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CHICANERY

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THE GOOSE-GIRL SPEAKS FROM INSIDE THE STOVE:
INTIMATE ADDRESS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMEN'S POETRY

In "The Goose-Girl," a Grimms' fairy tale, a princess is betrothed at a young age to a prince in a far-off kingdom. When the time comes for her to marry, she journeys the distance on horseback with only her waiting-maid for company. The princess' horse, Falada, has the power of speech; the waiting-maid rides a nag. By the time they arrive at the kingdom, the waiting-maid has tricked the princess into trading both her clothes and steed, and has thus assumed the princess' identity. The waiting-maid marries the prince and soon orders Falada's head to be cut off so he cannot speak of the ill deed. The princess, thought be a peasant, is given the task of tending geese; she arranges for Falada's head to be nailed upon a wall that she passes daily. Each day, as she drives the geese home, she passes the horse's head and addresses him, "Alas, Falada, look at you hanging there!" to which he replies, "Alas, young Queen, how ill you fare! If this your mother knew, her heart would break in two." This strange dialogue is reported to the king, who then presents himself to the Goose-Girl at her house, insisting she reveal why she addresses the horse in such a manner. But the princess cannot tell him, as the waiting-maid threatened her with death if she did not swear upon her life to keep quiet. She tells the king, "I may not tell that, and I dare not lament my sorrows to any human being, for I have sworn not to do so by heaven which is above me; if I had not done that, I should have lost my life." The king continues to insist, yet is unable to draw out her confession. Finally, he tells her, "If you will not tell me anything, tell your sorrows to the iron-stove there," and leaves.

The princess then creeps inside the iron-stove and begins to weep and lament, "Here I am deserted by the whole world, and yet I am a King's daughter, and a false waiting-maid has by force brought me to such a pass that I have been compelled to put off my royal apparel, and she

has taken my place with my bride-groom, and I have to perform menial service as a goose-girl. If this my mother knew, her heart would break in two." All the while the princess speaks, the king is standing outside by the pipe of the stove, listening to her account.

You will not be surprised to know that by the end the princess is returned to her fine apparel or that the false waiting-maid is placed in a nail-studded barrel which is then dragged through the town by two horses.

Despite the Christian morality that permeates all Grimms' fairy tales, "The Goose-Girl" provides a helpful analogy for understanding one mode by which contemporary American women poets address their audience. This mode may be characterized by the following strategies: first, the speaker asserts herself as "I" throughout the poem; second, she addresses a particular "you"; third, the poem serves as a vehicle by which the speaker may reveal the true nature of her relationship to the individual she addresses. The speaker within the poem addresses the "you," yet the poem itself is directed at the reader; in this sense, the poem has two audiences. In a similar manner, the princess in "The Goose-Girl" also has two audiences. The pivotal moment in the story occurs when the princess crawls inside the stove to speak of her sorrows and unwittingly reveals the truth of her circumstance to the king. Of course, all along the king was her desired audience, and we assume she tells the stove what she wished to tell him. Because the princess addresses an inanimate object, and believes no one can hear her, her statement is all the more believable. Why would she lie to a stove? Her manner of address attests to her lack of artifice.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the manner in which this mode of address is employed by contemporary American women poets as a means to confront issues of gender. Sylvia Plath in particular uses this mode to startling effect throughout her later work. When the

speaker of “Medusa” confronts her mother and claims, “I shall take no bite of your body, / body in which I live” she informs the reader of her rejection of the maternal role for which she has been designated. We find the speaker of “Lesbos” positioned in another woman’s kitchen, among “the smog of cooking, the smog of hell”; Plath vents her disdain for the women’s “cute decor.” At the close of the poem, she states: “I say I may be back. / You know what lies are for.” By allowing her reader to eavesdrop on this confrontational exchange, Plath asserts her refusal to be identified with this “[s]ad hag.” There are a number of poems in which Plath addresses an “iron-stove”; because the individuals she addresses cannot respond, we may regard them as similarly inanimate. In this manner, Plath’s reader is positioned outside the poem and must listen to the speaker’s account through the pipe. Thus, the reader assumes the role of overhearing the speaker, whose account is understood as unguarded and intimate. It is not surprising, then, that the critic George Steiner observes, “[T]he vehemence and intimacy of [Plath’s] verse is such as to constitute a very powerful rhetoric of sincerity” (296). Steiner refers in particular to “Daddy,” a poem which is perhaps most useful in understanding how Plath employs this mode as a vehicle to confront gender issues. Plath opens by pointing her finger directly at the object of her wrath:

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

Here, the speaker, much like the “Goose-Girl,” relents to her desire to express anger at a circumstance she perceives as unfair. The situation of the poem is the relationship itself. While we can understand the speaker as having risen out from the closed space of the “black shoe” to

address the father, we note that she still speaks from within the confines of the relationship. Because the poem is conducted entirely as a one-sided dialogue, Plath's address remains tightly pinned to the very circumstance she resists; like the "black shoe," this poem has little breathing room. Because the father is already dead, the speaker launches her tirade against an object as inanimate as the "black stove."

While the speaker's tantrum is contained within the confines of the relationship, the poem provides a vehicle for Plath to address larger issues. By speaking directly to "Daddy," Plath takes a direct route to what she perceives to be the source of the problem; in this manner, she demonstrates her refusal to tip-toe around the issue:

> Every woman adores a Fascist,
> The boot in the face, the brute
> Brute heart of a brute like you.

This statement is voiced with a threatening intelligence; the tone is ironic. While women are expected to "adore," or at least accept their oppression, the speaker is living testament that they do not. Here, the speaker's intimate address and personal account act as an argument not only for individual experience, but for that of women generally. Consider how differently this poem would read if Plath spoke *of* the father, rather than *to* him; more than likely, we would not be as compelled as readers to sympathize with her account. Because the poem is an exchange between the speaker and the father, we can witness Plath's pyrotechnics at a safer distance; in this manner, this mode of address both accommodates and validates the heightened emotions that fuel the poem. Again, because we listen through the pipe, we are more inclined to believe the authenticity of what the speaker reveals inside the stove.

Obviously, there are many other kinds of poems Plath could have written on this topic; she could have assumed an overtly biographical stance and spoken of her dead father in the third person. She could have taken an overtly political stance by addressing the situation of women directly (as Adrienne Rich does). But “Daddy” demonstrates that Plath is more clever than that, and, in my opinion, ultimately more subversive. We find that many breakthrough feminist poems of the 1960’s and 1970’s that addressed gender issues in a more didactic manner have, by adhering so much to the politics of their time, become obsolete. However, because the drama of “Daddy” is enacted in the present tense, and in this sense dramatized, the speaker’s battle assumes mythic proportions.

Toward the close of the poem, Plath deftly merges the father figure with the husband:

> I made a model of you,
> A man in black with a Meinkampf look
>
> And a love of the rack and the screw.
> And I said I do I do.

We learn that the speaker’s rejection of patriarchal power is not limited to the father when she claims, “If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two.” In this sense, the speaker’s direct address is itself a renunciation of the submissive roles assigned to women (here they are daughter and wife). The sound structure of the entire poem works off of the word “you”; by returning to the “you” over and over, the speaker repeatedly identifies why she “ . . . never could talk to you.” On a basic level, we can conclude that the speaker means she was unable to relate to her father. However, the implications are far more severe: the speaker comes into her own power only because she is finally able to articulate herself. Because the audience within the poem is “Daddy,” Plath establishes a strong sense of privacy; however, the drama of the poem is enacted

for the reader. Similarly, the Goose-Girl could only address her lament to the iron-stove, although the King was her desired (and, therefore, intended) audience.

By articulating individual experience, “Daddy” raises larger issues. By the same token, the father addressed becomes emblematic of all men. However, understanding this poem solely as an anathema disregards the emotion which resides at its core; “Daddy” is at once an elegy, a lament, a keening for what has passed. In short, “Daddy” is a poem about loss: the speaker’s loss of her father, of her husband, of her devotions and her former convictions.

In contrast, Louise Glück’s “Marathon,” also a poem of loss, is fueled by a more stoic grief. However, in several of the nine poems which comprise this sequence, Glück similarly engages in a one-sided dialogue with the object of the poem: a former lover. This poem moves in a nonlinear fashion through the course of the relationship, and arrives at its dissolution; in the third poem, “The Encounter,” the speaker turns to address her lover, recalling what was probably their first sexual encounter.

> You came to the side of the bed
> and sat staring at me.
> Then you kissed me--I felt
> hot wax on my forehead.
> I wanted it to leave a mark:
> that’s how I knew I loved you.
> Because I wanted to be burned, stamped,
> to have something in the end--
> I drew the gown over my head;
> a red flush covered my face and shoulders.

Significantly, this poem is told in retrospect; we sense that this recollection responds to loss when she states that she wanted “to have something in the end.” This statement suggests that the speaker   recognizes that she has nothing at “the end” of this relationship. The poem does not

serve merely as a reminder to the lover, but acts as a revision; by recalling a moment at which the "you" was also present, the speaker asserts her version. A desire for permanence pierces this poem. The speaker recalls how she wished to be branded by this love; the poem itself is similar to the "hot wax" she felt on her forehead in that it seals the experience through recollection. However, this is not only a poem of feeling: it describes action and, therefore, assigns responsibility. The poem opens with the lover arriving at the side of the speaker's bed; by this, we know that he has initiated the "encounter." The lover then kisses the speaker, who responds: "I felt . . .." In this manner, the poem is an articulation of the speaker's response to the lover's actions. Note how the speaker "felt," "knew," and "wanted"; she only moves to "draw" her gown over her head and make herself bare to the lover. The poem serves as a testament to the effect this lover's actions had upon her. The speaker then switches to the future tense:

> It will run its course, the course of fire,
> setting a cold coin on the forehead, between the eyes.

Glück's prediction that the "hot wax" will cool to a "cold coin on the forehead" foreshadows the demise of the relationship; in addition, the "coin" placed on the speaker's face suggests a funeral in which she will be the corpse. The death of the past self is implied throughout the poem. By directing her recollection at the lover, the speaker assumes an active role. In contrast, we note that her former self does not move; rather, she remains in the bed until the lover joins her.

> You lay beside me; your hand moved over my face
> as though you had felt it also--
> you must have known, then, how I wanted you.
> We will always know that, you and I.

The proof will be my body.

The speaker speculates that her lover's hand "moved over [her] face" because he, too, sensed "wax on [her] forehead" cooling to a "cold coin"; in this manner, the fate of their relationship is sealed (as Glück states at another point in the sequence: "there isn't a future"). The lover's hand "move[s] over" the speaker's face as a blind man's might. What both the lovers "will always know" is how they felt at this encounter. The purpose of the poem is to "burn" or "stamp" this memory into the mind of both the lover and the reader. Although "Marathon" as a sequence alternately condemns and praises the lover, it works out of a quiet intimacy. Ultimately, the poem operates as an open address and, in this manner, serves as a vow.

While the speaker of "Marathon" focuses intently on the beloved, she also inserts her own nature. The poems of this sequence do not shy from female sexuality; indeed, they are imbued with the speaker's awareness of her body's susceptibility to desire. This sense of vulnerability is heightened by the speaker's intimate address. In the same way that the King believed the Goose-Girl's unguarded account, we, as readers, endow the speaker of "Marathon" with our sympathy. In turn, the reader accompanies Glück as she navigates a distinctly female terrain. In "First Goodbye," a poem which comes later in the sequence, the speaker comes to regard her own experience more objectively when she considers her lover's future mistresses: "And the women lying there--who wouldn't pity them, / they way they turn to you, the way / they struggle to be visible." We are reminded that although the poem is addressed to the lover, he is no longer present. In this manner, Glück speaks from a position similar to Plath's in "Daddy"; that is, she speaks from the interior, from within the small space of the stove.

Karen Volkman's poem "Reflections" is similar to Glück's in that it is spoken from the interior and addresses, as its title suggests, a past love relationship. We note that she also opens her poem by addressing this former lover:

> That time, you stood on my bed admiring the winter tress.
>
> You said the sky's queer amber was the reflection of fallen snow.
>
> What good is a sky, I might have asked, if it will not give us new
blue distance, it will only throw our loss back at us, shabby lens.
>
> I folded the sheets, the mattress; across my apartment, you
washed and dressed.

The speaker recalls a time when she and the lover inhabited the same space; we note that the bed he "stood" on is hers, which identifies him as a visitor. The lover's observation regarding the snow is scientific; he offers the snow as a *reason* for the sky's "amber" hue. The speaker wishes in retrospect that she had countered his observations with a startlingly emotional metaphor; instead, the speaker "folded the sheets, the mattress" while the lover dressed. The speaker declines to assert her feelings, and turns instead to housework. We learn that, ironically, the speaker's quelled emotions have in turn worked their malevolence upon her.

> All winter, I grew pale and witchy, swatting erratic snowdrifts with
my ancient, fraying broom.
>
> I disproved your simplistic dualities, day by day.
>
> A forgotten evening phone call, for example, will carve its resonant
insult on mind and heart--but is that all?
>
> What body is that, hunched and shaking at the kitchen table, oh so late? . . .

This poem operates within a distinctly feminine realm. The speaker grows “witchy” from having to “swat . . .snowdrifts” which are representative of the lover and, as such, “erratic”; this implies the lover’s growing absence. The “ancient, fraying broom” she employs suggests not only the drudgery of household, but also the age-old resentments inherited by women. As witch, the speaker becomes an aberration within the society of the relationship (which is male dominated in this case). In speaking to the lover in retrospect, however, Volkman artfully abstracts the situation, thereby simultaneously mocking the lover and beating him at his own game. Rather than stating that she considered the lover a hypocrite, she claims, “I disproved your simplistic dualities”; similarly, she provides the “example” of the “forgotten evening phone call.” The speaker further abstracts the emotional situation by asking, “What body is that, hunched at the kitchen table. oh so late?” We note that she does not inquire as to *whose* body sits at the table; the body is hers, diminished by the lover’s lack of regard.

The speaker shifts to the present tense, acknowledging, “I recall your intelligent pleasure, much too well.” At this recollection, the speaker’s tone shifts from anger to remorse. For the remainder of the poem, she addresses her failure at assuming the role of witch; by this, she acknowledges her lack of power to cast the spell that would have bound her lover.

> My eyes are strange gold, but no one’s burned me as a witch yet.
> I would have flown my old broom right out of Syracuse, if it would
> have helped. . . .
>
> My broom wouldn’t fly, I’m no storybook witch;
>
> nor Circe who turned men to swine, not that one either --
>
> but faithful Calypso, that dispensable nymph,
>
> whose name means, in the dead Greek language, *I am hiding*.

The poem culminates with the speaker's inability to transcend her remorse over this loss. The first half of the poem accounts for her attempts to become a witch; however, she only "grew witchy" (a word that begs to be rhymed with "bitchy"). Because she is no "storybook witch," her broom cannot transport her; this suggests that there is no vehicle capable of removing her from the confines of her love, not even the poem. Similarly, that the speaker cannot assume the role of Circe asserts both her inability and reluctance to turn her lover into a "swine" in the poem. "Reflections" closes with the speaker's realization that is resigned to the role of Calypso, the nymph who keep Odysseus hostage on her island for seven years and remained inconsolable after he finally left. What begins as a poem of bitterness ends as a poem of love.

In addition to being a love poem, "Reflections" makes several statements about the roles women are either placed in or expected to assume on their own; the speaker attempts to adopt the role of witch, but is forced to assume that of Circe. That the speaker addresses the lover directly attests to the depth of her feeling; this mode also reveals her desire that he understand (with his "intelligen[ce]") her frustration at such predefined roles. There's a great deal of remorse in this poem, not to mention self-loathing. Volkman's allusions to Circe and Calypso assert her awareness that the poem arises out of a grief, which is distinctly female; in a manner reminiscent of Plath, she succeeds in elevating her subject matter to a mythic realm. Rather than writing a "he-dumped-me-so-I'm-crying-in-the-kitchen" poem, Volkman weaves her lament with shrewd, inherently political, observations about the roles women both assume and are, in turn, subsumed by. This is what makes the poem interesting. While the emotional pitch of "Reflections" is by no means subtle, Volkman's observations regarding gender are. Volkman's handling of the topic-- specifically her means of address-- make possible the poem's political overtones. If the

poem did not speak from the interior, from within the stove, it would appeal to a much narrower audience.

If this manner of address does not suggest a strictly feminist poetics, it certainly operates as a means for women to approach subject matter that is distinctly female, without engaging in overtly political rhetoric. By addressing the poem to an individual, the poet avoids the risk of generalization. In this way, she may articulate concerns that might otherwise alienate her audience; ultimately, she succeeds in communicating to her intended audience. In this way, the reader is akin to the King who stands by the stove's pipe, intent on hearing the realities of the Goose-Girl's circumstance. However, the similarity between the Grimms' fairy tale and the situation of contemporary American women poets stops there. None of these women, upon stepping out from the stove, will be made Queen. They practice a subversive poetics. They are all witches at heart.

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"YOUR FACE BROODS FROM MY TABLE, SUICIDE."
PLATH, SEXTON AND JAMES: A REEVALUATION

Confessional poetry is marked by what was, for its time, unseemly subject matter for poetry; we are now accustomed to the manner in which these poets discuss private issues such as mental instability, addiction, and the flaws of intimate relations. While Lowell courts madness, he does not dwell upon suicide to the extent that Berryman does in his *Dream Songs*. As opposed to Sexton and Plath, Berryman's poems are presentations of a dialogic exchange that occurs between his separate selves through his employment of the character Henry and his foil Mr. Bones. The works of Plath and Sexton remove all partitions between the self and death; the entire psychology of suicide is central to both their works.

These four confessional poets are so closely and automatically linked to one another that one begins to overlook the very great disparities in their respective works. Our understanding of these poets would benefit from analyzing their allegiances outside the confessional "school." I have already attempted to distinguish between the stances of Lowell and Berryman as different from those of Plath and Sexton, with regard to suicidal ideation. For the latter two poets, suicide held great, romantic significance; how they explored death as a figure of desire differs. Sexton is, to my mind, the weaker poet of the two. In fact, the motifs of the confessional school have more than likely sustained her continued presence in the canon; in this regard, I view her as piggybacking on the deserved reputation of Plath as a powerful poet. In this essay I will examine the dialogue between their works regarding suicide, as well as the rhetorical patterns that comprise this dialogue. I will also discuss at some length the neglected poetry of Thomas James who, like Sexton, was very much in dialogue with the poetry of Plath.

While Plath was deeply interested in the work of other “confessional” poets (she read Lowell’s *Life Studies* with excitement and knew Anne Sexton from his poetry workshop), she killed herself before she could attain a perspective and enter into the dialogue herself. In this manner, both Sexton and James were engaged in a one-sided dialogue with the work of Plath; this makes perfect sense given that much of confessional poetry is a one-sided dialogue with an intended reader (what I refer to as the intimate address). More often than not, we find Sexton lumped in with Plath, or (at greater cost), Plath’s work generalized with regard to Sexton’s. Sexton took many cues from Plath’s *Ariel* and was known to express envy at her friend’s posthumous success. Poet Thomas James published only one book of poems, *Letters to a Stranger*, before he committed suicide in 1974. His work owes much to its very close reading of Plath’s poetry; in fact, his debt to Plath is far more strikingly aesthetic than that of Sexton’s. *Letters to a Stranger* is a remarkably strong first book and, to my mind, works out of a genius far more authentic than that of Sexton’s. James’ book has been out of print for nearly three decades and I, like others, was only able to acquire a photocopy. It is a testament to the achievement of his work that so many contemporary poets have gone to great lengths to attain the few remaining copies of his book, and that photocopies have been circulated between contemporary American poets. *Letters to a Stranger* has acquired an underground status among those who yearn to see the book back in print.

Before we delve into the relationship between Plath’s and James’ work, it is helpful to explore the manner in which Sexton developed the idea of a “language” specific to suicides. In her poem “Wanting to Die,” Sexton clearly addresses Plath by several key phrases and ideas as asserted by “Lady Lazarus” and “Poem for a Birthday.” I consider this poem to be a strong example of what Sexton was capable of, despite her somewhat limited range. While Plath

celebrates her suicide attempts and returns triumphantly ("I have done it again."), Sexton opens her poem with a more meditative approach, referring in the first stanza to suicide as an "unnamable lust." She then attempts to provide the reader some insight into the psychology of suicides.

> Even then I have nothing against life.
> I know well the grass blades you mention,
> The furniture you have placed under the sun.
>
> But suicides have a special language.
> Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*.
> They never ask *why build*.

The logic of this statement, an attempt to define the "special language" suicides share, is bizarre. We can infer that because suicides do not question their desire for death (and therefore overlook the question of "why" do it at all), they have a sort of calling. This argument, as well as the imagery it employs, can be understood as an overt reference to Plath. We recall Plath's "Lady Lazarus" as stating triumphantly, "This is Number Three." Sexton aligns her experience with the following two stanzas:

> Twice I have simply declared myself,
> Have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy,
> Have taken on his craft, his magic.
>
> In this way, heavy and thoughtful,
> Warmer than oil or water,
> I have rested, drooling at the mouth-hole.

We recall how "Lady Lazarus" refers to her return as "'A Miracle!,'" in addition to the vengeance she enacts by eating the enemy, men, "like air." In addition, "mouth-hole" is an image one finds repeatedly cropping up in Plath's work: in "The Beekeeper's Daughter," the speaker kneels to look into the "hole-mouth" of the bees' burrow; in "The Stones" (the seventh

section of "Poem for a Birthday"), Plath recalls her first suicide attempt in that "[o]nly the mouth-piped out" (a reference to the manner in which she was rescued by her brother who found her in the cellar after hearing her moans). Plath also states in "Lady Lazarus" that "The sour breath / Will vanish in a day." Similarly, Sexton notes how Death will "empty [her] breath from its bad prison." Sexton makes her final overture to Plath in the closing lines:

> Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet,
> raging at the fruit, a pumped-up moon,
> leaving the bread they mistook for a kiss,
>
> leaving the page of the book carelessly open,
> something unsaid, the phone off the hook
> and the love, whatever it was, an infection.

This poem was written on February 3, 1964, nearly a year after Plath committed suicide in her London flat on February 11, 1963. It is a statement of compassion and empathy, but one not made without an awareness to the particulars of Plath's suicide; we may understand the reference to "the bread they mistook for a kiss" as the bread Plath left inside her children's room, so they would not go hungry when they woke in the morning to discover their mother had killed herself (an act of questionable logic). As a poem, "Wanting to Die" is Sexton's attempt to identify both herself and her poetics with Plath. It makes an important companion, I think, to "Lady Lazarus" because it provides us with additional view into the psychology that underlies that poem. It also contrasts to demonstrate the manner in which Sexton was able to create a very different poem by cannibalizing Plath's work; when set aside one another, Sexton's poem is weaker, mostly due to the laxness of its language and her tendency to sentimentalize her subject.

Another poem that exists clearly for the purpose of binding Sexton's career to Plath's is "Sylvia's Death," also included in her third book *Live or Die* (1966). We will attend to this poem briefly, as it provides us an all too tempting opportunity to take Sexton to task for her

stomach-churning sentimentality. Unlike "Wanting to Die," this poem neglects any attendance to the language of Plath's poetry, and instead pores over the spectacle of her suicide with disingenuous familiarity. On reading the poem, one might conclude (and many have) that Plath and Sexton were the most intimate of friends. In fact, the two were friends briefly while attending a workshop taught by Robert Lowell at Boston University in 1959. The lore has it that they would retire to the bar at the Ritz with poet George Starbuck and discuss their attempted suicides in a co-conspiratorial manner. In "Sylvia's Death," Sexton sentimentalizes Plath as a "funny duchess" and "blond thing." She also calls Plath a "Thief!" for accomplishing the death she herself has so long desired. Considering to the deep gravity of Plath's *Ariel* poems, one is tempted to take a critical stance regarding the very nature of her address. The strongest link between the two, therefore, can be found in "Wanting to Die." Perhaps ironically, this poem provides the perfect thesis with which to examine the relationship between Thomas James' poetry and that of Plath's; in their respective works, there truly does exist a special language that pertains specifically to suicides.

While not all of the poems in *Letters to a Stranger* are indebted to Plath, a striking number of them bear a very great resemblance to her poems. The second poem in the book, "Room 101," is set in a scenario that is immediately recognizable as that of Plath's poem "The Stones." It begins:

> Chiseled out of the dark, I lie
> Under the archlight. The moths steer
> Clear of my eyelids. Sun hits the floor
> Open at morning. Every day
> My mended arms grow stiff and lean.
> I come to trade my flesh for stone.

Compare this stanza to the first two stanzas of Plath's poem.

This is the city where men are mended.
I lie on a great anvil.
The flat blue sky-circle

Flew off like the hat of a doll
When I fell out of the light. I entered
The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard.

Clearly the setting is a hospital in which the speaker (of both poems) is treated not as a human, but rather as an object with replaceable parts; in this manner, the mending that takes place is entirely artificial. Both poems argue for the speaker's "indifference," as James claims he has "come to trade [his] flesh for stone." Here are sections from the final three stanzas of James' "Room 101."

. . . Someone
Drags his cast-iron leg. I lean
Into my moon. A girl limps
On her new toes, without a crutch.
I listen to my father's watch

Clicking against my ribs. My nurse
Is frayed behind her spectacles.
She brings me needles, gauze, and pills
That fall like little unripe pears.
She brings me a plaster paste to patch
My mouth. My new stone biceps itch.

I touch one granite ear, grown hard
And resonant as a conch. Light hurts
My eyes. I trade them both for quartz
On Wednesday morning. I am made
To last forever, girded bone.
A hornet tests my sculptured skin.

Note how "Room 101" has thoroughly digested the metaphors that underlie "The Stones." We find in Plath's poem that "[a] wind unstoppers the chamber / of the ear, older worrier," and, later, "[m]y swaddled legs and arms smell sweet as rubber." Plath's speaker then explains, "Love is

the uniform of my bald nurse." The poem closes with the lines "My mendings itch. There is nothing to do. / I shall be good as new." Here, as in James' poem, the fact that the speaker has been returned to health does not please her. There remains a numbness and artificiality; in fact, both speakers have been reassembled on a sort of assembly line. As Plath states, "The vase, reconstructed, houses / the elusive rose"; this refers, of course, to the heart. In this sense, the speaker has been "reconstructed" against her will. Both "Room 101" and "The Stones" are essentially about inhabiting an intense passivity and vulnerability; neither speaker takes an active part in his or her recovery. A genuine cure has not taken place in this sterile and chilled environment. "Room 101," as with many of James' other poems, is also in dialogue with Plath's "Tulips" and "The Colossus." The former poem is similarly set in a hospital, and the speaker claims that the nurses "bring [her] numbness in their bright needles, they bring [her] sleep . . . " In "The Colossus," the speaker regards her father as a monolithic sculpture over which she crawls like an ant; later in the poems she "squat[s] in the cornucopia of [his] left ear"; this ear recalls the "granite ear" which the speaker of "Room 101" touches while he listens ton his "father's watch clicking against [his] ribs."

A poem that is even more blatantly in dialogue with Plath's "Tulips" is James' similarly titled "Carnations." The flowers in both poems are overwhelming and lethal.

> The scent of carnations is too heady,
> Too full of edge for me to climb to sleep.
> The window's colors coil and unravel, snakes
> Moving through smoke, flamily shedding their skeins.
> Carnations are too pale for this faceted cut glass bowl.
>
> Instead of all this permanence,
> I would have preferred a bouquet of yellow flowers . . .

This poem reveals James' careful attention to the rhetorical structures employed in Plath's poem, which begins with the speaker stating, "[t]he tulips are too excitable," and later "[t]he tulips are too red in the first place." Plath's tulips are animalistic in that they "weigh" her down, and "eat [her] oxygen." While James claims he "would have preferred" something other than the carnations, which are likened to snakes "flamily shedding their skeins" (which recalls Plath's poem "Poppies in October"), Plath states that she "didn't want any flowers" and later charges that "[t]he tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals."

"Carnations" is nowhere near as extensive a poem as Plath's "Tulips," which employs long lines, seven line stanzas, and dense language. In this manner, "Carnations" only makes a brief visit into the territory of "Tulips." Another poem by James, "No Music," makes a further departure from "Tulips," and, in this way, perhaps offers a stronger testament to the effective manner in which James reworks Plathian symbolism into his work. "No Music" begins:

> In here, a name is unimportant. . . .

Once again, we find ourselves in a hospital setting.

> . . . You leave it behind you like a set of dentures.
> It grows so far away from you it is impossible
> To mouth its syllables with any kind of conviction.
> It grows mild and faded as a row of stitches.

We see how James has extended the metaphors Plath asserts in "Tulips":

> I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
> And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons . . .
>
> I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat
> Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.
> They have swabbed me clear of loving associations.

Then, in the second stanza of the James poem, we come upon the familiar topic of breath:

> The dead have such sweet breath.
> They are too entirely indifferent to their surroundings,
> Too wrapped up in themselves to notice anything . . .

James closes his poem by stating “It is impossible to move in all that white,” which returns us to the first stanza of Plath’s “Tulips”: “Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed in.”

The work of Thomas James provides us with an opportunity to witness a dialogue between two poets that is not determined, as in the case with Plath and Sexton, upon actual acquaintance, or the formation of certain motifs that assist in creating a school of poetry such as confessionalism. It is my opinion that if Plath and Sexton were not both female writers who turned “domestic” subject matter on its head, they would not be linked so continually. With regard to stance, language and psychic distress, the work of Plath and James may be said to share a sibling relationship. Perhaps this can serve to remind us of what was startling, new, and important abut Plath’s work: her ability to create imaginary settings that paralleled and enforced her ambition to articulate the discomfort with the world that a “suicide” experiences. The sensibility which lies at its core is not necessary the vaudevillian pandering that Plath enacts in “Lady Lazarus,” but rather her insistence that she cannot, try as she may, embrace life. As she states in “Tulips”:

> I didn’t want any flowers, I only wanted
> To lie with my hands turned up and utterly empty.
> How free it is, you have no idea how free---
> The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
> And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
> It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
> Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.

She closes the poem by likening the water she drinks as coming from “a country far away as health.”

James' poem "Wild Cherries" recounts the speaker walking through a cemetery with a friend, with whom he has "shared these silences / Though we are not a part of them, / Not yet.":

> Edging the cemetery fence where dusk is gathering
> Its broken strands, branches of wild cherries
> Bend to our fingertips. You reach for them.
> Your hands are gloved in shadow—
> The red juice stains your palms.
> As if a nail were driven into their hollows.

One notes the manner in which Christian symbolism is articulated in both poems. This provides us with the understanding that the gravitational pull of death is no casual matter, but rather heavily ritualized and spiritually significant. "Wild Cherries" continues:

> And I accept it gratefully. When you smile,
> I see you dying in a single instant.
> Walking back home, into ourselves, we enter
> A far-off country neither of us wanted.

"Wild Cherries" portrays a friendship in which two individuals who wish not to live provide one another not only with sympathy, but with a mirror into which each may look back at their respective selves. The same could be said to be true of the relationship of Thomas James' poetry to Plath's. This is why his poems are so heavily in dialogue with hers; they accompany her poems into the same territory of unbeing, and in this manner they make compelling, if not unsettling, companions to her poetic trajectory.

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FEMALE TROUBLE:

WOMEN'S TRANSGRESSIONS IN THE CONFESSIONAL MODE

Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton are frequently linked because of the exhibitionistic and transgressive nature of their work; as a pair, they offer what is considered to be the most authentic example of what it means to be a female "confessional" poet. This distinction, first applied by M.L. Rosenthal in response to Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, was not a category Plath and Sexton simply fell under: their lives and their poetry greatly informed how we understand and evaluate the "confessional" today. As Rosenthal originally defined it in 1959, confessional poetry confronts the "private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems" of the author: "Sexual guilt, alcoholism, repeated confinement in a mental hospital . . . these are explicit themes of a number of the poems, usually developed in the first person and intended without question to point to the author himself" (*New Poets*, 26). These poets investigated deeply private subject matter within a public context; as a result, their poems "violated the norms of decorum for subject matter prevailing in serious literature" (Middlebrook 633). What the definitive confessional poets, Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath all shared was a history of mental instability, and a willingness to represent in their poems "real-life episodes" that had caused "actual pain" (Middlebrook, 636).

The issue is complicated by the fact that the social transgressions confessional poetry confronts, as a literary convention, are implicitly moral. As a result, these poets have often come under the judgment of critics eager to point out not only the aesthetic failings of the confessional project, but the social irresponsibility inherent in its undertaking. Indeed, one consistently finds beneath the objective analyses of confessional poetics undertones of displeasure that are essentially judgments of value. Such judgments are leveled not only at the poems themselves,

but often at the lives the poets lived. One may argue that simply because a reader may derive a deeper understanding of confessional poetry by consulting the poets' biographies, it is not necessarily ethical to align a writer's lived actions with the actions represented in his or her creative works.

Yet, confessional poets set up their camp smack in the middle of the dangerous border that separates the poet's lived experience from the poem he/she has created. However, what makes the project exciting and dangerous is the poets' refusal to remain faithful to the truth, as opposed to offering strictly biographical revelations. Confessional poetry is never earnest; rather, it is mercilessly manipulative of the reader. This particular transgression, as an approach these poets consciously undertook, is the underpinning strategy that connects the very disparate works of the representative confessional poets. Yet, as there exists a broad array of crimes a person may commit, crimes that vary in implication according to the degree of misdeed, there are several ways in which the confessional poet may transgress.

The means by which a confessional poem transgresses are threefold; first, the speaker may expose his or herself to an extent that is indecent and offensive. Second, by transcending the conventional boundaries between truth and fiction, the poet may implicate not only his or herself, but actual persons in his or her life. Third, the confessional poem may act as an emotional and ideological attack on the reader. I would argue that in "violating the norms of decorum for subject matter in poetry," confessional poets face charges of indecent exposure, libel, and assault. It is interesting, however, to speculate that the reader may somehow be required to exonerate these poets from such charges, simply given that fact that their poems often make a plea of insanity. This paper seeks to examine how such violations operate within the context of the "confessional" as asserted by contemporary American female poets, specifically

Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.

As Diane Wood Middlebrook notes in her essay "What Was Confessional Poetry?" the "institution of family," among other subjects staked out by confessional poetry, "predictably" had other meanings for women poets: "The poetry written by Sexton and Plath attempts the construction of a poetics from within a women's perspective" (641). Critic Sandra Gilbert takes this argument further in her essay "'My Name is Darkness': The Poetry of Self-Definition"; she argues that "confessional" poetry has been "generally associated with a number of contemporary male poets, most notably Berryman, Lowell, and Snodgrass" (118). Conversely, Gilbert argues that the "self-defining confessional genre, with its persistent assertions of identity and its emphasis on a central mythology of the self, may be (at least for our own time) a distinctively female poetic mode" (118). Gilbert argues that the male confessional poet remains "an ironic sociologist of his own alienation because he considers his analytic perspective on himself a civilized, normative point of view"; in contrast, this "detached self-irony--the irony possible for a self-assured, normative sensibility " is "largely unavailable" to the female poet, who "even at her most objective . . .feels eccentric, not representative; peripheral, not central" (119). Upon analyzing critical responses to Plath and Sexton, we can conclude that it does mean quite another thing for a women to "violate decorum"; responding to Sexton's frankness regarding the female body, poet James Dickey stated, "It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience" (qtd in Perloff 285)-- or does he mean that she dwells on female bodily experience, and that in itself is disgusting?

The woman who confesses is, according to Deryn Rees-Jones, "frequently read as testifying only to her own anguish and her own 'weakness'; she is simply revealing the awfulness of femininity which was 'known' to be there all along, and which, in the most

simplistic terms, has led to her oppression in the first place" (285). Given Rees-Jones's observation, it is perhaps not so surprising that one often finds the poetry of Plath and Sexton criticized as "hysterical" and "sentimental." Despite the fact that their names are often spoken in one breath, Plath and Sexton employed distinctly different strategies in constructing the confessional. Furthermore, if we are to understand their respective works as violating "norms for decorum," we read their works as violations; in this regard, Plath and Sexton are perpetrators of different crimes. It follows then that the two poets, having acted (written) independently, would have different motivations and means by which to commit their violations. Sylvia Plath's poems have been charged for their often aggressive and merciless overtones; Sexton's poems, on the other hand, have been criticized for their direct handling of the female body as a subject. Surely their work has been with us long enough to demand a more precise account of why their respective works are so often lumped together. Yet, in an essay published as recently as 1998, the critic David Yezzi concludes, "Too often, Plath and Sexton succumb to blowing up the subject in a way that Lowell equated with false sentimentality" (8).

As Alicia Ostriker notes in "That Story," an essay from her book *Writing Like a Woman* (1983), "Anne Sexton is the easiest poet in the world to condescend to. Critics get in line for the pleasure of filing her under N for Narcissist and announcing that she lacks reticence" (59). One notes that the poems most frequently criticized are not necessarily the most representative of her work as a whole; Yezzi, for example, offers the following titles as examples of her "extreme sensibility": "The Abortion," "Menstruation at Forty," "Suicide Note," "The Breast," "In Celebration of My Uterus," "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator, and "Dreaming the Breasts" (such provocative titles do not, in fact, dominate her 600-page volume of collected poems). Clearly, Yezzi wants his reader to take note of Sexton's inappropriate subject matter, nearly all

of which is drawn from distinctly female bodily experience; in this manner, we find Sexton charged again with indecent exposure. The only poem Yezzi spends time with is "The Double Image," a piece Sexton published in her first volume *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* that deals directly with the speaker's prolonged hospitalization for mental illness and its effect on her young daughter; although the poem is packed with odd, exciting rhymes and phrases, Yezzi only allows that Sexton "*happens* on a lovely turn of phrase" (italics mine) (9). Yezzi concludes his examination by stating, "It's hard to say which is worse, Sexton's blandly disclosed suicide attempts, or the fact she's directing all of it to her daughter. Sexton's woeful inability to see beyond herself isn't moving, it's depressing" (9). One may question whether his evaluation leans more toward the moral than the aesthetic.

In a statement ironically reminiscent of weekday afternoon laundry detergent commercials aimed at housewives, the critic Rosemary Johnson wonders whether Sexton's "messy preoccupations will remain to stain the linen of the culture for long or whether good taste bleaches out even the most stubborn stain" (qtd. by Ostriker 59). If we abide with this analogy, we may understand Sexton as having stolen the fine literary "linen" to don for the "mess[iest]" and trashiest of explorations. Johnson's accusation carries the connotations of slovenly mishaps (spilling a plate of food one's lap), embarrassing incidents ("revealing the awfulness of femininity" by having one's period), and deviant sexuality (or merely loosing one's virginity and, therefore, one's purity). In short, Johnson charges the poet for distinctly feminine indecencies. Not that this would have surprised Sexton. The poems in her first volume attest to both her keen awareness of female roles and her desire to interrogate gender stereotypes. In one of her better known early poems "Her Kind," Sexton places herself within a tradition of aberrant women.

> I have gone out, a possessed witch,
> haunting the black air, braver at night;
> dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
> over the plain houses, light by light:
> lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
> A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
> I have been her kind.

Clearly, Sexton, who was herself from Massachusetts, wants us to recall the 1692 witch trials in Salem. In doing so, she alludes to a period in which women accused of deviant behaviors were thought to be witches, and therefore tried as such. Her admission operates less as a confession than a boast; as a criminal, she is unrepentant. In describing herself as a "possessed witch" the speaker suggests that she both possesses supernatural powers and is possessed by such powers. The claim that she has "done her hitch" not only serves the rhyme scheme; as a noun, the word "hitch" also means "a term of service, especially of military service." In this sense, the speaker's flight is conducted for the benefit of all those who are "Her Kind." The speaker's powers transcend darkness to the extent that they "haunt the black air"; that the speaker flies over "plain houses" attests to her ability to perceive the home (and therefore the notion of the home) from a distant perspective. That Sexton's speaker likens herself to a "twelve-fingered" witch suggests her strangeness is not contrived, but rather a manifestation of the speaker's predetermined form: in other words, what is unnatural for those who live in the "plain houses" is natural for the speaker. We may also understand this statement in regard to Sexton's calling as a poet. After all, for one to be a witch can also mean one who is "particularly skilled or competent at one's craft." By the close of the first stanza, we learn that Sexton clearly uses her witch as an analogy for the "kind" of woman she perceives herself to be: "A woman like that is not a woman, quite"; rather, the speaker engages in behaviors that deviate from those considered appropriately feminine.

In the second stanza, the speaker continues to recount her explorations.

> I have found the warm caves in the woods,
> filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
> closets, silks, innumerable goods;
> fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:
> whining, rearranging the disaligned.
> A woman like that is misunderstood.
> I have been her kind.

Here, the activities she undertakes occupy a domestic realm; however, her homemaking within the "warm cave" presents us with a fantastic and somewhat grotesque scenario. The speaker claims she has created a dwelling that "ordinary" individuals do not inhabit; in other words, Sexton is at home among the strange. Although she engages in familiar domestic endeavors, such as decorating and cooking, she nurtures "worms and elves." In this manner, we understand that while the speaker prides her feminine inclination to nurture, her beneficence is directed at the grotesque ("worms") or fantastic ("elves"). This scenario also suggests that the speaker largely inhabits her imagination; as Sexton claims, "A woman like that is misunderstood." Hence, although this woman performs a valuable service, the imaginary realm she inhabits is itself suspect.

Following the admissions of the first two stanzas, the poem closes with the speaker being carted off for her misdeeds.

> I have ridden in your cart, driver,
> waving my nude arms at villages going by,
> learning the last bright routes, survivor
> where your flames still bite my thigh
> and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
> A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
> I have been her kind.

It is at this point that the poem becomes less of a confession than an accusation; the speaker turns

to address the “driver” who executes her punishment. The speaker’s unrepentant manner is conveyed by the manner in which she “wave[s her] nude arms at villages going by”: this gesture suggests that the speaker signals both a friendly greeting and a plea for help. We learn that speaker is fated to die when she notes the “last bright route,” and claims her “ribs” will crack where the cart’s “wheels wind” up. That the speaker has been difficult to execute is apparent in her claim that “flames still bite [her] thigh.” In addition, this line carries the suggestion that the speaker has been sexually abused, perhaps raped, by the driver of the cart. What can we make of the fact that the only distinguishing aspect of the cart driver’s identity is his gender? The speaker’s previous interactions with others have only emerged in relation to the sexless “worms and elves.” Sexton’s final claim that “A woman like that is not ashamed to die” suggests that such a woman does not believe she has reason to be ashamed. This might lead one to conclude that Sexton is challenging the feminine ideal (or norm) as propagated within a patriarch ally dominated society. Ultimately, the poem operates more as a threat than a confession, especially in that the “witch” survives in Sexton, who is has not only “been” her kind, but remains her kind.

“Her Kind” provides a useful introduction to Sexton’s handling of subject matter and craft. Just as the witch who makes her home in a cave is “misunderstood,” the terrain upon which Sexton constructs her poems is often considered unseemly. Yet, if we are to understand the “confessional poem” as Joan Aleshire defines it in her recent essay “In Defense of the Lyric,” how do Sexton’s poems match up?

> In the confessional poem, as I’d like to define it, the poet, overwhelmed or intoxicated by the facts of his or her life, lets the facts take over. To say that a poem is ‘confessional’ is to signal a breakdown in judgment and craft . . . Confession in art, as in life, can be self-serving--an attempt to shift the burden of knowledge from speaker-transgressor to listener. (48 - 49)

First, one notes that Sexton employs a protracted analogy in "Her Kind," and leaves out the "facts of her life." Second, the poem strikes one as a celebration of craft, as opposed to an example of "breakdown" in "judgment and craft." The fact that Sexton's poem is carefully (and rather ingeniously) rhymed, and quite regular in meter and stanza length, reveals a great attention to craft. Third, the "knowledge" the speaker shares in "Her Kind" seems hardly a burden; again, the poem operates as both a threat and a boast. Considering that many critics consider Sexton "the most confessional" poet of all the poets labeled as such, it is interesting that "Her Kind" stubbornly refuses to fit the mold created by Aleshire. Any reader familiar with the defining confessional poets knows that each highly valued his or her own craft. Lowell, Berryman, Roethke, Snodgrass, Sexton, and Plath began their poetic careers working within in the New Critical mode of the "closed form." Even when these poets worked toward a more "open form," which regard to content and craft, each retained a strong fidelity to the strictures of traditional form, whether by employing rhyme or demonstrating a commitment to the integrity of the line as a unit.

"The Abortion," a poem Yezzi would no doubt find demonstrative of Sexton's "extreme sensibility," employs rhymed tercets, regular line lengths, and a refrain. With the exception of its closing line, the title delivers the most sensational component of the poem. It is interesting to note that while this poem was considered quite shocking when it appeared, a poem concerning same subject matter, "The Mother," was published by the African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks in 1944. Yet, Brooks' poem differs in that we read it expressly as a dramatic monologue; in "The Abortion," Sexton's speaker occupies the forefront of the poem in an intimate manner that suggests the poem is based on a lived experience.

. . . *Someone who should have been born*
is gone.

the grass as bristly and stout as chives,
and me wondering when the ground would break,
and me wondering how anything fragile survives;

up in Pennsylvania, I met a little man,
not Rumplestiltskin, at all, at all . . .
he took the fullness that love began.

Returning north, even the sky grew thin
like a high window looking nowhere.
The road was flat as a sheet of tin.

Somebody who should have been born
is gone.

Yes, woman, such logic will lead
to loss without death. Or say what you meant,
you coward . . . this baby that I bleed.

The poem obviously handles material that is both specific to the situation of women, and fraught with moral ambiguities. By refusing to reveal how "love began" or acknowledge the man's role in her pregnancy, Sexton essentially argues that it is a woman who must cope with the consequences of this circumstance. In this manner, the man who impregnated the speaker is relieved of his moral responsibility. That the individual who performs the abortion is a "little man" suggests that while the lover has not assisted the speaker, it is men as a whole who profit financially from performing the procedure. We also note Sexton's careful phrasing in the refrain "Somebody who should have been born / is gone." As opposed to calling the unborn child "someone" she acknowledges its physicality by referring to it as "some*body*" (italics mine). The poem also serves as an accusation, as the reader may interpret the speaker as addressing herself and/or her lover as "coward." The issue of responsibility is interesting in that the act of writing

and publishing this poem attests to Sexton's willingness to endure stigma for the sake of revealing an unpleasant reality shared by American women.

In her essay "Consorting With Angels," Deryn Rees-Jones quotes Lowell's eulogy for Sexton, in which he dismissed her as a poet for whom "the writing was too easy or too hard . . [m]any 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" (285). Taking her cue from Lowell, Rees-Jones reflects that "[t]his issue of embarrassment is an interesting one—Lowell, for example, makes extensive use of the quotation, Berryman adopts a person" (285); it is here that she comes upon one of the crucial differences between the work of female confessional poets as opposed to their male counterparts. Both Sexton and Plath shirk such devices, and choose instead to present their speaker by means of immediate address. In this manner, their poetry is more naked and daring. Yet, Lowell's statement also begs the question of how we come to believe in a poem's "truth." As Yezzi argues, "Confessional poetry lies like the truth." It is my belief that as readers we do poetry a disservice when we are unwilling to allow a poem to operate on its own terms. That is, the poem—confessional or not—should be understood as existing separately from the writer, outside his or her immediate reality, not matter how tempting it may be to infer that the poem has sprung from a lived experience. Perhaps we should always understand a poem as being "put into quotes, as the presentation of some character, not the author." When we see the poet's face as opposed to his or her poem, we are essentially employing a logical fallacy: *ad hominem*, an attack to the person that disregards the actual work at hand. Of course, the irony is that confessional poetry often employs logical fallacies; Sexton's "The Abortion" provides us with a fairly solid example of an *ad misericordium* argument. This

is why confessional poetry as a genre can be resistant to categorization; it is as slippery as the truths its claims to tell.

Such issues lie outside the realm of the aesthetic. We have seen that the flaws of the confessional mode do not lie in “lack of control” or craft, at least with regard to formal technique. This does not mean, however, that confessional poetry is exempt from aesthetic considerations. As Ostriker admits regarding the “vexed question of Anne Sexton’s artistry”: “I must say immediately and with regret that she is not a *fine* artist” (61). I have argued elsewhere that Sexton’s work is quite weak, especially when placed next to the poetry of Sylvia Plath. It is for this reason I find critics’ tendency to automatically pair the two poets rather distressing. While it cannot be denied that Sexton’s poetry vastly changed the landscape of contemporary American women’s poetry, her continued presence in the canon serves mostly to counterbalance Plath’s achievement. In other words, it is important for readers of confessional poetry to familiarize themselves with Sexton’s work, primarily to gain an understanding of the larger context in which the school developed. In terms of the school itself, the fact that Plath took her life before her most famous book, *Ariel,* was published demonstrates that she was not (and could not have been) actively involved in the extended development of the confessional movement. Frequently, she is criticized along with Sexton, Lowell and Berryman for seeking fame and notoriety; this is ironic given the fact she published *The Bell Jar* under a pseudonym and her career remained very much in the shadow of Ted Hughes’ until her death in 1963.

In his essay “’the pieces sat up and wrote’: Art and Life in John Berryman’s *Dream Songs,*” Luke Spencer examines “the shortcomings of the confessional mode as Berryman practiced it” (71). In his introduction, Spencer provides us with a literary example of the game “telephone”:

> John Haffenden records a comment by someone who was close to John Berryman in the early 1950s: . . . his rages and tantrums and affairs were all well known and gossiped about . . "It's all part of my biography, that's all," he said once, when he was chasing some young woman around, and obviously embarrassing and hurting Eileen [his wife]." (71)

This sort of hearsay, while compelling as the gossip it is, does not and should not assist a reader in further understanding a poet's trajectory. Such moral assessment is vaguely in reminiscent of the Victorian mode of criticism the New Critics were so opposed to. Spencer's essay has several interesting points, however, in that he creates an argument regarding the "poem-as-life": " . . . the *Dream Songs* were converted from little more than a ragbag of transparently disguised confessions into a self-generating, self-completing object, the poem-as-life" (73). Spencer's tone becomes strident when he denounces those who resist the connections between the lived-life to the poem-as-life.

> . . . Nor am I satisfied that most readers are 'unwilling' to accept the unsavory details of Berryman's womanising, drunkenness and ambition. Nevertheless, the idea of the poem as a form of rape is a productive one and entirely consistent with the exploitative attitudes toward people, especially women, which can be found throughout the sequence." (73)

While Berryman's poetics are not the primary consideration of this essay, I find Spencer's observations and moral judgments representative of several critical stances taken with regard to transgressions in Plath's work. It seems excessive and unreasonable, not to mention slanderous, to argue that the violations committed in Berryman's poems are analogous to a crime as heinous as rape. Similarly, I wonder if Yezzi is aware that the passages in his essay concerning Plath work out of a vocabulary that is practically legal in its connotations. As opposed to being an objective reader of her poetry, Yezzi condemns Plath for "poaching on already charged icons for emotional effect"; "For Plath . . . God was a sitting duck"; she employs a "dangerous form of

sentimentality," in addition to "strong-arming the reader" (11). It would seem that Yezzi borrowed the critic Charles Moleworth's verbal arsenal when he was writing his essay. Molesworth's essay, published in 1976, liberally uses words that connote misdeed when discussing confessional poetics; he believes that that "exacerbated sensibility" of Plath's "Tulips" "assaults us everywhere" (166). Later on in the essay, he gets so worked up over the fact that Plath employs a Holocaust analogy in her poem "Daddy" one can almost sense him frothing at the mouth. He charges, "But who but a supreme egotist can take the plight of the victims of genocide as the adequate measure of her own alienation?" Molesworth considers the poem's rhetorical strategy "barbaric" and "unreasonable." Attacking one of Plath's "lighter" poems, "You're," Molesworth calls the poem "debased," as resembling "sacred emblems of excremental junk" and, finally, as a "cheap, vulgar impediment to the imagination" (173). Plath is not the only subject of Moleworth's tirade; he finds the confessional poetry disagreeable as a project. Yezzi picks up where Molesworth left off when he condemns Plath for "deifying and undeifying the figure of her father for the purpose of ridicule" (10).

Which brings me to the question: do any of these critics have a sense of humor? It would seem that readers are unwilling to acknowledge that a lot of confessional poetry is actually quite funny, most especially because it is often self-deprecating. And, no, Plath is not being serious when she states in "Daddy" that "every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you." More so than other poems, the confessional poem is a performance, and in this it shares more with the dramatic monologue than poetry we might regard as more strictly autobiographical. The confessional poem seeks to shock, to make of the reader a voyeur; this is why Plath refers to her readers as "the peanut crunching crowd" in "Lady Lazarus." A poem becomes confessional when the speaker shirks responsibility for the

implications of his or her subject matter. The confessional poem operates essentially in a trickster mode. It is never faithful to the actual; its narrator is not reliable.

Nowhere in contemporary poetry has this argument been made more strongly than in the book *Confession* by Susan Hahn. The territory Hahn charts is that of the female confessional poet. The speaker of her poems commits various crimes, such as shoplifting, harassing a lover with repeated phone calls, stalking the aforementioned lover and his younger lover. *Confession* borders on the grotesque, but its morbidity is also deeply humorous. Hahn broadens the topical terrain for confessional poetry by delving into accounts of the female body aging and undergoing menopause, desperate purchases of extravagantly expensive cosmetic that will make her look younger, and by describing the process of undergoing liposuction. The title poem of the books enacts an interrogation, in which the speaker of the poems admits to various crimes, and is then interrogated by a figure of power, who we understand to be a judge.

> Do you swear to tell the whole truth . . . ?
> *No, Sir, the truth hemorrhages in my pen,*
> *But lies clotted on my tongue.*
>
> Do you want a lawyer?
> *No, Sire, I like the unprotected exposure.*
>
> Are you a Confessional Poet?
> *No, Sire, they all committed suicide*
> *In the 60s and 70s.*

The speaker answers further questions regarding her misdeeds, such as undergoing plastic surgery and making harassing phone calls to a former lover. The judge suddenly demands:

> ARE YOU A CONFESSIONAL POET?
> *NO SIR, I ALREADY SAID THEY ARE ALL DEAD.*

The fact that lines are uppercased for sake of intensity also serves to heighten the humor of the poem. As a whole, *Confession* is a parody of the female grotesque as exemplified by Sexton and Plath. The book is manipulative, riveting, hysterically funny, and stomach churning. While I wouldn't regard Hahn as one of the finer poets writing today, this particular project represents an important response to the legacy left by the female confessional poets. It is utterly dishonest, evasive, oblivious to appropriate behavior—and, in this manner, it takes liberties that would simply not be available to women writers today without the influence of Plath and Sexton. Why, however, do women poets wish to address such intimate and disturbing issues? What makes them feel at liberty to do so? The confessional project may be of particular interest to women because it allows them to misbehave on the page, to reconstruct their identities, to display the power of their intelligence through language, to speak their minds without being silenced or interrupted . . . and to, ironically, say what they really mean. In confessional poetry, there are no rules. Perhaps the only rule is that the speaker of the poem must transgress. As a playing-field, the possibilities are limitless. Rosenthal referred to Plath as "a true literalist of the imagination" (84). While Plath was true to her imagination, she was not, as many readers believe, interested in providing a realistic account of her life. I find myself agreeing with M.D. Duroff's observations:

> From her earliest madwomen and hysterical virgins to the late suicides and father-killers, Plath portrays characters whose stagey performances are subversions of the creative act. Absorbed in their rituals, they confess nothing. . . . If she reveals herself herself in these poems, she does so in the grotesque mirror of parody. If these poems come out of her own emotional experiences, as she said they did, they are not uninformed cries from the heart. (114)

Funnily enough, Plath, as with other female poets who work out of the confessional mode, operates within a poetic tradition that harkens back to Sir Phillip Sidney. In his "Defense

of Poetry," he argues that "the poet, he nothing affirm, and therefore never lieth . . . for, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to true which is false. . . . And therefore, though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not." Why we must take poets to task for the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of their inventions, I find difficult to understand. Critics have too long revealed themselves as cuckolded by confessional poetry. It is time that readers understand such poetry as defined by its artifice, by its ruthless desire to convince us its untruths are true. Rather than recoil from such displays of intimacy, readers ought to recognize the confessional for what it really is: a true expedition into the imagination, an act we need not regard with moral indignation.

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CHICANERY: POEMS

The wofull dayes so full of paine,
The werye nights all spent in vayne,
The labor lost for so small gayne,
To wryt them all yt will not bee;
But ha, ha, ha, full well is me,
For I am now at libretye.

--- Sir Thomas Wyatt

Part One

LOVE THE CONTAGION

Quest the contagion, funnel much muck
through your hands upraised and cupped,
pour river-brack down your throat, pick
your scabs with loving glee. Love your

master of pestilence, conqueror of white
clothes: mud prints, paw prints, germs
not even the physician knows. Eat through
a muskrat's lair, divine the grub's slumber

beneath rotting leaves, take the lot, crush
it in your bare hands. Look at the moon
for its holes, narrow your eye at its skin
until you find its pores, squint your eyes

at the filthy sun and run toward the flavor
factory where the cherry stench hangs
above the highway, the machines that cast
that bright net of scent into the polluted air:

a mix of chemical so thick you can almost
run your hands through it like jello. Instead
find yourself running your hands through
your own gnarled hair. Repel the lover,

cast his grace at broken ground. Wear
your lover's indiscretions like stickpins
in your apple hat: rotting skin, dry as dust,
ample-sliced, a great old pie atop your head!

Be the world. Do not deny our fascination
lies in its filth, the maggot's sweet diet.
Marvel at the corrupt! Make disgust your
lust and cast your fresh pain to the trash!

THE COLDEST OF LOVERS

Should have worn a splint, such as he suffered.
Should have been offered a hot-water bottle.
Should have not entered from behind.
Was known to say he verily regretted ever having met.

And so. And so the town shrank before him.
And shrank even further as he, shrinking, entered it.
He dictated how our lives should be lived.
He walked with his tank of oxygen while smoking a cigarette.

There were entreaties made in the offerings
of roses. Those reds bled at his toes.
He never lacked for a lack of posture. The lover,
the coldest of all, he only grows, he grows

upon us, fed by our simple offering of compassion.
And what he has known! And the fiery lights
that swept him back against the awnings
of churches—his father is only, only to blame!

Otherwise, the coldest of us should have been
the warmest, the one to offer us the most
appetizing and fecund of passions. Should have limped
away, yet instead ordered a Happy Meal.

Should have withstood his material desires,
yet he took the air, the bandages, the screws,
the nails, window frames, my birth control,
neighborhood newsletters, political views,

the nail clippers, a melon-baller, the lawn mower,
garden hoses, pots of flowers, the shower curtain,
the toilet brush, the knife set that was a gift from my parents.
And went homeward to his new home O.

And O. I watch a heap of disassembled shelves
decay on the lawn. I become what is known as a mean
drunk. I inhale the motes, skin particles he left
behind. I head off to the country of my mind.

TRICKSTER WEDDING

Whose coral-handled knife, inlaid with turquoise,
purchased in Mexico, did the house take? It was all
he asked back for, and had I seen it while cleaning?
We might have married in the swale, stood in that field
that looked like a sea, green and pale, into which our
shoes would have sunk, vows folding into wind like sails.

Certain birds, such as grackle and crow, are known
for their attraction to bits of twisted wire, discarded
scraps of aluminum foil. They arrive with cheap rings,
veiled. Such trickster figures are figure truly, know
nothing of the tricks they play, simply take for taking's
sake what they require for their febrile amusement.

What matter that he asked I take care when handling
his books? *These volumes, he nodded toward a set,*
are especially valuable. For this reason, our books never
met on a shelf. For years, I watched as he sat reading
within a wreath of smoke. Sometimes I tried to speak
to him. He said, *My books are my children*. Remember?

Crack its spine. Turn a page's corner down, close a cover
onto the page you've haphazardly tucked. I'd say, go ahead
and empty the still live ashtray, then go for a long drive,
but he'll smoke himself right out of this house anyway.
Having no will, his library will fall to you. Quiet now.
Read. All this could be yours someday, if you want it.

I untangled from a heap of laundry, kicked far back into
the room's hairy corner, a pair of velvet leggings, half
my height. I took inventory of the pale hairs stuck in
his brush, the eye pencils in the bathroom cabinet, dark
foundation drying in its pot. Continued counting: a note
in wide female cursive, concerning cheap plane fares.

The mole beneath his left eye, which you admire as star;
the wink his eye makes in the dark as he moves against
your sleep: enchantments you embrace as though his charms
were singly begotten. I urge you to counter any woman within
a five-mile radius, witch out how well they know him. Note
the chipped teapot: from that dark stain, they have sipped.

He drank bourbon, then called emptied bottles my fault.
He no longer wore his ring because, he said, it *hurt* his
finger. He counseled long his advice to the student body.
At night, his sleep turned to its back, sealed my dread.
I lay through days, blamed fever, begged he attend me,
suffered like a nineteenth century victim of neurasthenia.

Rather than brick or bottle, if I were the one scorned, I
Wouldn't bother with the fragility of windows. He'd
rouse from his lethargy, take you to court, or simply call
the police. What dismal gifts he has given us. They say
she looks like you, only years and years younger. They say
they cringe at meeting her, she looks so much like you.

MY BLACK ADDRESS

Forward me no more the mail sent
to that old address. No roses were

ever delivered to that door. My head
still sits stuck atop a spear and sings

the cannibal's song from the back
porch. A sort of lullaby for neighbors

who miss us. And, O, the flowers
still grow, more lushly than before,

the raw blooms fed at their root's
very foot by the marrow from my

discarded bones. Hands are shards
picked at by birds, and my skull's

become a cemetery for the mice.

And the red rat, with its mottled tail,
still survives in the crumbling shed

with its roof rusting red. And still
he gnaws at the lilacs. How did we

learn that the nearby zoo once flushed
droves of rats out, that they entered

into the cellars of that neighborhood
as poison drives into the blood, as

disease thrives in the veins of the ill?

In the worst days, he blamed me for
the fact the last he saw of his father's

face was in an open casket. But it is
not true that he looked at all. I looked

while he looked away. I wanted to see
what the terrible man looked like, and

then he only looked like a man, and
a dead one at that. I think my hands

are buried out back, deep, where
honeysuckle twists and, the neighbors

said, there used to be a little pond,
which was why the earth was so damp

down that little slope. I do not recall
what it was to kiss him. I haven't been

able to look at the moon the same since.
It feels as if it bit me. I remember how he

used to stand me over the heating vent
and that he would kiss, but not the kiss.

I did not know that I'd love memory
more for its mercy and less for the damp

visitations of his flashing change, twisting
mouth an aorta of grief. I have changed

my address, but it is no less black. It is
a lake's surface plated with onyx. You

can see yourself among the glaring numbers.
Your face will not grow wider with terror,

for it cannot go any wider with terror,
and there is, at least, some comfort in that.

INSIDE THE TREMBLING RESTAURANT

It was not I who sought the young fool.
It was the young fool who sought me.
Fell me to rooms till I was fisted by shadow.
Fell to me like lamplight, skin soft as ermine.
Bought my drinks till I drank his pockets dry.

A sweetness equal to hibiscus, his mouth
bordered on illegal-- my coat crawled off
my shoulders, lay pooled and patient below
the bar stool. I heard rain slapping windows,
darkness losing itself to gutters, waitresses

clearing glasses, the ocean from a thousand
miles away, my mouth knowing him as it
loves water. Scarves of air moved above
us, as the ceiling's fan swung low above
us, and the young women hid themselves

against the wallpaper's ancient flowers,
unafraid, wishing to claim him in a glance.
That century the nights lapped around us,
birth dates departed, and the constellations
spun swift and acrobatic. By then I had

forgotten to teach him a new vocabulary.
What he will not understand: *I cannot eat.*
I am still a child. And when I try to fit my
tongue around the word *love*, dogs whine
at my door, and rats shiver in their gutters.

TEENS LOVE HORSE DICK

So much pornography one cannot afford.
They say there’s a lady who spreads herself
so wide she welcomes inside the entire world.
So many innuendos I would prefer to miss.
A man said all young girls who love horses
are naturally suspect. He raised an eyebrow.
.
When he left, all he left was trash. A closet
clogged with old shirts and letters, notecards
on which he’d listed things he’d wished I had
done for him naked, but hadn’t. When young,
there was nothing I wanted more than a horse.
On the cards, his cursive soared toward what

he’d wanted. There was no room for a horse
in the city where I grew, so I began collecting
plastic models. I had a tiny leather saddle for
my favorite. What it was he needed, I must
have managed to ignore. After we split our
address, I read his notes, acquired this injury.

My questions are numerous: How did they get
my address? If teens do, in actuality, love
horse dick, how did I remain unaware of this
preoccupation throughout my adolescence?
They say they take credit cards. They say
we should drive down the coast and cross

over into Mexico, they suggest we head first
to see a donkey show, where a lady spreads
herself so wide you can see constellations beam
out from inside of her. This is the world they
want us to have. *I want to come in your mouth*.
It was uncertain just whom he addressed.

There are things one would rather not know.
I had intended for this recollection to be modest—
but it would not be right to not tell you how
when we were together once, he told me,
very clearly, that my technique would not do.
This is the worst thing I will ever tell you.

I WAS A HANDICAP TO OUR LEISURE

when I became afraid to drive.
          So when I drove, which was always, my knuckles
whitened on the wheel, and my jaw
          ached against my teeth. So when I begged to pull
to the side of the highway's graveled edge,
          I would have been grateful if you'd simply agreed
to take over the wheel. Yet, you—
          and you how death swung its trap open in the guise
of every road sign—always declined.

And so we concluded that it'd be best
          if I forewent my anxiety, and continued to steer.
When we stopped at bookshops,
          and I could not read the spines, my vision doubled
by nausea, you urged me to purchase
          a cloth-bound edition of Edith Sitwell. While I hid
a full hour inside the bathroom of
          that restaurant, intent on vomiting up the illness
that made the roads shrink, then swing

large, you ordered me a sandwich,
          tuna on soggy bread, and had it boxed for the ride.
It was not me who could never
          decide. All I wanted was for you to take the car over,
and drive. And so I continued to drive,
          past King's Island, where the ferris wheel loomed
macabre, where twisted tracks rose, then fell
          beneath small, unsteady wheels: those carloads
of screams, bloody ribbons cast to the air.

GASLIGHT

He asked to split a ream of paper
so I foolishly handed him the whole
sheaf, reminding him I'd be wanting
its other half back. Now I'm typing
on the ink-soaked ends of old papers,
squinting my eyes so as not to see
through their skins, read backwards
yesterday's or last month's intentions.

The same happened to my envelopes,
and let's not forget the paperclips,
and I used to have a full box of pens.
Now, they turn up beneath the sofa,
ends bitten as if the dogs were nervous,
or he (frown a crumpled napkin across
his brow) chomped an afternoon away.
I'm surprised to find my hands still

attached to the ends of my arms, which
I keep fastened to my sides as I pretend
to sleep, tongue locked behind my teeth,
words hoarded into that little corral that
sits in the furthest corner of my mind.
Sometimes, I think he's got into the wine,
spilled a little down the sink to make me
think I'm drinking more than I used to.

When I approach his study to request
he return my calculator, he doesn't hand
it over-- instead he slams the door.
When my spine hits the floor he applauds
me for being *such a fine actress!* Let
us see how he takes my absence. I am
packing up my desk. And I'll let him keep
the scissors: he'll find them in his back.

SCENES FROM THE BATTLE OF US

You are like a war novel, entirely lacking
female characters, except for an occasional
letter that makes one of the men cry.

> I am like a table
> that eats its own legs off
> because it's fallen
> in love with the floor.

My frantic hand can't find where my leg
went. You can play the tourniquet. A tree
with white limbs will grow here someday.

> Or maybe a pup tent
> that's collapsed in on itself,
> it so loves the sleep
> of men sleeping beneath it.

The reason why women dislike war movies
may have something to do with why men hate
romantic comedies: they are both about war.

> Perhaps I should
> live in a pig's trough.
> There, I'd be wanted.
> There, I'd be tasted.

When the mail bag drops from the sky
and lands heavy on the jungle floor, its letters
are prepared to swim away with your tears.

> One letter reads:
> *I can barely feel*
> *furtive*. The other:
> *I am diminishing*.

AFTER THE LAST FRIGHT

I carved upon my desk unsayables.
He drank until he vomited on himself.
Eavesdropping, the others resisted sleep.
The house knew the pain of sun on lacquered floorboards.

I carved it with the tips of scissors.
A door creaked; he hung his head into the room.
Please, the others cannot sleep.
The shingles twitched like skin beneath moonlight.

I spent the afternoon at a movie theater.
He staggered through brush toward a pay phone.
The others continued searching the streets for him.
The house held the moon above it, it was that imperial.

I recall the room was empty when I came back in.
He was arrested at the Quik-Trip while calling collect.
Frantic, the others circled the block again.
The house was ghost-white, older than the dead.

I needle-pointed for 72 hours straight.
He claimed the whole situation humiliated him.
Relieved, the others refrained from asking him what jail was like.
The house was swan to field, tiger to sea.

I lay in bed by the time the others came home.
He didn’t recall putting on the orange jumpsuit.
The others asked if I’d seen him around.
The house shuddered, *No-o-o-o*.

The house winced, winked its blinds.
The house whispered I should stay inside.
The others flew out the doors and into their cars.
The others slammed their cars into deer and cried.

He was more humiliated than he’d ever been.
He looked more or less the same, though his eyes were ringed.
The others hid in the basement.
He climbed the stairs and presented a ring.

The house swung its windows wide to ice.
He banged his nails blue, pinned his tongue to his tie.
He packed himself in a box, sent it to regions far off.

The others pressed their ears to the pipes.

The house wore its flames like a hat.
The house called a radio talk-show.
We drank all night, laughed all night, the night he left.
I shook in its mouth till the house drank me up.

Part Two

A WINDMILL MAKES A STATEMENT

You think I like to stand all day, all night,
all any kind of light, to be subject only
to wind? You are right. If seasons undo
me, you are my season. And you are the light
making off with its reflection as my stainless
steel fins spin.
                    On lawns, on lawns we stand,
we windmills make a statement. We turn air,
churn air, turning always on waiting for your
season. There is no lover more lover than the air.
You care, you care as you twist my arms
round, till my songs become popsickle

and I wing out radiants of light all across
suburban lawns. You are right, the churning
is for you, for you are right, no one but you
I spin for all night, all day, restless for your

sight to pass across the lawn, tease grasses,
because I so like how you lay above me,
how I hovered beneath you, and we learned
some other way to say *There you are*:

You strip the cut, splice it to strips, you mill
the wind, you scissor the air into ecstasy until
all lawns shimmer with your bluest energy.

MUG SHOT

There's always a certain glamour
in knowing that someone has need
to make of your face a remembrance.
The bracelets' wrist-chaff: someone attended
to their tightness with a kind precision
so that the slightest turn of hand causes bruise.
Driven through downtown, leaning back
against wrists paired and clasped
behind my back, felt sweet as notoriety.
Having had already a sharp sense

of my own delinquence, it seemed
a relief to have the arrest over with.
In a stainless steel cell, they required
I remove my underwire, in case I should fashion
a weapon, or use a strap to hang myself.
This one thought gave pleasure:
the sheer brutality of which the female
undergarment is capable.
The last glass tipped back began
its illicit travel through my deeper veins.

One was taking note of my occupation.
One was writing a receipt for my ring.
They had me wear an orange jumpsuit.
It seemed appropriate to laugh. The blanket they
handed me was scratchy and damp.
The cell was full. They told me to sleep on
the floor. The dead-drunk lady on the top bunk did not
wake as I stole her blanket. Sleep was
dying down into drowning laughter.
Sleep with its laugh and whiskey thralls.

MUCKRAKER

There was a desolation *kicked in*
the gut there was a manifestation
kicked in the gut there were purges
money withdrawn and bodies touched
a woman younger than you and that
audacious claim *I only love you*
how can I begin to make this report

the rutting at *the wall was dented*
the faceless aspect of the act *the wall*
had the snail-trail of a water-stain
the getting it over with *I love you*
for sake of sleep *It is only in this*
way forcing a conclusion so I can
have it done with *come* temporarily

a man made a chamber *where are you*
going out of cement *how long will*
it was twelve by twelve feet *you be*
gone he was known as the town recluse
when will you be back and known for
recycling bottles *when* he kept a girl
who would not be missed *come back*

ever felt like a slave *he kept her as*
a slave ever felt like someone owned
your thoughts *he only let them* that your
thoughts became so private *go to*
the bathroom when he decided they
become too private *he would let them*
so before you knew it *then he let*

them you were too alone to share
he chose the ones how did he love me
no one would notice and why *missing*
so he could be sure because I want
no one would notice to know why
you chose me *that they were missing*
for your purpose and *so he raped them*

when I go out *when he released them*
I have nowhere to go *he warned them*
other than away *that after two years of*

from this you call home *captivity with*
him when I want to be running *his slaves*
away *that if she should chose to speak*
I am sorry *and tell anyone of the cellar*

I won't make you angry again *he would*
kill her family I am tired *so that should*
a girl he held upstairs I am going *in a cell*
to sleep now *on a piece of foam* goodnight
on the cement floor of the cell I will wait
for you *and the singular gray light of the*
we will say good night *television he set*

in the cell for together *entertainment* please
forgive me for making you angry *so the*
girls thirsted in that cell I have washed the
last of your dishes *for light* Kiss *grieving*
simply for light me good night *she told the*
police don't you believe *they didn't believe*
her that I love you *how could she prove it*

DARK AGE

Song, try your arms against the keen
  of satellite's invisible fence: on late night
    television, a woman cooks her placenta.
Upstairs, my mother shrinks her uterus.
  Downstairs, I sit alone and run my mouth
    red along the length of your upraised arm.

Cry? Why, with this battery of images, need
  I consider expression that wets the cheek?
    I believe I am intended to murder you.
Money slicks your palm, gold glows your
  head, clouds backdrop your eyes, and time
    fashions you anew. You've shown me a bridge

can wind across a sea, that roads waver over
  waves beneath you. I hear your bridges sway
    and sing their asphalt and dinginess, say
it is time to enter the city and become one
  with the age of industry. Should I polish
    off the whole bottle tonight? Should I smoke

myself out of this house, or spend a life
  counting matches, my last second burning?
    I do not wish to be artless with evidence,
to leave behind stained clothes and sticky knives.
  Instead, I'll try to sing of us turning slowly:
    beautiful and dangerous as the planet we ride.

THE PET

I rode him through the village, smiling.
He tossed his tasseled mane in distress.
The villagers took his gesture as vanity,
and made no attempt to rein him back.
Camped at night by stream and fire,

he seemed to think stories were in order.
The ghoulish tales that twisted out his mouth
no longer frightened me. On leaving,
I'd taken on a certain complacency. Later,
he'd characterize my silence as merely

mean. But what is mean about a mouth
that, having no stories, claims it can provide
no flower for the ear, no wine for the wind?
I tried: I told the tale of him, which he
(the version being mine) was not much

interested in. But all of us: the fattening
moon, the yewey trees, the sharp-toothed
stars who combed their glowing backs against
the sky like cats: we laughed. And now
that I had left, where would I take him?

He was vehicle and, as such, responsibility.
He was deadening, tiresome, and necessary.
I made ourselves a home and kept him gently
as a pet. Visitors often wonder aloud,
How do you manage to keep such a creature

inside? The floors are stained with his keep.
I tell them my heart is huge and its doors
are small. Once I took him in he grew. Now
I cannot remove him without killing him,
which, frankly, I have never wanted to do.

LINES FOR A MENTOR

I am driving a screw into the plump of a cork.
I am ignoring the animal tracks left on my face.
I am lying at the bottom of a clothes hamper.

Bees crowd a trash can: a bouquet of stings.
I once asked a teacher where a letter begins.
How prickly I felt as I sat within his walls:

peach-hued, smoothly painted with Zen patience.
If I am to take his advice, I'll start with where
I am presently. I am a pelt full of gunshot,

too torn in death to be made a coat. I've endured
an eclipse each day, have learned to train my eyes
to avoid the sky's direct gaze. I take the sun's light

and put it on bread, eat daily a sandwich of red.
I never wanted to build a house without nails.
Or thought I could shoe a horse, and fire the shoes.

Or desired to landscape a garden where rare buttery
moths would arrive each night for nectar. I won't lie
and say I didn't mind, that I didn't cry once,

wanting to make the teacher mine, so I might
be him. He said, *Never strike a typewriter,*
for they are delicate instruments. I am crouched

beneath the threat of toppling bookshelves.
Of all the change that rattles in my head, the pennies
are his: not worth much, yet not entirely worthless.

HAVE YOU BEEN ANYWHERE?

I suppose I ought to consider the question rhetorical,
or know it simply means, I'd like to know what you've seen.

As a matter of fact, I've been the spider crawling your sheets,
the worm searching your warmth as you sleep,

the pain that blooms wings when you wake up beneath
the surgeon's knife. Blue-coastal waters have sucked my shores

with their icy lips, beat my black edges smooth. Something
once rose so high, I heard it was called a Mountain,

and sure it was pretty, and sure there are names I've been told
to call places, but I'd rather not repeat them in the room

your voice lilts through, this tent gaseous with your pale smiles
and tended hands, where I sit hunched like a dumb relative

with nothing to twist but this yarn's red strand. What am I
to crouch on this upholstered chair, in your lovely dim-lit room:

a Creature? Your lips are salmon pink, your skin smooth
as ocean glass. I think this may answer your question: my hands,

my brow, my little feet, my stare, all have traveled with this body
somewhere it would take a God to make me remember.

ORANGE DRINK MAN

More than a fixture of the neighborhood,
since you move constant through streets
and parks, liter of lethal orange soda
clutched in your filthy hands, you have

been spotted patting the imaginary back
of an imaginary friend, and been said to
sleep in leaves, knotted tree roots serving
as pillows for your twig-tangled head.

I have never seen you speak to the living;
you never eat, as though in communion
with the dead. Yet I know your ribs don’t
show, since I once saw you lift your shirt

above your belly in the Quik-Trip parking
lot. I looked away. Dirt could not hide
your thick torso, its male line of hair, so
you became real to me. But what am I to

you, and what of the bottle of dying fizz
you carry everywhere, its color bright
as a plastic sun against your worn clothes?
I do not agree with those who think

you miserable. I think you live the way
you want to. And that is why I pretend
to ignore you, the way you ignore the world.
You will always be trammeling the streets

and growling loud at the wind, a plastic
bottle beneath your arm: medallion, choice
of nourishment, jug of color. Perhaps it is
a gift, to companion yourself with air.

POSTSCRIPT

We sure are tired, so long the longing
we undertook. It would put you to sleep
to read the book of examinations, trials,
and speculations. Even the cattle minded
the haul we had in mind for them, lugging
the same records across and back the same
lands, as if we were lost in the ocean.
The cry-me scarves were sold on the way,
blue silk soaked with tear-salt; the fire
ants we played with for pain, arguing
whose hands had become the numbest, lost.
It is sorry, then, the haul come to nothing
in the net, only more weight of pages
and pages to trod with upon our backs.
Though the goal was not known, we knew
it would be discovered, would bloom out
like hills of poppies, crossing our eyes
with their red scent-- though the idea, if not
the goal, was always in plain-eyed view.
To turn the ear like a weather antenna,
risk the tamper of satellite communications,
to yelp like puppies in an abandoned basket,
to scream like dirt to an eye that endeavors
to clean. If someday you should have the sense
to find us, camped still at the place we stopped
to rest, where resting took longer than any
of us could expect, do not be drawn
by our gypsy calls, our lonely tweaking
at guitar strings, do not pause for a listen:
we have nothing more to sing of you.

AZALEAS

It was a town so quiet, the mailman was empty-handed.
Why then nostrils of bloom, breathing so pinkly?

Even the town crier had taken a vow of silence.
Why at the house's edge, beneath a wide-eyed window?

A pink so dense it begged hiding. Unsiblinged, unmated,
the moon might find one rocking in a hedge of pink.

It was a town clothed from head to toe: skirts draped
its ankles, sleeves were buttoned tight at its wrists.

So why a shimmered curtain, less a curtain than a sheer
view of two figures on a bed, eyes affixed to a blue flickering?

Blooms pink as baby mice, soft as tiny hands, cluttering
the bush as if in celebration. Why a town that never smiled?

A figure lifted an arm to the nightstand, drank long a glass
of amber. Blue light flickered to the metronome of drama.

Nobody touched nobody. Invisible figures mowed lawns
soundlessly. The halls, everywhere, blue and institutional.

Where cars never drove with their windows rolled down.
A town where anything might happen, except for me.

The flowers, only the flowers had hearts. Even birds
pretended, their beating of wings mechanized by meanness.

Except for the petals that touched my fingers, except
for the little oceans I viewed their pinks through,

except the tongue that was my nose, the whiskers
I wore as I crawled on my knees through yards,

beneath the fresh fingers of azalea blooms, beneath
a window that flickered blue, to where my smile grew.

Part Three

PAN

And if I loved a man with fawn-hued
trousers and shoes cleft, with new nubs
just apparent on his just-shaved head,
I might learn how to find the udder of
the sky, suck its blue-milk, be less than
taken aback by its startling color.

Should he heft me over his shoulder,
place me down by the edge of a frozen river,
wash my hair in twig-tangled ice, put his
mouth hot at my ear, speak shell-
soft, I think I might allow him to melt
me before an indoor fire, leave me

ragged, thaw me out with his unruly stare.
Perhaps then, he'll offer a book from
his tongue, his journeys through Siberia, his
nights quiet beneath tents in Senegal.
I'll know of the wine-dyed lips his mouth has
lipped. He'll speak soft of undulating bodies.

I'll hear it without jealousy. The book,
embroidered with dust, will fall from
his satchel, read itself to me. That afternoon
we'll lie underneath the Chynna tree,
breathe its softly graying shadow,
and I will let his tongue move across my teeth.

In three days hence, I will leave, don this metal
shield, saddle my volatile horse, part knowing
he will always breathe beneath the spring
of my absence. Or perhaps I will walk him into
the smoke-filled eye of the Bear Cat lounge,
where we'll sit on barstools, exchange

hands. His hand is rough, yet his nails shine
with moons. His teeth are strong: canine.
Our hands are doing the talking—but
before the door is knocked by that other fist (which
I must admit as love)--there is so much
I want to say. So I say *Seas*, I say *Distance*.

PREPARATIONS FOR AUGUST

Like drinking perfume, or chewing anise tablets,
I pour within myself a fragrance, so my breath
may smell of rose, my skin like pale citrus.
It is an act of doing, of pre-doing, what is called

preparation. No need for the silken dress, or green
beads of glass studding the neckline. To breathe
another's breathing, all that's done is to inhale.
What youth was to me was thrown away with

the porcelain cat whose neck, once broken, was
squiggled with a line of crack and glue. I may have
thrown it out, but I return my mind to it, just as
I return to you in thought. The briefest letter breathes

warm breath on my neck. I am tempted to call
the airlines and make reservations I'll never afford.
What I want is for someone to come at my calling,
no matter the cost. I require desperation, sweat, and loss.

It's a bird-feathered room, a silky-walled space
where we ought to meet. Likely it'll be blank walls
in a hotel room I'll remember as extravagantly green-hued.
I have always been jealous of anyone who wants you.

SHE WISHES HER BELOVED WERE DEAD

It punches like liquor to the gut. And it is enough.
How you swerve into the parking lot. And I only want
to get you drunk enough. I want your stare like a shot.
The Lamplighter's open till 2. That's late enough.

I think we've done well for ourselves. On the porch,
tongues sharp with Scotch. Outside the squat house
you've rented, we shine like crystals in the desert.
The moon is cast in a sky waylaid by ash. The one lit

bedside lamp flickers from inside with the shadows
of flies. It's only 3, so I tip the bottle toward your glass.
Brash, my hand remembers its place on your knee.
But you're as prim as a closed umbrella, useless in this

arid climate. You sniff as if you can smell a wedding
in the air, as if your parasol opens only for rain.
Dear less-than-a-man, I think with my blood.
The tufted blossoms of the Mimosa tree are pink,

but the female of the species in known to stink.
Stifling a yawn, you sink further back into your chair.
You say you hope we'll have a chance to rendezvous
some other time. No mention is made of where.

When you breathe deep in sleep, I hang from the rafters
like a bat. Dreaming of mother-hate, your limbs twitch
beneath the sheets. All night I swing above you, still
drunk from sipping at your chest: pale, tiny teacups.

FLUSH

He's light warbled through the distorted
glass of a window, the shimmery stalk
of lamp stand I view as I stand in ten below
with a cigarette and a thought of him, light

warbling like that, so the eye cannot rest,
jaw fluid and eyes dark-heavy, amove and alive
as if his blood won't rest, so I take it in
and puff out mouthfuls of ice-air, with

a thought of him, some dime-store story,
real enough to make me laugh, strange enough
to make me quake just after he's left, so I
kiss my desk, I kiss my hand at thinking

of him: some rough-headed, sharp-eyed man,
a gentleman carrying an old lady's bag off
the bus, her nodding thanks to him, his hips
could be made out beneath the wrinkle

of clothes; his midriff was, for a moment,
exposed when he reached for her luggage,
And when we disembarked, his cupped
hands flowered a flame for my cigarette.

BED AND BREAKFAST

We riddled the house upside-down, unplanted
the gardener's rows, unmade every bed. We

took lodging in their minds, and lodged our
minds in love, dragged their trash back from

the dumpsters, right back into the trashcans.
We unpainted living rooms, left our breakfast

untouched on the table. Our lodgings were in
our hearts, two awful twins just barely Siamese,

pairing terrible smiles for the hostess. All they
wanted us to do was to leave them alone and

fuck. But we were brother and sister in fervor,
we were over our heads in deviant analysis,

we were ready to take the whole place apart.
So, in the evenings, when things got so ashy

and dark in the sky, we spoke of forest fires,
smoke delivered by winds, bringing us bouquets

of air and din, which our lungs were fierce enough
to master. We were thick in the middle of love,

so sick from it insects flew between the cracks
in the screens to crawl on us, our bodies never

touching. I was hot for your beauty; you were
in love with my mind. It could never be, we said,

repeatedly. We left piles of ashes shed from
the heart's very cinder, which all the while we

had refused to notice while we schemed through
day after night, finding each other's eyes in

the dark: so brown, so beyond repair, so alike.

YOUR CALL IS VERY IMPORTANT TO US

Which is why when we call you we keen,
so you may shake harder in your waiting,
and should you question whether it is true,
you'll learn from your longing how very

important we find you. So when we drop
blue upon your head, then swing ourselves
against your eyes like a leaden pipe, then
soothe your brow with golden, streaming

clouds of light, you'll wake at last from
your fever, your fright, and know we knew
you'd call, that we've been waiting for you
all along. Then we'll call back, shriller still,

for what is an audience that does not cry back?
For whose lover does not hold back?
For who loves and will not answer the phone?
So when we drop night's block on your head

as a door loves to slam a hand in its jamb,
when we land beneath your heel, our stars
shards of glass left unswept on a floor,
we are only waiting for your call.

We knew it had to be you all along.
Your alertness to the sky, your painful, Why?
Your somber way of walking yourself home
alone. If not for our siren cry, what would

you do? How else could you believe anyone,
anyone at all, cared about you? Here, have
a drink on us; we'll have a drink on you.
Your taxi has left. Your home is ransacked.

We would ask that you not cry out. We would
ask you not to speak, although we speak to you.
You will consider the back door, a distant country.
Know we can reach *at least* that far to find you.

DOINGS AND WRONGS

The worst thing I ever did was
the worst thing I ever did, was:

most of all, I hate to apologize.
I hate to herd my clouds toward
that firmament of admittance.
Say, *hurt another*, say *lied*.

Say, *told untruths with ominous intent*.
Say, *lay pinned by one thought*

that sat heavy astride my chest.
It drew out my breath like clouds,
unstuffed my mouth as fingers

unravel the injured ear wadded in
deep with cotton. I do not require

the clock's gentle face as an alibi
for the years passed in that tiled room,
companied by disappointment's

asthmatic breath. Do not advise
the young to love with all they have.

It is simply unkind. He was there
a moment, gone a moment after.
I never did take well to a surprise.

It's as fun as shopping for a coffin.
So when I tell you a story, you will

see where the culpability tends to lie.
Lying requires very little discrimination.
There's no one to point a finger at.

There's no one to shake a finger at.
And the mirror is a ghastly invention.

THE FOLLOWING POEM IS BASED ON A TRUE STORY

My best friend reveals that she's hated
me for years. She is busy scrubbing
her bathroom radiator with a toothbrush.
She provides a detailed account of how
the paint chips are matted with hair.

My best friend works the night shift
at the IRS and insists she *likes* it.
She thinks I blew her off to have
a one-night stand with a Bulgarian
physicist, and though she is correct,

I cannot admit to seeing anything
wrong with that. She is fretting over
the postal system. She cannot trust
them with a change of address.
She will be forced to communicate

with debt collectors by phone. She will
spend several days on hold, growing
more irate by the hour, until her teeth
begin to show tiny cracks from tension.
Secretly, I've hated her right back.

She refers to my paramour as a *fuck*.
I feel as if I'm breathing inside a plastic
bag. I feel as if I've just lit the wrong
end of a cigarette. I want to tell her
she needs to go out and get fucked.

Odd, until now, I hadn't noticed
she doesn't have any other friends.
I wonder if I'll see the physicist again.
Maybe I should marry him so he
can become an American citizen.

Maybe he lied, is already married,
has kids. In truth, I would like to call
my best friend to discuss this suspicion.
(On these matters she is expert.) But
I don't think I need to tell you I won't.

NYQUIL

What a mother of a cloud the sky has dumped
on us tonight: a pig fat with fleece, adrowse
in its dankness, suspended above us like
a Zeppelin fattening on the verge— I lie wet

as stripped flesh, open to the fog which clothes
the window with gauze, begging for sleep
thick as syrup. A clock types, a typewriter winds
backwards through old scrolls, humming

its melancholy distraction. Green bottle,
languishing in the cabinet: you want my veins
pulled though with wires of bluish fire. You call,
Dreams of parrots await you, a slumber to outnumber

all waking days awaits you. The day, all of its
doings and dids, will unravel like an ill-fitting
sweater, as the sweetness burns through the tongue,
sinks past heart to ignite a tiny fire in the belly's

cave. It makes a bright hollow. It shuts the latch
of throat, smoothes breath out so it may pass lips
without catching on gasp. I thrash up from bed,
cough until out my mouth bursts green feathers,

and I cough all the parrots out. I cough up childhood,
its rollerskates, its curled grubs tucked wet in matted
leaves. Now, another slipper, a finger, a nip, again
a sip of that platonic kiss. Dousing all my coughs

out. Cold sheets cusp my neck: mother's hand.
I am forgetting him and I am forgetting them.
Wait a long while before you find my face, wait
before you slap me awake with patient sunlight.

LYING MY HEAD OFF

Here's my head, in a dank corner of the yard.
I lied it off and so off it rolled.
It wasn't unbelieving that caused it
to drop off my neck and loll down a slope.
Perhaps it had a mind of its own, wanted
to leave me for a little while.

Or it was scared and detached itself
from the stalk of my neck as a lizard's tail
will desert its body in fright of being caught.
The fact is, I never lied. The fact is,
I always lied. Before us, we have two mirrors.
At times, they say, one must lie in order

to survive. I drove by the house, passed
it several times, pretending it was not
my own. Its windows were red with curtains
and the honeyed light cast on the porch
did not succeed in luring me back inside.
I never lied. I drove by the house,

suckling the thought of other lovers
like a lozenge. I was pale as a papery birch.
I was pure as a brand new pair of underwear.
It will be a long while before I touch another.
Yet, I always lied, an oil slick on my tongue.
I used to think that I was wrong, could

not tell the truth for what it was. Yet, one
cannot take a lawsuit out on oneself.
I would have sworn in court that I believed
myself and then felt guilty a long time after.
I hated the house and I hated myself.
The house fattened with books, made me

grow to hate books, when all the while
it was only books that never claimed
to tell the truth. I hated him and I hated
his room, within which his cloud of smoke
heaved. I disappeared up narrow stairs,
slipped quick beneath the covers.

My stomach hurts, I told him, I was tired.
I grew my dreams thick through hot nights:
dear, flickering flowers. They had eyes
which stared, and I found I could not afford
their nurture, could not return their stare.
Meanwhile, liars began their parade

without my asking, strode sidewalks inches
before my doorstep. I watched their hulking
and strange beauty, their songs pregnant
with freedom, and became an other self.
I taught children how to curse.
I bought children gold pints of liquor.

I sold my mind on the street.
I learned another language. It translates easily.
Here's how: *What I say is not what I mean,*
nor is it ever what I meant to say.
You must not believe me when I say
there's nothing left to love in this world.