

# *In Search of an Accident of Hope—The Live or Die Life of Anne Sexton*

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## **Abstract**

**T**his article presents my independent research on the poet Anne Sexton. This research was made possible by access to the Humanities Research Center's excellent Sexton archive. As a piece of literary biography, the essay provides a balanced introduction to Sexton as a poet and a person, an introduction I hope will prove of interest to readers in diverse fields. I address Sexton's unusual development as a poet, her mental illness, her ambitions and the strategies she employed to further her career, her correspondence with students and admirers, and her teaching efforts at a number of schools and universities. I incorporate analyses of several of Sexton's poems at key junctures in the discussion of her life, all the while working to maintain the separation between Sexton herself

and the persona of the poems, a distinction that was frequently blurred by the classification (which she loathed) of her work as “confessional poetry.”

The writing in Sexton’s few journals reveals the eternal nay-saying of the internal critic. “I am too dramatic,” Sexton lamented, wishing instead to take “words in hand and speak out in unprecedented honesty.”<sup>1</sup> If Sexton was going to venture into contemplative journal writing, she wanted to strike deep and draw blood. No messing around, she insisted. In the first entry in her notebooks (May 25, 1960), Sexton stated “Rule one” for writing in the journal: “I must not imitate.” And: “For once, Anne, do not lie. Dare to be yourself.”<sup>2</sup> A year later, in her next entry, Sexton laid down the same kind of law again, “That must be my first rule, to dare to be trite with myself.”<sup>3</sup> Sexton saw herself as always trying too hard to be profound in these notebooks, to be like Stendhal, Rilke, and other writers and thinkers whom she respected. She wanted to be Anne the poet, but she found it difficult to tolerate the floundering and weakness that were part of the process of becoming that Anne.

That Sexton suffered from insecurity and doubt is no wonder: she was twenty-seven and recovering from a mental breakdown when she began to write poetry. She had no education beyond finishing school and, aside from a short modeling stint, had never worked. Even as she progressed in her literary career, Sexton continued to rely heavily on tranquilizers, alcohol, and frequent love affairs to temper the pain of life as she experienced it. Sexton desperately wanted to be loved by the people in her life. She was in constant search of closeness and security in her relationships, yet she harbored terrible fears of public interactions: “Somebody sees me, and *I see myself through them*. Then it’s all gone, the whole world falls apart.”<sup>4</sup>

Still, the powerful voice of her poems led many readers to envision a flamboyant, self-possessed (if suffering) woman. In some situations—readings, parties, and writing workshops, for example—Sexton played this role beautifully. Peter Davison, an editor at the *Atlantic Monthly* and a poet himself, described Sexton as he saw her at a party. She had “a combination of awkwardness

and grace, long legs and long arms, and smoke, smoke, smoke, smoke, smoke—always smoking. Intense blue eyes with big pupils; blue-black hair; slightly crooked nose.” Like many others meeting Sexton for the first time, he also noted that she carried herself like a model.<sup>5</sup> Throughout her life, articles and interviews described Sexton as a slender beauty, but by 1967 Sexton was carrying an extra thirty pounds on her once lean frame. Although she laughingly claimed, “I have just plain grown,”<sup>6</sup> the weight gain was the vexing consequence of a serious hip injury, Sexton’s lifelong aversion to exercise, and the side-effects of the tranquilizer Thorazine which she took for many years.

Many of Sexton’s students were shocked when they first met the Pulitzer Prize winner. To them, she seemed more like a fragile and overmedicated creature than the powerful poet they had expected. At Wayland High School, Massachusetts, where Sexton co-taught her first formal class in 1967, several students writing about their impressions of the class described Sexton as “the little lady that writes poems,”<sup>7</sup> and a student at Colgate College wrote of Sexton in 1972: “I thought MY GOD! this person, this poor girl, she’s as scared as I would be.”<sup>8</sup> The descriptions of Sexton as that “little lady” and “poor girl” had nothing to do with her height; after all, Sexton was 5’8.” Her fear of interacting with her students showed, but she persevered and in time found ways to manage this anxiety. Once she did, she became an excellent, if unconventional, teacher. Teaching, like writing, was a kind of magic to Sexton, and she believed that there was no magic without courage.<sup>9</sup>

Sexton often cited her alignment with Franz Kafka’s description of literature as “the axe for the frozen sea within us.” Poetry had certainly shattered the ice in Sexton. She began her adult life as a suicidal mother who believed that her only abilities were sexual and insisted to her psychiatrist that prostitution was the only career in which she might excel.<sup>10</sup> When she discovered poetry and the power of unexpected images and metaphors, Sexton also discovered her own worth as an artist. The persona of these poems is *not* “Mrs. Sexton,” housewife and mother, but rather the painfully perceptive Anne, the Anne who stirred the pot of remembered hurts and

guilt along with the occasional dazzling joy. The voice of these poems belongs to the woman who, after much pain, had given herself the license to question the most personal conditions of her own life: madness, family, the female body, spiritual hunger, and attraction to death.

Throughout her entire poetic career Sexton struggled with a mental illness that defied exact diagnosis. Martin Orne, her first psychiatrist, noted that Sexton “didn’t fit textbook criteria” and was “hysterical in the classic sense: like a chameleon, she could adopt any symptom.” Sexton suffered from chronic anxiety, “lesions of memory,” and “profound dissociation.”<sup>11</sup> Some of Sexton’s readers were convinced that she was schizophrenic; Sexton even received one letter from a doctoral student wanting her response to a dissertation on the relationship between schizophrenia and self-expression.<sup>12</sup> Sexton replied that she could be of little help: “I have never been diagnosed as schizophrenic, although I may write like one.”<sup>13</sup> Dr. Orne confirmed Sexton’s ironic refutation of this diagnosis: “I never saw evidence in her of loose associations of formal thought disorders, or other major symptoms of schizophrenia.”<sup>14</sup>

While her writing may not have been evidence of schizophrenia, it often did hinge on farming her unconscious for associations, images, and metaphors. She believed that poetry “milks the unconscious. The unconscious is there to feed it little images, little symbols, the answers, the insights I know not of.”<sup>15</sup> Expressed this way, the theory sounds mysterious, but Sexton’s imagistic expression of life experienced vividly, painfully, and personally is often what makes her work terrifying and enduring. In a description of *The Death Notebooks*, the last collection published before her suicide, Sexton defines several of the key features of her own poetry: “the poems will be very Sexton . . . intense, personal, perhaps religious in places”<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, some of Sexton’s poems were full of religious themes and imagery. Among these were “In the Deep Museum,” “Jesus Suckles,” and “The Rowing Endeth.” Some readers and critics found Sexton’s use of religious imagery almost blasphemous, while others saw it as a unique form of devotion. According to Sexton, one Catholic priest told her, “Your typewriter is your

altar,” and, “your poems are your prayers.”<sup>17</sup> At any rate, Sexton was not concerned with blasphemy. She liked imagining how her “funny God” might be—if she/he/it even existed.<sup>18</sup> Reared as a Protestant, she insisted on her lack of interest in joining any organized religion, although she corresponded with a Catholic priest and received religious instruction from an Episcopal seminarian.<sup>19</sup> Religion—Christianity in particular—was useful because it provided metaphors for guilt and suffering. In one lecture Sexton remarked, “I am told that my poetry is the work of a victim, of the passive sufferer, of the crucified man. And I put that thought in my mouth and taste it and find it surprising but true.”<sup>20</sup>

Yet Sexton was careful to make a distinction between personal and autobiographical writing: “I can be deeply personal, but often I’m not being personal about myself.”<sup>21</sup> Still, this personal poet was the poet Sexton *could* be and, her fans would argue, the poet she *should* be. Her poetry was almost never academic, and Sexton appealed to an audience that included not only the usual intellectuals and aspiring poets but also working people, housewives, and those seeking attention for mental illnesses. As one student wrote of Sexton’s writing, “she knitted together the stuff of our lives. Pictures at the bottom of drawers. Toys from childhood. The broken ends of things.”<sup>22</sup>

The impetus for Sexton’s early poetic work and many of her later poems came from the private sanctuary of the analyst’s office. Only a month after her first suicide attempt in November of 1956, Sexton began writing poems at the urging of Dr. Orne, her psychiatrist. She had experimented with poetry in high school but had ceased abruptly when her mother accused her of plagiarizing poems by Sara Teasdale. Dr. Orne encouraged Sexton to write because he believed that crafting language might tap into her creative potential and give her a sense of purpose.<sup>23</sup> According to Sexton, Dr. Orne had told her, “You can’t kill yourself, you have something to give. Why, if people read your poems . . . they would think, ‘There’s somebody else like me!’ They wouldn’t feel alone.”<sup>24</sup> In later interviews Sexton minimized the value of her early efforts, which she had always shown to Dr. Orne: “I kept writing and writing

and giving them all to him” simply “because he was approving.” Sexton categorized this early work as being “just from transference;”<sup>25</sup> however, early efforts as part of therapy rapidly grew into literary creations in their own right. In fact, Sexton was bent on making this jump. When her closest friend and fellow poet Maxine Kumin described a poem as “therapeutic,” Sexton exclaimed, “for god’s sake, forget that. I want to make it a real poem.” Such a piece would be stripped down and reworked until Sexton did make it into a “real poem,” or, if the transformation wasn’t happening for her, it might quickly find its way into the wastebasket.<sup>26</sup>

As a new poet, Sexton had almost no exposure to the great works of modern American poetry that yielded such an influence on the work of her contemporaries. The poetic voices of William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot, Edgar Lee Masters, H.D., and many others were entirely absent from Sexton’s writing world. “I’m not an intellectual of any sort that I know of,” she commented in one interview. “I don’t know the multiplication table, can’t spell, can’t punctuate. And until I started at twenty-seven, hadn’t done much reading.”<sup>27</sup> Described by some as a “primitive,” Sexton wrote instinctively, letting associations flow and thumping the typewriter keys to push the words out onto paper. She had remarkable discipline when it came to rewriting; she revised incessantly and sometimes went through hundreds of drafts to make the poem emerge from the sea of images in which it began.

Sexton’s attempts to break into the literary world were met with repeated discouragement from those who mattered most to her, the “real,” established poets and editors to whom she showed her poetry. Despite Sexton’s obvious talent, her gravitation toward unusually personal subjects—her own relationships and experiences with mental illness, for example—provoked discomfort and quite a few negative responses from these early readers. Objections to Sexton’s style and choice of subject were felt especially keenly by John Holmes, her poetry teacher first at the Boston Center for Adult Education in 1957 and later in other workshops. After several years of working together, it became evident that Holmes and Sexton disagreed not only on matters of style but also on matters of behavior. Where Holmes

was the reserved gentleman interested in preserving order and propriety, Sexton always wanted to stir things up in the workshop. In a letter to another member of the writing group, Holmes vented his frustrations with what he perceived as a conflation of personal extravagance and artistic irresponsibility. “Not that she has two subjects, mental illness and sex, but that she writes so absolutely selfishly, of herself, to bare and shock and confess. Her motives are wrong, artistically.”<sup>28</sup>

In 1959, after completing her manuscript for *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, Sexton encouraged the other workshop members to give her feedback. Holmes responded to the manuscript in a careful, sensitive letter articulating an opinion that Sexton would have difficulty accepting. “Don’t publish it” was his basic counsel. “You’ll certainly outgrow it and become another person, then this record will haunt and hurt you.”<sup>29</sup> This advice was partly rooted in the darker chapters of Holmes’ own life. Holmes’ early adulthood was marred by his struggle with alcoholism and the nightmarish end to his first marriage when his wife slit her wrists and bled to death over his papers.<sup>30</sup> As he strived to escape the shadow of these terrible events, it troubled Holmes that the traumas in Sexton’s life seemed to function so frequently as the inspiration for her work.

In “For John, Who Begg Me Not to Enquire Further” (see Appendix), a poem Sexton sent privately to Holmes, she responded to his objections to her style and choice of subject. “For John” is conciliatory in tone rather than confrontational, and it demonstrates a maturity that likely took Holmes by surprise. It also reveals a great deal about Sexton’s own understanding of her work as a poet. Holmes had written to Sexton: “It’s all a release for you, but what is it for anyone else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release?”<sup>31</sup> Sexton answered, saying “not that it was beautiful,” but that there was “something worth learning / in that narrow diary of my mind, / in the commonplaces of the asylum.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Sexton believed that her personal and emotional experience of the world offered something that might be valuable, not only to her, but also to others. In fact, “tapping” her “own head” was necessary to Sexton’s work given her conviction that “some-

thing outside of [her]self” could not speak the truths she valued most. For without the inclusion of the self, unbeautiful as it might be, “you would not know / that the worst of anyone / can be, finally, / an accident of hope.”

The idea that even “the worst of anyone”—even what was revealed in “the common places of the asylum”—could become “an accident of hope” through poetry was a miracle that Sexton did not take lightly. Poetry had the power to transform, and Sexton spoke of her conversion to the work of poetry as though it were a religious experience: it was a “rebirth,” and the process of writing a poem was a daily “miracle.”<sup>33</sup> “If I can write a poem,” Sexton explained in one interview, “I come into order again, and the world is again a little more sensible, and real.”<sup>34</sup>

Still, Sexton understood Holmes’ fear of the exposure of private demons, a fear she described in the poem as “an invisible veil between us all.” As real as this veil might be, in the final lines of “For John” Sexton captured the incredible intimacy that might be possible if the veil could drop:

And sometimes in private,  
my kitchen, your kitchen,  
my face, your face.

Between “my kitchen” and “your kitchen,” “my face” and “your face,” there was only a single breath, the hair’s width of a comma. In other words, Sexton saw her poetry not as mere release, but as efforts towards connection. The eloquence and earnestness of her defense demonstrated to Holmes that she had a mission for her poetry; she was after much more than a messy and imagistic purge of emotion.

The writing of “For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further” was a kind of assertion of independence, but Sexton was not turning her back on the growth she had experienced in Holmes’ workshop. Her interactions with other poets had helped her to develop her talent and make up for her late start as a writer. She had also established herself in a network of mentors and other writers that included Maxine Kumin, W.D. Snodgrass,

Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath. And to top it all off, she had discovered and maintained her own voice and approach to poetry in the process. In later interviews she often described how, despite her early attempts to write more conventional verse in the style of other workshop members, “I always ended up sounding like myself.”<sup>35</sup> Sexton’s commentaries on her development, delivered with pride, underline the importance she placed on establishing her own unique identity as a poet.

But Sexton’s feelings about how critics characterized her writing were another matter altogether. Her place among emerging confessional poets like W.D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath resulted in both praise and biting criticism. At best, her critics described her poems as “transformations of experience”<sup>36</sup> and “edifying, heroic acts.”<sup>37</sup> At worst, as one reviewer of Sexton’s work wrote, they entailed “sentimentality, self-dramatization, and the assumption that universal feelings are the private property of the poet.”<sup>38</sup> James Dickey, ever unhappy with the tedious “orthodoxy” of the poetry he lumped into the confessional heap, insisted in his review of *All My Pretty Ones* that “it would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience.”<sup>39</sup>

The negative shadings that some critics brought to the label “confessional” contributed to Sexton’s keen dislike for it, but she continued to affirm her vision of poetry. She encouraged students and other aspiring poets to make use of the vast poetic material available to them: their own experiences. “I say a poem should be personal—in the sense of someone having really lived something they are writing about.” Sexton ruefully added, “I’m afraid you may think I’m hawking my own brand of poetry but I’m not. Elizabeth Bishop, May Swenson, sometimes Adreine [sic] Rich have this quality and they are not ‘confessional’ (how I hate the term).”<sup>40</sup>

The nature of the poetry Sexton wrote, especially the first book, *To Bedlam and Back*, which explored Sexton’s experiences in a psychiatric ward, had a real impact on the way in which fans, would-be poets, and students wrote to her throughout her career. Many, even those who had never actually met Sexton, addressed her simply as “Anne” and wrote long, confiding letters about

death, mental illness, the heartbreak moments of parenting, the agony of trying to write, and other personal fears and traumas. Sexton almost always responded to these letters. To amateur writers she gave diplomatic responses with kind but generic advice, often directing them to Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, which she held in high regard. She responded gently to her supporters among the mentally ill, quietly affirming their experience and encouraging them to hold on to anything that would help them stay afloat in life. To one woman at McLean Hospital, Sexton wrote, "Poetry led me by the hand out of madness. I am hoping I can show others that route."<sup>41</sup>

However, any letter she received that seemed colored by pride disproportionate to the talent of the writer would be sure to receive a curt, or incisive, reply. "Stop writing letters to the top poets in America. It is a terrible presumption on your part," she wrote to one undisciplined poet, then added, "Rework or forget the whole thing. Spots of brilliance, associative imagery (sp?) is not enough [sic]."<sup>42</sup> But to writers in whom she discerned real talent, Sexton wrote with the insight and optimism that had so encouraged her when she was a young poet in search of critical responses from established poets. "You have force, you have imagery, you know what to do with words and what they'll do for you. Nothing will stop you. You *are* a poet. Don't stop. What I am trying to tell you is this can be your life. I hope you will choose it."<sup>43</sup>

Sexton recognized herself and her own needs in these correspondents. She understood their hunger for approval, for *contact*. The words of one grateful graduate student—"Yours was the first REAL VOICE I have heard back" from the poetry world<sup>44</sup>—could have been Sexton's own when she began to write in the late 1950s. Sexton often mentioned that letters of encouragement from an early mentor, W.D. Snodgrass, had helped to give her the "strength to be myself and to hell with the rest of them."<sup>45</sup> Even Sexton's rare, harsh replies to the more presumptuous letters read like the reprimands that she issued against herself in her journal entries.

Indeed, Sexton was extremely ambitious, and she envisioned herself in the company of writers like Kafka

and Dostoyevsky. "I have to be great," she exclaimed to her therapist. "I want to leave the impact of my personality carved in marble."<sup>46</sup> The prospect of fame seemed to appeal to Sexton in the same way that being liked by those around her did. In this sense, her ambition was another manifestation of her desperate desire to be loved. As for literary significance, Sexton was convinced that the gift of going "down deep" into the unconscious was what set great writers apart from the rest. Singling out this characteristic was Sexton's way of establishing her own terms for success, terms she knew she could take on.

One could hardly plumb the depths of the unconscious more faithfully than Sexton, who spent several evenings a week in therapy and took copious notes on tapes of her sessions with Dr. Orne. She was constantly exploring her associations and trying to lay claim to the syntax of the mind. Sexton's conception of what makes a writer great did not equate creativity with madness; however, it did render the "heightened awareness"<sup>47</sup> engendered by frequent psychoanalysis almost a creative necessity. Sexton's diligent efforts in psychotherapy attested to her real desire to gain mastery over the illness that limited the potential of so many of her days. Still, the illness became valorized in that it provided the main impetus for her explorations of her unconscious in therapy.

Sexton's ambitions as a writer were complex and contradictory. On the one hand, she wanted to be a "great" in the historical sense, like Kafka and Dostoyevsky. On the other, she was keenly interested in popular success. If garnering a large audience meant coming down to earth, Sexton was ready to take advantage of the traditional structure of her family, her home in the suburbs, and her relatively undistinguished New England lineage. "I have a best-seller mind, I'm really rather ordinary. I am popular with the masses: I have the common touch, I write about the middle class!"<sup>48</sup> Sexton made sporadic efforts in fiction which were partly inspired by her interest in reaching the kind of audience J.D. Salinger's work garnered. "You can move people more with a story than with poems. *Catcher in the Rye* speaks for its time, to many people," Sexton noted. Sexton's aspirations to popular success were not exactly harmonious with her hopes for long-term liter-

ary greatness, but both impulses reflected her desire to tap into an even deeper source of the approval and attention than that provided by her family and friends.

Sexton did not manage the move into fiction that she had hoped would put her work in the hands of middle-class Americans throughout the country. Her comic novel on sex life in the suburbs never reached completion, though the draft reflects her participation in a trend of the 1950s and 60s, a time when one of the only acceptable ways to criticize the institutions of home and family seemed to be through humor. However, Sexton did gain more widespread recognition as she began to give readings at a variety of venues in 1965, and she was increasingly acknowledged in poetry circles as a dramatic reader. From her earliest performances, “Her Kind” (see Appendix) was the poem with which Sexton began her readings to tell the audience “what kind of woman I am and to warn you of what kind of poet I am.”<sup>49</sup> It was part warning and part promise that a reading from Sexton—the “middle-aged witch” as she called herself in the introductory poem of *Transformations*—would not be like any other. Then, in 1968, Sexton began to perform with Her Kind, a musical group that grew from a student’s project setting her poetry to music. The title of the group was apt; the jazzy accompaniments of Her Kind would bring not only a new dimension to Sexton’s work but also a wider audience, some of whom might be “her kind.”

Sexton went to incredible lengths to bolster the courage and charisma she felt she needed to make it through her readings, which she described as “freak shows” that sold Anne the poet as “the actor, the clown, the oddball.”<sup>50</sup> Because she suffered from terrible stage fright, Sexton scripted and carefully rehearsed both her readings and any comments she would make. She confessed to one admirer writing for a literary journal, “All the things you quote from the reading, my little introductory notes, are, I hate to tell you, not in the least spontaneous with the exception of one or two sentences.”<sup>51</sup> Despite her laborious preparation, the hours before a performance usually found Sexton in a bar or hotel room downing staggering amounts of liquor just to stay calm. The travel necessary for many of her read-

ings was also a source of trauma; Sexton hated flying in airplanes.<sup>52</sup> In one essay, Sexton claimed that a single poetry reading usually stole a month from her writing and life since she needed two weeks before the reading to overcome her stage fright and two weeks after it to recover from the emotional drain of the performance.<sup>53</sup>

Working the poetry circuit became a way of maintaining the high standard of living to which her family had grown accustomed even as Kayo’s success in business affairs fluctuated. Sexton proved an effective self-promoter, and she managed to negotiate ever higher fees for her readings. After winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1967, she began to set her performance fees by monitoring the offers made to James Dickey, the poet whose reviews of her early work had been among the most scathing.<sup>54</sup> By 1974, the year of her death, Sexton was routinely requesting \$2,000 dollars for out of town poetry readings, although she was usually willing to settle for \$1,500.<sup>55</sup> Sexton had become one of the best paid poets of her generation, and there was no trace of the cowed “little lady” in the shrewd businesswoman negotiating these deals.

While public readings earned her the “real money,”<sup>56</sup> Sexton’s work as a teacher brought together several of the passions and needs of her life. Her teaching credentials boiled down to her talent as a writer, and while this qualification was affirmed by a substantial number of literary prizes and honorary degrees, it was still questioned by some of Sexton’s fellow teachers.<sup>57</sup> Sexton viewed teaching, with the many kinds of interactions it necessitated, as a serious matter. “The class, the life of it, will teach me or destroy me,” she wrote in one of the early entries of her teaching journal. Sexton believed that teaching in spite of her anxieties was necessary if she was to become, as she hoped, “more a saint and less an egocentric writer.”<sup>58</sup>

Sexton’s first major teaching position at Wayland High School in 1967 was part of an experimental English class she had helped design. Sexton was to function as a “poet in residence”—classroom evidence of the inner-workings of literary creation—while Bob Clawson, a young high school teacher, would be responsible for running the class. The course would have neither grades

nor a set curriculum, and the students would play an integral role in directing the focus of the class. Sexton's idealism was obvious in her description of the objectives of the course some months before her teaching position at Wayland High School, Massachusetts, began. She hoped that the students, once they discovered the potential of language, would themselves begin "to teach, to spread the word."<sup>59</sup> Sexton was later disappointed to discover that many of the students had less lofty interests; they were anxious to graduate and often more concerned about passing College Board exams than about unleashing the power of language.

Still, Sexton's experiences in the classroom both terrified and amazed her. The idea of being alone with the class was enough to fill her with dread: "If I'm loved, why am I nervous? Because I'm afraid there'll be nothing to say and there will be that dreadful silence."<sup>60</sup> On teaching her own poems, Sexton complained that "they keep turning to me for meanings that I refuse to give."<sup>61</sup> Sexton remained reluctant to explicate her own poems for the class, and instead she invested herself in original assignments that would hold silence at bay and help the students discover more of the tricks of language for themselves. After reading Sexton's "In the Deep Museum" (see Appendix), a poem that imagines Christ waking, finding himself buried, not resurrected, and then letting rats devour his flesh to "ke[ep] the miracle," she had the class write first person testimonies of the Crucifixion. Other assignments included graffiti-writing projects, prayers, and writing in the style of Sherwood Anderson's "The Story of Win Bidlebaum is a Story of Hands."

Some of the papers generated by the students possessed a startling originality, and Sexton basked in these flashes of young talent. "When they open, it's better than when I open," she wrote after describing some of the pieces she and Clawson had received from the students. Despite the uneasiness that remained with Sexton as she negotiated the difficult territory of teaching, the class was for her "a small miracle." Sexton found the immediacy of the teaching experience refreshing: "I sometimes feel the class is far more important than my writing. They give a quicker

response for one thing. When you write you wait three years and then they crucify you. When you teach you wait five days and they give it to you, give it to you, give it to you."<sup>62</sup>

Sexton continued to experience the work of her students as the most valuable and personal kind of gift. In 1968 she taught a poetry class at McLean's Hospital, a private mental institution, and offered a one month long private workshop for six Oberlin students home for the holidays. With the Oberlin students, Sexton was in charge of a small gathering of committed writers, not a crowd, as she had sometimes viewed the Wayland and McLean classes.<sup>63</sup> Sexton began to find herself as a teacher and establish her methods for teaching the tricks of poetry to young writers, abilities she would strengthen when she began to teach a poetry course at Boston University in 1969. Although Sexton was uncomfortable with the talk of canonical literature that sometimes worked its way into university discussions, she more than made up for this gap in her knowledge by showing students how to fight for the being of the poem. In a review of one of her Boston University courses, a student named the questions constantly implied in Sexton's workshop: "Does the poem have guts? Is imagery used as a vital way to intensify the poem, and not as mere decoration? Does the poem get to its content with heart and an acute eye? Does the poem *work*, in its breathing, its life-span? Does the poem *get* to life-experience, in all its ambiguity or lyricism or terror or love?"<sup>64</sup>

Sexton viewed the relationship between poets and their poems as sacred, and she did not allow outsiders to visit her workshops. They were intense sessions similar to therapy in their intimacy, but there was room for comic asides as well. "We needed the laughter. It was a great shock absorber," wrote one student who studied with Sexton in the final workshop of 1974.<sup>65</sup> Sexton also made a regular practice of inviting students to her home for private conferences. Her students brought their own work for an individual critique, and after a discussion of the work, Sexton shared a piece of her own poetry and asked for suggestions. To many students, "this little peek" at Sexton's work in progress was "a great, generous, equalizing gift."<sup>66</sup>

Friendships often evolved from these poolside chats. Sexton's letters to former students were conspiratorial, peppered with reminders like, "Don't let the bastards get you down," and, "Don't worry about your muse."<sup>67</sup> These outgoing letters also make it clear that her students were an important part of her life and support system. To one long-term student she wrote, "I miss you, I miss you, I miss you, as a poet as well as a friend."<sup>68</sup> To another, "you could think of [our workshop] as holding *me* together. Somehow what I try to give or bring forth helps me in a way that even my own writing cannot."<sup>69</sup>

In the same way that Sexton seemed to understand her students' need for respect and generous personal attention, they recognized her vulnerability and need to feel loved. Especially in her final year of teaching, Sexton's students became a "sort of class-beast that surrounded her, great, loving and focused, attentive."<sup>70</sup> The letters students sent to Sexton were gentle, playful at times, and always full of appreciation. "Some people seem to have the instinctive gift for being a good teacher, and you are one of them,"<sup>71</sup> wrote one student. Passing on news about other students in a previous workshop, another student told Sexton, "All of us talk about the time spent in the fall with you as a sort of golden age."<sup>72</sup> Other students spoke of their concern more directly. "I hope you've felt well in your body—strong and sleek, powerful in that way, the way you look to others, but don't always feel in your self."<sup>73</sup>

In May of 1967, when Sexton learned that her third book of poetry, *Live or Die*, had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize, she was ecstatic. Sexton had entertained hopes for the prestigious prize after publishing each of her books of poems, and she had even joked that she might "write a book and leave it, so when I die it can be published, and of course it will get the Pulitzer Prize—I want it just as much for when I'm dead as when I'm alive!"<sup>74</sup> The title for *Live or Die* came from Saul Bellow's *Herzog*: "With one long breath, caught and held in his chest, he fought his sadness over his solitary life. 'Don't cry you idiot! Live or die, but don't poison everything.'" But Sexton had not encountered the passage in the published text; it had come straight to her door five years earlier. In 1961 Sexton had written Bellow a fan letter,

and in his reply, Bellow had included the passage from what was then only a partial manuscript of *Herzog*. The words were magic to Sexton. They were still outside the finality of print—they might live on in the published novel, or they might die in a draft stored away somewhere. Sexton pasted the message over her desk.

*Live or Die* marked a change for Sexton, for the final poem, "Live" (see Appendix), ended the book on a positive, life-affirming note. For some this was too obvious or programmatic an ending; others complained that the finale lacked the polish of the earlier poems in the collection. Yet the fact that its imagery and language still seemed raw in places was appropriate; after all, the speaker of the poem has just discovered *life* for the first time. "What a bargain!" she cries, seeing the sun, "her yolk moving feverishly." And,

God! It's a dream,  
lovers sprouting in the yard  
like celery stalks

The speaker has no time to smooth out the wrinkles of the poem's images and metaphors, for the whole poem is stretching toward the last lines, enacting its mandate:

I say *Live, Live* because of the sun,  
The dream, the excitable gift.

As much as Sexton's family and friends might have liked to construe "Live" as a sign that she had finally chosen life over death once and for all, the cry *Live, Live!* belongs to the poem's persona, not to Anne Sexton herself. In an interview in September 1974, less than a month before her suicide, Sexton reminded that "poems stand for the moment they were written and make no promises."<sup>75</sup>

On October 3, 1974, after giving a successful reading at Goucher College, Sexton returned to find her entire Boston University class waiting for her at the airport. She was delighted. The next day, after lunch with a friend, Sexton prepared for her final departure. This time it would not be a symbolic act, as Sexton viewed her early suicide attempts, nor would she choose to use her

“kill-me pills,” the barbiturates that she usually carried in her pocketbook.<sup>76</sup> She removed her rings, put on her mother’s old fur coat, and poured herself a glass of vodka. She made her way to the garage, closed its doors, and climbed into her red Cougar. She started the car and turned on the radio. The attention of loved ones, literary success, the esteem of her students, and even poetry’s “accident of hope” could not bind Anne Sexton to the excitable gift of life.

## APPENDIX

### I. *Her Kind*<sup>a</sup>

I have gone out, a possessed witch,  
haunting the black air, braver at night;  
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch  
over the plain houses, light by light:  
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.  
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.  
I have been her kind.

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.

### 2. *For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further*<sup>b</sup>

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 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.

<sup>a</sup>*To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960).

<sup>b</sup>*To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960).

3. *The Fortress*<sup>c</sup>

*while taking a nap with Linda*

Under the pink quilted covers  
I hold the pulse that counts your blood.  
I think the woods outdoors  
are half asleep,  
left over from summer  
like a stack of books after a flood,  
left over like those promises I never keep.  
On the right, the scrub pine tree  
waits like a fruit store  
holding up bunches of tufted broccoli.  
We watch the wind from our square bed.  
I press down my index finger—  
half in jest, half in dread—  
on the brown mole  
under your left eye, inherited  
from my right cheek: a spot of danger  
where a bewitched worm ate its way through our soul  
in search of beauty. My child, since July  
the leaves have been fed  
secretly from a pool of beet-red dye.  
And sometimes they are battle green  
with trunks as wet as hunters' boots,  
smacked hard by the wind, clean  
as oilskins. No,  
the wind's not off the ocean.  
Yes, it cried in your room like a wolf  
and your pony tail hurt you. That was a long time ago.  
The wind rolled the tide like a dying  
woman. She wouldn't sleep,  
she rolled there all night, grunting and sighing.  
Darling, life is not in my hands;  
life with its terrible changes  
will take you, bombs or glands,  
your own child at  
your breast, your own house on your own land.  
Outside the bittersweet turns orange.  
Before she died, my mother and I picked those fat  
branches, finding orange nipples  
on the gray wire strands.

<sup>c</sup>From *All My Pretty Ones* (1962)

We weeded the forest, curing trees like cripples.  
Your feet thump-thump against my back  
and you whisper to yourself. Child,  
what are you wishing? What pact  
are you making?  
What mouse runs between your eyes? What ark  
can I fill for you when the world goes wild?  
The woods are underwater, their weeds are shaking  
in the tide; birches like zebra fish  
flash by in a pack.  
Child, I cannot promise that you will get your wish.  
I cannot promise very much.  
I give you the images I know.  
Lie still with me and watch.  
A pheasant moves  
by like a seal, pulled through the mulch  
by his thick white collar. He's on show  
like a clown. He drags a beige feather that he removed,  
one time, from an old lady's hat.  
We laugh and we touch.  
I promise you love. Time will not take away that.

4. *In the Deep Museum*<sup>d</sup>

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.

<sup>d</sup>From *All My Pretty Ones* (1962)

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.

5. *Live*<sup>e</sup>

*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 a 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,

<sup>e</sup>From *Live or Die*

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.

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