it as such. And you have every right to think that."

HEYEN: "Yeah. You have to go on writing what you have to write."

SEXTON: "Yeah."

HEYEN: "Yeah."

POULIN: "Who is that, another harsh statement by?"

SEXTON: "Is this called harsh statement time?"

POULIN: "No, but it's."

SEXTON: "No, I'm just kidding. Come on, let's get a little happy."

POULIN: "Well, someone said that the personal. I think it was James Dickey who said that the personal poets aren't personal, at all. They're very superficial. That it's only the facade of the person that's coming through. Do you? How do you respond to that?"

SEXTON: "I think it's a goddamn lie, because his poems are often personal."

POULIN: "He says the —"

SEXTON: "And I think also, that some of his are facade. I respect him, greatly, as a writer. You know, usually. You know, many of his poems, I admire. And if he wishes to say that about personal poems, I don't think he knows what in hell he's talking about. As a matter of fact, I think he's a very confused critic. I mean, he just ought to stick with his poetry, or movies, or novels, or. But that's just my opinion."

HEYEN: "Do you pay much attention to the reviews of your books, or criticism, or?"

SEXTON: "Well, I never, I think I was telling Al this last night. I never reply to a reviewer. I feel, I mean, I feel it's somehow tasteless, you know. They must give their, even if it's, you know. Except once. But to go on, why I don't reply. Because I can remember people saying, well, I had a review of eight books in The New York Times, and I've heard from six of them. And this was a former teacher saying that. And I thought, for Christ sakes, he's supposed to run around and say 'thank you'? You know. Because I mean, here's someone trying to tell the truth the way they see it. And I don't think they deserve a 'thank you' or a 'to hell with you'."

HEYEN: "Yeah."

SEXTON: "I've never written a 'to hell with you', at any rate. There was one review in a, I don't know if it's a big or small, but an English quarterly, which was so loving. Like, oh, Anne, Anne, and I can't remember it. But it went on and this, I mean, it was like a love letter or something. So, I did cable. I didn't know who he was. I mean, I never met him, heard of him. I cabled my publisher, you know, I cabled him, Kerr, my publisher. And I just said, 'Will you marry me?' And I got a very nice letter back, you know. And he was. But that was, you know, that's just the only time I've ever replied. And just only in that vein."

HEYEN: "Yeah."

SEXTON: "But I don't, I try not to let them get me down or up. You know, depending on which way it goes. Of course, the publishers care, terribly, and you know, they need good quotes and, you know, they're running a business. And if you got entirely. For instance, 'Transformations' got absolutely the most horrible reviews in Britain. But one. Which came much later, just a while ago. I mean, things like Walt, I mean, they are talking, writing. And I say Walt, and they quote two lines and they say, Disney, we mean, not Whitman. And then, it ends, 'God bless America, ha, ha.' It said. And I've, well, I guess this didn't travel very well across the Atlantic. But it, you know, it didn't get me down. Might have gotten the publisher down."

HEYEN: "This question fits in, somewhat, with what Al was asking before. And this is like a grab bag question, just throw it away. Because I'm sure it's too general. But it's always asked. Do you see your work as having essentially changed since you began? Is it something you could say, generally, about some real division as your books have progressed? Or? That's heavy, isn't it?"

SEXTON: "It's heavy, but it should be able to be answered. I see a progression. Just. Well, after 'Live or Die', I mean, 'To Bedlam and Part Way Back', mostly madness. 'All My Pretty Ones', mostly, I'm saying. Because this is a great generality. Death of parents and love, and some religious poems. 'Live or Die', a mixed bag, sequentially, dated as I wrote the poems, thinking, you know, live or die. Then, love poems. Well, that's, I mean, a whole book of love poems. That's certainly a step in the right direction. What comes next? Transformation. Okay. There are two very, I mean, there are two rather serious transformations. The rest are. I didn't really mean them to be comic. I mean, I guess I did, but I mean, I really didn't know what I was doing. I was, it was just. I just did what I felt like. I was very happy writing those poems. I was having a good time. Except for a few that gave me trouble. Then, 'The Book of Folly', which is really kind of a mixed bag of things. It's got a little hangover from the voice of 'Transformations', with some poems called 'The Jesus Papers'. Which are called either blasphemous or devout. It's probably blasphemous, I would say. I mean, the one, my publishers forced me to take out, and two friends advised me to take out, was Jesus ailing, in which I started out. This is unpublished and

not in the book. There was trouble that day. Jesus was constipated. Well, they said, now look, we just can't have this. So, I said, okay. But in the end of that book, I, there's a kind of belief thing going on and one fights what one. You know, it's a little war."

HEYEN: "Yeah. And now, you've finished a couple of other books."

SEXTON: "Now, then comes the "Death Notebooks", which is... I'd planned... I had this crazy idea I'd publish it posthumously. You know, my friends all going, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, as they always do. And I only, not that I was going to kill myself and bring out this book or anything. But I thought, wouldn't it be nice, you know, if after I were dead there were a statement about death. You know, about I, you know, and God. Which is a predominant theme in the book. He, being. And then, "The Awful Rowing Towards God". And that's about as far as I've gotten."

HEYEN: "We began with your poem, "With Mercy for the Greedy", and which talks about. I suppose it talks about your effort to come to terms with the cross. And I think it makes a statement, maybe, as poetry being a halfway house toward a religiousness that you can hold on to. What about with that poem, and now, with I just have the title to go by, "The Awful Rowing Toward God". Have you come somewhere, in regard to this religious quest, or?"

SEXTON: "I would say I do, in "The Awful Rowing Toward God"."

HEYEN: "Yeah."

SEXTON: "And I even do, in a certain, to a certain degree, in the "Death Notebooks". I mean, certainly ends on, I don't know. Could you say how it ends, or any opinion? I don't, you know."

POULIN: "Well, it ends with that series of psalms."

SEXTON: "Yeah. Which are praise."

POULIN: "Which are praise. And I think, even the section called "the furies"."

SEXTON: "Which are praise."

POULIN: "Which are praise."

SEXTON: "Not. Well, yes, yes, they are."

POULIN: "And we have approximately two minutes left."

SEXTON: "Quick, quick, quick."

POULIN: "I have -"

SEXTON: "Oh, you've got it. All right."

POULIN: "The poem from the "Death Notebooks" that we'd like you to read."

SEXTON: "Yes. I will."

POULIN: "As a conclusion."

SEXTON: "There were many fury poems. This is only one of them."

"The Fury of Cocks"

There they are
drooping over the breakfast plates,
angel-like,
folding in their sad wing,
animal sad,
and only the night before
there they were
playing the banjo.
Once more the day's light comes
with its immense sun,
its mother trucks,
its engines of amputation.
Whereas last night
the cock knew its way home,
as stiff as a hammer,
battering in with all
its awful power.
That theater.
Today it is tender,
a small bird,
as soft as a baby's hand.
She is the house.
He is the steeple.
When they fuck they are God.
When they break away they are God.
When they snore they are God.
In the morning they butter the toast.
They don't say much.
They are still God.
All the cocks of the world are God,
blooming, blooming, blooming
into the sweet blood of woman.

POULIN: "Anne Sexton, Bill, thank you, very much."

HEYEN: "Thank you."

SEXTON: "Thank you."

[Music]