

## Anne Sexton

Anne Gray Harvey was born in Newton, Massachusetts, in 1928. She attended Garland Junior College for one year and married Alfred Muller Sexton II at age nineteen. She enrolled in a modeling course at the Hart Agency and lived in San Francisco and Baltimore. In 1953 she gave birth to a daughter. In 1954 she was diagnosed with postpartum depression, suffered her first mental breakdown, and was admitted to Westwood Lodge, a neuropsychiatric hospital she would repeatedly return to for help. In 1955, following the birth of her second daughter, Sexton suffered another breakdown and was hospitalized again; her children were sent to live with her husband's parents. That same year, on her birthday, she attempted suicide.

She was encouraged by her doctor to pursue an interest in writing poetry she had developed in high school, and in the fall of 1957 she enrolled in a poetry workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education. In her introduction to Anne Sexton's Complete Poems, the poet Maxine Kumin, who was enrolled with Sexton in the 1957 workshop and became her close friend, describes her belief that it was the writing of poetry that gave Sexton something to work towards and develop and thus enabled her to endure life for as long as she did. In 1974 at the age of 46, despite a successful writing career--she won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1967 for *Live or Die*--she lost her battle with mental illness and committed suicide.

Like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, W. D. Snodgrass (who exerted a great influence on her work), and other "confessional" poets, Sexton offers the reader an intimate view of the emotional anguish that characterized her life. She made the experience of being a woman a central issue in her poetry, and though she endured criticism for bringing subjects such as menstruation, abortion, and drug addiction into her work, her skill as a poet transcended the controversy over her subject matter.

### A Selected Bibliography

#### Poetry

45 Mercy Street (1976)  
All My Pretty Ones (1962)  
Live or Die (1966)  
Love Poems (1969)  
Selected Poems (1964)  
The Awful Rowing Toward God (1975)  
The Book of Folly (1973)  
The Complete Poems (1981)  
The Death Notebooks (1974)  
To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960)  
Transformations (1971)  
Words for Dr. Y.: Uncollected Poems (1978)

#### Prose

Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters (1977)

[http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s\\_z/sexton/sexton\\_life.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/sexton/sexton_life.htm)

## Anne Sexton's Life

by Linda Wagner-Martin

sextondesck.jpg (10939 bytes)Sexton, Anne Gray Harvey (9 Nov. 1928-4 Oct. 1974), poet and playwright, was born in Newton, Massachusetts, the daughter of Ralph Harvey, a successful woolen manufacturer, and Mary Gray Staples. Anne was raised in comfortable middle-class circumstances in Weston, Massachusetts, and at the summer compound on Squirrel Island in Maine, but she was never at ease with the life prescribed for her. Her father was an alcoholic, and her mother's literary aspirations had been frustrated by family life. Anne took refuge from her dysfunctional family in her close relationship with "Nana" (Anna Dingley), her maiden great-aunt who lived with the family during Anne's adolescence. Sexton's biographer, Diane Middlebrook, recounts possible sexual abuse by Anne's parents during her childhood; at the very least, Anne felt that her parents were hostile to her and feared that they might abandon her. Her aunt's later breakdown and hospitalization also traumatized her.

Anne disliked school. Her inability to concentrate and occasional disobedience prompted teachers to urge her parents to seek counseling for her--advice her parents did not take. In 1945 they sent her to Rogers Hall, a boarding school in Lowell, Massachusetts, where she began to write poetry and to act. After graduation she briefly attended what she called a "finishing" school. Anne's beauty and sense of daring attracted many men, and at nineteen she eloped with Alfred "Kayo" Sexton II, even though she was engaged to someone else at the time. Then followed years of living as college student newlyweds, sometimes with their parents. Later, during Kayo's service in Korea, Anne became a fashion model. Her infidelities during her husband's absence led to her entering therapy. In 1953 Anne gave birth to a daughter, and Kayo took a job as a traveling salesman in Anne's father's business.

Depressed after the death of her beloved Nana in 1954 and the birth of her second daughter in 1955, Sexton went back into therapy. Her depression worsened, however, and during times when her husband was gone, she occasionally abused the children. Several attempts at suicide led to intermittent institutionalization, of which her parents disapproved. During these years, Sexton's therapist encouraged her to write.

In 1957 Sexton joined several Boston writing groups, and she came to know such writers as Maxine Kumin, Robert Lowell, George Starbuck, and Sylvia Plath. Her poetry became central to her life, and she mastered formal techniques that gained her wide attention. In 1960 *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* was published to good reviews. Such poems as "You, Doctor Martin," "The Bells," and "The Double Image" were often anthologized. Like such other so-called confessional poets as W. D. Snodgrass and Robert Lowell, Sexton was able to convince her readers that her poems echoed her life; not only was her poetry technically excellent, but it was meaningful to the midcentury readers who lived daily with similar kinds of fear and angst.

In 1959 Sexton unexpectedly lost both of her parents, and the memory of her difficult relationships with them--so abruptly ended--led to further breakdowns. Poetry seemed the only route to stability, though at times the friendships she made through her art, which led to sexual affairs, also were unsettling. Her marriage was torn by discord and physical abuse as her husband saw his formerly

dependent wife become a celebrity.

In 1962 Sexton published *All My Pretty Ones*. So popular was her poetry in England that an edition of *Selected Poems* was published there as a *Poetry Book Selection* in 1964. In 1967 Sexton received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *Live or Die* (1966), capping her accumulation of honors such as the Frost Fellowship to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference (1959), the Radcliffe Institute Fellowship (1961), the Levinson Prize (1962), the American Academy of Arts and Letters traveling fellowship (1963), the Shelley Memorial Prize (1967), and an invitation to give the Morris Gray reading at Harvard. To follow were a Guggenheim Fellowship, Ford Foundation grants, honorary degrees, professorships at Colgate University and Boston University, and other distinctions.

Sexton's reputation as poet peaked with the publication of *Love Poems* (1969), an off-Broadway production of her play *Mercy Street* (1969), and the publication of prose poems in *Transformations* (1972). Clearly her most feminist work, the pieces in *Transformations* spoke to a different kind of reader. The Sexton voice was now less confessional and more critical of cultural practices, more inclined to look outside the poet's persona for material. In 1963 Sexton had traveled in Europe, and in 1966 she and Kayo had gone on an African safari. In 1970 she had helped him start a business of his own after he broke associations with her father's former company. Contrary to her seemingly confident public manner, however, Sexton was heavily dependent on therapists, medications, close friends--particularly Maxine Kumin and, later, Lois Ames--and lovers. Continual depressive bouts, unexpected trance states, and comparatively frequent suicide attempts kept her family and friends watchful and unnerved. Finally, in 1973, Sexton told Kayo she wanted a divorce, and from that time on a noticeable decline in her health and stability occurred as loneliness, alcoholism, and depression took their toll.

Estranged from many of her former friends, Sexton became difficult for her maturing daughters to deal with. Aware that many of her readers did not like the religious poetry that she had recently begun writing with her more personal themes, Sexton became nervous about her poetry. Readings had always terrified her, but now she employed a rock group to back up her performances. She forced herself to be an entertainer, while her poems grew more and more privately sacral. In 1972 she published *The Book of Folly* and, in 1974, the ominously titled *The Death Notebooks*. Later that year, she completed *The Awful Rowing toward God*, published posthumously in 1975. Divorced and living by herself, Sexton was lonely and seemed to be searching for compassion through love affairs. She continued to be in psychotherapy, from which she evidently gained little solace. In October 1974, after having lunched with Maxine Kumin, Sexton asphyxiated herself with carbon monoxide in her garage in Boston.

Other posthumous collections of her poems include *45 Mercy Street* (1976) and *Words for Dr. Y: Uncollected Poems with Three Stories* (1978), both edited by Linda Gray Sexton. The publication of Sexton's work culminated in *The Complete Poems* in 1981. Sexton also wrote important essays about poetry and made insightful comments in her many interviews. She understood the fictive impulse, the way the writer uses both fact and the imagination in creation; and, like Wallace Stevens, she saw her art as the "supreme fiction," the writer's finest accomplishment. Much of what Sexton wrote was in no way autobiographical, despite the sense of reality it had, and thus criticisms of her writing as "confessional" are misleading. She used her knowledge of the human condition--often painful, but sometimes joyous--to create poems readers could share. Her incisive metaphors, the unexpected rhythms of her verse, and her ability to grasp a range of meaning in precise words have secured Sexton's good reputation. Though comparatively short, her writing career was successful, as

was her art.

## Bibliography

Anne Sexton's papers are housed at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin. The authorized biography is Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (1991), controversial in part because of the information supplied by Sexton's first therapist. The major critical study is Diana Hume George, *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton* (1987). Collections of criticism by various critics are Diana Hume George, *Sexton: Selected Criticism* (1988); J. D. McClatchy, *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics* (1978); Frances Bixler, *Original Essays on the Poetry of Anne Sexton* (1988); Steven E. Colburn, *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale* (1988); and Linda Wagner-Martin, *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton* (1989).

Cameron Northouse and Thomas P. Walsh published *Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton: A Reference Guide* (1974), but no complete bibliography exists. Diane Wood Middlebrook and Diane Hume George coedited *Selected Poems of Anne Sexton* (1988), and Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames edited *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (1977). Steven E. Colburn edited *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews and Prose* (1985), a collection of Sexton's previously published prose.

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## A Sexton Chronology

Compiled with information supplied by Diane Wood Middlebrook

1928 Born Anne Gray Harvey on November 9 in Newton, Massachusetts.

1934-47 Educated in Wellesley public schools; graduated from Rogers Hall, Lowell, Massachusetts.

1947 Attended the Garland School, a Boston finishing school for women.

1948 August 16: eloped with Alfred Muller Sexton 11 ("Kayo").

1949-52 Lived in Boston area, with brief residence in Cochituate, Baltimore, and San Francisco.

1953 July 21: Linda Gray Sexton born.

1954 July 15: Anna Ladd Dingley ("Nana" ) died at age eighty-six.

1955 August 5: Joyce Ladd Sexton born.

1956 July 13-August 3: hospitalized for treatment of anxiety; children sent to grandmothers.

1957 January: enrolled in John Holmes's poetry workshop at Boston Center for Adult Education. Met Maxine Kumin.

1958 Scholarship to Antioch Writers' Conference to work with W. D. Snodgrass. Began attending Robert Lowell's writing seminar at Boston University. Met George Starbuck.

1959 January: Sylvia Plath joined Lowell's seminar. March 10: Mary Gray Staples died of cancer. May 19: Houghton Mifflin accepted *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* for publication. June 3: Ralph Churchill Harvey died of cerebral hemorrhage, August: received Robert Frost Fellowship to attend Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.

1960 April: *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* published) nominated for National Book Award. June-July: courses in modern literature with Irving Howe and Philip Rahv at Brandeis University.

1961 Began writing play. Appointed to Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study.

1962 October: *All My Pretty Ones* published; nominated for National Book Award. November: Levinson Prize from Poetry.

1963 May 22: awarded traveling fellowship by American Academy of Arts and Letters. August 22-October 27: tour of Europe with neighbor Sands Robart.

1964 *Selected Poems* published in England. September-March 1965: Ford Foundation grant for residence with the Charles Playhouse, Boston.

1965 Elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, London. Received the first literary

magazine travel award from the International Congress of Cultural Freedom.

1966 August: hunting safari in Kenya with Kayo Sexton.

1967 May: awarded Pulitzer Prize for *Live or Die*. Shelley Award from the Poetry Society of America.

1968 July: formed rock group "Anne Sexton and Her Kind." Taught poetry at McLean's Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts.

1969 April: Guggenheim Fellowship for work on play *Mercy Street*, produced at American Place Theater, New York City, October 8-November 21. Began teaching at Boston University and conducting workshops for Oberlin College Independent Study students.

1970 June: honorary doctor of letters, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts.

1972 Promoted to full professor at Boston University. May-June: Crashaw Chair in Literature at Colgate University. Honorary doctor of letters, Fairfield University, Fairfield, Connecticut.

1973 May 5: *Transformations* in opera version by Conrad Susa premiered by the Minneapolis Opera Company. August: lectured at Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.

1974 October 4: died of carbon monoxide poisoning in the garage of her home.

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## 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.

## 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 waddled 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.

Looking glass upon the wall. . .  
Once more the mirror told  
and once more the queen dressed in rags  
and once more Snow White opened the door.  
This time she bought a poison comb,  
a curved eight-inch scorpion,  
and put it in her hair and swooned again.  
The dwarfs returned and took out the comb  
and she revived miraculously.  
She opened her eyes as wide as Orphan Annie.  
Beware, beware, they said,  
but the mirror told,  
the queen came,  
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.

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## The Truth the Dead Know

For my Mother, born March 1902, died March 1959  
and my Father, born February 1900, died June 1959

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 the stone boats. They are more like stone  
than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse  
to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone.

## 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.

## Groundbreaking Book: Live or Die by Anne Sexton (1966)

Born in 1928, Anne Sexton described her family as "hostile," and her early life encompassed a vast range of experience, including finishing school, a stint as a fashion model, and a turbulent marriage. In 1954, she was diagnosed with postpartum depression and suffered her first mental breakdown. She was admitted to Westwood Lodge, a psychiatric hospital to which she would repeatedly return for help.

Encouraged by her doctor to pursue her interest in writing, Sexton enrolled in a poetry workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education in the fall of 1957. A year later she joined Robert Lowell's writing workshop at Boston University along with Sylvia Plath. Deeply influenced by the Confessional poems that Lowell was writing, Sexton began crafting her own intimate portraits. She quickly gained a reputation for her unusually honest poetry, and her forthright, unflinching attention to feminist themes and the body.

Her most celebrated collection, *Live or Die*, is a fictionalized memoir of her recovery from mental illness. Each poem is dated as she moves from the opening lines of "And One for My Dame," to the closing lines of "Live." In the author's note, she says that the poems were written chronologically, "despite the fact that they read like a fever chart for a bad case of melancholy." Although the recovery mapped within the volume was not complete, the poems do not portend her suicide in 1974, just eight years later. While there is cause for sadness in these poems, there is celebration as well.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning *Live or Die* includes many of Sexton's most well-known poems, including "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman," and "Wanting to Die," and "Sylvia's Death," in which she writes to Plath: "Thief!--/how did you crawl into/ crawl down alone/into the death I wanted so badly and for so long."

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5972>

<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/11>

Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston in 1932. She grew up in a comfortably middle-class style and attended Smith College. She suffered a breakdown at the end of her junior year of college, but recovered well enough to return and excel during her senior year, receiving various prizes and graduating summa cum laude. In 1955, having been awarded a Fulbright scholarship, she began two years at Cambridge University. There she met and married the British poet Ted Hughes and settled in England, bearing two children. Her first book of poems, *The Colossus* (1960), demonstrated her precocious talent, but was far more conventional than the work that followed. Having studied with Robert Lowell in 1959 and been influenced by the "confessional" style of his collection *Life Studies*, she embarked on the new work that made her posthumous reputation as a major poet. A terrifying record of her encroaching mental illness, the poems that were collected after her suicide (at age 30) in 1963 in the volumes *Ariel*, *Crossing the Water*, and *Winter Trees* are graphically macabre, hallucinatory in their imagery, but full of ironic wit, technical brilliance, and tremendous emotional power. Her *Selected Poems* were published by Ted Hughes in 1985.

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5971>

Groundbreaking Book: *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath (1965)

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston in 1932 and attended Wellesley and Smith Colleges. Despite suffering from depression, she excelled in college, graduated summa cum laude, and received numerous prizes, including a Fulbright scholarship to study at Cambridge University. While in London, she met and married the British poet Ted Hughes, with whom she settled in England and had two children.

Overwhelmed by her clinical depression and the difficulties of caring for her children, she committed suicide just two weeks after publishing her novel, *The Bell Jar*. Her collection *Ariel* was published posthumously in 1965. Originally edited and compiled by Hughes, a new version of *Ariel* was released in 2004 that restores Plath's original order and the twelve poems missing from the first version. The new version also contains a foreword by her daughter, Frieda Hughes, herself a poet and a painter.

Part of the Confessional movement, alongside her contemporaries Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, Plath's work in *Ariel* is intensely personal. The darkly lyric poems address motherhood, sexuality, marriage, and her own experiences with depression. Despite the positive critical reception of her first, more traditional book, *Colossus*, the poems in *Ariel* were initially refused by many of the best editors in the country—the *New Yorker* would not publish more than a few lines of her later work.

Her late poetry, collected in *Ariel*, includes some of the best-known contemporary poems in the English language, including "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," "Ariel," and the opening poem of the collection: "Morning Song."

Daddy

You do not do, you do not do  
Any more, black shoe  
In which I have lived like a foot  
For thirty years, poor and white,  
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.  
You died before I had time--  
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,  
Ghastly statue with one gray toe  
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic  
Where it pours bean green over blue  
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.  
I used to pray to recover you.  
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town  
Scraped flat by the roller  
Of wars, wars, wars.  
But the name of the town is common.  
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.  
So I never could tell where you  
Put your foot, your root,  
I never could talk to you.  
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.  
Ich, ich, ich, ich,  
I could hardly speak.  
I thought every German was you.  
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine  
Chuffing me off like a Jew.  
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.  
I began to talk like a Jew.  
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna  
Are not very pure or true.  
With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck  
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack

I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of you,  
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.  
And your neat mustache  
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.  
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You--

Not God but a swastika  
So black no sky could squeak through.  
Every woman adores a Fascist,  
The boot in the face, the brute  
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,  
In the picture I have of you,  
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot  
But no less a devil for that, no not  
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.  
I was ten when they buried you.  
At twenty I tried to die  
And get back, back, back to you.  
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,  
And they stuck me together with glue.  
And then I knew what to do.  
I made a model of you,  
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.  
And I said I do, I do.  
So daddy, I'm finally through.  
The black telephone's off at the root,  
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two--  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year,  
Seven years, if you want to know.  
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart  
And the villagers never liked you.  
They are dancing and stamping on you.  
They always knew it was you.

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

12 October 1962

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Lady Lazarus

I have done it again.  
One year in every ten  
I manage it--

A sort of walking miracle, my skin  
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,  
My right foot

A paperweight,  
My face featureless, fine  
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin  
O my enemy.  
Do I terrify?--

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?  
The sour breath  
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh  
The grave cave ate will be  
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.  
I am only thirty.  
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.  
What a trash  
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.  
The peanut-crunching crowd  
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot--  
The big strip tease.  
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands  
My knees.  
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.  
The first time it happened I was ten.  
It was an accident.

The second time I meant  
To last it out and not come back at all.  
I rocked shut

As a seashell.  
They had to call and call  
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.  
I do it so it feels real.  
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.  
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.  
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day  
To the same place, the same face, the same brute  
Amused shout:

'A miracle!'  
That knocks me out.  
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge  
For the hearing of my heart--  
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge  
For a word or a touch  
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.  
So, so, Herr Doktor.  
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,  
I am your valuable,  
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.  
I turn and burn.  
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash--  
You poke and stir.  
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there--

A cake of soap,  
A wedding ring,  
A gold filling.

Herr god, Herr Lucifer  
Beware  
Beware.

Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air.

23-29 October 1962

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## Morning Song

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.  
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry  
Took its place among the elements.

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.  
In a drafty museum, your nakedness  
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

I'm no more your mother  
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow  
Effacement at the wind's hand.

All night your moth-breath  
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:  
A far sea moves in my ear.

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral  
In my Victorian nightgown.  
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try  
Your handful of notes;  
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

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