

Anne Sexton: 1928–1974 (1974)

I met Anne Sexton only once or twice. I was teaching at City College in New York when she died, and the still-tenuous women's community there decided to hold a memorial for her. Recalling the effect on so many young women poets of Sylvia Plath's suicide (an imaginative obsession with victimization and death, unfair to Plath herself and her own struggle for survival), I wanted to try to speak to the question of identification which a suicide always arouses. This was my attempt to do so.



Anne Sexton was a poet and a suicide. She was not in any conscious or self-defined sense a feminist, but she did some things ahead of the rebirth of the feminist movement. She wrote poems alluding to abortion, masturbation, menopause, and the painful love of a powerless mother for her daughters, long before such themes became validated by a collective consciousness of women, and while writing and publishing under the scrutiny of the male literary establishment. In 1966 I helped organize a read-in against the Vietnam War, at Harvard, and asked her to participate. Famous male poets and novelists were there, reading their diatribes against McNamara, their napalm poems, their ego-poetry. Anne read—in a very quiet, vulnerable voice—“Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman”—setting the first-hand image of a mother's affirmation of her daughter against the second-hand images of death and violence hurled that evening by men who had never seen a bombed

village. That poem is dated 1964, and it is a feminist poem. Her head was often patriarchal, but in her blood and her bones, Anne Sexton knew.

Many women writers, learning of her death, have been trying to reconcile our feelings about her, her poetry, her suicide at forty-five, with the lives we are trying to stay alive in. We have had enough suicidal women poets, enough suicidal women, enough of self-destructiveness as the sole form of violence permitted to women.

I would like to list, in Anne's honor and memory, some of the ways in which we destroy ourselves. Self-trivialization is one. Believing the lie that women are not capable of major creations. Not taking ourselves or our work seriously enough; always finding the needs of others more demanding than our own. Being content to produce intellectual or artistic work in which we imitate men, in which we lie to ourselves and each other, in which we do not press to our fullest possibilities, to which we fail to give the attention and hard work we would give to a child or a lover. Horizontal hostility—contempt for women—is another: the fear and mistrust of other women, because other women *are* ourselves. The conviction that "women are never really going to do anything," that women's self-determination and survival are secondary to the "real" revolution made by men, that "our worst enemies are women." We become our own worst enemies when we allow our inculcated self-hatred to turn such shallow projections on each other. Another kind of destructiveness is misplaced compassion. A woman I know was recently raped; her first—and typical—instinct was to feel sorry for the rapist, who had held her at knife-point. When we begin to feel compassion for ourselves and each other instead of for our rapists, we will begin to be immune to suicide. A fourth way is addiction. Addiction to "Love"—to the idea of selfless, sacrificial love as somehow redemptive, a female career; to sex as a junkie-trip, a way of self-blurring or self-immolation. Addiction to depression—the most acceptable way of living out a female existence, since the depressed cannot be held responsible, doctors will prescribe us pills, alcohol offer its blanket of blankness. Addiction to male approval: as long as you can find a man to vouch for you, sexually or intellectually, you must be somehow all right, your existence vindicated, whatever the price you pay.

Self-trivialization, contempt for women, misplaced compassion,

addiction; if we could purge ourselves of this quadruple poison, we would have minds and bodies more poised for the act of survival and rebuilding.

I think of Anne Sexton as a sister whose work tells us what we have to fight, in ourselves and in the images patriarchy has held up to us. Her poetry is a guide to the ruins, from which we learn what women have lived and what we must refuse to live any longer. Her death is an arrest: in its moment we have all been held, momentarily, in the grip of a policeman who tells us we are guilty of being female, and powerless. But because of her work she is still a presence; and as Tillie Olsen has said: "Every woman who writes is a survivor."