

# The Complete Poems

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Anne Sexton

WITH A FOREWORD BY

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Houghton Mifflin Company Boston



# How It Was

Maxine Kumin on Anne Sexton

ANNE SEXTON as I remember her on our first meeting in the late winter of 1957, tall, blue-eyed, stunningly slim, her carefully coifed dark hair decorated with flowers, her face skillfully made up, looked every inch the fashion model. And indeed she had briefly modeled for the Hart Agency in Boston. Earrings and bracelets, French perfume, high heels, matching lip and fingernail gloss bedecked her, all intimidating sophistications in the chalk-and-wet-overshoes atmosphere of the Boston Center for Adult Education, where we were enrolled in John Holmes's poetry workshop. Poetry — we were both ambitious beginners — and proximity — we lived in the same suburb — brought us together. As intimate friends and professional allies, we remained intensely committed to one another's writing and well-being to the day of her death in the fall of 1974.

The facts of Anne Sexton's troubled and chaotic life are well known; no other American poet in our time has cried aloud publicly so many private details. While the frankness of these revelations attracted many readers, especially women, who identified strongly with the female aspect of the poems, a number of poets and critics — for the most part, although not exclusively, male — took offense. For Louis Simpson, writing in *Harper's Magazine*,

"Menstruation at Forty" was "the straw that broke this camel's back." And years before he wrote his best-selling novel, *Deliverance*, which centers on a graphic scene of homosexual rape, James Dickey, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, excoriated the poems in *All My Pretty Ones*, saying "It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience..." In a terse eulogy Robert Lowell declared, with considerable ambivalence it would seem, "For a book or two, she grew more powerful. Then writing was too easy or too hard for her. She became meager and exaggerated. Many of her most embarrassing poems would have been fascinating if someone had put them in quotes, as the presentation of some character, not the author." Sexton's work rapidly became a point of contention over which opposing factions dueled in print, at literary gatherings, and in the fastnesses of the college classroom.

And yet the ground for Sexton's confessional poems had been well prepared. In 1956, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* had declaimed:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,  
starving hysterical naked

.....  
... on the granite steps of  
the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of  
suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy,  
and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin metrasol  
electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy  
pingpong & amnesia ...

At the time Sexton began to work in the confessional mode, W. D. Snodgrass had already published his prize-winning collection, *Heart's Needle*, which included details of his divorce and custody struggle. Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell were hammering out their own autobiographical accounts of alienation, despair, anomie, and madness. John Berryman, deceiving no one, charmingly protested in a prefatory note that the Henry of *The Dream Songs* "is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) ... who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about

himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second . . ." The use of *le moi* was being cultivated in fashionable literary journals everywhere. It seems curious that the major and by far most vitriolic expressions of outrage were reserved for Sexton.

Someone once said that we have art in order not to die of the truth, a dictum we might neatly apply to Sexton's perspectives. To Hayden Carruth, the poems "raise the never-solved problem of what literature really is, where you draw the line between art and documentary."

While Louise Bogan and Joyce Carol Oates for the most part appraise Sexton favorably, Mona Van Duyn finds Sexton's "delineation of femaleness so fanatical that it makes one wonder, even after many years of being one, what a woman is . . ." Muriel Rukeyser, who sees the issue as "survival, piece by piece of the body, step by step of poetic experience, and even more the life entire . . .," finds much to praise, for instance singling out "In Celebration of My Uterus" as "one of the few poems in which a woman has come to the fact as symbol, the center after many years of silence and taboo."

Over and over in the critical literature dealing with the body of Sexton's work, we find these diametrical oppositions. The intimate details divulged in Sexton's poetry enchanted or repelled with equal passion. In addition to the strong feelings Anne's work aroused, there was the undeniable fact of her physical beauty. Her presence on the platform dazzled with its staginess, its props of water glass, cigarettes, and ashtray. She used pregnant pauses, husky whispers, pseudoshouts to calculated effect. A Sexton audience might hiss its displeasure or deliver a standing ovation. It did not doze off during a reading.

Anne basked in the attention she attracted, partly because it was antithetical to an earlier generation's view of the woman writer as "poetess," and partly because she was flattered by and enjoyed the adoration of her public. But behind the glamorously garbed woman lurked a terrified and homely child, cowed from the cradle onward, it seemed, by the indifference and cruelties of

her world. Her parents, she was convinced, had not wanted her to be born. Her sisters, she alleged, competed against and won out over her. Her teachers, unable to rouse the slumbering intelligence from its hiding place, treated her with impatience and anger. Anne's counterphobic response to rejection and admonishment was always to defy, dare, press, contravene. Thus the frightened little girl became a flamboyant and provocative woman; the timid child who skulked in closets burst forth as an exhibitionist declaiming with her own rock group; the intensely private individual bared her liver to the eagle in public readings where almost invariably there was standing room only.

Born Anne Gray Harvey in 1928, she attended public school in Wellesley, Massachusetts, spent two years at Rogers Hall preparatory school, and then one year at Garland Junior College in Boston. A few months shy of her twentieth birthday, she eloped with Alfred Muller Sexton II (nicknamed Kayo), enrolled in a Hart Agency modeling course, and lived briefly in Baltimore and San Francisco while her husband served in the Navy. In 1953, she returned to Massachusetts, where Linda Gray Sexton was born.

The first breakdown, diagnosed as postpartum depression, occurred in 1954, the same year her beloved great-aunt Anna Ladd Dingley, the Nana of the poems, died. She took refuge in Westwood Lodge, a private neuropsychiatric hospital that was frequently to serve as her sanctuary when the voices that urged her to die reached an insistent pitch. Its director, Dr. Martha Brunner-Orne, figured in Anne's life as a benevolent but disciplinary mother, who would not permit this troubled daughter to kill herself.

Nevertheless, seven months after her second child, Joyce Ladd Sexton, was born in 1955, Anne suffered a second crisis and was hospitalized. The children were sent to live with her husband's parents; and while they were separated from her, she attempted suicide on her birthday, November 9, 1956. This was the first of several episodes, or at least the first that was openly acknowledged. Frequently, these attempts occurred around Anne's birthday, a time of year she came increasingly to dread. Dr. Martin Orne,

Brunner-Orne's son, was the young psychiatrist at Glenside Hospital who attended Anne during this siege and treated her for the next seven years. After administering a series of diagnostic tests, he presented his patient with her scores, objective evidence that, despite the disapproving naysayers from her past, she was highly intelligent. Her associative gifts suggested that she ought to return to the writing of poetry, something she had shown a deft talent for during secondary school. It was at Orne's insistence that Anne enrolled in the Holmes workshop.

"You, Dr. Martin" came directly out of that experience, as did so many of the poems in her first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. On a snowy Sunday afternoon early in 1957, she drove to my house to ask me to look at "something." Did she dare present it in class? Could it be called a poem? It was "Music Swims Back to Me," her first breakaway from adolescent lyrics in rhyming iambic pentameter.

Years later, when it seemed to her that all else in her life had failed — marriage, the succor of children, the grace of friendship, the promised land to which psychotherapy held the key — she turned to God, with a kind of stubborn absolutism that was missing from the Protestantism of her inheritance. The God she wanted was a sure thing, an Old Testament avenger admonishing his Chosen People, an authoritarian yet forgiving Father decked out in sacrament and ceremony. An elderly, sympathetic priest she called on — "accosted" might be a better word — patiently explained that he could not make her a Catholic by fiat, nor could he administer the sacrament (the last rites) she longed for. But in his native wisdom he said a saving thing to her, said the magic and simple words that kept her alive at least a year beyond her time and made *The Awful Rowing Toward God* a possibility. "God is in your typewriter," he told her.

I cite these two examples to indicate the influence that figures of authority had over Anne's life in the most elemental sense; first the psychiatrist and then the priest put an imprimatur on poetry as salvation, as a worthy goal in itself. I am convinced that poetry kept Anne alive for the eighteen years of her creative en-

deavors. When everything else soured; when a succession of therapists deserted her for whatever good, poor, or personal reasons; when intimates lost interest or could not fulfill all the roles they were asked to play; when a series of catastrophes and physical illnesses assaulted her, the making of poems remained her one constant. To use her own metaphor, "out of used furniture [she made] a tree." Without this rich, rescuing obsession I feel certain she would have succeeded in committing suicide in response to one of the dozen impulses that beset her during the period between 1957 and 1974.

Sexton's progress in Holmes's workshop in 1957 was meteoric. In short order her poems were accepted for publication in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, and the *Saturday Review*. Sam Albert was in that class, and Ruth Soter, the friend to whom "With Mercy for the Greedy" is dedicated. Through Holmes, we met George Starbuck at the New England Poetry Club. A year later, five of us joined together to form a workshop of our own — an arrangement that lasted until Holmes's untimely death from cancer in 1962. During this period, all of us wrote and revised prolifically, competitively, as if all the wolves of the world were at our backs. Our sessions were jagged, intense, often angry, but also loving. As Holmes's letters from this period make abundantly clear, he decried the confessional direction Anne's poems were taking, while at the same time acknowledging her talent. Her compulsion to deal with such then-taboo material as suicide, madness, and abortion assaulted his sensibilities and triggered his own defenses. Convinced that the relationship would harm my own work, he warned me to resist becoming involved with Anne. It was the only advice he gave me that I rejected, and at some psychic cost. Anne and I both regarded Holmes as an academic father. In desperate rebuttal, Anne wrote "For John, Who Begg Me Not to Enquire Further." A hesitant, sensitive exploration of their differences, the poem seeks to make peace between them.

Virtually every poem in the *Bedlam* book came under scrutiny during this period, as did many of the poems in *All My Pretty Ones*. There was no more determined reviser than Sexton, who

would willingly push a poem through twenty or more drafts. She had an unparalleled tenacity in those early days and only abandoned a “failed” poem with regret, if not downright anger, after dozens of attempts to make it come right. It was awesome the way she could arrive at our bimonthly sessions with three, four, even five new and complicated poems. She was never meek about it, but she did listen, and she did respect the counsel of others. She gave generous help to her colleagues, and she required, demanded, insisted on generous response.

As a result of this experience, Anne came to believe in the value of the workshop. She loved growing in this way, and she urged the method on her students at Boston University, Colgate, Oberlin, and in other workshops she conducted from time to time.

During the workshop years, we began to communicate more and more frequently by telephone. Since there were no message units involved in the basic monthly phone-company fee — the figure I remember is seven dollars — we had a second phone line installed in our suburban homes so that we could talk at will. For years we conducted our own mini-workshops by phone, a working method that does much to train the ear to hear line breaks, internal rhymes, intentional or unwanted musical devices, and so forth. We did this so comfortably and over such an extended period of time that indeed when we met we were somewhat shy of each other’s poems as they appeared on the page. I can remember often saying “Oh, so *that’s* what it looks like,” of a poem I had heard and visualized through half-a-dozen revisions.

Over the years, Anne’s lines shortened, her line breaks became, I think, more unpredictable, and her imagery grew increasingly surreal. Initially, however, she worked quite strictly in traditional forms, believing in the value of their rigor as a forcing agent, believing that the hardest truths would come to light if they were made to fit a stanzaic pattern, a rhyme scheme, a prevailing meter. She strove to use rhyme unexpectedly but always aptly. Even the most unusual rhyme, she felt, must never obtrude on the sense of the line, nor must the normal word order, the easy tone of vernacular speech, be wrenched solely to save a rhyme.

The impetus for creation usually came when Anne directly invoked the muse at her desk. Here, she read favorite poems of other poets — most frequently Neruda — and played certain evocative records over and over. One I remember for its throaty string section was Respighi's "Pines of Rome." Music acted in some way to free her to create, and she often turned the volume up loud enough to drown out all other sounds.

But for all the sought-after and hard-won poems Anne wrote — in this connection, I recall the arduous struggle to complete "The Operation," "All My Pretty Ones," "Flee on Your Donkey" — a number were almost totally "given" ones. "Riding the Elevator into the Sky," in *The Awful Rowing*, is an example. The newspaper article referred to in the opening stanza suggested the poem; the poem itself came quite cleanly and easily, as if written out in the air beforehand and then transcribed onto the page with very few alterations. Similarly arrived at, "Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound" began at the instant Anne sighted the nuns on an actual crossing. The poem was written much as it now appears on the page, except for minor skirmishes required to effect the closure in each stanza. "Young" and "I Remember" were also achieved almost without effort. But because Anne wanted to open *All My Pretty Ones* with a terse elegy for her parents, one shorn of all autobiographical detail, "The Truth the Dead Know" went through innumerable revisions before arriving at its final form, an *a b a b* rhyme scheme that allows little room for pyrotechnics.

For a time, it seemed that psychiatrists all over the country were referring their patients to Anne's work, as if it could provide the balm in Gilead for every troubled person. Even though it comforted and nurtured her to know that her poems reached beyond the usual sphere of belles lettres, she felt considerable ambivalence about her subject matter. Accused of exhibitionism, she was determined only to be more flamboyant; nevertheless, the strict Puritan hiding inside her suffered and grieved over the label of "confessional poet." For instance, when she wrote "Cripples and Other Stories" (in *Live or Die*), a poem that almost totally

“occurred” on the page in an hour’s time, she crumpled it up and tossed it into the wastebasket as if in embarrassment. Together we fished it out and saved it, working to make the tone more consistent and to smooth out some of the rhythmically crude spots. Into this sort of mechanical task Anne always flung herself gladly.

The results were often doubly effective. I remember, for instance, how in “The Operation” she worked to achieve through rhyme and the shaping of the poem’s three parts a direct rendition of the actual experience. The retardation of rhyming sounds in those short, rather sharply end-stopped lines, in the first section, for example (*leaf, straw, lawn: car, thief, house, upon*), add to the force of metaphor in the poem—the “historic thief,” the “Humpty-Dumpty,” and so on. Or, to take another poem, “Faustus and I,” in *The Death Notebooks*, was headed for the discard pile. It was a free-verse poem at the outset and had what seemed to me a malevolently flippant tone. Often when stymied for a more articulate response to one of her poems I disliked, I suggested, “Why don’t you pound it into form?” And often the experiment worked. In the case of the Faustus poem, the suggestion was useful because the rhyme scheme gave the subject a dignity it demanded and because the repetitive “pounding” elicited a level of language, of metaphor, that Anne had not quite reached in the earlier version.

Sexton had an almost mystical faith in the “found” word image, as well as in metaphor by mistake, by typo, or by misapprehension. She would fight hard to keep an image, a line, a word usage, but if I was just as dogged in my conviction that the line didn’t work, was sentimental or mawkish, that the word was ill-suited or the image trite, she would capitulate—unless she was totally convinced of her own rightness. Then there was no shaking her. Trusting each other’s critical sense, we learned not to go past the unshakable core, not to trespass on style or voice.

Untrammelled by a traditional education in Donne, Milton, Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, Anne was able to strike out alone, like Conrad’s secret sharer, for a new destiny. She was grim about her

lost years, her lack of a college degree; she read omnivorously and quite innocently whatever came to hand and enticed her, forming her own independent, quirky, and incisive judgments.

Searching for solutions to the depressive episodes that beset her with dismaying periodicity, Anne read widely in the popular psychiatric texts of the time: interpretations of Freud, Theodore Reik, Philip Rieff, Helena Deutsch, Erik Erikson, Bruno Bettelheim. During a summer-school course with Philip Rahv, she encountered the works of Dostoevski, Kafka, and Thomas Mann. These were succeeded by the novels of Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Kurt Vonnegut. But above all else, she was attracted to the fairy tales of Andersen and Grimm, which her beloved Nana had read to her when she was a child. They were for her, perhaps, what Bible stories and Greek myths had been for other writers. At the same time that she was being entertained and drawn into closer contact with a kind of collective unconscious, she was searching the fairy tales for psychological parallels. Quite unaware at first of the direction she was taking, she composed the first few "transformations" that comprise the book of that name. The book evolved very much at my urging, and gathered momentum as it grew. It struck me that Anne's poems based on fairy tales went one step further than contemporary poets' translations from languages they did not themselves read but apprehended through a third party. Their poems were *adaptations*; hers were *transformations*.

Thematically, Anne's concern in *Transformations* was a logical extension of the material she dealt with in the confessional genre, but this time with a society-mocking overlay. Her attention focuses on women cast in a variety of fictive roles: the dutiful princess daughter, the wicked witch, the stepmother. We see the same family constellations in a fairy-tale setting, ranging from the Oedipal explorations of "The Frog Prince" to the stage-set adultery of "The Little Peasant." The poems are replete with anachronisms from pop culture: the Queen in "Rumpelstiltskin" is "as persistent/ as a Jehovah's witness"; Snow White "opened her eyes as wide as Orphan Annie"; and Cinderella in her sooty rags looks

like Al Jolson. Moreover, the conventional happily-ever-after endings receive their share of sardonic jibes. Cinderella and her prince end up as "Regular Bobbsey Twins./ That story." And the princess and her husband in "The White Snake" are condemned by way of a happy ending to "a kind of coffin,/ a kind of blue funk."

Despite Houghton Mifflin's initial misgivings about publishing it, *Transformations* was widely acclaimed for its balance between the confessional and the fable. It was a new lode to mine. I hoped that by encouraging Anne to continue to look outside her own psyche for material, she might develop new enthusiasms to match the one she felt for the brothers Grimm.

And indeed her impulse to work in fable continued in *The Book of Folly*, where, in addition to three prose inventions, Sexton created the sequence of poems she called "The Jesus Papers." These are more searching, more daring than the early Jesus poems ("In the Deep Museum," "For God While Sleeping," "With Mercy for the Greedy") from *All My Pretty Ones*, in which it seemed to be the cruelty of the crucifixion itself that fascinated her. Now we have a different voice and a different Jesus, however humanized, however modernized — a Jesus who still suffers knowingly in order to endure.

Jesus, Mary, angels as good as the good fairy, and a personal, fatherly God to love and forgive her, figure ever more prominently in the late poems. Always Sexton explores relentlessly the eternal themes that obsess her: love, loss, madness, the nature of the father-daughter compact, and death — the Death Baby we carry with us from the moment of birth. In my view, the sequence entitled "The Death of the Fathers," a stunning investigation of these latter two themes, is the most successful part of *The Book of Folly*. It would be simplistic to suggest that the Oedipal theme overrides all other considerations in Sexton's work, but a good case might be made for viewing her poems in terms of their quest for a male authority figure to love and trust. Yeats once said that "one poem lights up another," and in Sexton's poetry the reader can find the poet again and again identifying herself through her relationship with the male Other, whether in the person of a lover

or — in the last, hasty, and often brilliant poems in *The Awful Rowing*, which make a final effort to land on “the island called God” — in the person of the patriarchal final arbiter.

The poems in *Transformations* mark the beginning of a shift in Sexton's work, from the intensely confessional to what Estella Lauter, in a fascinating essay, “Anne Sexton's ‘Radical Discontent with the Order of Things,’” has termed the “transpersonal.” In retrospect, it seems to me that the broad acceptance *Transformations* eventually earned in the marketplace (after hesitant beginnings) reinforced Sexton's deeply rooted conviction that poems not only could, but had to be, made out of the detritus of her life. Her work took on a new imaginative boldness. She experimented with a variety of persona/poems, particularly involving God figures, revisited the crucifixion stories, reworked the creation myth and ancient psalms, and even planned a book-length bestiary, which was only partially realized. Her perception of her place in the canon of American letters was enhanced, too, by the success of *Transformations*. Inscribing a copy of *The Book of Folly* for me in 1972, she wrote: “Dear Max — From now on it's OUR world.”

She began to speak of herself as Ms. Dog, an appellation that is ironic in two contexts. We were both increasingly aware of the Women's Movement. To shuck the earlier designations of Miss and Mrs. was only a token signal of where we stood, but a signal nonetheless. Dog, of course, is God in reverse. The fact that the word worked both ways delighted Sexton much as her favorite palindrome, “rats live on no evil star,” did. There was a wonderful impudence in naming herself a kind of liberated female deity, one who is “out fighting the dollars.”

In the collections that followed *Transformations*, images of God proliferate, crossing all boundaries between man and woman, human and animal; between inner and outer histories of behavior. It was slippery material, difficult to control. Not all the poems Anne arrived at in this pursuit of self-definition and salvation succeeded; of this she was well aware. Whenever it came down to a question of what to include, or what to drop from a forthcoming collection, Anne agonized at length. It was our practice over the

years to sit quietly with each other on the occasion of the arranging of a book, sorting through groups of poems, trying out a variety of formats, voting on which poems to save and which to discard. In a kind of despondency of the moment, suffering the bitter foretaste of reviews to come, Anne frequently wanted to jettison half the book. But I suspect this was a way she had of taking the sting out of the selection process, secure in the knowledge that she and I would always rescue each other's better poems; even, for the right reasons, rescue those flawed ones that were important psychically or developmentally. We took comfort from Yeats's "lighting-up," allowing the poems to gain meaning and perspective from one another.

When Anne was writing *The Awful Rowing* at white heat in January and February of 1973, and the poems were coming at the rate of two, three, even four a day, the awesome pace terrified me. I was poet-in-residence at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky; we had agreed in advance to split the phone bill. Fearing a manic break, I did everything I could to retard the process, long-distance, during our daily hour-long calls. The Sexton who had so defiantly boasted, in her Ms. Dog phase, "I am God la de dah," had now given way to a ravaged, obsessed poet fighting to put the jigsaw pieces of the puzzle together into a coherence that would save her — into "a whole nation of God." Estella Lauter states that "her vision of Him as the winner in a crooked poker game at the end of that book is a sporting admission of her defeat rather than a decisive renewal of the Christian myth." On one level, I agree. But on another, even more primitive level, God the poker-player was the one living and constant Daddy left to Sexton out of the "Death of the Fathers." Of course he held the crooked, winning hand.

Though the reviewers were not always kind to Anne's work, honors and awards mounted piggyback on one another almost from the moment of the publication in 1960 of her first book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. The American Academy of Letters Traveling Fellowship in 1963, which she was awarded shortly after *All My Pretty Ones* was published and nominated for the National Book Award, was followed by a Ford Foundation grant

as resident playwright at the Charles Playhouse in Boston. In 1965, Anne Sexton was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in Great Britain. *Live or Die* won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1967. She was named Phi Beta Kappa poet at Harvard in 1968 and accorded a number of honorary doctoral degrees.

Twice in the 1960s, and twice more in the 1970s, Anne and I collaborated to write books for children. *Eggs of Things* and *More Eggs of Things* were constructed within the constraints of a limited vocabulary. *Joey and the Birthday Present* and *The Wizard's Tears* were more fanciful excursions into the realm of talking animals and magical spells. Our work sessions were lighthearted, even casual. We took turns sitting at the typewriter; whoever typed had the privilege of recording or censoring the dialogue or description as it occurred to us. Three or four afternoon workouts sufficed for a book. We were full of generous praise for each other's contributions to the story line and to the exchanges of conversation. It was usually summer. We drank a lot of iced tea and squabbled amiably about how to turn the *Wizard's* townspeople into frogs, or about which of us actually first spoke the key line in *Joey*: "And they both agreed a birthday present cannot run away." Sometimes we explored plans for future collaborations. We would do a new collection of animal fables, modeled on Aesop. We would fish out the rejected sequel to *More Eggs*, entitled *Cowboy and Pest and the Runaway Goat*, and refurbish it for another publisher. Sexton enthusiastically entertained these notions, as did I. Working together on children's books when our own children were the age of our projected readership kept us in good rapport with each other's offspring. It provided a welcome breathing space in which nothing mattered but the sheer verbal play involved in developing the story. Indeed, we regressed cheerfully to whatever age level the text required, and lost ourselves in the confabulation.

But between the publication of new books and the bestowal of honors fell all too frequently the shadow of mental illness. One psychiatrist left. His successor at first succumbed to Sexton's charm, then terminated his treatment of her. She promptly fell downstairs and broke her hip — on her birthday. With the next doctor, her hostility grew. Intermediary psychiatrists and psychol-

ogists came and went. There seemed to be no standard for dealing with this gifted, ghosted woman. On Thorazine, she gained weight, became intensely sun-sensitive, and complained that she was so overwhelmed with lassitude that she could not write. Without medication, the voices returned. As she grew increasingly dependent on alcohol, sedatives, and sleeping pills, her depressive bouts grew more frequent. Convinced that her marriage was beyond salvage, she demanded and won a divorce, only to learn that living alone created an unbearable level of anxiety. She returned to Westwood Lodge, later spent time at McLean's Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, and finally went to the Human Resources Institute in Brookline, Massachusetts. But none of these interludes stemmed her downward course. In the spring of 1974, she took an overdose of sleeping pills and later remonstrated bitterly with me for aborting this suicide attempt. On that occasion she vowed that when she next undertook to die, she would telegraph her intent to no one. A little more than six months later, this indeed proved to be the case.

It seems presumptuous, only seven years after her death, to talk about Anne Sexton's place in the history of poetry. We must first acknowledge the appearance in the twentieth century of women writing poetry that confronts the issues of gender, social role, and female life and lives viewed subjectively from the female perspective. The earlier world view of the poet as "the masculine chief of state in charge of dispensing universal spiritual truths" (Diane Middlebrook, *The World Into Words*) has eroded since World War II, as have earlier notions about the existence of universal truths themselves. Freed by that cataclysm from their clichéd roles as goddesses of hearth and bedroom, women began to write openly out of their own experiences. Before there was a Women's Movement, the underground river was already flowing, carrying such diverse cargoes as the poems of Bogan, Levertov, Rukeyser, Swenson, Plath, Rich, and Sexton.\*

\* I have omitted from this list Elizabeth Bishop, who chose not to have her work included in anthologies of women poets.

The stuff of Anne's life, mercilessly dissected, is here in the poems. Of all the confessional poets, none has had quite Sexton's "courage to make a clean breast of it." Nor has any displayed quite her brilliance, her verve, her headlong metaphoric leaps. As with any body of work, some of the later poems display only ragged, intermittent control, as compared to "The Double Image," "The Operation," and "Some Foreign Letters," to choose three arbitrary examples. The later work takes more chances, crosses more boundaries between the rational and the surreal; and time after time it evokes in the reader that sought-after shiver of recognition.

Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton, who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter, which, twenty years later, seems far less daring. She wrote openly about menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery, and drug addiction at a time when the proprieties embraced none of these as proper topics for poetry. Today, the remonstrances seem almost quaint. Anne delineated the problematic position of women — the neurotic reality of the time — though she was not able to cope in her own life with the personal trouble it created. If it is true that she attracted the worshipful attention of a cult group pruriently interested in her suicidal impulses, her psychotic breakdowns, her frequent hospitalizations, it must equally be acknowledged that her very frankness succored many who clung to her poems as to the Holy Grail. Time will sort out the dross among these poems and burnish the gold. Anne Sexton has earned her place in the canon.

# Transformations

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(1971)

*To Linda, who reads Hesse  
and drinks clam chowder*



## THE GOLD KEY

The speaker in this case  
is a middle-aged witch, me —  
tangled on my two great arms,  
my face in a book  
and my mouth wide,  
ready to tell you a story or two.  
I have come to remind you,  
all of you:  
Alice, Samuel, Kurt, Eleanor,  
Jane, Brian, Maryel,  
all of you draw near.  
Alice,  
at fifty-six do you remember?  
Do you remember when you  
were read to as a child?  
Samuel,  
at twenty-two have you forgotten?  
Forgotten the ten P.M. dreams  
where the wicked king  
went up in smoke?  
Are you comatose?  
Are you undersea?

Attention,  
my dears,  
let me present to you this boy.  
He is sixteen and he wants some answers.  
He is each of us.  
I mean you.  
I mean me.  
It is not enough to read Hesse  
and drink clam chowder,  
we must have the answers.  
The boy has found a gold key

and he is looking for what it will open.

This boy!

Upon finding a nickel  
he would look for a wallet.

This boy!

Upon finding a string  
he would look for a harp.

Therefore he holds the key tightly.

Its secrets whimper  
like a dog in heat.

He turns the key.

Presto!

It opens this book of odd tales  
which transform the Brothers Grimm.

Transform?

As if an enlarged paper clip  
could be a piece of sculpture.

(And it could.)

## 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 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 wattled 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.

## THE WHITE SNAKE

There was a day  
when all the animals talked to me.  
Ten birds at my window saying,  
Throw us some seeds,  
Dame Sexton,  
or we will shrink.  
The worms in my son's fishing pail  
said, It is chilly!  
It is chilly on our way to the hook!  
The dog in his innocence  
commented in his clumsy voice,  
Maybe you're wrong, good Mother,  
maybe they're not *real* wars.  
And then I knew that the voice  
of the spirits had been let in —  
as intense as an epileptic aura —  
and that no longer would I sing  
alone.

In an old time  
there was a king as wise as a dictionary.  
Each night at supper  
a secret dish was brought to him,  
a secret dish that kept him wise.  
His servant,  
who had won no roses before,  
thought to lift the lid one night  
and take a forbidden look.  
There sat a white snake.  
The servant thought, Why not?  
and took a bite.  
It was a furtive weed,  
oiled and brooding  
and desirably slim.  
I have eaten the white snake!  
Not a whisker on it! he cried.  
Because of the white snake  
he heard the animals  
in all their voices speak.  
Thus the aura came over him.  
He was inside.  
He had walked into a building  
with no exit.  
From all sides  
the animals spoke up like puppets.  
A cold sweat broke out on his upper lip  
for now he was wise.

Because he was wise  
he found the queen's lost ring  
diddling around in a duck's belly  
and was thus rewarded with a horse  
and a little cash for traveling.  
On his way  
the fish in the weeds

were drowning on air  
and he plunked them back in  
and the fish covered him with promises.  
On his way  
the army ants in the road pleaded for mercy.  
Step on us not!  
And he rode around them  
and the ants covered him with promises.  
On his way  
the gallow birds asked for food  
so he killed his horse to give them lunch.  
They sucked the blood up like whiskey  
and covered him with promises.

At the next town  
the local princess was having a contest.  
A common way for princesses to marry.  
Fifty men had perished,  
gargling the sea like soup.  
Still, the servant was stage-struck.  
Nail me to the masthead, if you will,  
and make a dance all around me.  
Put on the gramophone and dance at my ankles.  
But the princess smiled like warm milk  
and merely dropped her ring into the sea.  
If he could not find it, he would die;  
die trapped in the sea machine.  
The fish, however, remembered  
and gave him the ring.  
But the princess, ever woman,  
said it wasn't enough.  
She scattered ten bags of grain in the yard  
and commanded him to pick them up by daybreak.  
The ants remembered  
and carried them in like mailmen.  
The princess, ever Eve,

said it wasn't enough  
and sent him out to find the apple of life.  
He set forth into the forest for two years  
where the monkeys jabbered, those trolls,  
with their wine-colored underbellies.  
They did not make a pathway for him.  
The pheasants, those archbishops,  
avoided him and the turtles  
kept their expressive heads inside.  
He was prepared for death  
when the gallow birds remembered  
and dropped that apple on his head.

He returned to the princess  
saying, I am but a traveling man  
but here is what you hunger for.  
The apple was as smooth as oilskin  
and when she took a bite  
it was as sweet and crisp as the moon.  
Their bodies met over such a dish.  
His tongue lay in her mouth  
as delicately as the white snake.  
They played house, little charmers,  
exceptionally well.  
So, of course,  
they were placed in a box  
and painted identically blue  
and thus passed their days  
living happily ever after —  
a kind of coffin,  
a kind of blue funk.  
Is it not?

## RUMPELSTILTSKIN

Inside many of us  
is a small old man  
who wants to get out.  
No bigger than a two-year-old  
whom you'd call lamb chop  
yet this one is old and malformed.  
His head is okay  
but the rest of him wasn't Sanforized.  
He is a monster of despair.  
He is all decay.  
He speaks up as tiny as an earphone  
with Truman's asexual voice:  
I am your dwarf.  
I am the enemy within.  
I am the boss of your dreams.  
No. I am not the law in your mind,  
the grandfather of watchfulness.  
I am the law of your members,  
the kindred of blackness and impulse.  
See. Your hand shakes.  
It is not palsy or booze.  
It is your Doppelgänger  
trying to get out.  
Beware . . . Beware . . .

There once was a miller  
with a daughter as lovely as a grape.  
He told the king that she could  
spin gold out of common straw.  
The king summoned the girl  
and locked her in a room full of straw  
and told her to spin it into gold  
or she would die like a criminal.  
Poor grape with no one to pick.

Luscious and round and sleek.  
Poor thing.  
To die and never see Brooklyn.

She wept,  
of course, huge aquamarine tears.  
The door opened and in popped a dwarf.  
He was as ugly as a wart.  
Little thing, what are you? she cried.  
With his tiny no-sex voice he replied:  
I am a dwarf.  
I have been exhibited on Bond Street  
and no child will ever call me Papa.  
I have no private life.  
If I'm in my cups  
the whole town knows by breakfast  
and no child will ever call me Papa.  
I am eighteen inches high.  
I am no bigger than a partridge.  
I am your evil eye  
and no child will ever call me Papa.  
Stop this Papa foolishness,  
she cried. Can you perhaps  
spin straw into gold?  
Yes indeed, he said,  
that I can do.  
He spun the straw into gold  
and she gave him her necklace  
as a small reward.  
When the king saw what she had done  
he put her in a bigger room of straw  
and threatened death once more.  
Again she cried.  
Again the dwarf came.  
Again he spun the straw into gold.  
She gave him her ring

as a small reward.  
The king put her in an even bigger room  
but this time he promised  
to marry her if she succeeded.  
Again she cried.  
Again the dwarf came.  
But she had nothing to give him.  
Without a reward the dwarf would not spin.  
He was on the scent of something bigger.  
He was a regular bird dog.  
Give me your first-born  
and I will spin.  
She thought: Piffle!  
He is a silly little man.  
And so she agreed.  
So he did the trick.  
Gold as good as Fort Knox.

The king married her  
and within a year  
a son was born.  
He was like most new babies,  
as ugly as an artichoke  
but the queen thought him a pearl.  
She gave him her dumb lactation,  
delicate, trembling, hidden,  
warm, etc.  
And then the dwarf appeared  
to claim his prize.  
Indeed! I have become a papa!  
cried the little man.  
She offered him all the kingdom  
but he wanted only this —  
a living thing  
to call his own.

And being mortal  
who can blame him?

The queen cried two pails of sea water.

She was as persistent  
as a Jehovah's Witness.

And the dwarf took pity.

He said: I will give you  
three days to guess my name  
and if you cannot do it  
I will collect your child.

The queen sent messengers  
throughout the land to find names  
of the most unusual sort.

When he appeared the next day  
she asked: Melchior?

Balthazar?

But each time the dwarf replied:  
No! No! That's not my name.

The next day she asked:  
Spindleshanks? Spiderlegs?

But it was still no-no.

On the third day the messenger  
came back with a strange story.

He told her:

As I came around the corner of the wood  
where the fox says good night to the hare  
I saw a little house with a fire  
burning in front of it.

Around that fire a ridiculous little man  
was leaping on one leg and singing:

Today I bake.

Tomorrow I brew my beer.

The next day the queen's only child will be mine.

Not even the census taker knows  
that Rumpelstiltskin is my name . . .

The queen was delighted.  
She had the name!  
Her breath blew bubbles.

When the dwarf returned  
she called out:  
Is your name by any chance Rumpelstiltskin?  
He cried: The devil told you that!  
He stamped his right foot into the ground  
and sank in up to his waist.  
Then he tore himself in two.  
Somewhat like a split broiler.  
He laid his two sides down on the floor,  
one part soft as a woman,  
one part a barbed hook,  
one part papa,  
one part Doppelgänger.

## THE LITTLE PEASANT

Oh how the women  
grip and stretch  
fainting on the horn.

The men and women  
cry to each other.  
Touch me,  
my pancake,  
and make me young.  
And thus  
like many of us,  
the parson  
and the miller's wife  
lie down in sin.

The women cry,  
Come, my fox,  
heal me.  
I am chalk white  
with middle age  
so wear me threadbare,  
wear me down,  
wear me out.  
Lick me clean,  
as clean as an almond.

The men cry,  
Come, my lily,  
my fringy queen,  
my gaudy dear,  
salt me a bird  
and be its noose.  
Bounce me off  
like a shuttlecock.  
Dance me dingo-sweet  
for I am your lizard,  
your sly thing.

Long ago  
there was a peasant  
who was poor but crafty.  
He was not yet a voyeur.  
He had yet to find  
the miller's wife  
at her game.  
Now he had not enough  
cabbage for supper  
nor clover for his one cow.  
So he slaughtered the cow  
and took the skin  
to town.

It was worth no more  
than a dead fly  
but he hoped for profit.

On his way  
he came upon a raven  
with damaged wings.  
It lay as crumpled as  
a wet washcloth.  
He said, Come little fellow,  
you're part of my booty.

On his way  
there was a fierce storm.  
Hail jabbed the little peasant's cheeks  
like toothpicks.  
So he sought shelter at the miller's house.  
The miller's wife gave him only  
a hunk of stale bread  
and let him lie down on some straw.  
The peasant wrapped himself and the raven  
up in the cowhide  
and pretended to fall asleep.

When he lay  
as still as a sausage  
the miller's wife  
let in the parson, saying,  
My husband is out  
so we shall have a feast.  
Roast meat, salad, cakes and wine.  
The parson,  
his eyes as black as caviar,  
said, Come, my lily,  
my fringy queen.  
The miller's wife,  
her lips as red as pimientos,

said, Touch me, my pancake,  
and wake me up.  
And thus they ate.  
And thus  
they dingoed-sweet.

Then the miller  
was heard stomping on the doorstep  
and the miller's wife  
hid the food about the house  
and the parson in the cupboard.

The miller asked, upon entering,  
What is that dead cow doing in the corner?  
The peasant spoke up.  
It is mine.  
I sought shelter from the storm.  
You are welcome, said the miller,  
but my stomach is as empty as a flour sack.  
His wife told him she had no food  
but bread and cheese.  
So be it, the miller said,  
and the three of them ate.

The miller looked once more  
at the cowskin  
and asked its purpose.  
The peasant answered,  
I hide my soothsayer in it.  
He knows five things about you  
but the fifth he keeps to himself.  
The peasant pinched the raven's head  
and it croaked, Krr. Krr.  
That means, translated the peasant,  
there is wine under the pillow.  
And there it sat  
as warm as a specimen.

Krr. Krr.

They found the roast meat under the stove.  
It lay there like an old dog.

Krr. Krr.

They found the salad in the bed  
and the cakes under it.

Krr. Krr.

Because of all this  
the miller burned to know the fifth thing.  
How much? he asked,  
little caring he was being milked.  
They settled on a large sum  
and the soothsayer said,  
The devil is in the cupboard.  
And the miller unlocked it.  
Krr. Krr.

There stood the parson,  
rigid for a moment,  
as real as a soup can  
and then he took off like a fire  
with the wind at its back.  
I have tricked the devil,  
cried the miller with delight,  
and I have tweaked his chin whiskers.  
I will be as famous as the king.

The miller's wife  
smiled to herself.  
Though never again to dingo-sweet  
her secret was as safe  
as a fly in an outhouse.

The sly little peasant  
strode home the next morning,  
a soothsayer over his shoulder

and gold pieces knocking like marbles  
in his deep pants pocket.  
Krr. Krr.

## GODFATHER DEATH

Hurry, Godfather death,  
Mister tyranny,  
each message you give  
has a dance to it,  
a fish twitch,  
a little crotch dance.

A man, say,  
has twelve children  
and damns the next  
at the christening ceremony.  
God will not be the godfather,  
that skeleton wearing his bones like a broiler,  
or his righteousness like a swastika.  
The devil will not be the godfather  
wearing his streets like a whore.  
Only death with its finger on our back  
will come to the ceremony.

Death, with a one-eyed jack in his hand,  
makes a promise to the thirteenth child:  
My Godchild, physician you will be,  
the one wise one, the one never wrong,  
taking your cue from me.  
When I stand at the head of the dying man,  
he will die indelicately and come to me.  
When I stand at his feet,  
he will run on the glitter of wet streets once more.  
And so it came to be.

Thus this doctor was never a beginner.  
He knew who would go.  
He knew who would stay.  
This doctor,  
this thirteenth but chosen,  
cured on straw or midocean.  
He could not be elected.  
He was not the mayor.  
He was more famous than the king.  
He peddled his fingernails for gold  
while the lepers turned into princes.

His wisdom  
outnumbered him  
when the dying king called him forth.  
Godfather death stood by the head  
and the jig was up.  
This doctor,  
this thirteenth but chosen,  
swiveled that king like a shoebox  
from head to toe,  
and so, my dears,  
he lived.

Godfather death replied to this:  
Just once I'll shut my eyelid,  
you blundering cow.  
Next time, Godchild,  
I'll rap you under my ankle  
and take you with me.  
The doctor agreed to that.  
He thought: A dog only laps lime once.

It came to pass,  
however,  
that the king's daughter was dying.

The king offered his daughter in marriage  
if she were to be saved.  
The day was as dark as the Führer's headquarters.  
Godfather death stood once more at the head.  
The princess was as ripe as a tangerine.  
Her breasts purred up and down like a cat.  
I've been bitten! I've been bitten!  
cried the thirteenth but chosen  
who had fallen in love  
and thus turned her around like a shoebox.

Godfather death  
turned him over like a camp chair  
and fastened a rope to his neck  
and led him into a cave.  
In this cave, murmured Godfather death,  
all men are assigned candles  
that inch by inch number their days.  
Your candle is here.  
And there it sat,  
no bigger than an eyelash.  
The thirteenth but chosen  
jumped like a wild rabbit on a hook  
and begged it be relit.  
His white head hung out like a carpet bag  
and his crotch turned blue as a blood blister,  
and Godfather death, as it is written,  
put a finger on his back  
for the big blackout,  
the big no.

## RAPUNZEL

A woman  
who loves a woman

is forever young.  
The mentor  
and the student  
feed off each other.  
Many a girl  
had an old aunt  
who locked her in the study  
to keep the boys away.  
They would play rummy  
or lie on the couch  
and touch and touch.  
Old breast against young breast . . .

Let your dress fall down your shoulder,  
come touch a copy of you  
for I am at the mercy of rain,  
for I have left the three Christs of Ypsilanti,  
for I have left the long naps of Ann Arbor  
and the church spires have turned to stumps.  
The sea bangs into my cloister  
for the young politicians are dying,  
are dying so hold me, my young dear,  
hold me . . .

The yellow rose will turn to cinder  
and New York City will fall in  
before we are done so hold me,  
my young dear, hold me.  
Put your pale arms around my neck.  
Let me hold your heart like a flower  
lest it bloom and collapse.  
Give me your skin  
as sheer as a cobweb,  
let me open it up  
and listen in and scoop out the dark.  
Give me your nether lips  
all puffy with their art

and I will give you angel fire in return.  
We are two clouds  
glistening in the bottle glass.  
We are two birds  
washing in the same mirror.  
We were fair game  
but we have kept out of the cesspool.  
We are strong.  
We are the good ones.  
Do not discover us  
for we lie together all in green  
like pond weeds.  
Hold me, my young dear, hold me.

They touch their delicate watches  
one at a time.  
They dance to the lute  
two at a time.  
They are as tender as bog moss.  
They play mother-me-do  
all day.  
A woman  
who loves a woman  
is forever young.

Once there was a witch's garden  
more beautiful than Eve's  
with carrots growing like little fish,  
with many tomatoes rich as frogs,  
onions as ingrown as hearts,  
the squash singing like a dolphin  
and one patch given over wholly to magic —  
rampion, a kind of salad root,  
a kind of harebell more potent than penicillin,  
growing leaf by leaf, skin by skin,  
as rapt and as fluid as Isadora Duncan.

However the witch's garden was kept locked  
and each day a woman who was with child  
looked upon the rampion wildly,  
fancying that she would die  
if she could not have it.  
Her husband feared for her welfare  
and thus climbed into the garden  
to fetch the life-giving tubers.

Ah ha, cried the witch,  
whose proper name was Mother Gothel,  
you are a thief and now you will die.  
However they made a trade,  
typical enough in those times.  
He promised his child to Mother Gothel  
so of course when it was born  
she took the child away with her.  
She gave the child the name Rapunzel,  
another name for the life-giving rampion.  
Because Rapunzel was a beautiful girl  
Mother Gothel treasured her beyond all things.  
As she grew older Mother Gothel thought:  
None but I will ever see her or touch her.  
She locked her in a tower without a door  
or a staircase. It had only a high window.  
When the witch wanted to enter she cried:  
Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair.  
Rapunzel's hair fell to the ground like a rainbow.  
It was as yellow as a dandelion  
and as strong as a dog leash.  
Hand over hand she shinnied up  
the hair like a sailor  
and there in the stone-cold room,  
as cold as a museum,  
Mother Gothel cried:

Hold me, my young dear, hold me,  
and thus they played mother-me-do.

Years later a prince came by  
and heard Rapunzel singing in her loneliness.  
That song pierced his heart like a valentine  
but he could find no way to get to her.  
Like a chameleon he hid himself among the trees  
and watched the witch ascend the swinging hair.  
The next day he himself called out:  
Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair,  
and thus they met and he declared his love.  
What is this beast, she thought,  
with muscles on his arms  
like a bag of snakes?  
What is this moss on his legs?  
What prickly plant grows on his cheeks?  
What is this voice as deep as a dog?  
Yet he dazzled her with his answers.  
Yet he dazzled her with his dancing stick.  
They lay together upon the yellowy threads,  
swimming through them  
like minnows through kelp  
and they sang out benedictions like the Pope.

Each day he brought her a skein of silk  
to fashion a ladder so they could both escape.  
But Mother Gothel discovered the plot  
and cut off Rapunzel's hair to her ears  
and took her into the forest to repent.  
When the prince came the witch fastened  
the hair to a hook and let it down.  
When he saw that Rapunzel had been banished  
he flung himself out of the tower, a side of beef.  
He was blinded by thorns that pricked him like tacks.  
As blind as Oedipus he wandered for years

until he heard a song that pierced his heart  
like that long-ago valentine.  
As he kissed Rapunzel her tears fell on his eyes  
and in the manner of such cure-alls  
his sight was suddenly restored.

They lived happily as you might expect  
proving that mother-me-do  
can be outgrown,  
just as the fish on Friday,  
just as a tricycle.  
The world, some say,  
is made up of couples.  
A rose must have a stem.

As for Mother Gothel,  
her heart shrank to the size of a pin,  
never again to say: Hold me, my young dear,  
hold me,  
and only as she dreamt of the yellow hair  
did moonlight sift into her mouth.

## IRON HANS

Take a lunatic  
for instance,  
with Saint Averton, the patron saint,  
a lunatic wearing that strait jacket  
like a sleeveless sweater,  
singing to the wall like Muzak,  
how he walks east to west,  
west to east again  
like a fish in an aquarium.  
And if they stripped him bare  
he would fasten his hands around your throat.

After that he would take your corpse  
and deposit his sperm in three orifices.  
You know, I know,  
you'd run away.

I am mother of the insane.  
Let me give you my children:

Take a girl sitting in a chair  
like a china doll.  
She doesn't say a word.  
She doesn't even twitch.  
She's as still as furniture.  
And you'll move off.

Take a man who is crying  
over and over,  
his face like a sponge.  
You'll move off.

Take a woman talking,  
purging herself with rhymes,  
drumming words out like a typewriter,  
planting words in you like grass seed.  
You'll move off.

Take a man full of suspicions  
saying: Don't touch this,  
you'll be electrocuted.  
Wipe off this glass three times.  
There is arsenic in it.  
I hear messages from God  
through the fillings in my teeth.

Take a boy on a bridge.  
One hundred feet up. About to jump,  
thinking: This is my last ball game.

This time it's a home run.  
Wanting the good crack of the bat.  
Wanting to throw his body away  
like a corn cob.  
And you'll move off.

Take an old lady in a cafeteria  
staring at the meat loaf,  
crying: Mama! Mama!  
And you'll move off.

Take a man in a cage  
wetting his pants,  
beating on that crib,  
breaking his iron hands in two.  
And you'll move off.

Clifford, Vincent, Friedrich,  
my scooter boys,  
deep in books,  
long before you were mad.  
Zelda, Hannah, Renée.  
Moon girls,  
where did you go?

There once was a king  
whose forest was bewitched.  
All the huntsmen,  
all the hounds,  
disappeared in it like soap bubbles.  
A brave huntsman and his dog  
entered one day to test it.  
The dog drank from a black brook;  
as he lapped an arm reached out  
and pulled him under.  
The huntsman emptied the pool  
pail by pail by pail  
and at the bottom lay

a wild man,  
his body rusty brown.  
His hair covering his knees.  
Perhaps he was no more dangerous  
than a hummingbird;  
perhaps he was Christ's boy-child;  
perhaps he was only bruised like an apple  
but he appeared to them to be a lunatic.  
The king placed him in a large iron cage  
in the courtyard of his palace.  
The court gathered around the wild man  
and munched peanuts and sold balloons  
and not until he cried out:  
Agony! Agony!  
did they move off.

The king's son  
was playing with his ball one day  
and it rolled into the iron cage.  
It appeared as suddenly as a gallstone.  
The wild man did not complain.  
He talked calmly to the boy  
and convinced him to unlock the cage.  
The wild man carried him and his ball  
piggyback off into the woods  
promising him good luck and gold for life.

The wild man set the boy at a golden spring  
and asked him to guard it from a fox  
or a feather that might pollute it.  
The boy agreed and took up residence there.  
The first night he dipped his finger in.  
It turned to gold; as gold as a fountain pen,  
but the wild man forgave him.  
The second night he bent to take a drink  
and his hair got wet, turning as gold

as Midas' daughter.  
As stiff as the Medusa hair of a Greek statue.  
This time the wild man could not forgive him.  
He sent the boy out into the world.  
But if you have great need, he said,  
you may come into the forest and call *Iron Hans*  
and I will come to help you for you  
were the only one who was kind  
to this accursed bull of a wild man.

The boy went out into the world,  
his gold hair tucked under a cap.  
He found work as a gardener's boy  
at a far-off castle. All day set out  
under the red ball to dig and weed.  
One day he picked some wildflowers  
for the princess and took them to her.  
She demanded he take off his cap  
in her presence. You look like a jester,  
she taunted him, but he would not.  
You look like a bird, she taunted him,  
and snatched off the cap.  
His hair fell down with a clang.  
It fell down like a moon chain  
and it delighted her.  
The princess fell in love.

Next there was a war  
that the king was due to lose.  
The boy went into the forest  
and called out: *Iron Hans, Iron Hans*,  
and the wild man appeared.  
He gave the boy a black charger,  
a sword as sharp as a guillotine  
and a great body of black knights.  
They went forth and cut the enemy down

like a row of cabbage heads.  
Then they vanished.  
The court talked of nothing  
but the unknown knight in a cap.  
The princess thought of the boy  
but the head gardener said:  
Not he. He had only a three-legged horse.  
He could have done better with a stork.  
Three days in a row,  
the princess, hoping to lure him back,  
threw a gold ball.  
Remember back,  
the boy was good at losing balls  
but was he good at catching them?  
Three days running the boy,  
thanks to Iron Hans,  
performed like Joe Dimaggio.  
And thus they were married.

At the wedding feast  
the music stopped suddenly  
and a door flew open  
and a proud king walked in  
and embraced the boy.  
Of course  
it was Iron Hans.  
He had been bewitched  
and the boy had broken the spell.  
He who slays the warrior  
and captures the maiden's heart  
undoes the spell.  
He who kills his father  
and thrice wins his mother  
undoes the spell.

Without Thorazine  
or benefit of psychotherapy

Iron Hans was transformed.  
No need for Master Medical;  
no need for electroshock —  
merely bewitched all along.  
Just as the frog who was a prince.  
Just as the madman his simple boyhood.

When I was a wild man,  
Iron Hans said,  
I tarnished all the world.  
I was the infector.  
I was the poison breather.  
I was a professional,  
but you have saved me  
from the awful babble  
of that calling.

## CINDERELLA

You always read about it:  
the plumber with twelve children  
who wins the Irish Sweepstakes.  
From toilets to riches.  
That story.

Or the nursemaid,  
some luscious sweet from Denmark  
who captures the oldest son's heart.  
From diapers to Dior.  
That story.

Or a milkman who serves the wealthy,  
eggs, cream, butter, yogurt, milk,  
the white truck like an ambulance  
who goes into real estate

and makes a pile.  
From homogenized to martinis at lunch.

Or the charwoman  
who is on the bus when it cracks up  
and collects enough from the insurance.  
From mops to Bonwit Teller.  
That story.

Once  
the wife of a rich man was on her deathbed  
and she said to her daughter Cinderella:  
Be devout. Be good. Then I will smile  
down from heaven in the seam of a cloud.  
The man took another wife who had  
two daughters, pretty enough  
but with hearts like blackjacks.  
Cinderella was their maid.  
She slept on the sooty hearth each night  
and walked around looking like Al Jolson.  
Her father brought presents home from town,  
jewels and gowns for the other women  
but the twig of a tree for Cinderella.  
She planted that twig on her mother's grave  
and it grew to a tree where a white dove sat.  
Whenever she wished for anything the dove  
would drop it like an egg upon the ground.  
The bird is important, my dears, so heed him.

Next came the ball, as you all know.  
It was a marriage market.  
The prince was looking for a wife.  
All but Cinderella were preparing  
and gussying up for the big event.  
Cinderella begged to go too.  
Her stepmother threw a dish of lentils

into the cinders and said: Pick them  
up in an hour and you shall go.  
The white dove brought all his friends;  
all the warm wings of the fatherland came,  
and picked up the lentils in a jiffy.  
No, Cinderella, said the stepmother,  
you have no clothes and cannot dance.  
That's the way with stepmothers.

Cinderella went to the tree at the grave  
and cried forth like a gospel singer:  
Mama! Mama! My turtledove,  
send me to the prince's ball!  
The bird dropped down a golden dress  
and delicate little gold slippers.  
Rather a large package for a simple bird.  
So she went. Which is no surprise.  
Her stepmother and sisters didn't  
recognize her without her cinder face  
and the prince took her hand on the spot  
and danced with no other the whole day.

As nightfall came she thought she'd better  
get home. The prince walked her home  
and she disappeared into the pigeon house  
and although the prince took an axe and broke  
it open she was gone. Back to her cinders.  
These events repeated themselves for three days.  
However on the third day the prince  
covered the palace steps with cobbler's wax  
and Cinderella's gold shoe stuck upon it.  
Now he would find whom the shoe fit  
and find his strange dancing girl for keeps.  
He went to their house and the two sisters  
were delighted because they had lovely feet.  
The eldest went into a room to try the slipper on  
but her big toe got in the way so she simply

sliced it off and put on the slipper.  
The prince rode away with her until the white dove  
told him to look at the blood pouring forth.  
That is the way with amputations.  
They don't just heal up like a wish.  
The other sister cut off her heel  
but the blood told as blood will.  
The prince was getting tired.  
He began to feel like a shoe salesman.  
But he gave it one last try.  
This time Cinderella fit into the shoe  
like a love letter into its envelope.

At the wedding ceremony  
the two sisters came to curry favor  
and the white dove pecked their eyes out.  
Two hollow spots were left  
like soup spoons.

Cinderella and the prince  
lived, they say, happily ever after,  
like two dolls in a museum case  
never bothered by diapers or dust,  
never arguing over the timing of an egg,  
never telling the same story twice,  
never getting a middle-aged spread,  
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.  
Regular Bobbsey Twins.  
That story.

## ONE-EYE, TWO-EYES, THREE-EYES

Even in the pink crib  
the somehow deficient,

the somehow maimed,  
are thought to have  
a special pipeline to the mystical,  
the faint smell of the occult,  
a large ear on the God-horn.

Still,  
the parents have bizarre thoughts,  
thoughts like a skill saw.  
They accuse: Your grandfather,  
your bad sperm, your evil ovary.  
Thinking: The devil has put his finger upon us.  
And yet in time  
they consult their astrologer  
and admire their trophy.  
They turn a radish into a ruby.  
They plan an elaborate celebration.  
They warm to their roles.  
They carry it off with a positive fervor.  
The bird who cannot fly  
is left like a cockroach.  
A three-legged kitten is carried  
by the scruff of the neck  
and dropped into a blind cellar hole.  
A malformed foal would not be nursed.  
Nature takes care of nature.

I knew a child once  
With the mind of a hen.  
She was the favored one  
for she was as innocent as a snowflake  
and was a great lover of music.  
She could have been a candidate  
for the International Bach Society  
but she was only a primitive.  
A harmonica would do.

Love grew around her like crabgrass.  
Even though she might live to the age of fifty  
her mother planned a Mass of the Angels  
and wore her martyrdom  
like a string of pearls.

The unusual needs to be commented upon . . .  
The Thalidomide babies  
with flippers at their shoulders,  
wearing their mechanical arms  
like derricks.  
The club-footed boy  
wearing his shoe like a flat iron.  
The idiot child,  
a stuffed doll who can only masturbate.  
The hunchback carrying his hump  
like a bag of onions . . .  
Oh how we treasure  
their scenic value.

When a child stays needy until he is fifty —  
oh mother-eye, oh mother-eye, crush me in —  
the parent is as strong as a telephone pole.

Once upon a time  
there were three sisters.  
One with one eye  
like a great blue aggie.  
One with two eyes,  
common as pennies.  
One with three eyes,  
the third like an intern.  
Their mother loved only One-Eye and Three.  
She loved them because they were God's lie.

And she liked to poke  
at the unusual holes in their faces.  
Two-Eyes was as ordinary  
as an old man with a big belly  
and she despised her.  
Two-Eyes wore only rags  
and ate only scraps from the dog's dish  
and spent her days caring for their goat.

One day,  
off in the fields with the goat,  
Two-Eyes cried, her cheeks as wet as a trout  
and an old woman appeared before her  
and promised if she sang to her goat  
a feast would always be provided.  
Two-Eyes sang and there appeared a table  
as rich as one at Le Pavillon  
and each dish bloomed like floribunda.  
Two-Eyes, her eyes as matched as a pen and pencil set,  
ate all she could.  
This went on in a secret manner  
until the mother and sisters saw  
that she was not lapping from the dog dish.  
So One-Eye came with her and her goat  
to see where and how she got the secret food.  
However Two-Eyes sang to her as softly as milk  
and soon she fell fast asleep.  
In this way Two-Eyes enjoyed her usual magic meal.  
Next the mother sent Three-Eyes to watch.  
Again Two-Eyes sang and again her sister fell asleep.  
However her third eye did not shut.  
It stayed as open as a clam on a half shell  
and thus she witnessed the magic meal,  
thus the mother heard all of it  
and thus they killed the goat.

Again Two-Eyes cried like a trout  
and again the old woman came to her  
and told her to take some of the insides  
of the slaughtered goat and bury them  
in front of the cottage.  
She carried forth the green and glossy intestine  
and buried it where she was told.  
The next morning they all saw  
a great tree with leaves of silver  
glittering like tinfoil  
and apples made of fourteen carat gold.  
One-Eye tried to climb up and pick one  
but the branches merely withdrew.  
Three-Eyes tried and the branches withdrew.  
The mother tried and the branches withdrew.  
May I try, said Two-Eyes,  
but they replied:  
You with your two eyes,  
what can you do?  
Yet when she climbed up and reached out  
an apple came into her hand  
as simply as a chicken laying her daily egg.

They bade her come down from the tree to hide  
as a handsome knight was riding their way.  
He stopped  
and admired the tree  
as you knew he would.  
They claimed the tree as theirs  
and he said sadly:  
He who owns a branch of that tree  
would have all he wished for in this world.  
The two sisters clipped around the tree  
like a pair of miming clowns  
but not a branch or an apple came their way.  
The tree treated them like poison ivy.

At last Two-Eyes came forth  
and easily broke off a branch for him.

Quite naturally the knight carried her off  
and the sisters were overjoyed  
as now the tree would belong to them.  
It burned in their brains like radium  
but the next morning the tree had vanished.  
The tree had, in the way of such magic,  
followed Two-Eyes to the castle.  
The knight married her  
and she wore gowns as lovely as kisses  
and ate goose liver and peaches  
whenever she wished.

Years later  
two beggars came to the castle,  
along with the fishermen and the peasants  
and the whole mournful lot.  
These beggars were none other than her sisters  
wearing their special eyes,  
one the Cyclops,  
one the pawnshop.  
Two-Eyes was kind to them  
and took them in  
for they were magical.  
They were to become her Stonehenge,  
her cosmic investment,  
her seals, her rings, her urns  
and she became as strong as Moses.  
Two-Eyes was kind to them  
and took them in  
because they were needy.  
They were to become her children,  
her charmed cripples, her hybrids —  
oh mother-eye, oh mother-eye, crush me in.

So they took root in her heart  
with their religious hunger.

## THE WONDERFUL MUSICIAN

My sisters,  
do you remember the fiddlers  
of your youth?  
Those dances  
so like a drunkard  
lighting a fire in the belly?  
That speech,  
as piercing as a loon's,  
exciting both mayors  
and cab drivers?  
Sometimes,  
ear to the bedside radio,  
frozen on your cot  
like a humped hairpin,  
or jolt upright in the wind  
on alternating current  
like a fish on the hook  
dancing the death dance,  
remember  
the vibrato,  
a wasp in the ear?  
Remember dancing in  
those electric shoes?  
Remember?  
Remember music  
and beware.

Consider  
the wonderful musician  
who goes quite alone

through the forest  
and plays his fiddle-me-roo  
to bring forth a companion.  
The fox  
was a womanly sort,  
his tongue lapping a mirror.  
But when he heard the music  
he danced forth  
in those electric shoes  
and promised his life  
if he too could learn to play.  
The musician despised the fox  
but nevertheless he said,  
You have only to do as I bid you.  
The fox replied,  
I will obey you as  
a scholar obeys his master.  
Thus the musician  
took him to an oak tree  
and bade him put his left paw  
in its wooden slit.  
Then he fixed him with a wedge  
until he was caught.  
The fox was left there  
kneeling like Romeo.

The musician went on  
playing his fiddle-me-roo  
to bring forth a companion.  
The wolf,  
a greedy creature,  
his eye on the soup kettle,  
heard the music  
and danced forth  
in those electric shoes.  
He came forth

and was bilked  
by the same order.  
The musician fastened  
both his paws to a hazel bush  
and he hung spread-eagle  
on a miniature crucifix.

The musician went on  
playing his fiddle-me-roo  
to bring forth a companion.  
The hare,  
a child of the dark,  
his tail twitching  
over the cellar hole,  
came forth and was had.  
With a rope around his throat  
he ran twenty times around the maypole  
until he foamed up  
like a rabid dog.

The fox  
as clever as a martyr  
freed himself  
and coming upon the crucifixion  
and the rabid dog,  
undid them  
and all three swept  
through the forest  
to tear off the musician's  
ten wonderful fingers.

The musician had gone on  
playing his fiddle-me-roo.  
Old kiteskin,  
the bird,  
had seen the persecution

and lay as still  
as a dollar bill.  
Old drowse-belly,  
the snake,  
did not come forth —  
He lay as still as a ruler.  
But a poor woodcutter  
came forth with his axe  
promising his life  
for that music.

The wolf, the fox,  
and the hare  
came in for the kill.  
The woodcutter  
held up his axe —  
it glinted like a steak knife —  
and forecast their death.  
They scuttled back into the wood  
and the musician played  
fiddle-me-roo  
once more.  
Saved by his gift  
like many of us —  
little Eichmanns,  
little mothers —  
I'd say.

## RED RIDING HOOD

Many are the deceivers:

The suburban matron,  
proper in the supermarket,  
list in hand so she won't suddenly fly,

buying her Duz and Chuck Wagon dog food,  
meanwhile ascending from earth,  
letting her stomach fill up with helium,  
letting her arms go loose as kite tails,  
getting ready to meet her lover  
a mile down Apple Crest Road  
in the Congregational Church parking lot.

Two seemingly respectable women  
come up to an old Jenny  
and show her an envelope  
full of money  
and promise to share the booty  
if she'll give them ten thou  
as an act of faith.

Her life savings are under the mattress  
covered with rust stains  
and counting.

They are as wrinkled as prunes  
but negotiable.

The two women take the money and disappear.

Where is the moral?

Not all knives are for  
stabbing the exposed belly.

Rock climbs on rock  
and it only makes a seashore.

Old Jenny has lost her belief in mattresses  
and now she has no wastebasket in which  
to keep her youth.

The standup comic  
on the "Tonight" show  
who imitates the Vice President  
and cracks up Johnny Carson  
and delays sleep for millions  
of bedfellows watching between their feet,

slits his wrist the next morning  
in the Algonquin's old-fashioned bathroom,  
the razor in his hand like a toothbrush,  
wall as anonymous as a urinal,  
the shower curtain his slack rubberman audience,  
and then the slash  
as simple as opening a letter  
and the warm blood breaking out like a rose  
upon the bathtub with its claw and ball feet.

And I. I too.

Quite collected at cocktail parties,  
meanwhile in my head  
I'm undergoing open-heart surgery.  
The heart, poor fellow,  
pounding on his little tin drum  
with a faint death beat.  
The heart, that eyeless beetle,  
enormous that Kafka beetle,  
running panicked through his maze,  
never stopping one foot after the other  
one hour after the other  
until he gags on an apple  
and it's all over.

And I. I too again.

I built a summer house on Cape Ann.  
A simple A-frame and this too was  
a deception — nothing haunts a new house.  
When I moved in with a bathing suit and tea bags  
the ocean rumbled like a train backing up  
and at each window secrets came in  
like gas. My mother, that departed soul,  
sat in my Eames chair and reproached me  
for losing her keys to the old cottage.  
Even in the electric kitchen there was

the smell of a journey. The ocean  
was seeping through its frontiers  
and laying me out on its wet rails.  
The bed was stale with my childhood  
and I could not move to another city  
where the worthy make a new life.

Long ago  
there was a strange deception:  
a wolf dressed in frills,  
a kind of transvestite.  
But I get ahead of my story.  
In the beginning  
there was just little Red Riding Hood,  
so called because her grandmother  
made her a red cape and she was never without it.  
It was her Linus blanket, besides  
it was red, as red as the Swiss flag,  
yes it was red, as red as chicken blood.  
But more than she loved her riding hood  
she loved her grandmother who lived  
far from the city in the big wood.

This one day her mother gave her  
a basket of wine and cake  
to take to her grandmother  
because she was ill.  
Wine and cake?  
Where's the aspirin? The penicillin?  
Where's the fruit juice?  
Peter Rabbit got camomile tea.  
But wine and cake it was.

On her way in the big wood  
Red Riding Hood met the wolf.  
Good day, Mr. Wolf, she said,

thinking him no more dangerous  
than a streetcar or a panhandler.  
He asked where she was going  
and she obligingly told him.  
There among the roots and trunks  
with the mushrooms pulsing inside the moss  
he planned how to eat them both,  
the grandmother an old carrot  
and the child a shy budkin  
in a red red hood.  
He bade her to look at the bloodroot,  
the small bunchberry and the dogtooth  
and pick some for her grandmother.  
And this she did.  
Meanwhile he scampered off  
to Grandmother's house and ate her up  
as quick as a slap.  
Then he put on her nightdress and cap  
and snuggled down into the bed.  
A deceptive fellow.

Red Riding Hood  
knocked on the door and entered  
with her flowers, her cake, her wine.  
Grandmother looked strange,  
a dark and hairy disease it seemed.  
Oh Grandmother, what big ears you have,  
ears, eyes, hands and then the teeth.  
The better to eat you with, my dear.  
So the wolf gobbled Red Riding Hood down  
like a gumdrop. Now he was fat.  
He appeared to be in his ninth month  
and Red Riding Hood and her grandmother  
rode like two Jonahs up and down with  
his every breath. One pigeon. One partridge.

He was fast asleep,  
dreaming in his cap and gown,  
wolfless.

Along came a huntsman who heard  
the loud contented snores  
and knew that was no grandmother.  
He opened the door and said,  
So it's you, old sinner.  
He raised his gun to shoot him  
when it occurred to him that maybe  
the wolf had eaten up the old lady.  
So he took a knife and began cutting open  
the sleeping wolf, a kind of caesarian section.

It was a carnal knife that let  
Red Riding Hood out like a poppy,  
quite alive from the kingdom of the belly.  
And grandmother too  
still waiting for cakes and wine.  
The wolf, they decided, was too mean  
to be simply shot so they filled his belly  
with large stones and sewed him up.  
He was as heavy as a cemetery  
and when he woke up and tried to run off  
he fell over dead. Killed by his own weight.  
Many a deception ends on such a note.

The huntsman and the grandmother and Red Riding  
Hood  
sat down by his corpse and had a meal of wine and  
cake.

Those two remembering  
nothing naked and brutal  
from that little death,  
that little birth,  
from their going down  
and their lifting up.

## THE MAIDEN WITHOUT HANDS

Is it possible  
he marries a cripple  
out of admiration?  
A desire to own the maiming  
so that not one of us butchers  
will come to him with crowbars  
or slim precise tweezers?  
Lady, bring me your wooden leg  
so I may stand on my own  
two pink pig feet.  
If someone burns out your eye  
I will take your socket  
and use it for an ashtray.  
If they have cut out your uterus  
I will give you a laurel wreath  
to put in its place.  
If you have cut off your ear  
I will give you a crow  
who will hear just as well.  
My apple has no worm in it!  
My apple is whole!

Once  
there was a cruel father  
who cut off his daughter's hands  
to escape from the wizard.  
The maiden held up her stumps  
as helpless as dog's paws  
and that made the wizard  
want her. He wanted to lap  
her up like strawberry preserve.  
She cried on her stumps  
as sweet as lotus water,

as strong as petroleum,  
as sure-fire as castor oil.  
Her tears lay around her like a moat.  
Her tears so purified her  
that the wizard could not approach.

She left her father's house  
to wander in forbidden woods,  
the good, kind king's woods.  
She stretched her neck like an elastic,  
up, up, to take a bite of a pear  
hanging from the king's tree.  
Picture her there for a moment,  
a perfect still life.  
After all,  
she could not feed herself  
or pull her pants down  
or brush her teeth.

She was, I'd say,  
without resources.  
The king spied upon her at  
that moment of stretching up, up  
and he thought,  
Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Mo —  
There but for the grace of —  
I will take her for my wife.

And thus they were married  
and lived together on a sugar cube.  
The king had silver hands made for her.  
They were polished daily and kept in place,  
little tin mittens.  
The court bowed at the sight of them from a distance.  
The leisurely passerby stopped and crossed himself.  
What a fellow he is, they said of the king,  
and kept their lips pursed as for a kiss.

But that was not the last word  
for the king was called to war.  
Naturally the queen was pregnant  
so the king left her in care of his mother.  
Buy her a perambulator, he said,  
and send me a message when my son is born.  
Let me hear no catcalls  
or see a burned mattress.  
He was superstitious.  
You can see his point of view.

When the son was born  
the mother sent a message  
but the wizard intercepted it,  
saying, instead, a changeling was born.  
The king didn't mind.  
He was used to this sort of thing by now.  
He said: Take care,  
but the wizard intercepted it,  
saying: Kill both;  
then cut out her eyes and send them,  
also cut out his tongue and send it;  
I will want my proof.

The mother,  
now the grandmother —  
a strange vocation to be a mother at all —  
told them to run off in the woods.  
The queen named her son  
Painbringer  
and fled to a safe cottage in the woods.  
She and Painbringer were so good in the woods  
that her hands grew back.  
The ten fingers budding like asparagus,  
the palms as whole as pancakes,  
as soft and pink as face powder.

The king returned to the castle  
and heard the news from his mother  
and then he set out for seven years in the woods  
never once eating a thing,  
or so he said,  
doing far better than Mahatma Gandhi.  
He was good and kind as I have already said  
so he found his beloved.  
She brought forth the silver hands.  
She brought forth Painbringer  
and he realized they were his,  
though both now unfortunately whole.  
Now the butchers will come to *me*,  
he thought, for I have lost my luck.  
It put an insidious fear in him  
like a tongue depressor held fast  
at the back of your throat.  
But he was good and kind  
so he made the best of it  
like a switch hitter.

They returned to the castle  
and had a second wedding feast.  
He put a ring on her finger this time  
and they danced like dandies.  
All their lives they kept the silver hands,  
polished daily,  
a kind of purple heart,  
a talisman,  
a yellow star.

## THE TWELVE DANCING PRINCESSES

If you danced from midnight  
to six A.M. who would understand?

The runaway boy  
who chucks it all  
to live on the Boston Common  
on speed and saltines,  
pissing in the duck pond,  
rapping with the street priest,  
trading talk like blows,  
another missing person,  
would understand.

The paralytic's wife  
who takes her love to town,  
sitting on the bar stool,  
downing stingers and peanuts,  
singing "That ole Ace down in the hole,"  
would understand.

The passengers  
from Boston to Paris  
watching the movie with dawn  
coming up like statues of honey,  
having partaken of champagne and steak  
while the world turned like a toy globe,  
those murderers of the nightgown  
would understand.

The amnesiac  
who tunes into a new neighborhood,  
having misplaced the past,  
having thrown out someone else's  
credit cards and monogrammed watch,  
would understand.

The drunken poet  
(a genius by daylight)  
who places long-distance calls  
at three A.M. and then lets you sit

holding the phone while he vomits  
(he calls it "The Night of the Long Knives")  
getting his kicks out of the death call,  
would understand.

The insomniac  
listening to his heart  
thumping like a June bug,  
listening on his transistor  
to Long John Nebel arguing from New York,  
lying on his bed like a stone table,  
would understand.

The night nurse  
with her eyes slit like Venetian blinds,  
she of the tubes and the plasma,  
listening to the heart monitor,  
the death cricket bleeping,  
she who calls you "we"  
and keeps vigil like a ballistic missile,  
would understand.

Once  
this king had twelve daughters,  
each more beautiful than the other.  
They slept together, bed by bed  
in a kind of girls' dormitory.  
At night the king locked and bolted the door.  
How could they possibly escape?  
Yet each morning their shoes  
were danced to pieces.  
Each was as worn as an old jockstrap.  
The king sent out a proclamation  
that anyone who could discover  
where the princesses did their dancing  
could take his pick of the litter.

However there was a catch.  
If he failed, he would pay with his life.  
Well, so it goes.

Many princes tried,  
each sitting outside the dormitory,  
the door ajar so he could observe  
what enchantment came over the shoes.  
But each time the twelve dancing princesses  
gave the snoopy man a Mickey Finn  
and so he was beheaded.  
Poof! Like a basketball.

It so happened that a poor soldier  
heard about these strange goings on  
and decided to give it a try.  
On his way to the castle  
he met an old old woman.  
Age, for a change, was of some use.  
She wasn't stuffed in a nursing home.  
She told him not to drink a drop of wine  
and gave him a cloak that would make  
him invisible when the right time came.  
And thus he sat outside the dorm.  
The oldest princess brought him some wine  
but he fastened a sponge beneath his chin,  
looking the opposite of Andy Gump.

The sponge soaked up the wine,  
and thus he stayed awake.  
He feigned sleep however  
and the princesses sprang out of their beds  
and fussed around like a Miss America Contest.  
Then the eldest went to her bed  
and knocked upon it and it sank into the earth.  
They descended down the opening

one after the other. The crafty soldier  
put on his invisible cloak and followed.  
Yikes, said the youngest daughter,  
something just stepped on my dress.  
But the oldest thought it just a nail.

Next stood an avenue of trees,  
each leaf made of sterling silver.  
The soldier took a leaf for proof.  
The youngest heard the branch break  
and said, Oof! Who goes there?  
But the oldest said, Those are  
the royal trumpets playing triumphantly.  
The next trees were made of diamonds.  
He took one that flickered like Tinkerbelle  
and the youngest said: Wait up! He is here!  
But the oldest said: Trumpets, my dear.

Next they came to a lake where lay  
twelve boats with twelve enchanted princes  
waiting to row them to the underground castle.  
The soldier sat in the youngest's boat  
and the boat was as heavy as if an icebox  
had been added but the prince did not suspect.

Next came the ball where the shoes did duty.  
The princesses danced like taxi girls at Roseland  
as if those tickets would run right out.  
They were painted in kisses with their secret hair  
and though the soldier drank from their cups  
they drank down their youth with nary a thought.  
Cruets of champagne and cups full of rubies.  
They danced until morning and the sun came up  
naked and angry and so they returned  
by the same strange route. The soldier  
went forward through the dormitory and into

his waiting chair to feign his druggy sleep.  
That morning the soldier, his eyes fiery  
like blood in a wound, his purpose brutal  
as if facing a battle, hurried with his answer  
as if to the Sphinx. The shoes! The shoes!  
The soldier told. He brought forth  
the silver leaf, the diamond the size of a plum.

He had won. The dancing shoes would dance  
no more. The princesses were torn from  
their night life like a baby from its pacifier.  
Because he was old he picked the eldest.  
At the wedding the princesses averted their eyes  
and sagged like old sweatshirts.  
Now the runaways would run no more and never  
again would their hair be tangled into diamonds,  
never again their shoes worn down to a laugh,  
never the bed falling down into purgatory  
to let them climb in after  
with their Lucifer kicking.

## THE FROG PRINCE

Frau Doktor,  
Mama Brundig,  
take out your contacts,  
remove your wig.

I write for you.  
I entertain.  
But frogs come out  
of the sky like rain.

Frogs arrive  
With an ugly fury.

You are my judge.  
You are my jury.

My guilts are what  
we catalogue.  
I'll take a knife  
and chop up frog.

Frog has no nerves.  
Frog is as old as a cockroach.  
Frog is my father's genitals.  
Frog is a malformed doorknob.  
Frog is a soft bag of green.

The moon will not have him.  
The sun wants to shut off  
like a light bulb.  
At the sight of him  
the stone washes itself in a tub.  
The crow thinks he's an apple  
and drops a worm in.  
At the feel of frog  
the touch-me-nots explode  
like electric slugs.

Slime will have him.  
Slime has made him a house.

Mr. Poison  
is at my bed.  
He wants my sausage.  
He wants my bread.

Mama Brundig,  
he wants my beer.  
He wants my Christ  
for a souvenir.

Frog has boil disease  
and a bellyful of parasites.  
He says: Kiss me. Kiss me.  
And the ground soils itself.

Why  
should a certain  
quite adorable princess  
be walking in her garden  
at such a time  
and toss her golden ball  
up like a bubble  
and drop it into the well?  
It was ordained.  
Just as the fates deal out  
the plague with a tarot card.  
Just as the Supreme Being drills  
holes in our skulls to let  
the Boston Symphony through.

But I digress.  
A loss has taken place.  
The ball has sunk like a cast-iron pot  
into the bottom of the well.

Lost, she said,  
my moon, my butter calf,  
my yellow moth, my Hindu hare.  
Obviously it was more than a ball.  
Balls such as these are not  
for sale in Au Bon Marché.  
I took the moon, she said,  
between my teeth  
and now it is gone  
and I am lost forever.  
A thief had robbed by day.

Suddenly the well grew  
thick and boiling  
and a frog appeared.  
His eyes bulged like two peas  
and his body was trussed into place.  
Do not be afraid, Princess,  
he said, I am not a vagabond,  
a cattle farmer, a shepherd,  
a doorkeeper, a postman  
or a laborer.  
I come to you as a tradesman.  
I have something to sell.  
Your ball, he said,  
for just three things.  
Let me eat from your plate.  
Let me drink from your cup.  
Let me sleep in your bed.  
She thought, Old Waddler,  
those three you will never do,  
but she made the promises  
with hopes for her ball once more.  
He brought it up in his mouth  
like a tricky old dog  
and she ran back to the castle  
leaving the frog quite alone.

That evening at dinner time  
a knock was heard at the castle door  
and a voice demanded:  
King's youngest daughter,  
let me in. You promised;  
now open to me.  
I have left the skunk cabbage  
and the eels to live with you.  
The king then heard of her promise  
and forced her to comply.

The frog first sat on her lap.  
He was as awful as an undertaker.  
Next he was at her plate  
looking over her bacon  
and calves' liver.  
We will eat in tandem,  
he said gleefully.  
Her fork trembled  
as if a small machine  
had entered her.  
He sat upon the liver  
and partook like a gourmet.  
The princess choked  
as if she were eating a puppy.  
From her cup he drank.  
It wasn't exactly hygienic.  
From her cup she drank  
as if it were Socrates' hemlock.

Next came the bed.  
The silky royal bed.  
Ah! The penultimate hour!  
There was the pillow  
with the princess breathing  
and there was the sinuous frog  
riding up and down beside her.  
I have been lost in a river  
of shut doors, he said,  
and I have made my way over  
the wet stones to live with you.  
She woke up aghast.  
I suffer for birds and fireflies  
but not frogs, she said,  
and threw him across the room.  
Kaboom!

Like a genie coming out of a samovar,  
a handsome prince arose in the  
corner of her royal bedroom.  
He had kind eyes and hands  
and was a friend of sorrow.  
Thus they were married.  
After all he had compromised her.

He hired a night watchman  
so that no one could enter the chamber  
and he had the well  
boarded over so that  
never again would she lose her ball,  
that moon, that Krishna hair,  
that blind poppy, that innocent globe,  
that madonna womb.

## HANSEL AND GRETEL

Little plum,  
said the mother to her son,  
I want to bite,  
I want to chew,  
I will eat you up.  
Little child,  
little nubkin,  
sweet as fudge,  
you are my blitz.  
I will spit on you for luck  
for you are better than money.  
Your neck as smooth  
as a hard-boiled egg;  
soft cheeks, my pears,  
let me buzz you on the neck  
and take a bite.

I have a pan that will fit you.  
Just pull up your knees like a game hen.  
Let me take your pulse  
and set the oven for 350.  
Come, my pretender, my fritter,  
my bubbler, my chicken biddy!  
Oh succulent one,  
it is but one turn in the road  
and I would be a cannibal!

Hansel and Gretel  
and their parents  
had come upon evil times.  
They had cooked the dog  
and served him up like lamb chops.  
There was only a loaf of bread left.  
The final solution,  
their mother told their father,  
was to lose the children in the forest.  
We have enough bread for ourselves  
but none for them.  
Hansel heard this  
and took pebbles with him  
into the forest.  
He dropped a pebble every fifth step  
and later, after their parents had left them,  
they followed the pebbles home.  
The next day their mother gave them  
each a hunk of bread  
like a page out of the Bible  
and sent them out again.  
This time Hansel dropped bits of bread.  
The birds, however, ate the bread  
and they were lost at last.  
They were blind as worms.  
They turned like ants in a glove

not knowing which direction to take.  
The sun was in Leo  
and water spouted from the lion's head  
but still they did not know their way.

So they walked for twenty days  
and twenty nights  
and came upon a rococo house  
made all of food from its windows  
to its chocolate chimney.  
A witch lived in that house  
and she took them in.  
She gave them a large supper  
to fatten them up  
and then they slept,  
z's buzzing from their mouths like flies.  
Then she took Hansel,  
the smarter, the bigger,  
the juicier, into the barn  
and locked him up.  
Each day she fed him goose liver  
so that he would fatten,  
so that he would be as larded  
as a plump coachman,  
that knight of the whip.  
She was planning to cook him  
and then gobble him up  
as in a feast  
after a holy war.

She spoke to Gretel  
and told her how her brother  
would be better than mutton;  
how a thrill would go through her  
as she smelled him cooking;  
how she would lay the table

and sharpen the knives  
and neglect none of the refinements.  
Gretel  
who had said nothing so far  
nodded her head and wept.  
She who neither dropped pebbles or bread  
bided her time.

The witch looked upon her  
with new eyes and thought:  
Why not this saucy lass  
for an hors d'oeuvre?  
She explained to Gretel  
that she must climb into the oven  
to see if she would fit.  
Gretel spoke at last:  
Ja, Fräulein, show me how it can be done.  
The witch thought this fair  
and climbed in to show the way.  
It was a matter of gymnastics.  
Gretel,  
seeing her moment in history,  
shut fast the oven,  
locked fast the door,  
fast as Houdini,  
and turned the oven on to bake.  
The witch turned as red  
as the Jap flag.  
Her blood began to boil up  
like Coca-Cola.  
Her eyes began to melt.  
She was done for.  
Altogether a memorable incident.

As for Hansel and Gretel,  
they escaped and went home to their father.

Their mother,  
you'll be glad to hear, was dead.  
Only at suppertime  
while eating a chicken leg  
did our children remember  
the woe of the oven,  
the smell of the cooking witch,  
a little like mutton,  
to be served only with burgundy  
and fine white linen  
like something religious.

## BRIAR ROSE (SLEEPING BEAUTY)

Consider  
a girl who keeps slipping off,  
arms limp as old carrots,  
into the hypnotist's trance,  
into a spirit world  
speaking with the gift of tongues.  
She is stuck in the time machine,  
suddenly two years old sucking her thumb,  
as inward as a snail,  
learning to talk again.  
She's on a voyage.  
She is swimming further and further back,  
up like a salmon,  
struggling into her mother's pocketbook.  
Little doll child,  
come here to Papa.  
Sit on my knee.  
I have kisses for the back of your neck.  
A penny for your thoughts, Princess.  
I will hunt them like an emerald.

Come be my snooky  
and I will give you a root.  
That kind of voyage,  
rank as honeysuckle.

Once  
a king had a christening  
for his daughter Briar Rose  
and because he had only twelve gold plates  
he asked only twelve fairies  
to the grand event.  
The thirteenth fairy,  
her fingers as long and thin as straws,  
her eyes burnt by cigarettes,  
her uterus an empty teacup,  
arrived with an evil gift.  
She made this prophecy:  
The princess shall prick herself  
on a spinning wheel in her fifteenth year  
and then fall down dead.  
Kaputt!  
The court fell silent.  
The king looked like Munch's *Scream*.  
Fairies' prophecies,  
in times like those,  
held water.  
However the twelfth fairy  
had a certain kind of eraser  
and thus she mitigated the curse  
changing that death  
into a hundred-year sleep.

The king ordered every spinning wheel  
exterminated and exorcized.  
Briar Rose grew to be a goddess  
and each night the king

bit the hem of her gown  
to keep her safe.  
He fastened the moon up  
with a safety pin  
to give her perpetual light  
He forced every male in the court  
to scour his tongue with Bab-o  
lest they poison the air she dwelt in.  
Thus she dwelt in his odor.  
Rank as honeysuckle.

On her fifteenth birthday  
she pricked her finger  
on a charred spinning wheel  
and the clocks stopped.  
Yes indeed. She went to sleep.  
The king and queen went to sleep,  
the courtiers, the flies on the wall.  
The fire in the hearth grew still  
and the roast meat stopped crackling.  
The trees turned into metal  
and the dog became china.  
They all lay in a trance,  
each a catatonic  
stuck in the time machine.  
Even the frogs were zombies.  
Only a bunch of briar roses grew  
forming a great wall of tacks  
around the castle.  
Many princes  
tried to get through the brambles  
for they had heard much of Briar Rose  
but they had not scoured their tongues  
so they were held by the thorns  
and thus were crucified.  
In due time

a hundred years passed  
and a prince got through.  
The briars parted as if for Moses  
and the prince found the tableau intact.  
He kissed Briar Rose  
and she woke up crying:  
Daddy! Daddy!  
Presto! She's out of prison!  
She married the prince  
and all went well  
except for the fear —  
the fear of sleep.

Briar Rose  
was an insomniac . . .  
She could not nap  
or lie in sleep  
without the court chemist  
mixing her some knock-out drops  
and never in the prince's presence.  
If it is to come, she said,  
sleep must take me unawares  
while I am laughing or dancing  
so that I do not know that brutal place  
where I lie down with cattle prods,  
the hole in my cheek open.  
Further, I must not dream  
for when I do I see the table set  
and a faltering crone at my place,  
her eyes burnt by cigarettes  
as she eats betrayal like a slice of meat.

I must not sleep  
for while asleep I'm ninety  
and think I'm dying.  
Death rattles in my throat

like a marble.  
I wear tubes like earrings.  
I lie as still as a bar of iron.  
You can stick a needle  
through my kneecap and I won't flinch.  
I'm all shot up with Novocain.  
This trance girl  
is yours to do with.  
You could lay her in a grave,  
an awful package,  
and shovel dirt on her face  
and she'd never call back: Hello there!  
But if you kissed her on the mouth  
her eyes would spring open  
and she'd call out: Daddy! Daddy!  
Presto!  
She's out of prison.

There was a theft.  
That much I am told.  
I was abandoned.  
That much I know.  
I was forced backward.  
I was forced forward.  
I was passed hand to hand  
like a bowl of fruit.  
Each night I am nailed into place  
and I forget who I am.  
Daddy?  
That's another kind of prison.  
It's not the prince at all,  
but my father  
drunkenly bent over my bed,  
circling the abyss like a shark,  
my father thick upon me  
like some sleeping jellyfish.

What voyage this, little girl?  
This coming out of prison?  
God help —  
this life after death?

