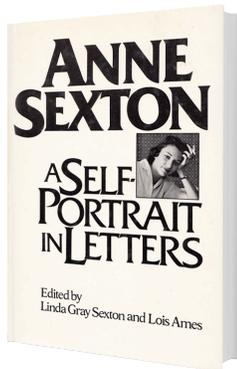


Prologue

Young
1928-1957



Anne Sexton smiles out of childhood snapshots and portraits, but even so, her large green eyes convey the pain she would later put into words. When she grew older, she described herself as “a girl who was meant to be a boy, the unwanted third daughter”; her memories were of a childhood studded with physical and mental abuse. Yet her older sister Blanche saw Anne as a “much-loved child, over-indulged—the center of attention.” Whatever the reality, an early sense of rejection was to haunt Anne throughout her life and shaped much of her poetry. [*****]. In the autumn of 1945 Anne’s parents [Ralph and Mary Gray Harvey] sent her to Rogers Hall, a boarding school in Lowell, Massachusetts, with moderate academic standards. She smoked in the bathrooms and constantly went off campus without permission. Again her grades suffered as she composed letters to boyfriends, who she did not hesitate to play against each other. One of her favorite tricks was to write passionate love letters to several different young men and then intentionally mix up the envelopes. [*****]

At Rogers Hall she began to write poetry. The themes were love and loss, loneliness and despair, and even then there was disquietude over her own death. She experimented with form, writing cinquains, terza rima, sonnets, and free verse. Persistently reworking each poem, draft after draft, she showed that while she might pay no attention in math class, when

interested she could spend considerable time on the smallest details. She published several of these poems in *Splinters*, the Rogers Hall yearbook. [*****].

In the fall [of 1949] she entered The Garland School, which was housed in a brownstone mansion on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston. There, girls from upper-middle-class families chewed gum and exchanged gossip behind the notebooks in which they took sporadic direction for maintaining well-supervised households. In later years she would refer to Garland as a “finishing school,” often remarking that the only thing she learned there was how to make a perfect white sauce. Most of her days and evenings were spent in planning dates with boys scattered at various colleges throughout New England. Decidedly, for Anne, Garland was a holding pattern before marriage.

Her two sisters had already married in grand style. By spring 1948 Anne was notifying friends that she was engaged to a young man from Wellesley. Then began arrangements for an elaborate wedding similar to Jane’s and Blanche’s. But in July, at the Longwood Cricket Club, she was introduced to Alfred Muller Sexton II. The handsome young man with the engaging grin was nicknamed Kayo. He had just completed his freshman year at Colgate University and wanted to be a doctor.

Soon Kayo invited Anne home to meet his family in Chestnut Hill. Wilhelmine and George Sexton were strict, serious, and loving parents; they had raised him and his sister Joan to be reserved and well mannered, and they expected their son to bring home young ladies of similar bearing. But the Harveys used their money to live ostentatiously; at just seventeen Anne had enjoyed the envy of her crowd with her own car, a shining black convertible. She did not conduct herself as a lady should. She smoked. She was too racy, too boy-crazy, too wild—and she was engaged to someone else. During this first meeting with Kayo’s parents, Anne wore too much bright red lipstick and stained Mrs. Sexton’s best linen napkins a gaudy crimson.

In less than three weeks Anne and Kayo found themselves madly in love, and for once Anne confided in her mother. Mary Gray had watched her daughter break hearts and engagements,

but Kayo was a person of substance. She gave her endorsement: “He will take care of you.”

Late in the evening of August 14, 1948, Kayo dropped from his second-story bedroom window, picked up Anne in her convertible, and began the long drive to North Carolina, where the legal marriage age was only eighteen. Anne had left the following letter for her parents with a note on the envelope: “To be put on table at breakfast time.”

Dearest Momie and Daddie—

I don’t know how to begin this letter—So I’ll jump right in and take my chances. By the time you read this you will have another son-in-law. I know that you like him—that everyone of my friends and relatives, who have met him, like him. And I love him. There would be no reason for you to oppose this marriage. Kayo is a fine person, responsible and kind. He can support me, he comes from very fine people. There can be nothing wrong in my choice.

Please do not think that I am trying to put something over on you. I know that many people think elopement is the wrong way to get married. But I’ve gone through getting engaged and preparing for a big wedding. I sort of feel as though I don’t want to do that again. You have married two of your daughters in the grandest of style—I am the third and last. I hope I am not disappointing you in the way I choose to get married. But I know that you will be happier about this marriage than the one I planned previously, despite how I am doing it. And I want you to be pleased. I love you both so very dearly.

Please don’t think I that I am unappreciative of all the wonderful things you have done for me. No daughter could have had more done for her than I have had. No one could say that I have eloped because you wouldn’t let me marry him. You would have let me make my own choice. And I have. I am so happy that you like him too—soon you will love him, I know. I feel terrible leaving my beautiful new room and gorgeous new home. When I sat the dinner table last night I looked at you both and thought how kind and sweet and loyal you were. I love you both and you are so cute. Daddy in a good mood and mother in a good mood. “I am lucky” I thought. But everyone needs their own home and their own life. Daddy has Mother and Mother has Daddy. And now that I’ve found the man I want for all my life to be the Daddy of my children, I just couldn’t seem to face the whole thing again. Please believe me—I would never do this if I thought you didn’t like Kayo.

[*****]

Oh please forgive me and understand—I want to be married and have a family. I love Kayo—and we both can't see waiting while he finishes college. I guess he will work for his father—that isn't planned so don't mention it to the Sextons. When you get this we will be married—please give us your blessing—please don't stop loving me—We love you—Soon you will be proud of me of us. We are going to have a happy marriage and lots of beautiful grandchildren for you. You will be proud. [*****] Be happy for me and realize that I feel as I leave tonight that I have your consent. [*****] I love you!

Anne

Chapter I

The Business of Words

December 1957—September 1959

In December of 1956, Anne had seen the program, “How to Write a Sonnet” on Educational Television. Curiosity overcame her fear of rejection and she telephoned her mother, the only person she knew who had written poetry, to ask “What is an image?” Shortly after Christmas she showed her toughest critic her first sonnet of the decade.

Dr. Sidney Martin [her first psychiatrist] also encouraged Anne. He recognized that her therapy progressed as she began to discover and appreciate her talents. As if to compensate for all her earlier years of scholastic laziness, she worked hard to learn about poetic form and herself. She found that emotions she couldn’t deal with in therapy appeared increasingly in her poetry worksheets. Spending hours listening to the tape recordings of her psychiatric sessions, and days rewriting her worksheets, she slowly pulled poetry from the dark core of her sickness.

In September of 1959, believing that she needed a teacher, Anne enrolled in a poetry seminar taught by the poet John Holmes at the Boston Center for Adult Education. Here she met Maxine Kumin, who would be her staunch friend and constant companion in poetry for the next seventeen years. Maxine, a Radcliffe graduate, possessed a technical expertise and an analytic detachment that balanced Anne’s mercurial brilliance.

As the years went by, Anne and Maxine often communicated daily, by letter if separated by ocean, otherwise by telephone. They supervised each other's poetry and prose, "workshopping" line by line for hours. They discussed husbands, friends, loves, and enemies; they worried and exulted over their children and their publications, borrowed each other's clothes, and criticized each other's readings.

If anyone else viewed Anne's writing as therapy or a hobby, she did not. Very quickly she established a working routine in a corner of the already crowded dining room. Piled high with worksheets and books, her desk constantly overflowed onto the dining room table; she wrote in every spare minute she could steal from child tending and house wifely duties. To make extra money for baby sitters, she began to sell Beauty Counselor cosmetics door-to-door.

By Christmas Day 1957, Anne could present her mother with a sheaf of poems she had written and rewritten over the previous year. She began publishing on a modest scale in *The Herald Tribune*, *The Fiddlehead*, and *The Compass Review*. On July 28, 1958, "The Reading" appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor*. [****] During the next twelve months she submitted poems to a number of the more prestigious literary magazines and by the fall had received several more acceptances [****] That April, Houghton Mifflin signed the contract for her first book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*.

As the workshop with John Holmes drew to a close in the spring of 1958, she gained the confidence to send her poetry to well-known journals. "For Johnny Pole on the Forgotten Beach" was accepted by *The Antioch Review* in late May when she received a letter from one of their editors, Nolan Miller.

[To Nolan Miller
The Antioch Review]

40 Clearwater Rd.
June 1st, 1958

Dear Mr. Miller:

[*****] I am twenty nine (am not sure if this qualifies me as a “young writer”) and have been writing for about a year. I have been published in *The Fiddlehead*, *The Compass Review*, (reprinted in the *New York Herald Tribune*), and have just received an acceptance from *The New Orleans Poetry Journal* for a really long poem—which is pleasing). I have started to get quite a bit of encouragement from various editors [*****] I have about twenty rejection slips from Howard Moss at *The New Yorker* saying “please send more” (am not sure what this means as they add up each week, after week—but it seems encouraging) also a couple of personal letters from Anne Freedgood at *Harper’s* and also *The Atlantic*..I didn’t mean to get going on what might happen but hasn’t, however the list of published looked so small.

I had been thinking of applying for your scholarship before I received your letter because it looks like the best one. However, did not because of the long trip out there which is an expense. I had even asked John Holmes (we are in a workshop together) if he would write a letter for me and he had agreed to do this. However, I guess I don’t need his letter now.

I would particularly like to meet W.D. Snodgrass because his poem “Heart’s Needle” startled me so when I read it, that I just sat there saying “Why didn’t I write this”. I admire his style and know that I need to study with someone I feel this way about.

Am writing this in a rush so that I can mail the revision of “Johnny Pole” tonight. I excuse this hurried and rambling letter (to myself at 10:00 a.m.) by saying that poets just aren’t expected to write sensible letters—just poems. Hope also you will forgive the fading type—am in need of a new ribbon.

Many thanks for giving me the chance to revise this poem as I knew it needed it—just needed someone to tell me.

Sincerely,
Anne Sexton

Epilogue

Anne's death was not unexpected. All those close to her had known that one day she would choose to commit suicide. At home in Weston on Friday, October 4, 1974, she took herself quickly and quietly.

Only the day before she had returned from a successful reading at Goucher College in Maryland, where the audience had given her an extended standing ovation. The academic year had just begun at Boston University and her students welcomed her home at the airport instead of meeting her in their weekly Thursday class. At Black Oak Road, housekeeping arrangements looked promising: a new young couple had moved into the basement apartment.

The weather that Friday was particularly invigorating—the “black” oaks and swamp maples were turning color. Anne shared lunch with Maxine Kumin in Newton and proofread the galley sheets for *The Awful Rowing Toward God* with her as they had done with her previous books. She had planned an evening out with one of the men she was currently seeing. But despite these signs of renewal and strength, she returned home to her death with no dramatics, no warning, no telephone calls.

Of all those who unconsciously prepared for her death, perhaps Anne herself was the most thorough. By July 1974 she had finished putting her house in order asking particular friends which of her possessions they would like as remembrances, and offering to write holographs of their favorite poems. She had selected a biographer and prepared the Boston University archive of her manuscripts and letters. After much thought, she had appointed her literary executor, and drawn up a will with specific instructions for her funeral. In

the last few years she had repeatedly told family members and friends that she wanted a palindrome from the side of an Irish barn carved on her gravestone. The words “Rats Live On No Evil Star” gave her a peculiar kind of hope.

She was acutely aware of how her death would affect others. In a letter written in April 1969 to her daughter Linda, she attempted to comfort and to hold, anticipating the day when touch would be impossible.

Wed. 2:45 p.m.

Dear Linda,

I am in the middle of a flight to St. Louis to give a reading. I was reading a *New Yorker* story that made me think of my mother and all alone in the seat I whispered to her, “I know, Mother, I know.” (Found a pen!) And I thought of you—someday flying somewhere all alone and me dead perhaps and you wishing to speak to me.

And I want to speak back. (Linda, maybe it won't be flying, maybe it will be at your *own* kitchen table drinking tea some afternoon when you are 40. *Anytime.*)—I want to say back.

1st I love you.

2. you *never* let me down.

3. I know. I was there once. I, *too*, was 40 and with a dead mother whom I needed *still*. [...]

This is my message to the 40-year-old Linda. No matter what happens you were always my bobolink, my special Linda Gray. Life is not easy. It is awfully lonely. *I* know that. Now you too know it—wherever you are, Linda, talking to me. But I've had a good life—I *wrote* unhappy—but I lived to the hilt. You too, Linda—Live to the HILT! To the top. I love you, 40-year-old Linda, and I love what you do, what you feel, what you are! Be your own woman. Belong to those u love. Talk to my poems, or talk to your heart—I'm in both if u need me.—I lied, Linda. I did love my mother and she loved me. So there! She never held me but I miss her so that I have to deny I ever loved her—or she me! Silly Anne!

XOXOXO
Mom