

Classic Poetry Series

**Anne Sexton
- poems -**

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Anne Sexton(9 November 1928 – 4 October 1974)

an American poet, known for her highly personal, confessional verse. She won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1967. Themes of her poetry include her suicidal tendencies, long battle against depression and various intimate details from her private life, including her relationships with her husband and children.

 Early Life and Family

Sexton was born in Newton, Massachusetts, and spent most of her life near Boston. In 1945, Sexton began attending a boarding school, Rogers Hall, in Lowell, Massachusetts. For a time as a young woman, she modeled at Boston's Hart Agency. She eloped in 1948 with Alfred Muller Sexton, known as 'Kayo.' Before their divorce in the early 1970s, she had two children with Kayo: Linda Gray Sexton, later a novelist and memoirist, and Joyce Sexton.

 Poetry

Sexton suffered from severe mental illness for much of her life, her first manic episode taking place in 1954. After a second breakdown in 1955 she met Dr Martin Orne, who became her long-term therapist at the Glenside Hospital, and encouraged her to take up poetry.

The first poetry workshop she attended was led by John Holmes. Sexton felt great trepidation about registering for the class, asking a friend to make the phone call and accompany her to the first session. She found early acclaim with her poetry; a number were accepted by The New Yorker, Harper's Magazine and the Saturday Review. Sexton later studied with <A href="

Sexton's poetic career was encouraged by her mentor W.D. Snodgrass, whom she met at the Antioch Writer's Conference in 1957. His poem "Heart's Needle" proved inspirational for her in its theme of separation from his three-year-old daughter. She first read the poem at a time when her own young daughter was living with Sexton's mother-in-law. She, in turn, wrote "The Double Image", a poem which explores the multi-generational relationship between mother and daughter. Sexton began writing letters to Snodgrass and they became friends.

While working with John Holmes, Sexton encountered Maxine Kumin. They

became good friends and remained so for the rest of Sexton's life. Kumin and Sexton rigorously critiqued each other's work and wrote four children's books together. In the late 1960s the manic elements of Sexton's illness began to affect her career, though she still wrote and published work and gave readings of her poetry. She also collaborated with musicians, forming a jazz-rock group called "Her Kind" that added music to her poetry. Her play "Mercy Street" was produced in 1969 after several years of revisions.

Within twelve years of writing her first sonnet, she was one of the most honored poets in America: a Pulitzer Prize winner, a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and the first female member of the Harvard chapter of Phi Beta Kappa.

Death

On October 4, 1974, Sexton had lunch with poet Maxine Kumin to revise galleys for Sexton's manuscript of *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, scheduled for publication in March 1975 (Middlebrook 396). On returning home she put on her mother's old fur coat, removed all her rings, poured herself a glass of vodka, locked herself in her garage, and started the engine of her car, committing suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning.

In an interview over a year before her death, she explained she had written the first drafts of *The Awful Rowing Toward God* in twenty days with "two days out for despair and three days out in a mental hospital." She went on to say that she would not allow the poems to be published before her death. She is buried at Forest Hills Cemetery & Crematory in Jamaica Plain, Boston, Massachusetts.

Content and themes of work

Sexton is seen as the modern model of the confessional poet. Aside from her standard themes of depression, isolation, suicide, and despair, her work also encompasses issues specific to women, such as menstruation and abortion — and more broadly, masturbation and adultery — before such subjects were commonly addressed in poetic discourse.

Her work towards the end of the sixties has been criticized as "preening, lazy and flip" by otherwise respectful critics. Some critics regard her dependence on alcohol as compromising her last work. However, other critics see Sexton as a poet whose writing matured over time. "Starting as a relatively conventional writer, she learned to roughen up her line [...] to use as an instrument against the politesse of language, politics, religion [and] sex [...]."

Her eighth collection of poetry is entitled *The Awful Rowing Toward God*. The title came from her meeting with a Roman Catholic priest who, although unwilling to administer last rites, told her "God is in your typewriter." This gave the poet the desire and willpower to continue living and writing. *The Awful Rowing Toward God* and *The Death Notebooks* are among her final works, and both center on the theme of dying.

Her work started out as being about herself, however as her career progressed she made periodic attempts to reach outside the realm of her own life for poetic themes. *Transformations* (1971), which is a re-telling of Grimm's Fairy Tales, is one such book. (*Transformations* was used as the libretto for the 1973 opera of the same name by American composer Conrad Susa.) Later she used Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno* and the Bible as the basis for some of her work.

Much has been made of the tangled threads of her writing, her life and her depression, much in the same way as with Sylvia Plath's suicide in 1963.

Subsequent controversy

Following one of many suicide attempts and breakdowns, Sexton worked with therapist Dr. Martin Orne. He diagnosed her with what is now described as bipolar disorder, but his competence to do so is called into question by his early use of allegedly unsound psychotherapeutic techniques. During sessions with Anne Sexton he used hypnosis and sodium pentothal to recover supposedly repressed memories. During this process, he allegedly used suggestion to uncover memories of inflicting childhood sexual abuse. This abuse was refuted in interviews with her mother and other relatives. Dr. Orne wrote that hypnosis in an adult frequently does not present accurate memories of childhood; instead, "adults under hypnosis are not literally reliving their early childhoods but presenting them through the prisms of adulthood". According to Dr. Orne, Anne Sexton was extremely suggestible and would mimic the symptoms of the patients around her in the mental hospitals to which she was committed. The Middlebrook biography states that a separate personality named Elizabeth emerged in Sexton while under hypnosis. Dr. Orne did not encourage this development and subsequently this "alternate personality" disappeared. Dr. Orne eventually concluded that Anne Sexton was suffering from hysteria. During the writing of the Middlebrook biography, Linda Gray Sexton stated that she had been sexually assaulted by her mother. In 1994, Linda Gray Sexton published her autobiography, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother*, Anne Sexton, which includes her own accounts of the abuse.

Middlebrook published her controversial biography of Anne Sexton with the

approval of Linda Gray Sexton, Anne's literary executor. For use in the biography, Dr. Orne had given Diane Middlebrook most of the tapes recording the therapy sessions between Orne and Anne Sexton. The use of these tapes was met with, as *The New York Times* put it, "thunderous condemnation". Middlebrook received the tapes after she had written a substantial amount of the first draft of Sexton's biography, and decided to start over. Although Linda Gray Sexton collaborated with the Middlebrook biography, other members of the Sexton family were divided over the book, publishing several editorials and op-ed pieces, in *The New York Times* and *The New York Times Book Review*.

Controversy continued with the posthumous public release of the tapes (which had been subject to doctor-patient confidentiality). They are said to reveal Sexton's inappropriate behavior with her daughter Linda, her physically violent behavior toward both her daughters, and her physical altercations with her husband.

Yet more controversy surrounded allegations that Anne Sexton had had an affair with the therapist who replaced Dr. Orne in the 1960s. No action was taken to censure or discipline the second therapist. Dr. Orne considered the affair with the second therapist (given the pseudonym "Ollie Zweizung" by Middlebrook and Linda Sexton) to be the catalyst that eventually resulted in her suicide.

45 Mercy Street

In my dream,
drilling into the marrow
of my entire bone,
my real dream,
I'm walking up and down Beacon Hill
searching for a street sign -
namely MERCY STREET.
Not there.

I try the Back Bay.
Not there.
Not there.
And yet I know the number.
45 Mercy Street.
I know the stained-glass window
of the foyer,
the three flights of the house
with its parquet floors.
I know the furniture and
mother, grandmother, great-grandmother,
the servants.
I know the cupboard of Spode
the boat of ice, solid silver,
where the butter sits in neat squares
like strange giant's teeth
on the big mahogany table.
I know it well.
Not there.

Where did you go?
45 Mercy Street,
with great-grandmother
kneeling in her whale-bone corset
and praying gently but fiercely
to the wash basin,
at five A.M.
at noon
dozing in her wiggy rocker,
grandfather taking a nap in the pantry,

grandmother pushing the bell for the downstairs maid,
and Nana rocking Mother with an oversized flower
on her forehead to cover the curl
of when she was good and when she was...
And where she was begat
and in a generation
the third she will beget,
me,
with the stranger's seed blooming
into the flower called Horrid.

I walk in a yellow dress
and a white pocketbook stuffed with cigarettes,
enough pills, my wallet, my keys,
and being twenty-eight, or is it forty-five?
I walk. I walk.
I hold matches at street signs
for it is dark,
as dark as the leathery dead
and I have lost my green Ford,
my house in the suburbs,
two little kids
sucked up like pollen by the bee in me
and a husband
who has wiped off his eyes
in order not to see my inside out
and I am walking and looking
and this is no dream
just my oily life
where the people are alibis
and the street is unfindable for an
entire lifetime.

Pull the shades down -
I don't care!
Bolt the door, mercy,
erase the number,
rip down the street sign,
what can it matter,
what can it matter to this cheapskate
who wants to own the past
that went out on a dead ship

and left me only with paper?

Not there.

I open my pocketbook,
as women do,
and fish swim back and forth
between the dollars and the lipstick.
I pick them out,
one by one
and throw them at the street signs,
and shoot my pocketbook
into the Charles River.
Next I pull the dream off
and slam into the cement wall
of the clumsy calendar
I live in,
my life,
and its hauled up
notebooks.

Anne Sexton

A Curse Against Elegies

Oh, love, why do we argue like this?
I am tired of all your pious talk.
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.

Everyone was always to blame:
the last empty fifth of booze,
the rusty nails and chicken feathers
that stuck in the mud on the back doorstep,
the worms that lived under the cat's ear
and the thin-lipped preacher
who refused to call
except once on a flea-ridden day
when he came scuffing in through the yard
looking for a scapegoat.
I hid in the kitchen under the ragbag.

I refuse to remember the dead.
And the dead are bored with the whole thing.
But you - you go ahead,
go on, go on back down
into the graveyard,
lie down where you think their faces are;
talk back to your old bad dreams.

Anne Sexton

A Story For Rose On The Midnight Flight To Boston

Until tonight they were separate specialties,
different stories, the best of their own worst.
Riding my warm cabin home, I remember Betsy's
laughter; she laughed as you did, Rose, at the first
story. Someday, I promised her, I'll be someone
going somewhere and we plotted it in the humdrum
school for proper girls. 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. And then returned
to land, as unlovely as any seasick sailor,
sincerely eighteen; my first story, my funny failure.
Maybe Rose, there is always another story,
better unsaid, grim or flat or predatory.
Half a mile down the lights of the in-between cities
turn up their eyes at me. And I remember Betsy's
story, the April night of the civilian air crash
and her sudden name misspelled in the evening paper,
the interior of shock and the paper gone in the trash
ten years now. She used the return ticket I gave her.
This was the rude kill of her; two planes cracking
in mid-air over Washington, like blind birds.
And the picking up afterwards, the morticians tracking
bodies in the Potomac and piecing them like boards
to make a leg or a face. There is only her miniature
photograph left, too long now for fear to remember.
Special tonight because I made her into a story
that I grew to know and savor.
A reason to worry,
Rose, when you fix an old death like that,
and outliving the impact, to find you've pretended.
We bank over Boston. I am safe. I put on my hat.
I am almost someone going home. The story has ended.

Anne Sexton

Admonitions To A Special Person

Watch out for power,
for its avalanche can bury you,
snow, snow, snow, smothering your mountain.

Watch out for hate,
it can open its mouth and you'll fling yourself out
to eat off your leg, an instant leper.

Watch out for friends,
because when you betray them,
as you will,
they will bury their heads in the toilet
and flush themselves away.

Watch out for intellect,
because it knows so much it knows nothing
and leaves you hanging upside down,
mouthing knowledge as your heart
falls out of your mouth.

Watch out for games, the actor's part,
the speech planned, known, given,
for they will give you away
and you will stand like a naked little boy,
pissing on your own child-bed.

Watch out for love
(unless it is true,
and every part of you says yes including the toes) ,
it will wrap you up like a mummy,
and your scream won't be heard
and none of your running will end.

Love? Be it man. Be it woman.
It must be a wave you want to glide in on,
give your body to it, give your laugh to it,
give, when the gravelly sand takes you,
your tears to the land. To love another is something
like prayer and can't be planned, you just fall

into its arms because your belief undoes your disbelief.

Special person,
if I were you I'd pay no attention
to admonitions from me,
made somewhat out of your words
and somewhat out of mine.

A collaboration.

I do not believe a word I have said,
except some, except I think of you like a young tree
with pasted-on leaves and know you'll root
and the real green thing will come.

Let go. Let go.

Oh special person,
possible leaves,
this typewriter likes you on the way to them,
but wants to break crystal glasses
in celebration,
for you,
when the dark crust is thrown off
and you float all around
like a happened balloon.

Anne Sexton

After Auschwitz

Anger,
as black as a hook,
overtakes me.
Each day,
each Nazi
took, at 8: 00 A.M., a baby
and sauteed him for breakfast
in his frying pan.

And death looks on with a casual eye
and picks at the dirt under his fingernail.

Man is evil,
I say aloud.
Man is a flower
that should be burnt,
I say aloud.
Man
is a bird full of mud,
I say aloud.

And death looks on with a casual eye
and scratches his anus.

Man with his small pink toes,
with his miraculous fingers
is not a temple
but an outhouse,
I say aloud.
Let man never again raise his teacup.
Let man never again write a book.
Let man never again put on his shoe.
Let man never again raise his eyes,
on a soft July night.
Never. Never. Never. Never. Never.
I say those things aloud.

I beg the Lord not to hear.

Again And Again And Again

You said the anger would come back
just as the love did.

I have a black look I do not
like. It is a mask I try on.
I migrate toward it and its frog
sits on my lips and defecates.
It is old. It is also a pauper.
I have tried to keep it on a diet.
I give it no unction.

There is a good look that I wear
like a blood clot. I have
sewn it over my left breast.
I have made a vocation of it.
Lust has taken plant in it
and I have placed you and your
child at its milk tip.

Oh the blackness is murderous
and the milk tip is brimming
and each machine is working
and I will kiss you when
I cut up one dozen new men
and you will die somewhat,
again and again.

Anne Sexton

All My Pretty Ones

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.

But the eyes, as thick as wood in this album,
hold me. I stop here, where a small boy
waits in a ruffled dress for someone to come...
for this soldier who holds his bugle like a toy
or for this velvet lady who cannot smile.
Is this your father's father, this Commodore
in a mailman suit? My father, time meanwhile
has made it unimportant who you are looking for.
I'll never know what these faces are all about.
I lock them into their book and throw them out.

This is the yellow scrapbook that you began
the year I was born; as crackling now and wrinkly
as tobacco leaves: clippings where Hoover outran
the Democrats, wiggling his dry finger at me
and Prohibition; news where the Hindenburg went
down and recent years where you went flush
on war. This year, solvent but sick, you meant
to marry that pretty widow in a one-month rush.
But before you had that second chance, I cried
on your fat shoulder. Three days later you died.

These are the snapshots of marriage, stopped in places.
Side by side at the rail toward Nassau now;
here, with the winner's cup at the speedboat races,
here, in tails at the Cotillion, you take a bow,

here, by our kennel of dogs with their pink eyes,
running like show-bred pigs in their chain-link pen;
here, at the horseshow where my sister wins a prize;
Now I fold you down, my drunkard, my navigator,
my first lost keeper, to love or look at later.

I hold a five-year diary that my mother kept
for three years, telling all she does not say
of your alcoholic tendency. You overslept,
she writes. My God, father, each Christmas Day
with your blood, will I drink down your glass
of wine? The diary of your hurly-burly years
goes to my shelf to wait for my age to pass.
Only in this hoarded span will love persevere.
Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you,
bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you.

Anne Sexton

An Obsessive Combination Of Onotological Inscape, Trickery And Love

Busy, with an idea for a code, I write
signals hurrying from left to right,
or right to left, by obscure routes,
for my own reasons; taking a word like writes
down tiers of tries until its secret rites
make sense; or until, suddenly, RATS
can amazingly and funnily become STAR
and right to left that small star
is mine, for my own liking, to stare
its five lucky pins inside out, to store
forever kindly, as if it were a star
I touched and a miracle I really wrote.

Anne Sexton

And One For My Dame

A born salesman,
my father made all his dough
by selling wool to Fieldcrest, Woolrich and Faribo.

A born talker,
he could sell one hundred wet-down bales
of that white stuff. He could clock the miles and the sales

and make it pay.
At home each sentence he would utter
had first pleased the buyer who'd paid him off in butter.

Each word
had been tried over and over, at any rate,
on the man who was sold by the man who filled my plate.

My father hovered
over the Yorkshire pudding and the beef:
a peddler, a hawker, a merchant and an Indian chief.

Roosevelt! Willkie! and war!
How suddenly gauche I was
with my old-maid heart and my funny teenage applause.

Each night at home
my father was in love with maps
while the radio fought its battles with Nazis and Japs.

Except when he hid
in his bedroom on a three-day drunk,
he typed out complex itineraries, packed his trunk,

his matched luggage
and pocketed a confirmed reservation,
his heart already pushing over the red routes of the nation.

I sit at my desk
each night with no place to go,
opening thee wrinkled maps of Milwaukee and Buffalo,

the whole U.S.,
its cemeteries, its arbitrary time zones,
through routes like small veins, capitals like small stones.

He died on the road,
his heart pushed from neck to back,
his white hanky signaling from the window of the Cadillac.

My husband,
as blue-eyed as a picture book, sells wool:
boxes of card waste, laps and rovings he can pull

to the thread
and say Leicester, Rambouillet, Merino,
a half-blood, it's greasy and thick, yellow as old snow.

And when you drive off, my darling,
Yes, sir! Yes, sir! It's one for my dame,
your sample cases branded with my father's name,

your itinerary open,
its tolls ticking and greedy,
its highways built up like new loves, raw and speedy.

Anne Sexton

Angels Of The Love Affair

'Angels of the love affair, do you know that other,
the dark one, that other me? '

1. ANGEL OF FIRE AND GENITALS

Angel of fire and genitals, do you know slime,
that green mama who first forced me to sing,
who put me first in the latrine, that pantomime
of brown where I was beggar and she was king?
I said, 'The devil is down that festering hole.'
Then he bit me in the buttocks and took over my soul.
Fire woman, you of the ancient flame, you
of the Bunsen burner, you of the candle,
you of the blast furnace, you of the barbecue,
you of the fierce solar energy, Mademoiselle,
take some ice, take some snow, take a month of rain
and you would gutter in the dark, cracking up your brain.

Mother of fire, let me stand at your devouring gate
as the sun dies in your arms and you loosen it's terrible weight.

2. ANGEL OF CLEAN SHEETS

Angel of clean sheets, do you know bedbugs?
Once in the madhouse they came like specks of cinnamon
as I lay in a choral cave of drugs,
as old as a dog, as quiet as a skeleton.
Little bits of dried blood. One hundred marks
upon the sheet. One hundred kisses in the dark.
White sheets smelling of soap and Clorox
have nothing to do with this night of soil,
nothing to do with barred windows and multiple locks
and all the webbing in the bed, the ultimate recoil.
I have slept in silk and in red and in black.
I have slept on sand and, on fall night, a haystack.

I have known a crib. I have known the tuck-in of a child

but inside my hair waits the night I was defiled.

3. ANGEL OF FLIGHT AND SLEIGH BELLS

Angel of flight and sleigh bells, do you know paralysis,
that ether house where your arms and legs are cement?
You are as still as a yardstick. You have a doll's kiss.
The brain whirls in a fit. The brain is not evident.
I have gone to that same place without a germ or a stroke.
A little solo act-that lady with the brain that broke.

In this fashion I have become a tree.
I have become a vase you can pick up or drop at will,
inanimate at last. What unusual luck! My body
passively resisting. Part of the leftovers. Part of the kill.
Angels of flight, you soarer, you flapper, you floater,
you gull that grows out of my back in the dreams I prefer,

stay near. But give me the totem. Give me the shut eye
where I stand in stone shoes as the world's bicycle goes by.

4. ANGEL OF HOPE AND CALENDARS

Angel of hope and calendars, do you know despair?
That hole I crawl into with a box of Kleenex,
that hole where the fire woman is tied to her chair,
that hole where leather men are wringing their necks,
where the sea has turned into a pond of urine.
There is no place to wash and no marine beings to stir in.

In this hole your mother is crying out each day.
Your father is eating cake and digging her grave.
In this hole your baby is strangling. Your mouth is clay.
Your eyes are made of glass. They break. You are not brave.
You are alone like a dog in a kennel. Your hands
break out in boils. Your arms are cut and bound by bands

of wire. Your voice is out there. Your voice is strange.

There are no prayers here. Here there is no change.

5. ANGEL OF BLIZZARDS AND BLACKOUTS

Angle of blizzards and blackouts, do you know raspberries,
those rubies that sat in the tree of my grandfather's garden?
You of the snow tires, you of the sugary wings, you freeze
me out. Let me crawl through the patch. Let me be ten.
Let me pick those sweet kisses, thief that I was,
as the sea on my left slapped its applause.

Only my grandfather was allowed there. Or the maid
who came with a scullery pan to pick for breakfast.
She of the rolls that floated in the air, she of the inlaid
woodwork all greasy with lemon, she of the feather and dust,
not I. Nonetheless I came sneaking across the salt lawn
in bare feet and jumping-jack pajamas in the spongy dawn.

Oh Angel of the blizzard and blackout, Madam white face,
take me back to that red mouth, that July 21st place.

6. ANGEL OF BEACH HOUSES AND PICNICS

Angel of beach houses and picnics, do you know solitaire?
Fifty-two reds and blacks and only myself to blame.
My blood buzzes like a hornet's nest. I sit in a kitchen chair
at a table set for one. The silverware is the same
and the glass and the sugar bowl. I hear my lungs fill and expel
as in an operation. But I have no one left to tell.

Once I was a couple. I was my own king and queen
with cheese and bread and rosé on the rocks of Rockport.
Once I sunbathed in the buff, all brown and lean,
watching the toy sloops go by, holding court
for busloads of tourists. Once I called breakfast the sexiest
meal of the day. Once I invited arrest

at the peace march in Washington. Once I was young and bold

and left hundreds of unmatched people out in the cold.

Anne Sexton

Anna Who Was Mad

Anna who was mad,
I have a knife in my armpit.
When I stand on tiptoe I tap out messages.
Am I some sort of infection?
Did I make you go insane?
Did I make the sounds go sour?
Did I tell you to climb out the window?
Forgive. Forgive.
Say not I did.
Say not.
Say.

Speak Mary-words into our pillow.
Take me the gangling twelve-year-old
into your sunken lap.
Whisper like a buttercup.
Eat me. Eat me up like cream pudding.
Take me in.
Take me.
Take.

Give me a report on the condition of my soul.
Give me a complete statement of my actions.
Hand me a jack-in-the-pulpit and let me listen in.
Put me in the stirrups and bring a tour group through.
Number my sins on the grocery list and let me buy.
Did I make you go insane?
Did I turn up your earphone and let a siren drive through?
Did I open the door for the mustached psychiatrist
who dragged you out like a gold cart?
Did I make you go insane?
From the grave write me, Anna!
You are nothing but ashes but nevertheless
pick up the Parker Pen I gave you.
Write me.
Write.

Anne Sexton

As It Was Written

Earth, earth,
riding your merry-go-round
toward extinction,
right to the roots,
thickening the oceans like gravy,
festering in your caves,
you are becoming a latrine.
Your trees are twisted chairs.
Your flowers moan at their mirrors,
and cry for a sun that doesn't wear a mask.

Your clouds wear white,
trying to become nuns
and say novenas to the sky.
The sky is yellow with its jaundice,
and its veins spill into the rivers
where the fish kneel down
to swallow hair and goat's eyes.

All in all, I'd say,
the world is strangling.
And I, in my bed each night,
listen to my twenty shoes
converse about it.
And the moon,
under its dark hood,
falls out of the sky each night,
with its hungry red mouth
to suck at my scars.

Anne Sexton

August 17th

Surely I will be disquieted
by the hospital, that body zone-
bodies wrapped in elastic bands,
bodies cased in wood or used like telephones,
bodies crucified up onto their crutches,
bodies wearing rubber bags between their legs,
bodies vomiting up their juice like detergent, Here in this house
there are other bodies.

Whenever I see a six-year-old
swimming in our aqua pool
a voice inside me says what can't be told...
Ha, someday you'll be old and withered
and tubes will be in your nose
drinking up your dinner.
Someday you'll go backward. You'll close
up like a shoebox and you'll be cursed
as you push into death feet first.

Here in the hospital, I say,
that is not my body, not my body.
I am not here for the doctors
to read like a recipe.
No. I am a daisy girl
blowing in the wind like a piece of sun.
On ward 7 there are daisies, all butter and pearl
but beside a blind man who can only
eat up the petals and count to ten.
The nurses skip rope around him and shiver
as his eyes wiggle like mercury and then
they dance from patient to patient to patient
throwing up little paper medicine cups and playing
catch with vials of dope as they wait for new accidents.
Bodies made of synthetics. Bodies swaddled like dolls
whom I visit and cajole and all they do is hum
like computers doing up our taxes, dollar by dollar.
Each body is in its bunker. The surgeon applies his gum.
Each body is fitted quickly into its ice-cream pack
and then stitched up again for the long voyage
back.

Anne Sexton

August 8th

Listen here. I've never played it safe
in spite of what the critics say.
Ask my imaginary brother, that waif,
that childhood best friend who comes to play
dress-up and stick-up and jacks and Pick-Up-Sticks,
bike downtown, stick out tongues at the Catholics.

Or form a Piss Club where we all go
in the bushes and peek at each other's sex.
Pop-gunning the street lights like crows.
Not knowing what to do with funny Kotex
so wearing it in our school shoes. Friend, friend,
spooking my lonely hours you were there, but pretend.

Anne Sexton

Baby Picture

It's in the heart of the grape
where that smile lies.
It's in the good-bye-bow in the hair
where that smile lies.
It's in the clerical collar of the dress
where that smile lies.
What smile?
The smile of my seventh year,
caught here in the painted photograph.

It's peeling now, age has got it,
a kind of cancer of the background
and also in the assorted features.
It's like a rotten flag
or a vegetable from the refrigerator,
pocked with mold.
I am aging without sound,
into darkness, darkness.

Anne,
who are you?

I open the vein
and my blood rings like roller skates.
I open the mouth
and my teeth are an angry army.
I open the eyes
and they go sick like dogs
with what they have seen.
I open the hair
and it falls apart like dust balls.
I open the dress
and I see a child bent on a toilet seat.
I crouch there, sitting dumbly
pushing the enemas out like ice cream,
letting the whole brown world
turn into sweets.

Anne,

who are you?

Merely a kid keeping alive.

Anne Sexton

Barefoot

Loving me with my shoes off
means loving my long brown legs,
sweet dears, as good as spoons;
and my feet, those two children
let out to play naked. Intricate nubs,
my toes. No longer bound.
And what's more, see toenails and
all ten stages, root by root.
All spirited and wild, this little
piggy went to market and this little piggy
stayed. Long brown legs and long brown toes.
Further up, my darling, the woman
is calling her secrets, little houses,
little tongues that tell you.

There is no one else but us
in this house on the land spit.
The sea wears a bell in its navel.
And I'm your barefoot wench for a
whole week. Do you care for salami?
No. You'd rather not have a scotch?
No. You don't really drink. You do
drink me. The gulls kill fish,
crying out like three-year-olds.
The surf's a narcotic, calling out,
I am, I am, I am
all night long. Barefoot,
I drum up and down your back.
In the morning I run from door to door
of the cabin playing chase me.
Now you grab me by the ankles.
Now you work your way up the legs
and come to pierce me at my hunger mark

Anne Sexton

Bat

His awful skin
stretched out by some tradesman
is like my skin, here between my fingers,
a kind of webbing, a kind of frog.
Surely when first born my face was this tiny
and before I was born surely I could fly.
Not well, mind you, only a veil of skin
from my arms to my waist.
I flew at night, too. Not to be seen
for if I were I'd be taken down.
In August perhaps as the trees rose to the stars
I have flown from leaf to leaf in the thick dark.
If you had caught me with your flashlight
you would have seen a pink corpse with wings,
out, out, from her mother's belly, all furry
and hoarse skimming over the houses, the armies.
That's why the dogs of your house sniff me.
They know I'm something to be caught
somewhere in the cemetery hanging upside down
like a misshapen udder.

Anne Sexton

Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)

Consider

a girl who keeps slipping off,
arms limp as old carrots,
into the hypnotist's trance,
into a spirit world
speaking with the gift of tongues.
She is stuck in the time machine,
suddenly two years old sucking her thumb,
as inward as a snail,
learning to talk again.
She's on a voyage.
She is swimming further and further back,
up like a salmon,
struggling into her mother's pocketbook.
Little doll child,
come here to Papa.
Sit on my knee.
I have kisses for the back of your neck.
A penny for your thoughts, Princess.
I will hunt them like an emerald.

Come be my snooky
and I will give you a root.
That kind of voyage,
rank as a honeysuckle.
Once
a king had a christening
for his daughter Briar Rose
and because he had only twelve gold plates
he asked only twelve fairies
to the grand event.
The thirteenth fairy,
her fingers as long and thin as straws,
her eyes burnt by cigarettes,
her uterus an empty teacup,
arrived with an evil gift.
She made this prophecy:
The princess shall prick herself
on a spinning wheel in her fifteenth year

and then fall down dead.
Kaputt!
The court fell silent.
The king looked like Munch's Scream
Fairies' prophecies,
in times like those,
held water.
However the twelfth fairy
had a certain kind of eraser
and thus she mitigated the curse
changing that death
into a hundred-year sleep.

The king ordered every spinning wheel
exterminated and exorcised.
Briar Rose grew to be a goddess
and each night the king
bit the hem of her gown
to keep her safe.
He fastened the moon up
with a safety pin
to give her perpetual light
He forced every male in the court
to scour his tongue with Bab-o
lest they poison the air she dwelt in.
Thus she dwelt in his odor.
Rank as honeysuckle.

On her fifteenth birthday
she pricked her finger
on a charred spinning wheel
and the clocks stopped.
Yes indeed. She went to sleep.
The king and queen went to sleep,
the courtiers, the flies on the wall.
The fire in the hearth grew still
and the roast meat stopped crackling.
The trees turned into metal
and the dog became china.
They all lay in a trance,
each a catatonic
stuck in a time machine.

Even the frogs were zombies.
Only a bunch of briar roses grew
forming a great wall of tacks
around the castle.
Many princes
tried to get through the brambles
for they had heard much of Briar Rose
but they had not scoured their tongues
so they were held by the thorns
and thus were crucified.
In due time
a hundred years passed
and a prince got through.
The briars parted as if for Moses
and the prince found the tableau intact.
He kissed Briar Rose
and she woke up crying:
Daddy! Daddy!
Presto! She's out of prison!
She married the prince
and all went well
except for the fear -
the fear of sleep.

Briar Rose
was an insomniac...
She could not nap
or lie in sleep
without the court chemist
mixing her some knock-out drops
and never in the prince's presence.
If it is to come, she said,
sleep must take me unawares
while I am laughing or dancing
so that I do not know that brutal place
where I lie down with cattle prods,
the hole in my cheek open.
Further, I must not dream
for when I do I see the table set
and a faltering crone at my place,
her eyes burnt by cigarettes
as she eats betrayal like a slice of meat.

I must not sleep
for while I'm asleep I'm ninety
and think I'm dying.
Death rattles in my throat
like a marble.
I wear tubes like earrings.
I lie as still as a bar of iron.
You can stick a needle
through my kneecap and I won't flinch.
I'm all shot up with Novocain.
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!
But if you kissed her on the mouth
her eyes would spring open
and she'd call out: Daddy! Daddy!
Presto!
She's out of prison.

There was a theft.
That much I am told.
I was abandoned.
That much I know.
I was forced backward.
I was forced forward.
I was passed hand to hand
like a bowl of fruit.
Each night I am nailed into place
and forget who I am.
Daddy?
That's another kind of prison.
It's not the prince at all,
but my father
drunkenly bends over my bed,
circling the abyss like a shark,
my father thick upon me
like some sleeping jellyfish.
What voyage is this, little girl?

This coming out of prison?
God help -
this life after death?

Anne Sexton

Buying The Whore

You are the roast beef I have purchased
and I stuff you with my very own onion.

You are a boat I have rented by the hour
and I steer you with my rage until you run aground.

You are a glass that I have paid to shatter
and I swallow the pieces down with my spit.

You are the grate I warm my trembling hands on,
searing the flesh until it's nice and juicy.

You stink like my Mama under your bra
and I vomit into your hand like a jackpot
its cold hard quarters.

Anne Sexton

Christmas Eve

Oh sharp diamond, my mother!
I could not count the cost
of all your faces, your moods-
that present that I lost.
Sweet girl, my deathbed,
my jewel-fingered lady,
your portrait flickered all night
by the bulbs of the tree.

Your face as calm as the moon
over a mannered sea,
presided at the family reunion,
the twelve grandchildren
you used to wear on your wrist,
a three-months-old baby,
a fat check you never wrote,
the red-haired toddler who danced the twist,
your aging daughters, each one a wife,
each one talking to the family cook,
each one avoiding your portrait,
each one aping your life.

Later, after the party,
after the house went to bed,
I sat up drinking the Christmas brandy,
watching your picture,
letting the tree move in and out of focus.
The bulbs vibrated.
They were a halo over your forehead.
Then they were a beehive,
blue, yellow, green, red;
each with its own juice, each hot and alive
stinging your face. But you did not move.
I continued to watch, forcing myself,
waiting, inexhaustible, thirty-five.

I wanted your eyes, like the shadows
of two small birds, to change.
But they did not age.

The smile that gathered me in, all wit,
all charm, was invincible.
Hour after hour I looked at your face
but I could not pull the roots out of it.
Then I watched how the sun hit your red sweater, your withered neck,
your badly painted flesh-pink skin.
You who led me by the nose, I saw you as you were.
Then I thought of your body
as one thinks of murder-

Then I said Mary-
Mary, Mary, forgive me
and then I touched a present for the child,
the last I bred before your death;
and then I touched my breast
and then I touched the floor
and then my breast again as if,
somehow, it were one of yours.

Anne Sexton

Cigarettes And Whiskey And Wild, Wild Women

(from a song)

Perhaps I was born kneeling,
born coughing on the long winter,
born expecting the kiss of mercy,
born with a passion for quickness
and yet, as things progressed,
I learned early about the stockade
or taken out, the fume of the enema.
By two or three I learned not to kneel,
not to expect, to plant my fires underground
where none but the dolls, perfect and awful,
could be whispered to or laid down to die.

Now that I have written many words,
and let out so many loves, for so many,
and been altogether what I always was—
a woman of excess, of zeal and greed,
I find the effort useless.
Do I not look in the mirror,
these days,
and see a drunken rat avert her eyes?
Do I not feel the hunger so acutely
that I would rather die than look
into its face?
I kneel once more,
in case mercy should come
in the nick of time.

Anne Sexton

Cinderella

You always read about it:
the plumber with the twelve children
who wins the Irish Sweepstakes.
From toilets to riches.
That story.

Or the nursemaid,
some luscious sweet from Denmark
who captures the oldest son's heart.
from diapers to Dior.
That story.

Or a milkman who serves the wealthy,
eggs, cream, butter, yogurt, milk,
the white truck like an ambulance
who goes into real estate
and makes a pile.
From homogenized to martinis at lunch.

Or the charwoman
who is on the bus when it cracks up
and collects enough from the insurance.
From mops to Bonwit Teller.
That story.

Once
the wife of a rich man was on her deathbed
and she said to her daughter Cinderella:
Be devout. Be good. Then I will smile
down from heaven in the seam of a cloud.
The man took another wife who had
two daughters, pretty enough
but with hearts like blackjacks.
Cinderella was their maid.
She slept on the sooty hearth each night
and walked around looking like Al Jolson.
Her father brought presents home from town,
jewels and gowns for the other women
but the twig of a tree for Cinderella.

She planted that twig on her mother's grave
and it grew to a tree where a white dove sat.
Whenever she wished for anything the dove
would drop it like an egg upon the ground.
The bird is important, my dears, so heed him.

Next came the ball, as you all know.
It was a marriage market.
The prince was looking for a wife.
All but Cinderella were preparing
and gussying up for the event.
Cinderella begged to go too.
Her stepmother threw a dish of lentils
into the cinders and said: Pick them
up in an hour and you shall go.
The white dove brought all his friends;
all the warm wings of the fatherland came,
and picked up the lentils in a jiffy.
No, Cinderella, said the stepmother,
you have no clothes and cannot dance.
That's the way with stepmothers.

Cinderella went to the tree at the grave
and cried forth like a gospel singer:
Mama! Mama! My turtledove,
send me to the prince's ball!
The bird dropped down a golden dress
and delicate little slippers.
Rather a large package for a simple bird.
So she went. Which is no surprise.
Her stepmother and sisters didn't
recognize her without her cinder face
and the prince took her hand on the spot
and danced with no other the whole day.

As nightfall came she thought she'd better
get home. The prince walked her home
and she disappeared into the pigeon house
and although the prince took an axe and broke
it open she was gone. Back to her cinders.
These events repeated themselves for three days.
However on the third day the prince

covered the palace steps with cobbler's wax
and Cinderella's gold shoe stuck upon it.
Now he would find whom the shoe fit
and find his strange dancing girl for keeps.
He went to their house and the two sisters
were delighted because they had lovely feet.
The eldest went into a room to try the slipper on
but her big toe got in the way so she simply
sliced it off and put on the slipper.
The prince rode away with her until the white dove
told him to look at the blood pouring forth.
That is the way with amputations.
They just don't heal up like a wish.
The other sister cut off her heel
but the blood told as blood will.
The prince was getting tired.
He began to feel like a shoe salesman.
But he gave it one last try.
This time Cinderella fit into the shoe
like a love letter into its envelope.

At the wedding ceremony
the two sisters came to curry favor
and the white dove pecked their eyes out.
Two hollow spots were left
like soup spoons.

Cinderella and the prince
lived, they say, happily ever after,
like two dolls in a museum case
never bothered by diapers or dust,
never arguing over the timing of an egg,
never telling the same story twice,
never getting a middle-aged spread,
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.
Regular Bobbsey Twins.
That story.

Anne Sexton

Clothes

Put on a clean shirt
before you die, some Russian said.
Nothing with drool, please,
no egg spots, no blood,
no sweat, no sperm.
You want me clean, God,
so I'll try to comply.

The hat I was married in,
will it do?
White, broad, fake flowers in a tiny array.
It's old-fashioned, as stylish as a bedbug,
but is suits to die in something nostalgic.

And I'll take
my painting shirt
washed over and over of course
spotted with every yellow kitchen I've painted.
God, you don't mind if I bring all my kitchens?
They hold the family laughter and the soup.

For a bra
(need we mention it?) ,
the padded black one that my lover demeaned
when I took it off.
He said, 'Where'd it all go? '

And I'll take
the maternity skirt of my ninth month,
a window for the love-belly
that let each baby pop out like an apple,
the water breaking in the restaurant,
making a noisy house I'd like to die in.

For underpants I'll pick white cotton,
the briefs of my childhood,
for it was my mother's dictum
that nice girls wore only white cotton.
If my mother had lived to see it

she would have put a WANTED sign up in the post office
for the black, the red, the blue I've worn.
Still, it would be perfectly fine with me
to die like a nice girl
smelling of Clorox and Duz.
Being sixteen-in-the-pants
I would die full of questions.

Anne Sexton

Cockroach

Roach, foulest of creatures,
who attacks with yellow teeth
and an army of cousins big as shoes,
you are lumps of coal that are mechanized
and when I turn on the light you scuttle
into the corners and there is this hiss upon the land.
Yet I know you are only the common angel
turned into, by way of enchantment, the ugliest.
Your uncle was made into an apple.
Your aunt was made into a Siamese cat,
all the rest were made into butterflies
but because you lied to God outrightly-
told him that all things on earth were in order-
He turned his wrath upon you and said,
I will make you the most loathsome,
I will make you into God's lie,
and never will a little girl fondle you
or hold your dark wings cupped in her palm.

But that was not true. Once in New Orleans
with a group of students a roach fled across
the floor and I shrieked and she picked it up
in her hands and held it from my fear for one hour.
And held it like a diamond ring that should not escape.
These days even the devil is getting overturned
and held up to the light like a glass of water.

Anne Sexton

Consorting With Angels

I was tired of being a woman,
tired of the spoons and the post,
tired of my mouth and my breasts,
tired of the cosmetics and the silks.
There were still men who sat at my table,
circled around the bowl I offered up.
The bowl was filled with purple grapes
and the flies hovered in for the scent
and even my father came with his white bone.
But I was tired of the gender things.

Last night I had a dream
and I said to it...
'You are the answer.
You will outlive my husband and my father.'
In that dream there was a city made of chains
where Joan was put to death in man's clothes
and the nature of the angels went unexplained,
no two made in the same species,
one with a nose, one with an ear in its hand,
one chewing a star and recording its orbit,
each one like a poem obeying itself,
performing God's functions,
a people apart.

'You are the answer, '
I said, and entered,
lying down on the gates of the city.
Then the chains were fastened around me
and I lost my common gender and my final aspect.
Adam was on the left of me
and Eve was on the right of me,
both thoroughly inconsistent with the world of reason.
We wove our arms together
and rode under the sun.
I was not a woman anymore,
not one thing or the other.

O daughters of Jerusalem,

the king has brought me into his chamber.
I am black and I am beautiful.
I've been opened and undressed.
I have no arms or legs.
I'm all one skin like a fish.
I'm no more a woman
than Christ was a man.

Anne Sexton

Courage

It is in the small things we see it.
The child's first step,
as awesome as an earthquake.
The first time you rode a bike,
wallowing up the sidewalk.
The first spanking when your heart
went on a journey all alone.
When they called you crybaby
or poor or fatty or crazy
and made you into an alien,
you drank their acid
and concealed it.

Later,
if you faced the death of bombs and bullets
you did not do it with a banner,
you did it with only a hat to
conver your heart.
You did not fondle the weakness inside you
though it was there.
Your courage was a small coal
that you kept swallowing.
If your buddy saved you
and died himself in so doing,
then his courage was not courage,
it was love; love as simple as shaving soap.

Later,
if you have endured a great despair,
then you did it alone,
getting a transfusion from the fire,
picking the scabs off your heart,
then wringing it out like a sock.
Next, my kinsman, you powdered your sorrow,
you gave it a back rub
and then you covered it with a blanket
and after it had slept a while
it woke to the wings of the roses
and was transformed.

Later,
when you face old age and its natural conclusion
your courage will still be shown in the little ways,
each spring will be a sword you'll sharpen,
those you love will live in a fever of love,
and you'll bargain with the calendar
and at the last moment
when death opens the back door
you'll put on your carpet slippers
and stride out.

Anne Sexton

Cripples And Other Stories

My doctor, the comedian
I called you every time
and made you laugh yourself
when I wrote this silly rhyme...

Each time I give lectures
or gather in the grants
you send me off to boarding school
in training pants.

God damn it, father-doctor,
I'm really thirty-six.
I see dead rats in the toilet.
I'm one of the lunatics.

Disgusted, mother put me
on the potty. She was good at this.
My father was fat on scotch.
It leaked from every orifice.

Oh the enemas of childhood,
reeking of outhouses and shame!
Yet you rock me in your arms
and whisper my nickname.

Or else you hold my hand
and teach me love too late.
And that's the hand of the arm
they tried to amputate.

Though I was almost seven
I was an awful brat.
I put it in the Easy Wringer.
It came out nice and flat.

I was an instant cripple
from my finger to my shoulder.
The laundress wept and swooned.

My mother had to hold her.

I know I was a cripple.
Of course, I'd known it from the start.
My father took the crowbar
and broke the wringer's heart.

The surgeons shook their heads.
They really didn't know-
Would the cripple inside of me
be a cripple that would show?

My father was a perfect man,
clean and rich and fat.
My mother was a brilliant thing.
She was good at that.

You hold me in your arms.
How strange that you're so tender!
Child-woman that I am,
you think that you can mend her.

As for the arm,
unfortunately it grew.
Though mother said a withered arm
would put me in Who's Who.

For years she has described it.
She sang it like a hymn.
By then she loved the shrunken thing,
my little withered limb.

My father's cells clicked each night,
intent on making money.
And as for my cells, they brooded,
little queens, on honey.

Oh boys too, as a matter of fact,
and cigarettes and cars.
Mother frowned at my wasted life.
My father smoked cigars.

My cheeks blossomed with maggots.
I picked at them like pearls.
I covered them with pancake.
I wound my hair in curls.

My father didn't know me
but you kiss me in my fever.
My mother knew me twice
and then I had to leave her.

But those are just two stories
and I have more to tell
from the outhouse, the greenhouse
where you draw me out of hell.

Father, I am thirty-six,
yet I lie here in your crib.
I'm getting born again, Adam,
as you prod me with your rib.

Anne Sexton

Crossing The Atlantic

We sail out of season into on oyster-gray wind,
over a terrible hardness.

Where Dickens crossed with mal de mer
in twenty weeks or twenty days

I cross toward him in five.

Wrapped in robes-

not like Caesar but like liver with bacon-

I rest on the stern

burning my mouth with a wind-hot ash,

watching my ship

bypass the swells

as easily as an old woman reads a palm.

I think; as I look North, that a field of mules

lay down to die.

The ship is 27 hours out.

I have entered her.

She might be a whale,

sleeping 2000 and ship's company,

the last 40¢ martini

and steel staterooms where night goes on forever.

Being inside them is, I think,

the way one would dig into a planet

and forget the word light.

I have walked cities,

miles of mole alleys with carpets.

Inside I have been ten girls who speak French.

They languish everywhere like bedsheets.

Oh my Atlantic of the cracked shores,

those blemished gates of Rockport and Boothbay,

those harbor smells like the innards of animals!

Old childish Queen, where did you go,

you bayer at wharfs and Victorian houses?

I have read each page of my mother's voyage.

I have read each page of her mother's voyage.

I have learned their words as they learned Dickens'.

I have swallowed these words like bullets.

But I have forgotten the last guest-terror.
Unlike them, I cannot toss in the cabin
as in childbirth.
Now always leaving me in the West
is the wake,
a ragged bridal veil, unexplained,
seductive, always rushing down the stairs,
never detained, never enough.

The ship goes on
as though nothing else were happening.
Generation after generation,
I go her way.
She will run East, knot by knot, over an old bloodstream,
stripping it clear,
each hour ripping it, pounding, pounding,
forcing through as through a virgin.
Oh she is so quick!
This dead street never stops!

Anne Sexton

'Daddy' Warbucks

What's missing is the eyeballs
in each of us, but it doesn't matter
because you've got the bucks, the bucks, the bucks.
You let me touch them, fondle the green faces
lick at their numbers and it lets you be
my 'Daddy! ' 'Daddy! ' and though I fought all alone
with molesters and crooks, I knew your money
would save me, your courage, your 'I've had
considerable experience as a soldier...
fighting to win millions for myself, it's true.
But I did win, ' and me praying for 'our men out there'
just made it okay to be an orphan whose blood was no one's,
whose curls were hung up on a wire machine and electrified,
while you built and unbuilt intrigues called nations,
and did in the bad ones, always, always,
and always came at my perils, the black Christs of childhood,
always came when my heart stood naked in the street
and they threw apples at it or twelve-day-old-dead-fish.

'Daddy! ' 'Daddy, ' we all won that war,
when you sang me the money songs
Annie, Annie you sang
and I knew you drove a pure gold car
and put diamonds in you coke
for the crunchy sound, the adorable sound
and the moon too was in your portfolio,
as well as the ocean with its sleepy dead.
And I was always brave, wasn't I?
I never bled?
I never saw a man expose himself.
No. No.
I never saw a drunkard in his blubber.
I never let lightning go in one car and out the other.
And all the men out there were never to come.
Never, like a deluge, to swim over my breasts
and lay their lamps in my insides.
No. No.
Just me and my 'Daddy'
and his tempestuous bucks

rolling in them like corn flakes
and only the bad ones died.

But I died yesterday,
'Daddy, ' I died,
swallowing the Nazi-Jap animal
and it won't get out
it keeps knocking at my eyes,
my big orphan eyes,
kicking! Until eyeballs pop out
and even my dog puts up his four feet
and lets go
of his military secret
with his big red tongue
flying up and down
like yours should have

as we board our velvet train.

Anne Sexton

Demon

A young man is afraid of his demon and puts his hand
over the demon's mouth sometimes...- D. H. Lawrence

I mentioned my demon to a friend
and the friend swam in oil and came forth to me
greasy and cryptic
and said,
'I'm thinking of taking him out of hock.
I pawned him years ago.'

Who would buy?
The pawned demon,
Yellowing with forgetfulness
and hand at his throat?
Take him out of hock, my friend,
but beware of the grief
that will fly into your mouth like a bird.

My demon,
too often undressed,
too often a crucifix I bring forth,
too often a dead daisy I give water to
too often the child I give birth to
and then abort, nameless, nameless...
earthless.

Oh demon within,
I am afraid and seldom put my hand up
to my mouth and stitch it up
covering you, smothering you
from the public voyeury eyes
of my typewriter keys.
If I should pawn you,
what bullion would they give for you,
what pennies, swimming in their copper kisses
what bird on its way to perishing?

No.
No.

I accept you,
you come with the dead who people my dreams,
who walk all over my desk
(as in Mother, cancer blossoming on her
Best & Co. tits-
waltzing with her tissue paper ghost)
the dead, who give sweets to the diabetic in me,
who give bolts to the seizure of roses
that sometimes fly in and out of me.

Yes.

Yes.

I accept you, demon.
I will not cover your mouth.
If it be man I love, apple laden and foul
or if it be woman I love, sick unto her blood
and its sugary gasses and tumbling branches.

Demon come forth,
even if it be God I call forth
standing like a carrion,
wanting to eat me,
starting at the lips and tongue.
And me wanting to glide into His spoils,
I take bread and wine,
and the demon farts and giggles,
at my letting God out of my mouth
anonymous woman
at the anonymous altar.

Anne Sexton

Despair

Who is he?

A railroad track toward hell?

Breaking like a stick of furniture?

The hope that suddenly overflows the cesspool?

The love that goes down the drain like spit?

The love that said forever, forever

and then runs you over like a truck?

Are you a prayer that floats into a radio advertisement?

Despair,

I don't like you very well.

You don't suit my clothes or my cigarettes.

Why do you locate here

as large as a tank,

aiming at one half of a lifetime?

Couldn't you just go float into a tree

instead of locating here at my roots,

forcing me out of the life I've led

when it's been my belly so long?

All right!

I'll take you along on the trip

where for so many years

my arms have been speechless

Anne Sexton

Doctors

They work with herbs
and penicillin
They work with gentleness
and the scalpel.
They dig out the cancer,
close an incision
and say a prayer
to the poverty of the skin.
They are not Gods
though they would like to be;
they are only a human
trying to fix up a human.
Many humans die.
They die like the tender,
palpitating berries
in November.
But all along the doctors remember:
First do no harm.
They would kiss if it would heal.
It would not heal.

If the doctors cure
then the sun sees it.
If the doctors kill
then the earth hides it.
The doctors should fear arrogance
more than cardiac arrest.
If they are too proud,
and some are,
then they leave home on horseback
but God returns them on foot.

Anne Sexton

Doors, Doors, Doors

1. Old Man

Old man, it's four flights up and for what?
Your room is hardly bigger than your bed.
Puffing as you climb, you are a brown woodcut
stooped over the thin tail and the wornout tread.

The room will do. All that's left of the old life
is jampacked on shelves from floor to ceiling
like a supermarket: your books, your dead wife
generously fat in her polished frame, the congealing

bowl of cornflakes sagging in their instant milk,
your hot plate and your one luxury, a telephone.
You leave your door open, lounging in maroon silk
and smiling at the other roomers who live alone.
Well, almost alone. Through the old-fashioned wall
the fellow next door has a girl who comes to call.

Twice a week at noon during their lunch hour
they pause by your door to peer into your world.
They speak sadly as if the wine they carry would sour
or as if the mattress would not keep them curled

together, extravagantly young in their tight lock.
Old man, you are their father holding court
in the dingy hall until their alarm clock
rings and unwinds them. You unstopper the quart

of brandy you've saved, examining the small print
in the telephone book. The phone in your lap is all
that's left of your family name. Like a Romanoff prince
you stay the same in your small alcove off the hall.
Castaway, your time is a flat sea that doesn't stop,
with no new land to make for and no new stories to swap.

2. Seamstress

I'm at pains to know what else I could have done

but move him out of his parish, him being my son;

him being the only one at home since his Pa
left us to beat the Japs at Okinawa.

I put the gold star up in the front window
beside the flag. Alterations is what I know

and what I did: hems, gussets and seams.
When my boy had the fever and the bad dreams

I paid for the clinic exam and a pack of lies.
As a youngster his private parts were undersize.

I thought of his Pa, that muscly old laugh he had
and the boy was thin as a moth, but never once bad,

as smart as a rooster! To hear some neighbors tell,
Your kid! He'll go far. He'll marry well.

So when he talked of taking the cloth, I thought
I'd talk him out of it. You're all I got,

I told him. For six years he studied up. I prayed
against God Himself for my boy. But he stayed.

Christ was a hornet inside his head. I guess
I'd better stitch the zipper in this dress.

I guess I'll get along. I always did.
Across the hall from me's an old invalid,

aside of him, a young one - he carries on
with a girl who pretends she comes to use the john.

The old one with the bad breath and his bed all mussed,
he smiles and talks to them. He's got some crust.

Sure as hell, what else could I have done
but pack up and move in here, him being my son?

3. Young Girl

Dear love, as simple as some distant evil
we walk a little drunk up these three flights
where you tacked a Dufy print above your army cot.

The thin apartment doors on the way up will
not tell us. We are saying, we have our rights
and let them see the sandwiches and wine we bought

for we do not explain my husband's insane abuse
and we do not say why your wild-haired wife has fled
or that my father opened like a walnut and then was dead.
Your palms fold over me like knees. Love is the only use.

Both a little drunk in the afternoon
with the forgotten smart of August on our skin
we hold hands as if we were still children who trudge

up the wooden tower, on up past that close platoon
of doors, past the dear old man who always asks us in
and the one who sews like a wasp and will not budge.

Climbing the dark halls, I ignore their papers and pails,
the twelve coats of rubbish of someone else's dim life.
Tell them need is an excuse for love. Tell them need prevails.
Tell them I remake and smooth your bed and am your wife.

Anne Sexton

Dreaming The Breasts

Mother,
strange goddess face
above my milk home,
that delicate asylum,
I ate you up.
All my need took
you down like a meal.

What you gave
I remember in a dream:
the freckled arms binding me,
the laugh somewhere over my woolly hat,
the blood fingers tying my shoe,
the breasts hanging like two bats
and then darting at me,
bending me down.

The breasts I knew at midnight
beat like the sea in me now.
Mother, I put bees in my mouth
to keep from eating
yet it did no good.
In the end they cut off your breasts
and milk poured from them
into the surgeon's hand
and he embraced them.
I took them from him
and planted them.

I have put a padlock
on you, Mother, dear dead human,
so that your great bells,
those dear white ponies,
can go galloping, galloping,
wherever you are.

Anne Sexton

Earthworm

Slim inquirer, while the old fathers sleep
you are reworking their soil, you have
a grocery store there down under the earth
and it is well stocked with broken wine bottles,
old cigars, old door knobs and earth,
that great brown flour that you kiss each day.
There are dark stars in the cool evening and
you fondle them like killer birds' beaks.
But what I want to know is why when small boys
dig you up for curiosity and cut you in half
why each half lives and crawls away as if whole.
Have you no beginning and end? Which heart is
the real one? Which eye the seer? Why
is it in the infinite plan that you would
be severed and rise from the dead like a gargoyle
with two heads?

Anne Sexton

Elegy In The Classroom

In the thin classroom, where your face
was noble and your words were all things,
I find this boily creature in your place;

find you disarranged, squatting on the window sill,
irrefutably placed up there,
like a hunk of some big frog
watching us through the V
of your woolen legs.

Even so, I must admire your skill.
You are so gracefully insane.
We fidget in our plain chairs
and pretend to catalogue
our facts for your burly sorcery

or ignore your fat blind eyes
or the prince you ate yesterday
who was wise, wise, wise.

Anne Sexton

Elizabeth Gone

1.

You lay in the nest of your real death,
Beyond the print of my nervous fingers
Where they touched your moving head;
Your old skin puckering, your lungs' breath
Grown baby short as you looked up last
At my face swinging over the human bed,
And somewhere you cried, let me go let me go.

You lay in the crate of your last death,
But were not you, not finally you.
They have stuffed her cheeks, I said;
This clay hand, this mask of Elizabeth
Are not true. From within the satin
And the suede of this inhuman bed,
Something cried, let me go let me go.

2.

They gave me your ash and bony shells,
Rattling like gourds in the cardboard urn,
Rattling like stones that their oven had blest.
I waited you in the cathedral of spells
And I waited you in the country of the living,
Still with the urn crooned to my breast,
When something cried, let me go let me go.

So I threw out your last bony shells
And heard me scream for the look of you,
Your apple face, the simple creche
Of your arms, the August smells
Of your skin. Then I sorted your clothes
And the loves you had left, Elizabeth,
Elizabeth, until you were gone.

Anne Sexton

End, Middle, Beginning

There was an unwanted child.
Aborted by three modern methods
she hung on to the womb,
hooked onto I
building her house into it
and it was to no avail,
to black her out.

At her birth
she did not cry,
spanked indeed,
but did not yell-
instead snow fell out of her mouth.

As she grew, year by year,
her hair turned like a rose in a vase,
and bled down her face.
Rocks were placed on her to keep
the growing silent,
and though they bruised,
they did not kill,
though kill was tangled into her beginning.

They locked her in a football
but she merely curled up
and pretended it was a warm doll's house.
They pushed insects in to bite her off
and she let them crawl into her eyes
pretending they were a puppet show.

Later, later,
grown fully, as they say,
they gave her a ring,
and she wore it like a root
and said to herself,
'To be not loved is the human condition,'
and lay like a stature in her bed.

Then once,

by terrible chance,
love took her in his big boat
and she shoveled the ocean
in a scalding joy.

Then,
slowly,
love seeped away,
the boat turned into paper
and she knew her fate,
at last.
Turn where you belong,
into a deaf mute
that metal house,
let him drill you into no one.

Anne Sexton

Flee On Your Donkey

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 defenses,
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.

Today an intern knocks my knees,
testing for reflexes.
Once I would have winked and begged for dope.
Today I am terribly patient.
Today crows play black-jack
on the stethoscope.

Everyone has left me
except my muse,
that good nurse.
She stays in my hand,
a mild white mouse.

The curtains, lazy and delicate,
billow and flutter and drop
like the Victorian skirts
of my two maiden aunts
who kept an antique shop.

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!
What happened to Jack and Doc and Reggy?
Who remembers what lurks in the heart of man?
What did The Green Hornet mean, he knows?
Or have I got it wrong?
Is it The Shadow who had seen
me from my bedside radio?

Now it's Dinn, Dinn, Dinn!
while the ladies in the next room argue
and pick their teeth.
Upstairs a girl curls like a snail;
in another room someone tries to eat a shoe;
meanwhile an adolescent pads up and down
the hall in his white tennis socks.
A new doctor makes rounds
advertising tranquilizers, insulin, or shock
to the uninitiated.

Six years of such small preoccupations!
Six years of shuttling in and out of this place!
O my hunger! My hunger!
I could have gone around the world twice
or had new children - all boys.
It was a long trip with little days in it
and no new places.

In here,
it's the same old crowd,
the same ruined scene.
The alcoholic arrives with his gold clubs.
The suicide arrives with extra pills sewn
into the lining of her dress.
The permanent guests have done nothing new.
Their faces are still small
like babies with jaundice.

Meanwhile,
they carried out my mother,
wrapped like somebody's doll, in sheets,
bandaged her jaw and stuffed up her holes.

My father, too. He went out on the rotten blood
he used up on other women in the Middle West.
He went out, a cured old alcoholic
on crooked feet and useless hands.
He went out calling for his father
who died all by himself long ago -
that fat banker who got locked up,
his genes suspended like dollars,
wrapped up in his secret,
tied up securely in a straitjacket.

But you, my doctor, my enthusiast,
were better than Christ;
you promised me another world
to tell me who
I was.

I spent most of my time,
a stranger,
damned and in trance—that little hut,
that naked blue-veined place,
my eyes shut on the confusing office,
eyes circling into my childhood,
eyes newly cut.
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
and giving up cigarettes each New Year,
were the new God,
the manager of the Gideon Bible.

I was your third-grader
with a blue star on my forehead.
In trance I could be any age,
voice, gesture—all turned backward
like a drugstore clock.
Awake, I memorized dreams.
Dreams came into the ring

like third string fighters,
each one a bad bet
who might win
because there was no other.

I stared at them,
concentrating on the abyss
the way one looks down into a rock quarry,
uncountable miles down,
my hands swinging down like hooks
to pull dreams up out of their cage.
O my hunger! My hunger!

Once, outside your office,
I collapsed in the old-fashioned swoon
between the illegally parked cars.
I threw myself down,
pretending dead for eight hours.
I thought I had died
into a snowstorm.
Above my head
chains cracked along like teeth
digging their way through the snowy street.
I lay there
like an overcoat
that someone had thrown away.
You carried me back in,
awkwardly, tenderly,
with help of the red-haired secretary
who was built like a lifeguard.
My shoes,
I remember,
were lost in the snowbank
as if I planned never to walk again.

That was the winter
that my mother died,
half mad on morphine,
blown up, at last,
like a pregnant pig.
I was her dreamy evil eye.
In fact,

I carried a knife in my pocketbook—
my husband's good L. L. Bean hunting knife.
I wasn't sure if I should slash a tire
or scrape the guts out of some dream.

You taught me
to believe in dreams;
thus I was the dredger.
I held them like an old woman with arthritic fingers,
carefully straining the water out—
sweet dark playthings,
and above all, mysterious
until they grew mournful and weak.
O my hunger! My hunger!
I was the one
who opened the warm eyelid
like a surgeon
and brought forth young girls
to grunt like fish.

I told you,
I said—
but I was lying—
that the knife was for my mother . . .
and then I delivered her.

The curtains flutter out
and slump against the bars.
They are my two thin ladies
named Blanche and Rose.
The grounds outside
are pruned like an estate at Newport.
Far off, in the field,
something yellow grows.

Was it last month or last year
that the ambulance ran like a hearse
with its siren blowing on suicide—
Dinn, dinn, dinn!—
a noon whistle that kept insisting on life
all the way through the traffic lights?

I have come back
but disorder is not what it was.
I have lost the trick of it!
The innocence of it!
That fellow-patient in his stovepipe hat
with his fiery joke, his manic smile—
even he seems blurred, small and pale.
I have come back,
recommitted,
fastened to the wall like a bathroom plunger,
held like a prisoner
who was so poor
he fell in love with jail.

I stand at this old window
complaining of the soup,
examining the grounds,
allowing myself the wasted life.
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.
Is this the old trick, the wasting away,
the skull that waits for its dose
of electric power?

This is madness
but a kind of hunger.
What good are my questions
in this hierarchy of death
where the earth and the stones go
Dinn! Dinn! Dinn!
It is hardly a feast.
It is my stomach that makes me suffer.

Turn, my hungers!
For once make a deliberate decision.
There are brains that rot here
like black bananas.
Hearts have grown as flat as dinner plates.

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.
Ride out
any old way you please!
In this place everyone talks to his own mouth.
That's what it means to be crazy.
Those I loved best died of it—
the fool's disease.

Anne Sexton

For God While Sleeping

Sleeping in fever, I am unfair
to know just who you are:
hung up like a pig on exhibit,
the delicate wrists,
the beard drooling blood and vinegar;
hooked to your own weight,
jolting toward death under your nameplate.

Everyone in this crowd needs a bath.
I am dressed in rags.
The mother wears blue.
You grind your teeth
and with each new breath
your jaws gape and your diaper sags.
I am not to blame
for all this. I do not know your name.

Skinny man, you are somebody's fault.
You ride on dark poles -
a wooden bird that a trader built
for some fool who felt
that he could make the flight. Now you roll
in your sleep, seasick
on your own breathing, poor old convict.

Anne Sexton

For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further

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.

And if I tried
to give you something else,
something outside of myself,
you would not know
that the worst of anyone
can be, finally,
an accident of hope.

I tapped my own head;
it was a glass, an inverted bowl.

It is a small thing
to rage in your own bowl.

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

And if you turn away
because there is no lesson here
I will hold my awkward bowl,
with all its cracked stars shining
like a complicated lie,
and fasten a new skin around it
as if I were dressing an orange
or a strange sun.

Not that it was beautiful,
but that I found some order there.
There ought to be something special
for someone
in this kind of hope.
This is something I would never find
in a lovelier place, my dear,

although your fear is anyone's fear,
like an invisible veil between us all...
and sometimes in private,
my kitchen, your kitchen,
my face, your face.

Anne Sexton

For Johnny Pole On The Forgotten Beach

In his tenth July some instinct
taught him to arm the waiting wave,
a giant where its mouth hung open.
He rode on the lip that buoyed him there
and buckled him under. The beach was strung
with children paddling their ages in,
under the glare of noon chipping
its light out. He stood up, anonymous
and straight among them, between
their sand pails and nursery crafts.
The breakers cartwheeled in and over
to puddle their toes and test their perfect
skin. He was my brother, my small
Johnny brother, almost ten. We flopped
down upon a towel to grind the sand
under us and watched the Atlantic sea
move fire, like night sparklers;
and lost our weight in the festival
season. He dreamed, he said, to be
a man designed like a balanced wave...
how someday he would wait, giant
and straight.
Johnny, your dream moves summers
inside my mind.
He was tall and twenty that July,
but there was no balance to help;
only the shells came straight and even.
This was the first beach of assault;
the odor of death hung in the air
like rotting potatoes, the junkyard
of landing craft waited open and rusting.
The bodies were strung out as if they were
still reaching for each other, where they lay
to blacken, to burst through their perfect
skin. And Johnny Pole was one of them.
He gave in like a small wave, a sudden
hole in his belly and the years all gone
where the Pacific noon chipped its light out.
Like a bean bag, outflung, head loose

and anonymous, he lay. Did the sea move fire
for its battle season? Does he lie there
forever, where his rifle waits, giant
and straight?...I think you die again
and live again,
Johnny, each summer that moves inside
my mind.

Anne Sexton

For My Lover, Returning To His Wife

She is all there.

She was melted carefully down for you
and cast up from your childhood,
cast up from your one hundred favorite aggies.

She has always been there, my darling.

She is, in fact, exquisite.

Fireworks in the dull middle of February
and as real as a cast-iron pot.

Let's face it, I have been momentary.

vA luxury. A bright red sloop in the harbor.

My hair rising like smoke from the car window.

Littleneck clams out of season.

She is more than that. She is your have to have,
has grown you your practical your tropical growth.

This is not an experiment. She is all harmony.

She sees to oars and oarlocks for the dinghy,
has placed wild flowers at the window at breakfast,

sat by the potter's wheel at midday,

set forth three children under the moon,

three cherubs drawn by Michelangelo,

done this with her legs spread out

in the terrible months in the chapel.

If you glance up, the children are there

like delicate balloons resting on the ceiling.

She has also carried each one down the hall

after supper, their heads privately bent,

two legs protesting, person to person,

her face flushed with a song and their little sleep.

I give you back your heart.

I give you permission -

for the fuse inside her, throbbing

angrily in the dirt, for the bitch in her

and the burying of her wound -

for the burying of her small red wound alive -

for the pale flickering flare under her ribs,

for the drunken sailor who waits in her left pulse,

for the mother's knee, for the stocking,

for the garter belt, for the call -

the curious call

when you will burrow in arms and breasts
and tug at the orange ribbon in her hair
and answer the call, the curious call.
She is so naked and singular
She is the sum of yourself and your dream.
Climb her like a monument, step after step.
She is solid.
As for me, I am a watercolor.
I wash off.

Anne Sexton

For The Year Of The Insane

A prayer

O Mary, fragile mother,
hear me, hear me now
although I do not know your words.
The black rosary with its silver Christ
lies unblessed in my hand
for I am the unbeliever.
Each bead is round and hard between my fingers,
a small black angel.
O Mary, permit me this grace,
this crossing over,
although I am ugly,
submerged in my own past
and my own madness.
Although there are chairs
I lie on the floor.
Only my hands are alive,
touching beads.
Word for word, I stumble.
A beginner, I feel your mouth touch mine.

I count beads as waves,
hammering in upon me.
I am ill at their numbers,
sick, sick in the summer heat
and the window above me
is my only listener, my awkward being.
She is a large taker, a soother.
The giver of breath
she murmurs,
exhaling her wide lung like an enormous fish.

Closer and closer
comes the hour of my death
as I rearrange my face, grow back,
grow undeveloped and straight-haired.
All this is death.
In the mind there is a thin alley called death

and I move through it as
through water.
My body is useless.
It lies, curled like a dog on the carpet.
It has given up.
There are no words here except the half-learned,
the Hail Mary and the full of grace.
Now I have entered the year without words.
I note the queer entrance and the exact voltage.
Without words they exist.
Without words on my touch bread
and be handed bread
and make no sound.

O Mary, tender physician,
come with powders and herbs
for I am in the center.
It is very small and the air is gray
as in a steam house.
I am handed wine as a child is handed milk.
It is presented in a delicate glass
with a round bowl and a thin lip.
The wine itself is pitch-colored, musty and secret.
The glass rises in its own toward my mouth
and I notice this and understand this
only because it has happened.

I have this fear of coughing
but I do not speak,
a fear of rain, a fear of the horseman
who comes riding into my mouth.
The glass tilts in on its own
and I am on fire.
I see two thin streaks burn down my chin.
I see myself as one would see another.
I have been cut in two.

O Mary, open your eyelids.
I am in the domain of silence,
the kingdom of the crazy and the sleeper.
There is blood here.
and I haven't eaten it.

O mother of the womb,
did I come for blood alone?
O little mother,
I am in my own mind.
I am locked in the wrong house.

Anne Sexton

Funnel

The family story tells, and it was told true,
of my great-grandfather who begat eight
genius children and bought twelve almost-new
grand pianos. He left a considerable estate
when he died. The children honored their
separate arts; two became moderately famous,
three married and fattened their delicate share
of wealth and brilliance. The sixth one was
a concert pianist. She had a notable career
and wore cropped hair and walked like a man,
or so I heard when prying a childhood car
into the hushed talk of the straight Maine clan.
One died a pinafore child, she stays her five
years forever. And here is one that wrote-
I sort his odd books and wonder his once alive
words and scratch out my short marginal notes
and finger my accounts.

back from that great-grandfather I have come
to tidy a country graveyard for his sake,
to chat with the custodian under a yearly sun
and touch a ghost sound where it lies awake.
I like best to think of that Bunyan man
slapping his thighs and trading the yankee sale
for one dozen grand pianos. it fit his plan
of culture to do it big. On this same scale
he built seven arking houses and they still stand.
One, five stories up, straight up like a square
box, still dominates its coastal edge of land.
It is rented cheap in the summer musted air
to sneaker-footed families who pad through
its rooms and sometimes finger the yellow keys
of an old piano that wheezes bells of mildew.
Like a shoe factory amid the spruce trees
it squats; flat roof and rows of windows spying
through the mist. Where those eight children danced
their starfished summers, the thirty-six pines sighing,
that bearded man walked giant steps and chanced
his gifts in numbers.

Back from that great-grandfather I have come

to puzzle a bending gravestone for his sake,
to question this diminishing and feed a minimum
of children their careful slice of suburban cake.

Anne Sexton

Ghosts

Some ghosts are women,
neither abstract nor pale,
their breasts as limp as killed fish.
Not witches, but ghosts
who come, moving their useless arms
like forsaken servants.

Not all ghosts are women,
I have seen others;
fat, white-bellied men,
wearing their genitals like old rags.
Not devils, but ghosts.
This one thumps barefoot, lurching
above my bed.

But that isn't all.
Some ghosts are children.
Not angels, but ghosts;
curling like pink tea cups
on any pillow, or kicking,
showing their innocent bottoms, wailing
for Lucifer.

Anne Sexton

Gods

Ms. Sexton went out looking for the gods.
She began looking in the sky
—expecting a large white angel with a blue crotch.

No one.

She looked next in all the learned books
and the print spat back at her.

No one

She made a pilgrimage to the great poet
and he belched in her face.

No one.

She prayed in all the churches of the world
and learned a great deal about culture.

No one.

She went to the Atlantic, the Pacific, for surely God...

No one.

She went to the Buddha, the Brahma, the Pyramids
and found immense postcards.

No one.

Then she journeyed back to her own house
and the gods of the world were shut in the lavatory.

At last!
she cried out,
and locked the door.

Anne Sexton

Going Gone

Over stone walls and barns,
miles from the black-eyed Susans,
over circus tents and moon rockets
you are going, going.
You who have inhabited me
in the deepest and most broken place,
are going, going.
An old woman calls up to you
from her deathbed deep in sores,
asking, 'What do you keep of her?'
She is the crone in the fables.
She is the fool at the supper
and you, sir, are the traveler.
Although you are in a hurry
you stop to open a small basket
and under layers of petticoats
you show her the tiger-striped eyes
that you have lately plucked,
you show her specialty, the lips,
those two small bundles,
you show her the two hands
that grip her fiercely,
one being mine, one being yours.
Torn right off at the wrist bone
when you started in your
impossible going, gone.
Then you place the basket
in the old woman's hollow lap
and as a last act she fondles
these artifacts like a child's head
and murmurs, 'Precious. Precious.'
And you are glad you have given
them to this one for she too
is making a trip.

Anne Sexton

Her Kind

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.

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.

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.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind.

Anne Sexton

Hornet

A red-hot needle
hangs out of him, he steers by it
as if it were a rudder, he
would get in the house any way he could
and then he would bounce from window
to ceiling, buzzing and looking for you.
Do not sleep for he is there wrapped in the curtain.
Do not sleep for he is there under the shelf.
Do not sleep for he wants to sew up your skin,
he want to leap into your body like a hammer
with a nail, do not sleep he wants to get into
your nose and make a transplant, he wants do not
sleep he wants to bury your fur and make
a nest of knives, he wants to slide under your
fingernail and push in a splinter, do not sleep
he wants to climb out of the toilet when you sit on it
and make a home in the embarrassed hair do not sleep
he wants you to walk into him as into a dark fire.

Anne Sexton

Housewife

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 fleshy mothers.
A woman is her mother.
That's the main thing.

Anne Sexton

Hurry Up Please It's Time

What is death, I ask.
What is life, you ask.
I give them both my buttocks,
my two wheels rolling off toward Nirvana.
They are neat as a wallet,
opening and closing on their coins,
the quarters, the nickels,
straight into the crapper.
Why shouldn't I pull down my pants
and moon the executioner
as well as paste raisins on my breasts?
Why shouldn't I pull down my pants
and show my little cunny to Tom
and Albert? They wee-wee funny.
I wee-wee like a squaw.
I have ink but no pen, still
I dream that I can piss in God's eye.
I dream I'm a boy with a zipper.
It's so practical, la de dah.
The trouble with being a woman, Skeezix,
is being a little girl in the first place.
Not all the books of the world will change that.
I have swallowed an orange, being woman.
You have swallowed a ruler, being man.
Yet waiting to die we are the same thing.
Jehovah pleasures himself with his axe
before we are both overthrown.
Skeezix, you are me. La de dah.
You grow a beard but our drool is identical.

Forgive us, Father, for we know not.

Today is November 14th, 1972.
I live in Weston, Mass., Middlesex County,
U.S.A., and it rains steadily
in the pond like white puppy eyes.
The pond is waiting for its skin.
the pond is waiting for its leather.
The pond is waiting for December and its Novocain.

It begins:

Interrogator:

What can you say of your last seven days?

Anne:

They were tired.

Interrogator:

One day is enough to perfect a man.

Anne:

I watered and fed the plant.

*

My undertaker waits for me.
he is probably twenty-three now,
learning his trade.
He'll stitch up the gren,
he'll fasten the bones down
lest they fly away.
I am flying today.
I am not tired today.
I am a motor.
I am cramming in the sugar.
I am running up the hallways.
I am squeezing out the milk.
I am dissecting the dictionary.
I am God, la de dah.
Peanut butter is the American food.
We all eat it, being patriotic.

Ms. Dog is out fighting the dollars,
rolling in a field of bucks.
You've got it made if you take the wafer,
take some wine,
take some bucks,
the green papery song of the office.
What a jello she could make with it,
the fives, the tens, the twenties,

all in a goo to feed the baby.
Andrew Jackson as an hors d'oeuvre,
la de dah.
I wish I were the U.S. Mint,
turning it all out,
turtle green
and monk black.
Who's that at the podium
in black and white,
blurting into the mike?
Ms. Dog.
Is she spilling her guts?
You bet.
Otherwise they cough...
The day is slipping away, why am I
out here, what do they want?
I am sorrowful in November...
(no they don't want that,
they want bee stings).
Toot, toot, tootsy don't cry.
Toot, toot, tootsy good-bye.
If you don't get a letter then
you'll know I'm in jail...
Remember that, Skeezix,
our first song?

Who's thinking those things?
Ms. Dog! She's out fighting the dollars.
Milk is the American drink.
Oh queens of sorrows,
oh water lady,
place me in your cup
and pull over the clouds
so no one can see.
She don't want no dollars.
She done want a mama.
The white of the white.

Anne says:
This is the rainy season.
I am sorrowful in November.
The kettle is whistling.

I must butter the toast.
And give it jam too.
My kitchen is a heart.
I must feed it oxygen once in a while
and mother the mother.

*

Say the woman is forty-four.
Say she is five seven-and-a-half.
Say her hair is stick color.
Say her eyes are chameleon.
Would you put her in a sack and bury her,
suck her down into the dumb dirt?
Some would.
If not, time will.
Ms. Dog, how much time you got left?
Ms. Dog, when you gonna feel that cold nose?
You better get straight with the Maker
cuz it's coming, it's a coming!
The cup of coffee is growing and growing
and they're gonna stick your little doll's head
into it and your lungs a gonna get paid
and your clothes a gonna melt.
Hear that, Ms. Dog!
You of the songs,
you of the classroom,
you of the pocketa-pocketa,
you hungry mother,
you spleen baby!
Them angels gonna be cut down like wheat.
Them songs gonna be sliced with a razor.
Them kitchens gonna get a boulder in the belly.
Them phones gonna be torn out at the root.
There's power in the Lord, baby,
and he's gonna turn off the moon.
He's gonna nail you up in a closet
and there'll be no more Atlantic,
no more dreams, no more seeds.
One noon as you walk out to the mailbox
He'll snatch you up -
a wopman beside the road like a red mitten.

There's a sack over my head.
I can't see. I'm blind.
The sea collapses.
The sun is a bone.
Hi-ho the derry-o,
we all fall down.
If I were a fisherman I could comprehend.
They fish right through the door
and pull eyes from the fire.
They rock upon the daybreak
and amputate the waters.
They are beating the sea,
they are hurting it,
delving down into the inscrutable salt.

*

When mother left the room
and left me in the big black
and sent away my kitty
to be fried in the camps
and took away my blanket
to wash the me out of it
I lay in the soiled cold and prayed.
It was a little jail in which
I was never slapped with kisses.
I was the engine that couldn't.
Cold wigs blew on the trees outside
and car lights flew like roosters
on the ceiling.
Cradle, you are a grave place.

Interrogator:
What color is the devil?

Anne:
Black and blue.

Interrogator:
What goes up the chimney?

Anne:

Fat Lazarus in his red suit.

Forgive us, Father, for we know not.

Ms. Dog prefers to sunbathe nude.

Let the indifferent sky look on.

So what!

Let Mrs. Sewal pull the curtain back,
from her second story.

So what!

Let United Parcel Service see my parcel.

La de dah.

Sun, you hammer of yellow,
you hat on fire,

you honeysuckle mama,
pour your blonde on me!

Let me laugh for an entire hour
at your supreme being, your Cadillac stuff,
because I've come a long way
from Brussels sprouts.

I've come a long way to peel off my clothes
and lay me down in the grass.

Once only my palms showed.

Once I hung around in my woolly tank suit,
drying my hair in those little meatball curls.

Now I am clothed in gold air with
one dozen halos glistening on my skin.

I am a fortunate lady.

I've gotten out of my pouch
and my teeth are glad
and my heart, that witness,
beats well at the thought.

Oh body, be glad.

You are good goods.

*

Middle-class lady,

you make me smile.

You dig a hole

and come out with a sunburn.
If someone hands you a glass of water
you start constructing a sailboat.
If someone hands you a candy wrapper,
you take it to the book binder.
Pocketa-pocketa.

Once upon a time Ms. Dog was sixty-six.
She had white hair and wrinkles deep as splinters.
her portrait was nailed up like Christ
and she said of it:
That's when I was forty-two,
down in Rockport with a hat on for the sun,
and Barbara drew a line drawing.
We were, at that moment, drinking vodka
and ginger beer and there was a chill in the air,
although it was July, and she gave me her sweater
to bundle up in. The next summer Skeezix tied
strings in that hat when we were fishing in Maine.
(It had gone into the lake twice.)
Of such moments is happiness made.

Forgive us, Father, for we know not.

Once upon a time we were all born,
popped out like jelly rolls
forgetting our fishdom,
the pleasuring seas,
the country of comfort,
spanked into the oxygens of death,
Good morning life, we say when we wake,
hail mary coffee toast
and we Americans take juice,
a liquid sun going down.
Good morning life.
To wake up is to be born.
To brush your teeth is to be alive.
To make a bowel movement is also desireable.
La de dah,
it's all routine.
Often there are wars
yet the shops keep open

and sausages are still fried.
People rub someone.
People copulate
entering each other's blood,
tying each other's tendons in knots,
transplanting their lives into the bed.
It doesn't matter if there are wars,
the business of life continues
unless you're the one that gets it.
Mama, they say, as their intestines
leak out. Even without wars
life is dangerous.
Boats spring leaks.
Cigarettes explode.
The snow could be radioactive.
Cancer could ooze out of the radio.
Who knows?
Ms. Dog stands on the shore
and the sea keeps rocking in
and she wants to talk to God.

Interrogator:
Why talk to God?

Anne:
It's better than playing bridge.

*

Learning to talk is a complex business.
My daughter's first word was utta,
meaning button.
Before there are words
do you dream?
In utero
do you dream?
Who taught you to suck?
And how come?
You don't need to be taught to cry.
The soul presses a button.
Is the cry saying something?
Does it mean help?

Or hello?
The cry of a gull is beautiful
and the cry of a crow is ugly
but what I want to know
is whether they mean the same thing.
Somewhere a man sits with indigestion
and he doesn't care.
A woman is buying bracelets
and earrings and she doesn't care.
La de dah.

Forgive us, Father, for we know not.

There are stars and faces.
There is ketchup and guitars.
There is the hand of a small child
when you're crossing the street.
There is the old man's last words:
More light! More light!
Ms. Dog wouldn't give them her buttocks.
She wouldn't moon at them.
Just at the killers of the dream.
The bus boys of the soul.
Or at death
who wants to make her a mummy.
And you too!
Wants to stuf her in a cold shoe
and then amputate the foot.
And you too!
La de dah.
What's the point of fighting the dollars
when all you need is a warm bed?
When the dog barks you let him in.
All we need is someone to let us in.
And one other thing:
to consider the lilies in the field.
Of course earth is a stranger, we pull at its
arms and still it won't speak.
The sea is worse.
It comes in, falling to its knees
but we can't translate the language.
It is only known that they are here to worship,

to worship the terror of the rain,
the mud and all its people,
the body itself,
working like a city,
the night and its slow blood
the autumn sky, mary blue.
but more than that,
to worship the question itself,
though the buildings burn
and the big people topple over in a faint.
Bring a flashlight, Ms. Dog,
and look in every corner of the brain
and ask and ask and ask
until the kingdom,
however queer,
will come.

Anne Sexton

Hutch

of her arms, this was her sin:
where the wood berries bin
of forest was new and full,
she crept out by its tall
posts, those wooden legs,
and heard the sound of wild pigs.
calling and did not wait nor care.
The leaves wept in her hair
as she sank to a pit of needles
and twisted out the ivyless
gate, where the wood berries bin
was full and a pig came in.

Anne Sexton

I Remember

By the first of August
the invisible beetles began
to snore and the grass was
as tough as hemp and was
no color—no more than
the sand was a color and
we had worn our bare feet
bare since the twentieth
of June and there were times
we forgot to wind up your
alarm clock and some nights
we took our gin warm and neat
from old jelly glasses while
the sun blew out of sight
like a red picture hat and
one day I tied my hair back
with a ribbon and you said
that I looked almost like
a puritan lady and what
I remember best is that
the door to your room was
the door to mine.

Anne Sexton

In Celebration Of My Uterus

Everyone in me is a bird.
I am beating all my wings.
They wanted to cut you out
but they will not.
They said you were immeasurably empty
but you are not.
They said you were sick unto dying
but they were wrong.
You are singing like a school girl.
You are not torn.

Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
and of the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you. I dare to live.
Hello, spirit. Hello, cup.
Fasten, cover. Cover that does contain.
Hello to the soil of the fields.
Welcome, roots.

Each cell has a life.
There is enough here to please a nation.
It is enough that the populace own these goods.
Any person, any commonwealth would say of it,
"It is good this year that we may plant again
and think forward to a harvest.
A blight had been forecast and has been cast out."
Many women are singing together of this:
one is in a shoe factory cursing the machine,
one is at the aquarium tending a seal,
one is dull at the wheel of her Ford,
one is at the toll gate collecting,
one is tying the cord of a calf in Arizona,
one is straddling a cello in Russia,
one is shifting pots on the stove in Egypt,
one is painting her bedroom walls moon color,

one is dying but remembering a breakfast,
one is stretching on her mat in Thailand,
one is wiping the ass of her child,
one is staring out the window of a train
in the middle of Wyoming and one is
anywhere and some are everywhere and all
seem to be singing, although some can not
sing a note.

Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
let me carry a ten-foot scarf,
let me drum for the nineteen-year-olds,
let me carry bowls for the offering
(if that is my part).
Let me study the cardiovascular tissue,
let me examine the angular distance of meteors,
let me suck on the stems of flowers
(if that is my part).
Let me make certain tribal figures
(if that is my part).
For this thing the body needs
let me sing
for the supper,
for the kissing,
for the correct
yes.

Anne Sexton

In Excelsis

It is half winter, half spring,
and Barbara and I are standing
confronting the ocean.
Its mouth is open very wide,
and it has dug up its green,
throwing it, throwing it at the shore.
You say it is angry.
I say it is like a kicked Madonna.
Its womb collapses, drunk with its fever.
We breathe in its fury.

I, the inlander,
am here with you for just a small space.
I am almost afraid,
so long gone from the sea.
I have seen her smooth as a cheek.
I have seen her easy,
doing her business,
lapping in.
I have seen her rolling her hoops of blue.
I have seen her tear the land off.
I have seen her drown me twice,
and yet not take me.
You tell me that as the green drains backward
it covers Britain,
but have you never stood on that shore
and seen it cover you?

We have come to worship,
the tongues of the surf are prayers,
and we vow,
the unspeakable vow.
Both silently.
Both differently.
I wish to enter her like a dream,
leaving my roots here on the beach
like a pan of knives.
And my past to unravel, with its knots and snarls,
and walk into ocean,

letting it explode over me
and outward, where I would drink the moon
and my clothes would slip away,
and I would sink into the great mother arms
I never had,
except here where the abyss
throws itself on the sand
blow by blow,
over and over,
and we stand on the shore
loving its pulse
as it swallows the stars,
and has since it all began
and will continue into oblivion,
past our knowing
and the wild toppling green that enters us today,
for a small time
in half winter, half spring.

Anne Sexton

In Memoriam

In Memoriam

What's missing is the eyeballs
in each of us, but it doesn't matter
because you've got the bucks, the bucks, the bucks.
You let me touch them, fondle the green faces
lick at their numbers and it lets you be
my 'Daddy!' 'Daddy!' and though I fought all alone
with molesters and crooks, I knew your money
would save me, your courage, your 'I've had
considerable experience as a soldier...
fighting to win millions for myself, it's true.
But I did win,' and me praying for 'our men out there'
just made it okay to be an orphan whose blood was no one's,
whose curls were hung up on a wire machine and electrified,
while you built and unbuilt intrigues called nations,
and did in the bad ones, always, always,
and always came at my perils, the black Christs of childhood,
always came when my heart stood naked in the street
and they threw apples at it or twelve-day-old-dead-fish.

'Daddy!' 'Daddy,' we all won that war,
when you sang me the money songs
Annie, Annie you sang
and I knew you drove a pure gold car
and put diamonds in you coke
for the crunchy sound, the adorable sound
and the moon too was in your portfolio,
as well as the ocean with its sleepy dead.
And I was always brave, wasn't I?
I never bled?
I never saw a man expose himself.
No. No.
I never saw a drunkard in his blubber.
I never let lightning go in one car and out the other.
And all the men out there were never to come.
Never, like a deluge, to swim over my breasts
and lay their lamps in my insides.
No. No.

Just me and my 'Daddy'
and his tempestuous bucks
rolling in them like corn flakes
and only the bad ones died.

But I died yesterday,
'Daddy,' I died,
swallowing the Nazi-Jap animal
and it won't get out
it keeps knocking at my eyes,
my big orphan eyes,
kicking! Until eyeballs pop out
and even my dog puts up his four feet
and lets go
of his military secret
with his big red tongue
flying up and down
like yours should have

as we board our velvet train.

Anne Sexton

In The Deep Museum

My God, my God, what queer corner am I in?
Didn't I die, blood running down the post,
lungs gagging for air, die there for the sin
of anyone, my sour mouth giving up the ghost?
Surely my body is done? Surely I died?
And yet, I know, I'm here. What place is this?
Cold and queer, I sting with life. I lied.
Yes, I lied. Or else in some damned cowardice
my body would not give me up. I touch
fine cloth with my hand and my cheeks are cold.
If this is hell, then hell could not be much,
neither as special or as ugly as I was told.
What's that I hear, snuffling and pawing its way
toward me? Its tongue knocks a pebble out of place
as it slides in, a sovereign. How can I pray>
It is panting; it is an odor with a face
like the skin of a donkey. It laps my sores.
It is hurt, I think, as a I touch its little head.
It bleeds. I have forgiven murderers and whores
and now must wait like old Jonah, not dead
nor alive, stroking a clumsy animal. A rat.
His teeth test me; he waits like a good cook,
knowing his own ground. I forgive him that,
as I forgave my Judas the money he took.
Now I hold his soft red sore to my lips
as his brothers crowd in, hairy angels who take
my gift. My ankles are a flute. I lose hips
and wrists. For three days, for love's sake,
I bless this other death. Oh, not in air -
in dirt. Under the rotting veins of its roots,
under the markets, under the sheep bed where
the hill is food, under the slippery fruits
of the vineyard, I go. Unto the bellies and jaws
of rats I commit my prophecy and fear.
Far below The Cross, I correct its flaws.
We have kept the miracle. I will not be here.

Anne Sexton

It Is A Spring Afternoon

Everything here is yellow and green.
Listen to its throat, its earthskin,
the bone dry voices of the peepers
as they throb like advertisements.
The small animals of the woods
are carrying their deathmasks
into a narrow winter cave.
The scarecrow has plucked out
his two eyes like diamonds
and walked into the village.
The general and the postman
have taken off their packs.
This has all happened before
but nothing here is obsolete.
Everything here is possible.

Because of this
perhaps a young girl has laid down
her winter clothes and has casually
placed herself upon a tree limb
that hangs over a pool in the river.
She has been poured out onto the limb,
low above the houses of the fishes
as they swim in and out of her reflection
and up and down the stairs of her legs.
Her body carries clouds all the way home.
She is overlooking her watery face
in the river where blind men
come to bathe at midday.

Because of this
the ground, that winter nightmare,
has cured its sores and burst
with green birds and vitamins.
Because of this
the trees turn in their trenches
and hold up little rain cups
by their slender fingers.
Because of this

a woman stands by her stove
singing and cooking flowers.
Everything here is yellow and green.

Surely spring will allow
a girl without a stitch on
to turn softly in her sunlight
and not be afraid of her bed.
She has already counted seven
blossoms in her green green mirror.
Two rivers combine beneath her.
The face of the child wrinkles.
in the water and is gone forever.
The woman is all that can be seen
in her animal loveliness.
Her cherished and obstinate skin
lies deeply under the watery tree.
Everything is altogether possible
and the blind men can also see.

Anne Sexton

Just Once

Just once I knew what life was for.
In Boston, quite suddenly, I understood;
walked there along the Charles River,
watched the lights copying themselves,
all neoned and strobe-hearted, opening
their mouths as wide as opera singers;
counted the stars, my little campaigners,
my scar daisies, and knew that I walked my love
on the night green side of it and cried
my heart to the eastbound cars and cried
my heart to the westbound cars and took
my truth across a small humped bridge
and hurried my truth, the charm of it, home
and hoarded these constants into morning
only to find them gone.

Anne Sexton

Killing The Love

I am the love killer,
I am murdering the music we thought so special,
that blazed between us, over and over.
I am murdering me, where I kneeled at your kiss.
I am pushing knives through the hands
that created two into one.
Our hands do not bleed at this,
they lie still in their dishonor.
I am taking the boats of our beds
and swamping them, letting them cough on the sea
and choke on it and go down into nothing.
I am stuffing your mouth with your
promises and watching
you vomit them out upon my face.
The Camp we directed?
I have gassed the campers.

Now I am alone with the dead,
flying off bridges,
hurling myself like a beer can into the wastebasket.
I am flying like a single red rose,
leaving a jet stream
of solitude
and yet I feel nothing,
though I fly and hurl,
my insides are empty
and my face is as blank as a wall.

Shall I call the funeral director?
He could put our two bodies into one pink casket,
those bodies from before,
and someone might send flowers,
and someone might come to mourn
and it would be in the obits,
and people would know that something died,
is no more, speaks no more, won't even
drive a car again and all of that.

When a life is over,

the one you were living for,
where do you go?

I'll work nights.
I'll dance in the city.
I'll wear red for a burning.
I'll look at the Charles very carefully,
wearing its long legs of neon.
And the cars will go by.
The cars will go by.
And there'll be no scream
from the lady in the red dress
dancing on her own Ellis Island,
who turns in circles,
dancing alone
as the cars go by.

Anne Sexton

Kind Sir: These Woods

Kind Sir: This is an old game
that we played when we were eight and ten.
Sometimes on The Island, in down Maine,
in late August, when the cold fog blew in
off the ocean, the forest between Dingley Dell
and grandfather's cottage grew white and strange.
It was as if every pine tree were a brown pole
we did not know; as if day had rearranged
into night and bats flew in sun. It was a trick
to turn around once and know you were lost;
knowing the crow's horn was crying in the dark,
knowing that supper would never come, that the coast's
cry of doom from that far away bell buoy's bell
said
your nursemaid is gone
. O Mademoiselle,
the rowboat rocked over. Then you were dead.
Turn around once, eyes tight, the thought in your head.
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.
And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course
to look-this inward look that society scorns-
Still, I search these woods and find nothing worse
than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns.

Anne Sexton

Knee Song

Being kissed on the back
of the knee is a moth
at the window screen and
yes my darling a dot
on the fathometer is
tinkerbell with her cough
and twice I will give up my
honor and stars will stick
like tacks in the night
yes oh yes yes yes two
little snails at the back
of the knee building bon-
fires something like eye-
lashes something two zippos
striking yes yes yes small
and me maker.

Anne Sexton

Lament

Someone is dead.
Even the trees know it,
those poor old dancers who come on lewdly,
all pea-green scarfs and spine pole.
I think...
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.
But it's done.
It's all used up.
There's no doubt about the trees
spreading their thin feet into the dry grass.
A Canada goose rides up,
spread out like a gray suede shirt,
honking his nose into the March wind.
In the entryway a cat breathes calmly
into her watery blue fur.
The supper dishes are over and the sun
unaccustomed to anything else
goes an the way down.

Anne Sexton

Lessons In Hunger

'Do you like me?'
I asked the blue blazer.
No answer.
Silence bounced out of his books.
Silence fell off his tongue
and sat between us
and clogged my throat.
It slaughtered my trust.
It tore cigarettes out of my mouth.
We exchanged blind words,
and I did not cry,
and I did not beg,
blackness lunged in my heart,
and something that had been good,
a sort of kindly oxygen,
turned into a gas oven.
Do you like me?
How absurd!
What's a question like that?
What's a silence like that?
And what am I hanging around for,
riddled with what his silence said?

Anne Sexton

Letter Written On A Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound

I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
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.

Dearest,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.

The sea is very old.
the sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with incurable age.

Still,
I have eyes,
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs by my knees;
the cement lifeboat that wears
its dirty canvas coat;
the faded sign that sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.

Oh, alright, I say,
I'll save myself.
Over my right shoulder
I see four arms
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out

from under their habits,
as good as good babies who
have sunk into their carriages.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.
Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen 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;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing without sound.
Dearest,
see how my dark girls sally forth,
over the passing lighthouse of Plum Gut,
its shell as rusty
as a camp dish,
as fragile as a pagoda
on a stone;
out over the little lighthouse
that warns me of drowning winds
that rub over its blind bottom
and its blue cover;
winds that will take the toes
and the ears of the rider
or the lover.
There go my dark girls,

their dresses puff
in the leeward air.
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs
or the breath of dolphins;
each mouth opens gratefully,
wider than a milk cup.
My dark girls sing for this.
They are going up.
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.

Anne Sexton

Live

Live or die, but don't poison everything...

Well, death's been here
for a long time -
it has a hell of a lot
to do with hell
and suspicion of the eye
and the religious objects
and how I mourned them
when they were made obscene
by my dwarf-heart's doodle.
The chief ingredient
is mutilation.
And mud, day after day,
mud like a ritual,
and the baby on the platter,
cooked but still human,
cooked also with little maggots,
sewn onto it maybe by somebody's mother,
the damn bitch!

Even so,
I kept right on going on,
a sort of human statement,
lugging myself as if
I were a sawed-off body
in the trunk, the steamer trunk.
This became perjury of the soul.
It became an outright lie
and even though I dressed the body
it was still naked, still killed.
It was caught
in the first place at birth,
like a fish.
But I play it, dressed it up,
dressed it up like somebody's doll.

Is life something you play?
And all the time wanting to get rid of it?

And further, everyone yelling at you
to shut up. And no wonder!
People don't like to be told
that you're sick
and then be forced
to watch
you
come
down with the hammer.

Today life opened inside me like an egg
and there inside
after considerable digging
I found the answer.
What a bargain!
There was the sun,
her yolk moving feverishly,
tumbling her prize -
and you realize she does this daily!
I'd known she was a purifier
but I hadn't thought
she was solid,
hadn't known she was an answer.
God! It's a dream,
lovers sprouting in the yard
like celery stalks
and better,
a husband straight as a redwood,
two daughters, two sea urchings,
picking roses off my hackles.
If I'm on fire they dance around it
and cook marshmallows.
And if I'm ice
they simply skate on me
in little ballet costumes.

Here,
all along,
thinking I was a killer,
anointing myself daily
with my little poisons.
But no.

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.

O dearest three,
I make a soft reply.
The witch comes on
and you paint her pink.
I come with kisses in my hood
and the sun, the smart one,
rolling in my arms.
So I say Live
and turn my shadow three times round
to feed our puppies as they come,
the eight Dalmatians we didn't drown,
despite the warnings: The abort! The destroy!
Despite the pails of water that waited,
to drown them, to pull them down like stones,
they came, each one headfirst, blowing bubbles the color of cataract-blue
and fumbling for the tiny tits.
Just last week, eight Dalmatians,
3/4 of a lb., lined up like cord wood
each
like a
birch tree.
I promise to love more if they come,
because in spite of cruelty
and the stuffed railroad cars for the ovens,
I am not what I expected. Not an Eichmann.
The poison just didn't take.
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.

Lobster

A shoe with legs,
a stone dropped from heaven,
he does his mournful work alone,
he is the old prospector for golf,
with secret dreams of God-heads and fish heads.
Until suddenly a cradle fastens round him
and his is trapped as the U.S.A. sleeps.
Somewhere far off a woman lights a cigarette;
somewhere far off a car goes over a bridge;
somewhere far off a bank is held up.
This is the world the lobster knows not of.
He is the old hunting dog of the sea
who in the morning will rise from it
and be undrowned
and they will take his perfect green body
and paint it red.

Anne Sexton

Locked Doors

For the angels who inhabit this town,
although their shape constantly changes,
each night we leave some cold potatoes
and a bowl of milk on the windowsill.
Usually they inhabit heaven where,
by the way, no tears are allowed.
They push the moon around like
a boiled yam.
The Milky Way is their hen
with her many children.
When it is night the cows lie down
but the moon, that big bull,
stands up.

However, there is a locked room up there
with an iron door that can't be opened.
It has all your bad dreams in it.
It is hell.
Some say the devil locks the door
from the inside.
Some say the angels lock it from the outside.
The people inside have no water
and are never allowed to touch.
They crack like macadam.
They are mute.
They do not cry help
except inside
where their hearts are covered with grubs.

I would like to unlock that door,
turn the rusty key
and hold each fallen one in my arms
but I cannot, I cannot.
I can only sit here on earth
at my place at the table.

Anne Sexton

Love Letter Written In A Burning Building

I am in a crate, the crate that was ours,
full of white shirts and salad greens,
the icebox knocking at our delectable knocks,
and I wore movies in my eyes,
and you wore eggs in your tunnel,
and we played sheets, sheets, sheets
all day, even in the bathtub like lunatics.
But today I set the bed afire
and smoke is filling the room,
it is getting hot enough for the walls to melt,
and the icebox, a gluey white tooth.

I have on a mask in order to write my last words,
and they are just for you, and I will place them
in the icebox saved for vodka and tomatoes,
and perhaps they will last.
The dog will not. Her spots will fall off.
The old letters will melt into a black bee.
The night gowns are already shredding
into paper, the yellow, the red, the purple.
The bed - well, the sheets have turned to gold -
hard, hard gold, and the mattress
is being kissed into a stone.

As for me, my dearest Foxy,
my poems to you may or may not reach the icebox
and its hopeful eternity,
for isn't yours enough?
The one where you name
my name right out in P.R.?
If my toes weren't yielding to pitch
I'd tell the whole story -
not just the sheet story
but the belly-button story,
the pried-eyelid story,
the whiskey-sour-of-the-nipple story -
and shovel back our love where it belonged.

Despite my asbestos gloves,

the cough is filling me with black and a red powder seeps through my
veins,
our little crate goes down so publicly
and without meaning it, you see, meaning a solo act,
a cremation of the love,
but instead we seem to be going down right in the middle of a Russian
street,
the flames making the sound of
the horse being beaten and beaten,
the whip is adoring its human triumph
while the flies wait, blow by blow,
straight from United Fruit, Inc.

Anne Sexton

Lullaby

It is a summer evening.
The yellow moths sag
against the locked screens
and the faded curtains
suck over the window sills
and from another building
a goat calls in his dreams.
This is the TV parlor
in the best ward at Bedlam.
The night nurse is passing
out the evening pills.
She walks on two erasers,
padding by us one by one.

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.
Let the others moan in secret;
let each lost butterfly
go home. Old woolen head,
take me like a yellow moth
while the goat calls hush-a-bye.

Anne Sexton

Menstruation At Forty

I was thinking of a son.
The womb is not a clock
nor a bell tolling,
but in the eleventh month of its life
I feel the November
of the body as well as of the calendar.
In two days it will be my birthday
and as always the earth is done with its harvest.
This time I hunt for death,
the night I lean toward,
the night I want.
Well then—
speak of it!
It was in the womb all along.

I was thinking of a son ...
You! The never acquired,
the never seeded or unfastened,
you of the genitals I feared,
the stalk and the puppy's breath.
Will I give you my eyes or his?
Will you be the David or the Susan?
(Those two names I picked and listened for.)
Can you be the man your fathers are—
the leg muscles from Michelangelo,
hands from Yugoslavia
somewhere the peasant, Slavic and determined,
somewhere the survivor bulging with life—
and could it still be possible,
all this with Susan's eyes?

All this without you—
two days gone in blood.
I myself will die without baptism,
a third daughter they didn't bother.
My death will come on my name day.
What's wrong with the name day?

It's only an angel of the sun.
Woman,
weaving a web over your own,
a thin and tangled poison.
Scorpio,
bad spider—
die!

My death from the wrists,
two name tags,
blood worn like a corsage
to bloom
one on the left and one on the right—
It's a warm room,
the place of the blood.
Leave the door open on its hinges!

Two days for your death
and two days until mine.

Love! That red disease—
year after year, David, you would make me wild!
David! Susan! David! David!
full and disheveled, hissing into the night,
never growing old,
waiting always for you on the porch ...
year after year,
my carrot, my cabbage,
I would have possessed you before all women,
calling your name,
calling you mine.

Anne Sexton

More Than Myself

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 . . .
I tapped my own head;
it was glass, an inverted bowl.
It's small thing
to rage inside your own bowl.
At first it was private.
Then it was more than myself.

Anne Sexton

Mother And Daughter

Linda, you are leaving
your old body now,
It lies flat, an old butterfly,
all arm, all leg, all wing,
loose as an old dress.
I reach out toward it but
my fingers turn to cankers
and I am motherwarm and used,
just as your childhood is used.
Question you about this
and you hold up pearls.
Question you about this
and you pass by armies.
Question you about this -
you with your big clock going,
its hands wider than jackstraws -
and you'll sew up a continent.
Now that you are eighteen
I give you my booty, my spoils,
my Mother & Co. and my ailments.
Question you about this
and you'll not know the answer -
the muzzle at the oxygen,
the tubes, the pathways,
the war and the war's vomit.
Keep on, keep on, keep on,
carrying keepsakes to the boys,
carrying powders to the boys,
carrying, my Linda, blood to
the bloodletter.
Linda, you are leaving
your old body now.
You've picked my pocket clean
and you've racked up all my
poker chips and left me empty
and, as the river between us
narrows, you do calisthenics,
that womanly leggy semaphore.
Question you about this

and you will sew me a shroud
and hold up Monday's broiler
and thumb out the chicken gut.
Question you about this
and you will see my death
drooling at these gray lips
while you, my burglar, will eat
fruit and pass the time of day.

Anne Sexton

Mr. Mine

Notice how he has numbered the blue veins
in my breast. Moreover there are ten freckles.
Now he goes left. Now he goes right.
He is building a city, a city of flesh.
He's an industrialist. He has starved in cellars
and, ladies and gentlemen, he's been broken by iron,
by the blood, by the metal, by the triumphant
iron of his mother's death. But he begins again.
Now he constructs me. He is consumed by the city.
>From the glory of words he has built me up.
>From the wonder of concrete he has molded me.
He has given me six hundred street signs.
The time I was dancing he built a museum.
He built ten blocks when I moved on the bed.
He constructed an overpass when I left.
I gave him flowers and he built an airport.
For traffic lights he handed at red and green
lollipops. Yet in my heart I am go children slow.

Anne Sexton

Music Swims Back To Me

Wait Mister. Which way is home?
They turned the light out
and the dark is moving in the corner.
There are no sign posts in this room,
four ladies, over eighty,
in diapers every one of them.
La la la, Oh music swims back to me
and I can feel the tune they played
the night they left me
in this private institution on a hill.

Imagine it. A radio playing
and everyone here was crazy.
I liked it and danced in a circle.
Music pours over the sense
and in a funny way
music sees more than I.
I mean it remembers better;
remembers the first night here.
It was the strangled cold of November;
even the stars were strapped in the sky
and that moon too bright
forking through the bars to stick me
with a singing in the head.
I have forgotten all the rest.

They lock me in this chair at eight a.m.
and there are no signs to tell the way,
just the radio beating to itself
and the song that remembers
more than I. Oh, la la la,
this music swims back to me.
The night I came I danced a circle
and was not afraid.
Mister?

Anne Sexton

My Friend, My Friend

Who will forgive me for the things I do?
With no special legend of God to refer to,
With my calm white pedigree, my yankee kin,
I think it would be better to be a Jew.

I forgive you for what you did not do.
I am impossibly guilty. Unlike you,
My Friend, I can not blame my origin
With no special legend or God to refer to.

They wear The Crucifix as they are meant to do.
Why do their little crosses trouble you?
The effigies that I have made are genuine,
(I think it would be better to be a Jew).

Watching my mother slowly die I knew
My first release. I wish some ancient bugaboo
Followed me. But my sin is always my sin.
With no special legend or God to refer to.

Who will forgive me for the things I do?
To have your reasonable hurt to belong to
Might ease my trouble like liquor or aspirin.
I think it would be better to be a Jew.

And if I lie, I lie because I love you,
Because I am bothered by the things I do,
Because your hurt invades my calm white skin:
With no special legend or God to refer to,
I think it would be better to be a Jew.

Anne Sexton

Noon Walk On The Asylum Lawn

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.

The grass speaks.
I hear green chanting all day.
I will fear no evil, fear no evil
The blades extend
and reach my way.

The sky breaks.
It sags and breathes upon my face.
In the presence of mine enemies, mine enemies
The world is full of enemies.
There is no safe place.

Anne Sexton

Oh

It is snowing and death bugs me
as stubborn as insomnia.
The fierce bubbles of chalk,
the little white lesions
settle on the street outside.
It is snowing and the ninety
year old woman who was combing
out her long white wraith hair
is gone, embalmed even now,
even tonight her arms are smooth
muskets at her side and nothing
issues from her but her last word - 'Oh.' Surprised by death.

It is snowing. Paper spots
are falling from the punch.
Hello? Mrs. Death is here!
She suffers according to the digits
of my hate. I hear the filaments
of alabaster. I would lie down
with them and lift my madness
off like a wig. I would lie
outside in a room of wool
and let the snow cover me.
Paris white or flake white
or argentine, all in the washbasin
of my mouth, calling, 'Oh.'
I am empty. I am witless.
Death is here. There is no
other settlement. Snow!
See the mark, the pock, the pock!

Meanwhile you pour tea
with your handsome gentle hands.
Then you deliberately take your
forefinger and point it at my temple,
saying, 'You suicide bitch!
I'd like to take a corkscrew
and screw out all your brains
and you'd never be back ever.'

And I close my eyes over the steaming
tea and see God opening His teeth.
'Oh.' He says.
I see the child in me writing, 'Oh.'
Oh, my dear, not why.

Anne Sexton

Old

I'm afraid of needles.
I'm tired of rubber sheets and tubes.
I'm tired of faces that I don't know
and now I think that death is starting.
Death starts like a dream,
full of objects and my sister's laughter.
We are young and we are walking
and picking wild blueberries.
all the way to Damariscotta.
Oh Susan, she cried.
you've stained your new waist.
Sweet taste -
my mouth so full
and the sweet blue running out
all the way to Damariscotta.
What are you doing? Leave me alone!
Can't you see I'm dreaming?
In a dream you are never eighty.

Anne Sexton

Old Dwarf Heart

True. All too true. I have never been at home in
life. All my decay has taken place upon a child.
Henderson the Rain King, by Saul Bellow

When I lie down to love,
old dwarf heart shakes her head.
Like an imbecile she was born old.,
Her eyes wobble as thirty-one thick folds
of skin open to glare at me on my flickering bed.
She knows the decay we're made of.

When hurt she is abrupt.
Now she is solid, like fat,
breathing in loops like a green hen
in the dust. But if I dream of loving, then
my dreams are of snarling strangers. She dreams that...
strange, strange, and corrupt.

Good God, the things she knows!
And worse, the sores she holds
in her hands, gathered in like a nest
from an abandoned field. At her best
she is all red muscle, humming in and out, cajoled
by time. Where I go, she goes.

Oh now I lay me down to love,
how awkwardly her arms undo,
how patiently I untangle her wrists
like knots. Old ornament, old naked fist,
even if I put on seventy coats I could not cover you...
mother, father, I'm made of.

Anne Sexton

Portrait Of An Old Woman On The College Tavern Wall

Oh down at the tavern
the children are singing
around their round table
and around me still.
Did you hear what it said?

I only said
how there is a pewter urn
pinned to the tavern wall,
as old as old is able
to be and be there still.
I said, the poets are tere
I hear them singing and lying
around their round table
and around me still.
Across the room is a wreath
made of a corpse's hair,
framed in glass on the wall,
as old as old is able
to be and be remembered still.
Did you hear what it said?

I only said
how I want to be there and I
would sing my songs with the liars
and my lies with all the singers.
And I would, and I would but
it's my hair in the hair wreath,
my cup pinned to the tavern wall,
my dusty face they sing beneath.
Poets are sitting in my kitchen.
Why do these poets lie?
Why do children get children and
Did you hear what it said?

I only said
how I want to be there,
Oh, down at the tavern
where the prophets are singing

around their round table
until they are still.

Anne Sexton

Raccoon

Coon, why did you come to this dance
with a mask on? Why not the tin man
and his rainbow girl? Why not Racine,
his hair marcelled down to his chest?
Why not come as a stomach digesting
its worms? Why you little fellow
with your ears at attention and your
nose poking up like a microphone?
You whig emblem, you woman chaser,
who do you dance over the wide lawn tonight
clanging the garbage pail like great silver bells?

Anne Sexton

Rapunzel

A woman
who loves a woman
is forever young.
The mentor
and the student
feed off each other.
Many a girl
had an old aunt
who locked her in the study
to keep the boys away.
They would play rummy
or lie on the couch
and touch and touch.
Old breast against young breast...
Let your dress fall down your shoulder,
come touch a copy of you
for I am at the mercy of rain,
for I have left the three Christs of Ypsilanti
for I have left the long naps of Ann Arbor
and the church spires have turned to stumps.
The sea bangs into my cloister
for the politicians are dying,
and dying so hold me, my young dear,
hold me...
The yellow rose will turn to cinder
and New York City will fall in
before we are done so hold me,
my young dear, hold me.
Put your pale arms around my neck.
Let me hold your heart like a flower
lest it bloom and collapse.
Give me your skin
as sheer as a cobweb,
let me open it up
and listen in and scoop out the dark.
Give me your nether lips
all puffy with their art
and I will give you angel fire in return.
We are two clouds

glistening in the bottle glass.
We are two birds
washing in the same mirror.
We were fair game
but we have kept out of the cesspool.
We are strong.
We are the good ones.
Do not discover us
for we lie together all in green
like pond weeds.
Hold me, my young dear, hold me.
They touch their delicate watches
one at a time.
They dance to the lute
two at a time.
They are as tender as bog moss.
They play mother-me-do
all day.
A woman
who loves a woman
is forever young.
Once there was a witch's garden
more beautiful than Eve's
with carrots growing like little fish,
with many tomatoes rich as frogs,
onions as ingrown as hearts,
the squash singing like a dolphin
and one patch given over wholly to magic -
rampion, a kind of salad root
a kind of harebell more potent than penicillin,
growing leaf by leaf, skin by skin.
as rapt and as fluid as Isadoran Duncan.
However the witch's garden was kept locked
and each day a woman who was with child
looked upon the rampion wildly,
fancying that she would die
if she could not have it.
Her husband feared for her welfare
and thus climbed into the garden
to fetch the life-giving tubers.
Ah ha, cried the witch,
whose proper name was Mother Gothel,

you are a thief and now you will die.
However they made a trade,
typical enough in those times.
He promised his child to Mother Gothel
so of course when it was born
she took the child away with her.
She gave the child the name Rapunzel,
another name for the life-giving rampion.
Because Rapunzel was a beautiful girl
Mother Gothel treasured her beyond all things.
As she grew older Mother Gothel thought:
None but I will ever see her or touch her.
She locked her in a tow without a door
or a staircase. It had only a high window.
When the witch wanted to enter she cried'
Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair.
Rapunzel's hair fell to the ground like a rainbow.
It was as strong as a dandelion
and as strong as a dog leash.
Hand over hand she shinnied up
the hair like a sailor
and there in the stone-cold room,
as cold as a museum,
Mother Gothel cried:
Hold me, my young dear, hold me,
and thus they played mother-me-do.
Years later a prince came by
and heard Rapunzel singing her loneliness.
That song pierced his heart like a valentine
but he could find no way to get to her.
Like a chameleon he hid himself among the trees
and watched the witch ascend the swinging hair.
The next day he himself called out:
Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair,
and thus they met and he declared his love.
What is this beast, she thought,
with muscles on his arms
like a bag of snakes?
What is this moss on his legs?
What prickly plant grows on his cheeks?
What is this voice as deep as a dog?
Yet he dazzled her with his answers.

Yet he dazzled her with his dancing stick.
They lay together upon the yellowy threads,
swimming through them
like minnows through kelp
and they sang out benedictions like the Pope.
Each day he brought her a skein of silk
to fashion a ladder so they could both escape.
But Mother Gothel discovered the plot
and cut off Rapunzel's hair to her ears
and took her into the forest to repent.
When the prince came the witch fastened
the hair to a hook and let it down.
When he saw Rapunzel had been banished
he flung himself out of the tower, a side of beef.
He was blinded by thorns that prickled him like tacks.
As blind as Oedipus he wandered for years
until he heard a song that pierced his heart
like that long-ago valentine.
As he kissed Rapunzel her tears fell on his eyes
and in the manner of such cure-alls
his sight was suddenly restored.
They lived happily as you might expect
proving that mother-me-do
can be outgrown,
just as the fish on Friday,
just as a tricycle.
The world, some say,
is made up of couples.
A rose must have a stem.
As for Mother Gothel,
her heart shrank to the size of a pin,
never again to say: Hold me, my young dear,
hold me,
and only as she dreamed of the yellow hair
did moonlight sift into her mouth.

Anne Sexton

Red Riding Hood

Many are the deceivers:
The suburban matron,
proper in the supermarket,
list in hand so she won't suddenly fly,
buying her Duz and Chuck Wagon dog food,
meanwhile ascending from earth,
letting her stomach fill up with helium,
letting her arms go loose as kite tails,
getting ready to meet her lover
a mile down Apple Crest Road
in the Congregational Church parking lot.
Two seemingly respectable women
come up to an old Jenny
and show her an envelope
full of money
and promise to share the booty
if she'll give them ten thou
as an act of faith.
Her life savings are under the mattress
covered with rust stains
and counting.
They are as wrinkled as prunes
but negotiable.
The two women take the money and disappear.
Where is the moral?
Not all knives are for
stabbing the exposed belly.
Rock climbs on rock
and it only makes a seashore.
Old Jenny has lost her belief in mattresses
and now she has no wastebasket in which
to keep her youth.
The standup comic
on the 'Tonight' show
who imitates the Vice President
and cracks up Johnny Carson
and delays sleep for millions
of bedfellows watching between their feet,
slits his wrist the next morning

in the Algonquin's old-fashioned bathroom,
the razor in his hand like a toothbrush,
wall as anonymous as a urinal,
the shower curtain his slack rubberman audience,
and then the slash
as simple as opening as a letter
and the warm blood breaking out like a rose
upon the bathtub with its claw and ball feet.
And I. I too.

Quite collected at cocktail parties,
meanwhile in my head
I'm undergoing open-heart surgery.
The heart, poor fellow,
pounding on his little tin drum
with a faint death beat,
The heart, that eyeless beetle,
running panicked through his maze,
never stopping one foot after the other
one hour after the other
until he gags on an apple
and it's all over.

And I. I too again.

I built a summer house on Cape Ann.
A simple A-frame and this too was
a deception - nothing haunts a new house.
When I moved in with a bathing suit and tea bags
the ocean rumbled like a train backing up
and at each window secrets came in
like gas. My mother, that departed soul,
sat in my Eames chair and reproached me
for losing her keys to the old cottage.
Even in the electric kitchen there was
the smell of a journey. The ocean
was seeping through its frontiers
and laying me out on its wet rails.
The bed was stale with my childhood
and I could not move to another city
where the worthy make a new life.
Long ago
there was a strange deception:
a wolf dressed in frills,
a kind of transvestite.

But I get ahead of my story.
In the beginning
there was just little Red Riding Hood,
so called because her grandmother
made her a red cape and she was never without it.
It was her Linus blanket, besides
it was red, as red as the Swiss flag,
yes it was red, as red as chicken blood,
But more than she loved her riding hood
she loved her grandmother who lived
far from the city in the big wood.
This one day her mother gave her
a basket of wine and cake
to take to her grandmother
because she was ill.
Wine and cake?
Where's the aspirin? The penicillin?
Where's the fruit juice?
Peter Rabbit got chamomile tea.
But wine and cake it was.
On her way in the big wood
Red Riding Hood met the wolf.
Good day, Mr. Wolf, she said,
thinking him no more dangerous
than a streetcar or a panhandler.
He asked where she was going
and she obligingly told him
There among the roots and trunks
with the mushrooms pulsing inside the moss
he planned how to eat them both,
the grandmother an old carrot
and the child a shy budkin
in a red red hood.
He bade her to look at the bloodroot,
the small bunchberry and the dogtooth
and pick some for her grandmother.
And this she did.
Meanwhile he scampered off
to Grandmother's house and ate her up
as quick as a slap.
Then he put on her nightdress and cap
and snuggled down in to bed.

A deceptive fellow.
Red Riding hood
knocked on the door and entered
with her flowers, her cake, her wine.
Grandmother looked strange,
a dark and hairy disease it seemed.
Oh Grandmother, what big ears you have,
ears, eyes, hands and then the teeth.
The better to eat you with my dear.
So the wolf gobbled Red Riding Hood down
like a gumdrop. Now he was fat.
He appeared to be in his ninth month
and Red Riding Hood and her grandmother
rode like two Jonahs up and down with
his every breath. One pigeon. One partridge.
He was fast asleep,
dreaming in his cap and gown,
wolfless.
Along came a huntsman who heard
the loud contented snores
and knew that was no grandmother.
He opened the door and said,
So it's you, old sinner.
He raised his gun to shoot him
when it occurred to him that maybe
the wolf had eaten up the old lady.
So he took a knife and began cutting open
the sleeping wolf, a kind of caesarian section.
It was a carnal knife that let
Red Riding Hood out like a poppy,
quite alive from the kingdom of the belly.
And grandmother too
still waiting for cakes and wine.
The wolf, they decided, was too mean
to be simply shot so they filled his belly
with large stones and sewed him up.
He was as heavy as a cemetery
and when he woke up and tried to run off
he fell over dead. Killed by his own weight.
Many a deception ends on such a note.
The huntsman and the grandmother and Red Riding Hood
sat down by his corpse and had a meal of wine and cake.

Those two remembering
nothing naked and brutal
from that little death,
that little birth,
from their going down
and their lifting up.

Anne Sexton

Red Roses

Tommy is three and when he's bad
his mother dances with him.
She puts on the record,
'Red Roses for a Blue Lady'
and throws him across the room.
Mind you,
she never laid a hand on him.
He gets red roses in different places,
the head, that time he was as sleepy as a river,
the back, that time he was a broken scarecrow,
the arm like a diamond had bitten it,
the leg, twisted like a licorice stick,
all the dance they did together,
Blue Lady and Tommy.
You fell, she said, just remember you fell.
I fell, is all he told the doctors
in the big hospital. A nice lady came
and asked him questions but because
he didn't want to be sent away he said, I fell.
He never said anything else although he could talk fine.
He never told about the music
or how she'd sing and shout
holding him up and throwing him.

He pretends he is her ball.
He tries to fold up and bounce
but he squashes like fruit.
For he loves Blue Lady and the spots
of red roses he gives her

Anne Sexton

Ringing The Bells

And this is the way they ring
the bells in Bedlam
and this is the bell-lady
who comes each Tuesday morning
to give us a music lesson
and because the attendants make you go
and because we mind by instinct,
like bees caught in the wrong hive,
we are the circle of crazy ladies
who sit in the lounge of the mental house
and smile at the smiling woman
who passes us each a bell,
who points at my hand
that holds my bell, E flat,
and this is the gray dress next to me
who grumbles as if it were special
to be old, to be old,
and this is the small hunched squirrel girl
on the other side of me
who picks at the hairs over her lip,
who picks at the hairs over her lip all day,
and this is how the bells really sound,
as untroubled and clean
as a workable kitchen,
and this is always my bell responding
to my hand that responds to the lady
who points at me, E flat;
and although we are not better for it,
they tell you to go. And you do.

Anne Sexton

Rowing

A story, a story!
(Let it go. Let it come.)
I was stamped out like a Plymouth fender
into this world.
First came the crib
with its glacial bars.
Then dolls
and the devotion to their plastic mouths.
Then there was school,
the little straight rows of chairs,
blotting my name over and over,
but undersea all the time,
a stranger whose elbows wouldn't work.
Then there was life
with its cruel houses
and people who seldom touched-
though touch is all-
but I grew,
like a pig in a trenchcoat I grew,
and then there were many strange apparitions,
the nagging rain, the sun turning into poison
and all of that, saws working through my heart,
but I grew, I grew,
and God was there like an island I had not rowed to,
still ignorant of Him, my arms, and my legs worked,
and I grew, I grew,
I wore rubies and bought tomatoes
and now, in my middle age,
about nineteen in the head I'd say,
I am rowing, I am rowing
though the oarlocks stick and are rusty
and the sea blinks and rolls
like a worried eyeball,
but I am rowing, I am rowing,
though the wind pushes me back
and I know that that island will not be perfect,
it will have the flaws of life,
the absurdities of the dinner table,
but there will be a door

and I will open it
and I will get rid of the rat insdie me,
the gnawing pestilential rat.
God will take it with his two hands
and embrace it.

As the African says:
This is my tale which I have told,
if it be sweet, if it be not sweet,
take somewhere else and let some return to me.
This story ends with me still rowing.

Anne Sexton

Rumpelstiltskin

Inside many of us
is a small old man
who wants to get out.
No bigger than a two-year-old
whom you'd call lamb chop
yet this one is old and malformed.
His head is okay
but the rest of him wasn't Sanforized?
He is a monster of despair.
He is all decay.
He speaks up as tiny as an earphone
with Truman's asexual voice:
I am your dwarf.
I am the enemy within.
I am the boss of your dreams.
No. I am not the law in your mind,
the grandfather of watchfulness.
I am the law of your members,
the kindred of blackness and impulse.
See. Your hand shakes.
It is not palsy or booze.
It is your Doppelganger
trying to get out.
Beware . . . Beware . . .

There once was a miller
with a daughter as lovely as a grape.
He told the king that she could
spin gold out of common straw.
The king summoned the girl
and locked her in a room full of straw
and told her to spin it into gold
or she would die like a criminal.
Poor grape with no one to pick.
Luscious and round and sleek.
Poor thing.
To die and never see Brooklyn.

She wept,

of course, huge aquamarine tears.
The door opened and in popped a dwarf.
He was as ugly as a wart.
Little thing, what are you? she cried.
With his tiny no-sex voice he replied:
I am a dwarf.
I have been exhibited on Bond Street
and no child will ever call me Papa.
I have no private life.
If I'm in my cups the whole town knows by breakfast
and no child will ever call me Papa
I am eighteen inches high.
I am no bigger than a partridge.
I am your evil eye
and no child will ever call me Papa.
Stop this Papa foolishness,
she cried. Can you perhaps
spin straw into gold?
Yes indeed, he said,
that I can do.
He spun the straw into gold
and she gave him her necklace
as a small reward.
When the king saw what she had done
he put her in a bigger room of straw
and threatened death once more.
Again she cried.
Again the dwarf came.
Again he spun the straw into gold.
She gave him her ring
as a small reward.
The king put her in an even bigger room
but this time he promised
to marry her if she succeeded.
Again she cried.
Again the dwarf came.
But she had nothing to give him.
Without a reward the dwarf would not spin.
He was on the scent of something bigger.
He was a regular bird dog.
Give me your first-born
and I will spin.

She thought: Piffle!
He is a silly little man.
And so she agreed.
So he did the trick.
Gold as good as Fort Knox.

The king married her
and within a year
a son was born.
He was like most new babies,
as ugly as an artichoke
but the queen thought him in pearl.
She gave him her dumb lactation,
delicate, trembling, hidden,
warm, etc.
And then the dwarf appeared
to claim his prize.
Indeed! I have become a papa!
cried the little man.
She offered him all the kingdom
but he wanted only this -
a living thing
to call his own.
And being mortal
who can blame him?
The queen cried two pails of sea water.
She was as persistent
as a Jehovah's Witness.
And the dwarf took pity.
He said: I will give you
three days to guess my name
and if you cannot do it
I will collect your child.
The queen sent messengers
throughout the land to find names
of the most unusual sort.
When he appeared the next day
she asked: Melchior?
Balthazar?
But each time the dwarf replied:
No! No! That's not my name.
The next day she asked:

Spindleshanks? Spiderlegs?
But it was still no-no.
On the third day the messenger
came back with a strange story.
He told her:
As I came around the corner of the wood
where the fox says good night to the hare
I saw a little house with a fire
burning in front of it.
Around that fire a ridiculous little man
was leaping on one leg and singing:
Today I bake.
Tomorrow I brew my beer.
The next day the queen's only child will be mine.
Not even the census taker knows
that Rumpelstiltskin is my name . . .
The queen was delighted.
She had the name!
Her breath blew bubbles.

When the dwarf returned
she called out:
Is your name by any chance Rumpelstiltskin?
He cried: The devil told you that!
He stamped his right foot into the ground
and sank in up to his waist.
Then he tore himself in two.
Somewhat like a split broiler.
He laid his two sides down on the floor,
one part soft as a woman,
one part a barbed hook,
one part papa,
one part Doppelganger.

Anne Sexton

Said The Poet To The Analyst

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.

Anne Sexton

Small Wire

My faith
is a great weight
hung on a small wire,
as doth the spider
hang her baby on a thin web,
as doth the vine,
twiggy and wooden,
hold up grapes
like eyeballs,
as many angels
dance on the head of a pin.

God does not need
too much wire to keep Him there,
just a thin vein,
with blood pushing back and forth in it,
and some love.
As it has been said:
Love and a cough
cannot be concealed.
Even a small cough.
Even a small love.
So if you have only a thin wire,
God does not mind.
He will enter your hands
as easily as ten cents used to
bring forth a Coke.

Anne Sexton

Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs

No matter what life you lead
the virgin is a lovely number:
cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,
arms and legs made of Limoges,
lips like Vin Du Rhône,
rolling her china-blue doll eyes
open and shut.
Open to say,
Good Day Mama,
and shut for the thrust
of the unicorn.
She is unsoiled.
She is as white as a bonefish.

Once there was a lovely virgin
called Snow White.
Say she was thirteen.
Her stepmother,
a beauty in her own right,
though eaten, of course, by age,
would hear of no beauty surpassing her own.
Beauty is a simple passion,
but, oh my friends, in the end
you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes.
The stepmother had a mirror to which she referred-
something like the weather forecast-
a mirror that proclaimed
the one beauty of the land.
She would ask,
Looking glass upon the wall,
who is fairest of us all?
And the mirror would reply,
You are the fairest of us all.
Pride pumped in her like poison.

Suddenly one day the mirror replied,
Queen, you are full fair, 'tis true,
but Snow White is fairer than you.
Until that moment Snow White

had been no more important
than a dust mouse under the bed.
But now the queen saw brown spots on her hand
and four whiskers over her lip
so she condemned Snow White
to be hacked to death.
Bring me her heart, she said to the hunter,
and I will salt it and eat it.
The hunter, however, let his prisoner go
and brought a boar's heart back to the castle.
The queen chewed it up like a cube steak.
Now I am fairest, she said,
lapping her slim white fingers.

Snow White walked in the wildwood
for weeks and weeks.
At each turn there were twenty doorways
and at each stood a hungry wolf,
his tongue lolling out like a worm.
The birds called out lewdly,
talking like pink parrots,
and the snakes hung down in loops,
each a noose for her sweet white neck.
On the seventh week
she came to the seventh mountain
and there she found the dwarf house.
It was as droll as a honeymoon cottage
and completely equipped with
seven beds, seven chairs, seven forks
and seven chamber pots.
Snow White ate seven chicken livers
and lay down, at last, to sleep.

The dwarfs, those little hot dogs,
walked three times around Snow White,
the sleeping virgin. They were wise
and wattled like small czars.
Yes. It's a good omen,
they said, and will bring us luck.
They stood on tiptoes to watch
Snow White wake up. She told them
about the mirror and the killer-queen

and they asked her to stay and keep house.
Beware of your stepmother,
they said.
Soon she will know you are here.
While we are away in the mines
during the day, you must not
open the door.

Looking glass upon the wall...
The mirror told
and so the queen dressed herself in rags
and went out like a peddler to trap Snow White.
She went across seven mountains.
She came to the dwarf house
and Snow White opened the door
and bought a bit of lacing.
The queen fastened it tightly
around her bodice,
as tight as an Ace bandage,
so tight that Snow White swooned.
She lay on the floor, a plucked daisy.
When the dwarfs came home they undid the lace
and she revived miraculously.
She was as full of life as soda pop.
Beware of your stepmother,
they said.
She will try once more.

Looking glass upon the wall...
Once more the mirror told
and once more the queen dressed in rags
and once more Snow White opened the door.
This time she bought a poison comb,
a curved eight-inch scorpion,
and put it in her hair and swooned again.
The dwarfs returned and took out the comb
and she revived miraculously.
She opened her eyes as wide as Orphan Annie.
Beware, beware, they said,
but the mirror told,
the queen came,
Snow White, the dumb bunny,

opened the door
and she bit into a poison apple
and fell down for the final time.
When the dwarfs returned
they undid her bodice,
they looked for a comb,
but it did no good.
Though they washed her with wine
and rubbed her with butter
it was to no avail.
She lay as still as a gold piece.

The seven dwarfs could not bring themselves
to bury her in the black ground
so they made a glass coffin
and set it upon the seventh mountain
so that all who passed by
could peek in upon her beauty.
A prince came one June day
and would not budge.
He stayed so long his hair turned green
and still he would not leave.
The dwarfs took pity upon him
and gave him the glass Snow White-
its doll's eyes shut forever-
to keep in his far-off castle.
As the prince's men carried the coffin
they stumbled and dropped it
and the chunk of apple flew out
of her throat and she woke up miraculously.

And thus Snow White became the prince's bride.
The wicked queen was invited to the wedding feast
and when she arrived there were
red-hot iron shoes,
in the manner of red-hot roller skates,
clamped upon her feet.
First your toes will smoke
and then your heels will turn black
and you will fry upward like a frog,
she was told.
And so she danced until she was dead,

a subterranean figure,
her tongue flicking in and out
like a gas jet.
Meanwhile Snow White held court,
rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut
and sometimes referring to her mirror
as women do.

Anne Sexton

Some Foreign Letters

I knew you forever and you were always old,
soft white lady of my heart. Surely you would scold
me for sitting up late, reading your letters,
as if these foreign postmarks were meant for me.
You posted them first in London, wearing furs
and a new dress in the winter of eighteen-ninety.
I read how London is dull on Lord Mayor's Day,
where you guided past groups of robbers, the sad holes
of Whitechapel, clutching your pocketbook, on the way
to Jack the Ripper dissecting his famous bones.
This Wednesday in Berlin, you say, you will
go to a bazaar at Bismarck's house. And I
see you as a young girl in a good world still,
writing three generations before mine. I try
to reach into your page and breathe it back...
but life is a trick, life is a kitten in a sack.
This is the sack of time your death vacates.
How distant you are on your nickel-plated skates
in the skating park in Berlin, gliding past
me with your Count, while a military band
plays a Strauss waltz. I loved you last,
a pleated old lady with a crooked hand.
Once you read Lohengrin and every goose
hung high while you practiced castle life
in Hanover. Tonight your letters reduce
history to a guess. The count had a wife.
You were the old maid aunt who lived with us.
Tonight I read how the winter howled around
the towers of Schloss Schwobber, how the tedious
language grew in your jaw, how you loved the sound
of the music of the rats tapping on the stone
floors. When you were mine you wore an earphone.
This is Wednesday, May 9th, near Lucerne,
Switzerland, sixty-nine years ago. I learn
your first climb up Mount San Salvatore;
this is the rocky path, the hole in your shoes,
the yankee girl, the iron interior
of her sweet body. You let the Count choose
your next climb. You went together, armed

with alpine stocks, with ham sandwiches
and seltzer wasser. You were not alarmed
by the thick woods of briars and bushes,
nor the rugged cliff, nor the first vertigo
up over Lake Lucerne. The Count sweated
with his coat off as you waded through top snow.
He held your hand and kissed you. You rattled
down on the train to catch a steam boat for home;
or other postmarks: Paris, verona, Rome.
This is Italy. You learn its mother tongue.
I read how you walked on the Palatine among
the ruins of the palace of the Caesars;
alone in the Roman autumn, alone since July.
When you were mine they wrapped you out of here
with your best hat over your face. I cried
because I was seventeen. I am older now.
I read how your student ticket admitted you
into the private chapel of the Vatican and how
you cheered with the others, as we used to do
on the fourth of July. One Wednesday in November
you watched a balloon, painted like a silver abll,
float up over the Forum, up over the lost emperors,
to shiver its little modern cage in an occasional
breeze. You worked your New England conscience out
beside artisans, chestnut vendors and the devout.
Tonight I will learn to love you twice;
learn your first days, your mid-Victorian face.
Tonight I will speak up and interrupt
your letters, warning you that wars are coming,
that the Count will die, that you will accept
your America back to live like a prim thing
on the farm in Maine. I tell you, you will come
here, to the suburbs of Boston, to see the blue-nose
world go drunk each night, to see the handsome
children jitterbug, to feel your left ear close
one Friday at Symphony. And I tell you,
you will tip your boot feet out of that hall,
rocking from its sour sound, out onto
the crowded street, letting your spectacles fall
and your hair net tangle as you stop passers-by
to mumble your guilty love while your ears die.

Song For A Lady

On the day of breasts and small hips
the window pocked with bad rain,
rain coming on like a minister,
we coupled, so sane and insane.
We lay like spoons while the sinister
rain dropped like flies on our lips
and our glad eyes and our small hips.

"The room is so cold with rain," you said
and you, feminine you, with your flower
said novenas to my ankles and elbows.
You are a national product and power.
Oh my swan, my drudge, my dear wooly rose,
even a notary would notarize our bed
as you knead me and I rise like bread.

Anne Sexton

Star-Nosed Mole

Mole, angel-dog of the pit,
digging six miles a night,
what's up with you in your sooty suit,
where's your kitchen at?
I find you at the edge of our pond,
drowned, numb drainer of weeds,
insects floating in your belly,
grubs like little fetuses bobbing
and your dear face with its fifth hand,
doesn't it know it's the end of the war?
It's all over, no need to go deep into ponds,
no fires, no cripples left.
Mole dog,
I wish your mother would wake you up
and you wouldn't lie there like the Pieta
wearing your cross on your nose.

Anne Sexton

Suicide Note

'You speak to me of narcissism but I reply that it is
a matter of my life' - Artaud

'At this time let me somehow bequeath all the leftovers
to my daughters and their daughters' - Anonymous

Better,
despite the worms talking to
the mare's hoof in the field;
better,
despite the season of young girls
dropping their blood;
better somehow
to drop myself quickly
into an old room.
Better (someone said)
not to be born
and far better
not to be born twice
at thirteen
where the boardinghouse,
each year a bedroom,
caught fire.

Dear friend,
I will have to sink with hundreds of others
on a dumbwaiter into hell.
I will be a light thing.
I will enter death
like someone's lost optical lens.
Life is half enlarged.
The fish and owls are fierce today.
Life tilts backward and forward.
Even the wasps cannot find my eyes.

Yes,
eyes that were immediate once.
Eyes that have been truly awake,
eyes that told the whole story—

poor dumb animals.
Eyes that were pierced,
little nail heads,
light blue gunshots.

And once with
a mouth like a cup,
clay colored or blood colored,
open like the breakwater
for the lost ocean
and open like the noose
for the first head.

Once upon a time
my hunger was for Jesus.
O my hunger! My hunger!
Before he grew old
he rode calmly into Jerusalem
in search of death.

This time
I certainly
do not ask for understanding
and yet I hope everyone else
will turn their heads when an unrehearsed fish jumps
on the surface of Echo Lake;
when moonlight,
its bass note turned up loud,
hurts some building in Boston,
when the truly beautiful lie together.
I think of this, surely,
and would think of it far longer
if I were not... if I were not
at that old fire.

I could admit
that I am only a coward
crying me me me
and not mention the little gnats, the moths,
forced by circumstance
to suck on the electric bulb.
But surely you know that everyone has a death,

his own death,
waiting for him.
So I will go now
without old age or disease,
wildly but accurately,
knowing my best route,
carried by that toy donkey I rode all these years,
never asking, "Where are we going?"
We were riding (if I'd only known)
to this.

Dear friend,
please do not think
that I visualize guitars playing
or my father arching his bone.
I do not even expect my mother's mouth.
I know that I have died before—
once in November, once in June.
How strange to choose June again,
so concrete with its green breasts and bellies.
Of course guitars will not play!
The snakes will certainly not notice.
New York City will not mind.
At night the bats will beat on the trees,
knowing it all,
seeing what they sensed all day.

Anne Sexton

Sylvia's Death

For Sylvia Plath

O Sylvia, Sylvia,
with a dead box of stones and spoons,
with two children, two meteors
wandering loose in a tiny playroom,
with your mouth into the sheet,
into the roofbeam, into the dumb prayer,
(Sylvia, Sylvia
where did you go
after you wrote me
from Devonshire
about raising potatoes
and keeping bees?)
what did you stand by,
just how did you lie down into?
Thief -
how did you crawl into,
crawl down alone
into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,
the death we said we both outgrew,
the one we wore on our skinny breasts,
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,
the death that talked like brides with plots,
the death we drank to,
the motives and the quiet deed?
(In Boston
the dying
ride in cabs,
yes death again,
that ride home
with our boy.)
O Sylvia, I remember the sleepy drummer
who beat on our eyes with an old story,
how we wanted to let him come
like a sadist or a New York fairy
to do his job,

a necessity, a window in a wall or a crib,
and since that time he waited
under our heart, our cupboard,
and I see now that we store him up
year after year, old suicides
and I know at the news of your death
a terrible taste for it, like salt,
(And me,
me too.
And now, Sylvia,
you again
with death again,
that ride home
with our boy.)
And I say only
with my arms stretched out into that stone place,
what is your death
but an old belonging,
a mole that fell out
of one of your poems?
(O friend,
while the moon's bad,
and the king's gone,
and the queen's at her wit's end
the bar fly ought to sing!)
O tiny mother,
you too!
O funny duchess!
O blonde thing!

Anne Sexton

That Day

This is the desk I sit at
and this is the desk where I love you too much
and this is the typewriter that sits before me
where yesterday only your body sat before me
with its shoulders gathered in like a Greek chorus,
with its tongue like a king making up rules as he goes,
with its tongue quite openly like a cat lapping milk,
with its tongue - both of us coiled in its slippery life.
That was yesterday, that day.
That was the day of your tongue,
your tongue that came from your lips,
two openers, half animals, half birds
caught in the doorway of your heart.
That was the day I followed the king's rules,
passing by your red veins and your blue veins,
my hands down the backbone, down quick like a firepole,
hands between legs where you display your inner knowledge,
where diamond mines are buried and come forth to bury,
come forth more sudden than some reconstructed city.
It is complete within seconds, that monument.
The blood runs underground yet brings forth a tower.
A multitude should gather for such an edifice.
For a miracle one stands in line and throws confetti.
Surely The Press is here looking for headlines.
Surely someone should carry a banner on the sidewalk.
If a bridge is constructed doesn't the mayor cut a ribbon?
If a phenomenon arrives shouldn't the Magi come bearing gifts?
Yesterday was the day I bore gifts for your gift
and came from the valley to meet you on the pavement.
That was yesterday, that day.
That was the day of your face,
your face after love, close to the pillow, a lullaby.
Half asleep beside me letting the old fashioned rocker stop,
our breath became one, became a child-breath together,
while my fingers drew little o's on your shut eyes,
while my fingers drew little smiles on your mouth,
while I drew I LOVE YOU on your chest and its drummer
and whispered, 'Wake up!' and you mumbled in your sleep,
'Sh. We're driving to Cape Cod. We're heading for the Bourne

Bridge. We're circling the Bourne Circle.' Bourne!
Then I knew you in your dream and prayed of our time
that I would be pierced and you would take root in me
and that I might bring forth your born, might bear
the you or the ghost of you in my little household.
Yesterday I did not want to be borrowed
but this is the typewriter that sits before me
and love is where yesterday is at.

Anne Sexton

The Abortion

Somebody who should have been born
is gone.

Just as the earth puckered its mouth,
each bud puffing out from its knot,
I changed my shoes, and then drove south.

Up past the Blue Mountains, where
Pennsylvania humps on endlessly,
wearing, like a crayoned cat, its green hair,

its roads sunken in like a gray washboard;
where, in truth, the ground cracks evilly,
a dark socket from which the coal has poured,

Somebody who should have been born
is gone.

the grass as bristly and stout as chives,
and me wondering when the ground would break,
and me wondering how anything fragile survives;

up in Pennsylvania, I met a little man,
not Rumpelstiltskin, at all, at all...
he took the fullness that love began.

Returning north, even the sky grew thin
like a high window looking nowhere.
The road was as flat as a sheet of tin.

Somebody who should have been born
is gone.

Yes, woman, such logic will lead
to loss without death. Or say what you meant,
you coward...this baby that I bleed.

Anne Sexton

The Addict

Sleepmonger,
deathmonger,
with capsules in my palms each night,
eight at a time from sweet pharmaceutical bottles
I make arrangements for a pint-sized journey.
I'm the queen of this condition.
I'm an expert on making the trip
and now they say I'm an addict.
Now they ask why.
WHY!

Don't they know that I promised to die!
I'm keeping in practice.
I'm merely staying in shape.
The pills are a mother, but better,
every color and as good as sour balls.
I'm on a diet from death.

Yes, I admit
it has gotten to be a bit of a habit-
blows eight at a time, socked in the eye,
hauled away by the pink, the orange,
the green and the white goodnights.
I'm becoming something of a chemical
mixture.
that's it!

My supply
of tablets
has got to last for years and years.
I like them more than I like me.
It's a kind of marriage.
It's a kind of war where I plant bombs inside
of myself.

Yes
I try
to kill myself in small amounts,
an innocuous occupatin.

Actually I'm hung up on it.
But remember I don't make too much noise.
And frankly no one has to lug me out
and I don't stand there in my winding sheet.
I'm a little buttercup in my yellow nightie
eating my eight loaves in a row
and in a certain order as in
the laying on of hands
or the black sacrament.

It's a ceremony
but like any other sport
it's full of rules.
It's like a musical tennis match where
my mouth keeps catching the ball.
Then I lie on; my altar
elevated by the eight chemical kisses.

What a lay me down this is
with two pink, two orange,
two green, two white goodnights.
Fee-fi-fo-fum-
Now I'm borrowed.
Now I'm numb.

Anne Sexton

The Ambition Bird

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.

All night dark wings
flopping in my heart.
Each an ambition bird.

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 dome 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 the 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.

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.

Anne Sexton

The Angel Food Dogs

Leaping, leaping, leaping,
down line by line,
growling at the cadavers,
filling the holy jugs with their piss,
falling into windows and mauling the parents,
but soft, kiss-soft,
and sobbing sobbing
into their awful dog dish.

No point? No twist for you
in my white tunnel?
Let me speak plainly,
let me whisper it from the podium-

Mother, may I use your pseudonym?
May I take the dove named Mary
and shove out Anne?
May I take my check book, my holographs,
my eight naked books,
and sign it Mary, Mary, Mary
full of grace?
I know my name is not offensive
but my feet hang in the noose.
I want to be white.
I want to be blue.
I want to be a bee digging into an onion heart,
as you did to me, dug and squatted
long after death and its fang.

Hail Mary, full of me,
Nibbling in the sitting room of my head.
Mary, Mary, virgin forever,
whore forever,
give me your name,
give me your mirror.
Boils fester in my soul,
so give me your name so I may kiss them,
and they will fly off,
nameless

but named,
and they will fly off like angel food dogs
with thee
and with thy spirit.
Let me climb the face of my kitchen dog
and fly off into my terrified years.

Anne Sexton

The Assassin

The correct death is written in.
I will fill the need.
My bow is stiff.
My bow is in readiness.
I am the bullet and the hook.
I am cocked and held ready.
In my sights I carve him
like a sculptor. I mold out
his last look at everyone.
I carry his eyes and his
brain bone at every position.
I know his male sex and I do
march over him with my index finger.
His mouth and his anus are one.
I am at the center of feeling.

A subway train is
traveling across my crossbow.
I have a blood bolt
and I have made it mine.
With this man I take in hand
his destiny and with this gun
I take in hand the newspapers and
with my heat I will take him.
he will bend down toward me
and his veins will tumble out
like children... Give me
his flag and his eye.
Give me his hard shell and his lip.
He is my evil and my apple and
I will see him home.

Anne Sexton

The Author Of The Jesus Papers Speaks

In my dream
I milked a cow,
the terrible udder
like a great rubber lily
sweated in my fingers
and as I yanked,
waiting for the moon juice,
waiting for the white mother,
blood spurted from it
and covered me with shame.
Then God spoke to me and said:
People say only good things about Christmas.
If they want to say something bad,
they whisper.
So I went to the well and drew a baby
out of the hollow water.
Then God spoke to me and said:
Here. Take this gingerbread lady
and put her in your oven.
When the cow gives blood
and the Christ is born
we must all eat sacrifices.
We must all eat beautiful women.

Anne Sexton

The Balance Wheel

Where I waved at the sky
And waited your love through a February sleep,
I saw birds swinging in, watched them multiply
Into a tree, weaving on a branch, cradling a keep
In the arms of April sprung from the south to occupy
This slow lap of land, like cogs of some balance wheel.
I saw them build the air, with that motion birds feel.

Where I wave at the sky
And understand love, knowing our August heat,
I see birds pulling past the dim frosted thigh
Of Autumn, unlatched from the nest, and wing-beat
For the south, making their high dots across the sky,
Like beauty spots marking a still perfect cheek.
I see them bend the air, slipping away, for what birds seek.

Anne Sexton

The Ballad Of The Lonely Masturbator

The end of the affair is always death.
She's my workshop. Slippery eye,
out of the tribe of myself my breath
finds you gone. I horrify
those who stand by. I am fed.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.
Finger to finger, now she's mine.
She's not too far. She's my encounter.
I beat her like a bell. I recline
in the bower where you used to mount her.
You borrowed me on the flowered spread.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.
Take for instance this night, my love,
that every single couple puts together
with a joint overturning, beneath, above,
the abundant two on sponge and feather,
kneeling and pushing, head to head.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.
I break out of my body this way,
an annoying miracle. Could I
put the dream market on display?
I am spread out. I crucify.
My little plum is what you said.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.
Then my black-eyed rival came.
The lady of water, rising on the beach,
a piano at her fingertips, shame
on her lips and a flute's speech.
And I was the knock-kneed broom instead.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.
She took you the way a women takes
a bargain dress off the rack
and I broke the way a stone breaks.
I give back your books and fishing tack.
Today's paper says that you are wed.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.
The boys and girls are one tonight.
They unbutton blouses. They unzip flies.
They take off shoes. They turn off the light.

The glimmering creatures are full of lies.
They are eating each other. They are overfed.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

Anne Sexton

The Bells

Today the circus poster
is scabbing off the concrete wall
and the children have forgotten
if they knew at all.
Father, do you remember?
Only the sound remains,
the distant thump of the good elephants,
the voice of the ancient lions
and how the bells
trembled for the flying man.
I, laughing,
lifted to your high shoulder
or small at the rough legs of strangers,
was not afraid.
You held my hand
and were instant to explain
the three rings of danger.

Oh see the naughty clown
and the wild parade
while love love
love grew rings around me.
this was the sound where it began;
our breath pounding up to see
the flying man breast out
across the boarded sky
and climb the air.
I remember the color of music
and how forever
all the trembling bells of you
were mine.

Anne Sexton

The Big Boots Of Pain

There can be certain potions
needed in the clock
for the body's fall from grace,
to untorture and to plead for.
These I have known
and would sell all my furniture
and books and assorted goods
to avoid, and more, more.

But the other pain
I would sell my life to avoid
the pain that begins in the crib
with its bars or perhaps
with your first breath
when the planets drill
your future into you
for better or worse
as you marry life
and the love that gets doled out
or doesn't.

I find now, swallowing one teaspoon
of pain, that it drops downward
to the past where it mixes
with last year's cupful
and downward into a decade's quart
and downward into a lifetime's ocean.
I alternate treading water
and deadman's float.

The teaspoon ought to be hearable
if it didn't mix into the reruns
and thus enlarge into what it is not,
a sea pest's sting turning promptly
into the shark's neat biting off
of a leg because the soul
wears a magnifying glass.
Kicking the heart
with pain's big boots running up and down

the intestines like a motorcycle racer.

Yet one does get out of bed
and start over, plunge into the day
and put on a hopeful look
and does not allow fear to build a wall
between you and an old friend
or a new friend and reach out your hand,
shutting down the thought that
an axe may cut it off unexpectedly.
One learns not to blab about all this
except to yourself or the typewriter keys
who tell no one until they get brave
and crawl off onto the printed page.

I'm getting bored with it,
I tell the typewriter,
this constantly walking around
in wet shoes and then, surprise!
Somehow DECEASED keeps getting
stamped in red over the word HOPE.
And I who keep falling thankfully
into each new pillow of belief,
finding my Mercy Street,
kissing it and tenderly gift-wrapping my love,
am beginning to wonder just what
the planets had in mind on November 9th, 1928.
The pillows are ripped away,
the hand guillotined,
dog shit thrown into the middle of a laugh,
a hornets' nest building into the hi-fi speaker
and leaving me in silence,
where, without music,
I become a cracked orphan.

Well,
one gets out of bed
and the planets don't always hiss
or muck up the day, each day.
As for the pain and its multiplying teaspoon,
perhaps it is a medicine
that will cure the soul

of its greed for love
next Thursday.

Anne Sexton

The Big Heart

'Too many things are occurring for even a big heart to hold.' - From an essay by
W. B. Yeats

Big heart,
wide as a watermelon,
but wise as birth,
there is so much abundance
in the people I have:
Max, Lois, Joe, Louise,
Joan, Marie, Dawn,
Arlene, Father Dunne,
and all in their short lives
give to me repeatedly,
in the way the sea
places its many fingers on the shore,
again and again
and they know me,
they help me unravel,
they listen with ears made of conch shells,
they speak back with the wine of the best region.
They are my staff.
They comfort me.

They hear how
the artery of my soul has been severed
and soul is spurting out upon them,
bleeding on them,
messing up their clothes,
dirtying their shoes.
And God is filling me,
though there are times of doubt
as hollow as the Grand Canyon,
still God is filling me.
He is giving me the thoughts of dogs,
the spider in its intricate web,
the sun
in all its amazement,
and a slain ram
that is the glory,

the mystery of great cost,
and my heart,
which is very big,
I promise it is very large,
a monster of sorts,
takes it all in—
all in comes the fury of love.

Anne Sexton

The Black Art

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.

A man who writes knows too much,
such spells and fetiches!
As if erections and congresses and products
weren't enough; as if machines and galleons
and wars were never enough.
With used furniture he makes a tree.
A writer is essentially a crook.
Dear love, you are that man.

Never loving ourselves,
hating even our shoes and our hats,
we love each other, precious, precious.
Our hands are light blue and gentle.
Our eyes are full of terrible confessions.
But when we marry,
the children leave in disgust.
There is too much food and no one left over
to eat up all the weird abundance.

Anne Sexton

The Break

It was also my violent heart that broke,
falling down the front hall stairs.

It was also a message I never spoke,
calling, riser after riser, who cares

about you, who cares, splintering up
the hip that was merely made of crystal,
the post of it and also the cup.

I exploded in the hallway like a pistol.

So I fell apart. So I came all undone.

Yes. I was like a box of dog bones.

But now they've wrapped me in like a nun.

Burst like firecrackers! Held like stones!

What a feat sailing queerly like Icarus
until the tempest undid me and I broke.

The ambulance drivers made such a fuss.

But when I cried, 'Wait for my courage!' they smoked

and then they placed me, tied me up on their plate,
and wheeled me out to their coffin, my nest.

Slowly the siren slowly the hearse, sedate
as a dowager. At the E. W. they cut off my dress.

I cried, 'Oh Jesus, help me! Oh Jesus Christ!'
and the nurse replied, 'Wrong name. My name
is Barbara,' and hung me in an odd device,
a buck's extension and a Balkan overhead frame.

The orthopedic man declared,
'You'll be down for a year.' His scoop. His news.
He opened the skin. He scraped. He pared
and drilled through bone for his four-inch screws.

That takes brute strength like pushing a cow
up hill. I tell you, it takes skill
and bedside charm and all that know how.
The body is a damn hard thing to kill.

But please don't touch or jiggle my bed.
I'm Ethan Frome's wife. I'll move when I'm able.
The T. V. hangs from the wall like a moose head.
I hide a pint of bourbon in my bedside table.

A bird full of bones, now I'm held by a sand bag.
The fracture was twice. The fracture was double.
The days are horizontal. The days are a drag.
All of the skeleton in me is in trouble.

Across the hall is the bedpan station.
The urine and stools pass hourly by my head
in silver bowls. They flush in unison
in the autoclave. My one dozen roses are dead.

The have ceased to menstruate. They hang
there like little dried up blood clots.
And the heart too, that cripple, how it sang
once. How it thought it could call the shots!

Understand what happened the day I fell.
My heart had stammered and hungered at
a marriage feast until the angel of hell
turned me into the punisher, the acrobat.

My bones are loose as clothespins,
as abandoned as dolls in a toy shop
and my heart, old hunger motor, with its sins
revved up like an engine that would not stop.

And now I spend all day taking care
of my body, that baby. Its cargo is scarred.
I anoint the bedpan. I brush my hair,
waiting in the pain machine for my bones to get hard,

for the soft, soft bones that were laid apart
and were screwed together. They will knit.
And the other corpse, the fractured heart,
I feed it piecemeal, little chalice. I'm good to it.

Yet lie a fire alarm it waits to be known.

It is wired. In it many colors are stored.
While my body's in prison, heart cells alone
have multiplied. My bones are merely bored

with all this waiting around. But the heart,
this child of myself that resides in the flesh,
this ultimate signature of the me, the start
of my blindness and sleep, builds a death crèche.

The figures are placed at the grave of my bones.
All figures knowing it is the other death
they came for. Each figure standing alone.
The heart burst with love and lost its breath.

This little town, this little country is real
and thus it is so of the post and the cup
and thus of the violent heart. The zeal
of my house doth eat me up.

Anne Sexton

The Break Away

Your daisies have come
on the day of my divorce:
the courtroom a cement box,
a gas chamber for the infectious Jew in me
and a perhaps land, a possibly promised land
for the Jew in me,
but still a betrayal room for the till-death-do-us—
and yet a death, as in the unlocking of scissors
that makes the now separate parts useless,
even to cut each other up as we did yearly
under the crayoned-in sun.
The courtroom keeps squashing our lives as they break
into two cans ready for recycling,
flattened tin humans
and a tin law,
even for my twenty-five years of hanging on
by my teeth as I once saw at Ringling Brothers.
The gray room:
Judge, lawyer, witness
and me and invisible Skee-zix,
and all the other torn
enduring the bewilderments
of their division.

Your daisies have come
on the day of my divorce.
They arrive like round yellow fish,
sucking with love at the coral of our love.
Yet they wait,
in their short time,
like little utero half-borns,
half killed, thin and bone soft.
They breathe the air that stands
for twenty-five illicit days,
the sun crawling inside the sheets,
the moon spinning like a tornado
in the washbowl,
and we orchestrated them both,
calling ourselves TWO CAMP DIRECTORS.

There was a song, our song on your cassette,
that played over and over
and baptised the prodigals.
It spoke the unspeakable,
as the rain will on an attic roof,
letting the animal join its soul
as we kneeled before a miracle-
forgetting its knife.

The daisies confer
in the old-married kitchen
papered with blue and green chefs
who call out pies, cookies, yummy,
at the charcoal and cigarette smoke
they wear like a yellowy salve.
The daisies absorb it all-
the twenty-five-year-old sanctioned love
(If one could call such handfuls of fists
and immobile arms that!)
and on this day my world rips itself up
while the country unfastens along
with its perjuring king and his court.
It unfastens into an abortion of belief,
as in me-
the legal rift-
as on might do with the daisies
but does not
for they stand for a love
undergoihng open heart surgery
that might take
if one prayed tough enough.
And yet I demand,
even in prayer,
that I am not a thief,
a mugger of need,
and that your heart survive
on its own,
belonging only to itself,
whole, entirely whole,
and workable
in its dark cavern under your ribs.

I pray it will know truth,
if truth catches in its cup
and yet I pray, as a child would,
that the surgery take.

I dream it is taking.
Next I dream the love is swallowing itself.
Next I dream the love is made of glass,
glass coming through the telephone
that is breaking slowly,
day by day, into my ear.
Next I dream that I put on the love
like a lifejacket and we float,
jacket and I,
we bounce on that priest-blue.
We are as light as a cat's ear
and it is safe,
safe far too long!
And I awaken quickly and go to the opposite window
and peer down at the moon in the pond
and know that beauty has walked over my head,
into this bedroom and out,
flowing out through the window screen,
dropping deep into the water
to hide.

I will observe the daisies
fade and dry up
wuntil they become flour,
snowing themselves onto the table
beside the drone of the refrigerator,
beside the radio playing Frankie
(as often as FM will allow)
snowing lightly, a tremor sinking from the ceiling-
as twenty-five years split from my side
like a growth that I sliced off like a melanoma.

It is six P.M. as I water these tiny weeds
and their little half-life,
their numbered days
that raged like a secret radio,
recalling love that I picked up innocently,

yet guiltily,
as my five-year-old daughter
picked gum off the sidewalk
and it became suddenly an elastic miracle.

For me it was love found
like a diamond
where carrots grow-
the glint of diamond on a plane wing,
meaning: DANGER! THICK ICE!
but the good crunch of that orange,
the diamond, the carrot,
both with four million years of resurrecting dirt,
and the love,
although Adam did not know the word,
the love of Adam
obeying his sudden gift.

You, who sought me for nine years,
in stories made up in front of your naked mirror
or walking through rooms of fog women,
you trying to forget the mother
who built guilt with the lumber of a locked door
as she sobbed her soured mild and fed you loss
through the keyhole,
you who wrote out your own birth
and built it with your own poems,
your own lumber, your own keyhole,
into the trunk and leaves of your manhood,
you, who fell into my words, years
before you fell into me (the other,
both the Camp Director and the camper),
you who baited your hook with wide-awake dreams,
and calls and letters and once a luncheon,
and twice a reading by me for you.
But I wouldn't!

Yet this year,
yanking off all past years,
I took the bait
and was pulled upward, upward,
into the sky and was held by the sun-

the quick wonder of its yellow lap-
and became a woman who learned her own skin
and dug into her soul and found it full,
and you became a man who learned his won skin
and dug into his manhood, his humanhood
and found you were as real as a baker
or a seer
and we became a home,
up into the elbows of each other's soul,
without knowing-
an invisible purchase-
that inhabits our house forever.

We were
blessed by the House-Die
by the altar of the color T.V.
and somehow managed to make a tiny marriage,
a tiny marriage
called belief,
as in the child's belief in the tooth fairy,
so close to absolute,
so daft within a year or two.
The daisies have come
for the last time.
And I who have,
each year of my life,
spoken to the tooth fairy,
believing in her,
even when I was her,
am helpless to stop your daisies from dying,
although your voice cries into the telephone:
Marry me! Marry me!
and my voice speaks onto these keys tonight:
The love is in dark trouble!
The love is starting to die,
right now-
we are in the process of it.
The empty process of it.

I see two deaths,
and the two men plod toward the mortuary of my heart,
and though I willed one away in court today

and I whisper dreams and birthdays into the other,
they both die like waves breaking over me
and I am drowning a little,
but always swimming
among the pillows and stones of the breakwater.
And though your daisies are an unwanted death,
I wade through the smell of their cancer
and recognize the prognosis,
its careful of loss-

I say now,
you gave what you could.
It was quite a ferris wheel to spin on!
and the dead city of my marriage
seems less important
than the fact that the daisies came weekly,
over and over,
likes kisses that can't stop themselves.

There sit two deaths on November 5th, 1973.
Let one be forgotten-
Bury it! Wall it up!
But let me not forget the man
of my child-like flowers
though he sinks into the fog of Lake Superior,
he remains, his fingers the marvel
of fourth of July sparklers,
his furious ice cream cones of licking,
remains to cool my forehead with a washcloth
when I sweat into the bathtub of his being.

For the rest that is left:
name it gentle,
as gentle as radishes inhabiting
their short life in the earth,
name it gentle,
gentle as old friends waving so long at the window,
or in the drive,
name it gentle as maple wings singing
themselves upon the pond outside,
as sensuous as the mother-yellow in the pond,
that night that it was ours,

when our bodies floated and bumped
in moon water and the cicadas
called out like tongues.

Let such as this
be resurrected in all men
whenever they mold their days and nights
as when for twenty-five days and nights you molded mine
and planted the seed that dives into my God
and will do so forever
no matter how often I sweep the floor.

Anne Sexton

The Breast

This is the key to it.
This is the key to everything.
Preciously.

I am worse than the gamekeeper's children
picking for dust and bread.
Here I am drumming up perfume.

Let me go down on your carpet,
your straw mattress - whatever's at hand
because the child in me is dying, dying.

It is not that I am cattle to be eaten.
It is not that I am some sort of street.
But your hands found me like an architect.

Jugful of milk! It was yours years ago
when I lived in the valley of my bones,
bones dumb in the swamp. Little playthings.

A xylophone maybe with skin
stretched over it awkwardly.
Only later did it become something real.

Later I measured my size against movie stars.
I didn't measure up. Something between
my shoulders was there. But never enough.

Sure, there was a meadow,
but no young men singing the truth.
Nothing to tell truth by.

Ignorant of men I lay next to my sisters
and rising out of the ashes I cried
my sex will be transfixed!

Now I am your mother, your daughter, your brand new thing - a snail, a nest.
I am alive when your fingers are.

I wear silk - the cover to uncover -
because silk is what I want you to think of.
But I dislike the cloth. It is too stern.

So tell me anything but track me like a climber
for here is the eye, here is the jewel,
here is the excitement the nipple learns.

I am unbalanced - but I am not mad with snow.
I am mad the way young girls are mad,
with an offering, an offering...

I burn the way money burns.

Anne Sexton

The Child Bearers

Jean, death comes close to us all,
flapping its awful wings at us
and the gluey wings crawl up our nose.
Our children tremble in their teen-age cribs,
whirling off on a thumb or a motorcycle,
mine pushed into gnawing a stilbestrol cancer
I passed on like hemophilia,
or yours in the seventh grade, with her spleen
smacked in by the balance beam.
And we, mothers, crumpled, and flyspotted
with bringing them this far
can do nothing now but pray.

Let us put your three children
and my two children,
ages ranging from eleven to twenty-one,
and send them in a large air net up to God,
with many stamps, real air mail,
and huge signs attached:
SPECIAL HANDLING.
DO NOT STAPLE, FOLD OR MUTILATE!
And perhaps He will notice
and pass a psalm over them
for keeping safe for a whole,
for a whole God-damned life-span.

And not even a muddled angel will
peek down at us in our foxhole.
And He will not have time
to send down an eyedropper of prayer for us,
the mothering thing of us,
as we drip into the soup
and drown
in the worry festering inside us,
lest our children
go so fast
they go.

The Children

The children are all crying in their pens
and the surf carries their cries away.
They are old men who have seen too much,
their mouths are full of dirty clothes,
the tongues poverty, tears like puss.
The surf pushes their cries back.

Listen.

They are bewitched.

They are writing down their life
on the wings of an elf
who then dissolves.

They are writing down their life
on a century fallen to ruin.

They are writing down their life
on the bomb of an alien God.

I am too.

We must get help.

The children are dying in their pens.

Their bodies are crumbling.

Their tongues are twisting backwards.

There is a certain ritual to it.

There is a dance they do in their pens.

Their mouths are immense.

They are swallowing monster hearts.

So is my mouth.

Listen.

We must all stop dying in the little ways,
in the craters of hate,
in the potholes of indifference-
a murder in the temple.

The place I live in
is a maze

and I keep seeking
the exit or the home.

Yet if I could listen

to the bulldog courage of those children
and turn inward into the plague of my soul
with more eyes than the stars

I could melt the darkness-
as suddenly as that time
when an awful headache goes away
or someone puts out the fire-
and stop the darkness and its amputations
and find the real McCoy
in the private holiness
of my hands.

Anne Sexton

The Civil War

I am torn in two
but I will conquer myself.
I will dig up the pride.
I will take scissors
and cut out the beggar.
I will take a crowbar
and pry out the broken
pieces of God in me.
Just like a jigsaw puzzle,
I will put Him together again
with the patience of a chess player.

How many pieces?

It feels like thousands,
God dressed up like a whore
in a slime of green algae.
God dressed up like an old man
staggering out of His shoes.
God dressed up like a child,
all naked,
even without skin,
soft as an avocado when you peel it.
And others, others, others.

But I will conquer them all
and build a whole nation of God
in me - but united,
build a new soul,
dress it with skin
and then put on my shirt
and sing an anthem,
a song of myself.

Anne Sexton

The Consecrating Mother

I stand before the sea
and it rolls and rolls in its green blood
saying, 'Do not give up one god
for I have a handful.'
The trade winds blew
in their twelve-fingered reversal
and I simply stood on the beach
while the ocean made a cross of salt
and hung up its drowned
and they cried Deo Deo.
The ocean offered them up in the vein of its might.
I wanted to share this
but I stood alone like a pink scarecrow.

The ocean steamed in and out,
the ocean gasped upon the shore
but I could not define her,
I could not name her mood, her locked-up faces.
Far off she rolled and rolled
like a woman in labor
and I thought of those who had crossed her,
in antiquity, in nautical trade, in slavery, in war.
I wondered how she had borne those bulwarks.
She should be entered skin to skin,
and put on like one's first or last cloth,
entered like kneeling your way into church,
descending into that ascension,
though she be slick as olive oil,
as she climbs each wave like an embezzler of white.
The big deep knows the law as it wears its gray hat,
though the ocean comes in its destiny,
with its one hundred lips,
and in moonlight she comes in her nudity,
flashing breasts made of milk-water,
flashing buttocks made of unkillable lust,
and at night when you enter her
you shine like a neon soprano.

I am that clumsy human

on the shore
loving you, coming, coming,
going,
and wish to put my thumb on you
like The Song of Solomon.

Anne Sexton

The Dead Heart

After I wrote this, a friend scrawled on this page, "Yes."

And I said, merely to myself, "I wish it could be for a different seizure—as with Molly Bloom and her 'and yes I said yes I will Yes.'"

It is not a turtle
hiding in its little green shell.
It is not a stone
to pick up and put under your black wing.
It is not a subway car that is obsolete.
It is not a lump of coal that you could light.
It is a dead heart.
It is inside of me.
It is a stranger
yet once it was agreeable,
opening and closing like a clam.

What it has cost me you can't imagine,
shrinks, priests, lovers, children, husbands,
friends and all the lot.
An expensive thing it was to keep going.
It gave back too.
Don't deny it!
I half wonder if April would bring it back to life?
A tulip? The first bud?
But those are just musings on my part,
the pity one has when one looks at a cadaver.

How did it die?
I called it EVIL.
I said to it, your poems stink like vomit.
I didn't stay to hear the last sentence.
It died on the word EVIL.
It did it with my tongue.
The tongue, the Chinese say,
is like a sharp knife:
it kills
without drawing blood.

Anne Sexton

The Death Baby

1. DREAMS

I was an ice baby.
I turned to sky blue.
My tears became two glass beads.
My mouth stiffened into a dumb howl.
They say it was a dream
but I remember that hardening.

My sister at six
dreamt nightly of my death:
'The baby turned to ice.
Someone put her in the refrigerator
and she turned as hard as a Popsicle.'

I remember the stink of the liverwurst.
How I was put on a platter and laid
between the mayonnaise and the bacon.
The rhythm of the refrigerator
had been disturbed.
The milk bottle hissed like a snake.
The tomatoes vomited up their stomachs.
The caviar turned to lave.
The pimentos kissed like cupids.
I moved like a lobster,
slower and slower.
The air was tiny.
The air would not do.

*

I was at the dogs' party.
I was their bone.
I had been laid out in their kennel
like a fresh turkey.

This was my sister's dream
but I remember that quartering;
I remember the sickbed smell
of the sawdust floor, the pink eyes,
the pink tongues and the teeth, those nails.

I had been carried out like Moses
and hidden by the paws
of ten Boston bull terriers,
ten angry bulls
jumping like enormous roaches.
At first I was lapped,
rough as sandpaper.
I became very clean.
Then my arm was missing.
I was coming apart.
They loved me until
I was gone.

2. THE DY-DEE DOLL

My Dy-dee doll
died twice.
Once when I snapped
her head off
and let it float in the toilet
and once under the sun lamp
trying to get warm
she melted.
She was a gloom,
her face embracing
her little bent arms.
She died in all her rubber wisdom.

3. SEVEN TIMES

I died seven times
in seven ways
letting death give me a sign,
letting death place his mark on my forehead,
crossed over, crossed over

And death took root in that sleep.
In that sleep I held an ice baby
and I rocked it
and was rocked by it.
Oh Madonna, hold me.
I am a small handful.

NA

My mother died
unrocked, unrocked.
Weeks at her deathbed
seeing her thrust herself against the metal bars,
thrashing like a fish on the hook
and me low at her high stage,
letting the priestess dance alone,
wanting to place my head in her lap
or even take her in my arms somehow
and fondle her twisted gray hair.
But her rocking horse was pain
with vomit steaming from her mouth.
Her belly was big with another child,
cancer's baby, big as a football.
I could not soothe.
With every hump and crack
there was less Madonna
until that strange labor took her.
Then the room was bankrupt.
That was the end of her paying.

5. MAX

Max and I
two immoderate sisters,
two immoderate writers,
two burdeners,
made a pact.
To beat death down with a stick.
To take over.
To build our death like carpenters.
When she had a broken back,
each night we built her sleep.
Talking on the hot line
until her eyes pulled down like shades.
And we agreed in those long hushed phone calls
that when the moment comes
we'll talk turkey,
we'll shoot words straight from the hip,

we'll play it as it lays.
Yes,
when death comes with its hood
we won't be polite.

6. BABY

Death,
you lie in my arms like a cherub,
as heavy as bread dough.
Your milky wings are as still as plastic.
Hair soft as music.
Hair the color of a harp.
And eyes made of glass,
as brittle as crystal.
Each time I rock you
I think you will break.
I rock. I rock.
Glass eye, ice eye,
primordial eye,
lava eye,
pin eye,
break eye,
how you stare back!

Like the gaze of small children
you know all about me.
You have worn my underwear.
You have read my newspaper.
You have seen my father whip me.
You have seen my stroke my father's whip.

I rock. I rock.
We plunge back and forth
comforting each other.
We are stone.
We are carved, a piet a
that swings.
Outside, the world is a chilly army.
Outside, the sea is brought to its knees.
Outside, Pakistan is swallowed in a mouthful.

I rock. I rock.
You are my stone child
with still eyes like marbles.
There is a death baby
for each of us.
We own him.
His smell is our smell.
Beware. Beware.
There is a tenderness.
There is a love
for this dumb traveler
waiting in his pink covers.
Someday,
heavy with cancer or disaster
I will look up at Max
and say: It is time.
Hand me the death baby
and there will be
that final rocking.

Anne Sexton

The Death King

I hired a carpenter
to build my coffin
and last night I lay in it,
braced by a pillow,
sniffing the wood,
letting the old king
breathe on me,
thinking of my poor murdered body,
murdered by time,
waiting to turn stiff as a field marshal,
letting the silence dishonor me,
remembering that I'll never cough again.

Death will be the end of fear
and the fear of dying,
fear like a dog stuffed in my mouth,
fear like dung stuffed up my nose,
fear where water turns into steel,
fear as my breast flies into the Disposall,
fear as flies tremble in my ear,
fear as the sun ignites in my lap,
fear as night can't be shut off,
and the dawn, my habitual dawn,
is locked up forever.

Fear and a coffin to lie in
like a dead potato.
Even then I will dance in my dire clothes,
a crematory flight,
blinding my hair and my fingers,
wounding God with his blue face,
his tyranny, his absolute kingdom,
with my aphrodisiac.

Anne Sexton

The Division Of Parts

1.

Mother, my Mary Gray,
once resident of Gloucester
and Essex County,
a photostat of your will
arrived in the mail today.
This is the division of money.
I am one third
of your daughters counting my bounty
or I am a queen alone
in the parlor still,
eating the bread and honey.
It is Good Friday.
Black birds pick at my window sill.
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.
A week ago, while the hard March gales
beat on your house,
we sorted your things: obstacles
of letters, family silver,
eyeglasses and shoes.
Like some unseasoned Christmas, its scales
rigged and reset,
I bundled out gifts I did not choose.
Now the houts of The Cross
rewind. In Boston, the devout
work their cold knees
toward that sweet martyrdom
that Christ planned. 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 usly hours. Black birds peck
at my window glass

and Easter will take its ragged son.
The clutter of worship
that you taught me, Mary Gray,
is old. I imitate
a memory of belief
that I do not own. I trip
on your death and Jesus, my stranger
floats up over
my Christian home, wearing his straight
thorn tree. I have cast my lot
and am one third thief
of you. Time, that rearranger
of estates, equips
me with your garments, but not with grief.

2.

This winter when
cancer began its ugliness
I grieved with you each day
for three months
and found you in your private nook
of the medicinal palace
for New England Women
and never once
forgot how long it took.
I read to you
from The New Yorker, ate suppers
you wouldn't eat, fussed
with your flowers,
joked with your nurses, as if I
were the balm among lepers,
as if I could undo
a life in hours
if I never said goodbye.
But you turned old,
all your fifty-eight years sliding
like masks from your skull;
and at the end
I packed your nightgowns in suitcases,
paid the nurses, came riding
home as if I'd been told
I could pretend

people live in places.

3.

Since then I have pretended ease,
loved with the trickeries of need, but not enough
to shed my daughterhood
or sweeten him as a man.

I drink the five o' clock martinis
and poke at this dry page like a rough
goat. Fool! I fumble my lost childhood
for a mother and lounge in sad stuff
with love to catch and catch as catch can.

And Christ still waits. I have tried
to exorcise the memory of each event
and remain still, a mixed child,
heavy with cloths of you.

Sweet witch, you are my worried guide.
Such dangerous angels walk through Lent.
Their walls creak Anne! Convert! Convert!
My desk moves. Its cavr murmurs Boo
and I am taken and beguiled.

Or wrong. For all the way I've come
I'll have to go again. Instead, I must convert
to love as reasonable
as Latin, as sold as earthenware:
an equilibrium

I never knew. And Lent will keep its hurt
for someone else. Christ knows enough
staunch guys have hitched him in trouble.
thinking his sticks were badges to wear.

4.

Spring rusts on its skinny branch
and last summer's lawn
is soggy and brown.

Yesterday is just a number.

All of its winters avalanche
out of sight. What was, is gone.

Mother, last night I slept
in your Bonwit Teller nightgown.

Divided, you climbed into my head.
There in my jabbering dream

I heard my own angry cries
and I cursed you, Dame
keep out of my slumber.
My good Dame, you are dead.
And Mother, three stones
slipped from your glittering eyes.
Now it's Friday's noon
and I would still curse
you with my rhyming words
and bring you flapping back, old love,
old circus knitting, god-in-her-moon,
all fairest in my lang syne verse,
the gauzy bride among the children,
the fancy amid the absurd
and awkward, that horn for hounds
that skipper homeward, that museum
keeper of stiff starfish, that blaze
within the pilgrim woman,
a clown mender, a dove's
cheek among the stones,
my Lady of first words,
this is the division of ways.
And now, while Christ stays
fastened to his Crucifix
so that love may praise
his sacrifice
and not the grotesque metaphor,
you come, a brave ghost, to fix
in my mind without praise
or paradise
to make me your inheritor.

Anne Sexton

The Doctor Of The Heart

Take away your knowledge, Doktor.
It doesn't butter me up.

You say my heart is sick unto.
You ought to have more respect!

you with the goo on the suction cup.
You with your wires and electrodes

fastened at my ankle and wrist,
sucking up the biological breast.

You with your zigzag machine
playing like the stock market up and down.

Give me the Phi Beta key you always twirl
and I will make a gold crown for my molar.

I will take a slug if you please
and make myself a perfectly good appendix.

Give me a fingernail for an eyeglass.
The world was milky all along.

I will take an iron and press out
my slipped disk until it is flat.

But take away my mother's carcinoma
for I have only one cup of fetus tears.

Take away my father's cerebral hemorrhage
for I have only a jigger of blood in my hand.

Take away my sister's broken neck
for I have only my schoolroom ruler for a cure.

Is there such a device for my heart?
I have only a gimmick called magic fingers.

Let me dilate like a bad debt.
Here is a sponge. I can squeeze it myself.

O heart, tobacco red heart,
beat like a rock guitar.

I am at the ship's prow.
I am no longer the suicide

with her raft and paddle.
Herr Doktor! I'll no longer die

to spite you, you wallowing
seasick grounded man.

Anne Sexton

The Double Image

1.

I am thirty this November.
You are still small, in your fourth year.
We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,
flapping in the winter rain.
falling flat and washed. And I remember
mostly the three autumns you did not live here.
They said I'd never get you back again.
I tell you what you'll never really know:
all the medical hypothesis
that explained my brain will never be as true as these
struck leaves letting go.

I, who chose two times
to kill myself, had said your nickname
the mewling mouths when you first came;
until a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
above your head. 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.

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.
I laughed to see the private iron in that hotel.
Today the yellow leaves
go queer. You ask me where they go I say today believed
in itself, or else it fell.

Today, my small child, Joyce,

love your self's self where it lives.
There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,
why did I let you grow
in another place. You did not know my voice
when I came back to call. All the superlatives
of tomorrow's white tree and mistletoe
will not help you know the holidays you had to miss.
The time I did not love
myself, I visited your shoveled walks; you held my glove.
There was new snow after this.

2.

They sent me letters with news
of you and I made moccasins that I would never use.
When I grew well enough to tolerate
myself, I lived with my mother, the witches said.
But I didn't leave. I had my portrait
done instead.

Part way back from Bedlam
I came to my mother's house in Gloucester,
Massachusetts. And this is how I came
to catch at her; and this is how I lost her.
I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said.
And she never could. She had my portrait
done instead.

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.

There was a church where I grew up
with its white cupboards where they locked us up,
row by row, like puritans or shipmates
singing together. My father passed the plate.
Too late to be forgiven now, the witches said.
I wasn't exactly forgiven. They had my portrait

done instead.

3.

All that summer sprinklers arched
over the seaside grass.
We talked of drought
while the salt-parched
field grew sweet again. To help time pass
I tried to mow the lawn
and in the morning I had my portrait done,
holding my smile in place, till it grew formal.
Once I mailed you a picture of a rabbit
and a postcard of Motif number one,
as if it were normal
to be a mother and be gone.

They hung my portrait in the chill
north light, matching
me to keep me well.
Only my mother grew ill.
She turned from me, as if death were catching,
as if death transferred,
as if my dying had eaten inside of her.
That August you were two, by I timed my days with doubt.
On the first of September she looked at me
and said I gave her cancer.
They carved her sweet hills out
and still I couldn't answer.

4.

That winter she came
part way back
from her sterile suite
of doctors, the seasick
cruise of the X-ray,
the cells' arithmetic
gone wild. Surgery incomplete,
the fat arm, the prognosis poor, I heard
them say.

During the sea blizzards
she had here
own portrait painted.
A cave of mirror
placed on the south wall;
matching smile, matching contour.
And you resembled me; unacquainted
with my face, you wore it. But you were mine
after all.

I wintered in Boston,
childless bride,
nothing sweet to spare
with witches at my side.
I missed your babyhood,
tried a second suicide,
tried the sealed hotel a second year.
On April Fool you fooled me. We laughed and this
was good.

5.

I checked out for the last time
on the first of May;
graduate of the mental cases,
with my analysts's okay,
my complete book of rhymes,
my typewriter and my suitcases.

All that summer I learned life
back into my own
seven rooms, visited the swan boats,
the market, answered the phone,
served cocktails as a wife
should, made love among my petticoats

and August tan. And you came each
weekend. But I lie.
You seldom came. I just pretended
you, small piglet, butterfly
girl with jelly bean cheeks,
disobedient three, my splendid

stranger. And I had to learn
why I would rather
die than love, how your innocence
would hurt and how I gather
guilt like a young intern
his symptoms, his certain evidence.

That October day we went
to Gloucester the red hills
reminded me of the dry red fur fox
coat I played in as a child; stock still
like a bear or a tent,
like a great cave laughing or a red fur fox.

We drove past the hatchery,
the hut that sells bait,
past Pigeon Cove, past the Yacht Club, past Squall's
Hill, to the house that waits
still, on the top of the sea,
and two portraits hung on the opposite walls.

6.

In north light, my smile is held in place,
the shadow marks my bone.
What could I have been dreaming as I sat there,
all of me waiting in the eyes, the zone
of the smile, the young face,
the foxes' snare.

In south light, her smile is held in place,
her cheeks wilting like a dry
orchid; my mocking mirror, my overthrown
love, my first image. She eyes me from that face
that stony head of death
I had outgrown.

The artist caught us at the turning;
we smiled in our canvas home
before we chose our foreknown separate ways.
The dry redfur fox coat was made for burning.

I rot on the wall, my own
Dorian Gray.

And this was the cave of the mirror,
that double woman who stares
at herself, as if she were petrified
in time - two ladies sitting in umber chairs.
You kissed your grandmother
and she cried.

7.

I could not get you back
except for weekends. You came
each time, clutching the picture of a rabbit
that I had sent you. For the last time I unpack
your things. We touch from habit.
The first visit you asked my name.
Now you will stay for good. I will forget
how we bumped away from each other like marionettes
on strings. It wasn't the same
as love, letting weekends contain
us. You scrape your knee. You learn my name,
wobbling up the sidewalk, calling and crying.
You can call me mother and I remember my mother again,
somewhere in greater Boston, dying.

I remember we named you Joyce
so we could call you Joy.
You came like an awkward guest
that first time, all wrapped and moist
and strange at my heavy breast.
I needed you. I didn't want a boy,
only a girl, a small milky mouse
of a girl, already loved, already loud in the house
of herself. We named you Joy.
I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me.
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
or soothe it. I made you to find me.

The Earth

God loafs around heaven,
without a shape
but He would like to smoke His cigar
or bite His fingernails
and so forth.

God owns heaven
but He craves the earth,
the earth with its little sleepy caves,
its bird resting at the kitchen window,
even its murders lined up like broken chairs,
even its writers digging into their souls
with jackhammers,
even its hucksters selling their animals
for gold,
even its babies sniffing for their music,
the farm house, white as a bone,
sitting in the lap of its corn,
even the statue holding up its widowed life,
but most of all He envies the bodies,
He who has no body.

The eyes, opening and shutting like keyholes
and never forgetting, recording by thousands,
the skull with its brains like eels-
the tablet of the world-
the bones and their joints
that build and break for any trick,
the genitals,
the ballast of the eternal,
and the heart, of course,
that swallows the tides
and spits them out cleansed.

He does not envy the soul so much.
He is all soul
but He would like to house it in a body
and come down
and give it a bath

now and then.

Anne Sexton

The Earth Falls Down

If I could blame it all on the weather,
the snow like the cadaver's table,
the trees turned into knitting needles,
the ground as hard as a frozen haddock,
the pond wearing its mustache of frost.
If I could blame conditions on that,
if I could blame the hearts of strangers
striding muffled down the street,
or blame the dogs, every color,
sniffing each other
and pissing on the doorstep...
If I could blame the bosses
and the presidents for
their unpardonable songs...
If I could blame it on all
the mothers and fathers of the world,
they of the lessons, the pellets of power,
they of the love surrounding you like batter...
Blame it on God perhaps?
He of the first opening
that pushed us all into our first mistakes?
No, I'll blame it on Man
For Man is God
and man is eating the earth up
like a candy bar
and not one of them can be left alone with the ocean
for it is known he will gulp it all down.
The stars (possibly) are safe.
At least for the moment.
The stars are pears
that no one can reach,
even for a wedding.

Perhaps for a death.

Anne Sexton

The Errand

I've been going right on, page by page,
since we last kissed, two long dolls in a cage,
two hunger-mongers throwing a myth in and out,
double-crossing out lives with doubt,
leaving us separate now, foggy with rage.

But then I've told my readers what I think
and scrubbed out the remainder with my shrink,
have placed my bones in a jar as if possessed,
have pasted a black wing over my left breast,
have washed the white out of the moon at my sink,

have eaten The Cross, have digested its lore,
indeed, have loved that eggless man once more,
have placed my own head in the kettle because
in the end death won't settle for my hypochondrias,
because this errand we're on goes to one store.

That shopkeeper may put up barricades,
and he may advertise cognac and razor blades,
he may let you dally at Nice or the Tuileries,
he may let the state of our bowels have ascendancy,
he may let such as we flaunt our escapades,

swallow down our portion of whisky and dex,
salvage the day with some soup or some sex,
juggle our teabags as we inch down the hall,
let the blood out of our fires with phenobarbital,
lick the headlines for Starkweathers and Specks,

let us be folk of the literary set,
let us deceive with words the critics regret,
let us dog down the streets for each invitation,
typing out our lives like a Singer sewing sublimation,
letting our delicate bottoms settle and yet

they were spanked alive by some doctor of folly,
given a horn or a dish to get by with, by golly,
exploding with blood in this errand called life,

dumb with snow and elbows, rubber man, a mother wife,
tongues to waggle out of the words, mistletoe and holly,

tables to place our stones on, decades of disguises,
until the shopkeeper plants his boot in our eyes,
and unties our bone and is finished with the case,
and turns to the next customer, forgetting our face
or how we knelt at the yellow bulb with sighs
like moth wings for a short while in a small place.

Anne Sexton

The Evil Eye

It comes oozing
out of flowers at night,
it comes out of the rain
if a snake looks skyward,
it comes out of chairs and tables
if you don't point at them and say their names.
It comes into your mouth while you sleep,
pressing in like a washcloth.
Beware. Beware.

If you meet a cross-eyed person
you must plunge into the grass,
alongside the chilly ants,
fish through the green fingernails
and come up with the four-leaf clover
or your blood with congeal
like cold gravy.

If you run across a horseshoe,
passerby,
stop, take your hands out of your pockets
and count the nails
as you count your children
or your money.
Otherwise a sand flea will crawl in your ear
and fly into your brain
and the only way you'll keep from going mad
is to be hit with a hammer every hour.

If a hunchback is in the elevator with you
don't turn away,
immediately touch his hump
for his child will be born from his back tomorrow
and if he promptly bites the baby's nails off
(so it won't become a thief)
that child will be holy
and you, simple bird that you are,
may go on flying.

When you knock on wood,
and you do,
you knock on the Cross
and Jesus gives you a fragment of His body
and breaks an egg in your toilet,
giving up one life
for one life.

Anne Sexton

The Evil Seekers

We are born with luck
which is to say with gold in our mouth.
As new and smooth as a grape,
as pure as a pond in Alaska,
as good as the stem of a green bean-
we are born and that ought to be enough,
we ought to be able to carry on from that
but one must learn about evil,
learn what is subhuman,
learn how the blood pops out like a scream,
one must see the night
before one can realize the day,
one must listen hard to the animal within,
one must walk like a sleepwalker
on the edge of a roof,
one must throw some part of her body
into the devil's mouth.
Odd stuff, you'd say.
But I'd say
you must die a little,
have a book of matches go off in your hand,
see your best friend copying your exam,
visit an Indian reservation and see
their plastic feathers,
the dead dream.
One must be a prisoner just once to hear
the lock twist into his gut.
After all that
one is free to grasp at the trees, the stones,
the sky, the birds that make sense out of air.
But even in a telephone booth
evil can seep out of the receiver
and we must cover it with a mattress,
and then tear it from its roots
and bury it,
bury it.

Anne Sexton

The Exorcists

And I solemnly swear
on the chill of secrecy
that I know you not, this room never,
the swollen dress I wear,
nor the anonymous spoons that free me,
nor this calendar nor the pulse we pare and cover.

For all these present,
before that wandering ghost,
that yellow moth of my summer bed,
I say: this small event
is not. So I prepare, am dosed
in ether and will not cry what stays unsaid.

I was brown with August,
the clapping waves at my thighs
and a storm riding into the cove. We swam
while the others beached and burst
for their boarded huts, their hale cries
shouting back to us and the hollow slam
of the dory against the float.
Black arms of thunder strapped
upon us, squalled out, we breathed in rain
and stroked past the boat.
We thrashed for shore as if we were trapped
in green and that suddenly inadequate stain

of lightning belling around
our skin. Bodies in air
we raced for the empty lobsterman-shack.
It was yellow inside, the sound
of the underwing of the sun. I swear,
I most solemnly swear, on all the bric-a-brac

of summer loves, I know
you not.

Anne Sexton

The Expatriates

My dear, it was a moment
to clutch for a moment
so that you may believe in it
and believing is the act of love, I think,
even in the telling, wherever it went.

In the false New England forest
where the misplanted Norwegian trees
refused to root, their thick synthetic
roots barging out of the dirt to work on the air,
we held hands and walked on our knees.
Actually, there was no one there.

For forty years this experimental
woodland grew, shaft by shaft in perfect rows
where its stub branches held and its spokes fell.
It was a place of parallel trees, their lives
filed out in exile where we walked too alien to know
our sameness and how our sameness survives.

Outside of us the village cars followed
the white line we had carefully walked
two nights before toward our single beds.
We lay halfway up an ugly hill and if we fell
it was here in the woods where the woods were caught
in their dying and you held me well.

And now I must dream the forest whole
and your sweet hands, not once as frozen
as those stopped trees, nor ruled, nor pale,
nor leaving mine. Today in my house, I see
our house, its pillars a dim basement of men
holding up their foreign ground for you and me.

My dear, it was a time,
butchered from time
that we must tell of quickly
before we lose the sound of our own
mouths calling mine, mine, mine.

Anne Sexton

The Fallen Angels

They come on to my clean
sheet of paper and leave a Rorschach blot.
They do not do this to be mean,
they do it to give me a sign
they want me, as Aubrey Beardsley once said,
to shove it around till something comes.
Clumsy as I am,
I do it.
For I am like them -
both saved and lost,
tumbling downward like Humpty Dumpty
off the alphabet.

Each morning I push them off my bed
and when they get in the salad
rolling in it like a dog,
I pick each one out
just the way my daughter
picks out the anchovies.
In May they dance on the jonquils,
wearing out their toes,
laughing like fish.
In November, the dread month,
they suck the childhood out of the berries
and turn them sour and inedible.

Yet they keep me company.
They wiggle up life.
They pass out their magic
like Assorted Lifesavers.
They go with me to the dentist
and protect me from the drill.
At the same time,
they go to class with me
and lie to my students.

O fallen angel,
the companion within me,
whisper something holy

before you pinch me
into the grave.

Anne Sexton

The Farmer's Wife

From the hodge porridge
of their country lust,
their local life in Illinois,
where all their acres look
like a sprouting broom factory,
they name just en years now
that she has been his habit;
as again tonight he'll say
honey bunch let's go
and she will not say how there
must be more to living
than this brief bright bridge
of the raucous bed or even
the slow braille touch of him
like a heavy god grown light,
that old pantomime of love
that she wants although
it leaves her still alone,
built back again at last,
mind's apart from him, living
her own self in her own words
and hating the sweat of the house
they keep when they finally lie
each in separate dreams
and then how she watches him,
still strong in the blowzy bag
of his usual sleep while
her young years bungle past
their same marriage bed
and she wishes him cripple, or poet,
or even lonely, or sometimes,
better, my lover, dead.

Anne Sexton

The Firebombers

We are America.
We are the coffin fillers.
We are the grocers of death.
We pack them in crates like cauliflowers.

The bomb opens like a shoebox.
And the child?
The child is certainly not yawning.
And the woman?
The woman is bathing her heart.
It has been torn out of her
and as a last act
she is rinsing it off in the river.
This is the death market.

America,
where are your credentials?

Anne Sexton

The Frog Prince

Frau Doktor,
Mama Brundig,
take out your contacts,
remove your wig.
I write for you.
I entertain.
But frogs come out
of the sky like rain.

Frogs arrive
With an ugly fury.
You are my judge.
You are my jury.

My guilts are what
we catalogue.
I'll take a knife
and chop up frog.

Frog has not nerves.
Frog is as old as a cockroach.
Frog is my father's genitals.
Frog is a malformed doorknob.
Frog is a soft bag of green.

The moon will not have him.
The sun wants to shut off
like a light bulb.
At the sight of him
the stone washes itself in a tub.
The crow thinks he's an apple
and drops a worm in.
At the feel of frog
the touch-me-nots explode
like electric slugs.
Slime will have him.
Slime has made him a house.

Mr. Poison

is at my bed.
He wants my sausage.
He wants my bread.

Mama Brundig,
he wants my beer.
He wants my Christ
for a souvenir.

Frog has boil disease
and a bellyful of parasites.
He says: Kiss me. Kiss me.
And the ground soils itself.

Why
should a certain
quite adorable princess
be walking in her garden
at such a time
and toss her golden ball
up like a bubble
and drop it into the well?
It was ordained.
Just as the fates deal out
the plague with a tarot card.
Just as the Supreme Being drills
holes in our skulls to let
the Boston Symphony through.

But I digress.
A loss has taken place.
The ball has sunk like a cast-iron pot
into the bottom of the well.

Lost, she said,
my moon, my butter calf,
my yellow moth, my Hindu hare.
Obviously it was more than a ball.
Balls such as these are not
for sale in Au Bon Marché.
I took the moon, she said,
between my teeth

and now it is gone
and I am lost forever.
A thief had robbed by day.

Suddenly the well grew
thick and boiling
and a frog appeared.
His eyes bulged like two peas
and his body was trussed into place.
Do not be afraid, Princess,
he said, I am not a vagabond,
a cattle farmer, a shepherd,
a doorkeeper, a postman
or a laborer.
I come to you as a tradesman.
I have something to sell.
Your ball, he said,
for just three things.
Let me eat from your plate.
Let me drink from your cup.
Let me sleep in your bed.
She thought, Old Waddler,
those three you will never do,
but she made the promises
with hopes for her ball once more.
He brought it up in his mouth
like a tricky old dog
and she ran back to the castle
leaving the frog quite alone.

That evening at dinner time
a knock was heard on the castle door
and a voice demanded:
King's youngest daughter,
let me in. You promised;
now open to me.
I have left the skunk cabbage
and the eels to live with you.
The kind then heard her promise
and forced her to comply.

The frog first sat on her lap.

He was as awful as an undertaker.
Next he was at her plate
looking over her bacon
and calves' liver.
We will eat in tandem,
he said gleefully.
Her fork trembled
as if a small machine
had entered her.
He sat upon the liver
and partook like a gourmet.
The princess choked
as if she were eating a puppy.
From her cup he drank.
It wasn't exactly hygienic.
From her cup she drank
as if it were Socrates' hemlock.

Next came the bed.
The silky royal bed.
Ah! The penultimate hour!
There was the pillow
with the princess breathing
and there was the sinuous frog
riding up and down beside her.
I have been lost in a river
of shut doors, he said,
and I have made my way over
the wet stones to live with you.
She woke up aghast.
I suffer for birds and fireflies
but not frogs, she said,
and threw him across the room.
Kaboom!

Like a genie coming out of a samovar,
a handsome prince arose in the
corner of her bedroom.
He had kind eyes and hands
and was a friend of sorrow.
Thus they were married.
After all he had compromised her.

He hired a night watchman
so that no one could enter the chamber
and he had the well
boarded over so that
never again would she lose her ball,
that moon, that Krishna hair,
that blind poppy, that innocent globe,
that madonna womb.

Anne Sexton

The Fury Of Abandonment

Someone lives in a cave
eating his toes,
I know that much.
Someone little lives under a bush
pressing an empty Coca-Cola can against
his starving bloated stomach,
I know that much.
A monkey had his hands cut off
for a medical experiment
and his claws wept.
I know tht much.

I know that it is all
a matter of hands.
Out of the mournful sweetness of touching
comes love
like breakfast.
Out of the many houses come the hands
before the abandonment of the city,
out of hte bars and shops,
a thin file of ants.

I've been abandoned out here
under the dry stars
with no shoes, no belt
and I've called Rescue Inc. -
that old-fashioned hot line -
no voice.
Left to my own lips, touch them,
my own nostrils, shoulders, breasts,
navel, stomach, mound,kneebone, ankle,
touch them.

It makes me laugh
to see a woman in this condition.
It makes me laugh for America and New York city
when your hands are cut off
and no one answers the phone.

Anonymous submission.

Anne Sexton

The Fury Of Beautiful Bones

Sing me a thrush, bone.
Sing me a nest of cup and pestle.
Sing me a sweetbread for an old grandfather.
Sing me a foot and a doorknob, for you are my love.
Oh sing, bone bag man, sing.
Your head is what I remember that August
you were in love with another woman but
that didn't matter. I was the guy of your
bones, your fingers long and nubby, your
forehead a beacon, bare as marble and I worried
you like an odor because you had not quite forgotten,
bone bag man, garlic in the North End,
the book you dedicated, naked as a fish,
naked as someone drowning into his own mouth.
I wonder, Mr. Bone man, what you're thinking
of your fury now, gone sour as a sinking whale,
crawling up the alphabet on her own bones.
Am I in your ear still singing songs in the rain,
me of the death rattle, me of the magnolias,
me of the sawdust tavern at the city's edge.
Women have lovely bones, arms, neck, thigh
and I admire them also, but your bones
supersede loveliness. They are the tough
ones that get broken and reset. I just can't
answer for you, only for your bones,
round rulers, round nudgers, round poles,
numb nubkins, the sword of sugar.
I feel the skull, Mr. Skeleton, living its
own life in its own skin.

Anne Sexton

The Fury Of Cooks

Herbs, garlic,
cheese, please let me in!
Souffles, salad,
Parker House rolls,
please let me in!
Cook Helen,
why are you so cross,
why is your kitchen verboten?
Couldn't you just teach me
to bake a potato,
to bake a potato,
that charm,
that young prince?
No! No!
This is my county!
You shout silently.
Couldn't you just show me
the gravy. How you drill it out
of the stomach of that bird?
Helen, Helen,
let me in,
let me feel the flour,
is it blinding and frightening,
this stuff that makes cakes?
Helen, Helen,
the kitchen is your dog
and you pat it
and love it
and keep it clean.
But all these things,
all these dishes of things
come through the swinging door
and I don't know from where?
Give me some tomato aspic, Helen!
I don't want to be alone.

Anne Sexton

The Fury Of Earth

The day of fire is coming, the thrush,
will fly ablaze like a little sky rocket,
the beetle will sink like a giant bulldozer,
and at the breaking of the morning the houses
will turn into oil and will in their tides
of fire be a becoming and an ending, a red fan.
What then, man in your easy chair,
of the anointment of the sick,
of the New Jerusalem?
You will have to polish up the stars
with Bab-o and find a new God
as the earth empties out
into the gnarled hands of the old redeemer.

Anne Sexton

The Fury Of Flowers And Worms

Let the flowers make a journey
on Monday so that I can see
ten daisies in a blue vase
with perhaps one red ant
crawling to the gold center.
A bit of the field on my table,
close to the worms
who struggle blinding,
moving deep into their slime,
moving deep into God's abdomen,
moving like oil through water,
sliding through the good brown.
The daisies grow wild
like popcorn.
They are God's promise to the field.
How happy I am, daisies, to love you.
How happy you are to be loved
and found magical, like a secret
from the sluggish field.
If all the world picked daisies
wars would end, the common cold would stop,
unemployment would end, the monetary market
would hold steady and no money would float.
Listen world.
if you'd just take the time to pick
the white flowers, the penny heart,
all would be well.
They are so unexpected.
They are as good as salt.
If someone had brought them
to van Gogh's room daily
his ear would have stayed on.
I would like to think that no one would die anymore
if we all believed in daisies
but the worms know better, don't they?
They slide into the ear of a corpse
and listen to his great sigh.

The Fury Of God's Good-Bye

One day He
tipped His top hat
and walked
out of the room,
ending the argument.
He stomped off
saying:
'I don't give guarantees'.
I was left
quite alone
using up the darkness.
I rolled up
my sweater,
up into a ball,
and took it
to bed with me,
a kind of stand-in
for God,
what washerwoman
who walks out
when you're clean
but not ironed.
When I woke up
the sweater
had turned to
bricks of gold.
I'd won the world
but like a
forsaken explorer,
I'd lost
my map.

Anne Sexton

The Fury Of Guitars And Sopranos

This singing
is a kind of dying,
a kind of birth,
a votive candle.
I have a dream-mother
who sings with her guitar,
nursing the bedroom
with a moonlight and beautiful olives.
A flute came too,
joining the five strings,
a God finger over the holes.
I knew a beautiful woman once
who sang with her fingertips
and her eyes were brown
like small birds.
At the cup of her breasts
I drew wine.
At the mound of her legs
I drew figs.
She sang for my thirst,
mysterious songs of God
that would have laid an army down.
It was as if a morning-glory
had bloomed in her throat
and all that blue
and small pollen
ate into my heart
violent and religious.

Anne Sexton

The Fury Of Hating Eyes

I would like to bury
all the hating eyes
under the sand somewhere off
the North Atlantic and suffocate
them with the awful sand
and put all their colors to sleep
in that soft smother.

Take the brown eyes of my father,
those gun shots, those mean muds.
Bury them.

Take the blue eyes of my mother,
naked as the sea,
waiting to pull you down
where there is no air, no God.
Bury them.

Take the black eyes of my love,
coal eyes like a cruel hog,
wanting to whip you and laugh.
Bury them.

Take the hating eyes of martyrs,
presidents, bus collectors,
bank managers, soldiers.
Bury them.

Take my eyes, half blind
and falling into the air.
Bury them.

Take your eyes.

I come to the center,
where a shark looks up at death
and thinks of my heart
and squeeze it like a doughnut.
They'd like to take my eyes
and poke a hatpin through
their pupils. Not just to bury
but to stab. As for your eyes,
I fold up in front of them
in a baby ball and you send
them to the State Asylum.
Look! Look! Both those

mice are watching you
from behind the kind bars.

Anne Sexton

The Fury Of Jewels And Coal

Many a miner has gone
into the deep pit
to receive the dust of a kiss,
an ore-cell.
He has gone with his lamp
full of mole eyes
deep deep and has brought forth
Jesus at Gethsemane.
Body of moss, body of glass,
body of peat, how sharp
you lie, emerald as heavy
as a golf course, ruby as dark
as an afterbirth,
diamond as white as sun
on the sea, coal, dark mother,
brood mother, let the sea birds
bring you into our lives
as from a distant island,
heavy as death.

Anne Sexton

The Fury Of Overshoes

They sit in a row
outside the kindergarten,
black, red, brown, all
with those brass buckles.
Remember when you couldn't
buckle your own
overshoe
or tie your own
overshoe
or tie your own shoe
or cut your own meat
and the tears
running down like mud
because you fell off your
tricycle?
Remember, big fish,
when you couldn't swim
and simply slipped under
like a stone frog?
The world wasn't
yours.
It belonged to
the big people.
Under your bed
sat the wolf
and he made a shadow
when cars passed by
at night.
They made you give up
your nightlight
and your teddy
and your thumb.
Oh overshoes,
don't you
remember me,
pushing you up and down
in the winter snow?
Oh thumb,
I want a drink,

it is dark,
where are the big people,
when will I get there,
taking giant steps
all day,
each day
and thinking
nothing of it?

Anne Sexton

The Fury Of Rain Storms

The rain drums down like red ants,
each bouncing off my window.
The ants are in great pain
and they cry out as they hit
as if their little legs were only
stitched on and their heads pasted.
And oh they bring to mind the grave,
so humble, so willing to be beat upon
with its awful lettering and
the body lying underneath
without an umbrella.
Depression is boring, I think
and I would do better to make
some soup and light up the cave.

Anne Sexton

The Fury Of Sunrises

Darkness
as black as your eyelid,
poketricks of stars,
the yellow mouth,
the smell of a stranger,
dawn coming up,
dark blue,
no stars,
the smell of a love,
warmer now
as authentic as soap,
wave after wave
of lightness
and the birds in their chains
going mad with throat noises,
the birds in their tracks
yelling into their cheeks like clowns,
lighter, lighter,
the stars gone,
the trees appearing in their green hoods,
the house appearing across the way,
the road and its sad macadam,
the rock walls losing their cotton,
lighter, lighter,
letting the dog out and seeing
fog lift by her legs,
a gauze dance,
lighter, lighter,
yellow, blue at the tops of trees,
more God, more God everywhere,
lighter, lighter,
more world everywhere,
sheets bent back for people,
the strange heads of love
and breakfast,
that sacrament,
lighter, yellower,
like the yolk of eggs,
the flies gathering at the windowpane,

the dog inside whining for good
and the day commencing,
not to die, not to die,
as in the last day breaking,
a final day digesting itself,
lighter, lighter,
the endless colors,
the same old trees stepping toward me,
the rock unpacking its crevices,
breakfast like a dream
and the whole day to live through,
steadfast, deep, interior.
After the death,
after the black of black,
the lightness, -
not to die, not to die -
that God begot.

Anne Sexton

The Fury Of Sunsets

Something
cold is in the air,
an aura of ice
and phlegm.
All day I've built
a lifetime and now
the sun sinks to
undo it.
The horizon bleeds
and sucks its thumb.
The little red thumb
goes out of sight.
And I wonder about
this lifetime with myself,
this dream I'm living.
I could eat the sky
like an apple
but I'd rather
ask the first star:
why am I here?
why do I live in this house?
who's responsible?
eh?

Anne Sexton

The Gold Key

The speaker in this case
is a middle-aged witch, me-
tangled on my two great arms,
my face in a book
and my mouth wide,
ready to tell you a story or two.
I have come to remind you,
all of you:
Alice, Samuel, Kurt, Eleanor,
Jane, Brian, Maryel,
all of you draw near.
Alice,
at fifty-six do you remember?
Do you remember when you
were read to as a child?
Samuel,
at twenty-two have you forgotten?
Forgotten the ten P.M. dreams
where the wicked king
went up in smoke?
Are you comatose?
Are you undersea?
Attention,
my dears,
let me present to you this boy.
He is sixteen and he wants some answers.
He is each of us.
I mean you.
I mean me.
It is not enough to read Hesse
and drink clam chowder
we must have the answers.
The boy has found a gold key
and he is looking for what it will open.
This boy!
Upon finding a string
he would look for a harp.
Therefore he holds the key tightly.
Its secrets whimper

like a dog in heat.
He turns the key.
Presto!
It opens this book of odd tales
which transform the Brothers Grimm.
Transform?
As if an enlarged paper clip
could be a piece of sculpture.
(And it could.)

Anne Sexton

The Hangman

Reasonable, reasonable, reasonable...we walked through
ten different homes, they always call them homes,
to find one ward where they like the babies who
looks like you. Each time, the eyes that no one owns
watched us intently, these visitors from the street
that moves outside. They watched, but did not know
about time, there in the house where babies never grow.
My boy, though innocent and mild
your brain is obsolete.
Those six times that you almost died
the newest medicine and the family fuss
pulled you back again. Supplied
with air, against my guilty wish,
your clogged pipes cried
like Lazarus.

At first your mother said...why me! why me!
But she got over that. Now she enjoys
her dull daily care and her hectic bravery.
You do not love anyone. She is not growing a boy;
she is enlarging a stone to wear around her neck.
Some nights in our bed her mouth snores at me coldly
or when she turns, her kisses walking out of the sea,
I think of the bad stories,
the monster and the wreck.
I think of that Scandinavian tale
that tells of the king who killed nine
sons in turn. Slaughtered wholesale,
they had one life in common
as you have mine,
my son.

Anne Sexton

The House

In dreams
the same bad dream goes on.
Like some gigantic German toy
the house has been rebuilt
upon its kelly-green lawn.
The same dreadful set,
the same family of orange and pink faces
carved and dressed up like puppets
who wait for their jaws to open and shut.
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.
The Irish boy
who dated her
(lace curtain Irish, her mother said)
urges her through the lead-colored garages
to feel the patent-leather fenders
and peek at the mileage.
All that money!
and kisses too.
Kisses that stick in the mouth
like the vinegar candy she used to pull
with her buttery fingers, pull
until it was white like a dog's bone,
white, thick and impossible to chew.
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.
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.

The maid
as thin as a pencil stick,
holds dinner as usual,
rubs her angry knuckles over the porcelain sink
and grumbles at the gun-shy bird dog.
She knows something is going on.
She pricks a baked potato.

The aunt,
older than all the crooked women
in
The Brothers Grimm,

leans by a gooseneck lamp in her second floor suite,
turns up her earphone to eavesdrop
and continues to knit,
her needles working like kitchen shears
and her breasts blown out like two
pincushions.

The houseboy,
a quick-eyed Filipino,
slinks by like a Japanese spy
from French Provincial room
to French Provincial room,
emptying the ash trays and plumping up
the down upholstery.

His jacket shines, old shiny black,
a wise undertaker.

The milkman walks in his cartoon
every other day in the snoozy dawn,
rattling his bottles like a piggy bank.
And gardeners come, six at a time,
pulling petunias and hairy angel bells
up through the mulch.

This one again, made vaguely and cruelly,
one eye green and one eye blue,

has the only major walk-on so far,
has walked from her afternoon date
past the waiting baked potatoes,
past the flashing back of the Japanese spy,
up the cotton batten stairs,
past the clicking and unclicking of the earphones,
turns here at the hall
by the diamonds that she'll never earn
and the bender that she kissed last night
among thick set stars, the floating bed
and the strange white key...
up like a skein of yarn,
up another flight into the penthouse,
to slam the door on all the years
she'll have to live through...
the sailor who she won't with,
the boys who will walk on
from Andover, Exeter and St. Marks,
the boys who will walk off with pale unlined faces,
to slam the door on all the days she'll stay the same
and never ask why and never think who to ask,
to slam the door and rip off her orange blouse.

Father, father, I wish I were dead.

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.
All day long the machine waits: rooms,
stairs, carpets, furniture, people -
those people who stand at the open windows like objects
waiting to topple.

Anne Sexton

The Interrogation Of The Man Of Many Hearts

Who's she, that one in your arms?

She's the one I carried my bones to
and built a house that was just a cot
and built a life that was over an hour
and built a castle where no one lives
and built, in the end, a song
to go with the ceremony.

Why have you brought her here?
Why do you knock on my door
with your little stores and songs?

I had joined her the way a man joins
a woman and yet there was no place
for festivities or formalities
and these things matter to a woman
and, you see, we live in a cold climate
and are not permitted to kiss on the street
so I made up a song that wasn't true.
I made up a song called Marriage.

You come to me out of wedlock
and kick your foot on my stoop
and ask me to measure such things?

Never. Never. Not my real wife.
She's my real witch, my fork, my mare,
my mother of tears, my skirtful of hell,
the stamp of my sorrows, the stamp of my bruises
and also the children she might bear
and also a private place, a body of bones
that I would honestly buy, if I could buy,
that I would marry, if I could marry.

And should I torment you for that?
Each man has a small fate allotted to him
and yours is a passionate one.

But I am in torment. We have no place.
The cot we share is almost a prison
where I can't say buttercup, bobolink,
sugarduck, pumpkin, love ribbon, locket,
valentine, summergirl, funnygirl and all
those nonsense things one says in bed.
To say I have bedded with her is not enough.
I have not only bedded her down.
I have tied her down with a knot.

Then why do you stick your fists
into your pockets? Why do you shuffle
your feet like a schoolboy?

For years I have tied this knot in my dreams.
I have walked through a door in my dreams
and she was standing there in my mother's apron.
Once she crawled through a window that was shaped
like a keyhole and she was wearing my daughter's
pink corduroys and each time I tied these women
in a knot. Once a queen came. I tied her too.
But this is something I have actually tied
and now I have made her fast.
I sang her out. I caught her down.
I stamped her out with a song.
There was no other apartment for it.
There was no other chamber for it.
Only the knot. The bedded-down knot.
Thus I have laid my hands upon her
and have called her eyes and her mouth
as mine, as also her tongue.

Why do you ask me to make choices?
I am not a judge or a psychologist.
You own your bedded-down knot.

And yet I have real daytimes and nighttimes
with children and balconies and a good wife.
Thus I have tied these other knots,
yet I would rather not think of them
when I speak to you of her. Not now.
If she were a room to rent I would pay.

If she were a life to save I would save.
Maybe I am a man of many hearts.

A man of many hearts?
Why then do you tremble at my doorway?
A man of many hearts does not need me.

I'm caught deep in the dye of her.
I have allowed you to catch me red-handed,
catch me with my wild oats in a wild clock
for my mare, my dove and my own clean body.
People might say I have snakes in my boots
but I tell you that just once am I in the stirrups,
just once, this once, in the cup.
The love of the woman is in the song.
I called her the woman in red.
I called her the woman in pink
but she was ten colors
and ten women
I could hardly name her.

I know who she is.
You have named her enough.

Maybe I shouldn't have put it in words.
Frankly, I think I'm worse for this kissing,
drunk as a piper, kicking the traces
and determined to tie her up forever.
You see the song is the life,
the life I can't live.
God, even as he passes,
hand down monogamy like slang.
I wanted to write her into the law.
But, you know, there is no law for this.

Man of many hearts, you are a fool!
The clover has grown thorns this year
and robbed the cattle of their fruit
and the stones of the river
have sucked men's eyes dry,
season after season,
and every bed has been condemned,

not by morality or law,
but by time.

Anne Sexton

The Inventory Of Goodbye

I have a pack of letters,
I have a pack of memories.
I could cut out the eyes of both.
I could wear them like a patchwork apron.
I could stick them in the washer, the drier,
and maybe some of the pain would float off like dirt?
Perhaps down the disposal I could grind up the loss.
Besides - what a bargain - no expensive phone calls.
No lengthy trips on planes in the fog.
No manicky laughter or blessing from an odd-lot priest.
That priest is probably still floating on a fog pillow.
Blessing us. Blessing us.

Am I to bless the lost you,
sitting here with my clumsy soul?
Propaganda time is over.
I sit here on the spike of truth.
No one to hate except the slim fish of memory
that slides in and out of my brain.
No one to hate except the acute feel of my nightgown
brushing my body like a light that has gone out.
It recalls the kiss we invented, tongues like poems,
meeting, returning, inviting, causing a fever of need.
Laughter, maps, cassettes, touch singing its path -
all to be broken and laid away in a tight strongbox.
The monotonous dead clog me up and there is only
black done in black that oozes from the strongbox.
I must disembowel it and then set the heart, the legs,
of two who were one upon a large woodpile
and ignite, as I was once ignited, and let it whirl
into flame, reaching the sky
making it dangerous with its red.

Anne Sexton

The Kiss

My mouth blooms like a cut.
I've been wronged all year, tedious
nights, nothing but rough elbows in them
and delicate boxes of Kleenex calling crybaby
crybaby, you fool!

Before today my body was useless.
Now it's tearing at its square corners.
It's tearing old Mary's garments off, knot by knot
and see - Now it's shot full of these electric bolts.
Zing! A resurrection!

Once it was a boat, quite wooden
and with no business, no salt water under it
and in need of some paint. It was no more
than a group of boards. But you hoisted her, rigged her.
She's been elected.

My nerves are turned on. I hear them like
musical instruments. Where there was silence
the drums, the strings are incurably playing. You did this.
Pure genius at work. Darling, the composer has stepped
into fire.

Anne Sexton

The Kite

Here, in front of the summer hotel
the beach waits like an altar.
We are lying on a cloth of sand
while the Atlantic noon stains
the world in light.
It was much the same
five years ago. I remember
how Ezio Pinza was flying a kite
for the children. None of us noticed
it then. The pleated lady
was still a nest of her knitting.
Four pouchy fellows kept their policy
of gin and tonic while trading some money.
The parasol girls slept, sun-sitting
their lovely years. No one thought
how precious it was, or even how funny
the festival seemed, square rigged in the air.
The air was a season they had bought,
like the cloth of sand.
I've been waiting
on this private stretch of summer land,
counting these five years and wondering why.
I mean, it was different that time
with Ezio Pinza flying a kite.
Maybe, after all, he knew something more
and was right.

Anne Sexton

The Legend Of The One-Eyed Man

Like Oedipus I am losing my sight.
Like Judas I have done my wrong.
Their punishment is over;
the shame and disgrace of it
are all used up.
But as for me,
look into my face
and you will know that crimes dropped upon me
as from a high building
and although I cannot speak of them
or explain the degrading details
I have remembered much
about Judas -
about Judas, the old and the famous -
that you overlooked.

The story of his life
is the story of mine.
I have one glass eye.
My nerves push against its painted surface
but the other one
waiting for judgment
continues to see . . .

Of course
the New Testament is very small.
Its mouth opens four times -
as out-of-date as a prehistoric monster,
yet somehow man-made
held together by pulleys
like the stone jaw of a back-hoe.
It gouges out the Judaic ground,
taking its own backyard
like a virgin daughter.

And furthermore how did Judas come into it -
that Judas Iscariot,
belonging to the tribe of Reuben?
He should have tried to lift him up there!

His neck like an iron pole,
hard as Newcastle,
his heart as stiff as beeswax,
his legs swollen and unmarked,
his other limbs still growing.
All of it heavy!
That dead weight that would have been his fault.
He should have known!

In the first place who builds up such ugliness?
I think of this man saying . . .
Look! Here's the price to do it
plus the cost of the raw materials
and if it took him three or four days
to do it, then, they'd understand.
They figured it weighed enough
to support a man. They said,
fifteen stone is the approximate weight
of a thief.

Its ugliness is a matter of custom.
If there was a mistake made
then the Crucifix was constructed wrong . . .
not from the quality of the pine,
not from hanging a mirror,
not from dropping the studding or the drill
but from having an inspiration.
But Judas was not a genius
or under the auspices of an inspiration.

I don't know whether it was gold or silver.
I don't know why he betrayed him
other than his motives,
other than the avaricious and dishonest man.
And then there were the forbidden crimes,
those that were expressly foretold,
and then overlooked
and then forgotten
except by me . . .
Judas had a mother
just as I had a mother.
Oh! Honor and relish the facts!

Do not think of the intense sensation
I have as I tell you this
but think only . . .

Judas had a mother.
His mother had a dream.
Because of this dream
he was altogether managed by fate
and thus he raped her.
As a crime we hear little of this.
Also he sold his God.

Anne Sexton

The Lost Ingredient

Almost yesterday, those gentle ladies stole
to their baths in Atlantic Cuty, for the lost
rites of the first sea of the first salt
running from a faucet. I have heard they sat
for hours in briny tubs, patting hotel towels
sweetly over shivered skin, smelling the stale
harbor of a lost ocean, praying at last
for impossible loves, or new skin, or still
another child. And since this was the style,
I don't suppose they knew what they had lost.

Almost yesterday, pushing West, I lost
ten Utah driving minutes, stopped to steal
past postcard vendors, crossed the hot slit
of macadam to touch the marvelous loosed
bobbing of The Salt Lake, to honor and assault
it in its proof, to wash away some slight
need for Maine's coast. Later the funny salt
itched in my pores and stung like bees or sleet.
I rinsed it off on 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.

Anne Sexton

The Moss Of His Skin

'Young girls in old Arabia were often buried alive next to their fathers, apparently as sacrifice to the goddesses of the tribes...'

-Harold Feldman, 'Children of the Desert' *Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Review*, Fall 1958

It was only important
to smile and hold still,
to lie down beside him
and to rest awhile,
to be folded up together
as if we were silk,
to sink from the eyes of mother
and not to talk.

The black room took us
like a cave or a mouth
or an indoor belly.

I held my breath
and daddy was there,
his thumbs, his fat skull,
his teeth, his hair growing
like a field or a shawl.

I lay by the moss
of his skin until
it grew strange. My sisters
will never know that I fall
out of myself and pretend
that Allah will not see
how I hold my daddy
like an old stone tree.

Anne Sexton

The Nude Swim

On the southwest side of Capri
we found a little unknown grotto
where no people were and we
entered it completely
and let our bodies lose all
their loneliness.

All the fish in us
had escaped for a minute.
The real fish did not mind.
We did not disturb their personal life.
We calmly trailed over them
and under them, shedding
air bubbles, little white
balloons that drifted up
into the sun by the boat
where the Italian boatman slept
with his hat over his face.

Water so clear you could
read a book through it.
Water so buoyant you could
float on your elbow.
I lay on it as on a divan.
I lay on it just like
Matisse's Red Odalisque.
Water was my strange flower,
one must picture a woman
without a toga or a scarf
on a couch as deep as a tomb.

The walls of that grotto
were everycolor blue and
you said, 'Look! Your eyes
are seacolor. Look! Your eyes
are skycolor.' And my eyes
shut down as if they were
suddenly ashamed.

The Other

Under my bowels, yellow with smoke,
it waits.

Under my eyes, those milk bunnies,
it waits.

It is waiting.

It is waiting.

Mr. Doppelganger. My brother. My spouse.

Mr. Doppelganger. My enemy. My lover.

When truth comes spilling out like peas
it hangs up the phone.

When the child is soothed and resting on the breast
it is my other who swallows Lysol.

When someone kisses someone or flushes the toilet
it is my other who sits in a ball and cries.

My other beats a tin drum in my heart.

My other hangs up laundry as I try to sleep.

My other cries and cries and cries
when I put on a cocktail dress.

It cries when I prick a potato.

It cries when I kiss someone hello.

It cries and cries and cries
until I put on a painted mask
and leer at Jesus in His passion.

Then it giggles.

It is a thumbscrew.

Its hatred makes it clairvoyant.

I can only sign over everything,
the house, the dog, the ladders, the jewels,
the soul, the family tree, the mailbox.

Then I can sleep.

Maybe.

Anonymous submission.

Anne Sexton

The Play

I am the only actor.
It is difficult for one woman
to act out a whole play.
The play is my life,
my solo act.
My running after the hands
and never catching up.
(The hands are out of sight -
that is, offstage.)
All I am doing onstage is running,
running to keep up,
but never making it.

Suddenly I stop running.
(This moves the plot along a bit.)
I give speeches, hundreds,
all prayers, all soliloquies.
I say absurd things like:
eggs must not quarrel with stones
or, keep your broken arm inside your sleeve
or, I am standing upright
but my shadow is crooked.
And such and such.
Many boos. Many boos.

Despite that I go on to the last lines:
To be without God is to be a snake
who wants to swallow an elephant.
The curtain falls.
The audience rushes out.
It was a bad performance.
That's because I'm the only actor
and there are few humans whose lives
will make an interesting play.
Don't you agree?

Anonymous submission.

The Poet Of Ignorance

Perhaps the earth is floating,
I do not know.
Perhaps the stars are little paper cutups
made by some giant scissors,
I do not know.
Perhaps the moon is a frozen tear,
I do not know.
Perhaps God is only a deep voice
heard by the deaf,
I do not know.

Perhaps I am no one.
True, I have a body
and I cannot escape from it.
I would like to fly out of my head,
but that is out of the question.
It is written on the tablet of destiny
that I am stuck here in this human form.
That being the case
I would like to call attention to my problem.

There is an animal inside me,
clutching fast to my heart,
a huge crab.
The doctors of Boston
have thrown up their hands.
They have tried scalpels,
needles, poison gasses and the like.
The crab remains.
It is a great weight.
I try to forget it, go about my business,
cook the broccoli, open the shut books,
brush my teeth and tie my shoes.
I have tried prayer
but as I pray the crab grips harder
and the pain enlarges.

I had a dream once,
perhaps it was a dream,

that the crab was my ignorance of God.
But who am I to believe in dreams?

Anonymous submission.

Anne Sexton

The Red Dance

There was a girl
who danced in the city that night,
that April 22nd,
all along the Charles River.
It was as if one hundred men were watching
or do I mean the one hundred eyes of God?
The yellow patches in the sycamores
glowed like miniature flashlights.
The shadows, the skin of them
were ice cubes that flashed
from the red dress to the roof.
Mile by mile along the Charles she danced
past the benches of lovers,
past the dogs pissing on the benches.
She had on a red, red dress
and there was a small rain
and she lifted her face to it
and thought it part of the river.
And cars and trucks went by
on Memorial Drive.
And the Harvard students in the brick
hallowed houses studied Sappho in cement rooms.
And this Sappho danced on the grass.
and danced and danced and danced.
It was a death dance.
The Larz Anderson bridge wore its lights
and many cars went by,
and a few students strolling under
their Coop umbrellas.
And a black man who asked this Sappho the time,
the time, as if her watch spoke.
Words were turning into grease,
and she said, 'Why do you lie to me? '
And the waters of the Charles were beautiful,
sticking out in many colored tongues
and this strange Sappho knew she would enter the lights
and be lit by them and sink into them.
And how the end would come -
it had been foretold to her -

she would aspirate swallowing a fish,
going down with God's first creature
dancing all the way.

Anne Sexton

The Road Back

The car is heavy with children
tugged back from summer,
swept out of their laughing beach,
swept out while a persistent rumour
tells them nothing ends.
Today we fret and pull
on wheels, ignore our regular loss
of time, count cows and others
while the sun moves over
like an old albatross
we must not count nor kill.
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.

Anne Sexton

The Room Of My Life

Here,
in the room of my life
the objects keep changing.
Ashtrays to cry into,
the suffering brother of the wood walls,
the forty-eight keys of the typewriter
each an eyeball that is never shut,
the books, each a contestant in a beauty contest,
the black chair, a dog coffin made of Naugahyde,
the sockets on the wall
waiting like a cave of bees,
the gold rug
a conversation of heels and toes,
the fireplace
a knife waiting for someone to pick it up,
the sofa, exhausted with the exertion of a whore,
the phone
two flowers taking root in its crotch,
the doors
opening and closing like sea clams,
the lights
poking at me,
lighting up both the soil and the laugh.
The windows,
the starving windows
that drive the trees like nails into my heart.
Each day I feed the world out there
although birds explode
right and left.
I feed the world in here too,
offering the desk puppy biscuits.
However, nothing is just what it seems to be.
My objects dream and wear new costumes,
compelled to, it seems, by all the words in my hands
and the sea that bangs in my throat.

Anne Sexton

The Stand-Ins

In the dream
the swastika is neon
and flashes like a strobe light
into my eyes, all colors,
all vibrations
and I see the killer in him
and he turns on an oven,
an oven, an oven, an oven,
and on a pie plate he sticks
in my Yellow Star
and then
then when it is ready for serving—
this dream goes off into the wings
and on stage The Cross appears,
with Jesus sticking to it
and He is breathing
and breathing
and He is breathing
and breathing
and then He speaks,
a kind of whisper,
and says . . .
This is the start.
This is the end.
This is a light.
This is a start.
I woke.
I did not know the hour,
an hour of night like thick scum
but I considered the dreams,
the two: Swastika, Crucifix,
and said: Oh well,
it doesn't belong to me,
if a cigar can be a cigar
then a dream can be a dream.
Right?
Right?
And went back to sleep
and another start.

Anne Sexton

The Starry Night

That does not keep me from having a terrible need of - shall I say the word -
religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars.

- Vincent Van Gogh in a letter to his brother

The town does not exist
except where one black-haired tree slips
up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.
Oh starry night! This is how
I want to die.

It moves. They are all alive.
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
to push children, like a god, from its eye.
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die:

into that rushing beast of the night,
sucked up by that great dragon, to split
from my life with no flag,
no belly,
no cry.

Anne Sexton

The Touch

For months my hand was sealed off
in a tin box. Nothing was there but the subway railings.
Perhaps it is bruised, I thought,
and that is why they have locked it up.
You could tell time by this, I thought,
like a clock, by its five knuckles
and the thin underground veins.
It lay there like an unconscious woman
fed by tubes she knew not of.

The hand had collapse,
a small wood pigeon
that had gone into seclusion.
I turned it over and the palm was old,
its lines traced like fine needlepoint
and stitched up into fingers.
It was fat and soft and blind in places.
Nothing but vulnerable.

And all this is metaphor.
An ordinary hand - just lonely
for something to touch
that touches back.
The dog won't do it.
Her tail wags in the swamp for a frog.
I'm no better than a case of dog food.
She owns her own hunger.
My sisters won't do it.
They live in school except for buttons
and tears running down like lemonade.
My father won't do it.
He comes in the house and even at night
he lives in a machine made by my mother
and well oiled by his job, his job.

The trouble is
that I'd let my gestures freeze.
The trouble was not
in the kitchen or the tulips

but only in my head, my head.

Then all this became history.

Your hand found mine.

Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot.

Oh, my carpenter,

the fingers are rebuilt.

They dance with yours.

They dance in the attic and in Vienna.

My hand is alive all over America.

Not even death will stop it,

death shedding her blood.

Nothing will stop it, for this is the kingdom

and the kingdom come.

Anne Sexton

The Truth The Dead Know

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.

We drive to the Cape. I cultivate
myself where the sun gutters from the sky,
where the sea swings in like an iron gate
and we touch. In another country people die.

My darling, the wind falls in like stones
from the whitehearted water and when we touch
we enter touch entirely. No one's alone.
Men kill for this, or for as much.

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

Anne Sexton

The Twelve Dancing Princesses

If you danced from midnight
to six A.M. who would understand?

The runaway boy
who chucks it all
to live on the Boston Common
on speed and saltines,
pissing in the duck pond,
rapping with the street priest,
trading talk like blows,
another missing person,
would understand.

The paralytic's wife
who takes her love to town,
sitting on the bar stool,
downing stingers and peanuts,
singing 'That ole Ace down in the hole,'
would understand.

The passengers
from Boston to Paris
watching the movie with dawn
coming up like statues of honey,
having partaken of champagne and steak
while the world turned like a toy globe,
those murderers of the nightgown
would understand.

The amnesiac
who tunes into a new neighborhood,
having misplaced the past,
having thrown out someone else's
credit cards and monogrammed watch,
would understand.

The drunken poet
(a genius by daylight)
who places long-distance calls

at three A.M. and then lets you sit
holding the phone while he vomits
(he calls it 'The Night of the Long Knives')
getting his kicks out of the death call,
would understand.

The insomniac
listening to his heart
thumping like a June bug,
listening on his transistor
to Long John Nebel arguing from New York,
lying on his bed like a stone table,
would understand.

The night nurse
with her eyes slit like Venetian blinds,
she of the tubes and the plasma,
listening to the heart monitor,
the death cricket bleeping,
she who calls you 'we'
and keeps vigil like a ballistic missile,
would understand.

Once
this king had twelve daughters,
each more beautiful than the other.
They slept together, bed by bed
in a kind of girls' dormitory.
At night the king locked and bolted the door
. How could they possibly escape?
Yet each morning their shoes
were danced to pieces.
Each was as worn as an old jockstrap.
The king sent out a proclamation
that anyone who could discover
where the princesses did their dancing
could take his pick of the litter.
However there was a catch.
If he failed, he would pay with his life.
Well, so it goes.

Many princes tried,

each sitting outside the dormitory,
the door ajar so he could observe
what enchantment came over the shoes.
But each time the twelve dancing princesses
gave the snoopy man a Mickey Finn
and so he was beheaded.
Poof! Like a basketball.

It so happened that a poor soldier
heard about these strange goings on
and decided to give it a try.
On his way to the castle
he met an old old woman.
Age, for a change, was of some use.
She wasn't stuffed in a nursing home.
She told him not to drink a drop of wine
and gave him a cloak that would make
him invisible when the right time came.
And thus he sat outside the dorm.
The oldest princess brought him some wine
but he fastened a sponge beneath his chin,
looking the opposite of Andy Gump.
The sponge soaked up the wine,
and thus he stayed awake.
He feigned sleep however
and the princesses sprang out of their beds
and fussed around like a Miss America Contest.
Then the eldest went to her bed
and knocked upon it and it sank into the earth.
They descended down the opening
one after the other. The crafty soldier
put on his invisible cloak and followed.
Yikes, said the youngest daughter,
something just stepped on my dress.
But the oldest thought it just a nail.

Next stood an avenue of trees,
each leaf make of sterling silver.
The soldier took a leaf for proof.
The youngest heard the branch break
and said, Oof! Who goes there?
But the oldest said, Those are

the royal trumpets playing triumphantly.
The next trees were made of diamonds.
He took one that flickered like Tinkerbell
and the youngest said: Wait up! He is here!
But the oldest said: Trumpets, my dear.

Next they came to a lake where lay
twelve boats with twelve enchanted princes
waiting to row them to the underground castle.
The soldier sat in the youngest's boat
and the boat was as heavy as if an icebox
had been added but the prince did not suspect.

Next came the ball where the shoes did duty.
The princesses danced like taxi girls at Roseland
as if those tickets would run right out.
They were painted in kisses with their secret hair
and though the soldier drank from their cups
they drank down their youth with nary a thought.

Cruets of champagne and cups full of rubies.
They danced until morning and the sun came up
naked and angry and so they returned
by the same strange route. The soldier
went forward through the dormitory and into
his waiting chair to feign his druggy sleep.
That morning the soldier, his eyes fiery
like blood in a wound, his purpose brutal
as if facing a battle, hurried with his answer
as if to the Sphinx. The shoes! The shoes!
The soldier told. He brought forth
the silver leaf, the diamond the size of a plum.

He had won. The dancing shoes would dance
no more. The princesses were torn from
their night life like a baby from its pacifier.
Because he was old he picked the eldest.
At the wedding the princesses averted their eyes
and sagged like old sweatshirts.
Now the runaways would run no more and never
again would their hair be tangled into diamonds,
never again their shoes worn down to a laugh,

never the bed falling down into purgatory
to let them climb in after
with their Lucifer kicking.

Anne Sexton

The Waiting Head

If I really am walking with ordinary habit
past the same rest home on the same local street
and see another waiting head at that upper front window,
just as she would always sit,
watching for anyone from her wooden seat,
then anything can be true. I only know
how each night she wrote in her leather books
that no one came. Surely I remember the hooks
of her fingers curled on mine, though even now
will not admit the times I did avoid this street,
where she lived on and on like a bleached fig
and forgot us anyhow;
visiting the pulp of her kiss, bending to repeat
each favor, trying to comb out her mossy wig
and forcing love to last. Now she is always dead
and the leather books are mine. Today I see the head
move, like some pitted angel, in that high window.
What is the waiting head doing? It looks the same.
Will it lean forward as I turn to go?
I think I hear it call to me below

but no one came no one came

.

Anne Sexton

The Wedding Ring Dance

I dance in circles holding
the moth of the marriage,
thin, sticky, fluttering
its skirts, its webs.
The moth oozing a tear,
or is it a drop of urine?
The moth, grinning like a pear,
or is it teeth
clamping the iron maiden shut?

The moth,
who is my mother,
who is my father,
who was my lover,
floats airily out of my hands
and I dance slower,
pulling off the fat diamond engagement ring,
pulling off the elopement wedding ring,
and holding them, clicking them
in thumb and forefinger,
the indent of twenty-five years,
like a tiny rip of a tiny earthquake.
Underneath the soil lies the violence,
the shift, the crack of continents,
the anger,
and above only a cut,
a half-inch space to stick a pencil in.

The finger is scared
but it keeps its long numb place.
And I keep dancing,
a sort of waltz,
clicking the two rings,
all of a life at its last cough,
as I swim through the air of the kitchen,
and the same radio plays its songs
and I make a small path through them
with my bare finger and my funny feet,
doing the undoing dance,

on April 14th, 1973,
letting my history rip itself off me
and stepping into
something unknown
and transparent,
but all ten fingers stretched outward,
flesh extended as metal
waiting for a magnet.

Anne Sexton

The Wifebeater

There will be mud on the carpet tonight
and blood in the gravy as well.
The wifebeater is out,
the childbeater is out
eating soil and drinking bullets from a cup.
He strides back and forth
in front of my study window
chewing little red pieces of my heart.
His eyes flash like a birthday cake
and he makes bread out of rock.
Yesterday he was walking
like a man in the world.
He was upright and conservative
but somehow evasive, somehow contagious.
Yesterday he built me a country
and laid out a shadow where I could sleep
but today a coffin for the madonna and child,
today two women in baby clothes will be hamburg.
With a tongue like a razor he will kiss,
the mother, the child,
and we three will color the stars black
in memory of his mother
who kept him chained to the food tree
or turned him on and off like a water faucet
and made women through all these hazy years
the enemy with a heart of lies.
Tonight all the red dogs lie down in fear
and the wife and daughter knit into each other
until they are killed.

Anne Sexton

The Witch's Life

When I was a child
there was an old woman in our neighborhood whom we called The Witch.
All day she peered from her second story
window
from behind the wrinkled curtains
and sometimes she would open the window
and yell: Get out of my life!
She had hair like kelp
and a voice like a boulder.

I think of her sometimes now
and wonder if I am becoming her.
My shoes turn up like a jester's.
Clumps of my hair, as I write this,
curl up individually like toes.
I am shoveling the children out,
scoop after scoop.
Only my books anoint me,
and a few friends,
those who reach into my veins.
Maybe I am becoming a hermit,
opening the door for only
a few special animals?
Maybe my skull is too crowded
and it has no opening through which
to feed it soup?
Maybe I have plugged up my sockets
to keep the gods in?
Maybe, although my heart
is a kitten of butter,
I am blowing it up like a zeppelin.
Yes. It is the witch's life,
climbing the primordial climb,
a dream within a dream,
then sitting here
holding a basket of fire.

Anne Sexton

To A Friend Whose Work Has Come To Triumph

Consider Icarus, pasting those sticky wings on,
testing that strange little tug at his shoulder blade,
and think of that first flawless moment over the lawn
of the labyrinth. Think of the difference it made!
There below are the trees, as awkward as camels;
and here are the shocked starlings pumping past
and think of innocent Icarus who is doing quite well:
larger than a sail, over the fog and the blast
of the plushy ocean, he goes. Admire his wings!
Feel the fire at his neck and see how casually
he glances up and is caught, wondrously tunneling
into that hot eye. Who cares that feel back to the sea?
See him acclaiming the sun and come plunging down
while his sensible daddy goes straight into town.

Anne Sexton

Torn Down From Glory Daily

All day we watched the gulls
striking the top of the sky
and riding the blown roller coaster.
Up there
godding the whole blue world
and shrieking at a snip of land.
Now, like children,
we climb down humps of rock
with a bag of dinner rolls,
left over,
and spread them gently on stone,
leaving six crusts for an early king.
A single watcher comes hawking in,
rides the current round its hunger
and hangs
carved in silk
until it throbs up suddenly,
out, and one inch over water;
to come again
smoothing over the slap tide.
To come bringing its flock, like a city
of wings that fall from the air.
They wait, each like a wooden decoy
or soft like a pigeon or
a sweet snug duck:
until one moves, moves that dart-beak
breaking over. It has the bread.
The world is full of them,
a world of beasts
thrusting for one rock.
Just four scoop out the bread
and go swinging over Gloucester
to the top of the sky.
Oh see how
they cushion their fishy bellies
with a brother's crumb.

Anne Sexton

Unknown Girl In A Maternity Ward

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

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

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

Down the hall the baskets start back. My arms
fit you like a sleeve, they hold
catkins of your willows, the wild bee farms

of your nerves, each muscle and fold
of your first days. Your old man's face disarms
the nurses. But the doctors return to scold
me. I speak. It is you my silence harms.
I should have known; I should have told
them something to write down. My voice alarms
my throat. 'Name of father-none.' I hold
you and name you bastard in my arms.

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

Anne Sexton

Us

I was wrapped in black
fur and white fur and
you undid me and then
you placed me in gold light
and then you crowned me,
while snow fell outside
the door in diagonal darts.
While a ten-inch snow
came down like stars
in small calcium fragments,
we were in our own bodies
(that room that will bury us)
and you were in my body
(that room that will outlive us)
and at first I rubbed your
feet dry with a towel
because I was your slave
and then you called me princess.
Princess!

Oh then
I stood up in my gold skin
and I beat down the psalms
and I beat down the clothes
and you undid the bridle
and you undid the reins
and I undid the buttons,
the bones, the confusions,
the New England postcards,
the January ten o'clock night,
and we rose up like wheat,
acre after acre of gold,
and we harvested,
we harvested.

Anonymous submission.

Wallflower

Come friend,
I have an old story to tell you—

Listen.
Sit down beside me and listen.
My face is red with sorrow
and my breasts are made of straw.
I sit in the ladder-back chair
in a corner of the polished stage.
I have forgiven all the old actors for dying.
A new one comes on with the same lines,
like large white growths, in his mouth.
The dancers come on from the wings,
perfectly mated.

I look up. The ceiling is pearly.
My thighs press, knotting in their treasure.
Upstage the bride falls in satin to the floor.
Beside her the tall hero in a red wool robe
stirs the fire with his ivory cane.
The string quartet plays for itself,
gently, gently, sleeves and waxy bows.
The legs of the dancers leap and catch.
I myself have little stiff legs,
my back is as straight as a book
and how I came to this place—
the little feverish roses,
the islands of olives and radishes,
the blissful pastimes of the parlor—
I'll never know.

Anne Sexton

Wanting To Die

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.
I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage.
Then the almost unnameable lust returns.

Even then I have nothing against life.
I know well the grass blades you mention,
the furniture you have placed under the sun.

But suicides have a special language.
Like carpenters they want to know which tools.
They never ask why build.

Twice I have so simply declared myself,
have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy,
have taken on his craft, his magic.

In this way, heavy and thoughtful,
warmer than oil or water,
I have rested, drooling at the mouth-hole.

I did not think of my body at needle point.
Even the cornea and the leftover urine were gone.
Suicides have already betrayed the body.

Still-born, they don't always die,
but dazzled, they can't forget a drug so sweet
that even children would look on and smile.

To thrust all that life under your tongue!-
that, all by itself, becomes a passion.
Death's a sad Bone; bruised, you'd say,

and yet she waits for me, year after year,
to so delicately undo an old wound,
to empty my breath from its bad prison.

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.

Anne Sexton

What's That

Before it came inside
I had watched it from my kitchen window,
watched it swell like a new balloon,
watched it slump and then divide,
like something I know I know -
a broken pear or two halves of the moon,
or round white plates floating nowhere
or fat hands waving in the summer air
until they fold together like a fist or a knee.
After that it came to my door. Now it lives here.
And of course: it is a soft sound, soft as a seal's ear
that was caught between a shape and a shape and then returned to me.
You know how parents call
from sweet beaches anywhere,
come in come in
,
and how you sank under water to put out
the sound, or how one of them touched in the hall
at night: the rustle and the skin
you couldn't know, but heard, the stout
slap of tides and the dog snoring. It's here
now, caught back from time in my adult year -
the image we did forget: the cranking shells on our feet
or the swing of the spoon in soup. It is real
as splinters stuck in your ear. The noise we steal
is half a bell. And outside cars whisk by on the suburban street
and are there and are true.
What else is this, this intricate shape of air?
calling me, calling you.

Anne Sexton

When Man Enters Woman

When man,
enters woman,
like the surf biting the shore,
again and again,
and the woman opens her mouth with pleasure
and her teeth gleam
like the alphabet,
Logos appears milking a star,
and the man
inside of woman
ties a knot
so that they will
never again be separate
and the woman
climbs into a flower
and swallows its stem
and Logos appears
and unleashes their rivers.

This man,
this woman
with their double hunger,
have tried to reach through
the curtain of God
and briefly they have,
though God
in His perversity
unties the knot.

Anne Sexton

Where I Live In This Honorable House Of The Laurel Tree

I live in my wooden legs and O
my green green hands.
Too late
to wish I had not run from you, Apollo,
blood moves still in my bark bound veins.
I, who ran nymph foot to foot in flight,
have only this late desire to arm the trees
I lie within. The measure that I have lost
silks my pulse. Each century the trickeries
of need pain me everywhere.
Frost taps my skin and I stay glossed
in honor for you are gone in time. The air
rings for you, for that astonishing rite
of my breathing tent undone within your light.
I only know how untimely lust has tossed
flesh at the wind forever and moved my fears
toward the intimate Rome of myth we crossed.
I am a fist of my unease
as I spill toward the stars in the empty years.
I build the air with the crown of honor; it keys
my out of time and luckless appetite.
You gave me honor too soon, Apollo.
There is no one left who understands
how I wait
here in my wooden legs and O
my green green hands.

Anne Sexton

Where It Was At Back Then

Husband,
last night I dreamt
they cut off your hands and feet.
Husband,
you whispered to me,
Now we are both incomplete.

Husband,
I held all four
in my arms like sons and daughters.
Husband,
I bent slowly down
and washed them in magical waters.

Husband,
I placed each one
where it belonged on you.
'A miracle,'
you said and we laughed
the laugh of the well-to-do.

Anne Sexton

With Mercy For The Greedy

for my friend Ruth, who urges me to make an appointment for the Sacrament of Confession

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

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

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

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

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

Anne Sexton

Woman With Girdle

Your midriff sags toward your knees;
your breast lie down in air,
their nipples as uninvolved
as warm starfish.

You stand in your elastic case,
still not giving up the new-born
and the old-born cycle.

Moving, you roll down the garment,
down that pink snapper and hoarder,
as your belly, soft as pudding,
slops into the empty space;
down, over the surgeon's careful mark,
down over hips, those head cushions
and mouth cushions,
slow motion like a rolling pin,
over crisp hairs, that amazing field
that hides your genius from your patron;
over thighs, thick as young pigs,
over knees like saucers,
over calves, polished as leather,
down toward the feet.

You pause for a moment,
tying your ankles into knots.

Now you rise,
a city from the sea,
born long before Alexandria was,
straightway from God you have come
into your redeeming skin.

Anne Sexton

Words

Be careful of words,
even the miraculous ones.
For the miraculous we do our best,
sometimes they swarm like insects
and leave not a sting but a kiss.
They can be as good as fingers.
They can be as trusty as the rock
you stick your bottom on.
But they can be both daisies and bruises.
Yet I am in love with words.
They are doves falling out of the ceiling.
They are six holy oranges sitting in my lap.
They are the trees, the legs of summer,
and the sun, its passionate face.
Yet often they fail me.
I have so much I want to say,
so many stories, images, proverbs, etc.
But the words aren't good enough,
the wrong ones kiss me.
Sometimes I fly like an eagle
but with the wings of a wren.
But I try to take care
and be gentle to them.
Words and eggs must be handled with care.
Once broken they are impossible
things to repair.

Anne Sexton

You, Doctor Martin

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. We stand in broken
lines and wait while they unlock
the doors and count us at the frozen gates
of dinner. The shibboleth is spoken
and we move to gravy in our smock
of smiles. We chew in rows, our plates
scratch and whine like chalk

in school. There are no knives
for cutting your throat. I make
moccasins all morning. At first my hands
kept empty, unraveled for the lives
they used to work. Now I learn to take
them back, each angry finger that demands
I mend what another will break

tomorrow. Of course, I love you;
you lean above the plastic sky,
god of our block, prince of all the foxes.
The breaking crowns are new
that Jack wore.
Your third eye
moves among us and lights the separate boxes
where we sleep or cry.

What large children we are
here. All over I grow most tall
in the best ward. Your business is people,
you call at the madhouse, an oracular
eye in our nest. Out in the hall
the intercom pages you. You twist in the pull

of the foxy children who fall

like floods of life in frost.

And we are magic talking to itself,
noisy and alone. I am queen of all my sins
forgotten. Am I still lost?

Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself,
counting this row and that row of moccasins
waiting on the silent shelf.

Anne Sexton

Young

A thousand doors ago
when I was a lonely kid
in a big house with four
garages and it was summer
as long as I could remember,
I lay on the lawn at night,
clover wrinkling over me,
the wise stars bedding over me,
my mother's window a funnel
of yellow heat running out,
my father's window, half shut,
an eye where sleepers pass,
and the boards of the house
were smooth and white as wax
and probably a million leaves
sailed on their strange stalks
as the crickets ticked together
and I, in my brand new body,
which was not a woman's yet,
told the stars my questions
and thought God could really see
the heat and the painted light,
elbows, knees, dreams, goodnight.

Anne Sexton