

Before Mary Baures, Psy.D., became a psychologist, she was a writer. She earned a master's degree in creative writing at Boston University where she worked with Anne Sexton the year before her death.

Dr. Baures first shares what it was like to watch her mentor suffering from emotional problems, and then she uses her clinical training to explore what was happening with Anne Sexton as she slid toward suicide.

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"Art should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within us."

Kafka

ANNE SEXTON "ONE WRITES BECAUSE ONE HAS TO"

ANNE SEXTON—BATTLING ONE'S DEMONS WITH POETRY OR USING POETRY TO BATTLE ONE'S DEMONS

I came to Boston in 1973 to study with Anne Sexton in the master's program in creative writing at Boston University. I was fascinated by her honesty, her wise profound observations, and the way she mocked her fears with humor.

One day stands out vividly. Anne and I had just crossed Commonwealth Avenue, and headed for the Dugout, a bar where we met after class. A young woman stepped in front of our path. She had mailed Anne some poems and wanted a reaction.

"Oh, yes," Anne said, making her voice gentle. "There are some good lines in them, but I teach a graduate class. I don't think you are ready for that."

"Should I be a writer?" the woman asked.

"One does not choose to write," Anne answered. "One writes because one has to. It is not an easy life. Look at me. I am staying in a mental hospital. I only come out to teach my class."

Speechless, the woman stood there staring at the backs of cars, their little red lights saying, "Let me out of this lane." Anne wished her good luck with her writing.

It was a sunny fall day and our eyes adjusted to the darkness of the bar. Two other members of the workshop waited for us at the dimly lit table. The nurse from the hospital had gone to the car, and, since she wasn't watching, Anne borrowed a dollar for a beer since the hospital made her give up her money. Her hand fumbled over five

packs of Benson and Hedges in her purse to an opened pack. She stuck the soft white stick in her mouth and leaned toward an orange flame.

“That was a marvelous poem you had today,” she raved, her blue-green eyes looking brightly across the table at the woman who had written it. After we finished talking about the poem, Anne said, “It’s a horrible place.” Everyone knew she referred to the hospital.

“At least you will get some gripping poems out of it,” another classmate said.

“No,” Anne replied her voice a bit loud. “I do not want to be known as the mad suicide poet, the live Sylvia Plath.”

Anne was an attractive Pulitzer Prize winning poet who seemed to squeeze every bit of enjoyment from life. It was sometimes hard to see how fragile she was.

She taught us about images and metaphors. They were more powerful when you found connections between unlike things—a fist and a fetus, eyelids and riding boots, a tongue and fish, flies and small black shoes, a girl curled like a snail. She showed us how to “image-monger” by spewing out a torrent of metaphors in a process called “storming the image.” We would “unrepress” by creating an unconscious for an object, like a can of Coke. Our associations became rapid as we talked over each other to get our ideas out. We became raunchy and laughed wildly.

I couldn’t understand how such a fun-loving person like Anne could obsess about dying. And if she really wanted to die, why did she have so many failed attempts? Were they expressions of ambivalence? Did part of her want to die, while another part was terrified of dying? Clearly another part wanted to live.

In our group, which had become a kind of family for Anne, she rarely discussed her suicidal impulses. She said she loved being with us because we were not used up or dirty with life. What I knew about her suicidal impulses came from her work. In *Live or Die*, she decided to live like the Dalmatian puppies she was unable to drown in the pails of water waiting for them. Like the Saul Bellow quote at

the beginning of her book, she decided to “...live or die but not poison everything.”

Another time she had admitted herself to a hospital, and she looked around at the brains rotting and the hearts going flat and decided to flee on her donkey, “...flee this sad hotel, ride out on some hairy beast, gallop backwards pressing your buttocks to his withers, sit to his clumsy gait somehow. Ride out any old way you please!”

She attempted suicide in 1970 when she was psychotic. Colors and sounds were either far away or very loud. She became convinced that her best friend, Maxine Kumin, was dead. Anne drove to a mutual friend’s house and described her confusion. When the mutual friend called Maxine, Anne was convinced that Maxine’s voice was a tape recording. Her friend came home with Anne, and when Anne’s husband left to drive the friend home, Anne overdosed.

Her doctors found that teaching was life-giving for her, so they allowed her to leave the hospital with a nurse just to teach her class. Soon *The Death Notebooks* came out and Sexton was released from the hospital. She began a series of readings around the country in her “performance mode.” “I could perform just before I die, but it’s a performance of the poems. I know the lines—it’s a practiced emotion.”

Her dramatic public personae contributed to her popularity and the sales of her books. She missed our class twice for hospitalizations after suicide attempts, but we were told that she was away with a busy reading schedule. A few students found her a bit unstable to be an effective mentor, but only on one occasion did I see her inappropriately angry. A male classmate attempted criticism of a poem by counting the number of references to music. I saw that something was “off” with Anne some days, but most days she was charismatic. Her laugh was deep and gusty, she was sometimes silly and the class was fun.

Although she could not hide her instability from us, she hid the worst part of her illness from her students. She’d been suicidal so many times before, and I thought she’d get through this crisis too. When she killed herself in October of 1974, I was dazed and shocked.

Now Anne Sexton's handwriting in my copy of *Live or Die*: "Live, dear friend, and write on and on..." seems to stretch out impossibly over the years. Back in 1973 when she gave me the book, it did not seem possible that I would have gone on to become a psychologist with some specialization in suicide evaluations. Anne would have laughed at the posthumous absurdity.

Now, with my training, I can see more clearly how Anne was careening toward her death and taking with her the bright distractions and warm touches that enabled her to endure so far.

Many of her losses were from her illness. Her diagnosis changed over time but she seemed bipolar with some dissociative features. As Kay Jamison says in *Touched with Fire*, thinking by people with bipolar can range from unusually clear, fast, and creative to retardation so profound there's no meaningful mental activity. In her section on Sexton, Jamison says Anne had a rapid cycling quality to her illness.

Sexton's ability to dip into primitive, irrational sources while being in reality helped her live on close terms with life's dark forces that she wrote about. Her compass needle was easily set ajar. Gaiety, fiery thoughts and feelings, and grand visions soon swung into grim and stormy moods.

The first time I saw Anne, she was high on love. In August of 1973, just before the fall term, Anne read at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference. The room was dark as she stood in spotlights reading with dramatic gestures—the clench of a hand to her throat, raising her hands to the heavens, pregnant pauses. Passion in her voice was palpable as she read her love poems.

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.

At the conference, Anne was with Phil Legler from Northern Michigan University. Legler had previously arranged her readings and fees at various colleges. As the sparks between them grew hotter, he wrote, "You live at such a screaming intensity, it's almost too painfully beautiful to bear. You've got both a lifetime fan of your work and a mad mad mad lover to cope with." Soon he checked himself into a psychiatric hospital because he was torn between his love for Anne and for his marriage and family.

She wrote to him that poets were always writing each other love letters but it was hard for the wives and husbands to understand. She explained that her husband was good-looking, stern, hated poetry, her abundance, and didn't desire her as a woman. "I went a bit haywire over getting some love."

Sexton began to consider divorcing Kayo, although she depended on him for a stable home. He shouldered many responsibilities she was not up to and made her work possible. As she wrote about in *Man and Wife*: "A soldier is forced to stay with a soldier because they share the same dirt, the same blows....Even their song is not a sure thing. It is not a language....It is a kind of breathing." Her life really began to unravel when she went through with the divorce, after twenty-four years of marriage.

Although her therapist advised her to go slowly with Legler, she soon flooded him with long erotic letters to leave his marriage and marry her. He was also desperate for her company, but feared he and Sexton had resonant weaknesses and might destroy each other.

As the complicated alliance with Legler unraveled, Sexton's psychiatrist, Dr. Constance Chase, went on vacation. Anne started having fugue states where the walls and floors seemed to shift. Her fear mounted to panic. When Legler finally decided to remain in his marriage, Sexton overdosed and spent a month in a hospital.

"Men," she told us were "...fraidy cats." She joined a dating service, and, terrified of being alone, hired live-in companions. Family rituals had contained some of her sickness but Kayo was gone and her daughters were away at school.

Going off Thorazine was another reason for Anne's decline. Dr. Chase was against it since Sexton said that it kept her sane and made her too tranquil. (Thorazine is not the best medication for bipolar illness. A better medication would have been lithium, but by the time she tried it in 1972, alcohol undermined the medication's effects.) After going off her medication, her periods of sickness were longer and the chaos was deeper.

One wonders if she would have stayed married to Kayo had she stayed on her medication. Although her illness was frustrating to him, he helped her through her breakdowns, starting at the beginning of them, when she was twenty-eight.

Anne's first breakdown came when she was unable to tolerate the stress of motherhood and she overdosed on barbiturates. "I was trying to lead a conventional life...but one can't build little white picket fences to keep nightmares out." Her mother-in-law, Billie, did a great deal of the parenting when her children were toddlers. Conflicts developed because Billie had a lot of authority over the children and Anne resented it.

When Sexton recovered some stability, she felt guilty for leaving her children. She wrote to Joy: "In naming you I named all the things you are except the ditch where I left you once...while I sailed off into madness." Her daughters were four and six when Anne emerged as a poet. She shared with them her passion for music, writing and acting. One game she played was upsetting to Linda because Anne played like a baby and insisted on them mothering her. Perhaps Anne didn't understand the effects of her instability and years of sickness and couldn't see her daughters' problem with it.

Anne started writing poetry at her psychologist's suggestions. Poetry, she said, led her by the hand out of madness. After the fragmentation of a psychosis, she knitted together the pieces of her life—faded pictures in scrapbooks, toys from childhood, the broken ends of things.

Most poems went through endless revisions—one 300 times and another over four years—until she found just the right juxtaposition of images, just the right voice. Giving artistic form to her madness gave her a sense of control over it, and she was able to explore it without being overwhelmed.

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;
lovely thing, twelve-fingered out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.

Anne's psychologist, Dr. Martin Orne, told her that she couldn't kill herself because her poems might be helpful to others going through similar things who couldn't express themselves as well. "That gave me a purpose," Anne said, "A little cause, something to do with my life, no matter how rotten I was."

She gave shape to the chaos that threatened to drown her and ordered her experiences so the world was sensible and real again. In poetry, she revealed things she needed to conceal from herself. After seeing it in her work, she integrated it into her therapy. "I alternate between hiding behind my own hands protecting myself anyway I can and this other this seeing, ouching other."

During therapy, a persona called Elizabeth (her paternal grandmother's name) emerged by scrawling in childlike letters across a notebook. In this dissociative form, she remembered an incestuous relationship with her father. Later, Anne questioned this memory, but her symptoms—the way she sexualized significant relationships—fit the picture of sexual abuse. Dr. Orne disengaged from acknowledging the Elizabeth persona as distinct from Anne because he did not want to encourage her dissociative states.

In her first interview with Dr. Orne, who was a clinical psychologist as well as a medical doctor, she said her best talent was

making men feel sexually powerful and that she should become a prostitute. At the beginning, Orne said Anne pushed reality away and "...you had to see deeply into her to know there was someone there." He began to see that she brought powerful resources to her healing: imagination and a facility with words, deep pleasures in living that gave her motivation to work hard. He helped her re-channel her energy and see herself as a capable person.

When dealing with her psychosis, as words crowded and pressed for headroom, Anne worked in strict form. When she arrived at the meaning, there was a change in her psyche. The form of the poem, she said, worked as a kind of super-ego for her. She said that it was a miracle she came out of it whole.

She began "Kind Sir: These Woods" with a quote from Thoreau: "For a man needs only to be turned around once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost...Not til we are lost...do we begin to find ourselves." In the poem, she compares her illness to a game she played as a child in Maine at her grandfather's cottage. In the game, she turned around with her eyes shut and the world was rearranged. A bell buoy's cry of doom told her that her nursemaid was gone and she was dead. In her illness, "...the woods were white and my night mind saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal. And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course to look—this inward look that society scorns—Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns."

Her first teacher, John Holmes at The Boston Center for Adult Education, told her that her poetry was such a narrow diary that she wasn't giving anything to the readers that teaches them, but she developed a huge following among others with emotional problems.

She saw her suicide attempt as a rebirth that separated her from her former life. Before she wrote poetry, Anne felt frozen or like a doll: shellacked, grinning and planted in an all-American kitchen. After madness cracked the surface of her life, a buried self emerged. Writing enabled her to develop a new self and she found positive meanings in her illness. She emerged from her grief with her head held

high, holding a finished book in her hand. When she wrote, she said she knew she was doing the thing she was born to do. Suicide, she said, was the opposite of the poem.

Sexton enrolled in Robert Lowell's class at Boston University along with Sylvia Plath and George Starbuck. When Lowell won the National Book Award, his acceptance speech distinguished between two types of poetry: "cooked" formal, expert and remote and "raw." The raw kind—written by Lowell, Sexton, Plath, Allen Ginsburg and Adrienne Rich—started a new movement in the culture. Some referred to the new style as "confessional." Sexton and Plath both tapped the constraints of conforming to feminine stereotypes at the beginning of the woman's movement. Both used mental illness as a generating motor for transcendent truth and beauty. Both used writing as escape from themselves.

Lowell told Sexton: "You stick to the truth and the simple expression of very difficult feelings." He must have resonated with her poems in her first book *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. Lowell was manic-depressive himself and had frequent hospitalizations. He wrote about seeing too much and feeling it with "one layer of skin missing." He called mania "a magical orange grove in a nightmare".

Anne Sexton became an American success story. She won the Pulitzer Prize and taught in a prestigious graduate writing program, yet she had little formal education.

On one level, Anne mastered her madness and found a purpose in her illness that she integrated into a new life-course attuned with the best in herself. She converted psychological pain into truth and beauty and taught her terrors to sing.

In a severe trauma such as a psychosis, the lifeline has been broken and the survivor must establish her life on a new basis. Images are a powerful way to compose a new truth and metaphors tap preverbal violations.

On another level, she blamed herself for her illness. As in literature where heroes are rewarded and villains are punished, she

felt she suffered because of some essential badness. She pursued love and lust and finally God, but nothing took her hunger or her feelings of badness away.

As she careened toward her death, she distorted her experiences more and more. Her distortions and her anguish stressed all of her relationships, including those with her doctors. During a discussion over her divorce settlement, Anne revealed a financial status that did not warrant the reduced fee that Dr. Chase gave her. Anne insisted that Dr. Chase had lost professional objectivity and had confused her own needs with those of her patient. Anne was bitter. When Dr. Chase ended the therapy, Sexton said, "This is no termination of any sort but an amputation, and I feel pretty damned desperate." Although Sexton did see a psychiatric social worker for a while, in the nine months of her remaining life, poetry became her principal therapy.

Anne depended a great deal on her doctors. When an earlier relationship with Dr. Orne dissolved, Anne felt that she lost part of herself. "For him to leave is to leave myself....I need someone, aside from pain, to rock me out, away alone." Her doctors helped her keep the voices away and became sustaining others, like her mother and Nana before, and her Muse and God afterwards.

After the termination of Dr. Chase, Anne became more and more suicidal and typed out her thoughts: "Can I save myself? I can try....I can keep right on trying. Granny, you electric Smith Corona heart, you buzz back at me and I pray you do not break."

During this time, she was unable to visit the dentist or go shopping alone. Earlier, she thought she could make her demons go away if there was enough love to put them down. Depending on her friends may have been how Anne stayed out of the hospital, but when they refused to care for her like a child, she felt abandoned. Similar to how her moods shifted from euphoria to depression, she viewed people as all good or all bad. When an unrealistic request was refused, she felt rejected.

As the others she depended on for psychic integration deserted her, she spiraled inward and became bitter, weary, frightened and alone.

The more chaotic her inner states, the less careful her craft. Although her poetry still had brilliant lines, its structure didn't seem to contain her chaotic emotions. Her critics said she reduced a once graceful style to its barest, crude essentials and showed little progression in her themes.

Mrs. Sexton went out looking for the gods.
She began looking in the sky
expecting a large white angel with a blue crotch.
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 a coming, it's a coming.

These lines are from *The Death Notebooks*. Herbert Kenny of *The Boston Globe* called the book a "deeply spiritual manifesto." Ben Howard of *Poetry* said she reduced her religious quest to a kind of verbal cartoon and evoked a sense of succession and repetition of events following one another in predictable and usually empty patterns. Another critic said, "...musically her instrument became the kazoo... yet her writing dazzled."

Earlier, her writing led to a process of discovery, surprise and synthesis. As many of her relationships went sour, she turned to God with a stubborn fanaticism and clung to her obsession of meeting Him and feeling His healing embrace. She visited an elderly priest who said he could not give the last rites but that God was her typewriter. Maxine Kumin believes that this down-to-earth wisdom may have kept Anne alive another year and enabled her to write her next book.

From January 10 to January 30 in 1973, she wrote *The Awful Rowing Toward God*. With five to seven poems pouring out a day, she called it a frenzy of despair and hope. Her goal was to rescue herself from chaos, but she was unable to progress beyond her one theme. Previously, one topic merged into another until she found themes she never considered before.

Earlier in *Transformations*, published in 1971, she modernized *Grimm Fairy Tales* and the center of gravity in her work shifted. She fused both public and personal themes and exhibited a gift for knocking social and moral conventions. Each poem-story was built around some dark psychic core, turned on a magical transformation.

The more she became isolated and cut off, she searched for some magical transformation in her psyche. After all, previously she had been transformed from a housewife into a poet. More and more, she inhabited a private self-contained world.

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.

This poem may have been in response to critics who said Anne was narcissistic. The more she lost perspective, how others viewed her took on an exaggerated importance, and the harder it was for her to regulate her self-esteem.

On March 7, she was scheduled to give a reading to promote *The Death Notebooks* at Sanders Theatre at Harvard. When she saw a mimeographed flyer (including a typo in the book title) to announce the reading, she shifted into high gear. She sent copies of the book to local radio stations and dared them to read poems such as “The Fury of Cocks” to announce the event. She hired an advertising agency to produce a poster and had it inserted into newspapers as a flyer.

When she arrived at the reading, wearing a long black and white skirt split to the knee, the hall was filled to the rafters. Some people sat in window frames, others on the fire escape. Her opening words sounded slurred, but then her voice gathered

confidence and deepened. She joked that she was reading from her “posthumous work.” She bantered with the audience, made cracks about *The New Yorker*, read about her madness in “Music Swims Back to Me” and ended with “The Touch.” The audience gave her a standing ovation.

The reading had been an overwhelming success and she received many positive reviews, but she focused on the negative. A *Boston Globe* critic accused her of commercialism and said she was filled with “middle-brow anguish.” When she was healthier, she would have been able to see that most of the reviews were positive, but she was unable to laugh off the criticism. She read it aloud in class and said: “See, even when you’re at the top, people still throw spitballs at you.”

In June of 1974, I went to Anne’s house in Weston to go over my thesis—a collection of poems and short stories. When I drove into her driveway on Black Oak Road, she and her dogs came out to greet me. (These were the Dalmatians she refused to drown when she decided to live and stop poisoning everything.) One of them had a lame paw. She said in a poem: “Come forth with a dog who is spotted and smiling and holds up his paw for the awful stars.”

She had just finished a short story and handed it to me for feedback. In it, a man who had just died waited at the gates of heaven to be judged for all the lives he ever lived. An amazing series of flashbacks, reeled through his mind. In earlier years, Anne wrote about death but grounded it in other themes: her parents, love, loss, lust, and motherhood. Now death was her only topic.

After I’d been there an hour, her voice became slurred by tranquilizers. Pills, she said, were time bombs she used to kill herself in small amounts.

She mentioned that she wanted to give a summer workshop, so I offered to put up some posters. A week later, she called to ask what I’d done because she’d received a huge response. I said, “Lots of people want to work with you because you are a wonderful teacher and writer.”

“Me?” she asked, “The confessional poet?”

As Anne careened toward her death, her poetic voice, which was authentic and original because it was so personal, began to feel shameful. When she was healthier, she could shrug off the complaints that she wrote confessional poetry.

The legal system had given the concept of confession a new twist. Some of her poems were about extramarital affairs, and during her divorce process, Anne felt unclothed in court. The only cure of such confessions, as she wrote in a poem, was to “...sit in a cold bath for six days, a bath full of leeches, drawing out your blood into which confessors heated the devil.”

Anne felt that something essential in her was missing, like her characters in an early poem, “The Lost Ingredient”, when they sat in tubs in Atlantic City, patting towels over their shivered skin and praying for impossible loves or new skin or another child.

When Anne divorced, she believed freedom was the lost ingredient, but just like the promise of lust, love and God, nothing made her whole. She wrote to her daughter Joyce that the divorce had been a mistake. “A little love is better than no love at all.” Friends could not pick up the pieces the way Kayo did. Her neediness strained her relationship with both of her daughters, and Maxine Kumin was angry with her for her rude behavior toward two professors when they read at Douglass College. Anne felt alone and poetry made little difference.

She attempted suicide in the spring of 1974 and complained to Maxine that the attempt aborted. She vowed to tell no one of her plan the next time.

On October 4, 1974, she read the proofs of *The Awful Rowing Toward God* and had a visit with Maxine who felt Anne was doing better because she’d been gay and silly. “I could perform just before I die,” she had said years earlier.

When Anne came home, she fixed a drink of vodka and wrapped herself in her mother’s old fur coat. Then she went to the

garage and sat in her red Cougar. With her mother’s coat embracing her, she breathed in the carbon monoxide poison in the exhaust fumes. Her final act was the dramatic end of *The Awful Rowing Toward God*.

After John Holmes complained that her writing was too narrow, she wrote a poem to him: “To John Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further”. In it she tells him that the commonplaces of the asylum where “...the cracked mirror of my selfish death out stared me were her education. 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.”

Now I imagine Anne up there, somewhere, still holding out her awkward bowl. We do not want to turn away from the lessons among her cracked stars.

As Denise Levertov said at one of Anne’s memorial services, “We who are alive must make clear, as she could not, the distinction between creativity and self destruction.”

One reason Anne killed herself is that she vividly imagined death as a healing place where she would get rid of the rat inside her, “the gnawing pestilent rat,” where “God would take it with His two hands and embrace it.” Finding God and death became fused into a place where she would find her lost self. She had looked for this healing place between herself and others, but because of her illness, was unable to find it.

As A. Alvarez said in his study of suicide: “Each suicide is a closed world with its own irresistible logic.” As Anne said in *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, “God was there like an island I had not rowed to.” As in the fairy tales she wrote, after a transformation, she’d enter another kingdom where she would be whole.

When Anne lost perspective, her illness made it hard for her to correct herself. She became alienated from friends who could have helped her. Robert Mazzocco wrote in *The New York Review of Books* that what killed Anne was not unhappiness, but something deeper—the horror of being unable to see or feel clearly, to be always only part way back from bedlam. “It’s the sense of the fragmentary

that barriers us, because things don't connect, so we don't add up, we become useless to ourselves and to others.”

From the time of Anne's breakdown at twenty-eight until her death at forty-five, poetry kept her alive. On one level, writing transformed Anne, but on another level, as Robert Lowell said, "...it became a monologue in which her brave heart drowned.”

Anne's inner sense of badness—of the rat inside —may have been a factor in her suicide. She may have been seeking a merger with God that in her fantasy would make her whole and good.

In life she never realized how beautiful she was, how she enriched the lives of others, how much she inspired others, and what a brilliant and wonderful contribution she made to the world. She wished, in death, to achieve that sense of wholeness and goodness that she was unable to achieve in life.