



# To Bedlam and Part Way Back

*Anne Sexton*

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This book of poems has the cumulative impact of a good novel. It has the richness variety and compactness of true poetry. It is a book to read and remembered. Sexton is an accomplished lyricist. She can combine the straightforwardness of playing on his speech with the saddle with the control, tight formal structure, and brilliantly effective imagery. But she makes her singular claim on our attention by the fact that she has important things to tell us and tells them dramatically.

## To Bedlam and Part Way Back Details

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Author : Anne Sexton

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## From Reader Review To Bedlam and Part Way Back for online ebook

### Emily Green says

Anne Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, her first book, begins with "You, Doctor Martin," and describes the life of a patient in a psychiatric ward. The experience is described with surreal details, such as the making of moccasins.

...I make  
moccasins all morning. At first, my hands  
kept empty, unraveled for the lives  
they used to work. Now I learn to take  
them back, each angry finger that demands

I mend what another will break tomorrow.

The speaker has lost control of her body through caring for others, and now must regain control by creating. Not for those she knows, but for others like herself.

As the speaker tells of her struggle back to life, she observes the presence of Dr. Martin, whose presence is omnipotent and that of a god among the other patients. The admiration and attraction to Dr. Martin wears no mask, "god of our block" the speaker calls him, and "prince of all the foxes." The mention of the fox, a common character in fairytales, begins the comparison of the patients to children who are in his care. The patients are innocent, helpless, and simple.

The surreal situations and images created in the poem suggest the fear of being in the hospital and the terror of losing control. "Am I still lost?" the speaker asks in the final stanza. Such a question does not hint at healing, but at the continuing feel of not being able to regain herself.

"Music Swims back to Me," originally published in *Hudson Review*, through the context of the rest of the book, can be assumed to take place in the psychiatric hospital. The confused speaker begins, "Wait Mister. Which way is home?" Lost in her illness, she is unsure how to regain the security of sanity of self. Being ill is similar to a child who has been lost after dark. What guides a person back? Throughout the book, Sexton's speaker searches for sign posts which will lead her back to her home, in both the literal sense, as well as the metaphor of being able to function in everyday life.

Though the book ends with "The Division of Parts," an exploration of the speaker's mother's death, "The Double Image" seems a much more appropriate ending poem, in part because it examines not just the relationship between the speaker and mother, but also between the speaker and her daughter, placing her in her place among the generations.

*To Bedlam and Part Way back* is not Sexton's best book, but it does show promise and hint at her fantastical use of language which she will display in *Transformations*, *All My Pretty Ones*, and *Live or Die*. She is one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, for my money.

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### Miguel Vega says

This book of poems was absolutely amazing!

I first learned of Anne Sexton last quarter while studying the Confessional School of Poetry, and as she was categorized along with Sylvia Plath, I gave her a shot! Her themes in this book are sexuality, female empowerment, female captivity through the societal and the psychological. The way she sees herself a witch because that's how female longing and lusting was/is treated morphs the poems into incantations, pleasant to read and hear!

Favorites: "You, Doctor Martin", "Music Swims Back to Me", "Elizabeth Gone", "Said the Poet to the Analyst", "Venus and the Ark", "Her Kind", "For Johnny Pole on that Forgotten Beach", "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward", "Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn," "For John, Who Begs Me not to Enquire Further," "The Double Image," "The Division of Parts".

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## Steve says

Note: I read this collection as it appears in *The Complete Poems: Anne Sexton*. When I first started reading *The Complete Poems*, it quickly occurred to me that it's insane to read any poet in a 600 page effort. So I decided to break this up by the various collections within the overall *Complete* edition. I will from time to time refer to the Maxine Kumin introduction, which does not appear in the individual collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*.

When I was younger, I recall not caring much for the "confessional" poets. I "confess," that's a silly stand, especially since confession and poetry so often go hand in hand. At its best, it's what makes poetry truer than truth. It strikes at the heart of the matter. Sexton was, especially after Plath's quick departure, the Queen. Up until now, I've only read a scattering of her poetry, and never a complete collection. "The Abortion," some *Transformations* poems, etc. As a poetic figure, she has often been a presence on the edge when it came to my readings (bios, memoirs, and poetry) on Plath and Lowell.

At the time *The Complete Poems* came out, Sexton's reputation, while solid, was not, as Kumin wrote at the time (1981), necessarily assured. Part of this was due to Sexton's late loosening grip on her craft, as drugs, booze and depression took their toll. Kumin tries to avoid any condemnation here, but reading in between the lines, she's not sure how Time will treat Sexton. But part of her disputed reputation was also wrapped up in gender. There's an undeniable squirm factor in some of Sexton's poems. Early in the Introduction ("How it Was"), in a startling pot-calling the-kettle-black paragraph, Kumin underscores this bias (which struck me as both hypocritical and dated):

*The facts of Anne Sexton's troubled and chaotic life are well known; no other American poet in our time has cried aloud publicly so many private details. While the frankness of these revelations attracted many readers, especially women, who identified strongly with the female aspect of the poems, a number of poets and critics -- for the most part, although not exclusively, male -- took offense. For Louis Simpson, writing in Harper's Magazine, "Menstruation at Forty" was "the straw that broke the camel's back." And years before he wrote his best selling novel, "Deliverance," which centers on a graphic scene of homosexual rape, James Dickey, writing in the New York Times Book Review, excoriated the poems in "All My Pretty Ones," saying "It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience..." In a terse eulogy Robert Lowell declared, with considerable ambivalence it would seem, "For a book or two, she grew more powerful. Then writing was too easy or too hard for her. She became meager and exaggerated."*

Since I'm on her first collection, Lowell's assessment may hold up -- but I'm betting on Kumin's sense that Sexton had a good long run. Still, the snarkiness of Lowell (Mr. Life Stories) seems more personal than professional.

So why Sexton? Why now? Recently, I saw a cool Youtube video (see link below) that someone put together with Sexton reading to Peter Gabriel's "Mercy Street" (based upon a Sexton posthumous collection). That sort of spurred me on. And then there's the *Mad Men* factor. The poems, which are not to my mind dated, do however seem to capture a time and place that I can recognize. As memories come rushing in with age, it's a time that seems even closer, but at the same time, when looking at my kids, and how they see their world (a scary place), also seems remote. Finally, as I get older, I increasingly find something attractive about these damaged singers singing their damaged songs. Perhaps because we're all damaged, and poets like Sexton have the gift and ability to articulate that damage in a way that we all can identify with.

Now for the collection. I'm rating this collection 5 stars. It's a first collection, but a remarkable one. One GR reviewer (Bill Kerwin) has noted that the first section of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* is somewhat derivative of other poets. Since I haven't read and compared, I can't comment on that (though I'm sure he's dead-on). Madness makes an immediate entry, with the collection's first poem, "You, Doctor Martin."

*You, Doctor Martin, walk  
walk from breakfast to madness. Late August,  
I speed through the antiseptic tunnel  
where the moving dead still talk  
of pushing their bones against the thrust  
of cure. And I am queen of the summer hotel  
or the laughing bee on a stalk*

*of death.*

Wow. Published a year before *Ariel*, I have to wonder how much influence Sexton had on Lady Lazarus. Plath is Plath. An exploding rocket of intensity. But with Sexton, you see the clinical details, the morbidity, all handled with great precision and power. A number of doctor, patient (poet) poems follow. Also some New England poems that have a great sense of place. Sexton's love of fairy tales, in "Her Kind," also makes an appearance:

*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.*

Witches aside, that's some pretty brutal self analysis. Especially so, if you accept poem placement as being deliberate, the next poem, "The Exorcists" makes for one powerful follow up. "The Exorcists" is an abortion poem that makes for an unbearably sad read. It starts out with both confession -- and clinical details that suggest too much:

*And I solemnly swear  
on the chill of secrecy  
that I know you not, this room never,  
the swollen dress I wear,  
nor the anonymous spoons that free me,  
nor this calendar nor the pulse we pare and cover.*

Sexton compounds this ordeal, with a lyrical account of the love affair that would lead the speaker to her room:

*I was brown with August,  
the clapping waves at my thighs  
and a storm riding into the cove. We swam  
while the others beached and burst  
for their boarded huts, their hale cries  
shouting back to and the hollow slam  
of the dory against the float.  
Black arms of thunder strapped  
upon us; squalled out, we breathed in rain  
and stroked past the boat.  
We thrashed for shore as if we were trapped  
in green and that suddenly inadequate stain*

*of lightening belling around  
our skin. Bodies in air  
we raced for the empty lobsterman-shack.  
It was yellow inside, the sound  
of the underwing of the sun. I swear,  
I most solemnly swear, on all the bric-a'-brac*

*of summer loves, I know  
you not.*

Folks, that's about as loaded as it can get, and note that Sexton is also a master at line breaks, which ratchets things up well beyond the Heartbreak zone.

The second, and shorter section is comprised of only a few poems, two of which are pretty long. "The Double Image" seems aimed at exorcising the influence of Sexton's mother. Then again, it seems kind of circular. What is interesting, is the poem starts out with the line "I am thirty this November." Kumin, in her introduction, points out that Sexton's various suicide attempts usually occurred around the time of her birthday. Knowing that, and then entering the gallery of the "The Double Image," makes for an ominous read. Things get even more bizarre with "The Division of Parts," which also focuses on Sexton's mother, Sexton's relationship with her, and Christ's crucifixion. Sexton's identification with Christ is a complex one, and I'm not totally sure I've grasped it. She identifies with Christ, as Christ to some extent, and yet is apart. It's a juggling act that I believe works, but is damned near impossible for me to explain. Overall, a great read and highly recommended.

Sexton & Gabriel "Mercy Street": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Y5KEL...>

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## **mwpm says**

A remarkable first collection! Sexton is at home among the confessional poets. Indeed, there are poems in this collection worthy of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell. Her most brutally honest piece in the collection is undoubtedly "The Double Image", in which the poet addresses motherhood and her suicide attempts...

1.

I am thirty this November.

You are still small, in your fourth year.  
We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,  
flapping in the winter rain,  
falling flat and washed. And I remember  
mostly the three autumns you did not live here.  
They said I'd never get you back again.  
I tell you what you'll never really know:  
all the medical hypothesis  
that explained my brain will never be as true as these  
struck leaves letting go.

I, who chose two times  
to kill myself, had said your nickname  
the mewling months when you first came;  
until a fever rattled  
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime  
above your head. Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,  
I heard them say, was mine. They tattled  
like green witches in my head, letting doom  
leak like a broken faucet;  
as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet,  
an old debt I must assume.

Death was simpler than I'd thought.  
The day life made you well and whole  
I let the witches take away my guilty soul.  
I pretended I was dead  
until the white men pumped the poison out,  
putting me armless and washed through the rigamarole  
of talking boxes and the electric bed.  
I laughed to see the private iron in that hotel.  
Today the yellow leaves  
go queer. You ask me where they go. I say today believed  
in itself, or else it fell.

Today, my small child, Joyce,  
love your self's self where it lives.  
There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,  
why did I let you grow  
in another place. You did not know my voice  
when I came back to call. All the superlatives  
of tomorrow's white tree and mistletoe  
will not help you know the holidays you had to miss.  
The time I did not love  
myself, I visited your shoveled walks; you held my glove.  
There was new snow after this.

2.

They sent me letters with news  
of you and I made moccasins that I would never use.

When I grew well enough to tolerate  
myself, I lived with my mother. Too late,  
too late, to live with your mother, the witches said.  
But I didn't leave. I had my portrait  
done instead.

Part way back from Bedlam  
I came to my mother's house in Gloucester,  
Massachusetts. And this is how I came  
to catch at her; and this is how I lost her.  
I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said.  
And she never could. She had my portrait  
done instead.

I lived like an angry guest,  
like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child.  
I remember my mother did her best.  
She took me to Boston and had my hair restyled.  
Your smile is like your mother's, the artist said.  
I didn't seem to care. I had my portrait  
done instead.

There was a church where I grew up  
with its white cupboards where they locked us up,  
row by row, like puritans or shipmates  
singing together. My father passed the plate.  
Too late to be forgiven now, the witches said.  
I wasn't exactly forgiven. They had my portrait  
done instead.

3.

All that summer sprinklers arched  
over the seaside grass.  
We talked of drought  
while the salt-parched  
field grew sweet again. To help time pass  
I tried to mow the lawn  
and in the morning I had my portrait done,  
holding my smile in place, till it grew formal.  
Once I mailed you a picture of a rabbit  
and a postcard of Motif number one,  
as if it were normal  
to be a mother and be gone.

They hung my portrait in the chill  
north light, matching  
me to keep me well.  
Only my mother grew ill.  
She turned from me, as if death were catching,  
as if death transferred,

as if my dying had eaten inside of her.  
That August you were two, but I timed my days with doubt.  
On the first of September she looked at me  
and said I gave her cancer.  
They carved her sweet hills out  
and still I couldn't answer.

4.

That winter she came  
part way back  
from her sterile suite  
of doctors, the seasick  
cruise of the X-ray,  
the cells' arithmetic  
gone wild. Surgery incomplete,  
the fat arm, the prognosis poor, I heard  
them say.

During the sea blizzards  
she had here  
own portrait painted.  
A cave of mirror  
placed on the south wall;  
matching smile, matching contour.  
And you resembled me; unacquainted  
with my face, you wore it. But you were mine  
after all.

I wintered in Boston,  
childless bride,  
nothing sweet to spare  
with witches at my side.  
I missed your babyhood,  
tried a second suicide,  
tried the sealed hotel a second year.  
On April Fool you fooled me. We laughed and this  
was good.

5.

I checked out for the last time  
on the first of May;  
graduate of the mental cases,  
with my analyst's okay,  
my complete book of rhymes,  
my typewriter and my suitcases.

All that summer I learned life  
back into my own

seven rooms, visited the swan boats,  
the market, answered the phone,  
served cocktails as a wife  
should, made love among my petticoats

and August tan. And you came each  
weekend. But I lie.  
You seldom came. I just pretended  
you, small piglet, butterfly  
girl with jelly bean cheeks,  
disobedient three, my splendid

stranger. And I had to learn  
why I would rather  
die than love, how your innocence  
would hurt and how I gather  
guilt like a young intern  
his symptoms, his certain evidence.

That October day we went  
to Gloucester the red hills  
reminded me of the dry red fur fox  
coat I played in as a child; stock-still  
like a bear or a tent,  
like a great cave laughing or a red fur fox.

We drove past the hatchery,  
the hut that sells bait,  
past Pigeon Cove, past the Yacht Club, past Squall's  
Hill, to the house that waits  
still, on the top of the sea,  
and two portraits hung on the opposite walls.

6.

In north light, my smile is held in place,  
the shadow marks my bone.  
What could I have been dreaming as I sat there,  
all of me waiting in the eyes, the zone  
of the smile, the young face,  
the foxes' snare.

In south light, her smile is held in place,  
her cheeks wilting like a dry  
orchid; my mocking mirror, my overthrown  
love, my first image. She eyes me from that face,  
that stony head of death  
I had outgrown.

The artist caught us at the turning;  
we smiled in our canvas home

before we chose our foreknown separate ways.  
The dry red fur fox coat was made for burning.  
I rot on the wall, my own  
Dorian Gray.

And this was the cave of the mirror,  
that double woman who stares  
at herself, as if she were petrified  
in time — two ladies sitting in umber chairs.  
You kissed your grandmother  
and she cried.

7.

I could not get you back  
except for weekends. You came  
each time, clutching the picture of a rabbit  
that I had sent you. For the last time I unpack  
your things. We touch from habit.  
The first visit you asked my name.  
Now you stay for good. I will forget  
how we bumped away from each other like marionettes  
on strings. It wasn't the same  
as love, letting weekends contain  
us. You scrape your knee. You learn my name,  
wobbling up the sidewalk, calling and crying.  
You call me mother and I remember my mother again,  
somewhere in greater Boston, dying.

I remember we named you Joyce  
so we could call you Joy.  
You came like an awkward guest  
that first time, all wrapped and moist  
and strange at my heavy breast.  
I needed you. I didn't want a boy,  
only a girl, a small milky mouse  
of a girl, already loved, already loud in the house  
of herself. We named you Joy.  
I, who was never quite sure  
about being a girl, needed another  
life, another image to remind me.  
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure  
nor soothe it. I made you to find me.

- The Double Image

## Dave says

I read this after reading the Selected Poems which is like a combination of greatest hits and muesem exhibit and Transformation which is much mature despite being based on children folk tales.

This was Sexton's first book, I read it as it appears in her completed poems. In the first book, there is a transformation from start to finish. Her early poems like You Doctor Martin and Kind Sir These Woods display all her raw talent. She's still working it out. A lot elaborate rhyme schemes that sometimes make the poems and other times get in the way. It's fun to see her play with different styles.

The shorter part two really shoes her growth. These are three of my favorites: For John, who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," "The Double Image" and "The Division of Parts". The second part is like going to a concert when the artist comes back for an encore. Division of Parts is my favorite by far.

In the first part, also enjoyed Her Kind, Said the Poet to the Analyst and Ringing the Bells.

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## Sarah says

Two poems:

### *Her Kind*

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

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

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

and

*Said the Poet to the Analyst*

My business is words. Words are like labels,  
or coins, or better, like swarming bees.  
I confess I am only broken by the sources of things;  
as if words were counted like dead bees in the attic,  
unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings.  
I must always forget how one word is able to pick  
out another, to manner another, until I have got  
something I might have said...  
but did not.

Your business is watching my words. But I  
admit nothing. I work with my best, for instance,  
when I can write my praise for a nickel machine,  
that one night in Nevada: telling how the magic jackpot  
came clacking three bells out, over the lucky screen.  
But if you should say this is something it is not,  
then I grow weak, remembering how my hands felt funny  
and ridiculous and crowded with all  
the believing money.

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## Caleb says

Highlights: Elizabeth Gone - The Moss of His Skin - Her Kind - Unknown Girl in a Maternity Ward

Hearing Anne Sexton read her poems aloud is a extraordinary experience that I wholly recommend. Her reading of "Her Kind" completes the poem in a way that I could not while reading alone, and the intensity of delivery in "The Moss of His Skin", "Elizabeth Gone" (and more) is a privilege to witness. This collection is sharp, wonderfully vivid and I find more digestible on first read than say Sylvia Plath. Beauty and grief tied carefully together with knowing hands.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btz8R...> - Anne Sexton reads: 'Her Kind' 1966

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## Michael says

First published at the start of the sixties, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* meditates upon the wonders of everyday life as well as the torments of the past and present. The dialogic poems of this two-part collection consider a vast spectrum of subjects: confinement in a psychiatric hospital, a grandmother's forgotten letters, the death of a brother, midsummer's feeling of ecstasy, an unwanted child, the separation of mother from daughter. They consistently focus upon female interiority, though, in addition to featuring dazzling images and conversational language. Sexton's work is often called confessional, with the implication that it merely airs in public the sordid events of her private life, but only rarely in poems like "The Double Image" does the poet deal with struggles that are uniquely hers. More often than not, Sexton's empathetic poems simply address shared experience in the first person.

Regarding influence: Sexton studied under Robert Lowell in 1958 before she published *Bedlam* in 1960, and

Lowell published his famously autobiographical *Life Studies* in 1959. Knowing only these two facts, many leap to the conclusion that Sexton merely copied Lowell while writing her first collection of poems. Interestingly enough, though, it was the electric drafts Sexton presented to Lowell as his student that revitalized her teacher's imagination and style. The intimacy and boldness of Sexton's verse inspired Lowell to discard his past work's well-wrought formalism and move toward a new aesthetic that later would be branded by critics as confessional. By contrast, Sexton didn't read anything by Lowell until after she had studied with him. Sadly, even as Sexton's work has become far more popular than Lowell's amongst the public, *Bedlam* still seems likely to be viewed as derivative of *Life Studies* for the foreseeable future.

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### **Velma says**

I am not a frequent consumer of poetry, and therefore not an expert on what makes a "good" poem, but I was stunned by the force and realism of some of the pieces in Sexton's first collection. I must say, I don't at all get the criticism lobbed by many that Sexton's work is too confessional. What the hell else is good literature, poetic or otherwise, but confessional?!?

I'd be interested in reading her collection 'Transformations' in future.

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My selection for Task #17 (A collection of poetry) on the BookRiot #readharder challenge 2015

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### **Beth says**

Some brilliant moments and some very dull ones too.

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### **Jelka says**

#### *LULLABY*

*It is a summer evening.  
The yellow moths sag  
against the locked screens  
and the faded curtains  
suck over the window sills  
and from another building  
a goat calls in his dreams.  
This is the TV parlor  
in the best ward at Bedlam.  
The night nurse is passing  
out the evening pills.  
She walks on two erasers,  
padding by us one by one.*

*My sleeping pill is white.  
It is a splendid pearl;*

*it floats me out of myself,  
my stung skin as alien  
as a loose bolt of cloth.  
I will ignore the bed.  
I am linen on a shelf.  
Let the others moan in secret;  
let each lost butterfly  
go home. Old woolen head,  
take me like a yellow moth  
while the goat calls hush  
a-bye.*

*FOR JOHN, WHO BEGS ME NOT TO ENQUIRE FURTHER*

*Not that it was beautiful,  
but that, in the end, there was  
a certain sense of order there;  
something worth learning  
in that narrow diary of my mind,  
in the commonplaces of the asylum  
where the cracked mirror  
or my own selfish death  
outstared me.  
And if I tried  
to give you something else,  
something outside of myself,  
you would not know  
that the worst of anyone  
can be, finally,  
an accident of hope.  
I tapped my own head;  
it was glass, an inverted bowl.  
It is a small thing  
to rage in your own bowl.  
At first it was private.  
Then it was more than myself;  
it was you, or your house  
or your kitchen.  
And if you turn away  
because there is no lesson here  
I will hold my awkward bowl,  
with all its cracked stars shining  
like a complicated lie,  
and fasten a new skin around it  
as if I were dressing an orange  
or a strange sun.  
Not that it was beautiful,  
but that I found some order there.  
There ought to be something special  
for someone in this kind of hope.  
This is something I would never find*

*in a lovelier place, my dear,  
although your fear is anyone's fear,  
like an invisible veil between us all...  
and sometimes in private,  
my kitchen, your kitchen,  
my face, your face.*

#### *FOR JOHNNY POLE ON THE FORGOTTEN BEACH*

*In his tenth July some instinct  
taught him to arm the waiting wave,  
a giant where its mouth hung open.  
He rode on the lip that buoyed him there  
and buckled him under. The beach was strung  
with children paddling their ages in,  
under the glare of noon chipping  
its light out. He stood up, anonymous  
and straight among them, between  
their sand pails and nursery crafts.  
The breakers cartwheeled in and over  
to puddle their toes and test their perfect  
skin. He was my brother, my small  
Johnny brother, almost ten. We flopped  
down upon a towel to grind the sand  
under us and watched the Atlantic sea  
move fire, like night sparklers;  
and lost our weight in the festival  
season. He dreamed, he said, to be  
a man designed like a balanced wave...  
how someday he would wait, giant  
and straight.*

*Johnny, your dream moves summers  
inside my mind.*

*He was tall and twenty that July,  
but there was no balance to help;  
only the shells came straight and even.  
This was the first beach of assault;  
the odor of death hung in the air  
like rotting potatoes; the junkyard  
of landing craft waited open and rusting.  
The bodies were strung out as if they were  
still reaching for each other,  
where they lay to blacken,  
to burst through their perfect skin.  
And Johnny Pole was one of them.  
He gave in like a small wave, a sudden  
hole in his belly and the years all gone  
where the Pacific noon chipped its light out.  
Like a bean bag, outflung, head loose*

*and anonymous, he lay. Did the sea move fire  
for its battle season? Does he lie there  
forever, where his rifle waits, giant  
and straight? ... I think you die again  
and live again,*

*Johnny, each summer that moves inside my mind.*

#### **HER KIND**

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

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

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

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#### **Steven Godin says**

Brief collection of poems, all featured range from good to sublime. Some of my faves - 'The Road Back', 'The Exorcists', 'Elizabeth Gone', 'Music Swims Back to Me', 'Unknown Girl in a Maternity Ward', and 'Lullaby' which is included below.

It is a summer evening.  
The yellow moths sag  
against the locked screens  
and the faded curtains  
suck over the window sills  
and from another building  
a goat calls in his dreams.  
This is the TV parlor  
in the best ward in Bedlam.

The night nurse is passing  
out the evening pills.  
She walks on two erasers,  
padding by us one by one.

My sleeping pill is white.  
It is a splendid pearl;  
it floats me out of myself,  
my stung skin as alien  
as a loose bolt of cloth.  
I will ignore the bed.  
I am linen on a shelf  
let the others moan in secret;  
let each lost butterfly  
go home. Old woolen head,  
take me like a yellow moth  
while the goat calls hush-  
a-bye.

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### **Bill Kerwin says**

Many of the poems in the long first section are haunting, most of them are accomplished, and a few--like "You, Dr. Martin" and "Her Kind"--are astonishingly forceful lyrics which every reader of poetry should know.

Sexton is still finding her voice here, and as a consequence much of the early part of this book is derivative--of Lowell and Snodgrass in particular--in ways that often dissipate the strength of her utterance.

In the short concluding second section, however--which consists of "For John, who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," "The Double Image" and "The Division of Parts"--Sexton's mature voice is present in all its power and richness.

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### **Alan says**

Real poems by a speaker who is also a person. I had almost forgotten. This book was so beautiful that parts of it brought me to tears. 3 or 5 of those were of gratitude: I'd almost forgotten that *people* were the things that wrote poetry; I'd almost forgotten the ridiculous presumptuous bravery it takes to even speak.

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### **Manik Sukoco says**

This was Anne Sexton's first collection of poems. It is easy to understand why it made such a strong impression. It has a power in feeling and expression, a reaching beyond any restraint or limit - it is confessional poetry in which the poet seems to spare no one, least of all herself. Her whole enterprise in poetry began at the suggestion of her psychoanalyst and she was in the worlds of extreme emotion long

before she began to write. Her descriptions of life in the asylum, including those of her fellow 'inmates' are striking. But the poems also include pieces involving her relations to family members, perhaps her mother first and above all, but also her father, and a beloved aunt of hers who she re-imagines the life of. Sexton's language is richly metaphoric and original. The feeling in reading her work is that she is a poet at the highest level, whatever objection one might have to certain kinds of sentiment she expresses i.e. She does not seem especially generous and forgiving of those closest to her. In one of the poems she speaks of herself as having been an unwanted third daughter. As a mother of two daughters she defines their lives and being too primarily in relation to her own needs.

Among the many outstanding poems there is the one which opens the book, 'You, Doctor Martin' which tells of her psychiatrist who each morning 'walks from breakfast to madness', 'Her Kind' in which the refrain 'I have been her kind' connects the poet with the 'witch' whose actions are described in the poem, 'Some Foreign Letters' in which she in rereading letters her aunt wrote from Europe in the 1890's 'learns to love her twice', 'The Funnel' in which she tells the story of her great- grandfather who ' begat eight genius children and brought twelve almost new pianos'. This last poem concludes with the following stanza:

"Back from that great- grandfather I have come  
to puzzle a bending gravestone for his sake,  
to question this diminishing and feed a minimum  
of children their careful slice of suburban cake."

Sexton is a writer whose sense of life's toughness, pain , difficulty, perhaps even impossibility is very great. She is not to be taken in large doses without danger of negative effect. But her power, daring and linguistic brilliance are unmistakable.

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### **Olivia says**

This is amazing. I used to be wary about buying first books of poetry, because I figured that buying "Selected Poems of \_\_\_\_" did the job for me. But I'm excited to see how this book compares to how Sexton progresses, so I think I'll read the rest of hers in order. I've read each of these poems three times so far, and I've gotten to the point where I can really identify with some things I didn't pick up on the first time. Which is what poetry is, of course.

I bought this book before Thanksgiving intending to find any copy of her work and ended up buying a very well-priced first edition, signed (!! ) at The Strand. Probably the highlight of this Thanksgiving.

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### **charlotte says**

changed my life

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### **Dorotea says**

Her poetry is highly personal, and I look forward to read more of hers. My best-loved poems of the collection are: Doctor Martin, The Double Image, and For John Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further. The first two are easily found online, the latter not quite so, so here's my favourite excerpt:

Not that it was beautiful,  
but that, in the end, there was  
a certain sense of order there;  
something worth learning  
in that narrow diary of my mind,  
in the commonplaces of the asylum  
where the cracked mirror  
or my own selfish death  
outstared me.  
And if I tried  
to give you something else,  
something outside of myself,  
you would not know  
that the worst of anyone  
can be, finally,  
an accident of hope.

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## Magdalen says

*The bedlam and part way* is the first collection of Sexton's poems I read and I must say I am impressed. She is witty and her writing is one of a kind. A lot different than I expected actually. My personal favourites were *The double image* , *Her kind* , *Elizabeth gone* and *For Johnny Pole on the forgotten beach*  
Looking forward to reading her other collections..

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## Drew says

There are poems that delight me every time I pick up this collection: "Her Kind," "Music Swims Back to Me," "The Double Image." There are poems that I'd forgotten and so astonished me, like new: "The Farmer's Wife," "The Moss of His Skin," "The Division of Parts." And then there's "Ringing the Bells," a poem I keep meaning to memorize because it speaks to me so deeply, a poem that is already imprinted on my brain that I would do well to transfer to my tongue. For that one alone, I will always be in her camp.

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