

# **Anne Sexton**

**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**

2004

**Publisher:**

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

## "Daddy" Warbucks

### 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

## **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.

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

## 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.

Submitted by Venus

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.

Anne Sexton



## 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. URL: <http://plagiarist.com/poetry/?wid=549> | Printed on 13 January 2003. Copyright © 2003 Plagiarist.com - All rights reserved. | <http://www.plagiarist.com> Plagiarist.com Poetry Archive: Talkback! & For Students Need help with an assignment? See how the Plagiarist.com PoetryNotes® can make poetry analysis a snap! & For Critics and Scholars Have something to say about this poem? Use our comment form to add a comment! &top&

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.

Submitted by Venus

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 come 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 glee 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

Good for visiting hospitals or charitable work. Take some time to attend to your health.

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

And do not be indiscreet or unconventional. Play it safe.

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 shows 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

## Bayonet

What can I do with this bayonet?  
Make a rose bush of it?  
Poke it into the moon?  
Shave my legs with its silver?  
Spear a goldfish?  
No. No.

It was made  
in my dream  
for you.  
My eyes were closed.  
I was curled fetally  
and yet I held a bayonet  
that was for the earth of your stomach.  
The belly button singing its puzzle.  
The intestines winding like alpine roads.  
It was made to enter you  
as you have entered me  
and to cut the daylight into you  
and let out your buried heartland,  
to let out the spoon you have fed me with,  
to let out the bird that said fuck you,  
to carve him onto a sculpture until he is white  
and I could put him on a shelf,  
an object unthinking as a stone,  
but with all the vibrations  
of a crucifix.

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  
cover 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

## 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  
ans 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

## **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.

Submitted by Venus

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.

Submitted by Venus

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.

Submitted by Venus

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.

Anne Sexton

## For the Year of the Insane

<i>a prayer</i>

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 into 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

## 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.

Submitted by Venus

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.

Submitted by Venus

Anne Sexton

## Her Kind

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

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

## 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, Skeeexix,  
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.  
Skeeexix, 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, Skeezeix,  
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 Skeeze 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.

Submitted by Dan Hayes

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 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.

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.

Submitted by Venus

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,  
weraing 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.

Submitted by Venus

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  
tinkerbelle 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

## 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

## Live

<i>Live or die, but don't poison everything... </i>

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 urchins,  
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.

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

## 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.

Submitted by elise

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



## 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

## 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 plactic 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 eyebal,  
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.

Anonymous submission.

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 who one words is able to pick  
out another, to manner another, until I have got  
somethhing I might have said...  
but did not.

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.

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.

Anne Sexton

## Suicide Note

<i>"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</i>

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

<i>for Sylvia Plath </I>

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.

Submitted by Venus

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. URL: <http://plagiarist.com/poetry/?wid=601> | Printed on 13 January 2003. Copyright &copy;2003 Plagiarist.com - All rights reserved. | <http://www.plagiarist.com> Plagiarist.com Poetry Archive: Talkback! &raquo; For Students Need help with an assignment? See how the Plagiarist.com PoetryNotes&trade; can make poetry analysis a snap! &raquo; For Critics and Scholars Have something to say about this poem? Use our comment form to add a comment! &laquo;top&raquo;

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 keping 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 come out painted on a ceiling.

He wants to pierce the hornet's nest  
and come out with a long godhead.

He wants to take bread and wine  
and bring forth a man happily floating in the Caribbean.

He wants to be pressed out like a key  
so he can unlock 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 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.

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  
needled 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.

They 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 Skeeze, 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 knelt 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 one might do with the daisies but does not for they stand for a love undergoing 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 until 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 own 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 waded through the smell of their cancer and recognize the prognosis, its careful 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, like 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.

Anne Sexton

## 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

<i>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."</i>

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.

## 4. MADONNA

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 pietà grave;  
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 pantomine  
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.

Anne Sexton



## 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 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 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 guarentees.  
I was left  
quite alone  
using up the darkenss.  
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.

Anonymous submission.

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, summertime, 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.

Submitted by Venus

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 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.

Submitted by Venus

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.

Submitted by Venus

Anne Sexton

## 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.

Anne Sexton



## 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 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 Starry Night

*<i>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. </i>*  
-- 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 their stone boats. They are more like stone  
than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse  
to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone.

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

## 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, fisted 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&mdash;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  
becuase 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.

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

## Welcome Morning

There is joy  
in all:  
in the hair I brush each morning,  
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,  
that I rub my body with each morning,  
in the chapel of eggs I cook  
each morning,  
in the outcry from the kettle  
that heats my coffee  
each morning,  
in the spoon and the chair  
that cry "hello there, Anne"  
each morning,  
in the godhead of the table  
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon  
each morning.

All this is God,  
right here in my pea-green house  
each morning  
and I mean,  
though often forget,  
to give thanks,  
to faint down by the kitchen table  
in a prayer rejoicing  
as the holy birds at the kitchen window  
peek into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it,  
let me paint a thank-you on my palm  
for this God, this laughter of the morning,  
lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,  
dies young.

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,  
through God  
in His perversity  
unties the knot.

Anne Sexton

## With Mercy for the Greedy

<i>for my friend Ruth, who urges me to make an appointment for the Sacrament of Confession</i>

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

## **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.

Submitted by Venus

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.

Anonymous submission.

Anne Sexton