

# Resistance, Rejection, Reparation: Anne Sexton and the poetry of therapy

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# I

## **Anne Sexton Anxiety: split, fragment, repeat**

### **The Anne Sexton Tapes**

During the North America summer of 2006, I went to Boston to listen to Anne Sexton's therapy tapes.<sup>1</sup> The tapes are a restricted holding of the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard. The collection consists of 101 reels of audiotape from Sexton's psychotherapy treatment with her psychiatrist Dr. Martin Orne, recorded during the years of 1961-1964. My thesis finds its structure from these tapes, in that it traces the poetry which emerged from Sexton's first major therapy, published in her first three books: *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1961), *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) and *Live or Die* (1966).<sup>2</sup> The tapes follow what biographer Diane Middlebrook terms Sexton's "maturation as an artist," providing the greatest insight into the emergence of her creativity in proximity to her therapy.<sup>3</sup> Although she was not in an analysis, Sexton's desire to be analyzed was a theme she often explored during her treatment with Orne, as she notes in a letter to her mentor, poet W. D. Snodgrass (24 Nov. 1959):

I wish I might try classical analysis as my psychiatrist is not doing me the good he ought to, or I ought to. I've wasted a complete year blocking out everything and trying not to talk about my parents being dead. Mostly I fight with him in an underhanded way. One day though I broke out and picked up all the things on his desk and threw them at him (including a lamp and an ink bottle). I'm better some, though. I don't go around trying to kill myself all the time as I once did. (Just him. Hal)



But my writing is in its beginning of trouble because I just have the most difficult time forcing myself to write about what I won't work on in therapy. My psychiatrist wants me to write short stories as you have to use more ego in order to write them.<sup>4</sup>

Beginning in January 1961, following Orne's sabbatical to the University of Sydney, Australia, Sexton's therapy tapes represent a unique archive in the history of women, poetry and psychotherapy. Donated in 2002 to the Radcliffe Institute by Sexton's daughter, Linda Gray Sexton, the tapes were used by the late Diane Middlebrook to write *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (1992). Linda Sexton also incorporated material from the tapes into her memoir, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* (1994).<sup>5</sup> Linda granted Middlebrook unrestricted access to the sprawling Sexton archive, which included the collection of tapes. She also gave me access to this rare material. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida discusses the origins of the word "archive," from the Greek "*arkheion*," originally meaning a place, house, address or domicile: "It is thus," he writes, "in this *domiciliation*, in this house arrest, that archives take place."<sup>6</sup> The Radcliffe Institute represents a true home for Sexton's tapes, both in terms of the Institute's links to Sexton's past—she was one of the original Radcliffe Scholars—and the specialist focus of the Schlesinger itself.

In 2006, I also spent several days rifling through folders of typescripts, pouring over manuscripts and letters, at Sexton's other archival home in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, part of the University of Texas, at Austin. This collection also contains photographs of the poet, some of which I've included in this thesis. It is a broad archive in its scope, housing Sexton's paintings, her typewriter, a pair of her reading glasses. Yet Sexton's materials feel somehow restricted by their relocation to Texas. Although my access to the tapes at

the Schlesinger involved some luck (in the form of a forwarded email, which included Linda Sexton's personal email address), and spontaneity (I decided to write to Linda direct, and she has been exceptionally supportive since our first correspondence), my experience of the tapes transformed my very notion of the Sexton archive.

During the many hours I spent listening to her voice (I listened to the collection twice, over the course of two separate trips), Anne Sexton emerged as a whole person. More than a textual trace on the page, her voice became a kind of acoustic "holding environment" in which to consider the poet and her work.<sup>7</sup> Through my encounter with the tapes, she became alive to me. Working alongside Diane Middlebrook's rough transcripts (now part of the Anne Sexton Papers at the Schlesinger), a makeshift guide through the three oversized boxes of CDs, I knew approximately which tapes were going to enrich my understanding of Sexton's poetry, and which tapes I preferred to avoid.<sup>8</sup> It may well have been my "archive desire" (Derrida 85) which motivated my second trip to the Schlesinger Library in 2008, to the scene of the poet who, through puffs of her cigarette and bouts of silence, talked to Orne, and to me, for days and weeks on end. The months I spent in Boston led me to the same places where Sexton spent her early creative life (Cambridge, Harvard), as well as the very street (Marlborough St), where Sexton went to see Dr. Martin Orne in his elegant brownstone, several blocks up from Boston Common.

In his Foreword to Middlebrook's biography, Martin Orne details the extreme memory difficulties that Sexton experienced, and how this impacted on her treatment. According to Orne, Sexton's memory problems led to an impasse in her therapy. Each session became (not unlike a poem), a contained unit, or vignette. The work of treatment broke up into individual, discrete narratives; each with a beginning, middle and an end (xv). Orne sensed that insufficient progress

was being made across his patient's therapy, as he remarked to Sexton during her treatment: "You have the tendency to isolate experiences, and have kind of a commitment to keep them as separate vignettes," to which she replied that it was just like her poems, "each one is different."<sup>9</sup> In order to overcome what he termed Sexton's "inability to recall what had occurred in previous sessions," and to circumvent this disruption to treatment, Orne began to audio-tape each session.<sup>10</sup>

Orne describes how Sexton made notes from memory, directly following their usually twice-weekly sessions; and how on the following day, she would listen to the session, in order to note, "discrepancies between her memories, her notes from the previous day, and what actually happened on the tape" (xvi). Middlebrook suggests that this complicated process of notetaking "placed Sexton in the role of the analyst in the psychodynamic relationship."<sup>11</sup> Whether or not it had this effect, Orne's use of the tapes was unconventional. As was his permissiveness about session times which often exceeded the "customary" fifty-minute mark (*Letters* 225).

In her analysis of "Anne Sexton's Treatment" (via Middlebrook's biographical account), Susan Kavalier-Adler points out that at the time Sexton was seeing Orne, although the object-relations school of thought was all the rage in Britain, the work of Melanie Klein, Ronald Fairbairn, D.W. Winnicott, and Michael Balint had not "voyaged across the Atlantic. There was no established technique for treating the whole range of borderline, schizoid, and narcissistic disorders."<sup>12</sup> Following the lead of the New York Psychoanalytic Training Institute, Sigmund Freud's writing went mostly unchallenged in the States, including among psychiatrists practicing psychoanalytically-inclined psychotherapy. As Kavalier-Adler states, Orne was "a clinical psychologist (Ph.D.), as well as an M.D." – in other words, he practiced as a psychiatrist-

psychologist, with a working knowledge of “Freudian psychoanalytic theory,” such as transference and defense mechanisms (186-87). Orne may well have been a radical in Boston circles, initially proscribing shock treatment following Sexton’s admission at Glenside (several months after her stay at Westwood Lodge in 1956), and replacing it with an intensive psychotherapy regime.<sup>13</sup> Orne’s use of audio-tape recordings raises a number of questions about the work of therapy, particularly in relation to the processes of memory. He notes that after implementing this procedure, Sexton was able to point to errors in *his* memory, creating a scenario in which “the patient now could know more than the therapist” (xvi). The taping technique was implemented not only to provide Sexton with a sense of object constancy, but also in response to the intellectual interest she invested in the process of therapy.

The intimacy with her subject that Middlebrook gained from listening to the tapes led to the creation of a provocative biography. In her biography, Middlebrook constructs a therapeutic narrative arc, through which a Boston housewife is transformed into a Pulitzer Prize winning poet (xviii). In this way, the biographer offers her readers a quasi-therapeutic experience of reading. In her Preface, Middlebrook establishes the biography’s therapeutic terrain:

Everything I have learned about her suggests that she would not have held back from the archive her manuscripts and private papers the full collection of tapes. Sexton was not a person with a strong sense of privacy. She was open and impulsive: many people found her exhibitionistic, and some of the people who lived with her found her outrageously, immorally invasive ... If suffering like hers had any use, she reasoned, it was not to the sufferer. The only way that an individual’s pain gained meaning was through its communication to others. (xxii-xxiii)

As Eugene Garfield observes, the biography's publication was a blockbuster event, provoking high-profile responses from both literary and psychiatric communities.<sup>14</sup> Although Middlebrook had been publishing academic articles on Sexton for over a decade, on the front page of *The New York Times*, Alessandra Stanley reported the 'story' behind the publication of the biography, in her article titled "Poet Told All; Therapist Provides the Record," on July 15 1991. This highly visible article incorporated quotes from various sources, including Linda Sexton ("I sometimes wonder if Mother is angry with me..."), and Middlebrook ("I don't think Anne Sexton cared what was known about her private life...She just didn't want to be known as a bad artist"). In the months that followed, Middlebrook's biography received close attention from the literary and psychiatric establishments. In her *Times* article, Stanley quotes the poet and editor of *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, J. D. McClatchy, who levels his criticism squarely at Sexton's psychiatrist, and the vicissitudes of counter-transference: "There is something a little sleazy about the way [Dr Orne] has put himself forward as [Sexton's] Pygmalion." McClatchy's compassion is reserved for Middlebrook, who he considers blameless for mining such a rich literary and biographical vein: "Imagine if we suddenly found tapes of the psychiatric sessions of Virginia Woolf, who would not want to listen?" Also writing for the *Times* ("Anne Sexton's River of Words," 17 Aug. 1991), Erica Jong (who Sexton mentored, and whose commentary was rejected in some quarters as "spurious"),<sup>15</sup> asks the more provocative version of McClatchy's question: "Do some people denigrate Anne Sexton's revelations because she was a woman?"; and, "If the poet Robert Lowell had left these therapy tapes, would we rejoice or denounce?"

Orne's response to Stanley's article was published the following week, again in the *Times* ("The Sexton Tapes," 23 July 1991). His opening sentence framed the main point of contention in relation to the use (and suggested misuse) of the Sexton tapes: "Few would dispute that a

patient's right to confidentiality survives death, but what about a patient's right to disclosure?" In Stanley's discussion of the tapes, she describes Sexton's "carefully hoarded" heaps of memorabilia and letters, illustrating Sexton's long-term interest in posterity. Sexton's investment in her own posterity was a constant throughout her life, evidenced by the scrapbooks she filled long before she was either a patient or poet.<sup>16</sup> In his Op-Ed piece, Orne's comment that "Anne knew what she was consenting to disclose because she had studied the tapes and taken extensive notes on them outside of therapy," suggests Sexton's desire to believe in the therapeutic narrative that Orne (and ultimately Middlebrook), helped construct for her.<sup>17</sup>

My own experience of the tapes confirmed Sexton's obsessive desire for a posthumous after-life. In her own words, she wanted to leave the "impact of [her] personality carved in marble."<sup>18</sup> Listening to the tapes was an insight into just how destructive that need to be great was for Anne, the person; and at the same time, how productive it was for the perfectionist poet. Linda Sexton describes the session on 30 November 1961 in which Orne suggested the destructiveness inherent in this need:

Over the years there would be more prizes, more honorary doctorates, more acclaim. 'I have to be great, that's the entire problem — I want to leave the impact of my personality carved in marble,' she had said to Dr. Orne back in 1961 in one of her more grandiose moods. His response ... expressed concern over her destructive need to become a star ...

All Sexton's "star" successes in the poetry world could not cure the depressive disturbance that she, and her friends and family, lived with. As Mutlu Blasing boldly puts it in "Anne Sexton, 'The Typo': "The typing cure is *not* the talking cure ..."<sup>19</sup>

While conducting research at the Harry Ransom Center (where the poet never set a foot),<sup>20</sup> Middlebrook acknowledged how Sexton's cultural baggage as a 1950s 'mad housewife' had made her "an object of suspicion in academic circles."<sup>21</sup> She also described the "magic" time she spent with Sexton, in the "sound corridor" of the tapes:

I spent much of the two years with Sexton's voice traveling through my ears and fingers, transcribing the tapes, feeling something like the dwarf in the story 'Rumpelstiltskin' (on which Sexton had based a poem), who had the magic power of spinning straw into gold. It was a fabulous experience: as the spools of tape unwound, I heard Sexton telling her own story in her own marvelous, throaty voice, often answering directly the very questions that interested me most. (89)

Within the "drama" of her work,<sup>22</sup> Middlebrook acknowledges the unusualness and privilege of her position as biographer, and how she became "captive" to the resourceful Sexton:

Such intimacy is never without costs. Invaded by Sexton's voice, I was also invaded by her pain and despair – and by the rage she cunningly triggered in her search for punishment. My respect for her psychiatrist intensified as I sat invisibly between the two of them, witnessing the resourcefulness of her pathology. (89)

Listening to the tapes caused Middlebrook to rewrite her manuscript in its entirety. Middlebrook describes her experience of showing the draft manuscript to Sexton's daughters Joy and Linda, who reacted with "outrage," accusing the biographer of having become an apologist for the "terrible demands" Sexton placed on her family: "Her daughters' angry responses to certain passages in the manuscript reminded me that they, too, had been her captives. But they hadn't been able to stop the world and get off as I had done in turning off the machine at the end of the day" (90). The publication of the biography was also the beginning of Middlebrook's own "metamorphosis" from English professor to biographer, and celebrity of letters (1990 155).<sup>23</sup>

Several years after the publication of the biography, by which time she did need an agent, as Middlebrook addresses herself retrospectively: "...suppose a biographer knows the subject's wishes in the matter of disclosure: is the biographer ethically obliged to respect those wishes?" ("Spinning Straw into Gold" 124). Middlebrook successfully argues Sexton's desire to disclose via the tapes, because of the poet's highly organized and carefully arranged archive.<sup>24</sup> It seems to me (as it did to Middlebrook), that Sexton knowingly left her tapes with Orne, like a kind of time bomb, planted with her psychiatrist, to ensure her posthumous reappearance as a figure of controversy.

In his Foreword to the biography, Orne writes that: "Sadly, if in therapy Anne had been encouraged to hold on to the vital supports that had helped her build the innovative career that meant so much to her and others, it is my view that Anne Sexton would be alive today" (xviii). From Middlebrook's perspective, Sexton fantasized her suicide as the ultimate career move (201). This view perhaps suggests the limits of biography, even with the use of such an unusual resource as your subject's psychotherapy sessions.<sup>25</sup> Speaking in 1991 at Borders, the "hip, tiny book store and espresso bar near Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia," Middlebrook told her audience that she has a number of fantasies about Sexton, one in particular about saving her from suicide: "But then," she suggests, "everyone has a rescue fantasy about Sexton" (Hughes 1991).

Clinical psychologist Barbara Lewin has suggested that Orne's release of the tapes, reflects his narcissistic, self-aggrandizing desire to participate in the Sexton story, as a kind of "therapist to the stars," in the tradition of Marilyn Monroe; or in Sexton's case, the mythic afterlife of the "crazy, sexy poetess" (11).<sup>26</sup> Lewin's concern is as much for the profession of psychotherapy



itself, which she perceives as being in danger of becoming the “ultimate media event,” through the erosion of the confidence of patients currently in treatment: “For Orne to have concluded that Sexton would have wanted their sessions aired is not only capitalizing on her masochistic self-destructiveness, but potentially reinforcing it in others” (11). By releasing the tapes, Orne was perhaps participating in his own fantasy as gatekeeper, as well as Sexton’s old destructive fantasy of her posthumous celebrity. Yet therapy is, to borrow from Lewin, an unglamorous art (10).

Orne’s claim that when he left Boston for Philadelphia in 1964, Sexton asked him to hold on to the tapes to use as he saw fit, informed part of his argument for posthumous disclosure, a claim he repeated to the *Psychiatric Times* (“Psychiatrist Criticized Over Release of Poet’s Psychotherapy Tapes,” 6 Sept. 1991). Speaking to Ken Hausman, Orne confirmed that Sexton “wanted me to keep the tapes and use them in any way that I saw would help others who were troubled.” Orne further argued the value of the tapes, as testament to the good work that a patient can accomplish in therapy. Because the outcome in Sexton’s case was suicide, Pellegrino suggests that rather than doing good, harm to other patients might just as arguably be a result of knowing the intimate details of the tapes – not to mention the harm to the memory of the deceased.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, a complaint to the APA Ethics Committee resulted in an investigation into Orne’s actions.<sup>28</sup> Hausman refers to comments made by committee member Elissa Benedek, regarding Sexton’s capacity as a patient to grant permission in such an instance:

Even if a seriously disturbed patient such as Sexton urges or gives consent to a psychiatrist to release tapes of their psychotherapy, a serious question arises of their competency to understand the nature and consequences of what could be disclosed.<sup>29</sup>

In a section of *Society* devoted to the issues of "Privacy, Professionalism and Psychiatry" related to the Sexton case, Benedek's view finds echoes among lawyers and psychotherapy practitioners.<sup>30</sup> Therapists and professors weighed in, accusing Orne not only of having capitalized on Sexton's "masochistic self-destructiveness,"<sup>31</sup> but also of intent by the very fact of keeping the tapes in his possession (Kroll 18),<sup>32</sup> and of having essentially disturbed the work of currently practicing psychotherapists and their patients (Shopper 26). Yet the overall effect of this commentary preserved the rights of the biographer and the literary establishment to use the tapes (Kroll 19).<sup>33</sup> In *Society*, the question of confidentiality relates mainly to the protection of the psychotherapy profession and by extension, the welfare of living patients.

In "Secrets of the Couch and the Grave: The Anne Sexton Case," Pellegrino argues the impossibility of knowing the effects of the release of the Sexton tapes:

Other patients under psychotherapy with Orne or other psychiatrists could identify with Sexton and be depressed by her suicide. Furthermore, it is not known how many patients or potential patients had their trust in psychotherapy undermined by knowing their analyses might one day be revealed. (872)

Two *Society* commentators take a slightly different view. Vern Bullough, arguing for the patient's right to disclosure, points out that the "patient's records are owned by the patient and not by the psychiatrist, the clinic, or a hospital" (12). This view of ownership, endorsed by other therapists,<sup>34</sup> echoes the words of John Freund (husband of Linda Sexton). In Freund's letter to the *Times*, he points out that Orne was "not alone in making the poet's psychiatric records available to the biographer."<sup>35</sup> Records from Westwood where Martin Orne's mother, Viennese-trained psychiatrist Dr Martha Brunner-Orne was director (and where Sexton was first hospitalized),<sup>36</sup> and McLean hospital were made available to the biographer.<sup>37</sup> As Gergen suggests, by putting

aside our anxieties around these questions of access and availability, the gains for both psychiatry and posterity, insofar as the tapes offer an insight into the healing powers of treatment, may begin to emerge more clearly (23); a view endorsed in high-profile venues such as the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>38</sup> In his *Time Magazine* article, Lance Morrow suggests (“Pains of the Poet—And Miracles,” 23 Sept. 1991), that if there is any argument for the release of the tapes, it is that Sexton’s “version of the story, elaborately unpretty,” is “being told”; Sexton’s tale, is truly the “tale that survives.”

The other “tale that survives” is that of Sexton’s abuse by her subsequent therapist. While plenty of words have been spent analyzing the meaning of the tapes for various professions – literary, therapeutic, legal – considerably fewer have been spent addressing the issue of ethical and professional misconduct of Sexton’s second major therapist. “Dr Otto Zweizung” (the pseudonym Middlebrook coined to conceal the identity of Frederick Duhl), practiced as a family therapist. He was still working in Boston at the time of the biography’s publication. Roazen does not neglect the subject of abuse, going so far as to hypothesize that, owing to the likelihood of Sexton’s seductiveness, it is not surprising that she “should have succeeded in seducing her other psychiatrist” (15). Reviewing Middlebrook’s biography in the *Times*, Katha Pollitt was the first to publically suggest what was really at stake in the case of Anne Sexton:

I have to confess that I can’t even work up much indignation over the release of the tapes as an issue of medical ethics. The posthumous revealing of Sexton’s confidences seems a peccadillo compared to what some of her therapists did to her while she was alive.<sup>39</sup>

That the sexual abuse of a patient in care was not given the same amount of consideration as the issue of confidentiality is alarming. As Goldstein suggests, and as much of the ground I’ve covered shows, the violation of professional taboo around confidentiality evoked a kind of

“primal horror” among Orne’s colleagues (347). Kroll argues that Orne’s relative silence on this issue is disturbing (19). In his Foreword to the biography, Orne refers to “another therapist” in oblique terms:

Although Anne initially did extremely well with another therapist, the therapeutic contract became untenable because of a change in their relationship. Unfortunately, this change also undermined her crucial relationship with her husband, thereby depriving Anne of what had been a vital interpersonal support.  
(xviii)

In other words, as well as sexually abusing her, Duhl encouraged Sexton to leave her husband, causing irreparable damage to an already vulnerable relationship. Orne did not report “Zweizung”/Duhl when he learned of the affair from Sexton, nor did he insist that the treatment be terminated (Lewin 9); although, according to Rosenbaum, Orne eventually confronted Duhl (161). Maxine Kumin, poet and Sexton’s close friend, publicly defended Orne’s actions, while denouncing the repressive response of the psychiatric community:

I thought then that the issue of the tapes was a smokescreen and I think so today as well. I feel that if psychiatrists choose to police their profession they would do well to go after the true culprits, those who seduce their patients, turn their backs on them mid-crisis, or out of timidity or inaction, are unwilling to tackle difficult cases.<sup>40</sup>

Kumin is almost the only voice to have also raised strong doubts about the ethical behavior of another of Sexton’s psychiatrists, who abruptly terminated treatment with her patient (Pellegrino 866). Middlebrook refers to this therapist as “Dr. Chase” in the biography. The former chair of the Ethics Committee of the American Psychological Association, Rachel Hare-Mustin wrote in 1991 of having “waited in vain,” as various psychoanalysts and psychotherapists publicly debated

the issue of confidentiality, for a “similar outcry over the sexual abuse of [Sexton] by the therapist who had an affair with her.”<sup>41</sup> Like Kumin, she viewed the outcry over the use of the tapes as an effective “smoke screen, obscuring the ethical violation that actually affected Sexton’s life” (408). A psychotherapist, Hare-Mustin takes issue with Middlebrook’s account of Sexton’s transformation from housewife into poet, because it ultimately neglects to examine the failure of the profession in treating her.

Hare-Mustin argues (successfully, I think), that Middlebrook avoids an important question, about the way in which material in therapy was used for “creative purposes,” rather than curative ones: “Did Anne Sexton’s psychotherapy liberate her creativity only to ultimately harm her? Were her suffering and death necessary?” (407). Members of Sexton’s family have publicly rebuked Middlebrook’s stance (or lack thereof) in relation to both the therapy material, and Sexton’s possible abuse by her father, and by her great-aunt. In the *New York Times*, two of Sexton’s nieces described how their aunt:

saw truth through the filter of her own psychological processes...Where others saw a child playing in a bright, cheery playroom with every conceivable toy, Anne saw herself as a poor waif, confined to a dank and friendless dungeon of anguish.<sup>42</sup>

Yet their perception that Middlebrook had taken at face-value Sexton’s remarks about her father, made “in some sort of hypnotic trance,” is at odds with the biographer’s stance on this specific material. Responding to Eugene Garfield’s questions about the biography’s reception, Middlebrook wrote that the more provocative responses concerned her handling of the material relating to sexual abuse (38). Middlebrook mentions a trend amongst her more dissatisfied readers, who came to her book as feminists and as incest-survivors:

As one very disappointed person wrote to me: 'I am an incest survivor. I read *Anne Sexton: A Biography* because I heard it dealt with incest.' The person saw the biography as perpetuating society's and the family's worst crime against the victim of incest: not believing her story. (38)

Middlebrook defends and maintains the ambivalent status of Sexton's story, arguing that she decided early on not to write about Sexton as victim. She wanted to construct a narrative of transformation that was true to "*feeling*" in the same way that Sexton sought truth "to *feeling*" in her work. Other tales of abuse emerged as confessions from surprising quarters.

In a public attack on Middlebrook in the *San Francisco Review of Books* ("From Behind the Bedlam," Nov.-Dec. 1993: 31-33), Erica Liederman—the daughter of the "suburban" psychiatrist who occasionally saw Sexton during Orne's vacations—wrote of her own abuse at the hands of her father.<sup>43</sup> Liederman accuses Middlebrook of being just like the "Freudian analysts who have doubted, diagnosed, and invalidated women's experience," by not believing Sexton's account of family abuse (31). Liederman's vitriol for Middlebrook is strikingly personalized, particularly in her re-appropriation of an image (presumably knowingly) from Sexton's "Live" (*Live* 87-90). Turning Sexton's imagery on its head—changing the animal from Dalmatian to Labrador, and the meaning from birth to death—Liederman vilifies what she terms Middlebrook's cannibalistic "posthumous consumption" of the poet:

A certain image comes to mind when I read literary biography in general, and when I read Middlebrook's book in particular. A friend has an old Labrador dog named Dirt. Dirt finds dead things and rolls in them. He comes home reeking of dead possum, dead jackrabbit, dead deer. Perhaps I err in choosing a dog as a point of comparison, but the image forces itself upon me. Dirt rolls in the

decomposing creatures as a way of masquerading as someone else for a day. Does he really think he fools us into believing he is another creature? I doubt it; it is his game, and we indulge him because he is a dog, and the act itself is innocent. Middlebrook, too, rolled in a dead thing. The only difference is, Middlebrook believes she has fooled us: she seems to believe that we will mistake Sexton's talent and poetry for hers. She covers herself with the scent of Sexton, and makes herself the spokesperson for the poetry that Sexton wrote. Are we fooled? I hope not. (33)

The image of Dirt rolling in decomposing animals does Middlebrook's work a disservice; the art of biography is arguably inherently cannibalistic, thriving off both the life and the remains of its usually deceased subject. As Janet Malcolm suggests, the biographer is like the "professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain the jewelry and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away."<sup>44</sup> I think the fact that Middlebrook has doggedly dug up the dirt (pretty or not), would have satisfied Sexton, as both the work's subject and as a reader of biography.

Also disturbing was the long-distance analysis of Linda Sexton's motives in granting Middlebrook access to the tapes. Following the revelation in Middlebrook's biography that Sexton had sexually and emotionally abused her eldest daughter, commentators unjustly suggested unjustly that in granting such unrestricted access, Linda was acting out her revenge fantasies against her mother posthumously (Viorst 650; Roazen 16; Gelman and Chideya writing for *Newsweek*, 29 July 1991).<sup>45</sup> In the aftermath of this publishing event, the Hollywood movie contract which Sexton's nieces feared (and which Linda Sexton, according to her husband, has long considered inappropriate), has not been forthcoming.<sup>46</sup> In her *New Yorker* review of Linda

Sexton's memoir, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* (1994),

Daphne Merkin imagines Sexton's cinematic bearing:

Unlike the *Redbook*-homemaker persona of her fellow-suicide Sylvia Plath, Sexton's image has an aura of glamour: tall and slim, green-eyed, dark-haired, and frequently tanned, she sported bright lipstick, cigarettes, and glittering rings. The drama of her art, it appeared, was matched by the drama of her looks, almost as if she were trying to envision herself, played by Rita Hayworth, in a movie version of her life: tormented suburban wife and mother is released by psychiatrist into the world of poetry-writing, where she ascends to the pinnacle, taking time off between mental hospitals and Pulitzer Prizes to flash her gams.<sup>47</sup>

A film-version of Sexton's life has not been made; and only Middlebrook has previously offered an evaluation of Sexton's poetry in relation to what the tapes can offer us, as readers. The argument for the tapes, a rich and valuable part of Sexton's legacy, must move beyond anxiety around access and the archive, and return us as readers and listeners to the voice and the words of the poet. The work of this thesis intersperses material from the tapes, with draft and published versions of Sexton's poems. I read Sexton's work in this unrestricted way, as an attempt to open the doors of the archive to readers, fans and scholars alike.

Sexton worked extremely hard at both her poetry (evidenced by the multiple drafts at the Harry Ransom Center), and at documenting her life as a poet, as Middlebrook writes:

From the outset, she kept letters she received from other writers, and made carbons of her own letters; thus, both sides of Sexton's correspondence are available to readers at the HRHRC. Moreover, she was a careful steward of her own manuscripts. Abundant worksheets for each published volume of Sexton's



work make possible a full view of the development of many individual poems and all of her books. In addition, the HRHRC contains worksheets and completed version of stories and plays by Anne Sexton, most of which remains unpublished.<sup>48</sup>

As she developed her fragments into multiple drafts, typescripts became manuscripts, and Sexton began to feel she had found something she could do with her unconscious, producing “insights” for which her audience of fans and literary editors paid and praised her.<sup>49</sup> Sexton’s draft process, full of associations and symbols, is as intriguing as her poetry. This thesis considers Sexton’s poems as polished products in relation to their rich archive of draft materials, full of tricks, and slips, and potentialities. As Blasing suggests, Sexton is “both typist and the typo-error she produces—both an agent and the mangling of the agent on the typewriter, which tells the lie/truth that she/we? *want* to hear” (191). As such, when quoting drafts, letters, and also the tapes, I “*want* to hear” Sexton’s typos. I have consciously preserved Sexton’s slips on the typewriter, as a gesture to what Maxine Kumin describes as her friend’s “almost mystical faith in the ‘found’ word image, as well as in metaphor by mistake, by typo, or by misapprehension”.<sup>50</sup>

In “Playing: Creative Activity and the Search for the Self,” Winnicott suggests that the successful, “universally acclaimed” artist who has produced something of cultural (and personal) value may, contrary to the appearance of all prizes, fellowships and accolades, have “failed to find the self that he or she is looking for.”<sup>51</sup> Sexton’s self-automated publicity machine generated various myths of the poet, as both ‘mad’ and cured artist. This thesis examines this myth of the ‘part way back’ poet in terms of Sexton’s creative work, in order to reanimate Sexton’s own questions regarding the relationship between poetry and therapy. In the second half of this first chapter, I offer an extended reading of “Said the Poet to the Analyst”, from *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*

(17), in order to establish Sexton's interest in the experience of therapy and psychoanalytic theory. I incorporate dream-work from Sexton's therapy, as well as musings from private, unpublished correspondence, and the rich archive of draft materials, which the poet collected and sheltered throughout her lifetime, as her literary and human legacy. In this way, I establish the 'unrestricted' framework that this thesis uses, an integrative approach that reads literary texts and archival materials together. In the second chapter, I offer a series of readings of poems from *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, in order to examine the way in which Sexton used the myth of the 'mad poet' as cultural currency, and to establish her interest in depression and mental illness. I also offer readings of publicity images of Sexton, to better understand how she was promoted (and promoted herself) as housewife, mother and poet. Chapter three focuses on Sexton's second book, *All My Pretty Ones*. It addresses the theme of mourning as a creative poetics of melancholia in Sexton's poetry, as well as her place in feminist critical history. Chapter four moves into an analysis of Sexton's third book *Live or Die*, by way of her publication history in *The New Yorker* magazine and Sexton's relationship (both public and private) with her readers. It aims to explore the assimilation of Sexton into the literary marketplace, as both 'mad' patient and prize-winning *New Yorker* poet. In this chapter I draw on the correspondence series from the *New Yorker* Records at the New York Public Library. In my final chapter, I offer an extended reading of "The Ambition Bird" from *The Book of Folly* (1972). I have chosen one of Sexton's later works in order to examine her emerging interest in posthumous literary celebrity, within a psychoanalytic framework. This chapter offers a broad discussion of Sexton in relation to Sylvia Plath, in order to begin to assess the cultural significance of Sexton's textual afterlife.

## The Poetry of Therapy

Sexton's early poetic career represents a complicated picture of a self split between the child-like world of the madhouse and the familial enclosures of the American suburbs. As Middlebrook suggests, a common feature among the so-called confessional "WASP writers" (Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman), was an interest in the psychodynamics of family life and the highly regulated world of the American Dream, conceptualized as a vision of middle-class private life. Writing for *Vanity Fair* in 2009, David Kamp reflects the relationship between the "burgeoning medium of television" and the American Dream of the family unit:

Nothing reinforced the seductive pull of the new, suburbanized American Dream more than the burgeoning medium of television, especially as its production nexus shifted from New York, where the grubby, schlubby shows *The Honeymooners* and *The Phil Silvers Show* were shot, to Southern California, where the sprightly, twinkly shows *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Leave it to Beaver* were made. While the former shows are actually more enduringly watchable and funny, the latter were the foremost "family" sitcoms of the 1950s—and, as such, the aspirational touchstones of real American families.<sup>52</sup>

Historically, confessional poetry can be situated in reaction to what Lowell termed the "tranquilized Fifties," visible in the televised incarnations of *Ozzie and Harriet* et al.<sup>53</sup> Christina Britzolakis characterizes the confessional style as resistant to New Critical distinctions "between the 'speaker' or 'persona' and the poet as biographical individual, [and] between public and private."<sup>54</sup> Britzolakis argues that the confessional poets would have been inconceivable without the popularization of Freudianism (147). The advent of psychoanalysis in the States – Freud was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in April 1956 – became, in Middlebrook's words, a

“mode of address to postwar existential misery.”<sup>55</sup> Like the appearance of televisions in the home, psychoanalysis became a solvent for the boundaries dividing public and private life. While New Criticism ignored the cultural context of the poem, as a confessional poet, Sexton re-appropriated the domestic sphere through its feminist potential, granting the apron and bedpost new representational capacity.<sup>56</sup>

Sexton’s way back from fragmentation, her reclaiming of a poetically personal “I,” can be read in terms of its debt to Freudian psychology, and the literary shape-shifting taking place around the poet at the time. Sexton explored psychological fragmentation through the image of a split-self. Privileging her knowledge of language and her ability to perform, Sexton applied a “mask to [her] face somewhat like a young man applying the face of an aging clown.”<sup>57</sup> By emphasizing the performative aspect of her poetic persona, Sexton suggests the inherently theatrical production of confessional poetry. Like a “robber” or “clown” at her dressing table, Sexton’s performance includes props – cups of coffee, sneezes, shots of bourbon at 2 a.m. – applied as age-lines and red lipstick (“Lecture One” 1). The masked figure represents the performatively unhinged psyche, as a way of telling the story of the poet’s mental illness. In her unpublished notes for a series of lectures at Colgate University in 1972, Sexton likened the process of poetic production to the work of the analyst, giving meaning to what the patient can only perceive as incoherent experience (6). Sexton’s comments find their parallel in Ludwig’s discussion of the “reciprocal relationship between the psychotherapeutic process and creativity”:

psychotherapy is an attempt on both the part of the therapist and the patient to impose order on chaos.... Most therapeutic explanatory systems serve as road maps, identifying the meaning of symbols and explaining where patients have been heading, and offer rituals for coping with unpleasant feelings during the trip.<sup>58</sup>

In her own pedagogical approach to poetry and the creative process, Sexton intimates the psychotherapeutic process. Rose Lucas frames Sexton's corpus in terms of its "articulation or translation of negative, depressive emotions."<sup>59</sup> Just as the writing process grants the poet literary and creative authority, creativity or play in therapy can similarly work in the service of mastering a sense of self, as Lucas argues: "The space of the poem, then, comes to replicate the potentially safe space of therapy, where, in intimate dialogue with a listening other—whether analyst or reader—interior material might be usefully rehearsed and re-ordered" (2009 48). Sexton textually approximates poetic and therapeutic spaces, as spaces of language. Yet unlike therapy, as Ludwig suggests, poetry is not "bound by the constraints of [a] theoretical system"; nor is it "confined to the therapy hour" (162). Sexton's creative activity, her play with words, transcends the page and the speech of therapy, and enters into a multiplicity of worlds: literary, domestic and scholarly.

On 28 October 1961, Sexton discussed with her psychiatrist the deception inherent in the title of her first book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. Sexton later related this question to a discussion about readers' interpretations of the book. She felt unnerved that readers might think having made it "Part Way Back" that she was now "just this cured thing"; that in writing her book, she intentionally made herself sound like a case history, and a "cured" one at that.<sup>60</sup> On 28 October 1961, Sexton wondered whether psychiatrists read her book and whether they would find it a valuable therapeutic tool.<sup>61</sup> At this point in the recording Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* seems to be playing in the background. In earlier tapes (which Sexton listened as part of her transcription process to assist her memory), Orne and Sexton encountered a competing soundtrack of music from the radio, ranging from chamber works to Berlioz symphonies, big band, *My Fair Lady*, string quartets, jaunty French *chanson*, opera. Before this problem could be fixed, the tapes, especially those from 1961, included hit songs such as "I've Got My Love To

Keep Me Warm,” “There’s a Light In Her Eye,” and the likes of Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman, not to mention the Saturday Showcase and Jazz Spectacular. As it turned out, Orne was recycling tapes which he’d used previously to record from the radio, rendering some sessions unlistenable-to, and leading to all sorts of difficulties for Sexton within the procedure that she and Orne had developed. Diane Middlebrook was as confused as I was (I didn’t solve this mystery until my second trip to the Schlesinger), about whether there was, in fact, a radio in the room.<sup>62</sup>

During her session on 12 January 1962, around the time she was completing a draft version of her second book, *All My Pretty Ones*, Sexton discussed with Orne the significance of the title of her first book, in relation to her new-found reading public of patients and psychiatrists:

Dr.: You always feel on the edge of disaster...Someday you’ll write about the edge of disaster.

A.S.: That’s all I’ve ever written about.

Dr.: It’s not. You’ve written a lot about disaster.

A.S.: You mean disaster itself.

Dr.: The feeling of disaster.... You’ve written about what you felt was over the edge.

A.S.: Mmmm.

Dr.: I’d like to see you write what’s on this side of the edge sometimes, where you are ...

A.S.: Therapy is short-hand talking.

Dr.: In a way.

A.S.: You mean happier things.

Dr.: No.... When you walk close to an edge and you look down and you can talk about the horror of falling.

A.S.: But you mean I never write about the horror of not falling?

Dr.: The fear of falling, without falling. The feeling that that edge can be a mile wide and you'd still feel at the edge. The feeling that it's always the last time.

A.S.: [laughs] That's me.

[...]

Dr.: The edge can be a mile wide and it can still be only an edge.

[...]

A.S.: What's the edge?

Dr.: The real edge you left sometime ago.

A.S.: What is the edge?

Dr.: Being alone.

A.S.: I suppose I think I'm not alone since I started to believe in you ... I suppose I'm not on the edge if I communicate to people and since I have written poetry, people understand it and some people like it ... trouble is, I'm not exactly my poetry ... kind of a major problem ... but people think they know me because they read my poetry ...

Dr.: They do, part of you.

A.S.: But they think that I'm so wise.

[...]

A.S.: This girl is sick, even though she claims to be well.

Dr.: She doesn't even claim to be well. The title of your first book was *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*.

A.S.: I hate that title though.

Dr.: It was a very honest title.

A.S.: I suppose that's why I kept it. A lot of people told me not to title it that, it was a bad title.

Dr.: It would've been dishonest to say it any other way.

A.S.: Oh, I could've just called it 'Poems' or something. I wanted ... to declare the subject matter.

Dr.: Yes, and you also declared that it was part way.

The therapeutic transference relationship was at once the great gamble and the "Big Cheat" for Sexton.<sup>63</sup> Although she began to experiment with poetry, in her own words, as a "reason to live," and at the encouragement of her therapist, Sexton's poetics often suggest that the construct of the journey or road back from madness is necessarily only ever part way.<sup>64</sup> The poet and the reader discover other places entirely: the poetics of disaster itself, as a journey through Sexton's poetics of madness, as a gesture to the possibility of recovery and reparation.

Like the poets she was frequently grouped with, as designated members of the 'confessional school' (Lowell, Plath and Berryman), Sexton displayed a "disdain for the idea of confessional poetry."<sup>65</sup> During an interview in 1970, Sexton was offered a definition of confessional poetry as "autobiographical—associated with a certain purgation, and sometimes classified as therapy," to which she replied:

Any poem is therapy. The art of writing is therapy. You don't solve problems in writing. They're still there. I've heard psychiatrists say, "See, you've forgiven your father. There it is in your poem." But I haven't forgiven my father. I just wrote that I did.<sup>66</sup>



In her unpublished lecture notes, Sexton describes writing as “a way of dominating experience, of running it over like a truck.”<sup>67</sup> In Sexton’s view, the poet is an active agent in the purgation and representation of psychic experience. Sexton compares writing the personal to “lying on the analyst’s couch, reenacting a private terror and the creative mind is the analyst who gives pattern and meaning to what the persona sees as only incoherent experience” (6). This process of ordering language into a poem, from the “narrow diary” of the mind (*Bedlam* 51), was also indebted to the poets Sexton encountered at poetry workshops and classes, as Mutu Blasing argues: “The mentally ill and therapist ‘talk language.’ And, [Sexton] later finds out, so did the poets, in the workshop; in the writing class, as in the hospital...” (178).

In the Foreword to *The Complete Poems*, Maxine Kumin recalls how Sexton’s first two books emerged from these workshops with John Holmes:

During the period, all of us wrote and revised prolifically, competitively, as if all the wolves of the world were at our backs. Our sessions were jagged, intense, often angry, but also loving.... Virtually every poem in the *Bedlam* book came under scrutiny in this period, as did many of the poems in *All My Pretty Ones*. There was no more determined reviser than Sexton, who would willingly push a poem through twenty or more drafts. (xxiv-xxv)

Kumin illuminates Sexton’s growing belief in the “value of the workshop”, as well as her method of constant revision, of hunting for the best word until the problem of the poem had been resolved in some way. From the dynamics of the workshop, Kumin’s friendship with Sexton emerged, strengthening around their lives as mothers and wives and their love of “language talk”:

During the workshop years, we began to communicate more and more frequently by telephone. Since there were no message units involved in the basic monthly

phone-company fee — the figure I remember is seven dollars — we had a second phone installed in our suburban homes so we could talk at will. (xxv)

These “mini-workshops,” conducted by phone, are testament to Sexton’s rigorous drafting process, which often relied on the ears of others, as well as her own.<sup>68</sup> At the same time she was attending poetry workshops, Sexton’s interest in the dynamics of psychotherapy increased, as Middlebrook’s biography reveals. Sexton began consuming “psychoanalytic literature,” which led her to read W.D. Snodgrass’s 1959 *Heart’s Needle* (76-77). As Maxine Kumin notes, Anne was engaged with all the “popular psychiatric texts”:

Anne read widely in the popular psychiatric texts of the time: interpretations of Freud, Theodore Reik, Philip Rieff, Helena Deutsch, Erik Erikson, Bruno Bettelheim. During a summer-school course with Philip Rahv, she encountered the works of Dostoevski, Kafka, and Thomas Mann. These were succeeded by the novels of Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Kurt Vonnegut. Above all else, she was attracted to the fairy tales of Andersen and Grimm ... (xxviii)<sup>69</sup>

Middlebrook also notes the range of psychoanalytic concepts that Sexton discussed in her therapy, including:

Freud on the Oedipus concept, on the theory of the superego, and on “Creative Writers and Daydreaming”; Jung on the notion of the self conversing with the self; a book about women’s sexuality; a book arguing in favor of silence on the part of the analyst. (1992 53)

Although the psychoanalytic literature that Sexton hungrily consumed influenced the themes of her poetry, Sexton spoke out against the characterization of her poetry as “therapy”: “Maxine [Kumin] said, well, that’s a therapeutic poem, and I said, for god’s sake, forget that. I want to

make it a real poem. Then I forced her into helping me make it a real poem, instead of just a kind of therapy for myself.”<sup>70</sup> By situating the poem solely written for the purpose of purgation as a kind of “failure,” Sexton suggests the distinction between the personal and the therapeutic:

Well, my poetry is very personal (*laughing*). I don’t think I write public poems. I write very personal poems but I hope that they will become the central theme to someone else’s private life. [...] Any public poem I have ever written, that wasn’t personal, was usually a failure.<sup>71</sup>

While Sexton distinguishes between the public poem and the personal poem, her confessional poetry represents a melding of the personal and the public, as poetic performance. In the same telephone interview, Sexton remarks that:

I didn’t make up my mind to write personal poems. When I started to write everyone told me, “These [poems] are too personal. These should not be published. You can’t write that way.” I tried to make them better poems, but they still had to be my kind of poems. (162)

The intimate details that Sexton draws on in her poetry represent Sexton’s own brand of personal poetics. Her poetry invites the reader simultaneously to witness and experience, encouraging empathy on the one hand, while functioning as a cracked mirror of the reader’s own experience. This is exemplified in “For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further,” which opens the second section of *To Bedlam*:

At first it was private.  
Then it was more than myself;  
it was you, or your house  
or your kitchen. (51)

Sexton successfully sold herself to readers and to magazines, such as *The New Yorker*. Her poetry about therapy suggests a canny knowledge of the “Po-Biz”, and emergent cultural or confessional trends.<sup>72</sup> By maintaining a degree of ambiguity about her own “cracked” autobiographical mirror, Sexton worked with suggestion and intimation in order to create a publicized, published (dis)ordered self: “and sometimes in private, / my kitchen, your kitchen, / my face, your face” (52). Her thematic interest in poetic performance shows the beginnings of what Suzanne Juhasz terms an aesthetics of personal poetry,<sup>73</sup> and which I term Sexton’s poetry of therapy.

### “Said the Poet to the Analyst”

In *How Do We Know Who We Are?: A Biography of the Self*, Arnold Ludwig describes a basic problematic of psychotherapy, in which the patient attempts to overcome the conflict between:

what is true but hard to describe—that is, the pure memory—and what is describable but partly untrue—that is, the screen memory. The very attempt to translate the original memory destroys it because the words, as they are chosen, likely misrepresent the image, and because the translation, no matter how good, replaces the original. (156)

Within Ludwig’s paradigm, the therapist works to recover the original memory behind the “screen memory”. In the *Language of Psychoanalysis*, Laplanche and Pontalis define screen memories in terms of the “sexual experiences or phantasies” from childhood, which they conceal.<sup>74</sup> The patient’s anxiety arises from the parapraxical emergence of the original memory, in the form of slips and symptoms. Karen Horney suggests anxiety may emerge following a revealing interpretation, in which the therapist “uncovers something of which the patient has had to be unaware.”<sup>75</sup> In any case, the therapy session represents a space full of unconscious anxieties. In 1968 Sexton discussed the relationship between her poetry and the unconscious:

Sometimes my doctors tell me that I understand something in a poem that I haven't integrated into my life. In fact, I may be concealing it from myself, while revealing it to the reader. The poetry is much more advanced, in terms of my unconscious than I am. Poetry, after all, milks the unconscious. The unconscious is there to feed it little images, little symbols, the answers and insights I know not of. In therapy, one seeks to hide...<sup>76</sup>

In her review of Middlebrook's biography for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Jacqueline Rose describes Sexton as a "mistress of the 'I' as fiction," for whom the "I" always represents the ultimate persona, or poetic masque.<sup>77</sup> In "Said the Poet to the Analyst" (*Bedlam* 17), Sexton parades the tensions between the autobiography and poetic invention, by inviting the reader to overhear her private terrors as performative confessions ("Lecture 9" 6). In a letter to her psychiatrist, cited by Middlebrook in her biography, Sexton discussed the relationship between her therapy and her poetry:

Of course I KNOW that words are just a counting game, I know this until the words start to arrange themselves and write something better than I would ever know.... I don't really believe the poem, but the name is surely mine so I must belong to the poem.... When you say "words mean nothing" then it means that the real me is nothing. All I am is the trick of words writing themselves. (82)

My reading of "Said the Poet to the Analyst" (*Bedlam* 17) aims to illuminate how the theories of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis shaped Sexton's early poetry. Sexton figures her therapy poem as a triangulated performance, dynamically constructed in the charged space between poet, therapist and reader:

My business is words. Words are like labels,  
or coins, or better, like swarming bees.  
I confess I am only broken by the sources of things;  
as if words were counted like dead bees in the attic,  
unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings.  
I must always forget how one word is able to pick  
out another, to manner another, until I have got  
something I might have said ...  
but did not.

Your business is watching my words. But I  
admit nothing. I work with my best, for instance,  
when I can write my praise for a nickel machine,  
that one night in Nevada: telling how the magic jackpot  
came clacking three bells out, over the lucky screen.  
But if you should say this is something it is not,  
then I grow weak, remembering how my hands felt funny  
and ridiculous and crowded with all  
the believing money. (17)

Sexton's therapy poems were highly performative poetic gambles, attuned to the increasingly valuable currency of the first-person pronoun in the poetry marketplace of their time. In a collection of untitled draft typescripts, Sexton does not include therapy as an explicit theme, concentrating instead on any type of interpretation (literary or analytic). In this series of typed drafts, Sexton types her way through a series of associations, only to arrive at the memory of a "nickle machine" in Reno:<sup>78</sup>

These works I have done  
are less valuable, unwrap them  
and they seem dull, these sense,

These things succeeded,  
worked over and won,  
seem less than a garden weeded,  
necessary, no fun  
unwrap them, each prize  
made only by me.  
O give me the doubtful size  
of magic, nothing to see,  
something to wonder,  
believe in something else,  
solve your surrender  
as the water melts  
into swimmer, grow funny,  
believe what you are not,  
as-  
I remember a nickel machine in Reno,  
at #.)) A.m. and my, 3 beads, jackpot,  
and my hands, ridiculous and crowded,  
with all the believing money.

Fig. 1. Unpublished ts., works, box 7, folder 3, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

Understand. We come from darkness  
and to the dark we still return.  
What beaches we talk looking for  
But we talk, looking for something less  
real than touch. O I turn  
with this dancing blood, my singing  
pulse, like the sound of the banjo sea.

I am tired of all these real things.  
Like how many jewels the clock is chiming,  
like how many points I lose in rhyming,  
or the bodies of wasps in the attic,  
lying on their dry wings,  
or tracking how one word reminds another,  
and manners along until I've got  
something sure, something to know.  
Maybe I only remember  
a nicle machine one night in Reno  
and at 3.00 a.m. three bells rang jackpot  
and my hands, ridiculous and crowded  
with all the believing money.

Today I am tired of counting things,  
like how many hands the clock is chiming  
of how many points do I win for  
for the bodies of the wasps in the attic,  
lying the yellow eyes on their dry wings.  
Today I am- I have forgotten  
how one word manners another  
until I track it down

fjfdkk yellow Joan how are you today am hunky dory  
fjfdid dk djyy huy k ggggggg

Fig. 2. Unpublished ts., works, box 7, folder 3, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.



Today I am tired of counting things  
like all the dead hornets in the attic,  
unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings.

Doctor, today I am tired of counting things,  
like all those dead hornets in the attic,  
unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings.  
Let me forget how one word will pick  
out another, will manner another, until I have got  
something I could have said, but did not.

For instance, I think of a nickle machine  
on night in Reno, Nevada and its jackpot.  
came clicking three bells on its screen.  
And you will say this is something, it is not  
and I will remember how my hands felt funny  
and ridiculous and crowded with all  
the believing money.

Doctor, today I am tired of sounting things,  
as if words were like all those dead hornet in the attic,  
unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings.  
Let me forget how one word will always pick  
out another, will manner another, until I have got  
something I would have said, but did not.

For instance, I think of a nickle machine  
one night in Reno and how the jackpot  
came clacking three bells over its screen.  
And you will say this is something it is not  
and I will remember how my hands felt funny  
and ridiculous and crowded with all  
that belieing money.

Fig. 3. Unpublished ts., works, box 7, folder 3, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

Today I am tired of counting things  
like how many deaths the clock is chiming  
or remembering the dead bodies of hornets  
in the attic, lying on their dry wings  
~~or tracking out the dream~~

Today I have forgotten how one word  
reminds another, manners another  
until I track it out, and prove  
that what I meant before, is not so.  
Let me remember, for instance  
one funny night in Reno  
and at 3:00 A.M. three bells  
spun  
and the bells stopped  
one, two and three  
into a jackpot  
and my hands, ridiculous  
and crowded with all  
the believing money.

#### POET TO HER ANALYST

Today I am tired of counting things  
like how many death the clock is chimed  
or how many points I gain  
for all the dead hornets in the attic,  
waiting the yellow eyes on dry wings  
or even how one word reminds another,  
manners another until I have got  
something I could have said  
but did not.  
Let me remember one thing, simply,  
let it be real, but incidental and funny.  
For instance I think  
of a nickle machine one night in Reno  
and at 2:00 A.M. three bells  
clicked out a jackpot  
and my hands, ridiculous and crowded  
with all the believing money.

*Handwritten notes:*  
The last line  
of the poem  
is the key  
to the whole  
thing.

Fig. 4. Unpublished ts., works, box 7, folder 3, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

Structured around the transactional exchange of “nicles,” Sexton choice of word suggests a scene of the transference exchanges, replete with the psychic costs of treatment.<sup>79</sup> Paying becomes a kind of ‘paying-off’ of a psychological debt. Pertinent to discussions of resistance, the patient realizes over time that although painful, there is greater value in feeling better or becoming well than holding onto a depression. As Sexton “worked over” her poem, in the second draft, headed “Understand. We come from darkness,” she introduced the concept of time (“Like how

many jewels the clock is chiming / like how many points I lose in rhyming”); making the comparison between the points lost “in rhyming” or the writing of the poem itself.<sup>80</sup> By introducing the concept of time, Sexton articulates a scene in which a distracted patient is always watching the meter.<sup>81</sup> The hands of the clock chime like the points that a patient can win in therapy, recalling memories of “the bodies of wasps in the attic / lying on their dry wings.” From her position on the analyst’s couch, that “nicle machine one night in Reno,” represents Sexton’s vision of the therapist’s motivating belief in the time-money paradigm. At the end of her second draft, the themes of time and counting have converged, ushering in the image of “wasps.”

In the third draft, headed “Today I am tired of counting things,” Sexton’s “dead hornets in the attic / unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings,” emerge (as if unconsciously), as unintentional associations in the presence of a Doctor.<sup>82</sup> The dead hornets and wasps register as symbols from the patient’s unconscious. In the *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard suggests that “not only our memories but the things we have forgotten are ‘housed’ [in the mind]. Our soul is an abode. And by remembering ‘houses’ and ‘rooms,’ we learn to ‘abide’ within ourselves.”<sup>83</sup> Bachelard offers the house, its nooks and corners, as an “abode” for daydreams (15). As “sites of our intimate lives,” Bachelard suggests that these houses and memories can be rediscovered through dreams, as sites or spaces which shelter daydreaming (8). The therapeutic space takes on the potentiality of a daydream, in which the therapist’s house or room “protects the [patient] dreamer” (6). The daydream becomes a safe place in which memories hidden in the unconscious can be recalled by the patient. Yet Sexton’s hornets suggest simultaneous potentialities. As memories, the hornets protect Sexton metaphorically, yet the attic in which they are housed represents another closed space, protecting the hornets’ “original value as images” (Bachelard,

*Poetics* 5). The hornets function as a symbolic resistance to the interpretations of the therapist; they act like screen memories, sheltering the original trauma, hiding the primal shame.

On November 14 1961, Sexton discussed with Orne the image of hornets as symbols of “some terrible evil thing” lurking in the unconscious:

And I have used hornets in poems about therapy...they are like a magical poison. I mean, I think that's the way I use them.... They represent to me some terrible evil thing, truth, you know, that's always around, even when everything's all right and they're always getting in at you, and that would be a good symbol for things you've forgotten in your unconscious. And I used it in a poem in my book [*Bedlam*], about words I guess. I don't know how you write poems but, I mean, I might've used other symbols. But I said something about, as though you could pick words apart like dead hornets. But our attic is full of hornets, and often dead hornets, scattered all over the attic ...

Sexton stated that although she used hornets in her poem, the symbol in the attic could be any bug – flies, bees, or wasps. She suggested that the reason she chose hornets is because she is specifically phobic about them.<sup>84</sup> Hornets represent a known fear or trauma defined symptomatically, linguistically, especially when they are located in the attic-space. They are both dead and alive, in the scene of anxiety and “poisonous” unconscious memories. Bachelard points out that in order to reach the attic itself: “we always *go up* the attic stairs, which are steeper and more primitive,” than regular stairs (26). Sexton's anxiety stems from this sense of the primitive, perhaps screening a primal scene. Her feelings of faintness or tiredness enact a kind of vertigo, as she climbs towards the attic, which brings her closer to the memory, echoing Jung's characterization of the attic as symbol for the mind or head (49). The very verticality of the house,

literal and metaphorical, hinges on the “polarity of cellar and attic, the marks of which are so deep”; Sexton climbs, in order not to fall (Bachelard 17).

The fear of interpretation overwhelms the poet, who returns the focus of the poem to the immediate situation of therapy. Sexton’s sudden gambling victory at the conclusion, in which the poet’s hands are “ridiculous and crowded / with all the believing money,” represents an attempt to distract her listener; as if to deny what may lurk behind the imagery of the “dead hornets.” By the fourth draft (headed “Today I am tired of counting things / like how many deaths the clock is chiming”), Sexton has titled her poem “POET TO HER ANYLYIST.” The second half of the draft has now, as in the final version, been entirely distracted by Sexton hitting the jackpot in the Silver (dream) State of Reno, Nevada.

In the published version of “Said the Poet”, anxieties about therapy emerge as questions about the nature of therapeutic work. The analyst’s business is knowable as the productive means of his own survival outside the session, while ensuring his physical attendance at the session itself. In his 1913 paper “On Beginning the Treatment,” Freud states that the two points “of importance at the beginning of the analysis are arrangements about *time* and *money*.”<sup>85</sup> Freud describes the doctor’s fee as a “medium for self-preservation and for obtaining power” (“On Beginning” 131). Money works as a protective mechanism for the therapist; it does a magic job, guaranteeing the analyst’s on-going attendance at sessions, within a ritualized framework. The analyst’s business, the dialogical work that he does with the patient – magically, repeatedly – during the session, constitutes the therapeutic exchange.

Because the analyst is not given voice in Sexton's poem, "Said the Poet" retains its authority as the poet's insight into the therapeutic process. By linking the "business" of language with therapy (through the words that form and inform every therapeutic exchange), Sexton suggests the therapeutic potential of "words." Conversely, Philip McGowan argues that Sexton's poem identifies that disjunction between analytic and poetic language, as reflected in the "gap between what is said to the analyst and what is not, or cannot, be said."<sup>86</sup> I would argue that this gap resonates in Sexton's poem as an anxious yet implicitly therapeutic space, connecting the dream-like language of poetry, and the words exchanged in the therapeutic theatre.

In "Said the Poet," the reader is not merely overhearing a confession but is being offered it as representation. Sexton positions the reader as a kind of interpretative analyst, whose presence at the poet/patient's session situates the poem as a triangulated performance. Sexton's relationship with "words," her "business," invests the analytic scene with a paradoxical complexity. As a patient undergoing treatment, Sexton's resistance is played against the knowledge of her traumatic or depressive knowledge, stored as affect or memory, expressed as "words." As Forrester suggests in *Language and the Origins of Psychoanalysis*, within the therapeutic space, language "*itself*" can become a symptom, as slips of the tongue, dreams and jokes begin to emerge.<sup>87</sup> Sexton's resistance is connected to her consciousness of the therapist's desire to interrogate her images. The poet's words, "like swarming bees" or "coins," burst from the "nickel machine" of unconscious thought. As McGowan argues, the presence of the slot machine suggests "an experience with language overflowing with suggestive import, fertile territory for a psychoanalytic unveiling of the hidden, unconscious meanings of a subject's words" (21). While wanting the analyst to protect her from her unconscious, the poet senses that she must protect herself symbolically from the analyst's interpretations. The threat is the analyst's analytic mode,

the analyst's "business" of interpretation. By getting closer to the sources of things, the memory attached to the poet's words becomes "unbuckled" through interpretation. The "yellow eyes" and "dry wings" fall to the attic floor; the poet's "swarming bees" transform into affectless, "dead" currency (Blasing 194).

On the tape recorded on April 21 1962, Sexton brings up the idea of paying more for therapy. Initially, her talk concerns having mastered a poem which had been troubling her: "I feel better because I've mastered my unconscious ... any time I write a poem, I've mastered my unconscious, even though the poem is very depressing." Sexton mentions paying more for treatment in order "to make up for the lack of me." This sense of a lack of self is mirrored in Juliet Mitchell's notion of absence (via André Green), as a precondition for fantasy:

that simple but extraordinary bewilderment of childhood that the world is there without us. Someone or something gives a place in that world. They see me, therefore I exist; I close my eyes and you can't see me; this is the earliest version of the peek-a-boo game of the very small child—you cannot see me, because I cannot see the world.<sup>88</sup>

The idea of paying more is a two-sided coin, expressing the desire to become more visible to the one who gives the patient a sense of existence: the analyst sees me, "therefore I exist." It could mean that the exchanged coin, as McGowan suggests, becomes a "symbol of the debt that one person owes to another," functioning as a "substitute for verbal communication" (20). Freud's comments on the subject are illuminating. He parenthetically mentions that the "value of the treatment is not enhanced in the patient's eyes if a very low fee is asked" ("On Beginning" 131). When Sexton says to Dr Orne that she's "not cheap," although she wants to emphasize her

difference from Orne's other patients (as the patient who pays more), she also articulates questions around the cost of becoming well (21 Apr. 1962).

By associating her "coins" with buzzing "words" in the air, which sound hollow like the "clacking bells," Sexton suggests that the patient must be able to afford the potential pain involved in getting well.<sup>89</sup> By wanting to be able to afford her sessions, the patient must be able to accept the psychic debt, the potential anxiety and the belief in treatment that must all be paid into her therapeutic account. In "Said the Poet," money lingers in the air like the bargaining stage. Sexton crowds out her bees with coins, returning the focus of the session to the immediate situation of therapy. By admitting "nothing" Sexton replaces her thoughts about therapy with what Juliet Mitchell terms "unsymbolizable absence" ("Trauma" 130), with self-protective "words," which she hides behind.

Sexton's "words" change in proximity to "the believing money," which is present as another kind of protective, transactional knowledge. Sexton suggests that if the words that comprise the exchange are only labels for the source of things, consequently, what she does not say becomes valuable. She has displaced her interest away from herself, onto the therapist – according to Freud, the possible early beginnings of an "effective transference" ("On Beginning" 139) – and begun to question his motivation for attending the session. Because of her anxiety, Sexton perceives the analyst's motivation in relation to money, rendering therapeutic intent incidental to attendance. As far as the poet is concerned, she has a specific fantasy about money, encapsulated in her "praise for a nickel machine / that one night in Nevada." Sexton's paranoia relates to the analyst's (or reader's) interpretations of her words, her fear that in telling of the magic jackpot, she should find that the bells on the "lucky screen" are dead bees after all.



Anxious to avoid interpretation, the poet creates a diversion by refocusing the second stanza of her poem on the therapeutic scene as a location of gambling. The poet crowds her hands with “believing money” in order to distract her listener from any insight into her dead bees. She bets that this distraction will be enough to protect her conscious (and unconscious) symbols. In *Revenge of the Crystal*, Baudrillard argues that “the effects of obscenity and seduction” are merged through the locus of gambling.<sup>90</sup> He describes how obscenity and the “illusion of value” are “resolved in games for money,” in which the “ecstasy and the disappearance of value” occur simultaneously (184). To quote Baudrillard, “in gambling, money is neither produced nor destroyed, but disappears as value and re-emerges as appearance, restored to its pure appearance through the instantaneous reversibility of winning and losing” (184). Sexton fears being told that “this is something it is not,” that the nickel machine could disappear, only to re-appear symbolically as the therapy machine into which Sexton places her word-coins. Because the poet gambles with imagery and words, the money she plays with is unadorned, and transforms into “pure circulation, into pure fascination, into an absolute passion.” Her gambling becomes like Baudrillard’s ecstatic form of value, implying an erotic component to the source memory (184). Sexton fears that her language selection will be disturbed and perhaps de-eroticized, through an accommodation of the analyst’s clinical interpretations.<sup>91</sup>

Karen Horney suggests that in dreams, symbols for the “analytic situation may be a school, a laundry, a basement, an evacuation.”<sup>92</sup> The ‘Westinghouse Laundromat Automatic Washer’ advertised in *Look* (1962) suggests a dream-like scene in which the suburban housewife (apron, high heels, bouffant) perpetually wins at the washing machine, her magic domestic jackpot. In *Radical Artifice*, Marjorie Perloff suggests that, “In the 1962 Westinghouse ad, text is minimal, the ejaculatory image of coins flying out of the washer (using a Westinghouse ‘pays







In Ginsberg's "Song of the Washing Machine," from *Death & Fame: Last Poems* (1999), the poet asks whether the "Burned out Burned out Burned out" housebound washing machine (and the body that works "for a house," as an extension of its appliances), suggests both the personal "account" of the self and the tax of the personal, within the domestic space:

Burned out Burned out Burned out  
We're not burned out We're not burned out  
for a house for a house for a house for a house  
Bathroom Bathroom Bathroom Bathroom  
At home At home At home At home  
We're not burned out We're not burned out  
Fair enough fair enough fair enough  
Can you account for yourself account for yourself  
Better not better not better not better not<sup>95</sup>

Washing is like the dream of the therapy session. In Sexton's scene of washing and gambling, the poet's account of herself is not only dependent on the "fair enough" interpretations of an analyst, or a 'good enough' fit between the "not burned out" patient and doctor. As a gamble, it implies an element of luck, in terms of the possible types of pleasurable and painful (positive or negative) transference that could emerge. In *Cassandra's Daughter: A History of Psychoanalysis in Europe and America*, Joseph Schwartz defines transference re-enactments as "new editions of old experiences ... accompanied by affect, mood and feeling."<sup>96</sup> Sexton's anxiety about money and the analyst may suggest something about the nature of her "old experiences." The swinging door of therapy hinges on the patient's capacity to overcome or win "better" over her own resistance.

Sexton gives money its full paradoxical significance in "Said the Poet." Her (in)ability to forget the transactional nature of the exchange, becomes her poetically manifest resistance. Yet Sexton's imagery betrays her belief in the therapeutic experience. By putting her coins into the therapy machine, Sexton suggests that there are gains to be made; her fantasy of hitting the jackpot represents her desire to win in treatment, in the form of a fantasized, curative windfall. The ridiculous feeling the poet experiences after this imagined win, implies that these gains are not monetary but psychological. It also hints at a fear of winning as a marker of the end to treatment, which could potentially represent an end of the self as ill or depressed. As McGowan argues, the analyst represents a substantive threat to Sexton's poetic identity, as it is linked to her depression, her tangle of "symbolic and metaphorical" freight (20). The "ridiculous" feeling of all the "believing money" registers as a symbol without specific meaning attached, like a mirror without a reflection. Yet it also represents a gesture towards the desire to get well. Sexton realizes and admits that in order for therapy to work, she must forget her "business," which is her intimacy with language. The "words" she must forget suggest a displacement of language within the therapeutic paradigm, and a simultaneous reconstitution of her own, personal language. Sexton intimates that within the therapeutic situation, words are only labels for feelings or affective states, which can easily be mislabeled. Anxiety about confession as the effect of a constraining power, in the Foucauldian sense, informs Sexton's work as a kind of deferral of insight, the patient's resistance to recuperative help. Nevertheless, the image of the jackpot suggests a positive transference to her therapist, the patient's need for her "words" to be "unbuckled." The jackpot represents Sexton's desire to invest belief in the therapist's interpretations, rather than simply growing weak in any moment of insight or analysis.

Sexton recounted two dreams to Dr Orne on July 29 1961. The first dream began with Marilyn Monroe, who she thought had “better have analysis”:

There seems to be this blonde girl, who symbolizes something to me ... I determined that she ought to go into therapy, I told her, you’d better have analysis ... and I thought she was Marilyn Monroe, and she said something, I don’t know how to spell or something, and then I knew she really wasn’t Marilyn Monroe.

The substitutive figure of Monroe as the patient in analysis dissolves, and is replaced by Sexton in the second dream. The poet imagines throwing her pocketbook down a well or a “small area of water,” seeing “all my money, all my charge-cards underwater,” and thinking: “I’ve got to get that money.”<sup>97</sup> As Karen Horney writes, in dreams there are “many symbols for the analytic situation that reveal the way in which the patient experiences it—e.g., as digging a tunnel, fishing, washing linen, painting a house, etc.” (223). In Sexton’s dream, the analytic situation incorporates a tunnel, a scene of fishing and washing simultaneously. She recalls promising a boy a dollar if he fishes out her money. Once the money reappeared, and while it was drying out, Sexton recalls that it didn’t look like “real money” anymore but more like “play money.”<sup>98</sup> At one point during the session, Sexton comments to Orne that maybe she was thinking that what she gives him “isn’t real money,” but magic coins. Money, as value or currency, disappears, only to reappear, as if magically transformed. In her therapy poem, Sexton needs to know that her analyst is not there to merely crowd his own hands with her money, that he is not part of the club of analysts.<sup>99</sup> Her coins believe. Like her words, she hands them over, but to get safely to the memory itself, she hopes to find her own belief mirrored in the (potentially frustrating silence of the)<sup>100</sup> analyst. In “Said the Poet,” the value of money disappears in order for Sexton’s poetic gambles to become spaces of play. The space of the well, a tunnel or void in the ground (the inverse of the attic), can be interpreted as a therapeutic space into which real money disappears, only to reappear as play

money or the money of therapeutic play in the dream-like state of therapy. It is play money that is put on the table in Sexton's therapy poems.

Baudrillard suggests that the "secret of gambling ... is that money doesn't exist" (184). Sexton's gamble restores money to non-existence: at the poem's conclusion money "exists neither as essence, nor as substance, nor as value" (Baudrillard 184). Sexton unlocks the therapy poem as a gamble for a poetics of self. By reducing money to appearance, Sexton is able to begin to work in therapy, and on her poetry. In her biography, Middlebrook recounts a story from Sexton's early marriage, in which she "withdrew all her savings from the bank and equipped herself with five hundred silver dollars to feed the slot machines at Harrah's Club in Reno, hoping for a jackpot that would win them a home of their own" (27). In "The Lost Ingredient," her poem about driving through Atlantic City and on to the casinos of Reno, Sexton writes of the "funny salt" which "itched in my pores and stung like bees or sleet" (*Bedlam* 42). The word salt is synonymous with "money or even lust," as words that cause an indefinable itch. Reno, the "Biggest Little City in the World," becomes the place where the poet goes to wash off the salt, hurrying "to steal / a better proof of tables where I always lost." Reno assumes the therapeutic potential of the poetic gamble, as a space where the poet is cleansed; and as the site where Sexton plays the tables, the same way she plays with word-coins in therapy. Following Baudrillard, because gambling "doesn't involve consumption or expenditure," the will to gamble, implies a passionate *dis*-belief in money and its value (185). Sexton's poem suggests a similar belief in the curative and cleansing rituals around money, and therapeutic play. Discussing "The Lost Ingredient" (*Bedlam* 42) in her session on 9 May 1961, Sexton revealed that she really did win money in Reno, reinscribing the space of loss as a winning site:

Later the funny salt  
itched in my pores and stung like bees or sleet.  
I rinsed it off in Reno and hurried to steal  
a better proof at tables where I always lost.  
  
Today is made of yesterday, each time I steal  
toward rites I do not know, waiting for the lost  
ingredient, as if salt or money or even lust  
would keep us calm and prove us whole at last. (42)

The therapy poem for Sexton is a rite imbued with unknowns. The today of the session or of the table, is constructed from the past, “made of yesterday.” It represents the desire to interrogate the unconscious memory, that “lost / ingredient,” to “steal / toward” a poetics of self. While money talks, anxiety shouts louder in “Said the Poet to the Analyst.” For therapy to work, its value as a transaction must disappear, only to reappear as the exchange of language and meaning. Sexton implies that her best work is not the therapy of the couch but the poem; and moreover, those poems that will “pay the bills” (Blasing 187). Sexton’s therapy poem represents a working-through of the poet’s discursive resistance to treatment.<sup>101</sup> Sexton’s *Bedlam* poem signals the beginning of a therapeutic narrative arc which runs through her first three books, and which form the focus of this thesis. It is not the work of this thesis to address the curative benefits of writing poetry. As Mutlu Konuk Blasing argues:

[T]here seems to be two kinds of “language,” the language of illness and that of the cure....Poetry comprises both languages, but at the level of the word, therapeutic discourse and poetic language are essentially at odds. The curative

project would stabilize the subject and her story-history, while the poetic project works against reference and stability at the level of the signifier. Sexton's confessional work is shaped by the conflict between the therapeutic project of ego stabilization and the poetic practice that destabilizes an ego; her poetry registers the conflicting claims of the referential and material axes of language on the patient-poet. (179)

In her first book, Sexton examines the experience of madness and the site of the asylum, through the formalized "language of illness," as a gesture towards recovery; it is a therapeutic project only by design. As Rose Lucas suggests, Sexton textually "strives to heal wounds as well as to identify them" (2009 47). In *Bedlam*, Sexton represents the beginnings of therapeutic treatment with a critical eye; her confessional work questions the very possibility of cure or "ego stabilization" as a likely outcome. In *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), Sexton's attention turns to the psychoanalytic causes of disturbance, through the process of mourning the loss of both her parents. And finally, in *Live or Die* (1966), Sexton meditates on the life of the poet in the suburbs. Her therapeutic trilogy culminates in the desire to write, as the desire to live, offering to her readers what Rose Lucas terms the "complex gift" of the personal poem (2009 45):

So I won't hang around in my hospital shift,  
repeating The Black Mass and all of it.  
I say *Live, Live* because of the sun,  
the dream, the excitable gift. (90)

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<sup>1</sup> Material from the tapes is used with permission from the Estate of Anne Sexton. Any reference to the tapes refers to my own notes, based on the research trips I conducted in 2006 and in 2008. If I reference Diane Middlebrook's transcripts of the tapes, this will be stated explicitly.



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<sup>2</sup> Anne Sexton's first three books, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1961), *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), and *Live or Die* (1966), were published in Boston, by Houghton Mifflin.

<sup>3</sup> Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1992): xxii.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Sexton, *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, ed. Linda Gray Sexton (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1991): 95.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Sexton, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* (Boston: Little Brown, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996): 2.

<sup>7</sup> I've borrowed this term from Kate Moses's description of archival recordings of Sylvia Plath's voice: "Such a tuning of the ear involves both public and private orientations. Published tapes offer a 'public tuning' of a voice recorded; but listening to the spoken word that performance evokes also involves intersubjective dimensions. As a more intimate record, the spaces of close listening have also been described as a kind of 'holding environment' between persons and poems" (91). See Moses's "Sylvia Plath's Voice, Annotated", in *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*, edited by Anita Helle (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P): 89-120.

<sup>8</sup> I had hoped to avoid a particular tape in which Sexton recounts her sexual abuse of her daughter, Linda Sexton. It seems that listening to this particular tape was a traumatic experience for the library's cataloguer too. As it turned out, the archivist had recorded this tape twice, both on the CD with the correct date labelled and on the preceding CD for the previous session.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Sexton, therapy tape, recorded on 13 January 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University. The Anne Sexton Papers are a restricted collection. Access to the tapes was made possible by Linda Gray Sexton, as Executor of Anne Sexton's Estate.

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<sup>10</sup> This procedure was experimental for its time. As Orne stated during Sexton's therapy, in his view, Boston of the 1960s was the "most conservative city for psychiatry in the country" (Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 24 Dec. 1963, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

<sup>11</sup> Middlebrook, "Psychotherapy as Theme and Influence in the Work of Anne Sexton," *Psychotherapy* 29.3 (Fall 1992): 403.

<sup>12</sup> "Anne Sexton's Treatment, Part I," *The Creative Mystique: From Red Shoes Frenzy to Love and Creativity* (New York: Routledge, 1996): 183.

<sup>13</sup> Sexton's experience bears a striking resemblance to the plot of *The Snake Pit* (dir. Anatole Litvak, 1948), starring Olivia de Havilland in the lead role. Middlebrook's account reveals how Sexton ended-up having long-term psychotherapeutic treatment: "Dr. Brunner-Orne prescribed vitamins and various psychoactive medications and discharged her [from Westwood]... during Dr. Brunner-Orne's vacation, Sexton was seen by her son, Dr. Martin Orne, whom she knew and liked (he had administered the battery of diagnostic tests at Westwood Lodge). She got on so well with him that she continued to see him after Dr. Brunner-Orne returned, and Dr. Orne continued as her psychiatrist for the next eight years." Several months later, following another suicide attempt, Sexton was admitted at Glenside (1992): 34.

<sup>14</sup> Eugene Garfield, "Psychiatrist and Biographer Differ over Anne Sexton's Suicide. Was It Preventable or Inevitable?" *Current Contents* 11 (16 Mar. 1992): 5-13. In *The New York Times* (9 Aug. 1991) Howard Kibel M.D., Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Cornell University, argued, "Confidentiality is not a privilege of the patient. It is a duty of the psychotherapist." In the same issue, Victor Bloom M.D., Clinical Assoc. Prof. of Psychiatry at Wayne State University School of Medicine, argued that as a "psychiatrist, psychotherapist and psychoanalyst," having read the book and the letters in the *Times*, it was clear to him that "disclosure was Anne Sexton's wish, and that it was right to carry it out."

<sup>15</sup> Paul Roazen, "Privacy and Therapy," *Society* 29.2 (Jan./Feb. 1992) 15.

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<sup>16</sup> These scrapbooks have been featured in Jessica Helfand's *Scrapbooks: An American History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> In her session on 7 Mar. 1961 (Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger), Sexton makes the vague statement that if Orne has the tapes, she doesn't care what he does with them. Sexton treats matters relating to the tapes in terms of posterity, her own, and Orne's. In the same session, she comments that she doesn't want the tapes to disappear, any more than she wants her poems to disappear.

<sup>18</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 30 Nov. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>19</sup> Mutlu Konuk Blasing, "Anne Sexton, 'The Typo,'" *Lyric Poetry: the Pain and the Pleasure of Words* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006): 188.

<sup>20</sup> Diane Middlebrook, "Postmodernism and the Biographer," *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography, and Gender*, ed. Susan Bell and Marilyn Yalom (Albany: SUNY P, 1990): 156.

<sup>21</sup> Middlebrook, "Spinning Straw into Gold," *The Literary Biography: Problems and Solutions*, ed. Dale Salwak (Iowa City: U of Iowa P): 86.

<sup>22</sup> Middlebrook, "Telling Secrets," *The Seductions of Biography*, ed. Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff (New York: Routledge, 1996): 127.

<sup>23</sup> Her description of her first meeting at the office of a literary agent in New York to sign her contracts has all the glamour of the outset of a high-powered, city career. So high-powered was this situation that, Middlebrook writes, she felt compelled to ask: "Do you think I need an agent?" to which the literary agent ("amused" by her query), replied: "Well, no. What you have signed is a good contract for an English professor. But when you have finished the book, you will be a biographer. Then you will need an agent" (1990 156).

<sup>24</sup> Middlebrook speculated that Sexton waited to kill herself until Linda was twenty-one, so that her daughter could "immediately" step into the role of executor of her will (1996 125).

<sup>25</sup> In "The Silent Woman," Janet Malcolm, writing about her own experience of writing biography, identifies the essential problem of that art as "the problem of how to write about people who can no

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longer change their contemporaries' perception of them, who are discovered frozen in certain unnatural or unpleasant attitudes, like characters in tableaux vivants or people in snapshots with their mouths open" (*New Yorker* 3 Aug. 1993: 111).

<sup>26</sup> Prior to the publication of the Sexton biography, as Samuel Hughes points out in his article "The Sexton Tapes" for *The Pennsylvania Gazette* (Dec. 1991), Orne was "best known to the general public as an expert witness for Patricia Hearst and for his pivotal testimony that led to the Hillside Strangler pleading guilty." Orne's obituary (May/June 2000) in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* – the university magazine, where Orne was Director of the Unit for Experimental Psychiatry at the Institute of Pennsylvania Hospital – describes his latter-day celebrity in these two cases: "An expert witness in legal cases involving coercion and memory distortion, Orne was one of four defense psychiatrists who examined kidnapped heiress Patty Hearst during her trial for bank robbery. He remained convinced of her innocence and more recently urged that she be pardoned. His involvement as an expert for the prosecution in the case of Kenneth Bianchi, who was convicted in the torture and murder of young women in the hillside strangler serial murders of the 1970s, was featured in the Emmy-award winning documentary by the British Broadcasting Corporation, *Mind of a Murderer* [*The Case of the Hillside Strangler*]."

<sup>27</sup> Edmund Pellegrino, "Secrets of the Couch and the Grave: The Anne Sexton Case," *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, ed. Stephen Lammers and Allen Verhey (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998): 874. A more complete version of Pellegrino's argument follows: "There is little or no evidence that intimate knowledge of another person's psychosocial and sexual torments are, in themselves, therapeutic or prophylactic for others similarly afflicted. Because the outcome in this case was suicide, harm might just as arguably occur." As Dr Alan Stone (quoted in Hughes' article, "The Sexton Tapes") points out, the 1960's was not a time in the history of therapy in the United States when such verbal contracts between doctor and patient necessarily resulted in written documentation.

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<sup>28</sup> The complaint to the Ethics Committee was ultimately withdrawn. See: Rosenbaum's discussion in his article, "The Travails of Martin Orne: On Privacy, Public Disclosure, and Confidentiality in Psychotherapy," *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* 24.3 (1994): 159-67.

<sup>29</sup> Ken Hausman, "Psychiatrist Criticized Over Release of Poet's Psychotherapy Tapes," *The Psychiatric News* 6 Sept. 1991. Paul Roazen similarly questions Sexton's "mental competence" to authorize the release of such tapes (*Society* 14).

<sup>30</sup> "The Grave's a Fine and Private Place," William Strong; "The Anne Sexton Controversy," Barbara Lewin; "Sexton's Daughter, Biographer and Psychiatrist," Vern Bullough; "Privacy and Therapy," Paul Roazen; "The Silence of the Tapes," Jerome Kroll; "The (H)orne of a Dilemma," Mary Gergen; "Breaching Confidentiality," Moisy Shopper, and "Confidentiality and Privacy," Frances Degen Horowitz, from a special section on "Privacy, Professionalism and Psychiatry," in *Society* 29.2 (Jan./Feb. 1992): 5-29.

<sup>31</sup> Jerome Kroll takes this one step further when he writes that "compliance with a patient's self-destructive demands is no more part of therapy than handing a razor blade to a patient as a bargained substitute for suicide would be an acceptable modification of therapy." (19) In her article, "Listening at the Keyhole: The Anne Sexton Tapes" (*Journal of The American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 20.4 1992: 645-53), Judith Viorst raises a similar concern: "When [Orne] says that privacy was of no concern to [Sexton] ... isn't he describing a symptom that should have been addressed? And can't a doctor display his profound respect for the wishes of a patient by analysing, rather than granting, them?" (648-49).

<sup>32</sup> Hausman writes that the fact alone that Orne "taped therapy sessions with Sexton at all has raised some psychiatric eyebrows."

<sup>33</sup> Kroll expands on the value of the Sexton tapes as an historical document: "Similarly, the field of history is dependent upon as full and rich a documentation as possible. Who would gainsay the value of original sources? Who would not love to have tape recordings of a conversation between Abélard and Héloïse, or Napoleon and Josephine, or Mikhail and Raisa, or of Freud's actual sessions?" (19).

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Goldstein ("Psychiatric Poetic License? Post-Mortem Disclosure of Confidential Information in the Anne Sexton Case," *Contemporary Psychiatry* 22.6 June 1992) writes, "Sexton's psychiatrist is absolutely correct when he asserts that the control of privacy and confidentiality lies with the patient" (343). He questions the dubious validity (in light of the transference), of an oral waiver "proffered by a patient to her psychiatrist while still in psychiatric treatment."

<sup>35</sup> John Freund, Letter, "The Poet's Art Mined the Patient's Anguish," *New York Times* 26 July 1991.

<sup>36</sup> Kavalier-Adler, *Creative Mystique* 186.

<sup>37</sup> Middlebrook notes: "During the years that Anne Sexton was making herself into a poet, her psychiatric illnesses also generated numerous records. Linda Sexton helped me acquire hospital records, and also permitted me to use a unique resource, audiotapes of over three hundred psychotherapy sessions with Dr. Martin Orne, Sexton's principal psychiatrist from 1956 to 1964" (1992 xxii).

<sup>38</sup> In his *Wall Street Journal* article, Raymond Sokolov suggests the "very strongest argument for the full and free use of the tapes is that they illuminate the work of an important poet" ("Shushing the Dead and the Dying," 21 Aug. 1991).

<sup>39</sup> Katha Pollit, "The Death is not the Life," *New York Times* 18 Aug. 1991.

<sup>40</sup> Maxine Kumin, Letter to the Pennsylvania Psychiatric Ethics Committee, 5 Aug. 1992. Cited in Rosenbaum, 1991.

<sup>41</sup> Rachel Hare-Mustin, "Cries and Whispers: The Psychotherapy of Anne Sexton," *Psychotherapy* 29:3 (Fall 1992): 406.

<sup>42</sup> Lisa Taylor Tompson and Mary Gray Ford, Letter, *New York Times* 25 Aug. 1991. The sisters commented, "Some families, confronted with a child like Anne, would have turned her over to state agencies for warehousing. Our family chose to accept responsibility for one of our own."

<sup>43</sup> Erica Liederman, "From Behind the Bedlam," *San Francisco Review of Books* (November-December, 1993): 31-33.

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<sup>44</sup> Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes* (London: Granta Books, 2005): 8-9.

<sup>45</sup> David Gelman and Farai Chideya, "Secrets of the Couch," *Newsweek* 29 July 1991.

<sup>46</sup> Although Middlebrook acknowledges that the matter was under deliberation, the Sexton papers were originally sold to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in September 1980: "The issues under deliberation were movie rights, period of exclusivity of access to unpublished material, relationship of the subject's family to the finished manuscript, and other details pertaining to ownership" ("Postmodernism and the Biographer," *Revealing Lives*, 155). The closest thing to an on-screen depiction of Sexton was Annette Bening's performance in *Running With Scissors* (2006), based on the memoir by Augusten Burroughs, in which Bening plays Deirdre Burroughs, an Anne Sexton aspirant.

<sup>47</sup> Daphne Merkin, "The Good Daughter," rev. of *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton*, by Linda Gray Sexton, *New Yorker* 31 Oct. 1994: 108-13.

<sup>48</sup> Middlebrook, "Anne Sexton: The Making of 'The Awful Rowing Toward God,' from *Rossetti to Sexton: Six Women Poets at Texas*, ed. Dave Oliphant, HRHRC, U of Texas at Austin): 224.

<sup>49</sup> Sexton, therapy tapes, rec. 4 Apr. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>50</sup> Maxine Kumin, Foreword, "How It Was: Maxine Kumin on Anne Sexton," *Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems*, 1981, ed. Linda Gray Sexton (New York: First Mariner-Houghton Mifflin, 1999): xxvii.

<sup>51</sup> D. W. Winnicott, "Playing: Creative Activity and the Search for the Self," *Playing and Reality* (1971; London: Routledge, 2005): 73.

<sup>52</sup> David Kamp, "Rethinking the American Dream," *Vanity Fair* (April 2009): 140.

<sup>53</sup> Diane Middlebrook, "What Was Confessional Poetry?" *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, ed. Jay Parini (New York: Columbia UP, 1993): 636. Lowell's phrase is cited by Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux in her chapter on "Ekphrasis in conversation: Anne Sexton and W.D. Snodgrass on Van Gogh," *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008): 109.

<sup>54</sup> Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999): 147.

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<sup>55</sup> Middlebrook further discusses the new presence of television technology in American homes, and the way in which its programs attempted to reflect the happy domestic sphere: “Programs that gained mass audiences were frequently comic representations of the vicissitudes of family life: ‘The Honeymooners,’ ‘I Love Lucy,’ ‘Father Knows Best.’ Their plots deployed extreme stereotypes of the American Mom against whom men struggled to maintain control and assert authority in the home” (“What Was Confessional Poetry?”): 647. Sexton described herself using television as a kind of “empty” nightly “narcotic” (Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 25 Nov. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

<sup>56</sup> Christopher Beach, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, suggests that the formal organization of Sexton’s earlier work presents the reader visually with that sense of “confinement or enforced order from which the speaker is trying to escape,” within the suburban home *Poetry* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2003): 162. Sexton privately echoed this view, when she remarked to her therapist (Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 13 July 1963, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger), that unlike the Beatnik poets who “splatter” violence everywhere in their poems, like wild animals, her poetry is “much more violent when it’s in bars,” locked into the cage of form.

<sup>57</sup> Sexton, “Lecture 1,” works, box 16, folder 5, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas, at Austin, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Arnold Ludwig, “Psychoanalyzing Freud,” *How Do We Know Who We Are? : A Biography of the Self* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997): 161.

<sup>59</sup> Rose Lucas, “Gifts of Love, Gifts of Poison: Anne Sexton and the Poetry of Intimate Exchange,” *Life Writing* 6.1 (Apr. 2009): 45.

<sup>60</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 18 Jan. 1962, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>61</sup> According to Kumin, there was a time when “it seemed that psychiatrists all over the country were referring their patients to Anne’s work, as if it could provide the balm in Gilead for every troubled person” (Foreword, *Complete* xxvi).



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<sup>62</sup> As Middlebrook noted in her transcripts for 16 Jan. 1962, "There's a radio in the room!"

<sup>63</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 12 May 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>64</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 2 May 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger. Discussing her original impulse to write, Sexton remarks to Orne that he gave her "a reason to live" when he said that her poems "would mean something to someone, [that] this would help someone. Your sickness, if expressed, would help someone. Well, this is a marvellous way of pushing against the impulse to destroy yourself if you really think that you are worthless.... But even my worthlessness would be of some use to someone. You know, would mean something."

<sup>65</sup> Adam Kirsch, Introduction to *The Wounded Surgeon* (New York: Norton, 2005): x. Kirsch's discussion of Plath's poetics is also interesting in relation to Sexton (235) who, like Plath, made significant use of that "venerable literary technique—the unreliable narrator" (263). See his discussion of the Plath "myth" (237).

<sup>66</sup> Interview with William Packard, "Craft Interview with Anne Sexton," *New York Quarterly* 3 (Summer 1970) 8-12, rpt. in *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978): 43-48.

<sup>67</sup> Sexton, "Lecture Nine," works, box 16, folder 5, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC, 5.

<sup>68</sup> In the year following Sexton's death, Kumin immortalized this process in a commemorative poem: "I'm still / talking to you, we'll split the phone bill, / it's expensive, calling from the other side ..."  
("How It Is," *New Yorker* 3 Mar. 1975: 38).

<sup>69</sup> In a letter to friend Anne Clarke, Sexton describes her love of bookshops and "buying" binges: "God! I do love bookshops. I went on a buying binge. I now own: *The Exploration of the Inner World*, a study of mental disorder and religious experience; *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir; *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis; Paul and Mary, two case histories by Bruno Bettelheim; *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters; *Notebooks 1935-1942* by Albert Camus; *Young Man Luther* by Erik Erikson; *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller; Stanislavsky on the Art of the Stage; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*

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by Edward Albee; *The Member of the Wedding* by Carson McCullers; *The Inferno* by Dante; *A Season in Hell* by Arthur Rimbaud; *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti* by Milton Rokeach; and *The Crackup* by F.S. Fitzgerald ... How's that. (In case you wonder what I'm reading) ..." (*Letters* 232-33)

<sup>70</sup> Sexton continues: "But I remember once a long time ago a poem called 'Cripples and Other Stories.' I showed it to my psychoanalyst—it was half—and I threw it in the wastebasket. Very unusual because I usually put them away forever. But this was in the wastebasket. I said, would you by any chance be interested in what's in the wastebasket? And she said, wait a minute Anne. You could make a real poem out of that." Interview. "With Maxine Kumin, Elaine Showalter, and Carol Smith." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4 (1976), rpt. in *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews and Prose*, ed. Steven Colburn (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1985): 169-70.

<sup>71</sup> Telephone interview with the students at Stephens College, 13 Apr. 1964, "Anne Sexton," *Talks with Authors*, ed. Charles F. Madden (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1968): 161.

<sup>72</sup> In her biography, Middlebrook frequently admires her subject's pragmatic approach to her self-described vocation as a poet (72). In her chapter on the Texas archive in *Rossetti to Sexton*, Middlebrook details the thoroughness of Sexton's house-keeping rituals, including her "voluminous unpublished business correspondence which provides a detailed view of the economics of her career" (224).

<sup>73</sup> Suzanne Juhasz, "Seeking the Exit or the Home: Poetry and Salvation in the Career of Anne Sexton," *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979): 263.

<sup>74</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973): 410-11.

<sup>75</sup> Karen Horney, *The Therapeutic Process: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Bernard J. Paris (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999): 212.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Barbara Kevles, "The Art of Poetry: Anne Sexton" (McClatchy): 5.

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<sup>77</sup> Jacqueline Rose, "Faking it up with the truth": Anne Sexton," rev. of *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, by Diane Middlebrook, *Times Literary Supplement* 1 Nov. (1991), rpt. in *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (London: Vintage, 2004): 23.

<sup>78</sup> Sexton, "These works I have done," works, box 7, folder 3, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC. I came across a number of early "therapy" poems at the Schlesinger Library which, although they were not strictly speaking drafts for "Said the Poet," certainly gestured in its direction. One of which is, "One Way of Avoiding the Issue" (11 Feb. 1957):

Tentatively I sacrifice  
my symptoms, one by one.  
So I may keep all my neurosis  
intact and still undone.

<sup>79</sup> Sexton referred to her admission price into the therapeutic theatre as her "nickel" (Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 25 July 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

<sup>80</sup> Sexton, "Understand. We come from darkness," works, box 7, folder 3, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

<sup>81</sup> During her session rec. 14 Nov. 1963, Sexton discussed the distraction of the 'running meter' or "nickel" machine, and how, as a talking point in therapy, it can prevent therapeutic work from being accomplished.

<sup>82</sup> Sexton, "Today I am tired of counting things / like all the dead hornets in the attic," works, box 7, folder 3, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

<sup>83</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (1958; Boston: Beacon Press, 1994): xxxvii.

<sup>84</sup> One month earlier, Sexton described a dream in which hornets filled a room, associating their "stinging" strings with birthday ribbon. Sexton took this association further, relating the sting to the mike of the tape recorder (rec. 14 Oct. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

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- <sup>85</sup> Sigmund Freud, "On Beginning the Treatment (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psychoanalysis I)" 1913, *Volume XII (1911-1913): The Case of Schreber Papers on Technique and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth P and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1958): 126.
- <sup>86</sup> Philip McGowan, "First Collections," *Anne Sexton and Middle Generation Poetry: The Geography of Grief* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2004): 18.
- <sup>87</sup> John Forrester, *Language and the Origins of Psychoanalysis* (London: Macmillan, 1980): 137.
- <sup>88</sup> Juliet Mitchell, "Trauma, Recognition, and the Place of Language," *Diacritics* 28.4 (1998): 122.
- <sup>89</sup> In her session on 25 July 1961, Sexton explicitly associates resistance with not being able to afford to go through the pain of becoming well.
- <sup>90</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Figures of the Transpolitical," *Revenge of the Crystal: Selected writings on the modern object and its destiny, 1968-1983*, ed. and trans. Paul Foss and Julian Pefanis (Leichhardt, N.S.W: Pluto Press, 1990): 184.
- <sup>91</sup> See: Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," *Studies on Child Language and Aphasia* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971): 51-52.
- <sup>92</sup> Horney (1999) also comments that symbols for the "analytic situation" may also take the form of "espionage, kidnapping, being exposed and attacked" (227).
- <sup>93</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "Against Transparency," *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991): 67.
- <sup>94</sup> *Mad Men*, "Indian Summer," dir. Tim Hunter, writ. Tom Palmer and Matthew Weiner, perf. Jon Hamm, Elizabeth Moss, Vincent Kartheiser, January Jones, Christina Hendricks and Bryan Batt, AMC, 4 Oct. 2007.
- <sup>95</sup> Allen Ginsberg, "Song of the Washing Machine," *Death & Fame: Last Poems* (London: Penguin, 1999): 63. In an interview for the *Paris Review*, Sexton mentioned that she liked Ginsberg "very much," except when, referring to his maternal elegy "Kaddish," he "writes about the ugly vagina, I feel awful.

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That kind of thing doesn't appeal to me. So I have my limitations, too. Homosexuality is all right with me. Sappho was beautiful. But when someone hates another person's body and somehow violates it—that's the kind of thing I mind" (28). In a letter from Sexton to Ted Hughes, who had invited her to a poet's festival in England, Sexton suggests her own curious kinship with Ginsberg as opposed to those other "lumps": "It looks as if I will be the only female poet at the festival (not counting Ginsberg!) ... is that so. How strange. I look drawn and haggard now, I will be no addition. I will work on a tan. Not, of course, that you asked me because I was another sex. No. That is another lump I dislike 'female poets lump' the 'confessional poets lump' of 'Lowell, Sexton Plath lump'" (20 Jan. 1967, correspondence, box 20, folder 7, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC).

<sup>96</sup> Joseph Schwartz, *Cassandra's Daughter: A History of Psychoanalysis in Europe and America* (London: Allen Lane, 1999): 132. Schwartz continues that, just as the patient responds strongly within the transference pull, so too can the analyst: "The feelings that can be aroused in the analyst as he or she listens to, engages with and absorbs what the analysand is saying are very powerful and at times disturbing."

<sup>97</sup> In another session, Sexton associates her pocketbook with being able to carry a concealed knife, like pills or a razor, in case she wanted to kill herself: "Of course, I could put a razor in my pocketbook; thing is, I don't want to kill myself at home, I probably want to kill myself right here ..." (therapy tape, rec. 16 Dec. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

<sup>98</sup> As Peter Fuller writes, "In so far as gambling is playing *with* money, rather than for money, it is a straightforward displacement of the universal childhood desire to play with faeces. In other words, it represents a general regression to the anal stage of development" (Introduction to *The Psychology of Gambling*, ed. Peter Fuller and Jon Halliday, London: Allen Lane, 1974): 73-74. Sexton plays *with* her coins or, it could be argued, her own shit, as repressive, regressive defense, to distract her silent analyst; the regressive aspect emerges as the "funny" feeling she experiences with her hands full of "believing money."

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<sup>99</sup> “I don’t like them [analysts]. They’re a club!”: Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 30 May 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger. This was an anxiety that came up frequently for Sexton during her therapy with Orne. Her friend the poet Maxine Kumin had a number of “analyst friends” who, as Sexton reported, would discuss how much which patient could be charged (therapy tape, rec. 15 Apr. 1962, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger). Sexton said to Orne that hearing about those conversations, as well as making her “furious,” destroyed her “belief” in analysis. Significantly, she saw Orne, a psychiatrist who knew analysts, as being separate from that “club.”

<sup>100</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” (1953), *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006): 207.

<sup>101</sup> In “The Play of Interpretation,” Adam Philips notes that in Winnicott’s view, resistance from the patient “reflects the analyst’s failure to play” (*Winnicott*, London: Penguin, 2007): 143.

## II

### Queen of this Summer Hotel

#### Suburban Cake

Robert Lowell was very supportive of Sexton's first manuscript, long before it had been accepted for publication at Houghton Mifflin. Sexton remarked to W. "De" Snodgrass in early 1959, "Lowell is really helping me, De, as kindly as possible and I can't figure it out. I am always so startled by goodness. He likes the look of my 'book,' with some critical reservations" (*Letters* 51). According to Sexton, Lowell showed the manuscript to editors at Knopf, as well to poets such as Stanley Kunitz, Bill Alfred, and Randall Jarrell (*Letters* 51-52; 70). In the published book, Sexton included a poem about her teacher's experience of mental illness, echoing Lowell's "Home After Three Months Away" from *Life Studies*, in which he describes himself as, "Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small."<sup>1</sup> (98). In "Elegy in the Classroom," Sexton characterizes Lowell as a frog-like prince, at once both an aristocratic ("noble") and "boily creature" (45). Her teacher squats, "like a hunk of some big frog":

You are so gracefully insane.  
We fidget in our plain chairs  
and pretend to catalogue  
our facts for your burly sorcery (45)

Middlebrook notes that in the same month that Houghton Mifflin accepted Sexton's manuscript for publication, Lowell's *Life Studies* was published in the United States, winning the National Book Award in the same year (1992 109). Lowell later penned the glowing lines of praise which featured on the front cover of *Bedlam*, which Middlebrook argues caused the book to create a stir

in local literary circles: "Robert Lowell's influence both on the design of *Bedlam* and on its marketing gave Sexton's first book an imprimatur of seriousness without which it might have sunk out of sight as rapidly as do most first books of poetry" ("Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell" 20). In another letter to her mentor Snodgrass, Sexton described the cover of *Bedlam*:

On the back cover [of my book] they have a terrible soulful huge head picture of me, under which they have in big fat black letters: ANNE SEXTON. I gave them a choice of pictures (fool fool!) and the cover, besides having that long title, & Lowell's quote, has a drawing of a mother and child holding hands... And inside the print is too small. And ... oh, I wish it were over with, done, done, and the terrible reviews out, out, out, so that I might carry them in my knapsack like heavy stones. (*Letters* 93)

On the cover of *Bedlam*, two blackened, mother and child figures hold hands, as though risen from their own ashes. Their proximity to death is written on their bodies, composed of this (almost) death. As if emerging from a post-apocalyptic Hiroshima scene of radiation outbreak, the figures have absorbed the ash into themselves, in order to avoid disappearing altogether into the white-hot traumatic scene.<sup>2</sup> Lowell's "very nice quote" publicly endorses Sexton's debut (*Letters* 91): "Swift lyrical openness ... an almost Russian abundance and accuracy. Her poems stick in my mind. I don't see how they can fail to make the great stir they deserve." In a letter to Sexton, Sylvia Plath remarked glowingly on the front cover's "fine red, purple & black on white & the beautiful words of Lowell ..." (5 Feb. 1961 HRHRC). Although Sexton apparently had little to do with the design of the book, the child on the front cover has been symbolically authored by the poet.



**TO BEDLAM  
AND PART WAY  
BACK  
BY  
ANNE  
SEXTON**

\$3.95

"Swift lyrical openness . . .  
an almost Russian  
abundance and accuracy.  
Her poems stick in my  
mind. I don't see how  
they can fail to make the  
great stir they deserve."

ROBERT LOWELL

Raskin

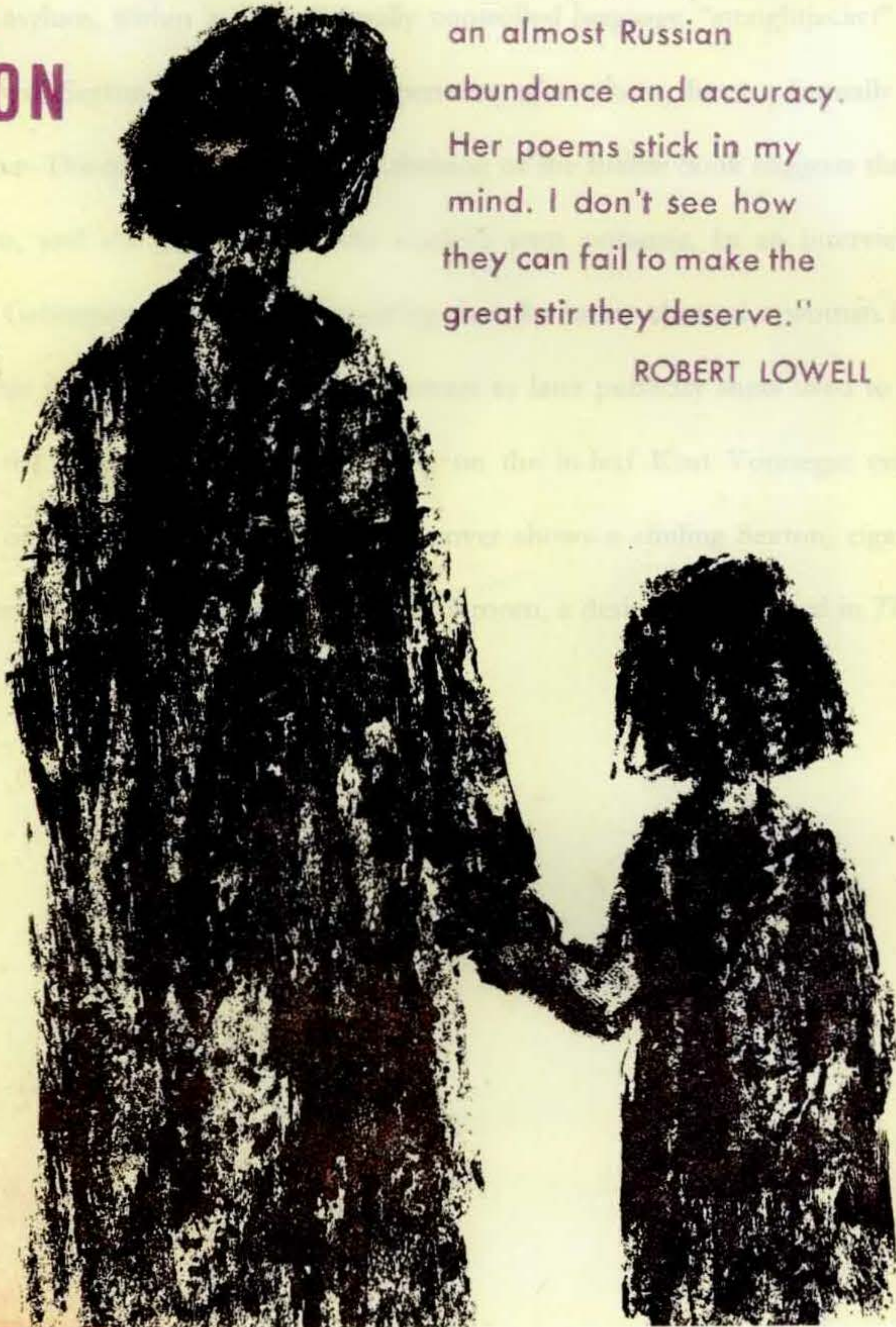
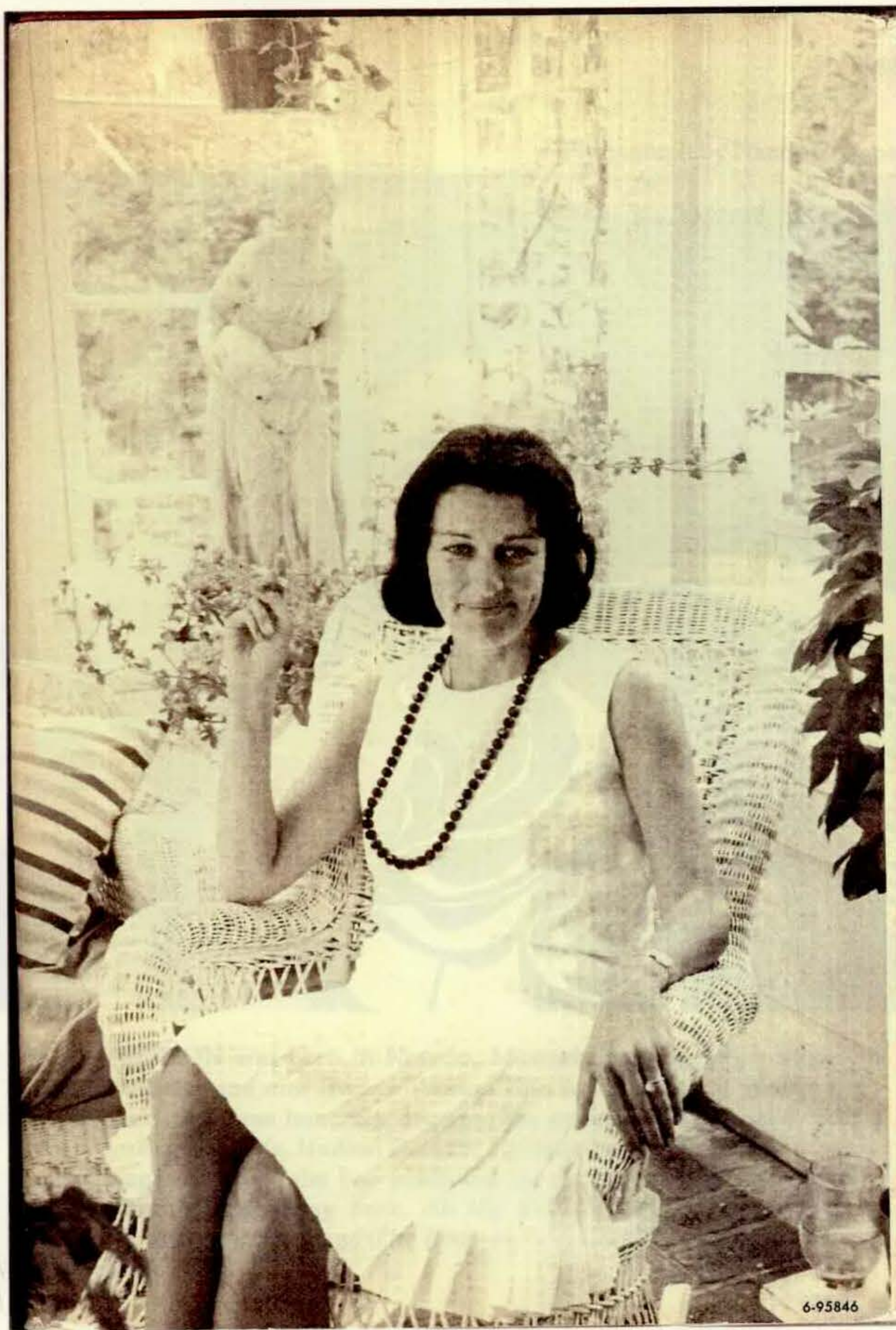


Fig. 6. Front cover of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1961). Illustration by Ellen Raskin.



The “book that therapy follows,” a phrase Sexton coined during her therapy, simultaneously represents where the poet went, and the way she came back;<sup>3</sup> it is, psychoanalytically, the place of language. Its poems are “bedlam poem[s]” (*Letters* 54), as well representative of the poet’s mastery over her madness through language. Sexton locates Part One of her book in the asylum, within a tight, formally controlled language “straightjacket” (Lucas 2009 48). In Part Two, Sexton reflects on the experience of madness, from a formally looser, ‘post-mad’ perspective. The inherently therapeutic division of the *Bedlam* book suggests the poet’s reparative movement, and the potential for the reader’s own catharsis. In an interview with Middlebrook, Allen Grossman recollects of “noticing that the jacket showed a woman in great pain” (1992 125). This photograph is in marked contrast to later publicity shots used to market Sexton’s books. In the case of *Transformations*, while on the in-leaf Kurt Vonnegut cries out, “Beware! Keep out of reach of children!” the back cover shows a smiling Sexton, cigarette in hand, lounging in a white wicker chair in a suburban sunroom, a design later echoed in *The Death Notebooks* (1974).<sup>4</sup>





**Fig. 7.** Back cover of *Transformations* (1971). Photograph by Rollie McKenna.

**Fig. 8.** Back cover of *The Death Netropolis* (1974). Photograph by Nancy Campbell



\$2.95

Photograph by Nancy Crampton



ANNE SEXTON was born in Newton, Massachusetts, in 1928. She grew up in Wellesley and now lives in Weston. She is a professor at Boston University and has three honorary degrees. Her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Hudson Review*, *Partisan Review*, *Poetry*, and many other magazines, and she has published six previous volumes of poetry: *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, *All My Pretty Ones*, *Live or Die*, *Love Poems*, *Transformations*, and *The Book of Folly*. In 1966 she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

6-95480

Fig. 8. Back cover of *The Death Notebooks* (1974). Photograph by Nancy Crampton.



In his review of Sexton's third book, Thomas McDonnell writes:

Not so incidentally, by the way, Anne Sexton is a strikingly beautiful woman, as anyone can see from the photo on the back of the dust jacket of her latest volume, *Live or Die*. The fact is that press agents and movie makers do not know what authentic glamour is, chiefly because they don't know what a woman is; and Anne Sexton is one of the few women writing poetry in the United States today of whom it is possible to say that her womanness is totally at one with her poems—and never more so than when she partially, and poetically ... denies it.<sup>5</sup>

The depressive position and the significance of her breakdown can neither be remedied nor repressed through the pictorial reconstruction of her "womanness." Within the defining *Bedlam* poem "The Double Image" (53-61), behind the image of New England contentment and familial unity, Sexton's smiling face betrays her.<sup>6</sup>

The photograph on the back cover of the reprinted edition of *Bedlam* was taken by T. Polumbaum. It is not the same image used in the first American edition, which was taken by Rollie McKenna. Elizabeth Bishop, in a letter to Lowell, described McKenna's image as "that sad photograph" of the young poet.<sup>7</sup> Middlebrook notes that the "book's reception was influenced pronouncedly by the portrait of Sexton by Rollie McKenna printed on the back dust jacket," a strikingly unsmiling image.<sup>8</sup> During a therapy session, Sexton discussed the preparations of her first book, and her desire for an inscrutable "face":

Well, I was very careful about the picture on my book. I didn't want it to look all, kind of, suburban ... I wanted it to just look kind of like a face ... a person, but you wouldn't really be able to define them, or you couldn't define what kind of a life they might live.<sup>9</sup>



In her selection of her mother's *Letters*, Linda Sexton includes a family photograph of "The Sextons, June 1961," taken about a year after *Bedlam's* publication in March 1960 (87).<sup>10</sup> The photograph shows Anne, her husband Kayo, and their two daughters, Linda and Joy, sitting together reading Sexton's first book.



*The Sextons, June 1961*

**Fig. 9.** Photograph of the Sextons, *Letters* 114.

The photograph suggests the returned mother's triumph as poet, wife and mother, complete with glossily "restyled" hair-do.<sup>11</sup> In *Anne Sexton: Teacher of Weird Abundance*, Paula Salvio writes that in looking at this publicity photo for the *Boston Globe*, we are "faced with some popular images of suburban life."<sup>12</sup> Salvio's reading of the photograph hinges on the positioning of Sexton's husband Kayo, "dressed in a dark suit and tie," assuming the subordinate place of wife. As Clare



Pollard points out, Kayo was "affectionately" known as "mother" in the Sexton household.<sup>13</sup> Yet Kayo's position in the frame also anchors the photograph. Kayo's tie and open-mouthed smile reinforce the regularity of time and order, suggested by the clock hovering above his head.<sup>14</sup> In this depiction, Sexton arguably becomes ornamental, accenting the curtains in her designer attire.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, MONDAY, JULY 18, 1960.

**HAPPY TO HAVE HIM HOME: Mrs. John F. Kennedy greets her husband at airport in Hyannis, Mass., after his flight from Boston. They went home to Hyannis Port by car.**

**CARLINO TO HEAD G.O.P. RIGHTS UNIT**

**Boston Police Check Throng As 15,000 Welcome Kennedy**

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Fig. 10. Photograph of the Kennedys, *New York Times* 18 July 1960.

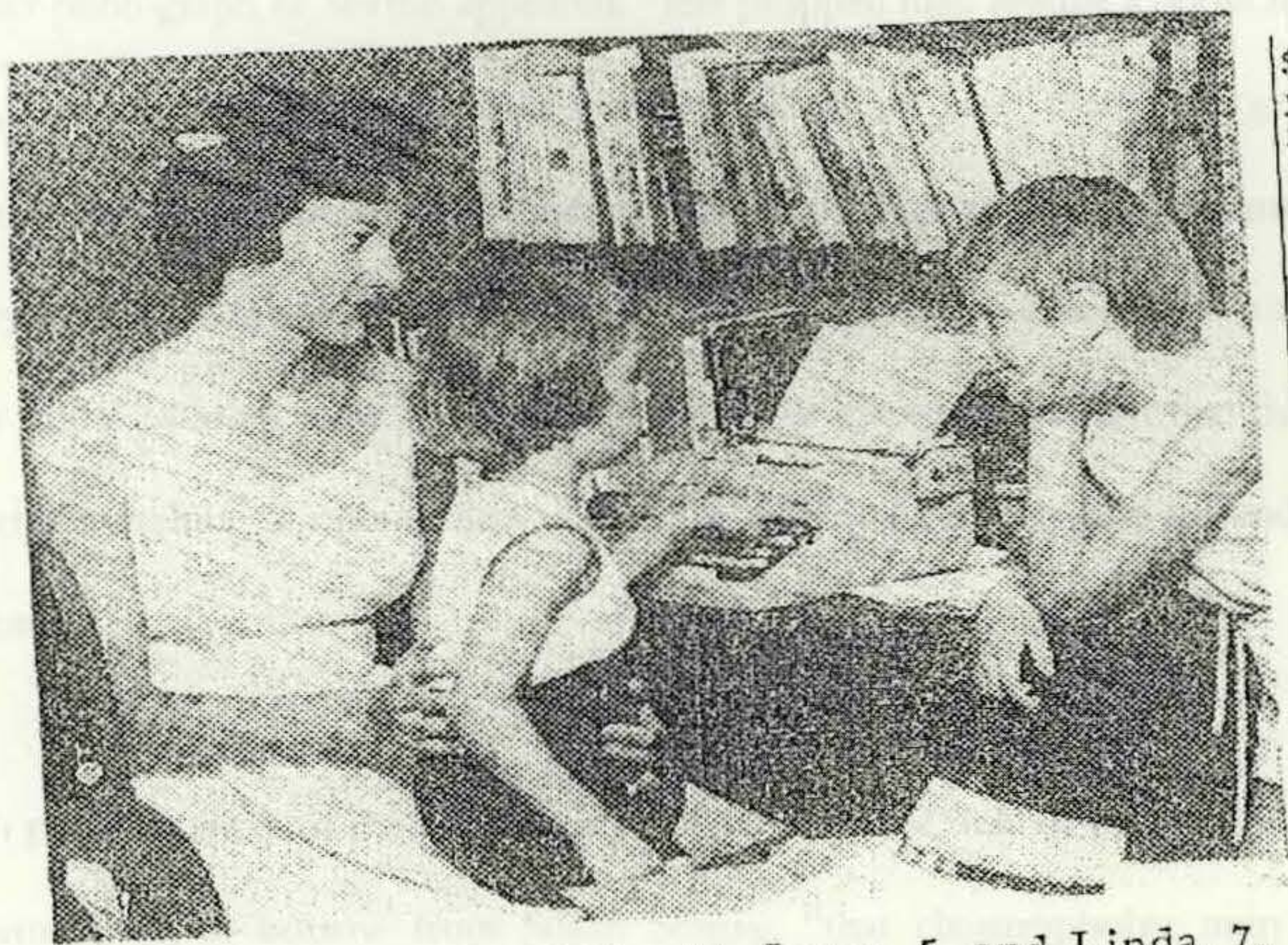


In the edition of the *Times* in which *Bedlam* was reviewed (18 July 1960), a photograph ran with the following caption "HAPPY TO HAVE HIM HOME: Mrs. John F. Kennedy greets her husband at airport in Hyannis Mass., after his flight from Boston. They went home to Hyannis Port by car." The Sextons bear a striking resemblance to the Kennedys in these shots. Jackie featured in a number of Sexton's dreams, in which she and the First Lady became interchangeable, like twin sisters.<sup>15</sup> The photographs of the two couples mirror each other, giving weight to Salvio's reading of the *Boston Globe* shot. The toothy smile that Mrs. Kennedy gives the camera as she greets her husband simultaneously suggests genuine and expertly performed joy. Her sideways gaze is directed towards the media, whereas Sexton stares the camera down. This was one of her first encounters of publicity photography involving her family, which might explain her shut mouth and vivid lips. Sexton had had some earlier experience as a fashion model and was adept at, in her own words, transforming into a "piece of merchandise" for buyers.<sup>16</sup> While Kayo echoes Kennedy in his suit, tie and even haircut, he also affectively resembles the Jacqueline figure, genuinely "HAPPY TO HAVE [HER] HOME," returned to the Boston suburbs.

Salvio's hypothesis that Sexton's "gaze suggests an appetite for something that lies beyond the confines of domestic responsibilities" is a tempting one (81), but Sexton's artfully made-up mask is flatter than that and resists this reading. Although Sexton may have been dreaming somewhere else altogether during the photographic session, her gaze does not betray appetite or longing. If anything she looks uncomfortable selling the promotional family shot. However, the photograph's composition endorses the self-fulfilling domestic scene. The modishly feminine black-and-white striped skirt Sexton wears, like the pretty nightgowns worn by her daughters, suggests the visual harmonization of interior and exterior. Sexton's skirt creates a "matchy-



matchy” harmony with her cushions, a mirror of decorative tranquility, in a spectacle of femininity. Sexton becomes the image of what Susan Kavalier-Adler terms the “false idealized self-object constellation”: the “self-perpetuated myth of the immaculate housewife,” dressed in I. Magnin.<sup>17</sup>



MRS. ANNE SEXTON with Joyce, 5, and Linda, 7, looking on, works on a poem. She will resume studying at Radcliffe soon.

**Fig. 11.** Sexton and her daughters. Margo Davy, “Educational Second Wind for Doctor and Poet: South Acton, Newton Mothers Included in Radcliffe Independent Study Program,” undated, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

An undated newspaper clipping at the Schlesinger Library, about the Radcliffe scholars program, features a photograph of “Mrs. Anne Sexton” with “Joyce, 5, and Linda, 7, looking on” as their mother works on a poem.<sup>18</sup> Its focus is as much the triumph of publication, as it is the achievement of combining motherhood and poetry. The children are all over their mother’s work,

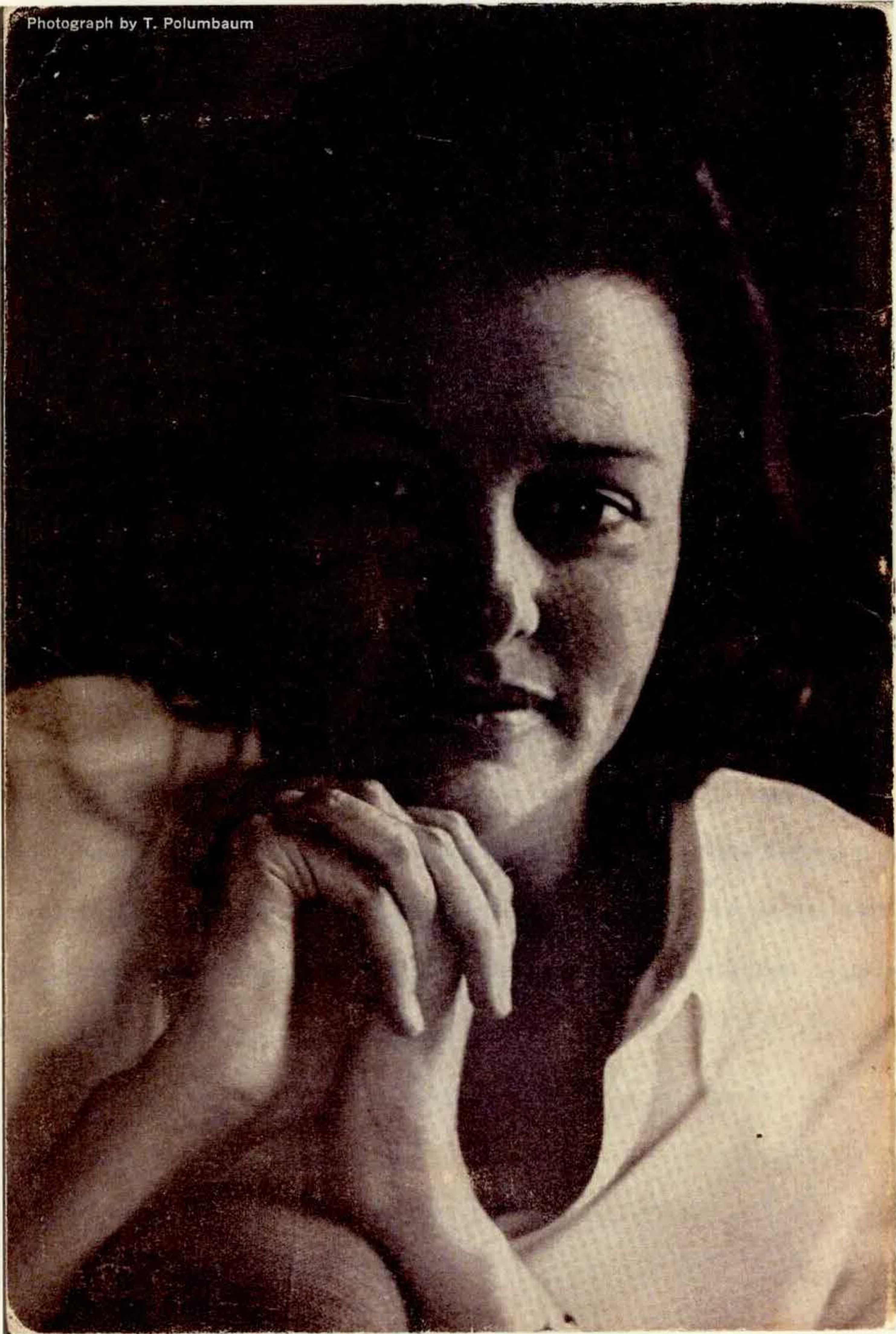


Joy even contributing by pressing keys on the typewriter. Sexton looks concerned rather than relaxed or pleased; her skin is pale, she seems fragile, somewhere between the poem and the stewpot.<sup>19</sup> Her school-aged daughters, conversely, appear healthy and lively. Linda, with short-cropped hair, is smiling warmly at her sister's play. As Middlebrook indicates, the Radcliffe Scholars received national press attention, making the cover of *Time* and featuring in *Newsweek*, in which another photograph of Sexton appeared: "feet propped high against a bookcase, with a pen in her hand, an open book in her lap, and a wide smile on her face" (150). The grants were big news, as Middlebrook explains, because "most of the fellowships recipients were married women supported by husbands, the issue of what the money was actually for became a major source of commentary in the national press." *Newsweek* in particular played up the fact that the grants were used to purchase washing machines, dishwashers, to employ hired help and to send the children to summer camp.

Both publicity shots of the poet suggest the survival not only of the mother and wife but the reinstatement of, to borrow from Susan Sontag, "that claustrophobic unity, the nuclear family."<sup>20</sup> This is symbolically confirmed by the double-head photo-op within the *Boston Globe* shot. In the reprint of *Bedlam*, the photograph of Sexton shows a young woman breaking into an almost imperceptible smile, and the hopeful gesture of her hands clutched together like a bouquet of fingers held beneath her chin. In each instance, Sexton becomes the object to-be-looked-at; she is simultaneously transformed into both subject and object.<sup>21</sup>



Photograph by T. Polumbaum



**Fig. 12.** Back cover of *Bedlam*. Photograph by T. Polumbaum.



In the blacked-out face of the figure on the front cover, the identity of the poet disappears, enticing the reader to substitute his or her own face. The photograph on the back cover also completes an autobiographical association that has been inferentially established on the front of the book. In a therapy session on 17 October 1961, Sexton describes a photograph taken in her writing room for an interview in *Newsweek*:

It's the first happy-looking picture I've ever had taken. Yeah, it'd take seventy to get one happy one ... And the funny thing is, you know, that I look so *happy!* Because I always take very somber or very bad pictures. It doesn't make me look beautiful, it just makes me look happy (laughs). Well, I look like, you know, I just won the Irish Sweepstakes ...<sup>22</sup>

In the same session, Sexton suggests to Orne that he should take this happy and smiling picture to Dr Brunner – her previous therapist and also Martin Orne's mother: "You can give it to Dr Brunner, and she can show it to her patients...." Both Sexton and Orne laugh at the suggestion that Brunner should put it in Westwood, where Sexton had convalesced, in order to show how "successful" Sexton's treatment had been; how her therapy and poetry worked together to create the "miracle" of the smiling woman. In this brief exchange between Sexton and Orne, the photograph represents the potential lie behind the visible encasement of success or successful treatment case.

## Graduate of the Mental Cases

During an interview that took place in the final year of her life, Sexton was asked, “Were the early poems ... the poems about madness—were they real poems about madness? Or were they poems about real madness?”<sup>23</sup> From the perspective afforded by hindsight, Sexton replied:

I don't think I was ever really mad. I mean ... but then again, of course, perhaps I was, but it depends on the clinical evaluation really. “Mad” is an open term. But they [the early poems] were about my ... they were confession, let us put it that way. I mean they were my experiences, some of my experiences, and I got that label very early, the “mad poet” and all that. (134)

The *Atlantic Monthly* described Sexton's *Bedlam* as a loose series of poems, depicting a narrative of breakdown and recovery. Sexton herself endorsed this view of her book as the story of her madness.<sup>24</sup> In her unpublished lecture notes, Sexton envisioned her first book as the basis for a poetics of self.<sup>25</sup> Yet when the reviews for *Bedlam* appeared, Sexton felt horrible about one in particular:<sup>26</sup>

Anne Sexton's poems so obviously come out of deep, painful sections of the author's life that one's literary opinions scarcely seem to matter; one feels tempted to drop them furtively in the ashcan, rather than be caught with them in the presence of so much naked suffering.<sup>27</sup>

James Dickey's assault on her technique was more upsetting to Sexton than his attacks on her subject matter.<sup>28</sup> So scathing was Dickey's critique that it led Sexton to enroll in summer school at Brandeis's Institute of Literature, where she read Europeans such as Dostoevsky, Mann, Brecht, Pirandello, Gide, Rilke, Sartre, Camus; and American writers, including Henry James, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Allen Tate, Nathanael West and William Faulkner, to sharpen her literary credentials (Middlebrook 1992 127). Although Dickey considered Sexton's themes a major subject

for poetry, in describing her work as essentially unliterary, Dickey relegated Sexton's poems to the ashcan of "contrivance and artificiality" (McClatchy 118).

Dickey's review reversed the biographical slant of Geoffrey Hartman's criticism, that Sexton had inappropriately exploited "the most sensational aspect of her experience," by suggesting that she was not exploitative enough (McClatchy 119). Richard Howard describes Sexton's first book as the work of a patient, as having been written with "something of the basket-weaver's patience about it."<sup>29</sup> In another review, Allen Grossman characterizes the poet's return from madness as a journey in which there is "no future for the mind beyond the search for the mind's real estate."<sup>30</sup> Grossman locates recovery and the possibility of reparation within the asylum, as the starting point for what Hartman refers to as self-knowledge (McClatchy 118). Writing in the *New York Times*, Thomas Lask argues that the book's built-in interest is not simply its representation of mental breakdown, but the way in which Sexton pictures it: "with a pitiless eye and a clairvoyant sharpness."<sup>31</sup>

In *Bedlam* – which appeared in the same year R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self* was published, across the Atlantic – Sexton wears the double mask of the poet and patient.<sup>32</sup> Sexton realizes Peter Brooks' notion of the "doubleness of the confessional act," which suggests the inherent:

discrepancy between constative and performative aspects of confession, a suspicion that the referential matter of the confession—the sin or fault presented—is not necessarily the meaning or the truth of the confession, that which is intended as the speech act.<sup>33</sup>

As Karen Alkalay-Gut argues, Sexton's poetic selves are many and multiple "Annas," ranging from: "mad Aunt Anna, to the cartoon character, little Orphan Annie. Elsewhere, [Sexton] sees

her name as the 'âne,' the donkey that will help her to escape her untenable situation, and as the self-named newborn who will emerge from a mystical unification with the universe."<sup>34</sup> This ongoing soul-rebirthing of 'Anne' into words, informed the early themes of poetry and therapy in Sexton's work.<sup>35</sup> In her 1968 interview for *Paris Review*, around the time of the publication of her fourth book, *Love Poems*, Sexton specified therapy as a theme in her first three books: "Well, in the first book, I was giving the experience of madness; in the second book, the causes of madness; and in the third book, finally, I find that I was deciding whether to live or to die" (13). In my reading of Sexton's *Bedlam* poems I will establish a frame of reference in terms Sexton's poetic interest in the dynamics of therapeutic discourse. From these readings, Sexton emerges not simply as a mad poet, but as a poet of madness.

In his *History of Sexuality: Volume I*, Michel Foucault describes the confessing subject's double (self) consciousness within the therapeutic space.<sup>36</sup> Foucault argues that the confessing subject is essentially a two-headed entity, where the self enacts a split through the confession, as a "ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement" (61). In Sexton's early poetry, the therapeutic theatre is a landscape of doubles, both conscious and unconscious. The *Part Way Back* of the title from Sexton's first book offers a narrative for the preservation of self, as a way out of the world of the asylum, through the work of language.

Sexton's book of "bedlam poetry" (*Letters 70*) promises a journey into madness, as a representation of the poet's own road to, and return from, *Bedlam*. In her interview with Barbara Kevles, Sexton charted the road of her *Bedlam* book:

Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I didn't know I had any creative

depths. I was a victim of the American Dream, the bourgeois, middle-class dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children. I thought the nightmares, the visions, the demons would go away if there was enough love to put them down. I was trying my damndest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one can't build little white fences to keep nightmares out. (McClatchy 3-4)

As its own "slice of suburban cake," the family home represents a socially approved form of madness (*Bedlam* 29). As Sexton described it in her therapy, it was the desire to have a "perfect little house in the suburbs."<sup>37</sup> In her response to Kevles, Sexton locates her "buried self" within the little white suburban fences, situating madness as the by-product of a world of diapers and white sauces. In establishing the hazy division between nightmares and normality, Sexton prefigures Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, in which he suggests that madness, "is only ever the *dividing* line between the mad and the normal, a line which normality shares with madness and which is even defined by it."<sup>38</sup> Sexton characterizes herself as a victim of middle-class values and the compromised American Dream. Rhetorically, she re-locates her divided self within another dream: that of the therapeutic success story.

As Philip McGowan suggests, *Bedlam* represents a collection of poems of location, dislocation and relocation (16). It contains, to borrow from McGowan, a series of voices seeking to orientate and "reorientate themselves within the physical world" (16). In writing about the experience of "being crazy" (*Letters* 70), Sexton offers her readers the possibility of recovery via self-knowledge, through the insight that the derangement of the senses offers, and within the representation of the therapeutic exchange. As Rose Lucas argues, while offering a potentially cathartic experience to her readers, Sexton's poetry can also be understood "as a product of the



very negative features of guilt, depression and hostility which it, seemingly, strives to counteract” (2009 53). In Sexton’s own words, her early poems represent a “symbolic world of the half-sane” or the “knowledgeable insane” (*Letters* 47). Sexton’s book offers its reader a way back, through the poet’s successful mastery of language, in the words of the “bedlam poem” (*Letters* 54).

While still putting together her manuscript, Sexton sent a copy to her teacher John Holmes. In reply, he suggested a change in the title, thinking that booksellers and publishers would be wary:<sup>39</sup>

I distrust the very source and subject of a great many of your poems, namely, all those that dwell on your time in hospital. ... I am uneasy ... that what looks like a brilliant beginning might turn out to be so self-centered and so narrowed a diary that it would be clinical only.

Something about asserting the hospital and psychiatric experience seems to me very selfish—all a forcing others to listen to you, and nothing given the listeners, nothing that teaches them or helps them. ... It bothers me that you use poetry in this way. It’s all a release for you, but what is it for anyone else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release? ...

Don’t publish it in a book. You’ll certainly outgrow it, and become another person, then this record will haunt and hurt you. It will even haunt and hurt your children, years from now.<sup>40</sup>

The poem “For John, Who Begg Me Not to Enquire Further” (51-52), represents Sexton’s response to Holmes. Its title invokes Schopenhauer, which Sexton used to introduce her first book, situating *Bedlam* in terms of the “appalling horror” of self-knowledge.<sup>41</sup> By referencing psychoanalysis so explicitly, Sexton suggests a narrative constructed around the return to a

repressed scene of trauma, recoverable only through an heroic journey or quest. As the seeker of self-knowledge, Sexton becomes Oedipus, entering the wilds of her psyche. In "For John," John Holmes becomes the Jocasta who begs Sexton "for God's sake not to inquire further ..."

The very topos of *Bedlam* is one of "enquiry," and forestalled knowledge; the "terrible fate" that awaits the philosophical enquirer defines it as a site or place, both within the "narrow diary of my mind," and within the "commonplaces of the asylum" poem (*Bedlam* 51). Sexton's *Bedlam* poems, like her apologia to her teacher John Holmes, represent "something worth learning" and worth the effort of enquiry (51):

Not that it was beautiful,  
but that, in the end, there was  
a certain sense of order there;  
something worth learning  
in that narrow diary of my mind,  
in the commonplaces of the asylum  
where the cracked mirror  
or my own selfish death  
outstared me. (51)

The *Bedlam* poem is a "cracked mirror" in which Sexton's "own selfish death" is not only reflected but 'outstares' the poet. In looking away from the "cracked mirror" which reflects a suicidal identity, the poet instead gestures towards her desire to live. By incorporating the reality of death as something other than suicide, Sexton implies that the "cracked mirror" can be mended, or at least partially repaired. Sexton explicitly makes the case for the subject matter of her poetry, by identifying her work as that of her own "mind." As a reflection of the soothingly

repetitive, 'commonplace' activities of the asylum, "For John" assumes its therapeutic character within the "sense of order" that the poet offers her readers. As Alicia Ostriker suggests, Sexton does not "glamorize madness, suicide" or pain.<sup>42</sup> She represents the suicidal experience, and does not "endorse, just as she does not condemn." Significantly, Ostriker wonders whether this approach to the representation of pain could be the reason for there never having been a "Sexton cult comparable to the Plath cult." This is a subject I examine in chapter five of this thesis.

The Fan Mail collection at the Harry Ransom suggests the cathartic potential of Sexton's early poetry.<sup>43</sup> As Janet Luedtke shows, Sexton's female correspondents found her work to be intensely and intrinsically interesting:

The listener/reader does not simply empathize with the confessing "witness," but instead re-produces the text internally so that the words become the listener's own. And, as the teller experiences catharsis and transcendence by the process of speaking, so does the listening community who "speaks" with her communally.

(175)

The "appalling horror" of Sexton's literary topos moves beyond witness. The reader's own pain, reflected in the "cracked mirror" of the private poem, in which the poet's kitchen becomes the reader's kitchen, your kitchen; her cracked face, your face (*Bedlam* 52). In "For John," Sexton implies that her teacher's apprehensions about the publication of the *Bedlam* book represent his own fear of finding himself within her poem, of seeing his face reflected "there." As Ostriker suggests, "For John" addresses a reader who is "at once in the poem and outside it, who is both John and anyone" (157). Through this shared knowledge, both textual and experiential, "you" and "I," Oedipus and Jocasta, become frighteningly blurred. An acceptance of this reflection, and of the poet's seduction of the reader, paves the way for the reader's own potential catharsis.

In Sexton's *Bedlam* book, split selves disappear into fragmented realities, sometimes to hide, sometimes to expose their maladies. Writing to Snodgrass in 1958, Sexton referred to the mental institution where she had recuperated as her "jail" (*Letters* 37).<sup>41</sup> The madhouse of "You, Doctor Martin" (4) – the opening poem in Part One of *Bedlam* – is represented as an emotionally privileged jail, housing hostility and aggression. The poetic "I" (the mad Sexton persona), refers to herself royally: "I am queen of this summer hotel / or the laughing bee on a stalk / of death." The sharpened axe-end of Sexton's poem, the point of its "stalk," is found in its sting of "death," or abjection (3). The domain of the laughing "queen" bee, who "rules the buzzing swarm" (Blasing 195), is also the "here" of the *Bedlam* book we are reading. As literary texts, Sexton's "bedlam poems" are indebted to Lowell's "Waking in the Blue" from *Life Studies* (95-96):

After a hearty New England breakfast,  
I weigh two hundred pounds  
this morning. Cock of the walk,  
I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey  
before the metal shaving mirrors,  
and see the shaky future grow familiar  
in the pinched, indigenous faces  
of these thoroughbred mental cases,  
twice my age and half my weight.  
We are old-timers,  
each of us holds a locked razor. (96)

Sexton echoes Lowell, "through the antiseptic tunnel" of the text (3). In *Bedlam*, as in "Waking in the Blue," "There are no knives / for cutting your throat" (3); the poets are protectively encased by their language-tubes. Through the therapeutic ordering of language and the creation of 'the

book that therapy follows,' Sexton's bedlam poems are like the rows of "moccasins / waiting on the silent shelf" (3); they gesture to the curative, through the process of creative articulation (Blasing 196).

Sexton is preoccupied by the presence of doctors who emerge from the psychoanalytic dream landscapes of *Bedlam*. On his morning rounds, "Dr Martin" walks the small path from breakfast to madness in the "summer hotel" in which Sexton is installed:

You, Doctor Martin, walk  
from breakfast to madness. Late August,  
I speed through the antiseptic tunnel  
where the moving dead still talk  
of pushing their bones against the thrust  
of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel  
or the laughing bee on a stalk  
of death. (3)<sup>45</sup>

Jo Gill argues that Sexton uses "summer hotel" to describe the institution, in order to parody the "middle-class ritual whereby mothers and children escaped from the suburban home for the long summer vacations while the fathers continued to commute into the city for work."<sup>46</sup> Certainly, Sexton's dream-like mad poems represent a time away, a hiatus, from the quotidian realities of the outside world ("You, Doctor Martin" 3). The Doctor/Sir figure become a kind of substitutive, therapist "You" in "You, Doctor Martin" (3-4), "Kind Sir: These Woods" (5) and "Music Swims Back to Me" (8-9).

Reading these poems sequentially, it is as though the routine visit of the Doctor to the ward in "You, Doctor Martin" has resulted in a private session in "Kind Sir," which Sexton experiences as a wander in the woods of the psyche:

Kind Sir: Lost and of your same kind  
I have turned around twice with my eyes sealed  
and the woods were white and my night mind  
saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal. (5)

For Sexton, this early experience of the therapeutic "inward look" is one of loss, and specifically a loss of self (5).<sup>47</sup> A game of free association in "Kind Sir" leads to a series of indeterminate, symbolic signposts. As a breaking-away from childhood, which is "*gone*," Sexton attempts to reconcile the loss and ending of the past, as an acceptance of the progression of time: "It was a trick / to turn around once and know you were lost" (5). In turning around twice with her "eyes sealed," the poet deceives herself into unlearning the thinking that has led her into madness. Although the "old game" is one of disorientation and nostalgia, the desire to forget an old "myself" enacts a reconstructed or therapized self:

And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course  
to look — this inward look that society scorns —  
Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse  
than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns. (5)

The second act of the game is the "opening" of the eyes, during which Sexton sees into a mirror-film on the eyeball, turning the viewer's outward gaze back onto the psyche, into an "inward look" – the therapeutic gaze – into the self of the poem. That she has found "nothing worse / than myself," suggests that this "myself" is still "caught" within the spikes of the thorny and "strange" memories, painful to touch.

At the Schlesinger Library, there is an earlier version of "Music Swims Back to Me" (8). Originally entitled "Hey Mister," Sexton addresses a silent, possibly imaginary Doctor-like interlocutor.<sup>48</sup> In the published version, the change in the first line, from "Hey Mister" to "Wait Mister," suggests Sexton's increased desperation: "Kind Sir: This is an old game / that we played when we were eight and ten" (5). In the absence of "sign posts" within the "room" inside the "private institution," only music can bring some sense of meaning to the wild mind. This music is like the "tune" or associated theme-music of the asylum itself, as in "Ringing the Bells": "A radio playing / and everyone here was crazy" (8). The *Bedlam* space is one of forgetting and the "forgotten," of being locked or strapped away with "no signs to tell the way." The "song that remembers" replaces the asylum mind, its memories, its ability to do anything other than ask the silent analyst for any directions, some kind of assistance. The question, "Which way is home?" frames Sexton's *Bedlam* book. The search for home, an identifiable soul-abode, suggests a loss of permanence within the forgotten limbo of the asylum, which is more like a state of unending transience.

The ordering of language within *Bedlam* mirrors the structures of the asylum, the regimented formalities of a "summer hotel," where meals take place at appointed hours, and activities occur at set times. At the centre of her book, Sexton offers a corridor of interconnected asylum poems: "Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn" (39),<sup>49</sup> "Ringing the Bells" (40) and "Lullaby" (41). In this group of "bedlam poem[s]," written around the time that she decided on the title of her book (*Letters* 54), Sexton offers a picture of the asylum as a containment space for the disordered mind. Middlebrook suggests that Sexton represents the asylum as a "metaphorical space in which to articulate the crazy-making pressures of middle-class life, particularly for women"; thus linking the home, the mental hospital and the body in terms of their femaleness

(1992 274). In “Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn” (39), Sexton wanders in a highly paranoid state through the asylum gardens:

The summer sun ray  
shifts through a suspicious tree.  
*though I walk through the valley of the shadow*  
It sucks the air  
and looks around for me. (39)

The environment moves around the poet, surreptitiously. Sexton’s paranoid anxiety is projected onto the natural world, as the “blades extend,” reaching her “way.” The “grass” and the sky have become unnatural through the prism of perception. The shifty “summer sun ray” alights, passing through objects; the light looks for her, sucking her air, as if to asphyxiate her. Sexton’s asylum mind is divided against itself. The grass’s taunting talk, the green chant, provides the soundtrack to Sexton’s seemingly schizophrenic *dérèglement*. Arnold Ludwig gives a detailed description relating to disturbances of perception in schizophrenics:<sup>51</sup>

Because of its capacity to deconstruct the self-system, schizophrenia is very instructive ... With this disorder, all types of strange and disturbing things happen to people. They see imaginary people and hear imaginary voices. Malignant influences work to control their thoughts and behaviors or harm them in some undefinable way. They see significance everywhere—in the raised eyebrows of people, in a newspaper headline, in a laugh—and all this somehow applies to them. The world in which they live becomes disturbing and threatening. Inner and outer reality become intertwined, and they lose the capacity to distinguish between them.



The unreal, plastic sky finally breaks in "Noon Walk." The tree, the grass and the sun are no longer simply part of the natural landscape, but become actively threatening "*enemies*." They become "malignant" and "threatening" to the fragmented, split self. This slip into a kind of fantasy state, where the limits of reality are no longer in place, recalls Melanie Klein's analysis of children, as described by Julia Kristeva.<sup>51</sup> Klein wrote in relation to the analyst's awareness of the child's unconscious, the force of which causes the analyst to confront a more enigmatic knowledge that "does not wish to be *familiar* with the real world through learning and adaptation to reality. Such *knowledge* staves off *awareness*" (40). In Sexton's poem, unconscious knowledge provokes a splitting-off process, in a simultaneous Kleinian moment of "desire *and* prohibition." Even in the noon daylight, the asylum lawn contains a world full of "enemies," just as the wandering mind harbors its own most dangerous adversaries. Sexton suggests that "There is no safe place," other than the poetic space of language.

At the end of "Ring the Bells," Sexton describes the clean sound of the bells, suggesting the absence of background anxiety, a kind of affectless space: "and this is how the bells really sound, / as untroubled and clean / as a workable kitchen" (40). The clean lines of the poem reflect order as an arrest of feeling. In its opening lines, Sexton also cleanly echoes Lowell's "Waking in the Blue" ("This is the way day breaks in Bowditch Hall at McLean's" 95), "And this is the way they ring / the bells in Bedlam" (40). Sexton's "Lullaby" (41), which appears on the page facing "Ring the Bells," locates the poet in "the TV parlor / in the best ward at Bedlam." The background "me" floats out beyond the self, leaving the feeling of untroubled cleanness, like "linen on a shelf":

My sleeping pill is white.

It is a splendid pearl;

it floats me out of myself,

my stung skin as alien

as a loose bolt of cloth.

I will ignore the bed.

I am linen on a shelf. (41)

Using images such as the “untroubled,” “clean” kitchen and the silent, “linen on a shelf,” Sexton suggests a critique of the normalizing function of medication. The swallowing of her “sleeping pill” ushers an almost affect-less lull, without desire (“I will ignore the bed”); it becomes the poet’s “pearl.” Not simply decorative, it retains a “workable” functionality. The specter of the perfect, “splendid pearl” of a housewife (an “alien” even to herself), stirs in the background of this series of poems: an image intrinsic to Sexton’s vision of her *Bedlam* book.

According to Middlebrook, “Her Kind” was the last poem that Sexton completed for the *Bedlam* manuscript (1992 113). “Her Kind” breaks through the confinement of both house and asylum, as well as the constraints of the ‘pearly’ feminine roles of wife and mother: the poet flies “out, a possessed witch / haunting the black air, braver at night” (21). Caroline Hall, in her discussion of Sexton’s fairytale *Transformations*, notes that inherently “bad” women are witches:

ugly, scheming, wielding over other women and men alike a magical, evil power of transformation, or at least wielding some kind of power. Good women are quiet, domestic, and submissive; they take care of children and/or home while their men go out to ‘work.’<sup>52</sup>

Middlebrook describes Sexton's two-headed consciousness in "Her Kind," the double "I", in order to characterize the poet as a "single persona identified with madness, but separated from it through insight" (1992 114). This insight is afforded by the ordering of language and the formal structure of the poem.<sup>53</sup> Karen Alkalay-Gut suggests that Sexton figures herself both "as a witch and as an analyst of this witch."<sup>54</sup> As Rose Lucas suggests, Sexton's witch is problematized as not only "negative" (2009 54), in the second stanza:

I have found the warm caves in the woods,  
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,  
closets, silks, innumerable goods;  
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:  
whining, rearranging the disaligned.  
A woman like that is misunderstood.  
I have been her kind. (21)

Sexton celebrates the images of maternal warmth as a badge of difference, offering shelter, food and clothing to the socially "disaligned" or marginalized. In her therapy session on July 6 1961, Sexton referred to the blurb on a book of Shirley Jackson's short stories, which stated that Jackson wrote "like a witch with a broomstick dipped in adder's blood."<sup>55</sup> Sexton wanted her critics to think of her as a witch, both fascinating and frightening. In "Her Kind," Sexton unashamedly identifies herself as both poet and "witch" woman; she becomes her own hysterical symptom, the black kite of earlier drafts flying out of the poem.<sup>56</sup> Sexton situates herself as the split "thing" with a divided consciousness, within what Deborah Forbes describes as a "borderline dramatic monologue."<sup>57</sup> Like the space of the poem, the witch's cave is a productive space, where the poet is at home.

Within what Middlebrook terms the double subjectivity or double consciousness of the poem, the fragmentation of witch woman and magical poet, arguably fixes a third term of performative embodiment: that of the mad poet. The three speakers that Middlebrook differentiates – the witch, the housewife and the adulteress – are unified in the figure of the poet, Anne Sexton. A “misunderstood” woman, “not a woman, quite,” figures the mad poet of *Bedlam*. Sexton defiantly represents her “haunting” as a creative flight from the roles of good or bad wife, mother or lover, into a transformative “out of mind” state of difference.<sup>58</sup>

In the final poem in Part One of *Bedlam*, Sexton is again flying in “A Story for Rose on the Midnight Flight to Boston” (46-47). Like the “warm caves” of “Her Kind,” Sexton’s “warm cabin home” is returning her to the city of the poem’s title, her Boston home. Lost in air-borne reverie, Sexton’s fear of flight causes other memories of “my first story, my first funny failure,” of flight:

The next April the plane  
bucked me like a horse, my elevators turned  
and fear blew down my throat, that last profane  
gauge of a stomach coming up. (46).

As in “Her Kind,” in “Story for Rose,” Sexton’s experience is reinforced as that of the “survivor.” Although “Her Kind” somewhat ambiguously uses the posthumous voice as poetic conceit, Sexton has implicitly survived attempts to burn her alive, thus proving her authenticity as witch:

I have ridden in your cart, driver,  
waved my nude arms at villages going by,  
learning the last bright routes, survivor  
where your flames still bite my thigh  
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind. (21)

Poetically reinventing herself as a woman at the stake, as well as this more modern brush with aerial death, Sexton imitates the witch in “kind,” by representing herself as mad or “out of mind.” At the point of the witch-burning Sexton’s affinity with the figure of the witch is brightest: “A woman like that is not ashamed to die” (21). In “A Story For Rose,” the sky does not break during her flight, the plane does not burst into flames, and Sexton is “returned / to land”: “We bank over Boston. I am safe. I put on my hat. / I am almost someone going home. The story has ended” (47). By landing safely in Boston, Sexton paves the way for Part Two of *Bedlam*. The poet is “safe” at the conclusion of “A Story for Rose.” Her personal investment in riding-out the flight home has brought her considerable returns, a realization of safety. The “story” of Betsy, the tale of an “old death,” like the accessorized “hat,” is something Sexton carries with her. Re-emerging from the past, it assumes a new shape, as a “story.” Like a selection of hats in the cupboard, or a collection of new poems in a book, Sexton suggests the ultimately grounding potential of her poems as “safe” spaces for both herself and the reader.

Sexton’s “The Double Image,” the defining work in Part Two of *Bedlam*, represents a dream within a dream of maternal succession. Sexton poeticizes the generational continuity between grandmother, mother and daughter, figuratively and permanently fixed in the hallway in the “foxes’ snare” of the mother’s gaze (60). “The Double Image” (53-61) is the first instance in *Bedlam* where Sexton explicitly refers to the subject of suicide. Although critics such as Jo Gill have read the poem in relation to narcissism,<sup>59</sup> I am interested in “The Double Image” in terms of the way in which Sexton uses textual space to suggest the stages of recovery. The poem signals the therapeutic potential of Sexton’s book and that its poems are the work of a mother “who chose two times / to kill myself” (53). Sexton’s desire to return to an old, idealized version of the self has led her to the point of breakdown. The time that she spends in the asylum is defined by

the absence of her children, and by the way in which she regresses into an infantile state: “I laughed to see the private iron in that hotel” (54). In speaking to her child, Sexton speaks to her mad self that allowed her mind to let go, from the perspective that post-madness affords:

Death was simpler than I'd thought.  
The day life made you well and whole  
I let the witches take away my guilty soul.  
I pretended I was dead  
until the white men pumped the poison out,  
putting me armless and washed through the rigamarole  
of talking boxes and the electric bed. (53-54)

The “green witches” inside her head, have a direct line of access to the poet. They address Sexton as directly as the poem addresses the child and its reader. The language Sexton uses is uncomplicated, except for moments when phrases from the discourse of “medical hypothesis” (53) creep into her lines. These words jolt, reminding the reader of where the poet has come back from, and the distance of this journey. The witches overwhelm Sexton like the figures of a fairy tale, like the villains of suburban family life. The “broken faucet” serves as a stand-in for the “broken” housewife and mother, who “let the witches take my guilty soul” away:

Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,  
I heard them say, was mine. They tattled  
Like green witches in my head, letting doom  
Leak like a broken faucet;  
as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet,  
an old debt I must assume. (53)

The fall into madness, like the yellow leaves going “queer,” suggests a disappearance of the self (53). The melancholic, “guilty soul” carted away in “The Double Image,” is markedly different to the earlier witch poem, “Her Kind,” in which Sexton reclaims identity through difference or strangeness. In *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva writes about “A Past That Does Not Pass By,” in which melancholy creates a “skewed” sense of time.<sup>60</sup> Kristeva suggests the traumatic basis of a past moment that “blocks the horizon of depressive temporality,” removing “any horizon, any perspective” (60). According to Kristeva, any perspective on time is blocked by depressive temporality, in which time feels as though it has been arrested:

Riveted to the past, regressing to the paradise or inferno of an unsurpassable experience, melancholy persons manifest a strange memory: everything has gone by, they seem to say, but I am faithful to those bygone days, I am nailed down to them, no revolution is possible, there is no future... (60)

Sexton’s regressive, child-like state in “The Double Image” characterizes the arrested space of madness. Sexton developed various fragments into a complete draft which she titled, “Through a Small Window.”<sup>61</sup> In this early version of “The Double Image,” Sexton evokes a “place that’s all [her] own,” an arrested space of language, where she nevertheless finds her “I.” In the draft, Sexton dismisses the significance of mirrors (“And mirrors too, / I will be done with mirrors.”), as projections of identity, which they cannot hold or contain. Sexton rejects the image of herself as mother and daughter.

In his commentary on the mirror stage, Lacan describes the young child’s ability to “recognize his own image” in a mirror.<sup>62</sup> Lacan describes how the act of looking into the mirror:

immediately gives rise in a child to a series of gestures in which he playfully experiences the relationship between the movements made in the image and the

reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it duplicates—namely, the child's own body... (94)

For Lacan, the mirror stage represents the context of identification, in which the subject “in the full sense analysis gives to the term,” experiences a transformation when he or she assumes an image: the primordial form of the ideal-I. In other words, the mirror stage works to “establish a relationship between an organism and its reality” (Lacan 96). Sexton described the “The Double Image” as a poem about “overcoming our father and mother,” and somehow “assuming our identities.”<sup>63</sup> Arguably, “The Double Image” also centers on the corporeal and affective reality of the body's history. In this way it directly echoes Lowell's “Home After Three Months Away” (97-98), in which the poet recuperates, following “the time I put away,” described as “child's play.” Sexton takes the theme of recuperation further, cracking the mirror held up to the 1950s mother and housewife, as a consequence of transformative therapy, and the assumption of a different “I”-ideal.

Middlebrook writes that the “true heirloom” in “The Double Image” is the mirror in which “the false selves of at least two generations are reflected” (1992 88). In a draft of “The Double Image” at the Schlesinger Library, Sexton describes the return to her mother's house of “false selves” in terms of being cradled, to “wring / that madness out of me.”<sup>64</sup> Within her childhood home, a regressive space of association and memory, Sexton can only ever be “Part Way back from Bedlam” (55). This is not the space of recovery but a zone of parental intervention and familial attempts at social reeducation, as a kind of cleaning or wringing-out of the psyche:



I lived like an angry guest,  
like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child.  
I remember my mother did her best.  
She took me to Boston and had my hair restyled.  
Your smile is like your mother's, the artist said.  
I didn't seem to care. I had my portrait  
done instead. (55)

The refrain of the portrait which the mother commissions for her "partly mended" daughter ("They had my portrait done instead"), is compounded by the repetition of "instead." This "restyled" portrait hangs within and over the poem. It is the "instead" version of the "outgrown" daughter, the child without the witches in her head. Constructed by the image of the portrait, this becomes the "instead" space in which the child's mother not only "cannot forgive" her daughter's suicide, but cannot accept it as part of her history. Sexton is caught psychically by the mother's Medusa look, immobilizing and potentially fatal. The repetition of the image, the inherent doubling of the mother-as-image, becomes for Sexton a kind of death sentence. The "canvas home" is a holding cell in which the poet is "waiting in the eyes" in the "zone / of the smile," to die (60). Her "young face," encased above the "dry red fur fox coat," is set in an imitative mime of the original mother, the "double woman." In this context, Sexton is more like the "foxy children" of "You, Doctor Martin" (4). Because the daughter's portrait has been arranged around her suicide attempts, this "Double Image" functions as a preservation of the self-image in the face of death. The real death lies within the potential for repetition in the mother's gaze or face. The mother's "mocking mirror" represents a smile which holds the daughter in place as repetition: "She eyes me from that face, / that stony head of death." The eyes in the mother's head are the eyes of compulsion and confinement.

Sexton enacts a rejection of the first image of the Mother in “The Double Image,” by creating her own self-image as a poet. The *Bedlam* book works to overthrow the mother as the first love and to disinherit the outgrown imagery of motherhood. This way is both the way into madness, and the *Part Way Back* from it. In *The Creative Mystique*, Susan Kavalier-Adler interprets Sexton’s words as a monologue to her own internal mother and defines the central theme of the poem as a “narcissistic tragedy.”<sup>65</sup> Kavalier-Adler suggests that within the mother who “uses her child to mirror herself” there is an infant who has been traumatically separated from her real, external mother (201). This external mother represents the mother who never gave the child what she needed in terms of mirroring. By textually enacting her own passage into (and out of) madness, Sexton graduates from the false image of Mother; offering an image of herself as a poet of “the mental cases”:

I checked out for the last time  
on the first of May;  
graduate of the mental cases,  
with my analyst’s okay,  
my complete book of rhymes,  
my typewriter and my suitcases. (58)

As the final poem in *Bedlam*, “The Division of Parts” (62-67) follows on directly from “The Double Image,” signaling the themes of disinheritance and rejection that take centre stage in *All My Pretty Ones*. The death of the mother enacts a series of divisions, of money, parts and ways, in which the mother and daughter finally and permanently become separated. The mother disappears into the elsewhere space beyond pleasure, beyond this world; she is only reachable

through the words of the melancholic poem. The maternal figure persists in the things or parts which, via the terms of the mother's will, construct the daughter's new role as inheritor:

I am one third  
of your daughters counting my bounty  
or I am queen alone  
in the parlor still,  
eating the bread and honey. (62)

Through the death of the mother, the daughters become divided-up or dispersed (each one is "alone"), at the same time as they enter into a contract with grief. Yet Sexton's "queen alone" state suggests a return to childhood and the spoiling attentions of a mother (feeding her "bread and honey"), as well as the *Bedlam* threat of derangement. "The Division of Parts" evokes an associative return to the first poem of *Bedlam*, "You, Doctor Martin" (3), in which Sexton describes herself as the "queen of this summer hotel" (3). In "The Division of Parts," Sexton again confronts the "stalk / of death." The poem's sting associates regressive childhood states and melancholia, as the pathological effects of mourning. At the very outset, the eating or counting of motherly inheritance is laced with ambivalence and even foreboding as "Black birds pick at my window sill" (62):

Your coat in my closet,  
your bright stones on my hand,  
the gaudy fur animals  
I do not know how to use,  
settle on me like a debt. (62)

Sexton attempts to resuscitate and preserve the dead maternal object, risking her own disappearance into the elsewhere space of the dead. By incorporating the dead object into herself,

Sexton preserves her link to the dead. In *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, Christina Britzolakis describes the consolatory process of elegy, in which the “lost object is transformed into an artefact” (193). In Sexton’s poem, the lost mother transforms into multiple objects and artefacts, divided among her daughters. The objects of inheritance suggest the legacy of femininity: “I bundled out with gifts I did not choose” (62). The mother’s closet of things, of accessorized outfits and matching hats and shoes emphasize the burden of maternal inheritance. In death, these objects occupy a transitional status as they pass from mother to daughter. Although the coat is in the daughter’s own closet, she uses the accusatory possessive “your” to describe the mother’s objects: “your bright stones on my hand.” Using the word “stones” rather than jewels or rings, compounds the weight and burden of these objects.<sup>66</sup> They are more like a clasp than an adornment, locking the daughter’s hand into the mother’s destiny. Sexton does not know “how to use” the coat itself, among multiple “gaudy fur animals” hanging in the closet; it does not reveal its function except as a burdensome legacy item.<sup>67</sup>

In her memoir of her mother, Linda Sexton describes her mother’s identification with Friedan’s text:

Though Mother never applied the word “feminist” to herself, when I was fifteen she gave me her copy of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique*, complete with her scribbled notes across the pages — notes that showed her identification with the problems Friedan described.<sup>68</sup>

In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan reported that in the 1950s, the fur industry considered itself in trouble. Increasingly, high numbers of young high school and college girls were equating fur coats with feminine uselessness, and being a kept woman.<sup>69</sup> Friedan writes that two out of three woman felt that “mink-wearers” were predatory, exploitative, dependent and

socially non-productive. The fur industry responded to these negative connotations through attempts to create a desirably feminine image of the fur garment as a “delightful necessity,” worn by happy women (195). Friedan cites the following guidelines for the fur industry’s counter-advertising:

Place furs in a family setting; show the pleasure and admiration of a fur garment derived by family members, husband and children; their pride in their mother’s appearance, in her ownership of a fur garment. Develop fur garments as ‘family’ gifts – enable the whole family to enjoy that garment at Christmas, etc., thus reducing its ego-orientation for the owner and eliminating her guilt over her alleged self-indulgence. (195)

In “The Division of Parts,” these “garments” and “family gifts” settle on the daughter “like a debt.” They suggest the daughter’s heavy obligation to the dead. The things of the deceased mother, the contents of a house, read like the catalogue of a life lived within conventional if not conservative bounds: “we sorted your things: obstacles / of letters, family silver, / eyeglasses and shoes.” Like the obstacles of convention, of formal tables laid with silver and accessorized outfits with matching hats and shoes, these maternal things represent the burden of feminine inheritance. Moreover, they weigh like obstacles to the daughter’s identity.

Like the advertisements for “Handmade Swedish Crystal” by R.F. Brodegaard accompanying Louise Bogan’s *New Yorker* review of *All My Pretty Ones*, these maternal objects are fetishized, at once desirable and obstacles to desire.<sup>70</sup> Alongside Bogan’s review is an advertisement for *The Pumpkin Eater* by Penelope Mortimer. It asks the question, “What’s the matter with Mrs. Armitage?”





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is a clerical comedy, which, since the setting is Spanish, also comes to a grim ending. The poor lunatic becomes the football in a struggle for power inside the diocese. To further his own ends, a parish priest scheming against his elderly and incompetent bishop plans to use the scandal caused by the young man, whose preachings lead to his arrest as a Communist; the bishop plans to exploit the scandal for another purpose; and the bishop's ambitious secretary has yet another scheme in mind. If del Castillo were merely being frivolous, he would be content to work this business of diamond-cut-diamond for its potential as farce. Instead, he movingly and touchingly describes how one of these schemers—Mosén Risueño, the parish priest—is brought to the meaning of his faith by contact with the lunatic. He knows that he is dealing not with a saint but with innocence betrayed, and that what he has been planning has been part of the betrayal. A crisis of conscience in which virtue triumphs is not easy for an author to handle without striking the note of priggishness, but del Castillo manages it, and makes his Father Risueño both credible as a Christian and likable as a man. The organization of the book owes a lot to Anatole France, a better writer than many people nowadays think, but the stylistic model del Castillo has taken is laconic and dry, with many direct approaches from author to reader, including footnotes commenting on the action. It suits del Castillo well and his Spanish material even better. The strength of the writing, however, is a matter of attitude; though del Castillo is intellectually French, he is in love with Spain. The warmth of feeling that underlies even his harshest criticisms makes "Through the Hoop" a thoroughly satisfying novel.

—ANTHONY WEST

#### VERSE

NOW that the work of male poets writing in English seems to have settled down into a few standard categories of material (bland, horrific) and of treatment (formal, loose), it is interesting to notice that poetry written by women (once thought to be limited to a rather narrow vein of personal lyricism) has also sorted itself out into a few basic kinds. To separate the work of women writers from the work of men is, naturally, a highly unfeminist action. But beneath surface likenesses, women's poetry continues to be unlike men's, all feminist statements to the contrary notwithstanding. Women function differently, in art as in life,

## What's the matter with Mrs. Armitage

**Listen to her fourth husband, Jake Armitage:** "We've got enough children. Good God, we've got enough! She can't go on having children forever, anyway, what for? She's got a bloody houseful already. And me, she's got me!"

**Listen to her psychiatrist:** "But you had two divorces and for a short time you were a widow. Could it be that in spite of what might be called a very full life, it's sex you really hate? Sex itself, you're frightened of?"

**Listen to her father:** "I'm not going to have you trailing home with half a dozen more children in five years time and another messed up marriage on your hands."

**Listen to her family doctor:** "Don't forget I've known your wife for twelve years. She's a remarkable woman, full of life. This doesn't make sense to me"

**And then listen to Mrs. Armitage:** "What, I asked myself — was I frightened of? Healthy and whole, married to a fourth husband (why four?) who loved me, with a bodyguard of children (why so many?) — what was I frightened of?"

## This novel is about Mrs. Armitage

(wife of the highly successful film writer) who in her 38th year, and with all her wits and beauty about her, finds her world closing in.

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"Stylish, witty, very funny and very sad."

—MARK SCHORER



## The Pumpkin Eater

A NOVEL BY  
**PENELOPE MORTIMER**

Author of *A Villa in Summer* and *Saturday Lunch with the Brownings*. 3rd printing before publication. \$4.95, at your bookstore

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Fig. 13. Advertisement for *The Pumpkin Eater* by Penelope Mortimer, *New Yorker* 27 Ap. 1963:



The catalogue of characters who the reader should “Listen to,” in order to understand ‘what’s the matter’ with Mrs. Housewife, includes her psychiatrist and her family doctor. Mrs. Armitage herself is “frightened,” of what she could not say, of a problem that has no name. After years of writing articles for *Harper’s*, *Reader’s Digest* and *Good Housekeeping*, it was in 1963 that Friedan coined the term “The Problem That Has No Name.” As Kirsten Fermaglich points out, after a national publicity tour, and excerpts in *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Mademoiselle*, Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* became a best-seller.<sup>71</sup> In the opening chapter which names the “nameless problem,” Friedan suggests the answer to what’s the matter with Mrs. Armitage:

The problem lay buried, unspoken for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban housewife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question: ‘Is this all?’ (13)

According to Friedan, the problem was really to do with listening to the experts who told American women how to “buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and build a swimming pool with their own hands; how to dress, look and act more feminine” (13).<sup>72</sup> The kitchen debate politicized the domestic.

As Clare Pollard argues, while Sexton celebrated the domestic, she also made use of “her incarnation as a beautiful, muffin-making mother-of-two to reveal the nightmare at the core of the family” (1). By writing from within the kitchen, full of its own pleasures and horrors, Sexton’s

poetic gestures were highly subversive. Illuminating Sexton's radical stance, Pollard describes how the housewife's economic function was centralised around the Tupperware party:

Party Susans (a segmented hors d'oeuvre dish) and TV Tumblers were sold in tones such as frosted crystal and sapphire blue to housewives visiting each other's homes. During these social occasions they were encouraged to play games devised by Tupperware such as 'Clothes Pin', 'Waist Management' and 'Game of Gossip', which reinforced supposedly 'feminine' concerns. (5)

Betty Friedan's research into the American housewife led her to conclude that American women had been "taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets" and who, like Sexton, publically wrote against the inheritance of 1950s feminine housewifely conventions.<sup>73</sup> Friedan controversially wrote of the housewife's suburban home as a "comfortable concentration camp," which Kirsten Fermaglich addresses in her article on Nazi imagery in *The Feminine Mystique* (210). As Fermaglich points out, Friedan borrowed liberally from Bruno Bettelheim's writings on concentration camps in order to argue that, like camp prisoners, suburban housewives were "dehumanized by their pointless work" (210). In many ways, "The Division of Parts," prefigures Sexton's small (though frequently cited) poem "Housewife," from *All My Pretty Ones*:

Some women marry houses.  
It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,  
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.  
The walls are permanent and pink.  
See how she sits on her knees all day,  
faithfully washing herself down.  
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah



into their fleshly mothers.

A woman *is* her mother.

That's the main thing. (48)

Sexton's image of the American housewife "on her knees all day, / faithfully washing herself down," suggests both obsessive devotion and the potential for perversion within the desire for polished cleanliness, a kind of internalized fascism.<sup>74</sup> As Gill argues, it also suggests the "perpetual cycle of consumption and waste," creating a strict contract between women and the home (78). The devout housewife suffers her work in order to achieve a "sweet martyrdom," to make her interior-decorated "pink" walls clean, reflexively becoming her house. The skin, like the walls of the house, represents a comfortable "pink" prison, within which her "heart / mouth, liver and bowel movements" are perpetually cleaned and maintained.

As in "The Operation" (*Pretty* 12-16) the mother's body is represented as a "gentle house" that shelters the embryos of both a child or daughter, and cancer.<sup>75</sup> Following Friedan, in the dream image of suburban American housewife, she was liberated from this type of drudgery by "labour-saving appliances" (15), the other question persisted: "What kind of a woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfilment waxing the kitchen floor?" (17). Or as Pollard suggests, another persistent question that conflated decor and personality in magazines like *House Beautiful* demanded of the housewife: "What *is* your house saying about you?" (9). Pollard suggests Sexton's potential for 'feminist camp' (20), which is particularly at work in "Housewife." There is an element of reactionary bad taste in Sexton's imagery ("a mouth, a liver, and bowel movements"), as a direct response to the tasteful mythology of the 1950s suburban housewife. Pollard makes her point about Sexton's "camp" more generally:

At the same time, with her imagery of Bobbsy twins, Duz and martinis, and the dedication of a poem to her uterus, Sexton exaggerates the assumed essence of woman – fleshy, over-emotional, domestic, swimming in pop-culture’s “matriarchal goo.” (21)

Sexton’s vision of the housewife contains an element of drag – her pink make-up made permanent for the erotic adventures of husbands.<sup>76</sup> If woman *is* her mother, it follows that men marry their mothers; the perverse, the taboo, is never far from the domestic enclosure. “Housewife” links Sexton’s first two books through its figuration of motherly inheritance: “a woman *is* her mother. That’s the main thing.”

In “The Division of Parts,” the mother’s death alters maternal objects through the transitional process of inheritance; these objects have always belonged to the daughter by right, even prior to possession of the maternal estate. What the daughter is rejecting in “The Division of Parts” (and what Sexton parodies in “Housewife”), is the deadly feminine. But only some women disappear into the house as an all-American object, becoming another part of the furniture. The pretty “pink” and “permanent” walls of the house suggest the prettified solidity of a constructed identity, “another kind of skin” as a prefabricated feminine role, a “kind of” camp death. As a site of the ongoing maternal, the “pink” house represents all “fleshy mothers,” and as the site of abject mimicry for married American suburban woman. Friedan and Sexton both perceived the family home as an identity trap, its comforts the ultimate deception.

The death of the mother represents both an excavation and an evacuation of the family house, as well as the house of memory, the rooms and spaces of childhood. The maternal objects excavated from the house reappear, reincarnated as gifts that the daughter does not choose

herself. Instead they settle like a debt that must be counted or sorted through. The objects themselves become emblems for the incorporation of the lost object, the dead mother. Yet Sexton is outwardly dismissive of her loss, as her mother does not die, but is textually preserved, as “loss”:

My timely loss  
is too customary to note; and yet  
I planned to suffer  
and I cannot. It does not please  
my yankee bones to watch  
where the dying is done  
in its ugly hours. (63)

Sexton suggests that her reluctance to “watch” or witness illness is peculiarly American (“yankee”), where sickness is to be both contained and avoided. In many ways, Sexton’s *Bedlam* poems occupy this paradoxical position, illustrating how the sickness of mental illness is contained and cordoned-off in the invisible world of the asylum, yet offering access to this ‘off-scene’ and obscene suffering. The daughter’s yankee bones in “The Division of Parts” are like the bones of the reader who cannot bear “to watch where the dying is done.”

Sexton presupposes her reader’s reaction, and offers comfort. In discovering that she cannot begin to suffer as she had planned to, Sexton suggests the pain of ambivalence, from where the reality of loss cannot be accessed. Figuratively and physically, she is housed behind the window glass of immobilizing grief, to the point that she is unable to actively mourn the loss of her mother. The glass protects her ambivalent and melancholic position of mourning. Behind the glass of her imitation of belief, the daughter finds she does not own her grief.

In rejecting her grief over the loss of her mother, Sexton enacts her refusal to assume the mother's legacy, to wear the garments of femininity, or to lose her identity in loss. Packing her mother's nightgowns in suitcases, Sexton plays a game of pretend that people who are no longer alive still "live in places," and that assuming the abject position of mourner is a matter only of belief. The nightgowns she brings home with her encourage the pretence of femininity as a means to avoid grief. She remarks that she has "pretended ease" behind a mask of feminine "trickeries," yet "not enough / to shed [her] daughterhood" (65). In the final poem in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, Sexton prefigures the themes of *All My Pretty Ones*, suggesting the danger inherent in the work of mourning. The main danger to woman is the threat of becoming her mother, by allowing herself to become dead through abject mimicry, or the incorporation of the dead maternal.

Sexton cannot shed her daughterhood by severing the libidinal bond between herself and her lost object; the identity of daughter persists, even in death. This reflects Schenck's description of the tentative resolution at the end of "The Division of Parts," in which the mother descends in order to comfort her daughter, suggesting separation through "attachment rather than rupture," or attachment as a means to recovery (18-19). In the event of death, Sexton cannot detach herself from the events of memory, while she is "still ... heavy with cloths" of the mother. She lounges in the "sad stuff": both the garments and the memories attached to them. The loss of the mother represents a lost childhood that is now "gone," has become the past, like her mother (66). In cursing her mother and naming her dead, the daughter imagines three stones slipping from her mother's "glittering eyes." The three stones, like the bright stones on the daughter's hand at the start of the poem, suggest the daughter's acceptance of loss, through a fantasy of her mother's disappearance. By sleeping in her mother's Bonwit Teller nightgown, Sexton preserves an on-going attachment to the mother, yet without the "gaudy" or "glittering" displays of femininity, or

identification. Because the daughter did not choose these inherited gifts, she must learn to integrate loss within her identity as a poet, which becomes the work of Sexton's second book, *All My Pretty Ones*.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Lowell, "Home After Three Months Away," *Life Studies* (London: Faber, 1959): 98.

<sup>2</sup> In his review of *Bedlam* ("The Hungry Sheep Look Up," *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton*, ed. Linda Wagner-Martin [G. K. Hall, 1989]: 19-24), Neil Myers describes Hiroshima as an "extension of *Bedlam*."

<sup>3</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 22 May 1962, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger:

Dr.: Can you explain?

A.S.: Explain? It's written in the book.

Dr.: What book?

A.S.: The book that therapy follows. I know it.

Dr.: You don't like that book do you?

A.S.: No. If it makes you well, you can never get out of it, it's all right, if that's the way it has to be. I'll fight it, but that's the way it will be. That's the way I am anyway.

<sup>4</sup> In his preface to *Transformations*, Vonnegut writes that Sexton "domesticates my terror, examines it and describes it, teaches it some tricks which will amuse me, then lets it gallop in my forest once more."

<sup>5</sup> Thomas P. McDonnell, "Light in a Dark Journey," *America* 116 (13 May 1967) 729-31, rpt. in *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton*, ed. Linda Wagner-Martin (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1989) 40-44.

<sup>6</sup> Sexton described "The Double Image" as a "homecoming poem" for her daughter Joy, in which she had to kill her mother in order to complete it (therapy tape, rec. 3 Feb. 1962, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

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<sup>7</sup> Photograph taken by T. Polumbaum. Anne's Sexton author shot on the back cover of *Bedlam*. The reference to Bishop's letter to Lowell (19 May 1961) occurs in Middlebrook's essay, "Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell" (*Original Essays on the Poetry of Anne Sexton*, ed. Francis Bixler. Conway, Arkansas: U of Central Arkansas P 1988, 18-19), and is part of the collection at the Houghton Library, Harvard. The photograph used for the backcover of *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), was taken by Elizabeth Bishop's friend Rollie McKenna (Bishop, Letter to Anne Sexton, 14 Sept. 1962, correspondence, box 18, folder 1, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC).

<sup>8</sup> Middlebrook, "Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell," Bixler 17-18. Sexton's letter to Snodgrass (25 Mar. 1960) is from the correspondence series (box 27, folder 7), Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

<sup>9</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 9 May 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>10</sup> Sexton, *Letters*, xxi. The photograph of "The Sextons" was taken by Charles Carey, and originally appeared in the *Boston Globe*, June 1961.

<sup>11</sup> Middlebrook has termed Sexton's transformation, her fairytale-like "metamorphosis from suburban housewife into major poet." See: "'I Tapped My Own Head': The Apprenticeship of Anne Sexton," *Coming to Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Diane Middlebrook and Marilyn Yalom (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1985): 195.

<sup>12</sup> Paula Salvio, "'... [I] Bend Down My Strange Face to Yours, And Forgive You': A Study of Anne Sexton's Pedagogy of Reparation," *Anne Sexton: Teacher of Weird Abundance* (New York: SUNY P, 2007): 81.

<sup>13</sup> Clare Pollard, "Her Kind: Anne Sexton, the Cold War and the idea of the housewife," *Critical Quarterly* 48.3 (Autumn 2006): 21.

<sup>14</sup> Salvio suggests that the object I have taken to be a clock is in fact a barometer.

<sup>15</sup> In this particular dream, Sexton imagined that Jackie wasn't "as rich as all the newspapers say." She dreamt that Jackie also came from a middle-class family and had "lived in a very small room": "And I met her and we talked and we liked each other. She liked me because I was a poet ..." (Sexton, therapy

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tape, rec. 12 Sept. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger). Middlebrook also cites a letter from Sexton to her publicity agent at Houghton Mifflin, in which she jokes about sending a copy of *All My Pretty Ones*, to Jacqueline Kennedy at the White House: "She is cultural; she is a woman; she is a mother; doesn't she have a dead father? And her husband comes from Massachusetts" (1992 194).

<sup>16</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 25 Sept. 1962, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>17</sup> The reference to I. Magnin clothes (a high fashion, luxury department store) occurs in Middlebrook (248). During an interview for the *USA: Poetry* series on National Educational Television, the interviewer, expressing his "puzzlement at all the contradictions" he was witnessing asked Sexton: "Here you are, this puritanical, beautiful chick and I. Magnin clothes; how do we handle that?" The poet replied: "I don't know how you handle that. That's going to be your problem, 'cause underneath it, the bad witch writes her poems."

<sup>18</sup> Margo Davy's article is titled, "Educational Second Wind for Doctor and Poet: South Acton, Newton Mothers Included in Radcliffe Independent Study Program," Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>19</sup> This phrase refers to a letter Sylvia Plath wrote Sexton, after reading *Bedlam*. Plath affectionately signs off: "Please sit down one day between the poem & the stewpot & write a newsy letter" (5 Feb. 1961, correspondence, box 24, folder 4, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC).

<sup>20</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1977): 9.

<sup>21</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981): 13.

<sup>22</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 17 Oct. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with William Heyen and Al Poulin, *American Poets in 1976*, ed. William Heyen (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill), rpt. in *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1985): 134.

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- <sup>24</sup> Barbara Kevles, "The Art of Poetry: Anne Sexton," Interview with Anne Sexton, *Paris Review* 52 (Summer 1971) 159-91, rpt. in McClatchy 9.
- <sup>25</sup> Sexton, "Lecture One," works, box 16, folder 5, ms., Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC, 1.
- <sup>26</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 14 Feb. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.
- <sup>27</sup> James Dickey, "First Five Books," rev. of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, by Anne Sexton, *Poetry* (1961), rpt. in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale* (1988): 63-4.
- <sup>28</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 14 Feb. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger. According to Sexton, this was exactly what she was afraid of – an attack on her technique, as though someone had "found her out."
- <sup>29</sup> Richard Howard, "Anne Sexton: 'Some Tribal Female Who Is Known But Forbidden,'" *Alone With America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950* (New York: Atheneum, 1971) 442-50, rpt. in McClatchy 193.
- <sup>30</sup> Allen Grossman, "The Point of View of the Survivor: The Poems of Anne Sexton," *The Justice* 11 June 1960, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.
- <sup>31</sup> Thomas Lask, "Books of The Times: From Battlefield to Asylum," rev. of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, by Anne Sexton, *New York Times* 18 July 1960.
- <sup>32</sup> R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1960; London: Penguin, 1965).
- <sup>33</sup> Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law & Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000): 117.
- <sup>34</sup> Karen Alkalay-Gut, "'For We Swallow Magic and We Deliver Anne': Anne Sexton's Use of Her Name," *The Anna Book: Searching for Anna in Literary History*, ed. Mickey Pearlman (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood P, 1992): 140.
- <sup>35</sup> Sexton, Interview with Barbara Kevles, McClatchy 6.



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<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, "Scientia Sexualis," *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1976; New York: Vintage, 1990): 61-62.

<sup>37</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 19 Mar. 1963, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger. In another session, Sexton described her newlywed desire for the "perfect" house, children and marriage (Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 30 Dec. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

<sup>38</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993): 127.

<sup>39</sup> Middlebrook, "I Tapped My Own Head" 203.

<sup>40</sup> Holmes, Letter to Anne Sexton, 8 Feb. 1959, box 20, folder 6, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

<sup>41</sup> This is the opening quotation that Sexton chose for *Bedlam*, taken from "a letter of Schopenhauer to Goethe, November 1815": "But most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to inquire further..."

<sup>42</sup> Alicia Ostriker, "Anne Sexton and the Seduction of the Audience," *Seduction and Theory: Readings of Gender, Representation, and Rhetoric, Theory: Readings of Gender, Representation, and Rhetoric*, ed. Dianne Hunter (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1989): 168. Ostriker further suggests that by advising Sexton against publishing her 'mad' poems, Homes "accuses Sexton, in other words, of what might be called an analog of attempted rape. His assumption is that her experiences are not only painful but intrinsically without interest, and that others cannot identify with her or them" (156).

<sup>43</sup> The reader response also suggests this cathartic aspect to Sexton's work, as Janet Luedtke discovered in the archive of fan mail at the HRHRC, which included the "triumphant tale of the young woman who writes in 1968 from the closed ward of a psychiatric hospital, but who, by 1973, has recovered, married, and gone on to graduate school in art therapy" ("Something Special for Someone': Anne Sexton's Fan Letters from Women," *Rossetti to Sexton*): 170.

<sup>44</sup> In another letter to Snodgrass written on "Sat. 7:00 A.M. [circa November 15, 1958]," Sexton indulges what she terms a "confused" epistle at the end of which, having stated that "[p]oetry has

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saved my life," she declares: "I am going into a mental institution today. I am hearing voices. I am never sane, you know..." (*Letters* 42).

<sup>45</sup> In an unpublished poem in the Anne Sexton Papers at the Schlesinger Library titled "Appointment Hour" (2 Jan. 1957), the poet makes a similar association between the therapist and eating:

Doctor, I want to know,  
Do you ever eat?  
The dinner hour arrives  
Each time we meet.

<sup>46</sup> Jo Gill, "Anne Sexton's Poetics of the Suburbs," *Health, Heredity and the Modern Home*, ed. Mark Jackson (Routledge, 2007): 66.

<sup>47</sup> Sexton creates a similar scenario in an early version of "Kind Sir," an unpublished draft entitled "Psychoanalysis: The Noon Slice" (Sexton, works, box 10, folder 6, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC). Sexton sets her poem within the "One hour" of the psychotherapy session. As a game of loss, the therapy session reads like an attempt to trick the "bric-a-brac" or "fool the piggy bank" of the "audible mind[s]" into free association. The psychotherapy trick recalls the old childhood game of becoming lost in reverie.

<sup>48</sup> "Hey Mister," 29 Sept. 1957, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger Library.

<sup>49</sup> An early version of "Noon Walk," titled "The Closing Vise" [sic] (7 Feb. 1957) can be found in the Anne Sexton Papers at the Schlesinger Library.

<sup>50</sup> Arnold M. Ludwig, *How Do We Know Who We Are?: A Biography of the Self* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997): 209.

<sup>51</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia UP, 2001): 40.

<sup>52</sup> Caroline King Barnard Hall, "Transformations: A Magic Mirror," Bixler 109.

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<sup>53</sup> In her *Paris Review* interview, Sexton described the style of her work in *Bedlam*. “In *Bedlam*, I used very tight form in most cases ... forming a stanza, a verse, making it an entity, and then coming to a little conclusion at the end of it, a little shock, a little double-rhyme shock” (McClatchy 13).

<sup>54</sup> Karen Alkalay-Gut, “The Dream Life of Ms. Dog: Anne Sexton’s Revolutionary Use of Pop Culture,” *College Literature* 32.4 (Fall 2005): 50-73.

<sup>55</sup> This is most likely to have been Jackson’s collection *The Lottery and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1949).

<sup>56</sup> Sexton, “Witch,” works, box 11, folder 2, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

<sup>57</sup> Deborah Forbes, “The Drama of Breakdown and the Breakdown of Drama: The Charismatic Poetry of Byron and Sexton,” *Sincerity’s Shadow: Self-Consciousness in British Romantic and Mid-Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004): 131.

<sup>58</sup> In an early version of “Her Kind” the witch is a creature of despair with a “wicked appetite” (Sexton, “Night Voice on a Broomstick,” works, box 10, folder 2, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC). She is very much the Salem ghost of All Hallows Eve, a lewd pumpkin skimming above the trees, where “October bends.” Middlebrook suggests that in 1957, “Night Voice” would have been a “sentimental piece of verse that might have found a home in the Halloween issue of a woman’s magazine” (“Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell,” Bixler 16).

<sup>59</sup> Jo Gill, “Textual Confessions: Narcissism in Anne Sexton’s Early Poetry,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 50.1 (Spring 2004): 59-87. Gill writes that “The Double Image” can “be read in terms of Lacan’s understanding of narcissism—as an examination of the way in which we achieve subjectivity by perceiving and identifying ourselves in relation to others” (71).

<sup>60</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP): 60.

<sup>61</sup> Sexton, “Through a Small Window,” works, box 11, folder 1, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

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<sup>62</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function," *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006): 94.

<sup>63</sup> Sexton, "The great theme is not Romea and Juliet.." [sic], works, box 16, folder 4, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC. Sexton states that her poem is "about insanity and suicide and recovery ... about guilt and death and the final survival of love."

<sup>64</sup> Sexton, "The Double Image," 18 Feb. 1958, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>65</sup> Kavalier-Adler, *Creative Mystique* 201.

<sup>66</sup> Jahan Ramazani suggests that this process of encumbering "rather than empowering" the survivor through the burden of these objects, reverses their significance as inheritance within traditional elegy (*Poetry of Mourning: the Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994, 301).

<sup>67</sup> Sexton commented to Orne (28 Nov. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger), that every time she put on her mother's "genuine" fur coat, she felt like her mother.

<sup>68</sup> Linda Gray Sexton, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* (Boston: Little Brown & Co, 1994): 98.

<sup>69</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; London: Penguin, 1965): 195.

<sup>70</sup> Bogan, Louise. "Verse." Rev. of *All My Pretty Ones*, by Anne Sexton. *New Yorker* 27 Ap. 1963: 173-75. Rpt. in McClatchy 126-27.

<sup>71</sup> Kirsten Fermaglich, "'The Comfortable Concentration Camp': The Significance of Nazi Imagery in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)," *American Jewish History* 91.2 (June 2003): 223.

<sup>72</sup> In *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics*, Michael Davidson discusses Frank O'Hara's "Poem (Khrushchev Is Coming on the Right Day!)" in relation to the cold war implications of kitchen cabinet aesthetics: "O'Hara invokes a major cold war figure whose arrival in New York on 18 September 1959 was eagerly anticipated. It was a visit inspired by a meeting earlier in the year between Vice President Nixon and the Soviet leader at an international exhibition in Moscow. In the 'kitchen cabinet' the two cold war warriors sparred over the superiority not of weaponry or ideology but of

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domestic conveniences like refrigerators and dishwashers. In the debate, Nixon equated the capitalist virtues of choice and competition with the female homemaker's right to choose brands of kitchen equipment ..." (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004): 66.

<sup>73</sup> Friedan explains the myth of the feminine mystique in the following way: "In the fifteen years after the Second World War, this mystique of feminine fulfilment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture. Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands good-bye in front of the picture window, depositing their stationwagonsful of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless kitchen floor.... They gloried in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: 'Occupation: housewife'" (16). Joanne Meyerowitz makes an interesting critique of Friedan's "hyperbolic" (245) misuse of popular culture in "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958", in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994): 229-262.

<sup>74</sup> Sexton's characterization of the housewife is echoed in Janet Malcolm's description in *The Silent Woman*, of the photographs of a young Sylvia Plath: "With her shining blond hair and her soft rounded face, she evokes the soap and deodorant advertisements of the 1940s and '50s, in which the words 'dainty' and 'fresh' never failed to appear" (54).

<sup>75</sup> From "The Operation":

It grew in her  
as simply as a child would grow,  
as simply as she housed me once, fat and female.  
Always my most gentle house before that embryo  
of evil spread in her shelter and she grew frail. (12)

<sup>76</sup> Pollard continues: "When Sexton stresses that she is 'an actress in her own autobiographical play,' we can begin to see her self-proclaimed pose as 'housewife-poet' as containing an element of drag –

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especially as we know that after her breakdown, Sexton basically ceased to do most domestic duties”

(21).

### III

## Catalogues of Lost Baggage

But then what, silence? Is this not another wound, another insult?

To whom?

Derrida "Roland Barthes"<sup>1</sup>

### **Mother, father, I'm made of**

The elegiac tone of the title poem of Sexton's second book, *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), was not to the taste of her editors at the *New Yorker* magazine. In a letter to Sexton, Rachel MacKenzie suggests that it was her treatment rather than subject matter that made the poem unsuitable for the magazine:

Alas, your feeling about ALL MY PRETTY ONES and The New Yorker proves to be right; it has not gone through. And I think you're probably right about the reason — that it's treatment rather than subject. On the other hand, we liked a lot about the poem and it may not be as far off as you feel that it is.<sup>2</sup>

MacKenzie's comments hint at Sexton's radical treatment of mourning in her second book. In "The Division of Parts," the final poem of *Bedlam*, Sexton bitterly cursed the figure of the dead mother for abandoning her daughter. In her second book, poems such as "The Truth the Dead Know" (3), "All My Pretty Ones" (4-5), "The Operation" (12-16), "The House" (41-44) and "A Curse Against Elegies" (19) continue this disruption of the pretty-picture past. Through a provocative dismantling of the closed spaces of nostalgia, of a childhood dominated by the "mother, father I'm made of" (10), Sexton directs a backwards, melancholic gaze into the halls of memory.

Sexton initially previewed the manuscript of her second book to her former poetry teacher, Robert Lowell. Following her correspondence with Lowell, Sexton wrote to her editor Paul Brooks at Houghton Mifflin. She passed on to Brooks Lowell's comments adding perhaps disingenuously that his remarks could not be used in the book's publicity (*Letters* 133). In his letter to Sexton, Lowell writes:

The best thing about your book is its unstopped fullness. I get an impression of increasing supply and weight; indeed your first book spills into the second and somehow adds to it. Perhaps you shouldn't be too critical, and should have no fears, except the fear of losing your material and screaming off into vagueness.

This you haven't done.<sup>3</sup>

Sexton was very pleased with Lowell's "awfully nice" comments, especially after having confided to him her concerns about the title of her second book:

someone has told me that the working title *All My Pretty Ones* was used in a book about models and call girls and maybe is going to be made into a musical on Broadway next year. I don't think *that* would help my book. I could call it *The Survivor* or *The Truth the Dead Know*. Got any ideas? (*Letters* 135)

The association between models and call girls cannot have been lost on Sexton. As a sometime model and door-to-door cosmetics salesgirl, Sexton certainly realized the potential value of Lowell's praise in marketing her book. Lowell's summation that Sexton had "made her life her treasury," situated the poet firmly within the confessional niche, explicitly linking her name to the eminent House of Lowell, worlds away from the wilder Beat confessionals. In the same letter, Lowell states that Sexton has written a:

number of poems that roll along in something I'd call your version of my Life Studies style; the method, and often the emotions, (This come from similar experience not imitation—I often think [when reading your poems], I've felt this too, but never written about it) ... (1 Dec. 1961 HRHRC)



The legacy of *Life Studies* reverberates throughout *All My Pretty Ones*, particularly Lowell's bequest of "revelations of mental illness and family trauma" (Kirsch 1). Sexton's book seems to spring from Lowell's entangled Oedipal romances; his un-sentimental elegies, treating the deaths of his mother, father and grandfather, which form the "Life Studies" series, and include "Commander Lowell" (84-86), "Father's Bedroom" (89), "For Sale" (90), "Sailing Home from Rapallo" (91-92) and "During Fever" (93-94).<sup>4</sup> Lowell's elegies provide rooms for his parents' corpses. As a house of poems, *Life Studies* contains its dead, preserving their "graveyard's soil," "coffin" and "casket" (91-92). Just as Sexton refuses her dead parents the public, outward rites of mourning, so too do Lowell's parents remain unburied, yet preserved, within his elegies. Lowell's image of Sexton mining her "treasury" was suitably psychoanalytic, suggesting as it did the work of an archaeological dig through layers of consciousness, while retaining the erotic component of creative cultivation.



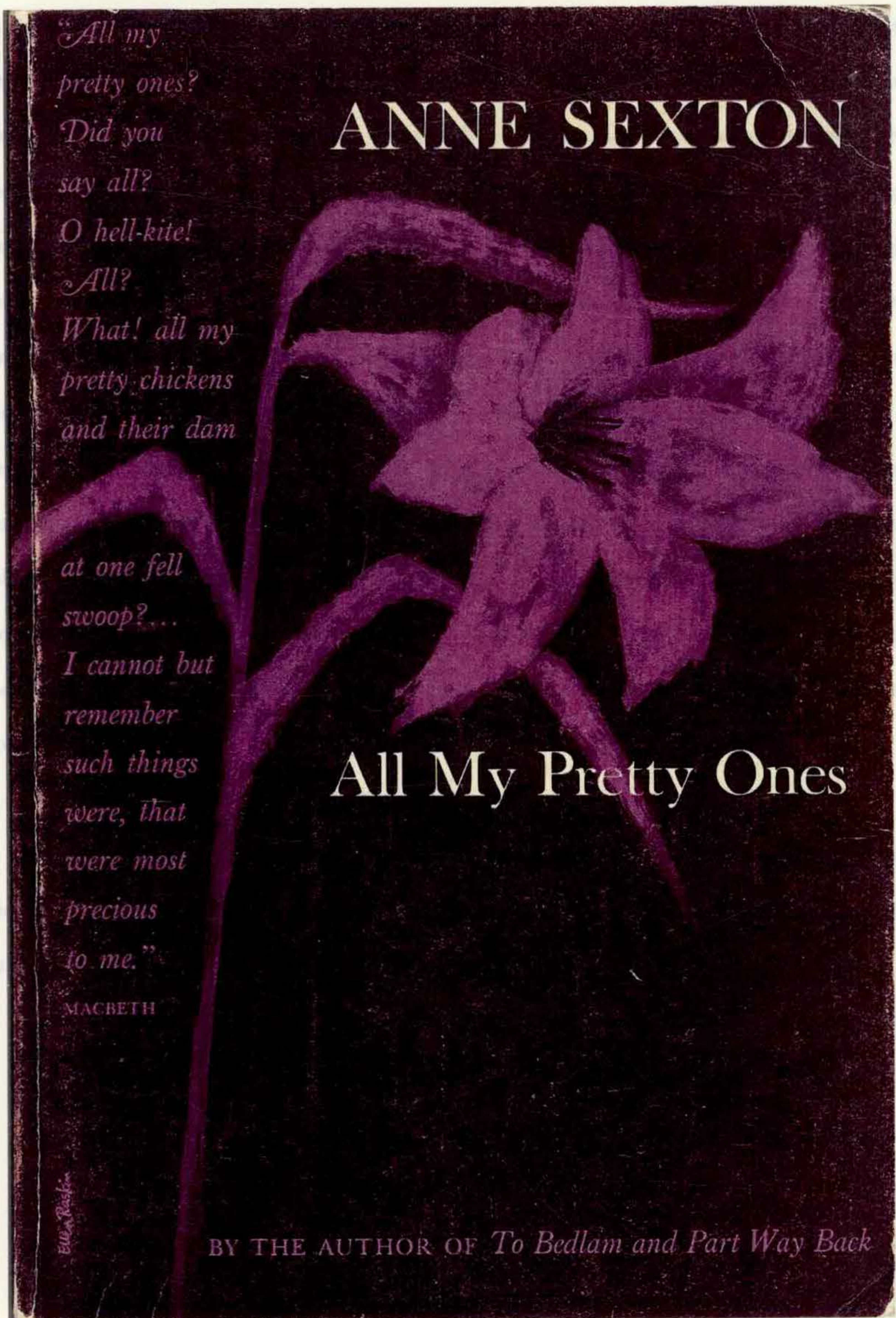


Fig. 14. Front cover of *All My Pretty Ones* (1962). Illustration by Ellen Raskin.



On 29 March 1962, Sexton brought a copy of her new book to her therapy session with Dr. Orne.<sup>5</sup> During the session, Sexton begins to associate the purple and violet colours used on the cover of her book with moments in therapy when she was unable to speak. At one point she complains, "My book is about the dead!" and, producing the purple volume from her handbag, remarks: "Oh, it looks like a funeral." The cover uses Ellen Raskin's illustration of a strikingly funereal wilting purple death-lily. Exasperated by the impending publication, Sexton declares to Orne: "It looks like a terrible death, you see? That colour? And it's got the quote." Within the context of "that" quote which features on the back cover of the book, Sexton envisions a "terrible death." Although she admits that she did not know what kind of cover they were designing at Houghton Mifflin, as the session continues, Sexton begins to warm to the choice of colour (although not the flower itself): "But, actually, now that I've had time, I like it!" Following the course of this interaction, Sexton's vision of a "terrible death" relates to her charged feelings about Lowell's comments. Almost a fortnight later, in her session on 10 April, Sexton began to work on her response to the Lowell quote.<sup>6</sup>

Sexton began her session on 10 April by declaring that she had made a failure of her Radcliffe grant.<sup>7</sup> She remarks that Orne told her to be a poet and so she did, but that she was not really a "great" poet, as evidenced by what she had been forced to do:

yesterday I had to write-up the back of my book jacket... I had to take out of the good quotes from people, things that they had said and make-up a back-jacket ... And, I feel as though I have destroyed myself as a poet by doing this. It isn't because they praise me, it's because, well for instance Lowell's quote, he wrote me in a letter. And I had to call him up long distance and say may I quote what you said to me privately, publicly...

Sexton's ambivalence about re-constructing herself for her book-jacket suggests the disjunction between the confessional poet and the marketing of the confessionals. Sexton states that it would

have been a different matter if the words had been presented to her by her publisher. Having to call up Lowell and then shape her own coherent praise, it was as though she'd been forced to write a positive review of herself. Through the construction of the review entitled "Anne Sexton is a Great Poet!," Sexton felt that the real Anne disappeared, as though she had "never existed anyway":

AS: Dr Orne I did the most terrible thing. I wrote down that I was great, I took it from people – and I am not great yet. ... I plagiarized it! Even though I didn't write it, I did. [Bang!]

Dr: Why do you have to be great?

AS: So I will live. [Repeats]

Dr: And you can't live and be good?

AS: No.

Dr: Why?

AS: There are so many good, they don't last, there're just a few, there is only *room* for a few.

Dr: Why do you have to last?

AS: Otherwise, why write. I must matter.

Dr: The good matters.

AS: No. Good passes, the death ... [mumbles] Great lasts, from another generation. It matters to someone else, who isn't even born yet. Matters, is a life thing.

Dr: Somewhere that's the key to your whole problem, this need to be great.

AS: I took the things I had seen, or read, Lowell's letter or – letters to my publisher, and I made them, no one gave them to me, I made them, I sat there, and I felt smaller and smaller: I felt like I was commercializing Anne Sexton, until I didn't even know who she was.

Dr: Does that make you great? ... What Lowell thinks? The thing is either great by itself or it isn't no matter who thinks what ... Why do you need to be great, why can't you be human? ...

AS: I'd rather be great and sick, I'd rather die today and be great, because look, my life would be worth much more.

Dr: Would it?

AS: Sure, it would go on.

Sexton's desire for greatness emerged in her therapy as a desire to leave a monument to herself in words. For Sexton, the poet writes against death in order to live beyond the limits of mortality: within the monumental object of the book, the poet does not dissolve or disappear. Sexton's second book houses its dead (including her own future death), collected in one place, within the language of melancholia.

Judith Butler describes melancholia as a defensive mechanism that "produces a set of spatializing tropes for psychic life, domiciles of preservation and shelter as well as arenas for struggle and persecution."<sup>8</sup> The space of Sexton's melancholic elegies, which preserve their continuity with the dead, suggests, to borrow from David Kennedy, that "mourning is unfinished and unfinishable. It also suggests an unwillingness to accept the fact of death by leaving the body figuratively and textually unburied."<sup>9</sup> Sexton shelters her dead within her poems; she writes loss, working her grief through frequently aggressive, negative, melancholy elegies. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva provides an account of such depressive mourning:

According to classic psychoanalysis theory (Abraham, Freud and Melanie Klein), depression, like mourning, conceals an aggressiveness toward the lost object, thus revealing the ambivalence of the depressed person with respect to the object of mourning. 'I love that object,' is what that person seems to say about the lost object, 'but even more so I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I

imbed it in myself; but because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad, I am non-existent, I shall kill myself.' (11)

Sexton's elegies are written from the depressive, melancholic position, in the shadow of the poet's own death. As a gesture beyond towering loss, and narcissistic identification with the fate of the dead, Sexton reclaims her lost objects within the poetic space which bridges this world and the next; she writes into the textual void of loss. My reading of Sexton's second book attempts to show how the poet wrote against identification with the dead *as* dead, through the construction of an elsewhere space.

In her description of the doubleness of women's elegies, Melissa Zeiger suggests that twentieth-century women's elegies raise questions about the "bodily disappearance" of the poet, in relation to feelings of loss and "ambivalence about separation from the dead."<sup>10</sup> Sexton's poems gesture to the work of mourning even as the poet melancholically grieves for her own future disappearance as dead object. Sexton's elegies are written from what David Kennedy terms the "negative position."<sup>11</sup> Kennedy writes: "Positives, made into negatives by death, must somehow be made into positives again or have that transformation compensated for" (21). Sexton's elegies become their own compensations for her past and future lost dead objects. Although written from the "negative position," Sexton gestures towards a new space of renewal, beyond death and the work of mourning.

Kennedy illuminates the sense of "personal expenditure" involved for the mourner and elegist, via Freud's account of his grandson's game of "*fort-da*" (24). Beyond the compensation that the boy created through his elaborate game—which I discuss in greater detail in my concluding chapter—Kennedy argues that the episode was significant because Freud introduced the concept of economics to the work of mourning. In Kennedy's words, "if mourning involves even greater self-expenditure how, the elegist asks, will I afford it?" (24). Or as Derrida put it:

“Are we trying to negate death or retain it? Are we trying to put things in order, make amends, or settle our accounts, to finish unfinished business? With the other? With the others outside and inside ourselves?”<sup>12</sup> Peter Sacks discusses Freud’s description of “*Fort-da*” in terms of compensation and what he terms the “absent present”: “By a primitive form of mourning, the child not only comes to terms with the otherness and absence of his first love-object, he also learns to represent absence, and to make the absent present....”<sup>13</sup> Sexton’s melancholic work, a child’s grief for the loss of both her parents, and all future loss, renders the unrepresentable present. She establishes a poetic account of grief, as textual compensation. The danger faced by the melancholic poet emerges as an ego-identification with the dead, or what Sacks terms a “death wish” via self-destructive regressive attachment (17).

In “Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-constructing the Elegy,” Celeste Schenck describes Sexton as reactionary and revisionary (18).<sup>14</sup> Schenck argues that Sexton, as a poet rarely associated with “codified, international, high” poetic forms like the ceremonial elegy, in her second book authors “an entire series of revisionary poems that register both her despair at the finality of death and her dissatisfaction with traditional patterns of inscribing grief” (18). Sexton’s melancholic poetics reject the traditional rites of masculine grief, which uphold libidinal, paternal architectures through renunciation. Schenck describes Sexton’s elegy to her mother, “The Division of Parts,” as a “deft deconstruction” of the elegiac genre. In her *Pretty* book, “The Operation” (12-16) performs similarly deconstructive work. The figure of the mother “at the dying door” haunts Sexton’s second book, in which maternal inheritance, the clothes and accoutrements of suburban motherhood, represents both the lost dead object, and the poet’s continuity with the dead.

In 1959, writing to her editor Fred Morgan at the *Hudson Review*, Sexton described her recent medical troubles:

So I just got out of hospital having had an operation ... not exactly a hysterectomy (can't spell that one, for sure) but half a one kind of. They also took out my appendix as long as they were in there and an ovary and a cyst the size of a grapefruit. Ah, the medical is so explicit. (can't spell anything today. Too weak.)  
(*Letters* 88)

Sexton's experience of a "kind of" hysterectomy became the basis for "The Operation," as "a personal narration about [her] experiences" (*Letters* 99). In "The Operation," the "mighty doctor" equates Sexton's "ills" with those of the dead maternal. It is through the excision of these connecting ills that the promise of recovery emerges (12). This recovery is not so much from the "operation" of the title, but rather from the delicate operation of mourning. Wanting to avoid replicating the "historic" house of the dead maternal as her own bodily home, the daughter's body has disobeyed her rejection of illness, allowing a cancerous thief to roam freely within her:

Automatically I get in my car,  
knowing the historic thief  
is loose in my house  
and must be set upon. (13)

Thinking that she will die or disappear like the mother, the daughter rejects mimicry or repetition of her mother's illness. Sexton uses the site of the female body, as a way to reject the "dying door" to oblivion:

I soar in hostile air  
over the pure women in labor,  
over the crowning heads of babies being born.  
I plunge down the backstair  
calling *mother* at the dying door,  
to rush back to my own skin, tied where it was torn. (14)



Through the pain of the operation, the “torn skin,” and nerves which “pull like wires / snapping from the leg to the rib,” the daughter relinquishes the dead maternal as an object of identification. She severs the umbilical cord emphatically, textually, re-embracing her “own skin,” wounds and all. Freud writes that just as the process of mourning impels the ego to:

renounce the object by declaring its death, and offers the ego the reward of staying alive, each individual battle of ambivalence loosens the fixation of the libido upon the object by devaluing, disparaging and, so to speak, killing it. There is a possibility of the process in the unconscious coming to an end, either once the fury has played itself out or after the object has been abandoned as worthless.<sup>15</sup>

In “The Operation,” Sexton represents the mother’s worthlessness as a dead or lost object, in order to emphasize the undesirability of incorporation. The daughter-ego “kills” the dead mother, “disparaging” her even as she lingers in the spaces of memory, in order to keep herself alive. Through this process, Sexton returns to the “good morning” memories of her mother, as an absent “good” object:

God knows

I thought I’d die — but here I am,  
recalling mother, the sound of her  
good morning, the odor of orange and jam. (15)

Through the revision of memory, Sexton is able to form new “good” attachments in the external world. As she recovers, her recuperative attitude is signalled by the change from the boots on her feet, “slapping the hospital floor” during visits to her mother’s deathbed, to a pair of “bunny pink slippers.” Although Sexton does not say whether these are “new” slippers, the catalogue of wires, stirrups and pain that has preceded their appearance in the poem, signals a feeling of newness and hope:

All's well, they say. They say I'm better.

I lounge in frills or, picturesque,

I wear bunny pink slippers in the hall.

I read a new book and shuffle past the desk

to mail the author my first fan letter. (15-16)

The change in wardrobe from “boots” to the camp “bunny pink slippers,” signals the movement from aggression, to an acceptance of loss. As a recovering patient, Sexton reads her “new book,” as a reflection of the new *Pretty* book that she offers her readers. The “new book” allows the work of mourning to proceed as depressive work, without disappearing entirely into the “black sun” of melancholia. The patient’s own private reading encourages the writer to emerge, in the form of her “first fan letter.” Sexton’s use of an autobiographical “I” is confounded in the poem’s final stanza, in which she shifts to the third person. This split suggests the greater shift that has taken place, from aggressive ambivalence, to acceptance:

Time now to pack this humpty-dumpty  
back the frightened way she came  
and run along, Anne, and run along now,  
my stomach laced up like a football  
for the game. (16)

The poet Anne speaks to the fan-letter writing Anne, as one who draws on the experience of being “laced up” in order to play the recuperative “game” of words. Her tone is motherly, telling herself to “run along now” and “play” with words. As Alkalay-Gut suggests, this shift into the third person intimates the complete incorporation of the Mother-voice: she is Mother, Anne and poet.<sup>16</sup> The writing up or lacing up of “The Operation,” and its placement in the “new book,” suggests its own recuperative potential, as a textual mirror of that same experience, for both the poet and the reader.

In a letter written on 21 August 1962, Sylvia Plath remarks that she is “absolutely stunned and delighted” by Sexton’s new book:

It is superbly masterful, womanly in the greatest sense, and so blessedly unliterary. One of the rare original things in this world one comes upon. I had just said the day before “One book I will buy is Anne Sexton’s next,” & there it was, in the morning mail the next day. I have these small clairvoyances. But I don’t have to be clairvoyant to see the Pulitzer and National Book Award and the rest in your lap for it.

I think “The Black Art” comes in my top favorite dozen, with the Northeaster Letter, Flight, the Letter Crossing Long Island Sound, Water, Woman with Girdle, Old, For God While Sleeping, Lament. Hell, they are all terrific.<sup>17</sup>

As Trinidad points out: “Plath knew and liked Sexton’s poetry.”<sup>18</sup> Plath’s letter to Sexton is full of praise for her Boston friend and her “small clairvoyances” about the Pulitzer and the National Book Award would prove almost prescient. Living in Devonshire at the time, Plath sounds isolated, particularly from the Boston scene, and in general:

Tell me what it is like to be a Lady Poet Laureate. How was the Radcliffe grant, did it really free you from the drudge of housework? And who is He? of the letters and Flight? Tell me how things are with you, and Maxine [Kumin] and George [Starbuck]. Who do you see, know, now? ... I would love one of your newsy letters to stick on the wall.

In 1962, *All My Pretty Ones* was published to wide acclaim by Houghton Mifflin, receiving a nomination for the National Book Award in 1963 (as had *Bedlam* in 1960). According to Middlebrook, *All My Pretty Ones* had sold 18000 copies by 1974 and double that by the mid-eighties (1992 187). As Middlebrook points out, the reviews in the major periodicals only reinforced the glowing advance notices (186). James Dickey’s caustic review in the *New York Times Book Review* (in keeping with his negative reception of *Bedlam*), proved to be the exception.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the mainly positive reception, Linda Sexton suggests the extreme effect of Dickey's review on her mother:

The most poignant image I have of the difficulties she endured as an artist was my discovery, on the evening of her suicide [in 1974], that she still carried in her wallet a clipping of the ax-job James Dickey had done on *All My Pretty Ones* in the *New York Times*. (96)

In his review, Dickey wrote that not only would it be "hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience," but that Sexton's verse was contrived, domestic and anti-poetic (106 Colburn). The very aspects of Sexton's book which Plath privately admired, Dickey publically repudiated. Dickey describes Sexton's work as part of the "new kind of orthodoxy," written against the order of New Criticism, exemplified by the recent work of Lowell and Snodgrass. Worse than joining the ranks of an "unliterary" crowd, to Dickey's mind, Sexton's domestic ("womanly") verse, represented a "determinedly outspoken soap-opera." Dickey's dismissive tone reflects his critical disengagement from Sexton's subject-matter, her catalogue of "surgeons and alcoholic lovers and dying parents," which he found so distasteful.

Louise Bogan's review for the *New Yorker* (27 Apr. 1963), conversely suggests the risks Sexton took in her second book, by assuming the "dangerous and difficult task of putting down the primary horrors of life, along with a good many of those secondary horrors" (175).<sup>20</sup> Bogan argues that these horrors are "almost always women's secrets that do not, in the ordinary way of things, get told." Sexton is strikingly the American "woman who writes" ("The Black Art" 65). Wearing her bold "red coat" and "new white gloves" ("Flight" 62), she queries not only the cage of motherhood and marriage, but the possibilities for freedom beyond the domestic enclosure. Although Sexton enacts a refusal to wholly identify with lost objects in *All My Pretty Ones*, the

poet identifies them as nevertheless part of her. Sexton problematizes the pathological status of the melancholic position.

## Lost Things

In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud characterizes melancholia as a

profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance and a reduction in the sense of self, expressed in self-recrimination and self-directed insults, intensifying into the delusory expectation of punishment. (204)

According to Freud, mourning resembles melancholia, but in mourning the "disorder of self-esteem is absent" (204). Al Alvarez described Freud's work on mourning in the following way: "he showed that in mourning and its pathological equivalent, melancholia, the ego tries to restore to life whatever has been lost by identifying with it, and then incorporating, or introjecting, the lost object into itself" (91). Butler illuminates the status of these lost objects in relation to the ego and the process of introjection as opposed to integration: "The object is lost, and the ego is said to withdraw the object into itself. The withdrawn object is already magical, a trace of some kind, a representative of the object, but not the object itself, which is, after all, gone" (180). In Butler's conception of introjection, lost objects are partly sheltered within the ego, which now "stands for the object" (180). The individual's rage is turned back upon the self. The objects in Sexton's second book are melancholy objects. Through a poetic dismantling of the idealised past, these lost objects are not only rejected by Sexton, but are finally identified and re-appropriated as her own melancholic "lost baggage" (68).

Within the affective space of melancholia, Sexton envisions the beginning of her own death ("Old Age" 37). The melancholic's dream, full of objects, overwhelms, riveting her to the past: "It does not pass by, the before/after notion does not rule it, does not direct it from a past

toward a goal" (*Black Sun* 60). The poet's dream is situated within the vaults of memory, charged by libidinal attachment to the past, its lost objects. The melancholic desires only to be left alone within her abject state, outside of the reality of loss in which the object has ceased to exist, in order for the dreaming to continue uninterrupted. Unlike the *Bedlam* poems which Sexton characterized as potentially therapeutic spaces of refuge and retreat, the melancholic position portends both death and the dream of death. In the space of melancholia, dwelling upon the past and the dead signifies the subject's unrelenting abjection. Surrounded by the debris of the past, haunted by the loss of her parental objects, Sexton enacts a rejection of inheritance as a refusal to mourn. Sexton rejects the loss of her parents, to reclaim her own "baggage."

As Freud suggests in "Mourning and Melancholia," the work of mourning is played out within the realm of memory traces of things, within the unconscious mind (216). Beneath the title of the book's first poem, "The Truth the Dead Know," Sexton dedicates her second book to her parents: "For my mother, born March 1902, died March 1959 / and my father, born February 1900, died June 1959" (3). Sexton first poem opens onto a landscape of loss, a topos of mourning for lost love-objects, in which the self, too, becomes object. In "The Truth the Dead Know" Sexton characterizes the ambivalent status of the dead:

Gone, I say and walk from church,  
refusing the stiff procession to the grave,  
letting the dead ride alone in the hearse.  
It is June. I am tired of being brave. (3)

The refusal of the rites of mourning enacts the daughter's rejection of the dead, and their status as dead, except as a manic declaration. As Zeiger suggests, Sexton presents the shock of grief as the "desire not be lost or separated oneself, either from one's own life or from the absent dead" (74). Following Zeiger and Schenck, Sexton has written her poem against elegy and against the dead. Although Sexton is alone, as the dead are alone in the hearse that carries them "to the

grave,” the refusal to mourn and to eulogise enacts the daughter’s attempt to preserve her connection to her parents. The place where people die, and the space of death itself, is an exclusively ‘other’ country that Sexton cannot inhabit. Simultaneously, the dead can no longer live in the country where their daughter is, in the living world, at the Cape, by the sea. No longer able to “cultivate” themselves, the dead are beyond pleasure.

Writing from the melancholic position, Sexton suggests her identification and connection with the dead through their rejecting agency, as a mirroring position of mutual refusal. The stone-like quality of the dead reflects their unresponsiveness to the rites or rituals of mourning:

And what of the dead? They lie without shoes  
in their stone boats. They are more like stone  
than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse  
to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone. (3)

Zeiger emphasises Sexton’s characterization of the dead’s “monumental, impassive persistence,” reinforcing their poetic status as ‘other’ (75). Yet the dead’s active refusal to become ‘other’, to embrace their status as “dead”, implies a consciously hostile agency. It is as though Sexton has animated the dead’s non-responsiveness and, in attempting to mirror their stance, has herself disappeared. Sexton embodies the position of refusal and, as Zeiger suggests, remains caught in the drama of her parents. Freud suggests that the work of mourning occurs following the evidence that reality-testing has shown that the “beloved object no longer exists” (204). The demand is then placed upon the libido to sever its bonds with the lost object. Sexton demands this same severance of the bond with her dead parents, enacted in a child-like way by pronouncing them “Gone.” The “truth the dead know” relates to this question of mourning. Sexton’s identification with the dead, through a mutual refusal of the rituals around the grave, preserves her parents from dying entirely. The poet shelters their dead bodies, housing them in her poem.

Middlebrook suggests that “The Truth the Dead Know” and “A Curse Against Elegies” (19) started out as the same draft, “Refusal” (130). Although “A Curse Against Elegies” is addressed to an unnamed “love,” it reads like Sexton’s dialogue with herself. This ‘double-headedness’ or double-consciousness suggests Sexton’s bind, in having to acknowledge loss in order to accept it. Sexton mirrors the dead, through a poetics of refusal:

Also, I am tired of all the dead.  
They refuse to listen,  
so leave them alone.  
Take your foot out of the graveyard,  
they are busy being dead. (19)

Sexton refuses to remember the dead because, as far as she’s concerned both she and “the dead are bored with the whole thing.” The daughter sees her own likeness reflected across the mirror of time and space, in her desire to forego the rites of mourning. The dead, down in the graveyard, are beyond language, and talking to the dead is like interacting with old bad dreams. Sexton’s poem reads like the self-accusation of the pathological melancholic who, in feeling herself unable to mourn, instead punishes and chides herself for her failures. The elegiac effect in Sexton’s *Pretty* poems belies the work of mourning they perform.

Through the rooms of memory, Sexton ushers the reader into the American suburban home of the 1960s, its seemingly comfortable domestic spaces, the paraphernalia of its bright objects and new attachments. Sexton’s “lost baggage” (68) is determinedly no longer the repetition or re-enactment of the past, but a way of reclaiming and re-appropriating loss. In order to no longer hate her own wardrobe of “shoes and hats” (65), in order to overcome a melancholic, narcissistic identification with the dead, the poet’s refusal to mourn the death of her parents enacts a rejection of inherited old objects. Sexton refuses both familial (particularly maternal) inheritance and funereal rites, as an attempt to give the dead agency through



reanimation. Framing her negative elegies, Sexton offers several poems which capture the nostalgia of a past time, a poeticized “old movie” version of her New England childhood (68), which form negative monuments to the past rather than simply ruptures: “The House” (41-44), “Young” (6) and “For Eleanor Boylan While Talking to God” (64). The melancholic poet returns to her childhood home, from a “thousand doors ago” (6), in order to “put away” and disinherit “The House” of memory, the repetition of its familial comforts; its pretty stairs, carpets and furniture (44). In “Young” Sexton emphasizes her separateness from her parents. The daughter is a “lonely kid / in a big house with four / garages,” who viewed the familial world from the outside. Although the figures in the poem are each alone in their own way, the overwhelming feeling is both melancholic and nostalgic for a past that was not defined by absence. Positioned between “Lament” and “All My Pretty Ones,” in “Young” Sexton refuses the self-destructive repetition or re-enactment of the past, which continues to live only in the space of memory.

Sexton maintains a position of rejection or refusal in the title poem, “All My Pretty Ones” (4-5). A self-contained narrative of the early stages of grief, the second poem in Sexton’s book shifts the focus from the church and the grave, to the house or residence of the father (4). Just as “The Division of Parts” dealt with the disencumbering of the daughter’s motherly inheritance, “All My Pretty Ones” addresses the father’s legacy:

Father, this year’s jinx rides us apart  
where you followed our mother to her cold slumber;  
a second shock boiling its stone to your heart,  
leaving me here to shuffle and disencumber  
you from the residence you could not afford:  
a gold key, your half of a woolen mill,  
twenty suits from Dunne’s, an English Ford,  
the love and legal verbiage of another will,

boxes of pictures of people I do not know.

I touch their cardboard faces. They must go. (4)

Sexton's father, having followed the daughter's mother "to her cold slumber," has also abandoned his daughter by dying. The daughter has been left "here to shuffle and disencumber" her father from "the residence [he] could not afford." Sexton suggests the economic work of mourning in terms of how, as a daughter, she must be able to "afford" the process of shuffling her libidinal attachments to her father. While still preserving the memory that "such things were / That were most precious," Sexton dislodges her object-investments. Freud defines pathological mourning through the appearance of self-reproaches, which are misdirected accusations against a lost love-object, that have turned on the ego (208). The pathological aspect of mourning asserts itself through ambivalence about having been responsible for the loss of the love-object, or for having desired that loss (210-11). In "All My Pretty Ones," Sexton's sense of abandonment prevails loudly in a silent "cardboard" scene of faces; in a house full of objects – keys, suits – no longer of the present.

The act of disencumbering connects Sexton to the recently dead and confirms this loss or disconnection. In "Lament" (7), Sexton concentrates more on feelings of abandonment and self-reproach. She declares that "Someone is dead," and ambivalently offers, "I think ... / I think I could have stopped it." By cataloguing the various ways in which she might have prevented the unspecified death, Sexton suggests the way in which her own life has been stopped. Dwelling on revisions of the past and self-reproach, Sexton is arrested by the past:

I think I could have stopped it,  
if I'd been as firm as a nurse  
or noticed the neck of the driver  
as he cheated the crosstown lights;  
or later in the evening,

if I'd held my napkin over my mouth.  
I think I could ...  
if I'd been different, or wise, or calm,  
I think I could have charmed the table,  
the stained dish or the hand of the dealer. (7)

The strange series of images suggests disconnection rather than a straightforward narrative of dying. The situation in the poem, its images of the "napkin" and the "crosstown lights", seems irreconcilable. The constant behind Sexton's imagery is ambivalent desire ("I think I could ..."), to have "been different," as if magically, she could have prevented death. In a "2 a.m." letter that she wrote to Howard Moss at the *New Yorker*, Sexton discussed the "I"'s motivations in her poem, which was ultimately rejected for publication in the magazine:

You are right about LAMENT. Something is wrong with it and I think that you put your finger right on the problem. I think I have fixed it, and with very little change. It needed to show a type of progression of events ... (this is hard to explain).... I did not mean death by stroke or auto accident.... no. no. no! I meant a magical act, that might have been stopped if "I" had noticed the warnings of danger. As if the "I" could have prevented the death (Mr. Fate if I had done something, either a negative or a positive action. You know?<sup>21</sup>

The progression of events is intentionally abstract, a series of disparate scenes in which the presence of a nurse suggests a stroke, and the image of the driver's neck an auto accident, without a singular or unifying context. As Sexton explains in her letter, the death should be believable, although it is meant symbolically. Unlike "All My Pretty Ones," in "Lament" Sexton is trapped within the self-recriminations of pathological mourning. This hostility, which cannot have the lost love-object as its focus, returns as self-recrimination, and the melancholic desire for punishment.

Kristeva questions the origins of her own melancholy, asking: “Where does this black sun come from? Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible, lethargic rays reach me, pinning me down to the ground, to my bed, compelling me to silence, to renunciation?” (3). Sexton is pinned down by feelings of blame in “Lament,” which reads as though it had been conjured by Kristeva’s pages: a “betrayal, a fatal illness, some accident that abruptly wrests me away....” As Kristeva suggests, melancholic or pathological mourning might occur following an infinite number of misfortunes (4). In “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud writes that, while mourning is most commonly the reaction to the loss of a beloved person, the work of mourning can occur around the loss of an ideal or “abstraction taking the place of a person” (203). In “All My .Pretty Ones,” Sexton’s father represents her memories of an idealized past. The father’s residence, full of objects, continues to connect the living daughter to the once living father. Yet Sexton embraces melancholia poetically, by speaking from within the blinding affect of the “black sun.”

The material objects of fatherly prosperity – twenty suits from Dunne’s, an English Ford – connect only to an old memory of the past and cannot truthfully reflect the present. Like the “boxes of pictures of people” who Sexton does not know, these things all “must go,” in order for the daughter to let go of her father as a living being and, in the sing-song style, to avoid her own destructive regression. Referring as far back into the past as the victory of Herbert Hoover as the Republican Presidential candidate in 1929, Sexton attempts to dislocate the facts of history (her own family’s and America’s), in order to “throw them out.” Within the melancholic position, death relegates life to a series of snapshots of marriage, to a past “stopped in places,” existing only in albums as equally unreliable and unknowable, as memory. In *Light in the Dark Room*, Jay Prosser writes that photographs are not signs of presence but evidence of absence, that the “presence of a photograph indicates its subject’s absence.”<sup>22</sup> Because photographs show the irreversible passing of time, Prosser argues, the photograph is essentially a melancholic object. In Sexton’s poem, death itself suggests this disruption of reliable assumptions about the past. The photographs, as reminders of death, disrupt and disturb the poet’s mourning,

by offering themselves as melancholic objects to cling to. The clippings and cardboard eyes looking out from within the snapshots, suggest their own future destruction, as her father holds “the winner’s cup at the speedboat races,” and smiles at the horseshow, dressed in tails at the Cotillion.

In “The House” (41-44) Sexton revises her nostalgic ideals of childhood, by returning to the “bad dream” of her father’s house.<sup>23</sup> Sexton examines the perfect green grass blades of an idealised past, in order to question the reliability of memory and the authenticity of her parents’ suburban ideals:

In dreams  
the same bad dream goes on.  
Like some gigantic German toy  
the house has been rebuilt  
upon its kelly-green lawn. (41)

Within this toy-like setting the family house is fascistically predetermined, like “some gigantic German toy.” The house has been “rebuilt” as a site of memory, and as an endlessly reproducible, squadron of homes, a staging of Freud’s repetition compulsion. These suburban “toy” soldiers uniformly salute the American way. As Philip McGowan argues, Sexton situates America within a “nexus of American traumas, registered in the modern landscapes (rural, urban, suburban, industrial) around her. These are traumatized spaces, physically and metaphorically scarred by twentieth-century life” (36). Although the “bad dream” goes on, Sexton’s reconstruction of the family house suggests a poetic attempt to demolish the central position that these rooms retain in the poet’s memory, as traumatic spaces. Sexton rebuilds only in order to tear down, or rather to refurbish a new, emptied-out space, replacing the original, lost objects, with her own future.



The “bad dream” of early family life is a dreadful or nightmarish drama for the poet. Part of the grotesquery of “All that money!” housed in the suburbs, is imitated within the repetition of the family structure, again mimicked by the rebuilt houses themselves and their contents. The three cars that sit in the garage, are cartoonish like the “orange and pink faces” of the family:

Nineteen forty-two,  
nineteen forty-three,  
nineteen forty-four ...  
it's all the same. We're at war.  
They've rationed the gas for all three cars.  
The Lincoln Continental breathes in its stall,  
a hopped up greyhound waiting to be sprung. (41)

A useless collection of mechanised toys, the quiet suburban army is “carved and dressed up like puppets / who wait for their jaws to open and shut” (41). They appear as the “puppets” of an ideology, “dressed up” to play a role, seemingly not even in control of their own movements or decisions. The image of the cardboard father resurfaces in this poem, “an exact likeness” of the drunkard in “All My Pretty Ones” (5):

Father,  
an exact likeness,  
his face bloated and pink  
with black market scotch,  
sits out his monthly bender  
in his custom-made pajamas  
and shouts, his tongue as quick as galloping horses,  
shouts into the long distance telephone call.  
His mouth is as wide as his kiss. (42)

Bachelard writes that the verticality of the house defines its character (a “vertical being”), appealing directly to “our consciousness of centrality”:

A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proof or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its reality: to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house; it would mean developing a veritable psychology of the house.<sup>24</sup>

Thus the house’s verticality is ensured by this concentration of what Bachelard terms the “polarity between the cellar and attic” (17). In Sexton’s “The House,” the daughter occupies the attic or more specifically the penthouse (“up another flight into the penthouse”), where she flees in retreat, passing through the hall of memory as she goes (43). In her poem, Sexton ruptures the very “illusions of stability” that Bachelard describes. Not only does Sexton slam the door on the house, she slams the door on its bad soul, disguised through the solidity of its “rooms, / stairs, carpets, furniture, [and] people” (44). Like the image of the mother who, “with just the right gesture, / kicks her shoes off,” the comfortable surrounds belie the haunted quality of its walls and hallways. The family itself, like its mother, “sorting her diamonds like a bank teller,” has been “made all wrong” (44). Sexton gives the model home the quality of near-photographic perfection, in order to question the authenticity of the picture being created for the reader. In her alabaster dressing room, the mother is “impossibly frumpy,” like the stolid architecture encasing her:

Mother,  
with just the right gesture,  
kicks her shoes off,  
but is made all wrong,  
impossibly frumpy as she sits there  
in her alabaster dressing room  
sorting her diamonds like a bank teller  
to see if they add up. (42)

Just as the milk bottles rattle “like a piggy bank,” the carpets and furniture appear to be made of money (43). The house’s “bad” soul is disguised or dressed up, to conceal what is rotten within. In turning from the original family objects, and slamming the door on these traces of “bad dream[s],” Sexton retreats to the penthouse space of the daydream.

Bachelard describes the ascent *up* the attic stairs, which are themselves “steeper and more primitive” than regular stairs, because they “bear the mark of ascension to a more tranquil solitude” (26). As a place of retreat, Sexton’s penthouse-poem represents a melancholy space. The daughter slams the door on her family and “rip[s] off her orange blouse,” while intoning the words: “*Father, father, I wish I were dead*” (43). As a return to original objects, the mother and father that she’s “made of” (10), the rivet which hooks Sexton’s poem to the “bad dream” of memory, is her dream of death:

At thirty five  
she’ll dream she’s dead  
or else she’ll dream she’s back.  
  
All day long the house sits  
larger than Russia  
gleaming like a cured hide in the sun. (44)

The melancholic penthouse of memory is a space of interminable capture and containment, like the family standing “at the open windows like objects / waiting to topple” (44). The weight of a well-furnished memory, full of objects, can feel larger than a country. It is leather-slick and well preserved “like a cured hide,” gleaming like her mother’s diamonds, like the wet “bender that she kissed” (43). The father’s lips catch his daughter, preventing any eradication of his kiss; or the memory trace of that “strange white key” which she fled from, “into the penthouse” (44). The dream of death, like the daughter playing dead in order to numb herself to her father’s unwelcome attentions, represents a traumatic trace, grafted onto the psyche.

In "All My Pretty Ones," Sexton's desire to fold away her father's "cardboard face," suggests the outward work of mourning. In a reversal of the incestuous encounter, the daughter "folds" her father down: "Now I fold you down, my drunkard, my navigator, / my first lost keeper, to love or look at later" (5). The father's kiss, like a recurring dream, cannot have the door slammed on it entirely, but must be put away or aside for later. The image of saving up her "first lost keeper" suggests the daughter's Oedipal entanglement and the lingering trace of an uncomfortable attachment. The death of the father represents a repetition of this original loss, during the developmental stages of early childhood, and perhaps another loss of innocence altogether. This may account for Sexton's use of an inverted mirror of the incest scene: "Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you, / bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you" (5).

Whether the daughter can "forgive" her father becomes secondary to the poet's representation of, and mastery over, the scene, in language. Reversing the roles of the encounter, by bending down her own "strange face" in order to "forgive" her father, Sexton effectively pronounces dead the "pretty" past, as a flimsy "cardboard" image. Kissing her father goodbye enacts an attempt to farewell the traumatic past. The mirror works both ways however; the daughter's ability to place herself in the role of the perpetrator suggests her own scarring which cannot be outlived, only lived-with. The daughter's simultaneous acknowledgement and acceptance of her wounds, "pretty or not," allows her to outlive the dead, and to offer a final gesture of reparation.

In the third section of *All My Pretty Ones*, Sexton offers a vision of a suburban ideal (in the shadow of illness), in her *New Yorker* (22 Sept. 1962) poem, "The Fortress (*while taking a nap with Linda*)" (31-33). The comforts offered "Under the pink quilted covers" are entirely motherly, contained within the protectively domestic space of the "square bed":

We watch the wind from our square bed.  
I press down my index finger —  
half in jest, half in dread —  
on the brown mole  
under your left eye, inherited  
from my right cheek: a spot of danger  
where a bewitched worm ate its way through our soul  
in search of beauty. (31)

The spectre of illness in “The Operation” re-emerges in “The Fortress” as a “spot of danger / where a bewitched worm ate its way” through the souls of both mother and daughter, connecting them physically and symbolically. The brown mole between Sexton and her daughter suggests a different kind of inheritance from the ills that Sexton inherited from her own mother. Sexton, as poet, woman and mother, does not offer her child an idealised view of the world. She acts the part of the realist in her admission that: “life is not in my hands; / life with its terrible changes / will take you, bombs or glands” (32).

Although the poem takes place within an intimate domestic scene, Sexton is blunt with her daughter about America’s legacy of bombs, as well as the realities of womanhood. Sexton offers her daughter the magic of “images” and pictures, the “promise” of language. The mother dispenses with the “old lady’s hat” in order to reclaim the moving image which, like Sexton’s poem, grants an escape from the “bombs and glands” of both internal and external worlds. The poem becomes a resting place or house for images; it enacts its own poetic promise of words, as a suburban shelter. The “trances and portents” (65) contained in the words of *All My Pretty Ones* suggest the transcendent and cathartic potential of poetry. In “The Black Art,” Sexton figures herself as a “modern” American “woman who writes,” for whom the life “cycles,” both biological and mechanical, are “never enough”:<sup>25</sup>



A woman who writes feels too much,  
those trances and portents!  
As if cycles and children and islands  
weren't enough; as if mourners and gossips  
and vegetables were never enough.  
She thinks she can warn the stars.  
A writer is essentially a spy.  
Dear love, I am that girl. (65)

Sexton figures the act of writing as enough, because of the good work it can do for both reader and poet. The poet cannot be satisfied with the suburban “cycles” of “children,” and holidays to “islands,” or even with the wonders of her own breakfast island, once she is practised in the art of writing. The “vegetables” in the garden are less appealing and less satisfying than the words she cultivates. Sexton implies that the work of mourning is never enough if it stops at ritual and does not embrace a poetics of melancholia. Unlike the language of “gossips,” it is the language of the poem that moves the poet beyond mourning. Sexton figures the writer as “essentially a spy” within the new America of the Cold War. She may own all the products and trappings of the modern housewife, and may fit comfortably into her shoes, but as an outsider, a “spy” whose intentions and purpose are always elsewhere, the poet hates her pretend wardrobe. These feminine accoutrements represent the trappings of the past, the vestiges of the dead.

In the final section of *All My Pretty Ones*, Sexton's two “Letter[s]” figure her as a poet of melancholia. In her third *New Yorker* outing (18 June 1961: 34), Sexton constructs a “very sad” melancholic space of self-destructive thoughts and semi-delusional projection, in her “Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound.”<sup>26</sup> The shadow of the “very old” sea, with “the face of Mary,” falls across Sexton's “sad” poem. This scene of the dead maternal suggests the “oceanic mother—enveloping and infinitely nurturing” which Hilary Clark locates in Sexton's

late work.<sup>27</sup> Child-like, Sexton clutches the props of adulthood: “my wallet, my cigarettes / and my car keys.” Like a handful of transitional objects, defences against anxiety, Sexton’s “cigarettes” and “keys” assume the charge of a child’s toy.<sup>28</sup>

Now I am going back  
and I have ripped my hand  
from your hand as I said I would  
and I have made it this far  
as I said I would  
and I am on the top deck now  
holding my wallet, my cigarettes  
and my car keys  
at 2 o’clock on a Tuesday  
in August of 1960. (55)

Clutching at these objects in her “hand,” Sexton suggests their ambivalent, irreconcilable status; she needs these objects as safety against the shadowy loss of the mother, a veritable sea of mourning. As both serious things and objects that can be enjoyed and played with, they protect the poet’s internal life. Like an “old naked fist” (10), tightly clenched in an embodiment of refusal, the “cement lifeboat” that comes into her line of sight represents the drowned vessel of failed mourning. The faded sign that orders her to “KEEP OFF,” reads like an aggressive request from beyond, demanding that she turn back from leaping from the top deck into the old maternal arms of the sea: “Oh, all right, I say / I’ll save myself.”

Just as the “seventy coats” (10) cannot alter the origins of her existence, so too the “cement lifeboat” with its “dirty canvas coat” fails to conceal its meaning or purpose as a last aid. Sexton’s suicidal thoughts transform through delusional projection, in the form of a prayer to God to “loosen” the “four nuns” also travelling on the deck of the ferry:

Oh God,  
although I am very sad,  
could you please  
let these four nuns  
loosen from their leather boots  
and their wooden chairs  
to rise out  
over this greasy deck,  
out over this iron rail,  
nodding their pink heads to one side,  
flying four abreast  
in the old-fashioned side stroke ... (57)

Rather than representing the reassurance of belief, Sexton's four nuns become participants in a melancholic fantasy.<sup>29</sup> The "dark girls," initially undressed by the wind, are projected by the poet's imagination, into the air; their habits puffing out like "black wings":

See them rise  
on black wings, drinking  
the sky, without smiles  
or hands  
or shoes.  
They call back to us  
from the gauzy edge of paradise,  
*good news, good news.* (58)

Riding the currents of the air, into the sky, the nuns assume the aspect of witches, recalling Sexton's signature *Bedlam* poem, "Her Kind." The dark girls rise up into the dead maternal space of the beyond, passively loosened from their leather boots. Sexton anchors herself to the poem

like a lifeboat, just as she employs the nuns to act out a version of her own self-destructive impulses. The nuns transform into an allegory of detachment, in which their literal attachment to the earth is loosened through unification with their absent love object (in this case, God). The poet keeps her hands and shoes, her cigarettes and keys, through the construction of a space beyond mourning within the “*good news*” poem. Rather than crossing over into the indefinable space beyond life, Sexton ambivalently gestures instead to the “*good*” work of her melancholic poetry, which keeps her on the ferry and within the world of “Letter[s].”

Sexton’s final letter, and the final poem of the *Pretty* book, reinforces the image of herself as a letter-writing poet, situating the “pretty or not” poem as the work of melancholia. In her “Letter Written During a January Northeaster” (66-68), Sexton is still haunted by the “small faces of the dead,” though her parents have been “gone for over a year now” (66). They are no longer looming blimps in the sky, but have become casual sleepers and dreamers in the ground, who prefer not to be disturbed:

The dead turn over casually,

thinking ...

Good! No visitors today.

My window, which is not a grave,

is dark with my fierce concentration

and too much snowing

and too much silence. (66)

This second letter signals a complicated rejection of melancholia as a resting place for mourning. The dead, pleased by the absence of visitors, reflect the poet’s own sense of “Good!” as an elsewhere space. Her window is emphatically “not a grave,” just as the poem-letter represents the return to life through the shock of the poet’s identifiable voice. In the shift from Monday to Tuesday, the reader of the letter learns that the writer has invented a lie: that there “is no other

day but Monday.” The writer had thought it “reasonable to pretend” that she was able to magically “change the day / like a pair of socks.” Cleaning up the words to create the order of sequence belies the fact that, according to the writer, the “days are all the same size / and words aren’t much company.” In my 1977 copy of *All My Pretty Ones*, the letters of the word “aren’t” look as though they’ve disappeared in the reprint. The “truth” is that the “days are all the same size.” Any notion of the truth is a revision; words are the writer’s only company within the space of loss:

Like all the dead  
he picks up his disguise,  
shakes it off and slowly pulls down the shade,  
fading out like an old movie.  
Now he is gone  
as you are gone.  
But he belongs to me like lost baggage. (68)

In her second book Sexton (citing Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*), “cannot but remember” (iii) her “lost baggage.” She reclaims the dead by re-appropriation, as finally lost to her, yet entombed within her melancholic poems. In this way, Sexton shelters her loss, preserves the dead as her own; she figures herself as the poet of the dead, through a rejection of nostalgia and memory. The *Pretty* book represents a lifting rather than a pulling down of the “shade” on the work of mourning. Loss is transformed within the space of the melancholic poem. Sexton crafts her own “handmade shoes,” her poems, as a gesture to the present.

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, “Roland Barthes,” *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001): 50.



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<sup>2</sup> At the end of her rejection letter, Rachel MacKenzie advises Sexton not to “keep back things you like just because you were right about this one” (MacKenzie, Letter to Anne Sexton, 16 Nov. 1959, correspondence, box 23, folder 5, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Lowell, Letter to Anne Sexton, 1 Dec. 1961, correspondence, box 22, folder 3, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC. Lowell’s words, which appeared on the back cover of *All My Pretty Ones*, were ultimately transformed into the following: “The best thing about *All My Pretty Ones* is its unstopped fullness. I get an impression of increasing supply and weight; indeed her first book, especially the best poems, spills into the second and somehow adds to it ... poems that all one can say is that they are Sexton and therefore precious. I sometimes feel that she is one of the few people who could write a whole book, like *The Spoon River Anthology*, where the little moments prop the big moments and there’d be little waste. To an extent, she has done this, and made her life her treasury.”

<sup>4</sup> Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (London: Faber, 1959).

<sup>5</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 29 Mar. 1962, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>6</sup> On 7 May 1963, Sexton wrote to Jon Stallworthy at Oxford University Press, expressing similar concerns about the intertwining of her name and Lowell’s: “The problem with asking Robert Lowell for a foreword seems almost insurmountable, to begin with, I dislike asking him for another ‘favor’... I have some advisors ... [who] tell me, advise me strongly, that it would do me great harm to have Lowell introduce me to the reading public of England – for then the critics would come forward with axes that were meant to chop Lowell’s head and not mine ... thus, I would become more Lowell than Sexton ... I would be not be judged for the poems alone but for Lowell’s reputation as well as mine own (feeble though it be)” (*Letters* 169).

<sup>7</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 10 Apr. 1962, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger. Although Sexton was genuinely excited and encouraged when she initially received the grant, she was suspicious of being grouped in with “overeducated” women; she felt like a “maverick” in their midst (Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 27 Apr. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

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<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, "Psychic Inceptions: Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage," *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997): 171.

<sup>9</sup> David Kennedy, *Elegy* (London: Routledge, 2007): 97.

<sup>10</sup> Melissa Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997): 64.

<sup>11</sup> Kennedy refers to Ginsberg's use of "lacklove" in "Kaddish," to describe a "state whose persistence and emphasis on absence is overwhelming" (21). Sexton second book similarly emphasizes this state of "lacklove," particularly associated with maternal absence.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, "Roland Barthes," *Work of Mourning* 50.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Sacks, "Interpreting the Genre: The Elegy and the Work of Mourning," *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: John Hopkins U P, 1985): 11.

<sup>14</sup> Celeste Schenck, "Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-constructing the Elegy," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 5. 1 (Spring 1986): 13-27.

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (1917; London: Penguin, 2005): 217.

<sup>16</sup> Karen Alkalay-Gut, "'For We Swallow Magic and We Deliver Anne'," *Anna Book* 142.

<sup>17</sup> Sylvia Plath, Letter to Anne Sexton, 21 Aug. 1962, box 24, folder 4, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

<sup>18</sup> David Trinidad, "'Two Sweet Ladies': Sexton and Plath's friendship and mutual influence," *American Poetry Review* 35.6 (Nov-Dec 2006): 21-29. Trinidad continues: "I think it's important to point out that Plath read *All My Pretty Ones* just weeks before beginning to write her *Ariel* poems. Plath wrote no poems between August 13, 1962 (a week before she wrote her 'thank-you note' to Sexton) and the end of September, when she, in essence, kicked Hughes out of Court Green" (24).

<sup>19</sup> James Dickey, "Dialogues with Themselves," rev. of *All My Pretty Ones*, by Anne Sexton, *New York Times Book Review* 28 Apr. 1963, rpt. in *Telling the Tale* 106. In "Female Voices, Male Listeners: Identifying Gender in the Poetry of Anne Sexton and Wanda Coleman," Ian Williams provides some perspective on the "troubled" relationship between female writers and male critics: "The

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relationship ... is troubled because of the long history of male tyranny in determining acceptable poetics production. Although contemporary female writers speak fearlessly of traditionally unspeakable subjects ... [t]hey often react against a perceived muzzle, wielded by male critics or mainstream criticism, that threatens to silence their work altogether" (*Women's Literary Creativity and the Female Body*, ed. Diane Long Hoeveler and Donna Decker Schuster, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 180-81.

<sup>20</sup> Louise Bogan, "Verse," *New Yorker* 27 Apr. 1963: 173-175, rpt. in McClatchy 126-127.

<sup>21</sup> Sexton, Letter to Howard Moss, 10 Jan. 1962, correspondence, box 23, folder 5, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

<sup>22</sup> Jay Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss* (Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 2005): 1.

<sup>23</sup> The *New Yorker* also decided against publishing this poem. In a letter to Sexton, Moss writes that: "The reader gets the picture all right, and some of the details are telling, but it still seems a bit disorganized to us, and perhaps too long for its own good" (18 Apr. 1961, Editorial Correspondence, New Yorker Records, Manuscripts & Archives, New York Public Library, New York City).

<sup>24</sup> Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* 17.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Patricia Marx, *Hudson Review* 18.4 (Winter 1965/66), rpt. in McClatchy 37.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Vinson describes how Sexton achieved the "clean look" of the poem, possibly increasingly its suitability for the *New Yorker*, in the drafting process of "Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound": "The handwritten draft is not in stanzas, which appear in the first typewritten draft, and it is wordy and less focused than later stages of the text. The forming of the poem into stanzas was, to use a domestic analogy, like housecleaning. To achieve a 'cleaner' look, nonessential or inappropriate language was discarded, in many instances what was too maudlin or personal" ("'Wild Animals Out in the Arena': Anne Sexton's Revisions for *All My Pretty Ones*," *Rossetti to Sexton*): 207-08.

<sup>27</sup> Hilary Clark, "Depression, Shame, and Reparation: The Case of Anne Sexton," *Scenes of Shame: Psychoanalysis, Shame and Writing*, ed. Joseph Adamson and Hilary Clark (Albany: SUNY P, 1999): 189.

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<sup>28</sup> As Winnicott suggests, it is sometimes the case that “there is no transitional object except the mother herself” (“Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena [1953],” *Playing* 6).

<sup>29</sup> As Robert Philips points out, “In need of some sign of the extraordinary, [Sexton] playfully imagines the four shipboard nuns in a state of miraculous levitation, an imaginative act which predated the television series *The Flying Nun*” (*The Confessional Poets*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1973): 80.

## IV

### *Live or Die's (sort of) Human Statement*

I am 36, fairly attractive, a mother, two girls are 10 and 12, a husband in the wool business. I live nine miles outside of Boston. I do not live a poet's life. I look and act like a housewife. My daughter says to her friends "a mother is someone who types all day." But still I cook. But still my desk is a mess of letters to be answered and poems that want to tear their way out of my soul and onto the typewriter keys. At that point I am a lousy cook, a lousy wife, because I am too busy wrestling with the poem to remember that I am a normal (?) American housewife.

(*Letters* 270)

### **New York City Will Not Mind**

In order to appreciate the shift that takes place in Sexton's 1966 book *Live or Die*, this chapter firstly returns to the time just prior to the publication of Sexton's books. It also offers readings of Sexton's *Live or Die* poems in terms of suicidality and reparation. Sexton's first appearances in *The New Yorker* were highly charged events for the poet, in terms of both her early career and her psychotherapy. As early as 1958, Sexton reported dreams of having a poem accepted in the magazine.<sup>1</sup> Her *New Yorker* poems represented small personal and professional breakthroughs and insights. Her later self-negating comments in therapy about the diminishment of these early achievements, signalled Sexton's desire to move onto her monumental life's work, a kind of poetics of posterity, which is the focus of the concluding chapter of this thesis.<sup>2</sup>

Of the twenty-one poems Sexton published in the *New Yorker* during her lifetime, only “Flee On Your Donkey,” deals explicitly with the themes of mental illness and suicide.<sup>3</sup> In “The Sun,” Sexton muses on flies in her examination of the “diseased” state of depression:

Neither bird nor acrobat  
they will dry out like small black shoes.

I am an identical being.  
Diseased by the cold and the smell of the house  
I undress under the infinite bulk.<sup>4</sup>

Sexton’s identification with flies, dried out “like small black shoes,” suggests her movement towards the health of the “yellow eye” of the sun. As an object to be striven toward, the sun was an image that Sexton associated with all “good things”:<sup>5</sup> “and I will tell them all stories of you / until I am laid away forever, / a thin gray banner.”<sup>6</sup> In her *New Yorker* poems, Sexton told stories to reveal the multiple layers of suburban life, the pitfalls and pleasures of domesticity.<sup>7</sup>

As a *New Yorker* poet, Sexton spoke from within her house on Clearwater Road in the Boston suburb Newton Lower Falls, where she lived from 1953 until 1964. Linda Sexton recalls when the Sextons, in late 1964, moved from Newton to “a house of an odd olive color” at 14 Black Oak Road (*Letters* 254) in Weston, which photographer Arthur Furst describes “upper-middle-class suburb of Boston.”<sup>8</sup> For Sexton, her new modern colonial was a “symbol of safety and security” (*Letters* 254). In her biography, Middlebrook offers a description of the “olive green house”:

Tall swamp maples flanked the olive green house, and woods bordered the lot at the back. A two-story modern colonial, brand new, the house was roomy and light, with a sunny kitchen that looked out on the perfect site for a swimming pool. Adjacent to the kitchen was a panelled room with a dark brick



fireplace, which Anne could use as a study. In the large sunken living room, two steps down, Kayo could install the huge stereo system he wanted. They chose bright wallpaper, and installed a brilliant orange carpet in the living room and a brilliant gold carpet through the front hall and up the stairs. (290-230)

Sexton's *New Yorker* poems existed at a remove from both the "literary critics" and the "suburban centres," composed, as they were, from the elements of the private family home, its sub-terrain "sewers" and "drainage" (Live 13); its green windows, beds, and cellars;<sup>9</sup> its gardens, horses and orchards;<sup>10</sup> its dogs and cats, lawnmowers and madras shirts.<sup>11</sup> These poems "throb like advertisements" for Anne Sexton, positioned sometimes in corners, sometimes occupying whole pages. As Middlebrook writes, Sexton *New Yorker* poems were generally neatly aligned and pristinely formal, "casually," yet artfully placed in amongst "witty cartoons about the Russians and fallout shelters and astronauts and the Chinese and psychiatrists and the Bomb" (1992 161). Even as the "woman stands by her stove," in often idyllic poems, everything seems possible.<sup>12</sup>

Sexton maintained her relationship with the *New Yorker* through its long-time poetry editor, Howard Moss.<sup>13</sup> As early as 1961, Sexton signed a first reading contract, giving the magazine first publication rights to anything she wrote.<sup>14</sup> This agreement put the poet in the "embarrassing" position of sending such unlikely poems as "Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator" to Moss, which he could not use: "You're right, and the difficult thing to say is that this *is* a good poem and it's not for us."<sup>15</sup> Nor did the *New Yorker* publish a single Grimm poem from Sexton's "pop-art creation" *Transformations* (her most popular book),<sup>16</sup> which instead appeared in such "wierd [sic]" venues as *Playboy* and *Cosmopolitan*.<sup>17</sup> In a letter to Snodgrass, Sexton hints at her intrinsic difference from the magazine: "I'm not really their type, as you know."<sup>18</sup> Yet Sexton's first acceptance at the *New Yorker* was sweet success: "I am immeasurably pleased that you want to buy THE ROAD BACK for The New Yorker. Despite my many successes nothing has been

sweeter. (I mean yippee).”<sup>19</sup> Sexton’s poems had previously been felt to be too private by the magazine’s editors, as well as too long.<sup>20</sup> This partly reflects the effect of the magazine’s editorial process, which ensured that Sexton’s *New Yorker* poetry sat comfortably with themes of middle-age, mortality and the suffering of change.<sup>21</sup>

The reader response to her *New Yorker* poems suggests the void that poets like Sexton and her contemporary Sylvia Plath filled, particularly for women readers.<sup>22</sup> As Eva Moskowitz points out, magazines (particularly women’s magazines such as *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Woman’s Home Companion*), were at the “height of their cultural power during the cold war”.<sup>23</sup> Following the publication of “Flee on Your Donkey” (7 May 1966), Mrs. John P. Ranson wrote to the magazine, describing how “exceptionally” moved she and her daughter had been by Sexton’s latest poem:

Would you be kind enough to tell me if Anne Sexton has published her poetry in a book or collection? My daughter has collected her poems over the last year; clipped them from your magazine, and unfortunately over the summer, lost the poem about the sick woman.

Both of us would appreciate either a reprint of that poem or finding out how to get a collection of Miss Sexton’s poetry. I find her work exceptionally real and moving.<sup>24</sup>

As Janet Luedtke argues, the Harry Ransom correspondence archive of Sexton’s Fan Mail shows how during these early years of publication, readers came to Sexton’s poetry as a:

kind of therapy—a way to stave off the intellectual and affectual tedium of the kitchen-kinder-kaffee-klatsch routine. But then, in the middle years as Sexton’s books began to knit together a collective narrative and her popularity grew, more of the correspondents began writing their own poetry, consciously shaping it as an adjunct to other women’s. (172)

Sexton's therapy tapes suggest that this shift occurred as early as 1963, after the publication of her first two books.<sup>25</sup> Sexton commented to Orne that would-be writers had been calling her, putting her in the role of the psychiatrist "being nice" to her patients.<sup>26</sup> Luedtke argues that Sexton's readers begun rushing between the typewriter and the pan, in an effort to make writing more than a hobby. The response to Sexton's poetry suggests her high visibility and early iconic status, as Luedtke writes:

The fan-mail collection consists of thirteen folders of letters set aside from the regular Sexton correspondence file and catalogued as a single entry: 'Fan Mail—869 items.' Beginning with two responses to the 1959 *New Yorker* publication of Sexton's "The Road Back," the collection contains between eight and thirty-six letters for each year until 1967, when Sexton won the Pulitzer prize for her third book, *Live or Die*. Thereafter, the volume averages about eighty letters per year, culminating in a deluge of one hundred sixty-nine items in 1974, the year that Sexton committed suicide on October 4th. (166)

In June 1959, Sexton's "Sunbathers" was published in the *New Yorker*, wedged between "sumptuous ads touting precisely what New Yorkers are supposed to cherish" (Grant 33). I'm interested in "Sunbathers" because it is a uncollected poem. It does was not published in either the *Complete Poems* or in *Bedlam*, which credits "The Road Back" as Sexton's first outing in the *New Yorker*. Yet it was with the publication "Sunbathers" that Sexton first stepped into a glossy, literary penthouse. Although it was hierarchically positioned towards the back of the publication on page 93 (Snodgrass's "Lying Awake" appears on page 36), Sexton's poem nevertheless received the magazine's endorsement.<sup>27</sup> The intimacy between advertisements and text, like accidental revelations throughout the magazine, reflect the way in which the *New Yorker* constructs its own metropolitan value system.<sup>28</sup>



when he has to keep feeding the box until nine-thirty. In the morning, the box has to be fed again at nine-thirty.

Down the road a piece from Rutland is Proctor, a marble center and the headquarters of the Vermont Marble Company. A self-conducted tour of the Vermont Marble Company takes twenty-seven minutes (a sign says so), down one corridor lined with marble slabs, up another, down another, with directional arrows on the floor guiding the visitor. One's companion on the journey is soft music, piped in from somewhere. Marble is solemn. Many varieties of marble are on display—Westland Dark Cream Vein, Best Light Cloud, Eureka Danby, Taconic Green Vein—all gleaming and ready to be turned into ashtrays, cocktail-table tops, or headstones. The directional arrows lead one past an assortment of headstones and back into the entrance hall, where marble cuff links are on sale at the desk. Row upon row of marble slabs makes the Vermont Marble Company just about the most solemn place in all Vermont, including cemeteries. By comparison, cemeteries jump.

The hills that surround Rutland bring darkness early to the city. The outdoor bookstalls of the Charles E. Tuttle Old Book Shop (founded in 1832, and specializing in Japanese books, Old Mr. Tuttle knew why) are covered against the nippy night air. Hardly anybody is out, except a puzzling number of police, who seem to be shadowing one another, and the street lights shed a faint glow upon the almost deserted pavement. On many corners, it's quite a high, awkward step from the curb to the street. Watch your step. The public library closes at nine.

—PHILIP HAMBURGER

### SUNBATHERS

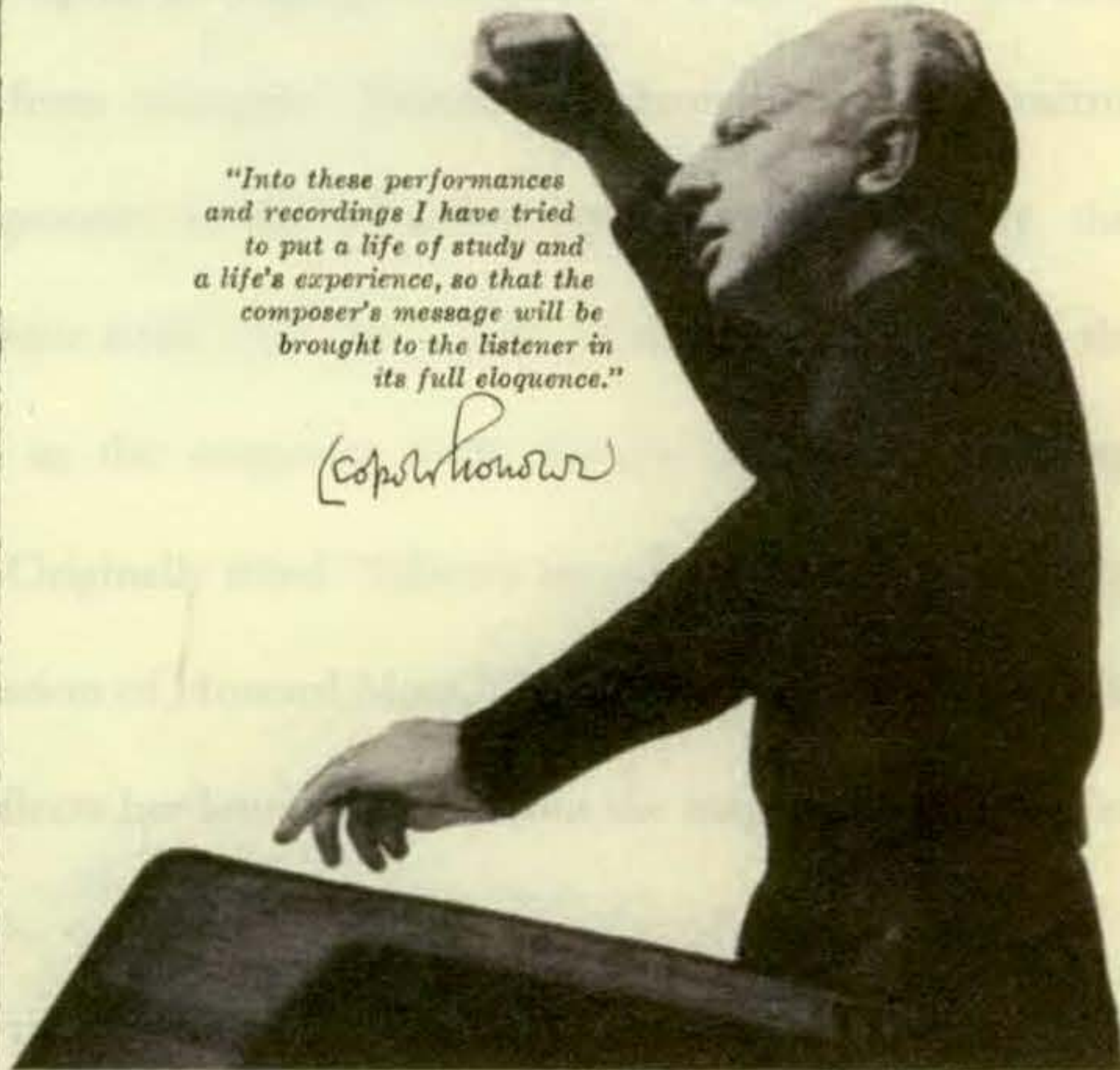
The girls peel their suburban layers, arranging for the sun in innocent poses, nesting their limbs in canvas chairs, and nude at the knee, which June discloses. The air is easy for girls in chairs—a blue mirror the light exposes for goddesses dreaming in delicate layers below the orange bee and the brief roses.

—ANNE SEXTON

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Fig. 15. "Sunbathers," *The New Yorker* 13 June: 93.



Poetry is part of the *New Yorker's* symbolic furniture, at home, situated inside short stories or longer articles. The penthouse is a symbolic ideal or idyll in the *New Yorker* value system.<sup>29</sup> Even a small poem like "Sunbathers" is elevated to a higher floor:<sup>30</sup> "Sunbathers" glimmers like a suburban after-thought, in amongst the advertisements for Stokowski's recordings and Fundador Brandy ("The Classic Brandy of Spain").<sup>31</sup> As a poet unknown to *New Yorker* readers, Sexton authoritatively depicts a scene from suburban American. Sexton holds up a mirror to the moment of her own poetic exposure; as the suburban layers are peeled away, the poet is 'disclosed' to the readers of the June issue. Like the residue of the American dream, the poem's small size reflects its presence in the magazine itself: always threatening to disappear, to luxuriously fold back into itself. Originally titled "Elbows on a June Window," Sexton changed the title of the poem at the suggestion of Howard Moss.<sup>32</sup> In a letter to Moss, Sexton's discussion of possible titles for the poem reflects her knowingness about the magazine's editorial style, even at this early stage:<sup>33</sup>

Now--- the title. First of all, please do change the "July" in line 8 to "June". I agree. However, I am having more trouble with the title. I can't think of anything special or brilliant. But in order of preference: SUN BATHERS, or THE GIRLS IN THE CHAIRS, or AT SUMMER SOLTICE.... or if it must be simpler yet.... JUNE or SONG (titles that suggest to the reader that the poem isn't supposed to have a title anyhow). You are right about the "ELBOWS" one. It is too cute. Do you like SUN BATHERS? It suggests a painting and is still so simple and direct. No beating around the bush there --- even the rose bush!<sup>34</sup>

As an emerging poet, the publication of "Sunbathers" was a significant moment in Sexton's early poetic career, which may explain why two versions of Sexton's letter exist, one draft and a final version.<sup>35</sup> Sexton's first *New Yorker* poem suggests the stabilization of its own market value. Nude at the knee, her suburban girls are unthreatening poetically, as suburban fantasy.

“Sunbathers” exists within a contextual envelope, in which the reader only catches a momentary glimpse of a scene, never yielding entirely.

I found two early versions of “Sunbathers” at the Schlesinger Library, titled “The Human Burn” and “Elbows on the June Window.”<sup>36</sup> At the Harry Ransom Center, I came across “This Human Turn,” in which Sexton evokes the transient feelings of summer.<sup>37</sup> In “Elbows on the June Window,” Sexton offers up her ‘sunny’ girls for consumption. They are described like edible delicacies, “as sweet in the air as clover and roses” and “moist in the mirror the sun exposes”; nesting in canvas chairs, the “goddesses dream in coffe [sic] cream layers.” A melancholy air hangs over the girls, a sense of blue loss or mourning. The June summer afternoon implies a disclosure that is lost in the telling – the rose/girl-buds themselves, the poem’s brevity – implies both absence and longing. Sexton’s “Sunbathers” creates an erotic affect within the magazine’s interiority.<sup>38</sup> Like the narrative frame that operates in magazines like *Playboy*,<sup>39</sup> “Sunbathers” is a polite striptease of “seminaked” girls who, like suburban *Playboy* fantasies, appear “passive, childlike, and nondemanding” (Simon 102). Sexton offers the girls to readers as a momentary pleasure, like the “wonderful” and “warm” roses that a housewife might receive from her (guilty) husband, as in the advertisement for Florists’ Telegraph Delivery. What appears to be a revealing poem is in fact an artful concealment.





Something warm and human and wonderful happens  
when you send flowers-by-wire

**FLORISTS' TELEGRAPH DELIVERY**



Fig. 16. Advertisement for Florists' Telegraph Delivery, *The New Yorker* June 13 1959: 88.<sup>40</sup>

In her second outing in the *New Yorker* (29 Aug. 1959: 30), Sexton's "The Road Back" occupies a more visible position towards the front of the magazine.<sup>41</sup> During the space of a summer, Sexton's cultural currency has increased markedly. Situated on the same page as the short story "August" by Mavis Gallant, Sexton's literary status has been seamlessly elevated.<sup>42</sup> In her drafts for the "The Road Back," Sexton toyed with various titles, including: "The Albatross," "The Sun," "The Tug Boat," "Time Tugged & Swept," "After the Turning," "Under/Beneath a Turning Sun," "Rumor/s" and "The Road Back From Truro."<sup>43</sup> Her final title leaves out the



uppermost point of Cape Cod, preserved in the poem in terms of the sense of middle-class privilege it evokes. As Sexton freely admitted in her therapy, she wrote mainly about the middle class in her poetry (25 July 1961, Schlesinger). “The Road Back” suggests the heavy knowledge of loss that comes like a sting at the end of summer. In both Sexton’s poem and the context of the *New Yorker*, summer comes to represent a time of play and leisure, a kind of idealised time, distinct from the “regular loss / of time”:

There is no word for time.  
Today, we will not think  
to number another summer  
or watch its white bird into the ground.  
Today, all cars,  
all fathers, all mothers, all  
children and lovers will  
have to forget  
about that thing in the sky  
going around  
like a persistent rumor  
that will get us yet.<sup>44</sup>

Suburban *New Yorker* readers – from Baltimore, Walter H. Buck (whose card bears the insignia “Maryland Club”), and from Gladwyne PA, Mrs. Walter J. Johnson – responded personally to Sexton’s poem, suggesting its potential as a site for identification and catharsis.<sup>45</sup> Walter Buck writes that Sexton phrased her poem perfectly, while Mrs. Walter J. Johnson (Edith) is more effusive:

My dear Anne Sexton, I can’t let your wonderful short but all embracing poem go by with[out] telling you what a wallop it gave me. It expresses so deeply what I’ve been feeling for many years now, and more particularly this last year.

Last spring my husband died and my world has been full of “rumor”.... I love the doom going through your poem. It makes me tremble, and if I can tremble over a poem, or any other person, and if a poem like yours can be written, I can believe in almost anything.

Now this week my grandchildren will be piling in cars, counting cows, and coming home and not know that a summer has gone. Thank you for what you have given and expressed for us, in “The Road Back.”<sup>46</sup>

Edith Johnson’s response suggests the poem’s cathartic potential for readers. As Luedtke documents, the publication of “The Road Back” elicited Sexton’s first archived reader responses (166). According to Luedtke, Sexton’s correspondents came from “cities, suburbs, and rural areas in every state”; many were students and amateur “housewife-poets,” suggesting Sexton’s resonance within a “distinctly female” and middle-class community (166). “The Road Back” is nostalgic, both thematically and as a site of memory as experience, or the experience of memory. Sexton offered her readers a testimonial within which, to again borrow from Luedtke, the “listener/reader does not simply empathize with the confessing ‘witness,’ but instead reproduces the text internally so that the words become the listener’s own” (175). As Mrs. Johnson puts it, Sexton has given expression to ‘our’ feelings: the collective “we” of the poem is Mrs. Johnson and all readers, from a particular background or class. Contextually, the poem is a road back from Cape Cod and a road back nostalgically to a past time that is always dissolving at the moment of reading the late-summer edition of the magazine.

As a substitute for the loss which comes at the end of summer, the poem embodies the desire for a return to a state before conscious knowledge of that “persistent rumour.” Sexton mourns the regaining of the regularity of non-vacation time. In her article “Her Kind: Anne Sexton, the Cold War and the idea of the housewife,” Clare Pollard links atomic iconography to the image of the housewife: “Suburbia ... was built with atomic warfare in mind, with the idea

that scattered citizens were less of a bomb threat” (14). Pollard argues that Sexton’s “thing in the sky” suggests an atomic weapon. Sexton experienced dreams about “the bomb” and being bombed: “Maybe it’s the bomb that depresses me. I do wonder what the point in therapy is if we’re all going to die in a year or two.”<sup>47</sup> As Jung suggests, at this time there was also a growing paranoia about the potential threats that the sky contained, including “supernatural beings as well as dark disks or round holes.”<sup>48</sup> In 1959, Jung argued that atomic explosions had caused many individuals to think about the possibility of “much more advanced dwellers on Mars or Venus, who [might be] worried about possible chain-reactions and the consequent destruction of our planet.”<sup>49</sup> According to Jung, UFOs became “*symbols*” from the unconscious (14); in this way, Sexton’s “thing” is any “thing” for her readers, *New Yorker* or otherwise – the threat of depression, alien invasion, or the Bomb.<sup>50</sup>

By 1969, Sexton’s status as a Pulitzer Prize winner and as a popular poet saw her “Moon Song, Woman Song” land in the *New York Times*, to celebrate the successful Apollo 11 moon mission.<sup>51</sup> Yet it was around this time that Sexton’s relationship with the magazine soured, and fewer of her poems were published in its pages.<sup>52</sup> In her transcripts of Sexton’s tapes, Middlebrook wonders aloud whether the magazine become less receptive to Sexton’s work around 1964.<sup>53</sup> In her biography, Middlebrook refers to the poet’s cynical view of the literary taste of the *New Yorker* editors (161). By 1968, Sexton felt aggrieved about her first reading agreement, after she learnt of better deals her male contemporaries received. In a letter to Moss, “The point to this letter is a query. Why does Ed Sissman get \$300 for signing his contract and I get \$100? What more is there to say?”<sup>54</sup> During the years following this exchange, Sexton had only one poem accepted in the *New Yorker*, “The Boat” (7 Aug. 1971: 30). In a letter to Sexton (30 Oct. 1970 HRHRC), Moss cited reasons such as tone and style for the general absence of her work from the magazine’s pages. Sexton suggested her own reasons: that her poems had become too painful or too personal for the *New Yorker*.<sup>55</sup>

In discussions with Orne about her early attempts to write, Sexton remarked that one of her main motivations, alongside the therapeutic benefits that this activity might yield, was to have a poem published in the *New Yorker*.<sup>56</sup> Although publication in the magazine represented an advertising coup, Sexton felt anxious about becoming an identifiable *New Yorker* poet (9 Feb. 1961, Schlesinger). In one session, speaking about her own feelings of inadequacy as well as her general views on the magazine, Sexton suggested that the *New Yorker* was an inadequate 'house' for posterity: "I didn't just want to be in the stupid New Yorker, all the stupid poets are in the New Yorker, it doesn't mean a thing. I want to be a great poet, I want to be great, so that when I'm dead I'll still be great and I'm great after that, that is if there's any posterity left" (25 July 1961, Schlesinger).<sup>57</sup> As far as Sexton was concerned, magazines dissolved into space, tossed into the garbage (30 Nov. 1961, Schlesinger). She commented that, "If I write a poem I don't give a damn where it's published, it's going to be in my next book, there, saved, where it gets published is merely a credit on my book, some cash or not some cash." She didn't want her poetic legacy to be discarded, like a pair of old gloves or last season's fur coat. Although in 1969, six Sexton poems were anthologized in *The New Yorker Book of Poems*, the fact that these fashionable magazine publications would ultimately disappear, was a cause of anxiety.<sup>58</sup> Sexton wanted to make a poetic contribution, a "sort of human statement" (87) that would (out)last (her).

## Live, Live

After Mother's death, an interviewer for a PBS station asked me which of her poems was my favorite. "Live," I answered without a pause. Surely this poem embodied my greatest fantasy: there, on that page, my mother chose life over death. I could not perceive the formulaic aspects of the poem at that time, not quite appreciate the canny search she had made, looking for an upbeat ending for the book called *Live or Die*. Who would buy such a book if the final poem were entitled "Die," even if, for the poet, "Die" suited her better?

Linda Sexton<sup>59</sup>

Towards the end of *Live or Die*, Sexton grouped a series of what Diana Hume George terms "Die" poems.<sup>60</sup> These poems, which include "Wanting to Die" (58-59), "Suicide Note" (75-77) and "The Addict" (85-86), are shaped, in George's words, "by the decision implied in the title" of the book. The final poem of this collection, the "Live" (87-90) poem which defines it, rises up like a crescendo at its close. "Live" was Linda Sexton's favourite poem, because it embodied her "fantasy" about her mother, in which Anne Sexton chooses life over death. I argue that "Live" embodies Sexton's "sort of human statement," which recognises both the life and death drives, as inextricable forces.

The reviews of *Live or Die* give some sense of the startling effect Sexton's third book had on her readership.<sup>61</sup> Generally the reviews were positive and as Middlebrook points out, took their cue from the "Author's Note," approached the book as an autobiographical "fever chart" (264): "To begin with, I have placed these poems (1962-1966) in the order in which they were written with all due apologies for the fact that they read like a fever chart for a bad case of melancholy" (xi). Writing for the *Hudson Review* (which published several poems from *Live or Die*), Hayden Carruth writes how Sexton's book raises the "never-solved problem of what literature



really is,” in terms of how she manages to blur the line between art and documentary.<sup>62</sup> Carruth decides that although Sexton presents her text as the “record of four years of emotional illness,” that these are poems which speak “confidently of the future” and future work. Charles Gullans, writing for the *Southern Review*, dismisses Sexton’s work as “not poems, unless we conceive of a poem as the simple delineation of anguish or literal confession.”<sup>63</sup> It is not the subject which offends Gullans, he considers “[w]anting to die, resisting suicide, checking into the mental hospital, talking to one’s psychiatrist” and “insanity and the threat of it,” suitable subjects for poetry. It seems that by framing her poems as a chronological “fever chart”, Sexton disqualifies her work from literary appraisal or aspirations. Gullans feels too intimately implicated; as though he’d been made a third party to Sexton’s conversations with her psychiatrist.<sup>64</sup> Gullans wavers between descriptions of Sexton’s poetry as monstrous self-indulgence, and as a “documentation of a neurosis,” for which she should be pitied as the victim of psychosis. Certainly, Sexton’s representation of suicidal instincts is confronting because as she was able to draw from her own experiences as material. Gullans reacts against the way in which the reader, he feels, is invited (or forced) to participate in the violent feelings of the poems. Arguably, this has always been one of Sexton’s most compelling strengths as a poet.

Linda Sexton’s comments are interesting to re-examine in light of these reviews. Writing many years after her mother’s suicide in 1974, she suggests that “Die” would have been a more biographically truthful title for the book’s concluding poem. Sexton gave herself a happy ending in her book, declaring that, above all, she would “Live.” In his review, McDonnell describes “Live” as a poem of life transformed by art as personal catharsis: “We need the poetry of a woman who couldn’t drown the eight Dalmatians in the pails of water set aside for them” (138). The response from readers endorsed McDonnell’s description of this need for an Anne Sexton “human statement,” particularly among readers who encountered her work in the *New Yorker*, and who may not have been regular poetry readers.<sup>65</sup> The response from readers to “Flee on

Your Donkey,” from Kathleen Spivack, Janet Flanner and one Mrs. Walter B. Johnson, was striking enough for Howard Moss to pass it on to Sexton.<sup>66</sup> A letter addressed to Miss Sexton from Elizabeth (her last name seems to be Leung – although it’s almost illegible), writing from one of the colleges of the University of Illinois, suggests the strong need among young women for a poet like Sexton:

I started to read your poem “Pain for A Daughter” in the March 26 New Yorker because my eye was caught by the word “horses.” When I was twelve and thirteen and fourteen, I had a horse. I started “Flee On Your Donkey,” in the May 7 issue, because I saw that you had written it.

My best friend came down, we read each poem over, and we sat in silence. We never really did talk successfully about either. You express so beautifully [what] we have felt and half sensed.

I cannot tell you how I admire and am moved by, your ability.

Reading your poetry, one is carried by it and must follow through with the process, the action, the thought and the feeling ... and one does feel. Please write more. Your work is so wonderful and I cherish it.<sup>67</sup>

Elizabeth’s description of Sexton’s ability to express feelings which are only half sensed, and which cannot necessarily be talked about, distinctly echoes Betty Friedan’s assessment of the problem which is only “felt and half sensed.”<sup>68</sup> Sexton knew her audience intimately, through shared experience. She encountered them at readings; she answered their personal and confessional letters. If her third book was going to succeed, it needed to end on a high note in order to “Live” in the eyes of her readers. Linda Sexton’s “fantasy” of her mother is a personal one, just as any reader’s fantasy of Sexton is probably both biographical and textual. In her third volume, Sexton played her best hand textually, reassuring her readers that in among the “Suicide

Note” and “Wanting to Die” (the latter having been flatly refused by the *New Yorker*, along with “Menstruation at Forty”),<sup>69</sup> there was still reason to hope, a desire to “Live.”

In *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Laplanche and Pontalis, following Melanie Klein, characterise reparation as a mechanism within which the individual makes a fantasised reparation with the love-object, in order to overcome the depressive position (388-89). As Laplanche and Pontalis point out, Klein’s work contains several words which are extremely close to each other in meaning: ‘*Weiderberstellung*’ or restoration, and ‘*Wiedergutmachung*,’ meaning restitution or reparation (389). Klein’s use of these terms suggests reparation made ‘to someone,’ as it is linked to the depressive position’s “establishment of a relation with the whole object.” More specifically, this object is the maternal object. These reparations, as movements towards the recovery of self, can at once suggest manic and obsessional defences, such as the “compulsive repetition of reparatory acts.” For Klein, it is the victory of the life instincts over the death instincts in which reparation can be described as most successful. In Klein’s own words: “By thus restoring its wholeness to the loved object and negating all the evil it has been done it, the child is said to be assured of the possession of a thoroughly ‘good’ and stable object whose introjections will strengthen his ego” (Laplanche and Pontalis 389). In *Live or Die*, Sexton presents a personal, poetic battle between the life and death drives, waged over the site of the poet’s textual self.

In poems such as “The Sun” (3), “Three Green Windows” (13-14) and “Consorting with Angels” (20-21), Sexton examines the body as a psychical and physical trap. Caught within a depressive state, the abject body locks the mind in a cage of inertia, from which escape is highly unlikely and implausible, except through death or by playing dead. Beginning her melancholic fever chart with a quotation from Saul Bellow’s early draft of his novel *Herzog* (which had been published in 1964), Sexton expands her book’s title to include an addendum:

With one long breath, caught and held  
in his chest, he fought his sadness over  
his solitary life. Don't cry, you idiot!  
Live or die, but don't poison everything ... (vii)

Sexton levels the original accusation of toxicity and poison at herself. In first part of her book, as an act of performative narcissism, Sexton's autobiographical "I" has replaced her maternal love-object with herself. The poet has become her own love-object, both good and bad, who wants to live and who wants to kill herself, to reduce this irredeemable self to a perfected "thin gray banner" (3). In the latter part of the book, Sexton examines the lust for death more explicitly in poems such as "Wanting to Die" (58-59) and "Suicide Note" (75-77). In these poems, Sexton melancholically enters addictive and unsatisfying dreams of dying. Yet Sexton's third book ultimately gestures to the work of reparation. In examining the private aspects of the soul, Sexton attempts to move beyond the depressive position, through a resounding textual endorsement of a positive narcissism. In this climactic conclusion, following a chronological movement from "January 25, 1962" (2), through to "February the last, 1966" (90), in "Live" (87-90) Sexton offers her own self-image as icon, as stable and essentially good (though not cured, as such).<sup>70</sup> *Live or Die* suggests a reparative movement beyond the prison of debilitating depressive illness, through the breaking of the fever which the poems contain. Sexton's "sort of human statement" (87) is constructed as an act of reparation to the self, written against the seductive lure of suicide.

Sexton represents suburbia as a dream-like space, which blurs public and private, echoing the evocation of *Bedlam* in her first book. Jo Gill characterizes Sexton's post-war suburban poetics in terms of both "female spaces" (64) and an "historically specific suburban world of open-plan lounges and modern kitchen appliances, of picture windows, backyards and barbecues."<sup>71</sup> Gill argues:

For Sexton, the American suburbs represent both a literal place and a figurative space, one whose meanings and parameters have to be constantly negotiated and repeatedly tested in order to fully accommodate the multiple identifies (housewife, poet, and madwoman) that she proposes to install there. (63)

In her poetic figuration of the suburbs, Sexton presents multiple layers of both tranquillity and disorder, blurring lines of perspective and identity. Clare Pollard traces this blurring through the image of the picture window or window wall as design feature of the suburban home, which literally blurred the "lines between public and private" (9). The picture window, at the front of a house and facing the street, allowed for a two-way mirror of surveillance and observation.<sup>72</sup> During daytime, it provided for the caged woman a vision of a picture perfect external world, a vision of the model suburb.

In "Those Times ...", the "precious window" is "an ugly eye" (31). The housewife of the poem prefers to sit "all day / stuffing [her] heart into a shoe box." The window is something to be avoided in the house because its gaze is all knowing and all seeing "eye." In "Self in 1958" (73-74), Sexton identifies herself as only an approximate "I." Like a deformed ghost, this "I" has no internal reality, only the external features of a plaster doll. The doll's eyes, which appear never to shut, as though fixed or programmed in a permanently paranoid state of vigilance (73). Yet even an affectless "I" is able to question her reality as "approximately an I. Magnin transplant":



What is reality?

I am a plaster doll; I pose  
with eyes that cut open without landfall or nightfall  
upon some shellacked and grinning person,  
eyes that open, blue, steel, and close.

Am I approximately an I. Magnin transplant?

I have hair, black angel,  
black-angel-stuffing to comb,  
nylon legs, luminous arms  
and some advertised clothes. (73)

In the 1960's, I. Magnin was a San Francisco-based high fashion and speciality goods luxury department store, founded in 1876 by Mary Ann Magnin. Their clothes could be ordered through catalogue (which may be most likely how Sexton encountered them), and magazine advertisements.<sup>73</sup> Like a mannequin in the display window of a department store, Sexton's "I" lives "in a doll's house," an approximate replica of an "advertised" catalogue, staged and perfected as though for sale and use. This visible deception signals the "counterfeit" currency and values of a perfected suburban dwelling. Sexton's poem is more like a movie set with a props department, a carefully crafted production constructed from cardboard. Suburban life seems somehow enlarged or blown-up, as if in preparation for the microscopic lens used for its close-up, within a tightly controlled frame. A looming panoptical eye appears to take aim at the scene, shooting a picture which will ultimately be projected as a real-life version on the big screen.

The “black angel” housewife, artfully displaying her “nylon legs,” is at once the home’s most visible asset (in her advertised clothes, she models the model lifestyle), yet because the terms of her contract fix her to the inside of the doll’s house, she is entirely invisible, sequestered behind the big front door:

Someone plays with me,  
plants me in the all-electric kitchen,  
Is this what Mrs. Rombauer said?  
Someone pretends with me —  
I am walled in solid by their noise —  
or puts me upon their straight bed. (73)

The Sexton-doll is played-with rather than one who plays, emphasising her lack of agency. She is passively planted in the “all-electric kitchen” like a listening-device, or a time-bomb, disguised as a Cold War home decoration. She becomes the spy in the house, voiceless, affectless; a perfectly functional toy. Glenna Matthews suggests that the “all-electric kitchen” was held up to housewives in magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal*, as the most desirable and comfortable modern wonder.<sup>74</sup> After living for many years without a dishwasher this was something Sexton herself wanted, and at one stage, she considered using her Radcliffe money for this purpose.<sup>75</sup>

When the original Mrs. Rombauer needed funds to support her family in 1931, she penned her cookbook *The Joy of Cooking: A Compilation of Reliable Recipes and Casual Culinary Chat*.<sup>76</sup> Sexton probably encountered Mrs. Rombauer following the reprint of the original edition in 1962. As Middlebrook writes, both cooking and mealtimes seem to have rarely been occasions of much joy in the Sexton household. In an interview with Middlebrook, Linda Sexton recalled how she and her younger sister Joy would be:

banished at cocktail hour, while Daddy and Mother absorbed their martinis or whatever. By the time dinner was served at eight or nine o’clock they would be

sloshed. The meal was full of tension. And there was just never enough food! Daddy would open one small package of frozen peas, maybe bake those small boiling potatoes, one apiece — no salad, no dessert. Mother would gag down a drumstick. She was hardly able to swallow anything solid; she'd often get up from the table and vomit her food.<sup>77</sup>

In the Sexton home, mealtimes were highly charged events, involving minor battles between husband and wife, and between Sexton and food.<sup>78</sup> Yet, within this picture of the Sexton family sitting down to a meal of peas and a couple of small potatoes, the essential ritual of eating together, or sitting down together as a family around a table, was consistently (perhaps traditionally) preserved.<sup>79</sup>

In “Self in 1958,” Sexton characterizes the normal food-preparing mother as an alien creature, alien also to herself. Sexton’s plaster doll foreshadows Ira Levin’s 1972 publication of *The Stepford Wives*, film versions of which were released in 1975 (starring Katharine Ross) and 2004 (starring Nicole Kidman). In Levin’s suburban thriller, the men of Stepford remodel their free-thinking wives into ideal designer robots, as all-electric as the kitchens they live in. Sexton’s cry, “They think I am me!” suggests the crucial split between an all-electric functionality – behind eyes which never shut, the battery is always switched on – and the presence of an invisible interior life, similarly electrified, yet not on display and therefore not recognizable. The inner electrical current could equally be characterized as desire, and suggestively, unrecognizable desire within the functionality of the family structure: that is to say, same-sex desire. In an earlier draft of “Self in 1958”, titled “I Live In A Dollhouse”, Sexton focuses on a “straight doll” who someone places “upon the straight bed”, to make “pretend.” In repressing these latent homosexual tensions in the published version, Sexton poem reflects the high-functionality of its doll-subject.<sup>80</sup>

As in the published version, someone plays with the doll and pretends with her, suggesting at the very least the absence of the doll's desire while being played with in the kitchen, or bedroom. Playing pretend preserves the image of suburban stability, while making wholesome the disordered desires of the doll herself. The doll's very femininity as construct hints at an absence or loss of self, one of many, as Blasing argues, "ready-made slots" which Sexton "plays" or plays up: "a witch, a mental case ... a hypersexual body" (186). Within a hyper-feminine mode the housewife loses her subjectivity, unable to function as anything other than an object or device within a system of desire.

Sexton suggests similar housebound constraints or restraints in "The Sun," which resolves in the poem's final image of the gray banner, a reflection of the poem's look on the page.<sup>81</sup> The housewife's final incarnation is as spare-part; a device that, being no longer functional, has been crushed into a serviceable banner. Although this banner represents a final resting place, the poetic box suggests the possibility of a movement beyond the diseased house. In "Consorting with Angels" (20-21), Sexton takes this notion of the definitional house further by linking it, as in "Self in 1958", to the functions or mechanisms of gender:

I was tired of being a woman,  
tired of the spoons and the pots,  
tired of my mouths and my breasts,  
tired of the cosmetics and the silks. (20)

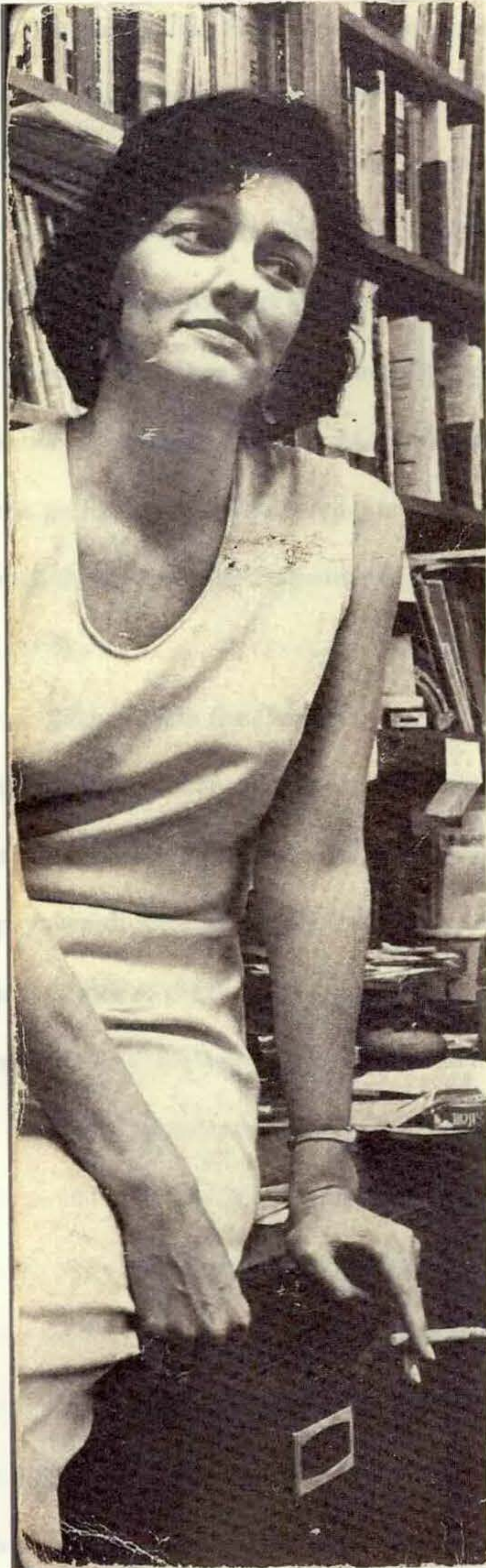
Sexton genders the "things" of the household (its "spoons and pots"), in order to suggest the robotic functionality of the mechanized, feminine housewife.<sup>82</sup> In rejecting her own mouths and breasts, Sexton refuses the skin of "cosmetics and silks," gendered signifiers written on the body, and the limits they place on desire.

In his review of *Live or Die for America*, Thomas McDonnell remarked on what a “strikingly beautiful woman” Anne Sexton is, “as anyone can see from the photo on the back dust jacket.”<sup>83</sup> In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop, Sexton wrote about the “trouble” she’d been having with “getting a book jacket I can tolerate”:

the picture for my book (taken during a T.V. interview done at my home) looks haggard and worried. But I don’t rue this as by the time people meet me I always look as old as the picture on my book. Really don’t care how I look, but how my cover looks, my LIVE OR DIE.... [My husband] has entered and has looked at the picture on the back of my book [and] has observed he dislikes it. I should have a drawing as you did.<sup>84</sup>

The portrait was taken at Sexton’s interview as part of the NET Series, for *USA: Poetry* (Middlebrook 1992 264). Middlebrook characterizes it as a dramatic photograph, in which Sexton is “perched on the end of her desk, eyes left, unsmiling and intense, shot from below so that she seems very tall.” Middlebrook points out that at this point in her career, Sexton was enough of a “name” poet that she no longer required blurbs from other poets. This striking image, cigarette in hand, a sideways gaze, was enough: it is the very vision of Sexton’s “cultural currency,” as a suburban “poet-madwoman-sexpot-witch” (Blasing 186). Yet McDonnell decides that never is Sexton more at one with her own “womanness” than when she “partially and poetically” refuses it (136). In rejecting feminine things, Sexton rejects the gender of things, as well as any notion of “being a woman” as not one thing but the Other. Sexton’s publicity shot wears its femininity on its sleeveless shift, to the point where the filing cabinet that Sexton is resting her hands on looks more like an accessory than office equipment. The burning cigarette, not far from the accessorised wrist-watch, touches the frame of the image and with the shelves of books in the background, suggests what may lie beyond these feminine tropes.





NET Series, USA: Poetry

## ANNE SEXTON

Anne Sexton won immediate recognition as a strong voice in American poetry with the 1960 publication of her first book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, followed by critical acclaim of her second volume, *All My Pretty Ones*, published in 1962. *Live or Die*, her third volume, consists of poems written from January 25, 1962 to February, 1966, many of them published in such leading periodicals as *The New Yorker*, *Harper's* and *Encounter*.

The poems are arranged chronologically and compose a fierce and intimate autobiography. The poet speaks with total frankness, her imagery and reference brilliant and hard as diamonds. It is impossible for her to be banal. Much of her experience is rendered as nightmare but it is significant that the final poem is stunningly affirmative, its title the single command "Live."

This collection is a striking body of work by a poet whose experience is intensely female, whose poetry is strong and powerful.

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Fig. 17. Back cover of *Live or Die* (1966). Photograph taken for the NET Series, USA: Poetry.



In *Live or Die*, Sexton uses the trope of un/dressing to describe the way in which the female domestic body performs the household, as the representative of the functional suburban model. In “Consorting with Angels” Sexton is undressed, revealing that she has “no arms or legs”: she is “all one skin like a fish,” and no longer a woman. The woman of the house, the gendered feminine robot is all arms and legs; her skin is dressed as many skins, as if concealing the possibility of her own desire. By creating these layers around the housewife, she is figuratively, permanently laid away, like “linen waiting on a shelf” (*Bedlam* 41); she is immobilized by the performance of her own function, and her inability to know herself intimately, except through the rejection of the gender of things.

Bachelard, in the *Poetics of Space*, describes wardrobes as the “veritable organs of the secret psychological life” (78). He goes on to suggest that: “Every poet of furniture—even if he be a poet in a garret, and therefore has no furniture—knows that the inner space of an old wardrobe is deep. A wardrobe’s inner space is an *intimate space*, space that is not open to just anybody.” In “Those Times ...” Sexton rehearses her life in the closet in amongst the charged fetish-objects of woman: shoes (“the heavy oxfords, the thick execution reds”) and dresses:

and then the dresses swinging above me,  
always above me, empty and sensible  
with sashes and puffs,  
with collars and two-inch hems  
and evil fortunes in their belts. (31)

Yet the daughter does not play the game of dressing up as mother. Sexton reverses this game into an ugly exercise of Mother undressing her daughter, in a ritual of “nightly humiliations.” Kissing dolls is another kind of rehearsal for her “plans of flight,” as if riding on the desires that are kept hidden in the secret life of the wardrobe, just as the daughter hides in the closet (“as one

hides in a tree"). This dream of flight suggests a defeminised female body, which is not locked in the elaborate prison of "dresses ... with sashes and puffs."

In exchanging collars and belts for a flight of the "body into the sky," Sexton trades the paraphernalia of the suburban closet, for the dream-ride on an elevator, which suggests the numerous levels of a sky-rise city building. By rejecting the "precious window," or the pretty picture window view onto her own body, by "stuffing [her] heart into a shoe box," Sexton substitutes the feminised version of her girl-doll body. At one point, she refers to the "same terrible rose repeating on the walls" (30), revealing a horror of the feminine as repetition of the original mother-rose. Similarly, the rose, like the dead dolls, are like tongues blooming "over and over / bursting from lips," suggesting an eroticized female body as a zone of pleasure which, in the presence of the mother, becomes unimaginable. The mother figure in "Those Times ..." is a large presence in the childhood house. Her presence, quite aside from the forceful act of undressing her daughter, prevents the female body from being recognizable as anything other than a site that requires external and internal control, vigilance and examination or assessment.

The windows of the home that "flash open on someone's city," surreally suggest the absence of the city and the urban. The city is "someone[else]'s city," which the house doll is not part of; she is firmly planted in suburbia, walled in by wholesome gates. For Sexton, both in her poetry and privately, the city and the suburbs existed as highly oppositional forces.<sup>85</sup> A city or urban way of thinking suggested to Sexton the kind of liberal-mindedness and openness which was not possible behind the walled-in world of the suburbs, except through her own experiments and success with writing. Sexton's agoraphobia was often crippling to the point that she rarely left the house, except to attend her regular therapy sessions. As Linda Sexton indicates, leaving the walls of the house was a major event in Sexton's life, and required a steeling effort on the part of the poet:

One spring afternoon, Mother and I ventured together into Boston, a place I had been only a few times, though it was only a half hour's drive away. Mother had never taken either Joy or me for lunch or to the theater because of her agoraphobia, but when the movie *Gone with the Wind* was rereleased that year, she steeled herself and took me to see Vivien Leigh cast her spell. (115)

It is unsurprising that Sexton's poems often contain such movie-like spells, particularly of women confined by stricture or structures. Sexton's work may have been influenced by Douglas Sirk's 1955 *All That Heavens Allows* (starring Jane Wyman and Rock Hudson). Certainly, she was terrified by Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*;<sup>86</sup> and she identified with Elizabeth Taylor's *Cleopatra* (1963), as the embodiment of a powerful woman.<sup>87</sup> On one occasion, Maryel Locke recalls going to see Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) with Sexton, in March 1973:

I talked [Sexton] into going with me to see Ingmar Bergman's film, *Persona*, because I thought the intertwining relationships of the two characters was like Anne's close relationship with Maxine Kumin, a poet soon to be a 1973 Pulitzer-Prize winner. Seeing that it was going to require Anne's making a sacrifice—not smoking a cigarette for ninety minutes—she and I discussed at length whether she should do it. She finally decided to go and was enthralled by the film which we saw at the Brattle Theater in Cambridge.<sup>88</sup>

In a similar vein of identification and projection, Sexton felt great sympathy for Marilyn Monroe following her suicide, relating in particular to Monroe's desire to “*be someone for someone: a star, or no-one.*”<sup>89</sup> By the end of “Self in 1958,” as if beginning a star-like emergence from the walls of her own confinement, Sexton defines the housewife's predicament as an infantilizing maternal legacy:<sup>90</sup>

But I would cry,  
rooted into the wall that

was once my mother,  
if I could remember how  
and if I had the tears. (74)

The poet's "I" explicitly separates herself from the "Self" of the poem's title, suggesting the potential of the poem as a site of both emergence and splitting. Sexton's poem removes the shackles from its doll-"I," revises its faceless, maternal inheritance. By enacting this split between the doll and the poet, Sexton cedes to the reality of the poet-star "I."

Linda Sexton describes the significant development which took place in Sexton's life circa 1958: "And so, in 1958, that which had begun as a therapeutic exercise blossomed into a vocation: Mother began to send her poetry out to a variety of literary journals and magazines and by 1958 had discovered success that accelerated weekly" (82). The year of 1958 was a turning point for Sexton in terms of her identity as a poet, the year that poetry became more than a therapeutic exercise. Sexton dates the composition of "Self in 1958" between "June 1958-June 1965." As her daughter recalls:

By the time we moved to Weston in 1964, our home overflowed unabashedly with the evidence of Mother's total immersion in her writing: books stacked high on all available surfaces, drifts of paper and worksheets, breakfast dishes in the sink, beds unmade, ashtrays overflowing with sour old cigarette butts, the acrid smell of spaghetti sauce scorching on the bottom of the big aluminum pot. (89)

Sexton's 1958 "Self" poem captures an identity shift, a progression away from the figure of mother, only concerned with her "big aluminium pot." This shift recalls the Kleinian notion of reparation, in which the child desires to repair and preserve the mother's body, or the maternal object, protecting it from attacks by 'bad' objects. The love-object is restored to wholeness, giving the child a secure 'good' object, critical for ego-development. Sexton's 'smiling' mother-doll is 'good' and wholesome, at least superficially. Sexton suggests the not 'good-enough'

Mother, in the Winnicottian sense. By comparing the mother's physical and emotional absence to being "rooted into the wall," the poet Sexton of 1965 illuminates her distance from this 1958 self. Her lack of pity ("if I had the tears"), suggesting both the fluidity of identity (she has altogether forgotten how to play that role), yet with an eerie trace of the indestructibly robotic.

In the final section of this chapter, I read several poems from *Live or Die* in which Sexton, through the representation of a suggestively autobiographical narrative, grapples with the question of suicide. "Flee On Your Donkey" closely examines the scene of the disordered senses, hinting at the final therapeutic cry of *Live or Die*.<sup>91</sup> It was written towards the end of Sexton's treatment with Orne, and represents the beginning of the end of their time together, following the poet's admission to Westwood Lodge in 1962. In Sexton's third book, madness has become a truly abject topos of retreat, at once a familiar place for the "terribly patient" poet to return to, and a place to be avoided at all costs:

Because there was no other place  
to flee to,  
I came back to the scene of the disordered senses,  
came back last night at midnight,  
arriving in the thick June night  
without luggage or defences,  
giving up my car keys and my cash,  
keeping only a pack of Salem cigarettes  
the way a child holds on to a toy.  
I signed myself in where a stranger  
puts the inked-in X's —  
for this is a mental hospital,  
not a child's game. (4)



It is the *Bedlam* scene that Sexton re-enters, “without luggage or defences.” This scene no longer holds the potential of a reparative space but has become a place of last resort. In returning to the “scene of the disordered senses,” the incoming patient must give over her adult objects (her car keys and cash); Sexton is only identifiable by the “a pack of Salem cigarettes” which she clutches “the way a child holds a toy.” Within this regressive scene, she is as undefended as a child might be in the presence of a gathering swarm of insects:

Hornets have been sent.

They cluster like floral arrangements on the screen.

Hornets, dragging their thin stingers,

hover outside, all knowing,

hissing: *the hornet knows*.

I heard it as a child

but what was it that he meant?

*The hornet knows!* (5)

In her dazzling essay simply titled “Anne Sexton, “The Typo,”” Mutlu Konuk Blasing argues that with “**hornets**, of course, we circle back to Dr. Orne.”<sup>92</sup> In her original word-counting poem, “Said the Poet to the Analyst” (*Bedlam* 17), Sexton transformed her wasps and hornets into dead bees, as eroticized symbols of the unconscious.<sup>93</sup> In “Flee on Your Donkey,” the hornets become symbols of the doctor’s penetration of her thoughts. Sexton’s hornets are almost polymorphous in their ability to transform, at once feminine (clustering “like floral arrangements”) and masculine, “dragging their thin stingers.” Blasing suggests that for Sexton the hornets represent being seen through by her very words (186). They see and ‘know’ the way the therapist knows: *The Orne knows!*

Within the narrative of the poem, Sexton's "terribly patient" persona is promised another world by her doctor, beyond the straitjackets of mourning. The therapeutic scene, unlike that "same ruined scene" (6) of disorder in the asylum, suggests its own topos of taboos and Oedipal alliances:

Years of hints  
strung out — a serialized case history —  
thirty-three years of the same dull incest  
that sustained us both.  
You, my bachelor analyst,  
who sat on Marlborough Street,  
sharing your office with your mother (7)

Sexton's "bachelor analyst" shares his office with his mother, another kind of incestuous association. It might also suggest the particular luggage that Sexton carried with her as a patient. She seems to cry out for her doctor ("O[rne]h, my hunger! My hunger!" 7), caught in an erotic transference, while the doctor is sustained by his fee structure. The therapeutic scene, unlike the *Bedlam* topos where the patient has only her child's toy to hold, is sustaining in that it satisfies the patient's intellectual hunger, if not the erotic desires it stirs up.

Blasing writes that there are "two kinds of language" operating in Sexton's poetry, "the language of illness and that of cure" (179). What is striking about "Flee on Your Donkey" is the new suggestion that perhaps there is no cure as such for Sexton, only the possibility of language as a sustaining "good nurse."<sup>94</sup> Symptomatically, Sexton's "I" acts out her desire to never leave the romance of her therapist, by collapsing in an "old-fashioned swoon / between the illegally parked cars" outside her doctor's office. By using an 'illegal' tactic, fashioned as a distressed damsel's manoeuvre, Sexton pretends "dead for eight hours," in order to regain access to the safety of the office: "You carried me back in / awkwardly, tenderly" (8). The fantasy of rescue is

complete only in the doctor's awkward embrace. Implicitly, this resembles an incestuous embrace, breaking the taboo on touching and intimate physical contact between patient and therapist. By playing dead within the incestuous embrace, Sexton embodies the psychological death of incest. In acting out this scene of rescue, Sexton's "I" shows her therapist two things: her desire for his love, and her desire for self-murder.

Of her poem "Wanting to Die" (58-59), Sexton wrote in 1966, several years after Plath's own suicide, that it reflected the "desperately similar need that Sylvia and I share" (*Letters* 280). Sexton describes her desire for death as an "almost unnameable lust." Sexton writes from within this affective lust, from within the "special language" of suicide. In "The Addict" (85-86), Sexton attempts to circuitously kill the life of the death drive within her, by killing herself in small amounts: "It's a kind of war / where I plant bombs inside / of myself" (86). The suicide is always at war within the "bad prison" of herself. Put another way, the interiority of the suicide is like a split-self, where one part wants to live and to kill-off the other part of the self that wants to die, like cutting off a malignant limb:

Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet,  
raging at the fruit, a pumped-up moon,  
leaving the bread they mistook for a kiss,  
  
leaving the page of the book carelessly open,  
something unsaid, the phone off the hook  
and the love, whatever it was, an infection. (59)

As one of Diane George's students commented, "Wanting to Die" ultimately "self-destructs" (134). The poem becomes the suicide, a representational substitute for actual death. In this sense, the poem and the suicide are oppositional, creative and destructive. Its only translation, paradoxically, is the act itself, a kind of narcissistic self-love (and self-hatred) taken to

a dangerous extreme. "Wanting to Die" directly addresses the reader ("you"), implicating them in the experience of suicide, both in terms of their own depressive feelings, and the reader's responsibility for the poet. Sexton creates a dangerous intimacy between her work and the reader. The poem has been built to self-destruct, a word-bomb on the page.

Hume cites a 1965 letter from Sexton to Charles Bowman, in which the poet stated that "Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem" (144). George questions the poet's equation:

[Sexton] liked the formulation enough to repeat it and expand on it in interviews. Perhaps she believed it. If she did, she was at odds with popular and scholarly beliefs about the purposes and directions of extremist art. I think she wanted, even desperately needed, to believe in the saving power of poetry. It is possible that poetry even delayed her death, that every poem she wrote provided another temporary respite from the death demon that pursued her from within. Sexton seems to have believed in the magic of words, in their ritual utility in incantation; but words failed her as often as they saved her. (145)

George's comments in many ways preserve the ambiguity inherent in Sexton's poetry. By creating an opposition between her own work and suicide, Sexton enacts several codes of logic. At first glance, this opposition seems obvious. Suicides are motivated by the desire to put an end to life; anything oppositional to this must symbolise a call to live, to life. Could it also be possible that rather than acting out an impulse towards self-harm or self-destruction, the poet redirects that same impulse into the poem? In the process of working-through, where impulses are redirected into the work, the therapeutic benefits are questionable at best. George isolates the incantatory quality of Sexton's work, her belief in the "magic of words," which suggests the therapeutic. I think George also illuminates the potential of Sexton's poetry in favour of the reader, rather than the poet. Even a self-destructing poem as a textual performance of suicide,

has the potential to empathically reassure the depressive reader, by giving voice to their own feelings and drives. Sexton's textual suicides allow the reader the cathartic space to contemplate their own feelings. In this sense, her poetry is contemplative rather than curative, constructed through its therapeutic potential for the reader.

In "Suicide Note" (75-77), Sexton represents a state of mind which has moved beyond help or cure: "Even the wasps cannot find my eyes." Like knowing hornets or therapists that hover at the periphery of consciousness, the wasps cannot find the "I" any longer, as Sexton moves beyond words. This poem can be read in the absence of the therapist, who has pierced the eyes or the many "I"s of the poet. Certainly, the reappearance of the earlier refrain from "Flee on Your Donkey" ("O my hunger! My hunger!"), suggests the desire for the returned therapist (*Orme knows!*). In "Flee" the siren, like the poem, announces the suicide to the surrounding streets and neighbours, like a "noon whistle that kept insisting on life / all the way through the traffic lights" (9). The mood of "Flee" is more hopeful, in that it suggests a return and a possible recuperation, unlike "Suicide Note," which enacts a final testimony. Hunger dominates both poems as a kind of erotic transference:

Soon I will raise my face for a white flag,  
and when God enters the fort,  
I won't spit or gag on his finger.  
I will eat it like a white flower. (10)

The trick or innocence of madness (or hunger) is only to be rediscovered within the incestuous, erotic transference to the therapist (9). Acting out the erotic transference with the therapist (eating God's "finger"), keeps the patient alive, although caught within a repetition or re-enactment of an original trauma. She acts out her compulsive death-drive as an erotic interaction with the therapist (fantasised or otherwise), in order to preserve the traumatic scene. Although



certainly precluding cure and discussion of the impulses behind the transference, this acting out prevents that other act, of suicide:

Anne, Anne,  
flee on your donkey,  
flee this sad hotel,  
ride out on some hairy beast,  
gallop backward pressing  
your buttocks to his withers,  
sit to his clumsy gait somehow. (11)

In her *Letters*, Sexton discussed a later sexual affair with a new male therapist, following Dr. Orne's departure from Boston. Although my reading of the poem is not biographical, I thought it worth considering Sexton's therapist's interpretations of her thoughts on suicide:

My therapy is degenerating to SEX. Boy, there are some things that I do avoid, avoid, avoid! But we got to it by the back door, starting with the poem "Wanting to Die" ... and the discussion of sex and death. When (to me) death takes you and puts you thru the wringer, it's a man. But when you kill yourself it's a woman. And it goes on from there to his discovery that 1. I don't really think the dead are dead 2. that I certainly don't think I'll die even tho I'm dead 3. that suicides go to a special place ... asleep for instance. 4. that suicide is a form of masturbation!!!  
(231)

Suicide as masturbation fits within Sexton's poetic paradigm of sex with the therapist. Yet by masturbating on her own, by talking to her own mouth (*Live* 11), by experimenting with pills or nooses, Sexton gets dangerously close to the paroxysm of the deliberate decision, the death act itself. Blasing argues that in "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator," Sexton performs "textually" as her

fingers work the typewriter and masturbate, hitting the letter keys and the key spots: "She's my workshop"; "I beat her like a bell" ... I am Anne Sexton: I perform textually. And "I am fed"; the poems pay the bills, but more important, I eat myself ... in masturbation/poems. (187)

Even construed creatively as a textual performance, the masturbation act carries the freight of self-annihilation, of eating or cannibalizing the self, in order to pay the bills, to pay the doctor. In "Flee on Your Donkey," an erotic coupling with the therapist suggests a pass out of the "sad hotel," riding out on the back of "some hairy beast," her fatherly doctor God. Although it looks like a way out of maddening hunger, if this riding has been sanctioned by the therapist within the frame of treatment, it becomes representative of a fantasy of suicide. Sexton's fourth book, *Love Poems* (which this thesis does not address), centres thematically on the love affair between a patient and her therapist. According to Middlebrook, Sexton understood the gravity of her affair with her therapist, "Dr. Zweizung": "Sexton's coy phrase 'doctor-daddy' conveys how conscious she was of her own transgression in this relationship" (1992 259). In an interview Middlebrook conducted with Maxine Kumin, Sexton's friend and contemporary gives a rather more frank assessment of these doctor-patient transgressions. After all these years, Kumin was "still indignant: 'Imagine paying to get laid twice a week!' Why did Sexton persist in the affair? 'Anne always had the notion she was the most underloved person in the universe,' Kumin said. 'There could never be enough proof that she was loved'" (259).

In "Flee on Your Donkey," leaving the city hotel ("New York City will not mind" 77), suggests that even though an awareness of the external world remains, Sexton's separateness, and the possibility of her disappearance, is her most defining quality. This oppositional approximation between the city and the plaintive cry from the suburbs implies Sexton's desire for her absence to be felt along the island of Manhattan. To borrow from Gill, Sexton figured

the suburbs as the “site of her poetry,” defined against the “metropolitan and masculine literary” model (2007 65). Although the poem turns on suicidal feelings, it signals Sexton’s ambition *not* to disappear into the anonymity of the suburban sprawl. It is this ambition which explains Sexton’s paradoxical status as the *New Yorker’s* most visible poet of the suburbs at this time, particularly in poems such as “Three Green Windows,” “Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman,” “Pain for a Daughter” and “Your Face on the Dog’s Neck,” all of which were published in the lead-up to the publication of *Live or Die*.<sup>95</sup> These poems contain strikingly intimate suburban pictures of “elsewhere” spaces away from city-life (Gill 69). Sexton creates an “odd home” of textual space around her daughter’s body, like a “miniature map of the world” from within the house of language (*Live* 62). It is an imagined dream of time stopped still, even as the daughter’s body changes, of magical bedposts: “a world of its own, / a delicate place” (64). The “new thing” is the potential of this space to accommodate a house, dinner-time and a cellar (68-69), a suburban “snapshot” (70) which has been “stopped in time” by the poet. The suburban poem becomes Sexton’s own “well built house” of words, a room for the reader to exist in: “while the neighbor’s lawnmower bites and spits out / some new little rows of innocent grass” (72).

In *Live or Die*, Sexton captures the paradoxical aspect of suicide as the end of a life and a moment of almost electrically heightened aliveness: “To thrust all that life under your tongue!” (58). By the book’s completion, the mud has washed off the poet, because she has “kept right on going on” along this chronological narrative stream (87). This, in effect, becomes her “sort of human statement”: the textualisation of her experience, even as a “dressed” or publicised body: “But I played it, dressed it up, / dressed it up like somebody’s doll” (88). Sexton ‘plays’ the orchestra of her own textual symphony, while simultaneously conducting and composing it. She dresses herself as an Annie-word-doll, more than just “somebody’s doll”, she becomes her own creation on the page.

Sexton becomes her own “dream,” her own transitional object, as well as the reader’s “bargain” (88). Sexton figures herself as icon; a kind of sun-goddess, who sprouts roses of poems off her “hackles.” She embodies herself as the ultimate creative life-source, a strange mother who provides the heat of the flame for her family’s ritual: “If I’m on fire they dance around it / and cook marshmallows” (89). Sexton textualizes herself as apron-wearing empress, mother, cleaner, wife, bitch-goddess, poet: “Even crazy. I’m as nice / as a chocolate bar.” In “Live,” Sexton becomes a paradoxical figure of both work and play:

I’m an empress.

I wear an apron.

My typewriter writes.

It didn’t break the way it warned.

Even crazy, I’m as nice

as a chocolate bar.

Even with the witches’ gymnastics

they trust my incalculable city,

my corruptible bed. (89)

This witch, painted “pink” in a grotesque parody of the made-up housewife, cannot destroy what has been created, either her own life, composed of daughters, a house, a husband and a typewriter; or the lives of Dalmatian puppies, an unexpected “gift.”<sup>96</sup> Sexton’s book, her poem, her poetic self, combine as a “dream” of life, offered to the reader as “the excitable gift” of being alive, as a textual resistance to “The abort! The destroy!” (89-90). At the completion of her first three books, Sexton rejects her own disappearance in order to deflate the lure of suicide’s bright balloon. She offers her readers her own “incalculable” poetics of “blowing” and “fumbling” words, as gestures to life, to her “city” of words.

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<sup>1</sup> Middlebrook's summary of Orne's notes includes this dream, reported on 22 February 1958 (transcripts, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger). The first therapy tape in the collection at the Schlesinger Library is dated 21 Jan. 1961. Around the time that "Letter Written on a Ferry Crossing Long Island Sound" was published in the *New Yorker* (10 June 1961: 34), Sexton commented that, even with a new poem in the magazine, she felt so depressed that she couldn't even "do the dishes," suggesting that Sexton had certainly moved beyond a purely therapeutic investment in these poems (Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 8 June 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger). Sexton remarked that as her mother was dying, she said: "Mommy, I have a poem in the *New Yorker*," to which she replied, "Well, you always said you would" (Sexton, therapy tape, 27 Sept. 1962, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

<sup>2</sup> In the same session, Sexton is generally disparaging all the magazines that she had been published in until that time: "Anybody in the world could get in the *New Yorker* if they could write halfway. Anybody could get in the *Hudson* if they use the right technique" (therapy tape, rec. 9 Feb. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

<sup>3</sup> Sexton, "Flee On Your Donkey," *New Yorker* 7 May 1966: 44. The entry for "Flee On Your Donkey" in *The Complete New Yorker* (Book and 8 DVD-ROMs, Random House, 2005) is the only instance in that particular collection where Sexton's name and her work are associated in the 'Keywords' section with words such as "Insane" and "Mental Hospitals."

<sup>4</sup> Sexton, "The Sun," *New Yorker* 12 May 1962: 44. Ultimately, published in *Live or Die*, Sexton revised this line: "I undress under the burning magnifying glass" (3). Sylvia Plath "loved" this poem, which she came across in its magazine version: "Let me know when & where I can see the new stuff you must have done since the book [*All My Pretty Ones*]. I loved the flies in their foul caves poem, but see no magazines except the *New Yorker*, which is a free copy. More power to you, although you seem to need nothing--- it is all there" (Plath, Letter to Anne Sexton, 21 Aug. 1962, correspondence, box 24, folder 4, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC).



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<sup>5</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 7 Oct. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger. Sexton mentions sunshine, light, the fruits of the kitchen. She also comments that her own kitchen was indeed, yellow.

<sup>6</sup> This poem was written at the suggestion of Orne, who encouraged her to get out of the house and write a poem in the sun, or a “sun poem,” on the sun (Sexton, therapy tapes, rec. 20 & 22 March 1962, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

<sup>7</sup> “The Fortress (While Taking a Nap With Linda),” *New Yorker* 22 May 1962: 44.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Furst, Foreword, “Photographing Anne,” *Anne Sexton: The Last Summer* (New York: St. Martin’s P, 2000): vii. In a *Look* piece, Barbara Kevles describes Sexton at home: “She runs the hub of her life from a swivel chair—a snug workbench by a desk. Pivoting, she turns to greet family/friends or, with a few pushes, reaches a phone, her private intercom with the world” (“Through Bedlam’s Door With Anne Sexton,” *Look* (12 Oct. 1968): 39, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

<sup>9</sup> Sexton, “Three Green Windows,” *New Yorker* 6 June 1964: 44.

<sup>10</sup> Sexton, “Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman,” *New Yorker* 7 Aug. 1965: 30; and “Pain for a Daughter,” *New Yorker* 26 Mar. 1966: 50.

<sup>11</sup> Sexton, “Your Face on the Dog’s Neck,” *New Yorker* 3 Sept. 1966: 40.

<sup>12</sup> Sexton, “It Is A Spring Afternoon,” *New Yorker* 27 Apr. 1968: 48.

<sup>13</sup> By 1971, Sexton was once again happy to tease Moss in their correspondence: “What has happened to you, Howard? Usually you are in Europe at this time or at least Fire Island” (15 June 1971, correspondence, box 23, folder 5, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC).

<sup>14</sup> On 28 Oct. 1961 (therapy tape, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger), Sexton commented that although she “didn’t write for the *New Yorker*,” they were keen to sign her to a contract: “I got a contract from the *New Yorker*, I don’t know why, because I’ve only sold them three poems, but it’s a very financially good thing, the only thing is that it tends to make you a prostitute ... They get first reading rights on anything you write and they pay you about twice as much as they pay anyone else

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and you get a cost of living adjustment.... I don't know why they ever gave it to me, maybe they have ten poets a year on contract."

<sup>15</sup> Sexton, Letter to Howard Moss, 28 Nov. 1967; and Moss, Letter to Sexton, 5 Dec. 1967, New Yorker Records, NYPL.

<sup>16</sup> Caroline King Barnard Hall, "*Transformations: A Magic Mirror*," Bixler 107.

<sup>17</sup> Sexton, Letter to Howard Moss, 2 Sept. 1970, correspondence, box 22, folder 5, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC. See also *Letters*: 25 Aug. & 22 Sept. 1970.

<sup>18</sup> *Letters* 130. Sexton was more direct with Orne, when she stated that her poems were "not" *New Yorker* poems (Sexton, therapy tape, 30 Nov. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger). In a letter to Moss, Sexton attempted to define the *New Yorker* style, which she thought had a "certain joyousness in it, a kind of humor," which she thought her work lacked (Letter to Moss, 1 Nov. 1961, New Yorker Records, NYPL).

<sup>19</sup> Moss sent his acceptance letter on 10 Feb. 1959, box 23, folder 5; Sexton's letter to Howard Moss is dated 13 Feb. 1959 (correspondence, box 22, folder 5, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC). In her journals (*Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil. London: Faber, 2000), Sylvia Plath describes her ardent desire to be published in that "blessed *New Yorker* print" (399). By 8 Aug. 1958, the compelling daydream had become a kind of personal apotheosis: "I am awestruck, excited, smiling inside creamy as a cat: the day has evaporated, quite gone, in a rapt contemplation of my poem "Mussel Hunter At Rock Harbor" which came out in the Aug. 9 issue of the blessed glossy New Yorker – the title in that queer wobbly, half-archaic type I've dreamed poem & story titles in for about eight years." (413) Publication in the *New Yorker*, or even in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, is treated by Plath as a potentially magical process of transformation, a major fantasy of scenario in which her 'bad' or "malignant" self becomes "radiant" through the object-definition brought by the physical production of a "book of poems" or a short stories being printed in those "blessed glossy pages." Aurelia Plath, writing in 1963 to thank the "Editor of The New Yorker" for "the beautiful arrangement of flowers [sent] in memory of [her] daughter" (Letter to Howard Moss, 23 Mar. 1963,

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New Yorker Records, NYPL), spoke of Sylvia Plath's joy at her first acceptance in the magazine: "I recalled her phoning me a few years ago -- her voice radiant with joy -- "I've arrived Mother! A New Yorker acceptance, at last!"

<sup>20</sup> Moss, Letter to Anne Sexton, 5 Jan. 1959, New Yorker Records, NYPL. Although ultimately "Sunbathers" (13 June 13 1959), marked Sexton's first appearance in the magazine, "The Road Back" was accepted first for publication.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Grant, "Mythologizing Manhattan: the *New Yorker's* New York," *American Studies* 28.1 (Spring 1987): 39.

<sup>22</sup> The correspondence between Moss and Sexton also suggests the significance of this publication for poets. In their discussion about the title for "Letter Written on a Ferry Crossing Long Island Sound," Moss (Letter to Anne Sexton, 15 Nov. 1960, New Yorker Records, NYPL), aims for accuracy, suggesting an alternative to Sexton's original title: "There just is no such thing called "The Long Island Ferry," alas, and we'd hate to let ourselves open to a thousand letters from Long Island residents who'd like to know what ferry, etc." Sexton's card to Moss (16 Nov. 1960, New Yorker Records, NYPL) suggests the visibility that the *New Yorker* offered its poets, in the form of a readership far greater than a traditional poetry audience: "I see your point about the thousand letters from Long Island residents. God knows we don't want to alienate Long Island! I don't really like the title but I can't think of a better one.... and then, when I put it in a book I can use the first title if I like (so few people read books of poems that my chance of such protests from L.I. is pretty slim)."

<sup>23</sup> Eva Moskowitz, "Home: The Unhappy Housewife, 1945-1965", *In Therapy We Trust* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2001): 156.

<sup>24</sup> Mrs. John P. Ranson, Letter to Howard Moss, 20 Sept. 1966, correspondence, box 23, folder 5, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

<sup>25</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 9 May 1963, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>26</sup> This started to occur as early as 1963, after the publication of her first two books Sexton commented to Orne that would-be writers had been calling her up, making her feel like she had to

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act the part of psychiatrist “being nice” to her patients (9 May 1963, Schlesinger). Although as Rose Lucas argues, the textual site of the poem can also be considered as “a poisoned apple to lure the reader into the same sinkhole of despair as the speaker—to be doubled, fatally caught in the binds of repetition” (2009 57).

<sup>27</sup> W. D. Snodgrass, “Lying Awake,” *The New Yorker* 13 June 1959: 36.

<sup>28</sup> John Cheever, “The Season of Divorce,” *Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 1990): 181.

<sup>29</sup> As in Sally Benson’s *New Yorker* story “Suite 2049” (14 Mar. 1936), in which: “the Bentleys take a mid-town hotel room to avoid searching for a permanent apartment before the summer season begins—only to find themselves moving from hotel to hotel and to ever higher floors ...”

<sup>30</sup> See Grant’s (1987) discussion of “height” (41).

<sup>31</sup> The English poet James Raimés, in a letter to Sexton from Oxford, amusingly describes the publication of some of her poems in *NOVA*: “Never have I seen such an ironical presentation. Your poetry threads its thin way through the glare and gloss of advertisements, and JUST at the most momentous point in one of your most momentous poems (isn’t it?), JUST at exactly that point, it is completely lost, submerged under the barrage of bright advertisements (demanding to be read, posing questions demanding to be answered), and then reappears, to answer the questions correctly and survive!” (James Raimés, Letter to Anne Sexton, 1 Nov. 1966, miscellaneous, box 33, folder 3, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC).

<sup>32</sup> Moss, Letter to Anne Sexton, 24 Apr. 1959, correspondence, box 23, folder 5, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC. Moss wrote: “We think the poem needs a new title, something simpler, perhaps. There is also, it seems to us, a discrepancy between the ‘June’ of the title and the ‘July’ that appears in line 8. We’d like to change your ‘July’ in this line to ‘June.’” In a letter following this correspondence, George Starbuck (poet, as well as Sexton’s lover and editor at Houghton Mifflin) wrote to Moss that H.M. was: “definitely publishing a collection of Anne Sexton’s poems[.] Probably in Spring 1960. She would like us to include both the summer poems you have accepted, and we hope you can print them both this summer. She suggests you could even change ‘June’ to ‘July’ in the sunbathers poem

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if it would be easier to fit it in in July” (Starbuck, Letter to Howard Moss, 26 May 1959, New Yorker Records, NYPL).

<sup>33</sup> Sexton, “What’s That,” *Bedlam* 36.

<sup>34</sup> Sexton, Letter to Howard Moss, 27 Apr. 1959, New Yorker Records, NYPL.

<sup>35</sup> Ever conscious of posterity, Sexton kept carbon copies of all of her typed correspondence. In each version, Sexton’s asks for forgiveness for “this casual letter,” blaming the lateness of the hour. I found the draft letter to Moss in the Anne Sexton Papers (27 Apr. 1959, correspondence, box 23, folder 5) at the HRHRC. The sent letter (also dated 27 Apr. 1959) is housed in the New Yorker Records, NYPL.

<sup>36</sup> Sexton, “The Human Burn,” 10 Feb. 1958, unpublished ts., and “Elbows on the June Window,” 18 Feb. 1958, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>37</sup> Sexton, “This Human Turn,” 10 Feb. 1958, works, box 2, folder 1, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC:

We melt out our bronze skin,  
Anointed for the rites of sun,  
Chin at the sky, arms outflung,  
We assume this July color in.

~~Swung out from our archetypes~~

We to sprawl flat upon our holidays,  
To ripen, to perform this praise  
of flesh turning it its stripes.

<sup>38</sup> See Simon’s discussion of commodity fetishism in relation to *Playboy*, as well as his description of the magazine’s narrative structure, designed to seduce and “create an erotic aura” around the reader by surrounding him “completely” with consumer goods (*Trash Culture: Popular Culture and the Great Tradition*, U of California P: Berkeley, 1999: 102).

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<sup>39</sup> Sexton, "The Little Peasant," *Playboy* 18.1 (Jan. 1971): 196.

<sup>40</sup> Page 88 in this instance refers to the publication American edition, available from *The Complete New Yorker*.

<sup>41</sup> It was published after a considerable editorial process. When *the New Yorker* bought "The Road Back," Moss pointed out that "rumors aren't usually swept out," to which Sexton heartily agreed: "What can be wrong with me! Of course rumors are not swept out." The poem was renovated to fit both the context of the editorial aesthetics of its magazine-house (Moss, Letter to Anne Sexton, 10 Feb. 1959; and Sexton, Letter to Howard Moss, 13 Feb. 1959, correspondence series, box 23, folder 5, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC).

<sup>42</sup> Mavis Gallant, "August," *New Yorker* 29 Aug. 1959: 26. In the *Complete New Yorker*, Gallant's story is described as being about an American woman, Bonnie McCarthy, and her daughter Florence whom she left alone in an apartment in France during the month of August: "Florence slept all that month almost every hour of the day, and became almost completely insane. In the end, she committed suicide."

<sup>43</sup> These unpublished drafts are in the Works Series (box 7, folder 3) of the Anne Sexton Papers at the HRHRC. "The Road Back," 2 July 1958, is in the Anne Sexton Papers at the Schlesinger Library.

<sup>44</sup> In the *Bedlam* version of "The Road Back," Sexton altered the arrangement of the following lines of the second stanza: "Today we will / not think to number another summer / or watch its white bird into the ground" (43). Sexton also added a comma after "sky," in the *Bedlam* version.

<sup>45</sup> Both Walter H. Buck's card to Sexton (2 Sept. 1959) and Mrs. Walter J. Johnson's undated letter are to be found in the Miscellaneous Series, box 33, folder 2, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

<sup>46</sup> Sexton commented (Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 26 Aug. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger) that something that greatly cheered her was receiving a letter from "someone who's read my book and they think I'm wonderful." Sexton went on to describe receiving a letter on that same day: "I got a letter today, kind of cheered me up, from someone who liked my book ... someone who said 'I know that life is hell to try to live through,' ... that's the way I feel! No one can understand that



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because I have everything – you know, I have a nice husband, nice children – why would anyone understand, just on face value?”

<sup>47</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. on 5 Mar. 1964 and 28 Oct. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>48</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, “UFOs in Modern Painting,” *Flying Saucers*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (1959; London: Routledge, 2002): 96.

<sup>49</sup> Jung, “UFOs as Rumors,” *Flying Saucers*, 9. Jung notes that airfields and “atomic installations held a special attractions for [UFOs], from which it was concluded that the dangerous development of atomic physics and nuclear fission had caused a certain disquiet on our neighbouring planets and necessitated a more accurate survey from the air. As a result, people felt they were being observed and spied upon from space” (3).

<sup>50</sup> Pollard notes Mary McCarthy’s recollection of hearing about the bombing of Hiroshima while shopping for groceries on Cape Cod, and asking herself: “What am I doing buying a loaf of bread?” (16).

<sup>51</sup> Sexton, “Moon Song, Woman Song,” *New York Times* 21 July 1969: 17.

<sup>52</sup> Sexton’s absence from the magazine was reassuringly acknowledged by Moss as one of those “streaks” (Letter to Anne Sexton, 27 Oct. 1970, correspondence, box 23, folder 5, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC): “We’ve turned down quite a few of your poems lately and so I hope you know that there’s no diminishment of interest in your poems here. It’s one of those streaks that happen, and I’m anxious for it to end.”

<sup>53</sup> See Middlebrook’s transcript for 15 Mar. 1964, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>54</sup> Sexton, Letter to Howard Moss, 26 Sep. 1968, correspondence, box 23, folder 5, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

<sup>55</sup> See Sexton’s letters to Moss on 1 Mar. 1967 & 15 Mar. 1967, New Yorker Records, NYPL. Also, Moss’s letter to Sexton, 13 Mar. 1962, correspondence, box 23, folder 5, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC, rejecting “Sailing to Byzantium,” reveals something of the magazine’s in-house style, which avoided writers writing about writing and poets writing poems about poems: “there are wonderful

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things, of course, but, as a whole, it seemed to us personal not in the best way—that is, it generates emotions more meaningful to the writer than the reader.”

<sup>56</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 14 Mar. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>57</sup> Marie Czach describes the historical context that Arbus, Plath and Sexton were working in: “All three ... lived at least part of their lives immersed in the visual culture of popular magazines directed at women.... The magazines were not only an important outlet for publication for Plath’s, Sexton’s and Arbus’s work, but an opportunity to act out an adolescent fantasy on the printed page” (“Diane Arbus, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton: Astringent Poetry and Tragic Celebrity,” *History of Photography* 19.2 Summer 1995: 102).

<sup>58</sup> Six of Sexton’s poems were published (in alphabetical order) in *The New Yorker Book of Poems*, including: “Flee on Your Donkey,” “Letter Written on a Ferry Crossing Long Island Sound,” “Little Girl My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman,” “The Road Back,” “The Sun,” and “Three Green Windows” (New York: Viking Press, 1969).

<sup>59</sup> Linda Sexton, *Searching for Mercy Street* 129.

<sup>60</sup> Diana Hume George, “*The Violent against Themselves*,” *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton*, (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1987): 139.

<sup>61</sup> Louis Simpson (“The New Books,” rev. of *Live or Die*, by Anne Sexton, *Harper’s* 235.1407 Aug. 1967, 90-91), felt that in *Live or Die*, Sexton was merely self-dramatizing out of “habit”: “A poem titled ‘Menstruation at Forty’ was the straw that broke this camel’s back.”

<sup>62</sup> Hayden Carruth, “In Spite of Artifice,” rev. of *Live or Die*, by Anne Sexton, *Hudson Review*, XIX.4 (Winter 1966-67) 698, rpt. in McClatchy, 130-31. The *Live or Die* poems which appeared in the *Hudson Review*, but are not discussed in this chapter, were “Imitations of Drowning,” “To Lose the Earth,” “Crossing the Atlantic,” “Menstruation at Forty” and “Two Sons.”

<sup>63</sup> Charles Gullans, “Poetry and Subject Matter: From Hart Crane to Turner Cassity,” *The Southern Review* 7.2 (Spring 1970): 497-98, rpt. in McClatchy 131-32.

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<sup>64</sup> In an exclamatory flourish, Gullans documents his dismay at having to read Sexton's "not poems": "It is painful, embarrassing, and irritating. The immediacy and terror of her problem are painful; the personal character of the confessional detail is embarrassing; and the tone of hysterical melodrama which pervades most of the writing is finally irritating" (McClatchy 131).

<sup>65</sup> One example of this exists in the form of an East Village reader's letter to Howard Moss (18 Feb. 1968, New Yorker Records, NYPL), in response to Sexton's poem, "For My Lover, Returning to his Wife" (3 Feb. *New Yorker* 1968 91). Mrs. Emily Novitz writes: "Dear Sir: Are there any published collections of the poetry of Anne Sexton? Cordially, Emily Novitz (Mrs.)," to which Moss replies: "Dear Mrs. Novitz, Yes, there are several. The latest, called LIVE OR DIE, won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry last year, and I'm sure is available both at libraries and bookshops. Sincerely, Howard Moss (Letter to Emily Novitz, 1 Mar. 1968, New Yorker Records, NYPL).

<sup>66</sup> Sexton, "Flee on Your Donkey," *New Yorker* 7 May 1966: 44-45. The letter from Moss to Anne Sexton reads: "There has been such general admiration for and comment on FLEE ON YOUR DONKEY that I would find it hard to repeat it all and identify the sources. But two notes this morning are still fresh in my mind: Kathleen Spivack and Mrs. Walter B. Johnson both wrote to say how much they admired the poem. And Janet Flanner told me how impressed she was with it" (1 June 1966, New Yorker Records, NYPL). It isn't clear whether Mrs. Walter B. Johnson is the same reader as Mrs. Walter (Edith) J. Johnson, or whether this was a slip on Moss's part.

<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth Leung, Letter to Anne Sexton, 14 July 1966, miscellaneous, box 33, folder 3, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC.

<sup>68</sup> In an interview with Patricia Marx, Sexton was asked what her feelings were about the "feminine mystique," to which she replied: "Maybe modern woman is more conscious now, more thinking. I can't tell. Sometimes I feel like another creature, hardly a woman, although I certainly am, in my life. I can't be a modern woman. I'm a Victorian teenager—at heart" (McClatchy 37).

<sup>69</sup> Rachel MacKenzie writes that the reason she is writing is that "Howard [Moss] is away from the office for a week or two" (MacKenzie, Letter to Anne Sexton, 30 Mar. 1964, New Yorker Records,

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NYPL). Howard Moss was the main poetry editor at *The New Yorker*, during the time Sexton was writing.

<sup>70</sup> Sexton felt that giving the poems a chronological order lent the book a sense of urgency and immediacy. Middlebrook cites Sexton's comment in a private letter the poet wrote to Anne Wilder (9 June 1965), on page 241 of her biography. As Middlebrook points out, the chronology of the dates was "fudged" where necessary.

<sup>71</sup> Jo Gill, "Anne Sexton's Poetics of the Suburbs," *Health, Heredity and the Modern Home*, ed. Mark Jackson (Routledge, 2007): 63.

<sup>72</sup> Clare Pollard, "Her Kind: Anne Sexton, the Cold War and the idea of the Housewife," *Critical Quarterly* 48.3 (2006): 1-24.

<sup>73</sup> I. Magnin was ultimately eaten-up in a takeover by Macy's California.

<sup>74</sup> As Glenna Matthews points out in *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), these new appliances went well beyond the kitchen, and included: "the dishwasher, and the washing machine, [and] such items as the electric fan, electric sewing machine, electric heater, electric clock, electric milk-bottle warmer, electric heating pad, and electric hair curler" (189).

<sup>75</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 14 Dec. 1963, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger. During this session, Sexton discussed the significance of her three-thousand dollar Radcliffe grant, which she used to add a study/sunroom onto her house. It also paid in part for the redecoration of the family living room, to suit Sexton's husband Kayo's taste. Ultimately, as Middlebrook reports, the Radcliffe grant was used as "the down payment on a swimming pool, which filled up most the back yard. It was far from opulent; a canvas inset of the sort currently being peddled in the suburbs, it was about fifteen by twenty-five feet, and Anne and Kayo did most of the finishing work and replanting themselves. Yet this apparently frivolous use of the grant scandalized the Yankee director of the institute, and the story that Anne Sexton used her Radcliffe fellowship to build a swimming pool is still told in Boston circles" (1992 150-51).

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<sup>76</sup> Iram Rombauer's *The Joy of Cooking: A Compilation of Reliable Recipes with a Casual Culinary Chat* was first published by A.C. Clayton, in St. Louis, 1931. A fourth edition (and the version Sexton most likely encountered), which listed Marion Rombauer-Becker as co-author, was published in 1962 by Bobbs-Merill Co., New York.

<sup>77</sup> Middlebrook (1992): 333-34. The quotation is taken from an interview Middlebrook conducted with Linda Sexton on 15 Oct. 1980 (see "Sources and Notes" 454). In her memoir, Linda Sexton writes about a happier experience in the kitchen with her mother: "Mother and I mix the stiff, sticky cookie dough in the V-shaped beige bowl, ridged along the outside, that holds potato salad during summer. We roll it out, arms aching, in the dim yellow kitchen, grease the cookie sheet that twenty years later will come to rest in my kitchen drawer. She laughs. She wears her black hair cropped short, and wraps an apron around her waist. Rings sparkle on her fingers as she wields measuring cups and spoons. Ginger snaps — her favorite cookies. Ginger snaps — not the comfort of oatmeal, not the richness of chocolate chip. Ginger snaps: an exotic mix of sugar and bite, just like Mother. From the oven, the sweet caramel of sugar baking. For me, this smell will always signal safety: if you can bake cookies, you can't be too crazy" (58).

<sup>78</sup> As the editor of a "unique" cookbook (*A Treasury Favorite Recipes of the Stars Cook Book*), of the "dishes, cakes pies" preferred by all of the "TOP STARS" (including "Lucille Ball, Bob Hope, Ring and Katharine, John Wayne, Perry Como, Dick Van Dyke, Carol Channing, Pearl Bailey, Barbara Streisand, Angela Lansbury, Julie Andrews, Joey Bishop, Johnny Carson, Red Skelton and many others"), it was Bessie C. Redmer's personal interest in poetry and her admiration of Sexton's work that encouraged her to write to this particular star-poet (12 Apr. 1969, correspondence, box 19, folder 5, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC): "CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR NEW BOOK TITLED "LOVE POEMS". I hope that it becomes a BEST SELLER FOR YOU. I love poetry. And in fact I am trying to write it. It is very hard to write though. It took me a month to write out one poem. I have sent it into MC CALLS magazine. I hope that they think it is good enough to publish. I thought it was a fine poem. However I maybe wrong." Perhaps indicating her complete

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absence of interest in cooking, Sexton responded (2 May 1969, correspondence, box 19, folder 5, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC) with the instructions for preparing her favorite recipe, "Cucumber Soup (Hot or Cold)":

2 8 inch cukes

2 Tablespoons butter

½ teaspoon dried dill seed

1 teaspoon wine vinegar

3 Tablespoons quick cooking farina

salt & Pepper

¼ cup onions

4 cups chicken broth

1 cup sour cream.

Peel cukes and chop in ½ inch cubes (@ 3 cups). Melt butter, stir in onions and cook 1 minute. Add cukes, broth, vinegar and dill. Bring to boil. Stir in farina. Simmer uncovered for 20 minutes or until farina is very tender. Puree in blender with sour cream. Serve with cukes slices or fresh dill.

<sup>79</sup> In her memoir, Linda Sexton describes how this ritual of mealtimes was preserved to an almost hysterical degree: "We set up strict boundaries around family life as if we were behind a fence, as if gates and posts could keep us safe. I did not invite friends to spend the night unless my parents were having a good stretch, unless Mother seemed 'all right' on Saturday afternoon. If their friends stopped by for a drink without calling first, Mother and Dad would wait them out rather than asking if they would like to join us for dinner — even when ample food cooked in oven, growing more well done by the minute" (113).

<sup>80</sup> "I Live In A Dollhouse," 25 Feb. 1957, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>81</sup> "The Sun," *New Yorker* 12 May 1962: 44.



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<sup>82</sup> Glenna Matthews describes how the contradictory role of the mother, who was supposed to “let go as her children grew up, to refrain from invoking any maternal authority over them, and yet to “Be There” should they need her (182).

<sup>83</sup> Thomas McDonnell, “Light in a Dark Journey,” *America* 116.19 (13 May 1967): 729-31, rpt. in McClatchy, 132-138. He continues: “The fact is that press agents and movie makers do not know what authentic glamour is, chiefly because they don’t know what a woman is; and Anne Sexton is one of the few women writing poetry in the United States today of whom it is possible to say that her womanness is totally at one with her poems” (136).

<sup>84</sup> In the same letter, Sexton writes, “The first one, I hope I have talked HM Co out of it, made me quite ill. The ills of body and mind, breath as one, how closely aligned! It looked like pink birds standing on green snakes which after considerable study turned into three dragons. I have pleaded with them to use a pen drawing of an artist friend [Barbara Swan] (am even willing to pay for its use)” (Sexton, Letter to Elizabeth Bishop, 23 May 1966, correspondence, box 18, folder 1, Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC). Sexton expressed these feelings three days earlier in a letter to Maxine Kumin: “Decided I couldn’t stand that book cover [for *Live or Die*], it probably made me sick! Am pleading with HM Co. NOT to use it. Think, as I dashed in there in the rain yesterday with a temp. and all – that I convinced them not to use, but tried, unsuccessfully I think, to get them to use Barbara [Swan]’s drawing of MAN CARRYING A MAN” (*Letters* 296).

<sup>85</sup> In her therapy, Sexton remarked on her dislike of the “stupid suburbs,” and particularly what she termed suburban ways of thinking. On the therapy tape for 25 July 1961, Sexton remarks: “And I look at my life and think, is this the life of a genius, of a great poet, out here in the stupid suburbs?” On another tape (29 Aug. 1961), Sexton remarks how she perhaps as a fantasy, she’d like to live in a city. On 25 Nov., Sexton declares that she wants to get rid of that girl in the suburbs, suggesting an identity that she had to play at (Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

<sup>86</sup> Sexton hints at the cathartic potential of Hitchcock’s “horror” movie. Although the shower scene was “terrifying” (she also states she started to scream “Stop it!” during the scene, and had to be taken

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out of the cinema), ultimately she didn't mind "this terrible, morbid movie, because it gives me something to be frightened of that has nothing to do with me" (Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 30 Sept. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

<sup>87</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 12 Aug. 1963, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>88</sup> Maryel Locke, "Anne Sexton Remembered," *Rossetti to Sexton* 161.

<sup>89</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 20 Aug. 1963, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger. Sexton was also drawn to the star-power of Judy Garland, in terms of the reaction she got out of her live audiences (therapy tape, 10 Aug. 1961).

<sup>90</sup> On 25 Nov. 1961 (Schlesinger), Sexton remarked that she wanted to get rid of that "girl" out in the suburbs.

<sup>91</sup> In length, it's followed closely by "Days Without You" (*New Yorker* 29 June 1968, 34), which appeared after the excision of ten of the eighteen days in the original poem and any explicit anti-war sentiment. The full version of this poem, titled "Eighteen Days Without You," was published in Sexton's *Love Poems* (1969).

<sup>92</sup> Blasing, "Anne Sexton, 'The Typo,'" *Lyric Poetry* 186.

<sup>93</sup> Sexton gave Orne her own "interpretation" of her poem, declaring that the "knowing" hornets with their thin stingers was "obviously a reference to masturbation" (Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 26 Feb. 1963, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger).

<sup>94</sup> Sexton described "Flee," as a "mess of images about being sick ... except that in the end it says, I want to get well ..." Sexton viewed this poem as an opportunity to dramatise Westwood, and how she feels when she's sick (26 Feb. 1963, Schlesinger).

<sup>95</sup> Sexton, "Three Green Windows," *New Yorker* 6 June 1964: 44; "Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman," *New Yorker* 7 Aug. 1965: 30; "Pain for a Daughter," *New Yorker* 26 Mar. 1966: 50, and "Your Face on the Dog's Neck," *New Yorker* 3 Sept. 1966: 40.

<sup>96</sup> Although as Linda Sexton comments in her memoir: "Mother had never had any real intention of drowning the puppies — much less if they were purebred Dals that we could sell for a reasonable

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sum. There were no pails of water waiting, and we slept through the vigil of death she painted.

Literary license also gave Mother the metaphor about “birch trees,” for — as anyone familiar with Disney knows — Dals are born without any spots showing through their temporarily snow-white coats” (129).



## An(ne) Impossible Legacy



**Fig. 18.** Sylvia Plath's 'immortality desk'. Personal photograph by the author, Karen Kukil's office, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Nielson Library, Smith College, 23 Aug. 2006.

A legacy of melancholia—of aberrant or uncompleted mourning—is, by definition, an impossible legacy.

(Christine Britzolakis 214)

### The Bomb Opens like a Shoebox

I took the photograph of Sylvia Plath's writing desk in August 2006. I had been at Smith College for about a week, reading Plath's papers in the Mortimer Rare Book Room. On my final day at Smith, I noticed a large block of wood leaning against the wall in Karen Kukil's office. She



explained that it had been Plath's writing desk, fashioned by her husband Ted Hughes.<sup>1</sup> According to Karen, who edited Plath's *Journals*, the wood had been originally intended for a coffin. This desk was later immortalized by Hughes in "The Table" from *Birthday Letters*:

I wanted to make you a solid writing-table  
That would last a lifetime.  
I bought a broad elm plank two inches thick,  
The wild bark surfing along one edge of it,  
Rough-cut for coffin timber. Coffin elm  
Finds a new life, with its corpse,  
Drowned in the waters of earth. It gives the dead  
Protection for a slightly longer voyage  
Than beech or ash or pine might.<sup>2</sup>

Seeing Plath's "coffin-elm" desk (which Hughes declared, many years after his wife's death: "No longer a desk. / No longer a door. / Once more simply a board"), was "a door," for me, to another poem, another scene of writing. It opened the way for me to Anne Sexton's "The Ambition Bird," from *The Book of Folly*:

So it has come to this—  
insomnia at 3:15 A.M.,  
the clock tolling its engine  
  
like a frog following  
a sundial yet having an electric  
seizure at the quarter hour.

The business of words keeps me awake.

I am drinking cocoa,  
that warm brown mama.

I would like a simple life  
yet all night I am laying  
poems away in a long box.

It is my immortality box,  
my lay-away plan,  
my coffin. (3)

Through my reading of “The Ambition Bird” in this concluding chapter, I address Sexton’s “immortality box,” her poetic, posthumous legacy. Several months before her death on 4 October 1974, one of Sexton’s last poems to be published during her lifetime appeared in the 3 June issue of the *New Yorker*.<sup>3</sup> “Riding the Elevator into the Sky” is full of New York hotels, the warnings of a “fireman,” and elevators that seek out the “floor of the fire” before smashing “into the sky.” Fused with such peremptory warnings of explosions in a “kitchen of clouds,” Sexton’s poem has made several commemorative reappearances in the online magazine *MUG (Manhattan User’s Guide)*, to mark the anniversary of the events of 11 September 2001:

Floor five hundred  
messages and letters centuries old,  
birds to drink,  
a kitchen of clouds.  
Floor six thousand:



the stars,  
skeletons on fire,  
their arms singing.  
And a key,  
a very large key,  
that opens something—  
some useful door—  
somewhere—  
up there.

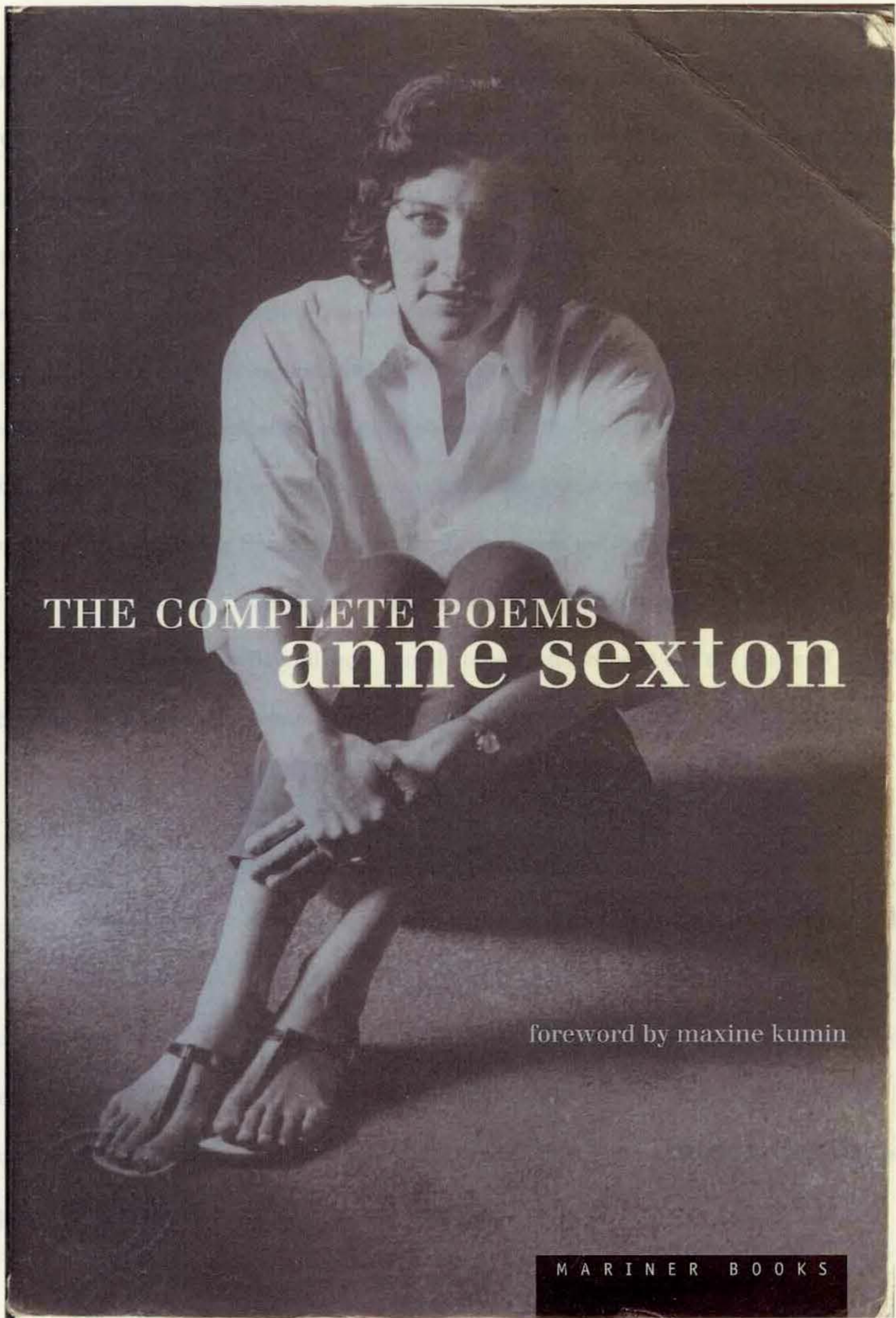
“Riding the Elevator into the Sky” was published posthumously in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975), and then subsequently in the *Complete Poems* (426-7). It was also the only poem accepted for publication in the *New Yorker* from Sexton’s *Awful Rowing*.<sup>4</sup> It has been reprinted four times in *MUG* (<http://www.manhattanusersguide.com/>) since 11 September 2001. Another curious reappearance by Sexton has been in the magazine *Teen People*, where her poem “Just Once” was published in February 2002: “Just once I knew what life was for. / In Boston, quite suddenly, I understood.”<sup>5</sup> Somewhere between *Teen People* and *MUG*, Anne Sexton persists in a cultural, textual space between life and death. This chapter aims to explore that space, and to examine Sexton’s own desires for her posthumous life.

In the marketing of Sexton’s *Complete Poems* (that other legacy item), the facts of the poet’s life are presented in an evidentiary manner: “Boston,” “Pulitzer,” “suicide.” The internal narrative structure suggests its own inevitability. Following the success of Middlebrook’s biography, a National Bestseller (it also won The National Book Critics Circle Award, The Bay Area Book Reviewers Association Award and was nominated for The National Book Award), First Mariner

Books reissued editions of *Love Poems* (1999) and *Transformations* (2001), as well as the *Selected Poems* (2000), edited by Middlebrook and Diana Hume George, and *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (2004), edited by Linda Sexton. The First Mariner reissues maintain the suicide line consistently, except in the case of *Love Poems*, which is not such a good fit with the market-myth of Sexton. The back cover of *Love Poems* states simply that Sexton was “the author of ten collections of poems,” and that she “received the Pulitzer Prize in 1967.” These poems are touted as a celebration of “the sensual frontiers of Sexton’s time,” without any implications of an autobiographical case history. Similarly, the reissue of the *Letters* (a more explicitly living and biographical document), does not mention suicide in its back-cover blurb.

Sexton’s market value as a posthumous poet positions her as a “commodity with a recognized value as public currency” (Blasing 185). It also emphasizes, as Lowell does, her “deadly increasing pace” towards the end of her life.<sup>6</sup> In relation to the publication of the *Complete Poems*, Middlebrook declares that she despises “the end of that book: full of posthumously published writing, it shows me a Sexton wrenched by pain and alcoholism into a grotesque simulacrum of the person I had come to respect and, yes, to love” (“Spinning Straw” 86-90). Middlebrook captures the publishing effect created by the complete collection: Sexton’s poems have become posthumous works. The new edition of the *Complete Poems* presents the reader with a posthumous Sexton, an object always-already symbolically possessed by the reader, through the lens of the camera; a narrative that hinges, that reads backwards, through suicide. In *The Art of Disappearance*, Baudrillard argues that every “photographed object is simply the trace left behind by the disappearance of everything else.”<sup>7</sup> The photograph represents “the perfect crime,” in which both reality and illusion are trapped in the image, wrenched from the “context of the real world” (9).





**Fig. 19.** Front cover of *Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems*. Photograph by T. Polumbaum.



The object/subject is eternally restored to “silence” and “immobility,” terms reminiscent of casualties, and the dead or deadly ‘Other.’ The manipulated front-cover photographic image of Sexton is, to borrow from Sontag, “an interpretation of the real” (154). Awash in a psychedelic blue, the image represents a trace of the poet, “something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask”: “Yet you’ll press me down in your envelope; / pressed as neat as a butterfly, forever, forever, / beside Mussolini and the Pope” (*Death Notebooks* 6). In his discussion of photography, Baudrillard suggests that any attempt to “artFistically retouch the photograph” is necessarily “abominably aesthetic,” an interference with the “moment of the negative” (5). The significance of the *Complete Poems* is its value as a posthumous document; the back cover provides the reader with a particular frame of reference: *Sexton is dead and she is going to die.*<sup>8</sup> The poet is both the “face of the Medusa,” threatening to immobilize the reader through her retouched veil, and the “bad” object/subject to Baudrillard’s “good” object, still in need of “the desire of the other” (5); Sexton’s gaze signals the complicated transaction, between the spectre and the spectator:



The poet is displayed as the desirable object on the cover of her books. Like “Snow White,” Sexton has been buried in “a glass coffin,” her “doll’s eyes” not shut but prized open in a dumb stare (*Transformations* 8). She has been caught like “Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)” by the “thirteenth fairy” (109). Yet instead of dying – that other “event” – Sexton’s curse has been “mitigated” by the twelfth fairy: her death has been changed “into a hundred-year sleep”; she is trapped, “stuck in the time machine” of her own death (107):



This trance girl  
is yours to do with.  
You could lay her in a grave,  
an awful package,  
and shovel dirt on her face  
and she'd never call back: Hello there! (111)

The re-imagined, photographic framing of her books emphasizes what Sontag refers to as the “consumer’s relation” to events (155). It presents Sexton as “an awful package”; she does not “leave”; her ghost is “anesthetized and fastened down,” like the Barthes’ butterfly in *Camera Lucida*, Lewis Payne. She – no longer Sexton, but a fantasy of the dead poet – stares back at the spectator and prospective reader, haunted by her own death. The book-cover is Sexton’s cell, where she is waiting to die. The “*shared* hallucination” – she is not there, but she has been there – of Photoshop’s painted veil, announces that, to borrow from Barthes, “*This will be and this has been*” (96).

Since the early days of her career as a poet, in literary criticism and in popular culture, Sexton has been one of the doomed witches from her own Grimm Brothers’ *Transformations*. She has become “memorable” for her suicide, like an exemplary “crone in the fables,” haunting her own poems.<sup>9</sup> Sexton’s books have entered a peculiar commercial exchange, in which the fantasy of the poet is bought and sold, in line with contemporaneous currencies of production and consumption. Although Lowell publically gave Sexton his original endorsement at the outset of her career, his posthumous assessment of her corpus presents her in a different light:

What went wrong? For a book or two, she grew more powerful. Then writing was too easy or too hard for her. She became meagre and exaggerated. Many of her most embarrassing poems would have been fascinating if someone had put them in quotes, as the presentation of some character, not the author.<sup>10</sup>

Lowell offers a somewhat different posthumous assessment of Sylvia Plath in the Foreword of the first American edition of *Ariel* (1966). He writes how Plath “becomes herself,” as opposed to Sexton’s un-becoming or “embarrassing” late work: “In these poems, written in the last months of her life, and often rushed out at the rate of two or three a day, Sylvia Plath becomes herself, becomes something imaginary, newly, wildly and subtly created....”<sup>11</sup> The front cover of this first edition includes comments from Lowell, George Steiner, Al Alvarez, *The Times* and Sexton. Steiner declares that there was no way back for Plath (“She could not return from them [her poems]”), after such a volume of risk-taking poetics. Alvarez is yet more blunt: “In a curious way, the poems read as though they were written posthumously. It needed not only great intelligence and insight to handle the material; it also took a kind of bravery. Poetry of this order is a murderous art.” Both Steiner and Alvarez invest Plath’s original volume with a meta-narrative of tragic cause and consequence, in an attempt to make sense of or explain what is senseless. Only Sexton, on the inside flap of Plath’s book, refuses to buy into Lowell’s myth of the tragic “heroine ... playing Russian roulette with six cartridges in the cylinder.” Sexton, whose comment is limited to barely a line, does not classify Plath in terms of the gamble that she is meant to have taken. She states simply: “I am very moved. These last poems stun me!”

In her therapy (7 Mar. 1963), Sexton discussed Sylvia Plath’s suicide. She remarked to Orne that during the time they knew each other, while Plath and her husband Ted Hughes were living in Boston, they often talked about suicide.<sup>12</sup> In her journals, Plath wrote about her



friendship with Sexton, and their “triple martini afternoons at the Ritz” (480).<sup>13</sup> While Plath’s journal describes how both she and Sexton took part in Robert Lowell’s poetry class, it does not suggest much closeness between the two poets. In among her responses to Sexton, including her “desire to get [her] hair cut attractively,” Plath writes: “Criticism of my four poems in Lowell’s class: criticism of rhetoric. He sets me up with Ann[e] Sexton, an honor, I suppose. Well, about time. She has very good things, and they get better, though there is a lot of loose stuff (475).” Heather Cam argues that Sexton had a “liberating” influence on Plath’s poetry (430),<sup>14</sup> and Plath’s journals certainly support the case for Sexton’s influence on Plath’s poetic development. She genuinely admires the “good things” in Sexton’s work. Plath gives the impression that Sexton’s ease of poetic phrase and honesty in writing were as much a part of her personality as a feature of her poetry.

One of Plath’s many biographers, Paul Alexander, credits the *New Yorker* (3 Aug. 1963) with having initiated the “construction of Plath’s posthumous reputation as an important poet,” by publishing “a two-page selection of her work under the title ‘Seven Poems’.”<sup>15</sup> In a letter to Aurelia Plath, Howard Moss describes the “extraordinary” response from poets and readers to the group of Plath’s seven poems.<sup>16</sup> In this commemorative appearance, the magazine acknowledges the end of Plath’s life (“1932-1963”), situating these seven poems as her last words.<sup>17</sup> During her lifetime, Plath published nine poems in the *New Yorker*.<sup>18</sup> Her first posthumous publication, six months after her suicide, comprised poems she had already sold to the magazine. Published together, they read like Plath’s own elegy to herself.<sup>19</sup>

After Plath's suicide, Sexton suggested to Orne that her friend had come "home" by killing herself.<sup>20</sup> Sexton went on to complete "Sylvia's Death," which became the centrepiece of the explicitly chronological *Live or Die* (38-40). Sexton's poem was rejected in a polite but firm letter from Howard Moss at the *New Yorker*.

This isn't for us, as you suspected, but I was very interested in reading it for many reasons.... You might be interested in a group of seven poems by Sylvia Plath that we plan to publish in the July 13th issue. They are among the last poems she wrote, and I think they're extraordinarily good.<sup>21</sup>

In "Sylvia's Death," Sexton characterizes death as the poets' "boy," the poem's dashing romantic male lead:

(In Boston  
the dying  
ride in cabs,  
yes death again,  
that ride home  
with *our* boy.) (39)

Death is located in the "mouth[s]" of the budding poets, triangulated as "the one we talked of so often each time / we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston, // the death that talked of analysts and cures" (38-39). Sexton configures their mutual romance with death as an "oedipal rivalry" (Kavaler-Adler 1996 235), a love affair centred around language and 'talk' about therapy ("cures"). The poets drink to death, and ride "in cabs" with eroticized death. Yet the desire for death is highly paradoxical, almost de-eroticized.

The “ride home” with death leads the poet to a “dead box of stones and spoons,” a “stone place” unadorned and undecorated in the colours of maternal domestic bliss (40). Plath’s children are envisioned as “two meteors / wandering loose in the tiny play room.” The poets become their own motherless “children,” becoming objects or ‘things’ by going to bed in death’s sheet. Plath and Sexton are “stones and spoons” without a “cupboard” or drawer where they can belong:

what is your death  
but an old belonging,  
  
a mole that fell out  
of one of your poems? (40)

Middlebrook states that Sexton “identified Plath’s suicide as an enviable career move”; for Sexton, suicide became “a *glamorous* death, for an artist; the world would now pay more serious attention to Plath’s poetry than was otherwise conceivable. Ernest Hemingway’s death and Arthur Miller’s play *After the Fall*—based on the suicide of Marilyn Monroe—were Sexton’s points of reference” (2003 216-17). Several years after the completion of “Sylvia’s Death,” Sexton wrote “The Barfly Ought to Sing”, a work of public mourning as reminiscence of her friendship with Plath. In her memoir, Sexton links herself and Plath through their earlier suicide attempts:

We would pile into the front seat of my old Ford, and I would drive quickly through the traffic to, or near, the Ritz. I would park illegally in a LOADING ZONE ONLY telling gaily, “It’s okay, because we are only going to get loaded!” Off we’d go, each on George [Starbuck]’s arm, into the Ritz and drink three or four or two martinis... Often, very often, Sylvia and I would talk at length about

our first suicides; at length, in detail, and in depth between the free potato chips.

Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem.<sup>22</sup>

Following a trail of martinis and free potato chips, Sexton links Plath's desk to her own *not* coffin-desk. Suicide, as the "opposite of the poem," positions the suicide poet as paradoxically her own deadly, creative muse, hard at work in the construction of her "immortality box." While her early trio of books suggests an earnest self-analysis, by 1972's *Book of Folly*, as the self-proclaimed survivor of her neuroses and a series of breakdowns, Sexton is a self-consciously performative poet. Her concerns emerge as poetic meditations on the role and function of the feminine at the point of language, especially the suburban wife and mother as "The Other" (30); the politics and violence of war, and the emerging visibility of capitalism as Cold War materialism in the "simple life" offered by the American suburbs. In this later stage of her writing life, Sexton interrogates the possibility of her own work as a cage or box for madness.

Sexton's poetry is emphatically not that of a "victim." In her unpublished lecture notes, she dismissed descriptions of her work as that "of a victim, of the passive sufferer" ("Lecture Nine" 2). Ben Howard suggests in his 1976 review of *Folly*, "what [Sexton] was not writing ... were suicide notes. Nor, for the most part, are these poems cries for help."<sup>23</sup> In an attempt to understand her legacy, I read Sexton's poetry as the work of an ambitious poet, whose radical poetics examined the 'impossible' posthumous. In "The Ambition Bird," Sexton writes a poetic monument to outlive her, through which she may posthumously, perpetually, return to the world. The poem simultaneously becomes her "immortality box," "lay-away plan" and "coffin" (3). Through the image of the poem as "immortality box," Sexton plays a Freudian game of "*Fort-Da*" ("gone-there"), in which the poet disappears on the page, into an imagined, immortalised,

posthumous reappearance as language. My reading of “The Ambition Bird” questions the possibilities for Sexton’s legacy, in relation to the destructive desire for literary immortality. Using Freud’s theory of the death drive and Bachelard’s poetics of flight, I suggest how Sexton, in this later stage of her writing life, consciously wrote against the posthumous legacy of “suicide bitch” (*Folly* 8).

The idea of the poem as an object, a “box” or solid thing created by the poet, entered Sexton’s discussions with Dr Orne: “each poem is an object, to make *this* object,” a book (30 Dec. 1961, Schlesinger). The object-ness of the poem as something that exists in the world, separate from the poet, intrigued Sexton: “Each poem is an object, but they really all go together to make this solid object, whatever it is. I mean that’s what I love about when I write a poem, there it is! It exists, it didn’t exist before.”<sup>24</sup> As a therapy theme, Sexton’s object-sense of the poem implied a creative process, through which something “new” was brought to life by the poet: “I always say that creation is the act of producing something, or creating something that wasn’t there, you know, and making it be there ...”<sup>25</sup> This process of “making it be there,” was also creative in another sense for Sexton, in terms of identity: “an existence, a something, a life.” Sexton’s treatment remained intrinsically linked to her poetry, even if the theme of therapy and psychoanalysis became less interesting to her. On 11 November 1961, Sexton spoke about her own writing processes and the need to fashion herself an existence from her craft, as her desire for the solidity of both professional and personal success. She compared her writing to building up “a house with blocks,” in order to make a life for herself.

In *On Not Being Able To Sleep*, Jacqueline Rose suggests that while Sexton's poetry may have been "a part of the process of recovery," the value of her early breakdown as public writing was significantly formative (19). Rose characterizes the tone of public self-flagellation which "occasionally creeps" into Sexton's poetry, as essentially Puritan or "writing as social service":

If poetry was a liberation in that it allowed her to move beyond and expose the limitations of the oppressive middle-class home, it also arose out of a partly Puritan injunction to enlarge her sphere of suffering for the good of the world, that is, out of the very form of religious and social coercion she was most furiously trying to escape. (19)

As Rose argues, Sexton was the "performance artist of intimacy," especially in the early seventies. She was able to give audiences a "great literary roadshow of the unconscious," and to present her "writing as psychic striptease" (17). Sexton's "middle-class" act was very much part of this "roadshow" performance. The details she aired seemed more personal because they emerged from the domestic space, the site of the psychodrama of family life. In "The Ambition Bird," Sexton imagines her "immortality box" as a containment space or site (*Folly* 3). She experiences Bachelard's daydream from the *Poetics of Space* (184) at night, as "insomnia at 3:15 A.M."

In "The Ambition Bird," Sexton echoes her early poem "Said the Poet to the Analyst" (*Bedlam* 17). By 1972, Sexton has absented her "Analyst"; she is alone in her examination of her drives and impulses. The "business of words keeps [her] awake," transporting Sexton from the ordinary domesticity of kitchen table, a site of food preparation and cocoa-drinking. Bachelard describes how the daydream "feeds on all kinds of sights" in the dreamer's immediate surroundings: "the daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity" (183). Sexton draws on the objects within her sight to flee the



“nearby,” and transport herself (and her poem, the closest ‘thing’ to the poet at the moment of composition), “far off, elsewhere, in the space of *elsewhere*” (184).

The destructive force of ambition defines Sexton’s “*elsewhere*.” Like “having an electric / seizure at the quarter hour,” every quarter hour, the very pulse of “ambition” conjures Freud’s theory of the death drive. Through the image of her “immortality box,” Sexton re-imagines and revises Freud’s writings on the “postponement of satisfaction,” as the ego’s instinctual replacement of the pleasure principle with the reality principle (4). The poet’s postponement of literary success relegates feeling and experience beyond both reality and pleasure, to a posthumous “*elsewhere*,” where the poet is not and cannot be. Sexton’s revision of Freud’s reality principle rejects pleasure at the corporeal level of experience, opting instead for an imagined, disembodied satisfaction, in the image of the posthumous poet.

The multiple deaths of the “ambition bird,” a series of transformative disappearances, enact Sexton’s dreams of future flights into a self-preservative literary after-life:

The bird wants to be dropped  
from a high place like Tallahatchie Bridge.

He wants to light a kitchen match  
and immolate himself.

He wants to fly into the hand of Michelangelo  
and come out painted on a ceiling.

He wants to pierce the hornet's nest  
and come out with a long godhead.

He wants to take bread and wine  
and bring forth a man happily floating in the Caribbean.

He wants to be pressed out like a key  
so he can unlock to Magi.

He wants to take leave among strangers  
passing out bits of his heart like hors d'oeuvres.

He wants to die changing his clothes  
and bolt for the sun like a diamond. (3-4)

In *Air and Dreams*, Bachelard writes that what is “primordially beautiful about birds is their flight.”<sup>26</sup> The imaginary bird, Bachelard continues, “the bird that flies in our dreams, and in genuine poems, cannot be one of *gaudy* colours. It is most often blue or black; it flies upward or downward (66).” Although Sexton’s bird appears as a dark creature with “dark wings,” his various flights suggest the “gaudy” colours of a neurotic bird, in a permanent state of anxiety or hysteria. He wants to change “his clothes,” his “colours,” through a final flight from this world to the next, to create a new and explosive plumage by destroying himself, flying into “the sun like a diamond.” Throughout the poem, his darkness is constantly revising itself towards a final disappearance, a

“bolt for the sun,” in a glittery excess of visibility. This final flight does not suggest a second act, although it does suggest a “gaudy” instance of transformative cross-dressing: the reappearance of the female poet in the final stanzas of the poem.

Sexton’s image of the bird’s little deaths suggests her sadistic textual impulse, enacted through the bird-object’s subjection to various cruelties. The poet displaces her destructive impulses onto the “ambition bird.” As Lacan states, the “killing of the thing” enacts the “endless perpetuation of the subject’s desire” (263); Sexton’s bird-“thing” perpetuates her desire for greatness. Yet the poet rejects the external world, the regressive pleasures of “cocoa,” through her desire to open the poem out through her waking dreams. Giving the “bird” a masculine gender, the poet further others and objectifies her “ambition” away from the Anne Sexton of the kitchen-table.

After creating the bodily link between herself and the bird – they are “in” the poet’s heart and inseparable except perhaps in death – the bird initially disappears passively, “dropped / from a high place like Tallahatchie Bridge.” In a coy pop-reference to Bobbie Gentry’s 1967 hit song “Ode to Billie Joe,” the Tallahatchie Bridge strangely reflects the poem’s future posthumous status; it collapsed in 1972 around the time *The Book of Folly* was published. When Sexton read “The Ambition Bird” on 7 March 1974, in the Sanders Theatre at Harvard (her final reading), the audience laughed knowingly at her pop culture sensibility, at the mention of the Tallahatchie Bridge.<sup>27</sup>

Having been dropped from the bridge, the bird reappears at the table, where he imagines himself lighting a “kitchen match” and self-immolating. The sacrifice of Sexton’s “ambition” posits the site of the “kitchen” and the suburban house as an immolation box, for both poet and housewife “mama.” In his 1976 review of *The Book of Folly*, Ben Howard suggests that Sexton’s characteristic metaphor combines:

imagery of violence and death with imagery of the kitchen, suggesting a close, even inevitable relationship between them. Rarely have poems been so well-stocked with household products and brand-names—Kleenex, Lysol, Clorox, Bab-O—and with domestic objects generally. The immediate effect of such imagery is to evoke the Mad Housewife, driven to distraction by suburban confinement.<sup>28</sup>

In “The Ambition Bird,” Sexton is unable to satisfy her insomniac cravings for immortality; she is not the “good enough” mother of her own ambition. As an immolation box of “suburban confinement,” the kitchen becomes a coffin for the female poet’s ambition. Sexton captures Ben Howard’s “horror of suburban sterility” and its “suppressed violence,” in the figure of the housewife, outside the hours of daytime domesticity. As a familial space, as the site of the preparation and consumption of “cocoa,” the kitchen is transformed in the early morning by the figure of the female poet, undefined by her role as wife and mother. As insomniac, Sexton performs her night-time transformation into “Mrs. Death” (*Folly* 7), becoming the deadly, demonic feminine at table. Through the creative act, Sexton recovers her “immortality box” which, also the poet’s coffin, represents a containment space, like a microcosmic kitchen or house. Textually constructed, the immortality box holds the potential of a language prison, of the poet’s own creation.

In "Going Gone," Sexton imagines herself as the othered "She" about to take flight from this world (*Folly* 20): "She is the crone in the fables. / She is the fool at the supper." Sexton writes her witch persona into *The Book of Folly*, setting herself up simultaneously as the fool at the empty supper table at "3.15 A.M.," and the cunning "crone" who wants to sup on "Hansel and Gretel" (*Transformations* 101). In *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, Maria Tatar suggests that there are in fact two villains in this children's fable:<sup>29</sup>

In early versions of the tale, the woodcutter and his wife are the biological parents of the children. By the fourth edition of the *Children's Stories and Household Tales* in 1840, the Grimms had turned the "wife" into a "stepmother" and made her into the real villain of the piece. (73)

In the Grimm "Hansel and Gretel," the husband (not the "evil" wife), is the "fool" at the table: his anxiety about the children being devoured by wild beasts in the woods guarantees the whole family's starvation (Tatar 74). As his wife suggests, he "might as well start sanding the boards for [their] coffins." Tatar cites Bruno Bettelheim's psychoanalytic interpretation of the fable, in which the witch represents the "omnipotent mother, who, in her role as supreme provider, is always also the withholder of nourishment" (78). In *Transformations*, Sexton's witch is also capable of creating the perfect "rococo house" as a symbol of provision and maternal warmth: "made all of food from its windows / to its chocolate chimney" (103). In Sexton's fable, the witch excels at food preparation and presentation. Her housewifely abilities are displayed by the architectural design of the "house / made all of food," as well as by the supper she is able to provide for her guests. By supping from the plentiful table of the crone, the children themselves enact their role as the witch's children. This re-enactment of home-life consumption perhaps

gives the children their flavour, as an incestuous rite or debauched feast echoed in “Hansel and Gretel”, in which a mother speaks to her son:

Little plum,  
said the mother to her son,  
I want to bite,  
I want to chew,  
I will eat you up.  
Little child,  
Little nubkin,  
Sweet as fudge,  
you are my blitz.  
I will spit on you for luck  
for you are better than money.  
Your neck as smooth  
as a hard-boiled egg;  
soft cheeks, my pears,  
let me buzz you on the neck  
and take a bite.  
I have a pan that will fit you.  
Just pull up your knees like a game hen. (101)

The desire for her son to “pull up [his] knees” so that she might “chew” and “eat” his “sweet ... fudge”, suggests the mother’s Oedipal desire to “devour the other in an act of violent and sexualised incorporation” (Lucas 2009 54). Or, in Sexton’s words: ‘Oh succulent one, / it is



but one turn in the road / and I would be a cannibal!’ (102). Rather than violating her son in the marriage bed where he was created, the mother’s sexual, cannibal instincts will be played out through her kitchen oven, the site of feminine warmth. The threat the witch poses to her children is eroticized as the carnal desire to consume them. In other words, she is the all-consuming mother, disguised only by her “wig” (*Folly* 7), or her old woman’s costume. The witch-mother’s culinary desire for Gretel (“Why not this saucy lass / for an hors d’oeuvre?”), similarly describes an imagined scene of consumption as Oedipal desire, in which the surrogate daughter, by her very ‘sauciness,’ suggests a plate of nibbles before the main course of son (104). Tatar argues that, because by the end of the original Grimm tale, the children’s stepmother has died, there is an unconscious link between the mother at home and the witch in the forest, both at different extremes of “maternal evil at home” (85); or as Rose Lucas terms it, “the nurturing Good Mother, and the devouring Bad Mother.”<sup>30</sup>

In Sexton’s transformation, the mother is also disposed of in the poem’s conclusion (105), preserving the link between “cooking witch” and the dead mother. Rose Lucas argues, the “cannibalistic witch” in Sexton’s “Hansel and Gretel,” can be read as a “figure of monstrous maternity, the dark and devouring counterpart of phallic fantasy” (2009 54). Like an omnipotent “Mrs. Death,” the fabled mother is both the cannibal who preys on her own succulent children in order to survive (102), as well as a cannibalised figure whose death inadvertently teaches children – both the fairytale creations and their reading counterparts – the necessary skills for survival and self-preservation.



**Fig. 20.** Anne Sexton setting a table. Literary Files, Photography Collection, HRHRC.<sup>31</sup>

In the *Book of Folly*, Sexton wears the witch/mother persona “like a wig” or mask. In “Dreaming the Breasts” (26-27), Sexton envisions her dead Mother’s once living breasts as a “delicate asylum” that she ate up:

Mother,  
strange goddess face  
above my milk home,  
that delicate asylum,  
I ate you up.  
All my need took  
you down like a meal. (26)

The implied causality in the daughter’s life “debt” to her dead mother, which she remembers “in a dream,” in a poem, problematizes the poet’s guilty textual dilation. The child’s need to satisfy her hunger, which takes her mother’s milk “down like a meal,” also takes down the mother herself through ingestion, in a reversal of the cannibal fables. Yet the mother’s breasts are “midnight” breasts, hanging above the daughter “like two bats.” The scene of feeding occurs at night, the mother, witch-like, becomes a paradoxical site of both life and death, and her daughter is vampiric in her desire to be fed and in her capacity to take life. The mother and the daughter are both dangerous containers, housing fatal potentialities. The Mother is no longer mother or woman, because her daughter has eaten her. In order to neutralize the destructive significance of the mother’s fate, Sexton has “planted” her mother’s breasts poetically, as a revisionist, creative act. As in “The Ambition Bird,” Sexton hijacks the destructive potentiality of the creative act, through poetic conceit. By poetically planting the dead maternal breasts, the objects of home and life, the poem itself becomes the Mother’s box into which she is padlocked as a “dear dead human”, a

poetic dream-figure. Through the parallel creative act of planting the poem in her *Book*, Sexton re-imagines her mother into an elsewhere space, a safe “wherever,” of words and dreams (27).

By revising the destructive potentiality of the mother, Sexton is able to write a different version of motherhood and the maternal for herself, in which the maternal body is not fed upon, or Oedipally feeding off her children. The poet’s “warm brown mama” has replaced the mother’s “milky home.” Sexton evokes the trademark witch-self from *Bedlam’s* “Her Kind”:

I have gone out, a possessed witch,  
haunting the black air, braver at night;  
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch  
over the plain houses, light by light:  
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.  
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.  
I have been her kind. (21)

Sexton’s “woman” is defined by her “*dream of flight*,” which Bachelard describes in *Air and Dreams*, as “one of the most obvious symbols for classical psychoanalysis” (19). In the psychoanalytic mode, flight symbolizes “voluptuous desire.” Sexton’s flying witch satisfies her desire for release from the suburban population of “plain houses,” from their potentially self-destructive enclosures, and from the traditional role of stay-at-home mother. As a poet, Sexton flies beyond the very house that she inhabits during the day as that other “kind” of woman, a conventional wife and mother. At “3.15 A.M.” Sexton becomes the demon of the house, bound to and unbound from its domestic objects. Her drive to be “over” and above the house is fuelled by her own “dark,” insomniac desire. Sexton’s bird does Bachelard’s “vectorial” (21) hitch in



“The Ambition Bird,” flying out from the house, its “plain” tables and matches, its sleeping husband and children.

Through the image of the “immortality box” as an investment in the poet’s after-life, Sexton enters into an elaborate Freudian game of “*Fort-da*,” or “Gone-there,” in which she disappears, to one day return as posthumous language. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Freud describes his observations of a “game played by a little boy of one and a half,” in which the otherwise “good little boy” indulges his:

disturbing habit of taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner, under the bed, and so on, so that hunting for his toys and picking them up was often quite a business. As he did this he gave vent to a loud, long-drawn-out ‘o-o-o-o’, accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction. His mother and the writer of this account were agreed in thinking that this was not a mere interjection but represented the German word ‘*fort*’ [‘gone’]. I eventually realized that it was a game and that the only use he made of any toys was to play ‘gone’ with them. One day I made an observation which confirmed my view. The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it. It never occurred to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage. What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skilfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive ‘o-o-o-o’. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful ‘*da*’ [‘there’]. This, then, was the complete game—disappearance and return. As a rule one only

witnessed its first act, which was repeated untiringly as a game in itself, though there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act. (8-9)

In Sexton's game of "*fort-da*," the poet knowingly becomes the object with which she plays "disappearance and return." Sexton imagines the "coffin"-poem as a container for her posthumous image. The poet of the "kitchen" table disappears ("*fort*"), only to reappear (the joyful "*da*"), textually immortalized. Yet this future space, beyond the reality of the poet's surroundings and the poet's own lifetime, is also beyond the greater pleasure that is necessarily attached to the return of the poet. In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud's interpretation suggests the difference between the boy's game and Sexton's version of "*fort-da*":

Throwing away the object so that it was 'gone' might satisfy an impulse of the child's, which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him. In that case [the game] would have a defiant meaning: "All right, then, go away! I don't need you. I'm sending you away myself." (10)

As her own self-object, Sexton's disappearance is also a simultaneously sadistic and masochistic revenge on herself and her own mortality.<sup>32</sup> The poem represents the poet's compensation for what Freud terms the "instinctual renunciation" (9), or the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction in the poet's waking life. Sexton is driven to compensate for the limits of her own mortality, by creating a poem to physically outlive her, through which she may infinitely return. In a footnote to his interpretation of the little boy's game, Freud describes another scene involving the same child:



One day the child's mother had been away for several hours and on her return was met with the words 'Baby o-o-o-o!' which was at first incomprehensible. It soon turned out, however, that during this long period of solitude the child had found a method of making himself disappear. He had discovered his reflection in a full-length mirror which did not quite reach to the ground, so that by crouching down he could make his mirror-image 'gone'. (9)

Having constructed her *Book* or "box" with a view to posthumous celebrity, Sexton's mirror-image as mad poet disappears within her poem. Through her disappearance as object and reappearance as posthumous image, Sexton enacts a revenge on her self as the to-be 'gone' mother of her work. The poet's departure, like the departure of the little boy's mother, is enacted through the poem as a 'Sexton o-o-o-o,' the words which mark her disappearance from this world. As a mirror of this disappearance, it also represents a preliminary scene, to the publication of her immortalized, "joyful" return. In the *Book of Folly*, the "loud, long-drawn-out 'o-o-o-o,'" becomes instead an "Oh," an ambiguous non-linguistic sigh expressing neither interest nor satisfaction, only the proximity of the body to its own end (7). Through her poetic game, Sexton revises a passive acceptance of death as a Freudian defiance of both pleasure and mortality: "All right, then, go away! I don't need you. I'm sending you away myself" (Freud 10). Even though she is the "you" who she throws into the corner of her "coffin," Sexton takes on an active part in her game of poetic mastery.

In "The Ambition Bird," the poet's desire to immortalize herself is displaced, as the desire to "light a kitchen match" and self-immolate. The displacement of her masochism onto the "ambition bird," frames her work as an "ambition" poem (3). The incompatibility of her will to greatness with the desire to experience pleasure or comfort at a corporeal level, in her "warm,"

maternal cup of “cocoa,” causes a metaphoric splitting-off process. Sexton’s “dark wings,” her night dreams, keep her from sleep and implicitly from health. Like a waking traumatic dream, Sexton represents her visions as repetitions of that same fatality (Freud 15-16). Like a child with her toys, the poet sadistically acts out her destructive drives through these plural bird doubles, dressed-up as substitutive satisfactions, to be thrown away and retrieved again in a secondary game of *fort-da*.

In the poet’s final vision, Sexton emphasizes the bird’s sparkling and god-like visibility as he bolts “for the sun like a diamond.” The desire for posthumous visibility is the “greater pleasure” in this game of disappearance and return. Towards the end of the poem, and just before the poet re-emerges from within the poem after having figuratively disappeared throughout the bird’s compulsive display, Sexton evokes a dinner or cocktail party scene: “He wants to take leave among strangers / passing out bits of his heart like hors d’oeuvres” (4). Freud makes the distinction between the artistic play of children and the play that adults engage in, which “unlike children’s, is aimed at an audience” (601). Sexton’s poem is conscious of its spectators and does not spare them the “painful experiences” attached to sadistic and masochistic impulses. Freud suggests that in this dialogue between spectator and performer, the spectatorship of pain can “yield pleasure as [a] final outcome” in the audience, and that the experience of reading or viewing can be a “highly enjoyable” one. Sexton serves the reader her bird-heart as “hors d’oeuvres.” She dresses-up her unconscious mind and the origins of her insomnia as finger-food. While Sexton, like any good hostess, wishes to entertain the reader, her main interest resides beyond the immediacy of pleasure. Sexton manifests a compulsion to repeat, to immortalize herself through the transfigurations of self-immolation.

In the *Language of Psycho-Analysis*, Laplanche and Pontalis describe Freud's repetition compulsion as an "ungovernable process originating in the unconscious," in which "the subject deliberately places himself in distressing situations, thereby repeating an old experience," without consciously recalling the original experience itself (78). As the "fulfilment of a repressed wish" and as a symptomatic "acting-out," Sexton's insomniac repetitions assume the "obsessional" quality of ritual (Laplanche and Pontalis 78-79). Through the symbolic ego-substitute of the bird, Sexton's poem functions both as a working-through of a scene of unconscious trauma, and also a pleasurable/painful discharge, driven by or towards Freud's "death instincts" (Laplanche and Pontalis 97). Sexton echoes Freud's characterization of the death drive, in her textualized "daemonic" or obsessional desire. Yet the poet manages to unite two competing instincts by positioning the instinct to "bring about death" as an ironically self-preservative function (Freud 33). The poem does not represent the poet's "determination ... to maintain its existence in the face of every obstacle." Instead, it expresses the poet's wish through the many "wants" of her displaced double, the "ambition bird," to "die only in [her] own fashion." By striving to create the perfect "coffin," the poem is an expression of the repressed desire for complete satisfaction during her lifetime.

Freud writes of a "sadistic component in the sexual instinct" which are at play in the ambition bird's performance of highwire, death-defying feats (47). Sexton also plays on notions of the sado-masochistic impulse, when sadism as a death instinct is performing "under the influence of the narcissistic libido," or the desire to immortalize the self. Sexton only seems to turn away from her own ego by displacing her wants or drives onto the bird, caught in the cage of her heart. The punishing yet entertaining imagery that Sexton directs towards the "ambition bird," suggests the masochism inherent in the poet's own desire for immortality, to "fly into the hand of

Michelangelo / and come out painted on a ceiling.” The sadistic death instinct emerges in relation to the object which, as the constructor/creator of her coffin, both is and is not entirely the poet. Although her impulses seem masochistic at first, when Sexton refers possessively (“my”), to the masochistic construction of her “box,” the reader is led to believe that it is not so much her doing as it is the night bird’s.

By the end of the poem, the poet has rejected the image of herself as either masochist or sadist, although, following Freud, it could be argued that Sexton’s sadistic display with her bird was entirely masochistic in terms of its “satisfaction,” within the fantasy of substitution.<sup>33</sup> While admitting that she is both the “He” and “I” of the poem, Sexton rejects the equation of the “sexual instincts” with the “death instincts,” by rejecting the creation of a destructive “box” outright (620): “I must get a new bird.” Having initially equated the ego instincts with the death-drive, through the image of the “immortality box,” Sexton re-emerges as a Freudian by revising her heart’s desires, and disconnecting them from the rejected bird. The desire for immortality as a living poet is reattached to the poetic form as a creative rather than a destructive act. Sexton still desires an immortality box, but she writes against the destructive potentiality of the poetic box, in which the poet is daemonic or defined by her symptoms. The desire to create a “new immortality box” is aligned with the life instinct, outside of the image of Sexton as suicide. Sexton becomes her own “good enough” mother, by reconstituting pleasure in the moment of composition.

Sexton refuses Freud’s death drive as a governing principle in her work. “The Ambition Bird” itself, as an object produced and created by the poet, mirrors this refusal. Sexton reconstitutes the destructive and masochistic repetitions that her bird-double undergoes. It is only after her male gendered double’s initial drop from the heights of worldly greatness (his drop from

beyond this world and language, into silence and non-language), and his parallel rejection of the trappings of domesticity through self-immolation, that Sexton can begin to reconfigure the creative process for herself as a housewife poet. The bird's impulses are reconstructed as creative, not only because they serve the poem, but in terms of their transformative potentiality. In *Air and Dreams*, Bachelard writes that in a dream of desire a "bird struck by death never falls vertically out of the sky" (69). Sexton's bird-poem "never falls" from the sky but dies by flying into the sky, only to be reborn and reconfigured. This "aerial poetry" expresses the poet's suffering as the desire of "someone held prisoner by the earth ... acted upon by imaginary forces that seek to leave the earth" (Bachelard 88).

In his analysis of Hitchcock's 1963 film *The Birds*, Robert Samuels argues that "it is impossible to determine whether the attacking birds represent the externalisation of the male fear of feminine sexuality or whether these threatening beings represent the masculine death drive."<sup>34</sup> Sexton's birds and bird-selves suggest similar gender complexities, if not an embodiment of the masculine death drive. The "he" bird is Sexton's Other, her double, who is consumed by the "business of words." Sexton suggests the destructive potentiality of the masculine desire to succeed within the poetry marketplace. The poet places a metaphorically masculine ambition in her own heart, yet by the poem's end, she has served up "the bits of *his* heart" (my emphasis), from her own language-cage. Sexton has created a poem of consumption, in which the reader witnesses the "He"-bird inside the poet as he is repeatedly consumed: by water and fire, by strangers at a dinner party, and finally by the sun into which "He" disappears. By giving her "ambition bird" a masculine gender, Sexton others and objectifies destructive literary ambition away from her own subjectivity. In doing so, she hints at the possibility of a different kind of

poetic “key” to her own posthumous image, defined against the language of symptoms, and the restriction of pleasure to the second act of the poet’s return.

Sexton kills the bird through “his” own willingly and wilful repetition of his destructive impulses, as the embodiment of the “masculine death drive” (Samuels 123). She reclaims her desire for poetic creation, by writing against the self-destructive instincts. Through the construction of the poem as its own object of desire, rather than a kitchen/house/coffin “box” for the poet’s masochistic and suicidal impulses, Sexton suggests a “new” kind of box. Not a coffin for ambition or the female poet as suicide, but the poem itself as the sustaining cocoa of the here-and-now. Sexton rejects the desk-coffin and the posthumous value of the literary suicide, dressed-up as an “hors d’oeuvre” for the reader:

He wants, I want.

Dear God, wouldn’t it be  
good enough to just drink cocoa?

I must get a new bird  
and a new immortality box.

There is folly enough inside this one. (4)

The bird’s folly, which is at “heart” the poet’s folly, implies that the pleasurable “elsewhere” of poetic space does not reside in the poet’s textual after-life of the “ambition” *Book*. Having initially equated the narcissistic ego instincts with the death drive through the image of the “immortality box,” Sexton reappears at the end of the poem to reject the “ambition bird” and the ambition poem. As its own object of desire rather than as an immolation box, Sexton’s poem



reconstitutes pleasure's "elsewhere." Sexton privileges the moment of the poem's composition, replacing the fool's gamble for posthumous celebrity, her suicidal game of "disappearance as return."<sup>35</sup> While preserving her legacy, Sexton implodes the poem as word-"coffin," rejecting its destructive force. In this way, Sexton recasts the poem as a creative, self-sustaining act.

Since the publication of the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Sexton has maintained her place in the American canon.<sup>36</sup> Her status has been preserved in the 7th edition of the *Norton*, which features six of her poems.<sup>37</sup> Reading Sexton's poetry, I sometimes hear her voice talking into the tape recorder in Dr. Martin Orme's office on Marlborough St. Her voice followed me during those Boston months, and made its way into my dreams. On my second trip to the Schlesinger, I found an apartment at the other end of Marlborough St. Not knowing anyone else in the city, I decided, on Thanksgiving afternoon, to wander towards Boston Common, to find the place itself, the scene of all those words, spoken and written. This thesis reads Sexton, like a walk along the street of her words, to provoke, to reawaken readers; perhaps to rescue the poet from the posthumous life of the canonised suicide. This was my motivation in opening the archive of tapes. I wanted to create a new shelter for Anne Sexton, to make room for her as a person and a poet. My desire to write about her began with her textual life; her words on the page, still alive today. In this thesis I hope I have constructed a space of words and from words, where the living memory of Anne Sexton can be at home.

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<sup>1</sup> In his Introduction to Plath's *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1981), Ted Hughes describes Plath's attitude to her work as "artisan like: if she couldn't get a table out of the material, she was quite happy to get a chair, or even a toy. The end product for her was not so much a successful poem, as something that had temporarily exhausted her ingenuity." (13)

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, "The Table," *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber, 1998): 138-139. Elizabeth Bronfen writes in *Sylvia Plath*: "Describing how he built her a writing table leads him to recognize that in so doing he

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gave her an entrance into precisely the underworld from which ‘Daddy’ came so uncannily to be resurrected” (Plymouth, U.K.: Northcote House, 1998): 25.

<sup>3</sup> It was also around this time that a young Frenchman named Philippe Petit performed the acrobatic feat of walking between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, New York City. The Towers had been erected over the past several years, and were officially declared opened on April 4, 1973. Petit walked across the Towers on August 7, 1974. See *Man on Wire*, directed by James Marsh (2008).

<sup>4</sup> In response to a letter from Jack Zucker (Letter to Howard Moss, 8 Oct. 1974, New Yorker Records, NYPL), offering his services in the form of a memorial written to Sexton (which he had already “delivered at the New England Poetry Club and [had] published in the local newspaper”), Howard Moss restated the magazine’s position regarding dead authors: “I’ve talked to the other editors here and the magazine doesn’t plan to do a piece on Anne Sexton. We confine obituaries to members of staff, and when a poet dies who has been a long-time contributor, as Anne was, we usually run the remaining poems we have on hand with the dates of birth and death below them. We feel those are the best, and only, tributes. In this case, we weren’t holding any of Anne’s poems, having printed the ones we had taken” (Letter to Jack Zucker, 25 Oct. 1974, New Yorker Records, NYPL).

<sup>5</sup> Sexton, “Just Once,” *Teen People* 5.1 (Feb. 2002): 16. “Just Once” was one of Sexton’s first published poems. It appeared alongside several others in *Audience V* (Aug. 1958): 35-40.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Lowell, “Anne Sexton,” *McClatchy* 71-73.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Art of Disappearance*, trans. Nicholas Zurbrugg (Brisbane, Qld.: Institute of Modern Art, 1994): 2.

<sup>8</sup> Barthes writes of Alexander Gardner’s portrait of Lewis Payne: “In 1865, young Lewis Payne tried to assassinate Secretary of State W. H. Seward. Alexander Gardner photographed in his cell, where he was waiting to be hanged. The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the

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*punctum* is: he is going to die. I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake" (*Camera Lucida* 95-96).

<sup>9</sup> Sexton, *The Book of Folly* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972): 20.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Lowell, "Anne Sexton," McClatchy 71-73.

<sup>11</sup> Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* was originally edited by Ted Hughes, with a Foreword to the U.S. edition by Robert Lowell (New York: Harper & Row, 1966): ix-xi.

<sup>12</sup> See self-described "Sexton and Plath-oholic" David Trinidad's "Two Sweet Ladies': Sexton and Plath's friendship and mutual influence," *American Poetry Review* 35.6 (Nov-Dec 2006): 21-29. Trinidad writes of Plath and Sexton's "Hollywood" legacy: "When I saw the 2003 movie *Sylvia*, I was disappointed that the filmmakers failed to include a scene of Plath, Sexton, and Starbuck drinking martinis at the Ritz bar. So vividly, thanks to Sexton's "The Bar Fly Ought to Sing," has that scene lived in my imagination. I thought Gwyneth Paltrow made a fairly decent Plath, though the script was awful and Daniel Craig, who played Ted Hughes, was physically too small for the role. (Sexton once jokingly called Hughes "Ted Huge.") But who could have played Sexton? For a while I thought Mercedes Ruehl could do her justice--but maybe it was just her big Brunette hair. Sexton said she and her Ritz cohorts always wished the waiters would mistake them for celebrities, "some strange Hollywood types." Plath and Sexton did indeed become celebrities--in the poetry world and beyond. Due, in large part, I believe, to the mystique of their brief, intense friendship" (28 -29).

<sup>13</sup> Plath, *Journals* 480.

<sup>14</sup> Heather Cam "Daddy': Sylvia Plath's Debt to Anne Sexton," *American Literature* 59.3 (Oct. 1987): 429-432. Cam continues: "Clearly [Plath] drew upon her former classmate's poem ["My Friend, My Friend"] as she wrote 'Daddy,' and her debt is considerable. Acknowledging the debt, however, is not to detract from Plath's achievement" (432).

<sup>15</sup> Yagoda (*About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*. New York: Scribner, 2000, 302), refers to Paul Alexander's *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999). Plath's

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“Seven Poems” (*New Yorker*, August 3 1963, 28-9) included: “Two Campers in Cloud Country,” “The Elm Speaks,” “Mystic,” “Amnesiac,” “Mirror,” “Among the Narcissi” and “The Moon and the Yew Tree.”

<sup>16</sup> Moss, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 11 Sept. 1963, New Yorker Records, NYPL.

<sup>17</sup> The posthumous Plath appeared in similarly commemorative contexts in the ensuing years. A Plath poem (“Gigolo”), did not appear again in the *New Yorker* until November 21 1970, and this time, without dates. Prior to the American publication of *Crossing the Water* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), in the March 6 1971 edition of the *New Yorker*, six Plath poems appeared under the heading “Six Poems” (written between 1961 and 1962, those poems included “The Babysitters,” “Pheasant,” “The Courage of Shutting Up,” “Apprehensions,” “For a Fatherless Son” and “By Candlelight”). The magazine was the first place to publish these poems, now with their own posthumous, autobiographical hue. It had been almost ten years since Plath had appeared in the magazine. Most of the poems within the “Seven” and “Six” eventually appeared in *Crossing Over* and *Winter Trees* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), edited by her husband Ted Hughes. For American readers, this first-sighting of Plath’s poems in the *New Yorker*, continued the association between the Plath literary legacy and the magazine, curiously preserving the first reading contract that Plath signed with them in 1961. In her *Journals*, on Tuesday Feb. 28 1961 (601) Plath refers to “an air letter from the New Yorker ... with a \$100 contact for letting them have “first reading of all my poems for a year!”

<sup>18</sup> Plath sometimes felt that her work was “a bit too wild and bloody” for the *New Yorker*, and was genuinely surprised and “delighted” when they took one (Plath, Letter to Howard Moss, 10 Oct. 1962 New Yorker Records, NYPL).

<sup>19</sup> By 1972, this auto-elegiac framework had become the standard for the posthumous reappearances of Plath, “a suicide at thirty,” such as in Gloria Steinem’s *Ms.*, which published “Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices,” touting the poem/play as Plath’s “Last Major Work” (*Ms.* Spring 1972: 85-

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88, Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer). The feature article by Jane O'Reilly for this issue of *Ms.*

fittingly examines "The Housewife's Moment of Truth."

<sup>20</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 7 Mar. 1963, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>21</sup> Moss, Letter to Anne Sexton, 11 June 1963, New Yorker Records, NYPL. "Sylvia's Death" was ultimately published in *Poetry* CIII (June 1964): 224-26.

<sup>22</sup> "The Barfly Ought to Sing" *TriQuarterly* 7 (Fall 1966), rpt. in Colburn (1985): 6-13.

<sup>23</sup> Ben Howard, "Shattered Glass," rev. of *The Book of Folly*, *The Death Notebooks*, and *The Awful Rowing Toward God* in *Poetry* 127 (1976), rpt. in Colburn (1988): 309.

<sup>24</sup> In the same session, Sexton describes how her first two books together make a "person," because of their thematic connection: or perhaps, she muses, like a "baby."

<sup>25</sup> Sexton, therapy tape, rec. 11 Nov. 1961, Anne Sexton Papers, Schlesinger.

<sup>26</sup> Bachelard, "The Dream of Flight," *Air and Dreams: An Essay On the Imagination of Movement*, trans. Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell. (1943; Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications, 1988): 66.

<sup>27</sup> This recording is part of the Woodberry Poetry Room Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard.

<sup>28</sup> Howard continues: "Mrs. Sexton's images evoke the horror of suburban sterility, the suppressed violence and irrational fear of a woman enmeshed in domestic routine. 'Blood fingers' tie the poet's shoe; she discovers blood in her gravy; and blood flows from the kitchen pump.... To a large extent ... Mrs. Sexton's personal tragedy seems to have been bound up in old domestic objects, both as literal impediments and as symbols of her role" (308).

<sup>29</sup> Maria Tatar edited and translated *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (New York: Norton 2004). "Hansel and Gretel" appears on pages 72-85.

<sup>30</sup> Rose Lucas, "A Witch's Appetite: Anne Sexton's *Transformations*," *Southern Review* 26.1 (Mar. 1993): 73-85.

<sup>31</sup> Photograph of Anne Sexton setting a table, Literary Files, Photography Collection, HRHRC.



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<sup>32</sup> Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen argues that “when the child abandons his toys (what he ‘has’), he is treating them the way his mother treats him. In this sense, by throwing his toys away he is not so much sacrificing his mother as himself: he himself is drawing away from himself by playing the mother’s role (the ‘active role’) ... The child is playing at being his mother.... (“Dreams Are Completely Egoistic, *The Freudian Subject*, trans. Catherine Porter. Stanford, CA: Stanford U P, 1988, 33).

<sup>33</sup> Freud, “A Child Is Being Beaten,” *Volume XVII (1917- 1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis): 191. Certainly, a Freudian conception of “guilt” in relation to sadism operates in Sexton’s poem (189).

<sup>34</sup> Robert Samuels, “The Birds: Žižek, Ideology, and The Horror of the Real,” *Hitchcock’s Bi-Textuality: Lacan, Feminisms, and Queer Theory* (New York: State U of New York): 123.

<sup>35</sup> In the typescript “4:00 A.M.,” which appears to be an early draft of “The Ambition Bird,” Sexton describes the good work of writing: “(Still it is better) Better now to write, to celebrate / the terrible hours, before ~~the cup of~~ coffe [sic] is cold, / and the cigarette out and even a lie is out of date” (works, box 9, folder 7, unpublished ts., Anne Sexton Papers, HRHRC).

<sup>36</sup> Six of Sexton’s poems appeared in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* 1st ed., vol. 2 (ed. Ronald Gottesman, New York: Norton, 1979), including: “You, Doctor Martin,” “All My Pretty Ones,” “Letter Written on a Ferry Crossing Long Island Sound,” “Flee on Your Donkey,” “Sylvia’s Death,” and “Cinderella.” The inclusion of Sexton was revised in the ensuing editions: by the 4th edition (Vol. 2, ed. Nina Baym, New York, Norton, 1985), eight Sexton poems were included; in the 5th edition (New York: Norton, 1998), this was reduced to five.

<sup>37</sup> In the 7th edition of the Norton Anthology, the following Sexton poems have been included: “The Truth the Dead Know,” “Starry Night,” “Sylvia’s Death,” “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman,” and from the series “The Death of the Father,” “2. How We Danced” and “3. The Boat” (Vol. E, ed. Nina Baym, New York: Norton, 2007).





Boston Common, personal photograph by the author, 7 Dec 2008.



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