

Some poems from *Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*

From *Live or Die* (1966)

Live

Live or die, but don't poison everything. . .

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 a 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 played 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 that 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.

From *The Jesus Papers* (1972)

Jesus Suckles

Mary, your great
white apples make me glad.
I feel your heart work its
machine and I doze like a fly.
I cough like a bird on its worm.
I'm a jelly-baby and you're my wife.
You're a rock and I the fringy algae.
You're a lily and I'm the bee that gets inside.
I close my eyes and suck you in like a fire.
I grow. I grow. I'm fattening out.
I'm a kid in a rowboat and you're the sea,
the salt, you're every fish of importance.

No. No.
All lies.
I am small
and you hold me.
You give me milk
and we are the same
and I am glad.

No. No.
All lies.
I am a truck. I run everything.
I own you.

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.

From *The Death Notebooks* (1974)

from 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 lava.
The pimentos kissed like cupids.
I moved like a lobster,
slower and slower.
The air was tiny.
The air would not do.

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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.

From *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975)

When Man Enters Woman

When man
enters woman,
like the surf biting the shore,
again and again,
and the woman opens her mouth in 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,
though God
in His perversity
unties the knot.

Epilogue from *Anne Sexton: a self-portrait in letters*

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 Kurnin 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.

[a few selections from *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath]

SHEEP IN FOG

The hills step off into whiteness.
People or stars
Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.

The train leaves a line of breath.
O slow
Horse the colour of rust,

Hooves, dolorous bells—
All morning the
Morning has been blackening,

A flower left out.
My bones hold a stillness, the far
Fields melt my heart.

They threaten
To let me through to a heaven
Starless and fatherless, a dark water.

THE APPLICANT

First, are you our sort of a person?
Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or a hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then
How can we give you a thing?
Stop crying.
Open your hand.
Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

To fill it and willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it.
Will you marry it?
It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end
And dissolve of sorrow.
We make new stock from the salt.
I notice you are stark naked.
How about this suit—

Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
Will you marry it?
It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
Against fire and bombs through the roof.
Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
I have the ticket for that.
Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
Well, what do you think of *that*?
Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.
You have an eye, it's an image.
My boy, it's your last resort.
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

Ariel

Stasis in darkness.
Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor and distances.

God's lioness,
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels and knees!—The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to
The brown arc
Of the neck I cannot catch,

Nigger-eye
Berries cast dark
Hooks—

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
Shadows.
Something else

Hauls me through air—
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.

White
Godiva, I unpeel—
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child's cry

Melts in the wall.
And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

THE MUNICH MANNEQUINS

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb

Where the yew trees blow like hydras,
The tree of life and the tree of life

Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.
The blood flood is the flood of love,

The absolute sacrifice.
It means: no more idols but me,

Me and you.
So, in their sulphur loveliness, in their smiles

These mannequins lean tonight
In Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome,

Naked and bald in their furs,
Orange lollies on silver sticks,

Intolerable, without mind.
The snow drops its pieces of darkness,

Nobody's about. In the hotels
Hands will be opening doors and setting

Down shoes for a polish of carbon
Into which broad toes will go tomorrow.

O the domesticity of these windows,
The baby lace, the green-leaved confectionery,

The thick Germans slumbering in their bottomless Stolz.
And the black phones on hooks

Glittering
Glittering and digesting

Voicelessness. The snow has no voice.