THE DESIGN OF DEATH

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by

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The purpose and method of this thesis proposes a comparative study of significant poems by two twentieth century women poets writing in the confessional genre that has at its basis a deep personal experience of death. Both poets have a common, yet unique, background of extremity, of hospitals, operations, wards. Both speak as women who in the stages of womanhood - daughter, wife, mother - have been defined by death and dying. Both articulate that experience through similar recurring patterns of imagery such as that of the body, which reflecting the experience of the physical visible world is fragmented, dismembered, grotesque; an object, a synthetic doll, a prison where the mind as the instrument of perception and the storehouse of experience, struggles to make itself articulate and becomes the voice of the poet.

The method of this comparative study will be a close textual analysis of each poem, and a careful tracing of patterns of imagery that elaborate and develop the main theme. While the focal point will be the theme of death and related thematic motifs such as suicide and madness, I

shall also explore and discuss language as the vehicle of experience and vision. I mean by vision the imaginative rendering through metaphor, image, symbol and theme, of the nature of reality, as seen by these two women poets. I shall finally conclude this study with an endeavour to delineate their two distinct yet analogous poetic visions, including the poets, attempt to answer the question and meaning of death.

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THE ADDICT

Sleepmonger,
deathmonger,
with capsules in my palms each night,
eight at a time from sweet pharmaceutical bottles
I make arrangements for a pint-sized journey.
I'm the queen of this condition.
I'm an expert on making the trip
and now they say I'm an addict.
Now they ask why.
Why!

Don't they know
that I promised to die!
I'm keeping in practice,
I'm merely staying in shape.
The pills are a mother, but better,
every color and as good as sour balls.
I'm on a diet from death.

Yes, I admit
it has gotten to be a bit of a habit -
blows eight at a time, seared in the eye,
hauled away by the pink, the orange,
the green and the white goodnights.
I'm becoming something of a chemical
mixture.
That's it!

My supply
of tablets
has got to last for years and years.
I like them more than I like me.
Stubborn as hell, they won't let go.
It's a kind of marriage.
It's a kind of war
where I plant bombs inside
of myself.

Yes
I try
to kill myself in small amounts,
an innocuous occupation.

Actually I'm hung up on it.
But remember I don't make too much noise.
And frankly no one has to lug me out
and I don't stand there in my winding sheet.
I'm a little buttercup in my yellow nightie
eating my eight leaves in a row
and in a certain order at in
the laying on of hands
or the black sacrament.

It's a ceremony
but like any other sport
it's full of rules.
It's like a musical tennis match where
my mouth keeps catching the ball.
Then I lie on my altar
elevated by the eight chemical kisses.

What a lay me down this is
with two pink, two orange,
two green, two white goodnights.
Fee-fi-fo-fum -
Now I'm borrowed.
Now I'm numb.

First of February 1966.

THE ADDICT

The title is an explicit and yet ambiguous definition of the identity of a woman who experiences herself as a victim, and a devotee.

The twin themes of suicide and death are dramatized as an addiction, both as a psychological need and an existential and spiritual necessity. The structure of the poem evokes the experience of the addict. The voice of the poem is that of a woman who in the process of self-revelation, is aware of the dialectic of the self, "I like them more than I like me," and is therefore able to maintain in tone a balance between self-mockery and serious confession. The poet's awareness of herself as an addict operates through the secondary theme of reduction and aggression. She experiences herself as a child, a daughter who finds a substitute mother in the pills in the same way the grown woman finds a substitute lover. The dialectic of the self is further explored in the dialectic of the body and the mind. The body passively acquiesces to gradual suicide. The body dissolves and becomes the chemical components that nourish it. The "pills" are equated with food and sleep. The mind, on the other hand, is the recorder and commentator of the experience, who to the last, is aware of the actions and

consequences of its initial commitment to death: "I promised to die."

> Sleepmonger,
> deathmonger,
> with capsules in my palms each night,
> eight at a time from sweet pharmaceutical bottles
> I make arrangements for a pint-sized journey.

The first stanza is a statement of fact of the poet's conditions: addiction. "Sleepmonger/deathmonger," defines the addict ironically as a professional, a trader, trading life for death; a dealer whose interchangeable commodities are death and sleep. Her occupation is full time and permanent. Sexton's one image of the body in the stanza, "with capsules in my palms," does not suggest a clutching desperate gesture despite the context, but one of offering - the merchant's, the supplicant's and finally the child's. It is therefore an innocent gesture, which becomes sinister, in terms of the context. The image of "night" establishes immediately the poem's setting of darkness and death. The "night," as the archetypal mother of all things, is introduced here and developed further later in the poem. Sleep and death are the goals of the poet's "journey," a return to the womb, to the non-being of the addict's last statement: "Now I'm numb." The "capsules" from their "pharmaceutical bottles" connote the poet's

condition of sickness and dependence on medicine. She is a victim. But capsules also suggest travel in space and time, the dimension substantiated and inforced by the word "journey." The image "pint-sized," with its connotations of a measured drink and a slang diminutive, simultaneously define the addict as a sophisticated connoisseur (with the concomitant implication of escape suggested by the allusion to drink) and the addict's regression:

> I'm the queen of this condition.
> I'm an expert on making the trip
> and now they say I'm an addict.
> Now they ask why.
> Why!

She is isolated by the inherited condition that she rules over. Further, "queen," in the sense of mock sovereignty, also introduces the poem's tone of self-mockery. Like an "expert" she has special knowledge on "making the trip." The "trip" suggests a short voyage of diversion, an excursion for pleasure, which, in context, maintains the tone of irony. The word "trip," in the drug-taker's language, is the addict's experience; the trip is his only reality. An appropriately and impersonal "they" in the next line, indicates the alienation of the addict from the world. The world is nevertheless addressed, which in her projection, wants to know "why." The suggestion, in the repetition of "Why!" followed by an exclamation mark, is

that it is too late. The world's need to know "why" is pointless.

> Don't they know
> that I promised to die!
> I'm keeping in practice.
> I'm merely staying in shape.
> The pills are a mother, but better,
> every colour and as good as sour balls.
> I'm on a diet from death.

Stanza two is a statement of the addict's motivation, phrased as a confession to an imaginary and indifferent world. "Don't they know/that I promised to die!" is the addict's undaunted answer of commitment to death as if it were life. Similarly, "I'm keeping in practice . . . staying in shape" denotes life, but the aim is not physical strength and health, but rather in this parody of cocktail-bar mock bravado, a gradual weakening of the body. This ironic inversion of meaning implies a process of reduction and regression, which is developed further and more concretely in the equation of "pills" and "mother"; the addict is a child. The pills are a substitute mother "but better" suggests the failure of the real mother in the same way as the world has failed the addict. The "pills" are the central image and metaphor of the poem. The poet sets up a series of equations that elucidate the nature and motivations of the addict. Pills, in context

of "every colour and as good as sour balls," is an obvious reference to candies in a jar. This image is later expanded in an image of the child at play. Pills are the coloured chemical components in the capsule, the hour glass of the addict. Each is also like a coloured cocktail in a glass. These allusions to sweets and alcoholic beverages are linked to the "pint-sized journey" of the first stanza. In the final analysis, there is an implied movement (progression and regression) from the brightly coloured world of candy-land to the brightly coloured world of the addict. "I'm on a diet from death" is an inverted image of life feeding on death, and literally a reference to her sole sustenance - the pills.

> Yes, I admit
> it has gotten to be a bit of a habit -
> blows eight at a time, socked in the eye,
> hauled away by the pink, the orange,
> the green and the white goodnights.

Stanza three centers on the experience of the addict as victim. Following the confessional motif introduced in the previous stanza, it opens on a statement of admission with overtones of the victim's mock-forced confession, substantiated in the subsequent images of violence. However, the admission is qualified by "it has gotten to be a bit of a habit," which changes the nuance of the confession to an

ironic self-acknowledgement. "Blows . . . socked in the eye" develops the image of the victim and evokes the final physical degradation of the drunk and the junky, whose body, it is implied, is "hauled away." The allusion to a drunken brawl sustains the bar-room motif of the poem, which is one of its suggested settings. The sole explicit image of the body in this stanza is "eye," which in the context of "blows" and "socked" implies a loss of vision, in the sense of succumbing to the pills.

> I'm becoming something of a chemical
> mixture.
> That's it!

Unlike the drunk or the junky, she has no body. The body is equated with a chemical process of dissolution. This last image alludes to the cocktail shaker, a beaker of bubbling chemical, and in reference to the addict herself, a dissolving capsule. She is her addiction. The conclusion of the stanza is a progression from ironic confession, with all its attendant bar-room imagery, action and language, to ironic self-realization; "That's it!"

> My supply
> of tablets
> has got to last for years and years.

Stanza four is a statement on addiction revealed as an involved, gradual process of self-destruction that is

paradoxically self-fulfillment. What William Burroughs calls the "algebra of need" and its concomitant anxiety, focuses attention on the all important "supply." The addiction is an endless condition. The tone is balanced between an imperative anxiety and a casual concern.

> I like them more than I like me.
> Stubborn as hell, they won't let go.
> It's a kind of marriage.
> It's a kind of war
> where I plant bombs inside
> of myself.

The need is concretely a psychological self-evasion, and an existential self-rejection. The pills become the object of love and the self is unloved. The motivation implied in the third stanza is here made explicit. The rejection is physical, substantiated in the almost absolute absence of explicit body imagery throughout the poem. This physical rejection is further developed in this stanza by reference to extreme physical situations that are symbolic equations for another dimension; at the same time, these same physical situations in reality are judged inadequate. "Stubborn as hell, they won't let go" personifies the pills as a demonic pursuit and emphasizes their uncanny control over Sexton. And in the context of addiction as a marriage, a consummation, the pills become the substitute lovers. Subliminally, consummation is with oneself. Furthermore,

"It's a kind of war" suggests self-inflicted violence and suicide. But "plant" also connotes seeds and refers back to pills - the chemicals that take root in her. The obvious reference is to that of an inverted pregnancy. She is cultivating death. She is a foetus in her own womb; self-consummation is paradoxically self-regeneration.

> Yes
> I try
> to kill myself in small amounts,
> an innocuous occupation.
> Actually I'm hung up on it.
> But remember I don't take too much noise.
> And frankly no one has to lug me out
> and I don't stand there in my winding sheet.

The syntax that introduces stanza five has the effect of self-mocking assertion. The addict has admitted the habit and now she confesses her motive and the practice of self-destruction in a series of incongruous understatements, references and images. She characterizes her death-wish as a suicide in installments and that she is a prudent professional ("expert") addict whose addiction is an insignificant business operation, more like a minor hobby or a harmless pastime. This ironic underplay is carried further with the pun on "occupation," referring back to stanza four where the addict's relationship to drugs is compared to "war." Drugs occupy her life, specifically her body, like an enemy. The equation of need between enemy and enemy,

drug and body, is suggested in matter-of-fact, down-to-earth drug-world idiom of resignation to neurotic and physical obsession. The implication of being "hung up," in the context of "actually," holds another meaning in the sense of being 'hooked' to physical need and desire, which can be seen as a profane, literal, synthetic crucifixion. At the same time, as an admission of the addict's necessity and corrupted desire, the reference is an explicit indication that she is playing a game, which involves a process of self-evasions and self-recognitions. She goes on to remind her audience in the same tough, confessional monologue of her 'good points,' which however, are all negatively defined, implying that she has none because they all emerge from the evasion of reality and its various kinds of "marriage" and "war." But since her habit is "innocuous," there are no ulterior motives to scare or haunt or involve anyone else. She's not a helpless victim; she can take care of herself. Moreover, her frankness and restraint have not made her end up as some spectral figure of a terminal junky wrapped in a death shroud, which may also allude to a heroin addict's tourniquet. She is self-sufficient and dependent only upon herself. She can hold up her habit, even if she is "hung up."

> I'm a little buttercup in my yellow nightie
> eating my eight loaves in a row
> and in a certain order as in
> the laying on of hands
> or the Last Sacrament.

The assertion of the tough outer self maintained so far in the poem contrasts sharply with image of the self presented in the second part of the fifth stanza, which predominates for the rest of the poem. The shift is sudden, like a change in a dual personality, making incongruous the juxtaposition of two figures: the one of death wrapped in a "winding sheet," which the addict rejects, and the other of innocence in the "yellow nightie." The effect is like a flash-back or over-lay, to a childhood bedtime experience. In the context of the addict's motive to kill herself, the figure of the child characterizes the addict's regressed state and her dependence on the maternal sustenance of pills. Moreover, the images of death and innocence, juxtaposed in this way, suggest the figure of the sacrificial victim which now begins to emerge explicitly in the poem, developing up to what the addict is "hung up on," literally pills and suicide, but symbolically, a synthetic cross.

The sacrificial rites are conveyed in a perverse equation between pious innocence and sorcery. The invoked setting of a drunk at a bar, is replaced by the child at a communion rail. The pills are the sacramental host, and

the deliberate procedure of "eating" them is likened to communion, or initiation, seen in inversion as "the black sacrament." The "leaves" are not the mystical body of Christ, but the mystical flesh of the devil. They are both a blessing and a curse.

> It's a ceremony
> but like any other sport
> it's full of rules.
> It's like a musical tennis match where
> my mouth keeps catching the ball.
> Then I lie on my altar
> elevated by the eight chemical kisses,

Stanza six extends the addiction from being something ritually invoking witchcraft, to being as mundane as a game, where similar "rules" are followed. However, there are no competitors, whether in communion or a game of tennis. The addict serves no one but herself. The last two lines define the addict as the sacrificial victim who is her own priestess, an implication linked to the "queen" of stanza one. The "altar" defines her condition. It is her bed and the "chemical kisses" replace the mother's goodnight kisses as well as the lover's. It is her sacrificial altar upon which she leaves her body and enters, "elevated" into the passive, chemically induced state. Further, the implication is that she is 'altar-ed' by the experience.

What a lay me down this is
with two pink, two orange,
two green, two white goodnights.
Fee-fi-fo-fum --
Now I'm borrowed.
Now I'm numb.

Stanza seven slows down in pace to a literal stop, paralleling the addict's nightly last moments of consciousness. While maintaining the analogy of the child going to bed, with references to children's night-time prayers and fairy-tales, the poem ends with the experience of a woman who seeks fulfillment in death that is wanting in life. The woman, who through addiction seeks to escape her body ("Now I'm borrowed. Now I'm numb."), finds a substitute lover in suicide and death. Her addiction is a seduction: "What a lay me down this is/with two pink, two orange,/ two green, two white goodnights." The sexual connotations are explicit. She is seduced; the last moments of consciousness are orgiastic.

The refrain from a fairy-tale that concludes the experience, evokes once more the soothing image of the mother, a return to the womb and non-being. The allusion to "Jack the Giant Killer," implies an equation between the pills and the magical beans of the story, the seeds of the beanstalk that takes Jack to another world which proves to be dangerous and threatening. The pills are also the giant,

who cuts off people's heads. "Fee-fi-fo-fum" suggests a different existence. She is no longer an addict; she belongs to someone else or something else, and devoid of identity and sensation, she is no longer suffering: "Now I'm borrowed./Now I'm numb."

THE OPERATION

1.

After the sweet promise,
the summer's mild retreat
from mother's cancer, the winter months of her death,
I come to this white office, its sterile sheet,
its hard tablet, its stirrups, to hold my breath
while I, who must, allow the glove its oily rape,
to hear the almost mighty doctor over me equate
my ills with hers
and decide to operate.

It grew in her
as simply as a child would grow,
as simply as she housed me once, fat and female.
Always my most gentle house before that embryo
of evil spread in her shelter and she grew frail.
Frail, we say, remembering fear, that face we wear
in the room of the special smells of dying, fear
where the snoring mouth gapes
and is not dear.

There was snow everywhere.
Each day I grueled through
its sloppy peak, its blue-struck days, my boots
slapping into the hospital halls, past the retinue
of nurses at the desk, to murmur in cahoots
with hers outside her door, to enter with the outside
air stuck on my skin, to enter smelling her pride,
her upkeep, and to lie
as all who love have lied.

No reason to be afraid;
my almost mighty doctor reasons.
I nod, thinking that woman's dying
must come in seasons,
thinking that living is worth buying.
I walk out, scuffing a raw leaf,
kicking the clumps of dead straw
that were this summer's lawn.
Automatically I get in my car,
knowing the historic thief
is loose in my house
and must be set upon.

2.

Clean of the body's hair,
I lie smooth from breast to leg.
All that is special, all that was rare
is common here. Fact: death too is in the egg.
Fact: the body is dumb, the body is meat.
And tomorrow the O.R. Only the summer was sweet.

The rooms down the hall are calling
all night long, while the night outside
sucks at the trees. I hear limbs falling
and see yellow eyes flick in the rain. Wide eyed
and still whole I turn in my bin like a shorn lamb.
A nurse's flashlight blinds me to see who I am.

The walls color in a wash
of daylight until the room takes its objects
into itself again. I smoke furtively and squash
the butt and hide it with my watch and other effects.
The halls bustle with legs. I smile at the nurse
who smiles for the morning shift. Day is worse.

Scheduled late, I cannot drink
or eat, except for yellow pills
and a jigger of water. I wait and think
until she brings two mysterious needles: the skills
she knows she knows, promising, soon you'll be out.
But nothing is sure. No one. I wait in doubt.

I wait like a kennel of dogs
jumping against their fence. At ten
she returns, laughs and catalogues
my resistance to drugs. On the stretcher, citizen
and boss of my own body still, I glide down the halls
and rise in the iron cage toward science and pitfalls.

The great green people stand
over me; I roll on the table
under a terrible sun, following their command
to curl, head touching knee if I am able.
Next, I am hung up like a saddle and they begin.
Pale as an angel I float out over my own skin.

I soar in hostile air
over the pure women in labor,
over the crowning heads of babies being born.
I plunge down the backstair
calling mother at the dying door,
to rush back to my own skin, tied where it was torn.
Its nerves pull like wires
snapping from the leg to the rib.
Strangers, their faces rolling like hoops, require
my arm. I am lifted into my aluminum crib.

3.

Skull flat, here in my harness,
thick with shock, I call mother
to help myself, call toe of frog,
that woolly bat, that tongue of dog;
call God help and all the rest.
The soul that swam the furious water
sinks now in flies and the brain
flops like a docked fish and the eyes
are flat boat decks riding out the pain.

My nurses, those starchy ghosts,
hover over me for my lame hours
and my lame days. The mechanics
of the body pump for their tricks.
I rest on their needles, am dosed
and snoring amid the orange flowers
and the eyes of visitors. I wear,
like some senile woman, a scarlet
candy package ribbon in my hair.

Four days from home I lurk on my
mechanical parapet with two pillows
at my elbows, as soft as praying cushions.
My knees work with the bed that runs
on power. I grumble to forget the lie
I ought to hear, but don't. God knows
I thought I'd die -- but here I am,
recalling mother, the sound of her
good morning, the odor of orange and jam.

All's well, they say. They say I'm better.
I lounge in frills or, picturesque,
I wear bunny pink slippers in the hall.
I read a new book and shuffle past the desk
to mail the author my first fan letter.
Time now to pack this humpty-dumpty
back the frightened way she came
and run along, Anne, and run along now,
my stomach laced up like a football
for the game.

THE OPERATION

This is a poem in three parts each one delineating a stage in an operation.

The first stage consists of Entry and Preparation: The setting, a hospital ward, is introduced and concretely evoked: doctor, nurses, hospital halls, and operating theatre. It is the scene of suffering and death, where the body is violated, dismembered and patched up again. Here the poet centers her own experience in the memory of her mother's disease, suffering and death which merges with her own predicament in time - past and present.

The second stage consists of The Waiting and the Operation: The details of the experience are actualized in time, night and morning. The experience of waiting is equated with being locked behind a wall. The body is a house, a cage that imprisons the self - the soul. The operation is invoked as a sacrificial ritual. The body is vulnerable. The body is meat.

The third stage is The Recovery: This focuses on the mechanics of the body; the death of the re-incarnated soul, the self that remains detached but marks the pain and the loss.

The whole experience is dramatized as the separation of the body and the soul.

Section I: The Hospital

The poem opens on the metaphor of the cycle; an equation of the cycles of the seasons and the stages in a woman's life, the poet's mother and herself. The growth implicit in the season of summer is transferred with gruesome and sinister connotations to a disease - "mother's cancer," that unlike "the summer's mild retreat" does not let up. The winter is seen as a conquering destructive force that ends in her mother's death. The connotations of winter are sustained further in the unchanged setting of the hospital - the scene of her mother's suffering and death - where the poet returns, now herself to be examined. She experiences herself as a victim violated by a disembodied glove: "I, who must, allow the glove its only rape." The image of the doctor looms, faceless but almost supernatural as he pronounces her "ills" to be her mother's "and decide(s) to operate."

Stanza two is a flash back to her mother's illness. Sexton draws a parallel between an embryo and cancer: "It grew in her (the mother) as simply as a child would grow." Death and life are both of the womb. There is a further equation between the poet as child in her mother's house-like womb and the "shelter" of "that embryo/of evil," that

grew in her mother while she grew weak. Her mother's weakness is associated with her own weakness which is also fear: "Frail, we say, remembering fear, that face we wear," in the knowledge of death that alienates the living: "fear/ where the snoring mouth gapes/and is not dear." Sleep and death are one.

Stanza three particularizes the winter of her mother's dying in terms of the poet's own experience, visiting her mother "Each day," defeated by the knowledge of her dying: "I grueled through/its sloppy peak, its blue-struck days." Her daily visit reflects her emotional state of frustration and helplessness: "my boots/slapping into the hospital halls." The unchanging sameness and helplessness extend to the nurses in attendance. They become presences of ill omen, useless in a sinister way: "the retinue/of nurses at the desk, to murmur in cahoots/ with hers outside her door." Like a gigantic conspiracy, no one acknowledges the fact of death, least of all her mother with "her pride,/her upkeep" and Sexton herself, who lies, like the mother. This is the lie "as all who love have lied," that paradoxically justifies the pretence and maintains one's dignity in the face of utter helplessness.

In stanza four the juxtaposition of the past experience of fear merges with the poet's own present

experience: "No reason to be afraid,/my almost mighty doctor reasons." The irony is overt; fear has little to do with reason, nor does death, and the ironic reference to the doctor as "almost mighty" diminishes whatever stature his profession gives him in the context of the poem. "I nod" indicates the poet's acquiescence. This is followed by her own 'reasoning', which carries the logic of past experience: "thinking that woman's dying/must come in seasons." The allusion is to the season of her mother's illness and death which she herself seems to be re-enacting. However, "thinking that living is worth buying" carries the connotations of her willingness to pay the price, an ultimate risk. "I walk out, scuffing a raw leaf" is an action which symbolically reflects on herself as the "raw leaf," with the further implication of self destruction. The fallen "raw leaf" sustains the seasonal setting of autumn. It also particularizes her stage in the cycle of life and death. The line, "kicking the clumps of dead straw" reinforces the above suggestion and becomes an extended symbolic gesture of rebellion against death. "Automatically" summarizes the shock of realization of the imminence of death; the effect is a kind of somnolence associated with extremity of fear. Death, like a "thief," is rampant in the body.

Section II: The Hospitalization

This section concentrates on the body's preparation for the operation, and on the operation itself. The focus is on what is done to the body and simultaneously, what the "I" experiences within and beyond the body.

The first action is humiliating. "Clean of the body's hair," she feels naked and exposed in a series of images that suggest an animal being prepared for sacrifice and butchery. Vulnerable and fragmented "from breast to leg," she feels on exhibit. "All that was special, all that was rare/is common here." The logic of the experience leads to the following conclusion: "Fact: death too is in the egg." The immediate reference is to her mother's cancer, as well as the concomitant conclusion that all life engenders death. This leads to the realization that "the body is dumb, the body is meat." The body has no consciousness; it can be cut up and disposed of. However, as a jarring contrast it was once briefly fully and sensually alive: "Only the summer was sweet."

Stanza two depicts the night time vigil, and the poet's helpless waiting. Voices "calling/all night long" is the image that particularizes the night scene in the hospital. The image of "the night outside/sucks at the trees," reflects the poet's experience of the dark forces

of nature that feed on life. The experience becomes nightmarish: "I hear limbs falling/and see yellow eyes flick in the rain." The dismemberment implicit in "limbs falling" projects the poet's fear manifest in her experience of the external world, and extends the experience of the hospital as a place of butchery. The lights on the street, the "yellow eyes flick," become ominous signs. Sleepless, or "Wide eyed," she feels like an innocent victim readied for some eventual sacrifice: "still whole I turn in my bin like a shorn lamb." The hospital's nocturnal identity routine - "A nurse's flashlight blinds me to see who I am" - carries a startling connotation: the patient victim awaiting execution.

Night fades and fuses into daylight like a painting: "The walls color in a wash/of daylight until the room takes its objects/into itself again." The patient/victim is caught in a habitual cycle: "I smoke furtively and squash/ the butt and hide it with my watch and other effects." The activity is reductive, a deprivation, and as meaningless as the implication of vitality in "The halls bustle with legs." This is also an example of the continuing imagery of fragmentation. The nurse enters with her mechanical "morning shift" smile; the night is bad, but "Day is worse."

Marking time, her attention is centered on "yellow pills" and the nurse with "mysterious needles." The nurse takes on sinister connotations: "the skills/she knows she knows." She is like a Sybil, guardian of the gates of hell or health: "promising, soon you'll be out." But there are no certainties, in spite of the reassurance. The experience of the patient is of utter solitude: "But nothing is sure. No one." The patient marks time: "I wait in doubt."

The waiting is reductive: "I wait like a kennel of dogs/jumping against their fence." She is like a dumb animal in expectation of being let out and freed. The nurse becomes an embodiment of time: "at ten/she returns, laughs and catalogues/my resistance to drugs." Her laughter is sinister. The further implication is that fear has its own force of consciousness. Although she is helpless she is in control as she is carried on the "stretcher," still the "citizen/and boss" of her body. However, a drugged consciousness takes over: "I glide . . . and rise." She is split, at the same time disembodied and trapped like an animal in an "iron cage," the elevator in the institution of "science and pitfalls."

Stanza six is the drama of the operation. The whole scene is hallucinatory with the further ironic allusion to

science fiction: "The great green people stand/over me; I roll on the table/under a terrible sun; following their command." She is the initiate into some unknown sacrificial rite where she must "curl," like an embryo, "head touching knee," a preparatory act for a final rebirth. "Next, I am hung up like a saddle," shifts in tone and connotation. The body is insensible, stripped like leather hung up to be cured. Detached from her own body, she experiences it as meat, on the one hand, and etheral on the other: "Pale as an angel I float out over my own skin."

Stanza seven records the experience of being detached from the body; while the operation is in progress. She enters an alien dimension of being: "I soar in hostile air/over the pure women in labor." This antithetical image of woman, at the farthest remove from her own immediate experience, connotative of dismemberment and mutilation, particularizes the simultaneity of life and death. Further, "over the crowning heads of babies being born" extends the juxtaposition of life and death. Her motion of ascent and descent alludes to the soul liberated from the body as an inverted parallel to being born. However, as babies enter the world, she "plunge(s) down the backstair/calling mother at the dying door." The allusion is also of a return to the womb. The call to her mother evokes life and becomes a

pass word, not of entry into death but a passage of return: "to rush back to my own skin, tied where it was torn." The allusion is to the tying of the umbilical cord and the tearing at birth. The emphasis is on the return to life equated with pain: "Its nerves pull like wires/ snapping from the leg to the rib." Sewn together like an old doll, she is like a newly created homuncule. "Strangers, their faces rolling like hoops," substantiates the connotations of the return as alien. Section two ends with a double image, like a double exposure of old age and birth: (they) "require/my arm. I am lifted into my aluminum crib." It is a return without rebirth, an image of life as patched up and deposited in a cold metallic receptacle.

Section III: The Recovery

The recovery is actualized ironically not by life but death. The first image, "Skull flat," implies her physical and emotional state of helplessness, with "here in my harness" recalling and extending the image of the body as a "saddle." The consciousness of the body is equated with being an animal, a beast to be harnessed. In another sense, the "harness" is the body, the prison of the soul. The return to the body is conceived of as an act of violence, "thick with shock." She calls out her helplessness: "I

call mother/to help myself," appealing to what is most immediate. The allusion is to her own self and to the mother she experienced in another dimension of being. She also calls to the supernatural forces, the dark powers that govern animal life: "call toe of frog,/that woolly bat, that tongue of dog;/call God help and all the rest." The reference to God, almost casually, and in the context, would seem to be a denial, which refers back to "No one. I wait in doubt," of stanza 4 in section 2.

The return to consciousness is defined as a dying and further as a decay: "The soul that swam the furious water/sinks now in flies and the brain/flops like a docked fish." The soul falls into matter but it is like a fish out of its element. The body's life is equated with expressionless suffering: "the eyes/are flat boat decks riding out the pain."

Stanza two develops the stages of the body's recovery that like a mechanism follows its own course: "The mechanics/of the body pump for their tricks." Her consciousness makes a record of the activity that surrounds the body: "My nurses, those starchy ghosts,/hover over me for my lame hours/and my lame days." The body is of time and therefore the image of lameness, with the further

implication of being weak, crippled and dependent, is transferred to time itself. The reality of the nurses is spectral and their power supernatural: "I rest on their needles." Her being "dosed and snoring" suggests that she is adulterated to a grumbling animal, or impaired like a "senile woman." She is conspicuous "amid the orange flowers/and the eyes of visitors."

Time is measured by a return home: "four days from home." But she is still like an apparition that is not at home in herself: "I lurk." She is esconced defensively in the mechanical paraphernalia that surrounds her, comforting but not "as soft as praying cushions." This image pinpoints the lack of any other solace on any other level. The bed provides the illusion of motion: "My knees work with the bed that runs on power." Ironically, the only visible effective power is mechanical. The image of herself is pathetic: "I grumble to forget the lie/I ought to hear, but don't." She is alive, though she thought, and perhaps wished, she would die. The statement, "here I am, recalling mother," intimates a resignation to the immediacy of the present as distinct from the past, when she 'called' on mother. It also refers back to her mother's illness and death marking her own, parallel though distinct, experience.

The stanza closes on a note of loss, "recalling mother, the sound of her/good morning, the odor of orange and jam," alluding to the lost mother and her own loss implied in the contrasting images of health and the allusion to childhood.

"All's well" sounds the ironic note of her recovery. "They say I'm better," emphasizes the impersonal nature of the pronouncement. This same note of irony is carried to the description of herself: "I lounge in frills or, picturesque,/I wear bunny pink slippers in the hall." It is a frivolous and superficial image, particularly so in the context of "shuffle past." The body is dragged around in its heaviness. The juxtaposition of reading a new book and the trivial activity of mailing "the author my first fan letter," is acutely jarring with the next line: "Time now to pack this humpty-dumpty/back the frightened way she came." The "frightened way" defined the nature of the whole experience in terms of fear, and fear qualifies "way" which is equated with life. Like a little girl who has been hurt playing, she is sent on her way: "and run along, Anne, and run along now." But the game continues, a game where one's strength to endure is tested viciously. She leaves the hospital with her "stomach laced up like a football/for the game."

Black lady,
two eyes,
low as tobacco, who inked you in?
The shoemaker could not do it,
nor the sculptor nor the cubist.
Trunk is what you are, with two washbowls.
You are a sweetener, a drawer of blood -- that's all,
a hot voice, an imminence and then a death.
Why death? Death's in the goodbye.

My love,
when you leave in which crevice will you hide?
What signs will remain?
Black slime will not come of it,
nor backwash from the traveler.
You will nest
Like a drowned bat upon my shoulder.
In one hand I will have to hold that silence.
There will be no track anymore.
There will be only that peculiar waiting.
There will be nothing to pick up.
There will be nothing.

There will have been a house --
a house that I knew,
the center of it,
a tiny heart,
synthetic though it was
making that thin buzz-buzz
like a sly beetle.

Black lady,
what will I do
without your two flowers?
I have inhabited you, number by number.
I have pushed you in and out like a needle.
Funny digits, I have danced upon your trunk
and I have knelt on your torso.
With my words I have perjured my soul.
Take note -- there will be an absence.
It will be a cancer, spreading like a white dog
who doubles back, not knowing his name.

Although I will inherit darkness
I will keep dialing left to right.
I will struggle like a surgeon.
I will call quickly for the glare of the moon.
I will even dial milk.
I will hold the thread that was fished through the ceiling
that leads to the roof, the pole, the grass,
that ends in the sea.

I will not wait at the rail,
looking upon death,
that single stone.
I will call for the boy-child I never had.
I will call like the Jew at the gate.
I will dial the wound over and over
and you will not yield
and there will be nothing,
black lady; nothing,
although I will wait,
unleashed and unheard.

January 3, 1964

The central image of the poem is the telephone, which in a sequence of metaphorical statements, is made to reflect the experience of the poet. Within the general context, the telephone is the embodiment of the woman's projections in the sense that what she experiences is made concrete in images that carry the meanings and associations the telephone has for her. It is the focal point of her experience. It concentrates her attention and also defines her. In identifying with it, the telephone is made to reflect her fragmented state of being, her sense of loss of communication and contact with herself and the external world. But in so far as it is outside of her experience, an instrument that establishes or terminates communication, the telephone also assumes an autonomous existence that tyrannizes her, and becomes the instrument of her undoing.

Black lady,
two eyes,
low as tobacco, who inked you in?

The first stanza is a statement/question that addresses the telephone as if it were an image of worship: "Black lady." Simultaneously, the image becomes animate. There is an explicit identification between the telephone and the woman: "two eyes/low as tobacco." The image

suggests the face of a woman waiting for a telephone call with a lit cigarette. As Sexton addresses the telephone, she is also addressing herself. Conversely, as her attention is centered on the telephone, she feels the "two eyes" are watching her. The eyes of the "Black lady" are also the low eyes of the skull of death, which is a projected reflection of her psychological and spiritual death, her madness. The telephone becomes the embodiment of her necessity, as implied in "low as tobacco." The implication is self degrading. She reaches for it habitually, as she would for a cigarette.

The question concludes with the ironic "who inked you in?" alluding to herself and to the telephone in an attempt to define its conception and meaning.

> The shoemaker could not do it,
> nor the sculptor nor the cubist.

Its merely practical nature is negated and the references to the "sculptor" and the "cubist" suggest that it is neither an artistic nor geometric creation. However, magical qualities are conferred on it by the association of the above lines with a nursery rhyme. The child-like tone and repetitive phrasing imply a sense of wonder with an enigmatic mystery.

Trunk is what you are, with two washbowls.

This image, in the context of "Black lady," evokes the Venus and the Black Madonna, the "washbowls" suggesting both the fountains of classical statuary and the bowls of holy water in a church. (The allusion to the fragmented "Trunk" of a Venus mirrors the poet's state of dismemberment.) The woman is a supplicant, a worshipper at the shrine of this black confessional. The "washbowls" suggest ablution and absolution. And with a changed focus, the telephone becomes the container, the "Trunk" and "washbowls" of the woman's most precious offerings: her tears and her prayers. The implicit image of a deity is sustained by the next line which invests the telephone with the power of life and death:

> You are a sweetener, a drawer of blood -- that's all,
> a hot voice, an imminence and then a death.
> Why death? Death's in the goodbye.

It is at once a giver and a being that feeds off life. In another sense, she sees the telephone as the "drawer of blood," the heart bleeding from the wounds inflicted by a broken connection. The title of the poem, in the context of the "drawer" image, suggests the identification numerals of a morgue and by extension, the ironically impersonal inscription of a tombstone. The "drawer of blood" is a variation of a recurrent Sexton image of the heart as a cupboard.

The qualifying "that's all" would seem to imply ironically that the powers of the deity are contained, temporal: "a hot voice, an imminence and then a death," which simultaneously extends and reduces the significance of the telephone, the allusion being to the confrontation with mortality. Further, the telephone is an instrument of passion, "a hot voice" connotative of a lover, but also a sign of impending breakdown: "an imminence and then a death." It is the messenger of broken contacts and severed lines: "Death's in the goodbye." The wiring of the telephone becomes veins and arteries in the reflected body imagery of the poem, which becomes explicit in the next stanza ("in which crevice will you hide?") and is developed in stanza four.

> My love,
> when you leave in which crevice will you hide?
> what signs will remain?
> Black slime will not come of it,
> nor backwash from the traveler.
> You will rest
> Like a drowned bat upon my shoulder.

In stanza two, the emphasis and tone shift. "My love" evokes the language and tenor of the love lyric. However, "when you leave" projects and dramatizes the anticipated end of the affair, and the tone shifts again with the incongruous "in which crevice will you hide?" Now the

telephone becomes a metaphor for a relationship that is dead in its inception, and therefore, like the telephone itself, sterile communication. Nevertheless, the loss will be haunting, with the further implication that the telephone will be a messenger of corruption and decay, without leaving any visible signs. It will not record the departure of the lover ("backwash from the traveler") or offer the release of a clean break:

> In one hand I will have to hold that silence.

This is an allusion to both the experience of the telephone, and the telephone as a metaphor of [redacted]elation-ship. The only release is in a further reduction of the lover, and the poet's experience of the nature of love itself, to the "drowned bat" that rests "upon (her) shoulder." The image is linked to the vampirism suggested by the "drawer of blood" in stanza one.

The inverted gothic transformation of the telephone from vampire to bat reflects the emotional vicissitude of the woman who attempts to articulate the experience of loss and perhaps exorcise it. The following lines have that quality of ritual re-enactment:

> There will be no track anymore.
> There will be only that peculiar waiting.
> There will be nothing to pick up.
> There will be nothing.

"There will be" repeated over and over again actualizes the loss. In another sense, the poet is voicing the experience of the void, the terminal experience that the silence of the telephone symbolizes. (8018 almost spells "void.") "There will be nothing" is the consequence of a breakdown and the severing of all lines. After the breakdown, there will be no psychic or spiritual fragments left to collect. In the erotic sense, there will be no more lovers' liaisons ("Pick-up(s)"), and this particular lover will no longer come for her, intoxicate her with love or literally lift her body. The breakdown also means alienation and an end to communication ("no track"), an end to the mutual pursuit of lovers and the pursuit of mystery (on the "track") and existentially, an end to the recording and notating of experience (keeping "track").

> There will have been a house --
> a house that I knew,
> the center of it,
> a tiny heart,
> synthetic though it was
> making that thin buzz-buzz
> like a sly beetle.

Stanza three is the breaking point in the poem. The focal point is shifted from the telephone to the self. It is like a cross-roads where the experience of self in time fuses with the present and makes the transition from

the future time of stanza two to time past, projected into the future. Seemingly, this is the poet's retrospective look, after the loss, in an attempt to center her being and retrieve a meaning from itself: "There will have been a house --/a house that I knew." She is juxtaposing an ideal projection of the house that is longed for with what was actually known. So while the allusion to the past seems to be in terms of having had a structure and meaning, as implied by the connotation of "house," - this very meaning is undercut in the subsequent lines. The house becomes a metaphor for self, and "the center of it, a tiny heart." This identification defines her heart as "synthetic" which implies that there has been nothing vital at the center of her being, but a faint stirring "buzz-buzz" in her heart. (This recalls the doll image of self Sexton makes use of in "Self in 1958.") However, she shifts from what is synthetic to what is alive "like a sly beetle," but low on the hierarchy of being and associated with death and decay, like the bat. This image of herself as the "sly beetle" is another reduction of her metamorphosizing heart, (following the "drawer of blood" and the "drowned bat"). The visual association of the black shell of the beetle with the telephone is clear.

On another level, the allusion is to a dung beetle and the ensuing reference of being alive in the dung of the world. Furthermore, "beetle" has connotations of endurance; it knows how to survive, using the world's dung to build its house, (as Sexton 'inhabits' the telephone), although it has no consciousness. This metaphor is characteristic of the retreat into madness. Ultimately, this stanza is a black vision of the human condition. What could have been and what one desires are juxtaposed with what is.

> Black lady,
> what will I do
> without your two flowers?
> I have inhabited you, number by number.
> I have pushed you in and out like a needle.

The loss of contact dramatized in stanza two and reflected as her underlying experience leads paradoxically to a questioning, in stanza four, that marks a changed perspective towards herself and the telephone. While this stanza recapitulates the initial ambiguous image of the telephone as "Black lady" and particularizes the ritual of the supplicant invoked in stanza one, the question "what will I do/without your two flowers?" suggests the woman's dawning sense of her own separateness (the past tense confirms the change), as she attempts in the subsequent lines to articulate her obsession and dependence on the telephone.

"I have inhabited you, number by number" extends the metaphor of the telephone as a house, depicting her extremity. "I have pushed you in and out like a needle" suggests that she now recognizes the extent of her addiction. The hallucinatory image of the "Black lady" with her "two flowers" recalls the "two washbowls" and the "two eyes" of the first stanza, which together evoke an effigy at a shrine and herself still a supplicant. The fragments are pieced together as she recognizes her own fragmentation:

> Funny digits, I have danced upon your trunk
> and I have knelt on your torso.
> With my words I have perjured my soul.
> Take note -- there will be an absence.
> It will be a cancer, spreading like a white dog
> who doubles back, not knowing his name.

A rite where the woman is an initiate is intimated. However, in another sense, the implication is ironic as she is a performer and the action a put-on. The pun on "digits" dramatizes the obsessive experience that makes of a fragment - fingers and hand - the whole. "With my words I have perjured my soul" is a further instance of recognition - of her own deception and perversity. "Take note" is an ironic reminder to herself of the necessity and consequences of recognition and confrontation. The line "there will be an absence" qualifies "There will be nothing." of stanza two - the experience of the void which endured, leads to the

recognition of loss: unconnected she is sickened and victimized. "It will be a cancer" feeding off itself "spreading like a white dog/who doubles back, not knowing his name" dramatizes the loss and actualizes her attachment to the telephone, like that of a dog for his master. The metaphor is reductive. Like the dog abandoned by his master, she is hurt and has lost her identity.

> Although I will inherit darkness
> I will keep dialing left to right.
> I will struggle like a surgeon.
> I will call quickly for the glare of the moon.
> I will even dial milk.

Stanza five is an affirmation in spite of the loss: "Although I will inherit darkness/I will keep dialing left to right." She is renouncing the telephone, the obsessional ritual and habit, while affirming her will and desire to communicate. However, she continues to use the telephone image. The repetition of "I will" extends the implicit connotations of endurance of the previous stanza, while shifting the nuance from an unconscious to a conscious level. "I will struggle like a surgeon" inverts the image of herself as a victim ("I have pushed you in and out like a needle," the "cancer, spreading like a white dog/who doubles back") and suggests a fight to cure herself. The "call" for the "glare of the moon" and the resolution to "dial milk" denote

her readiness to re-integrate mystery and re-establish contact with the feminine principle and her own womanhood. The stanza concludes with an image of herself in ultimate patience:

> I will hold the thread that was fished through the ceiling
> that leads to the roof, the pole, the grass,
> that ends in the sea.

It also suggests her willingness to accept ambiguity. The "thread" is the life-line that links her to the world and beyond it to the primeval forces of birth and death. On another level, she has taken on the characteristics of the telephone; her lines are open to the dimensions that go beyond the room, to the roof," the "grass," the "sea." (These lines echo the echo of a nursery rhyme in stanza one.) To re-establish communication, she must go back to the source.

> I will not wait at the rail
> looking upon death,
> that single stone.

In the last stanza, the telephone regains its objectivity, divested of the poet's projected image of death. She has made the choice for life in spite of the unyielding silence at the centre of her own being: "you will not yield." However, "I will not wait at the rail" dramatizes her refusal to be a victim. The allusion to judgment and justice

implicit in the connotations of "rail" actualize her rejection of guilt and resignation and ultimately death, "that single stone," particularized as a grave. (She is back on the 'track.' In the context of the title's allusion to an impersonal grave-marking, she is un-writing her own epitaph.) The "rail" also alludes to her as a supplicant at the temple, but she "will not wait," which implies her refusal to continue to worship at the shrine of death: "Black lady."

> I will call for the boy-child I never had.
> I will call like the Jew at the gate.
> I will dial the wound over and over
> and you will not yield
> and there will be nothing,
> black lady, nothing,
> although I will wait,
> unleashed and unheard.

As in stanza five, the emphasis is on 'willing.' "I will call for the boy-child I never had" establishes her faith in life and her desire to maintain a lineage (line). "I will call like the Jew at the gate" dramatizes her sense of injustice and her recognition of the absurd. Her willingness to re-establish links, "I will dial the wound over and over," is revealed as a courageous act. It entails the acceptance of silence: "there will be nothing,/ black lady, nothing,/although I will wait,/unleashed and unheard" freed of the master/dog relationship to the

telephone. In spite of the disconnection implicit in "unheard" and the pain it involves, she will continue to make her statement. The poem ends on a note of ambiguity.

GHOSTS

Some ghosts are women,
neither abstract nor pale,
their breasts as limp as killed fish.
Not witches, but ghosts
who come, moving their useless arms
like forsaken servants.

Not all ghosts are women,
I have seen others;
fat, white-bellied men,
wearing their genitals like old rags.
Not devils, but ghosts.
This one thumps barefoot, lurching
above my bed.

But that isn't all.
Some ghosts are children.
Not angels, but ghosts;
curling like pink tea cups
on any pillow, or kicking,
showing their innocent bottoms, wailing
for Lucifer.

GHOSTS

This short poem in three stanzas consists of an introductory statement, its repetition and variation, defining "ghosts" as a reality of the poet's experience. That is, the poem distinguishes between the reality of one's experience of ghosts versus the fanciful mystification of that experience. Within the general context of the poem, ghosts are equated with lifelessness though paradoxically they are neither invisible nor supernatural manifestations but living bodies of women, men and children. The emphasis is on the body, its weakness and limitation. The body suffers the transformations inherent in the flesh. By juxtaposing the commonplace image, the trinity of woman, man and child (the family) as they exemplify "ghosts" with their mythic and archetypal analogues, the witch, devil and angel, the poet is introducing a new dimension to the idea of ghosts and suggesting another experience of that nether world that is haunting because it is ordinary and real. Ghosts are the haunting spectres that populate her dreams, the obsessive projections of her madness and the horrific reality of her vision.

Stanza one and two are structurally balanced. Each particularizes the image of ghosts in the stage of adult-

hood, and simultaneously distinguishes between women and men as ghosts. Stanza three concludes the poem with an image of children as ghosts which synthesizes the vision and is the focal point of the poet's insight into the nature of the ghostly.

The first stanza is the introductory statement that actualizes the poet's experience of ghosts:

> Some ghosts are women,
> neither abstract nor pale,
> their breasts as limp as killed fish.

Women as ghosts are the sterile symbols of fecundity and childbearing. Their life source, "breasts," are exhausted and void of sustenance. They evoke pathos and a horror of the flesh. The analogy with "killed fish" implies that they have been violated, with the further implication that they are fragmented physical beings in the process of decay.

The second part of the stanza extends the image of women as ghosts through a qualifying statement:

> Not witches, but ghosts
> who come, moving their useless arms
> like forsaken servants.

The negation of the supernatural dimension emphasizes their human nature, and dissociates them from evil. They have neither supernatural power nor knowledge. Instead, their stance and posture evokes the pitiful victim. The "forsaken

servants" alludes ironically to their role, which once fulfilled discards them. They are now "useless." The life force equated with youth is the cruel master who has abandoned them. They are alive, but their life has no meaning. Their movement is purposeless; they are not going anywhere.

Stanza two continues the thought and develops the image of ghosts to include men:

> Not all ghosts are women,
> I have seen others:
> fat, white-bellied men,
> wearing their genitals like old rags.

As with stanza one, the focal point is the physical dimension that redefines what is spectral by what is visibly of the body. As with "women" the image of the body is lifeless and sterile. The image of "white-bellied" refers back to the image of the fish extending the associations to, perhaps, an allusion to the cosmic fish that symbolizes the whole of the physical universe that becomes here a ghostly replica. This is a way of evoking and symbolizing the atrophy of the life force. In another sense, "white-bellied" connotes the pot-bellied, self-satisfied man who displays his worn out masculinity. A note of contempt is implicit in the connotations of "old rags." Their potency wasted, men are old and decrepit, ghosts:

Not devils, but ghosts.
This one thumps barefoot, lurching
above my bed.

With this qualifying statement, which parallels the structure of stanza one, the emphasis shifts from the vision to the poet who perceives or hallucinates the experience. The suggestion in "lurching/above my bed" in relation to the particularized "This one," also evokes a childhood recollection of the drunken father (an image that is recurrent in Sexton's poems). This is the first personal, ominous note of the poem. There is a distinction being made between passive, victimized "women" who are abandoned, and with whom an aggressive act is associated, versus "men" who are actively a threat. The implicit violence in "lurching" and "thumps" suggests that they are violators long after the fact.

The reference to "bed" fuses the two dimensions of the poet's experience of ghosts - alluding to childhood nightmares, and extended to include the hallucinations of madness, but also a dramatization of the poet's vision of man in his fallen stage of adulthood.

Stanza three continues the statement about ghosts inclusive of children:

But that isn't all.
Some ghosts are children.

The child represents the transition between this world and the other, pre-natal state, the nether world. The emphasis is on what is engendered:

> Not angels, but ghosts;
> curling like pink tea cups
> on any pillow, or kicking,
> showing their innocent bottoms, wailing
> for Lucifer.

The analogy with "tea-cups" alludes to something domestic and to something in a fairy-tale, while on another level, it implies fragility. All these associations merge and become explicit in the subsequent image of their innocence. However, juxtaposed with "wailing/for Lucifer," their innocence is undercut, and the implication of their need demonic. On the other hand, since the emphasis is on the body it is the body that is innocent and the reference to "children" as "ghosts" alludes to the mystery of incarnation. The process of dying, of bodily corruption and dissipation associated with women and men is envisioned as the future of the "children." In the latter context, "wailing/for Lucifer" can be understood in a different sense, as a desire to return to the lost light, the original source, suggested by the reference to "Lucifer" as the morning star. The image of "tea-cups" is also one of containment and in the final sense the suggestion is that the spirit, in

being incarnate, recapitulates the Fall.

It is significant that it is only in relation to children that the image of ghosts becomes explicitly 'other wordly.'

FOR THE YEAR OF THE INSANE

a prayer

O Mary, fragile mother,
hear me, hear me now
although I do not know your words.
The black rosary with its silver Christ
lies unblessed in my hand
for I am the unbeliever.
Each bead is round and hard between my fingers,
a small black angel.
O Mary, permit me this grace,
this crossing over,
although I am ugly,
submerged in my own past
and my own madness.
Although there are chairs
I lie on the floor.
Only my hands are alive,
touching beads.
Word for word, I stumble.
A beginner, I feel your mouth touch mine.

I count beads as waves,
hammering in upon me.
I am ill at their numbers,
sick, sick in the summer heat
and the window above me
is my only listener, my awkward being.
She is a large taker, a soother.
The giver of breath
she murmurs,
exhaling her wide lung like an enormous fish.

Closer and closer
comes the hour of my death
as I rearrange my face, grow back,
grow undeveloped and straight-haired.
All this is death.
In the mind there is a thin alley called death
and I move through it as
through water.
My body is useless.

It lies, curled like a dog on the carpet.
It has given up,
There are no words here except the half-learned,
the Hail Mary and the full of grace.
Now I have entered the year without words.
I note the queer entrance and the exact voltage.
Without words they exist.
Without words one may touch bread
and be handed bread
and make no sound.

O Mary, tender physician,
come with powders and herbs
for I am in the center.
It is very small and the air is gray
as in a steam house.
I am handed wine as a child is handed milk.
It is presented in a delicate glass
with a round bowl and a thin lip.
The wine itself is pitch-colored, musty and secret,
The glass rises on its own toward my mouth
and I notice this and understand this
only because it has happened.
I have this fear of coughing
but I do not speak,
a fear of rain, a fear of the horseman
who comes riding into my mouth.
The glass tilts in on its own
and I am on fire;
I see two thin streaks burn down my chin.
I see myself as one would see another.
I have been cut in two.

O Mary, open your eyelids.
I am in the domain of silence,
the kingdom of the crazy and the sleeper.
There is blood here
and I have eaten it.
O mother of the womb,
did I come for blood alone?
O little mother,
I am in my own mind.
I am locked in the wrong house.

August 1963

FOR THE YEAR OF THE INSANE

This poem dramatizes the poet's awareness and experience of herself in madness. Her madness is one that recalls the archetypal initiation into another dimension of being, another plane of reality. It is the entry into inner experience. Structured as a prayer, this poem posits the analogy or link between madness and vision. The focal point of the poem is the breakdown of external reality with which the poet equates the body, and the externalization of the inner reality, the domain of madness and/or vision. In the process of awareness, Sexton becomes split in four ways. She is the poet, observing and notating the occasion (". . . and I notice this . . ."). She is the mad/sane woman who experiences the dichotomy of the mind and the body ("I am in my own mind . . ."). She is the madonna recapitulating in her own suffering the archetype of the sufferer - the Mater Dolorosa. Finally, she is both observer and victim in a ceremony of which she herself is the officiating priestess. These fragmentations of the poet are not, however, clearly structured since the whole experience is an ambiguity.

The poem opens with an invocation to Mary, the mother of sorrows:

> Mary, fragile mother,
> hear me, hear me now
> although I do not know your words.

This is an appeal. She desires a hearing but she does not know the ritual, the language. She is unknowing, but like the novice about to take vows, the desire is there. The qualifier "fragile" suggests that the image of the madonna can be easily shattered, like the woman herself. She sees the madonna in terms of her own fragmentation and loss. By extension, her connection to the spiritual dimension is tenuous.

> The black rosary with its silver Christ
> lies unblessed in my hand
> for I am the unbeliever.

These lines expand the initial statement - the appeal to Mary as the maternal mediator of faith. Since she is not one of the faithful, the supplicant does not know how to address the madonna. Although she does not know what the words mean, she tries to initiate herself. She is aware of the concrete meaning of the rosary, its physical dimension and spiritual possibility. But the "black rosary" in contrast to the "silver Christ" emphasizes the conflict between the demonic aspects of the body and the spirit, which is mercurial like the fragile image of the madonna.

> Each bead is round and hard between my fingers,
> a small black angel.

By qualifying the rosary as "hard" and "small," she is reducing it to a physical object, devoid of spiritual content. Each bead is an inverted or "black angel." In the context of the subsequent lines, the angel becomes a messenger, the rosary a bridge. This is the prayer:

> O Mary, permit me this grace,
> this crossing over,
> although I am ugly,
> submerged in my own past
> and my own madness.

She asks to be re-born, to make a "crossing" from madness and history into faith and vision. She asks to experience a new dimension of being beyond her physical nature, which she equates with the madness and personal past in which she is "submerged." Through this imagery of water, which is expanded in the poem, the elements also become threatening. The attempt to cross over is part of the burden, in itself an experience of crucifixion.

The focal point of these lines is an existential self-assessment, articulated as a confession in terms of the physical and historical.[4] The subsequent lines dramatize the psychological dimension, the reality of the self that is caught in madness, and the experience of the body's "weakness" and fragmentation:

Although there are chairs
I lie on the floor.
Only my hands are alive,
touching beads.

The prayer is not in the words (she does not know them); it is in the madness (she lies on the floor like a corpse - "only (her) hands are alive.") Further, the hands themselves are the instruments of the prayer, "touching beads." She herself becomes the rosary. Ironically, in her posture of madness, she is in the prostration of prayer. The prayer is in the reaching. (This is the "dumb prayer" of "Sylvia's Death.") She seeks to make contact and initiate herself through touch - the rosary. The prayer, as stated previously, is a prayer for a prayer to 'cross over' into belief and sanity.

Stanza one concludes with an ambiguous note of affirmation:

Word for word, I stumble.
A beginner, I feel your mouth touch mine.

The allusion is to Mary as the mother instructing Sexton as the child, and breathing new life, not into the body which has succumbed to madness, but the mind. The beginner's first tentative steps suggest an equation between prayer and her articulation through poetry.

Stanza two shifts back to the image of herself as static, in comparison to the tentative movement of the previous stanza. The emphasis in this stanza is on her helplessness. She is reduced:

> I count beads as waves,
> hammering in upon me.
> I am ill at their numbers,
> sick, sick in the summer heat
> and the window above me
> is my only listener, my awkward being.

Extending the sea imagery of the first stanza, the implication now is that she has surfaced. But the experience is violent and overwhelming, stifling and oppressive as suggested in the repetition of "sick," and the connotations of "summer heat," denoting madness perhaps linked to sexual guilt or unfulfillment. The madness is obsessive. The "waves, hammering" carry the implicit image of the crucifixion (here in the sense of her past) into the poem's continuing water symbolism, and therefore the possibility of rebirth. The window in the room which is a cell, becomes an image of containment and restriction as well as one that connotates a possible transcendence:

> She is a large taker, a soother.
> The giver of breath
> she murmurs,
> exhaling her wide lung like an enormous fish.

The window is both a projection of her own necessity and a vision. The window becomes animate, a composite image

that fuses the supplicant and the Mater Dolorosa. It is the "only listener," Mary, and in the context of the sea and the fish it connotes life and renewal, suggestive of the womb. In an explicitly Christian sense, the father (the "large taker"), the holy spirit ("The giver of breath") and the son (the "fish") are evoked through the mother, who encompasses the trinity. However, the implication is also that the fish is out of water, which suggests the demonic element of suffocation. This ambiguity is reflected in the direction that the whole experience she is articulating takes. It is a movement of going forward (she is "A beginner" in stanza one) and simultaneously of a return:

> Closer and closer
> comes the hour of my death
> as I rearrange my face, grow back,
> grow undeveloped and straight-haired.
> All this is death.

The image here is particularized as a regression. It is one of physical transformation, and connotative of a sense of diminishing - an inverted growing. The emphasis shifts from the outer to the inner world, from the present to the past. In the process, the mind is dissociated from the body:

> In the mind there is a thin alley called death
> and I move through it as
> through water.
> My body is useless.

It lies, curled like a dog on the carpet.
It has given up.)

The "thin alley" and the passage "through water" is [illegible] birth; she is moving into death and madness. While she is entering inner space and time, a split develops in consciousness. She is also aware of this time and place. She becomes the observer, the unsubstantial witness of the process - the dichotomy of body and mind. She records the experience - "I note":

There are no words here except the half-learned,
the half-fairy and the full of grace.

In the implied institution, "here," there is separation from her own experience which results in the desperate and necessarily ambiguous prayer. The asylum is where everything is arrested mid-way and nothing goes to completion. This is the place of extremity, the possibilities being madness, death or grace, or death and grace. The rest is silence: "Now I have entered the year without words."

The suggestion now is that madness is in time, specifically within recurrent cycles of madness. The further implication is that Sexton is conscious of the change, but unable to articulate it except to denote the shock, suffering and torture it entails:

I note the queer entrance and the exact voltage.
Without words they exist.
Without words one may touch bread
and be handed bread
and make no sound.

The literal experience in the asylum becomes the metaphor for the inner experience. The "queer entrance" is into experience outside of normalcy, through the experience of madness. The emphasis is on silence, on the endurance of suffering in silence, and on sheer survival. It is also a reference to the rites of communion. However, the allusion to grace is ambiguous in the context of the "queer entrance" and the "exact voltage" which are, on a literal level, explicit images of the terminal state of madness and the shock therapy used to treat it. Again, she is "without words," inarticulate. The communion is incomplete; the possibility of redemption is only partial for only the bread which is the body is alive. The link as with the beads, is through touch.

Stanza four begins with another invocation to Mary, but now, in the context of the asylum, she replaces the doctors. Her healing powers are "powders and herbs," the magical and the natural:

O Mary, tender physician,
come with powder and herbs
for I am in the center.

The emphasis on the body is sustained. The last line qualifies her entry into another dimension of being - the inner reality beyond the scope and knowledge of doctors. She has reached the source, the center which is also the point of crucifixion of the flesh:

> It is very small and the air is gray
> as in a steam house.

The center is womb-like, promising re-birth. But the implication is ambiguous - suggestive, on the one hand, of a cleansing, purifying bath and, on the other, it reflects back to the stifling experience explicit in the image of "summer heat" of stanza two. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that madness has a design beyond logic, hence the experience is both a religious and a mad one:

> I am handed wine as a child is handed milk.

The allusion is to the child receiving sustenance from the "mother," again connotative of regression but also renewal - an offering. In the last sense, the image reflects back to stanza one - "Word for word, I stumble. A beginner, I feel your mouth touch mine." - and the further implication is that this is, in some incomprehensible way, a communion. Through the image of the cup of wine, the Christ image is inferred, as the cup she is presented with is both potential redemptive communion and the chalice of suffering. Drinking

the wine is an acceptance of the "exact voltage" of madness, while the cup also symbolizes the "fragile mother."

But the chalice appears in a disconnected hallucinatory manner, hence the emphasis is on the mad vision:

> The wine itself is pitch-colored, musty and secret.
> The glass rises on its own toward my mouth

Grace and madness merge. What distinguishes them from each other is the poet's awareness: "I notice this and understand this/only because it has happened." On this level, the act of poetry is grace. Through it she affirms both the vision and the madness, which are the cup of suffering. This is contained in the nature of the offering: "The wine itself is pitch-coloured, musty and secret." There is an obvious allusion to the demonic nature of this communion which links back to the "black rosary" experienced merely as "beads" in stanza one and two, and here extended to the void, the experience of the black pit.

The second half of the stanza expands the vision, but the emphasis shifts to her reaction of fear:

> I have this fear of coughing
> but I do not speak,
> a fear of rain, a fear of the horseman
> who comes riding into my mouth.

The focal point is fear itself, substantiated by the repetition. "Coughing" connotes breaking silence and hence of making oneself manifest through speech, and in the

context of the vision it suggests her fear of breaking the reality (the continuity) of the vision (grace) and simultaneously a fear of the vision itself (madness). Moreover, fear is associated with the perception of the external world as it is with the struggle and dialectic between madness and the sacramental vision. Both are experienced as a threat and violation: "a fear of rain, a fear of the horseman/who comes riding into my mouth." This fear is extreme and ultimate; terror with what is life giving and purifying ("rain"), and what entails death, judgment and revelation, implicit in the image of the apocalyptic "horseman," which also implies the threat of instinctual nature.

The ambiguity between madness and vision is resolved in an ironic baptism of fire:

> The glass tilts in on its own
> and I am on fire.

Although the connotations of purification by the holy spirit are implicit, the emphasis is on destruction:

> I see myself as one would see another.
> I have been cut in two.

The ambiguity concludes in the experience of duality. She is divided, outside and yet inside herself, one self feeds on the other, as suggested in the image of vampirism: "two thin streaks burn down my chin." The wine is her own

blood, intimating the self that feeds on the other, in the sense that she is her own sacrifice.

The last stanza begins with a final desperate appeal to Mary. Her prayer is now for sanity:

> O Mary, open your eyelids.
> I am in the domain of silence,
> the kingdom of the crazy and the sleeper.

The image of Mary denotes the failure of response to the appeal - reflecting the partial failure of the religious experience that is the poem. Mary is perceived as asleep or dead. And in this sense, Mary is a projection of herself - the self that has failed to transcend the madness. At the center of her being there is silence, and silence to her appeal. Instead, she is initiated into what is primordial and cannibalistic:

> There is blood here
> and I have eaten it.

The implication of spilt blood and sacrificial initiation is in the context of madness, with herself as victim. Blood fuses bread and wine, which connoting food refers back to cannibalism and the divided self:

> O mother of the womb,
> did I come for blood alone?

The question alludes to her necessity - the madness that has defined her and continues to determine her. The last

appeal to Mary ("O mother of the womb") recapitulates the initial invocation to Mary as mother, now particularized as the universal symbol of birth, as the archetypal mother. However, she has failed to become manifest in the vision and in Sexton herself:

> O little mother,
> I am in my own mind.
> I am locked in the wrong house.

The diminutive qualifying mother particularizes the failure. The final image is a prison. Sexton is caught in her own mind, suggesting that she is aware of her own madness. The sacrament has led to a partial redemption at this point, but she is unable to transcend it. She is conscious, the suggestion being that she has 'crossed over' into her 'right mind.' However, the spiritual dimension remains elusive. She is caught in the physical dimension, the body. She is in the devil's house rather than God's.

WITH MERCY FOR THE GREEDY

For my friend, Ruth, who urges me to make an appointment for the Sacrament of Confession

Concerning your letter in which you ask
me to call a priest and in which you ask
me to wear The Cross that you enclose;
your own cross,
your dog-bitten cross,
no larger than a thumb,
small and wooden, no thorns, this rose --

I pray to its shadow,
that gray place
where it lies on your letter . . . deep, deep.
I detest my sins and I try to believe
in The Cross. I touch its tender hips, its dark jawed face,
its solid neck, its brown sleep.

True. There is
a beautiful Jesus.
He is frozen to his bones like a chunk of beef.
How desperately he wanted to pull his arms in!
How desperately I touch his vertical and horizontal axes!
But I can't. Need is not quite belief.

All morning long
I have worn
your cross, hung with package string around my throat.
It tapped me lightly as a child's heart might,
tapping secondhand, softly waiting to be born.
Ruth, I cherish the letter you wrote.

My friend, my friend, I was born
doing reference work in sin, and born
confessing it. This is what poems are:
with mercy
for the greedy,
they are the tongue's wrangle,
the world's pottage, the rat's star.

WITH MERCY FOR THE GREEDY

This poem dramatizes the poet's ultimate concern, within the context of the Christian framework and the dialectics of faith and doubt. The religious dimension that informs the personal experience of suffering is explored within the context of its historical and universal analogue - the symbol of the cross and Jesus.

The central theme is suffering, made articulate as a confession from the perspective of the woman, the poet and the religious seeker. The poem is literally a confession, structured as a personal letter, which replaces the priest. The characteristic of a confession within a confession emerges. On one level, the poem is an answer to a friend which is undertaken with both seriousness and self-irony. On another level, it is the dramatization of the 'hunger' for the incarnate spirit and simultaneously the need to transcend the flesh. It is also a poetic statement that defines Sexton's own poetry as confession.

The opening statement is a reply (an affirmation of a received message), and an acknowledgement of an implicit 'invitation' (to take on the faith), and a gift (the bond of friendship - philia). The basic organic structure of the poem is, in the building up of successive levels of

meaning contained by the image of the cross:

> Concerning your letter in which you ask
> me to call a priest and in which you ask
> me to wear The Cross that you enclose;

The initial statement is ambiguous. It evokes an immediacy of concern, but as an address it is formal (like a business letter), and almost non-committal. It suggests a deliberate detachment, an ambiguous attitude towards the efficacy of the offering (the enclosed cross), to manifest the spirit, to evoke faith:

> your own cross,
> your dog-bitten cross
> no larger than a thumb,
> small and wooden, no thorns, this rose --

The poet acknowledges the offering, which is made explicit in the connotation of "this rose." The suggestion of the "rose," in the context of the cross, is of blood and the heart. However, unlike Christ's cross and an actual rose, this cross has "no thorns," that is, the offering is genuine, without any intention of inflicting pain. On another level, the friend is asking Sexton to 'wear the cross,' take it up and share her burden. Despite the authenticity of the offering, Sexton rejects the cross as the embodiment of the spirit, in spite of the implicit need to transcend the flesh. The focus is on the juxtaposition of the "The Cross" (capitalized) and the consequent

associations with its explicit reduction to a 'harmless' piece of wood (cross with a small 'c'). It is only through love and affirmation of friendship, that it metamorphoses into a flower.

Further, the pattern of imagery that qualifies the cross, denotes the physical and temporal, suggesting that within the poet's experience, the cross is not symbolic of the incarnate god, but of human suffering. It is "dog-bitten," like meat (an image linked to the conception of Christ as a "chunk of beef," later in the poem); it is "no larger than a thumb," both images that limit it to temporal reality and the body. The cross is the tattered and worn universal symbol of suffering that establishes, as suggested above, the bond of friendship, implying the shared burden through the image of "your own cross." (The name of the poet's friend suggests that Sexton may be alluding to the biblical Ruth, who chooses to share the suffering of her friend and mother-in-law, Naomi.)

Stanza two focuses on the urgency of the poet's need for faith that seems to transcend her conscious doubt:

> I pray to its shadow,
> that gray place
> where it lies on your letter . . . deep, deep.

The immediate allusion is to the invisible dimension, the ambiguity of its mystery and silence, its impenetrability. The "shadow" she "pray(s) to" emphasizes the invisible dimension, which qualified as a "gray place" infers that this is her ironic Calvary. She is witness to the reality of crucifixion (suffering) and sharing in it, but the cross "lies", rather than stands erect, a pun that is perhaps an allusion to the vertical dimension (transcendence) as a lie, and a re-statement of the reality of human suffering.

In another sense, "shadow" implies that its mystery is not incarnate; it is just a shadow, an appearance, an image that becomes haunting. The image also suggests the imitation of Christ, in the sense of taking on suffering and guilt. The connotations of "deep" and its repetitions, emphasize that mystery of silence are inaccessible, or that they are beyond the reach of the poet's need and appeal. With the next line, the emphasis shifts from the unsubstantiality of the image of the cross to the physical reality of her experience of self and the cross:

I detest my sins and I try to believe
in The Cross. I touch its tender hips, its dark jawed face,
its solid neck, its brown sleep.

Her self-accusation recalls the act of contrition in the sacrament of the confessional: "I detest my sins,"

(The suggestion, in context, is that they are of the flesh and her inability to transcend it.) "The Cross" becomes the embodiment of man, with the further implication of his vulnerability. The "dark jawed face," with its suggestion of the skull and the jaws of hell evokes, on the one hand, fear and death, while simultaneously the image infers a mysterious and seductive figure, the male lover. The gift of the cross and the letter itself has suggested the bond of philia. Now another dimension of love is introduced - the erotic. The implication is that the poet is seduced by her image of Jesus: the "tender hips, its dark jawed face." The necessity of the flesh is emphasized: the spirit is not discernable in spite of the urgency of the poet's need to reach out. But the slight pause after "I try to believe" confirms her previous statement of necessity and doubt. She longs to believe in "The Cross." (capitalized again), in all its dimensions. However, "touch," denoting physical contact, fails to manifest the spirit. Instead, vulnerability of the body and death define the experience. The juxtaposition of need and the limitations of the body make actual the poet's struggle with faith and her own limitations.

The image of the cross is anthropomorphic, within the poet's experience. It metamorphoses from a symbol with

all its implications, including the concrete experience of the symbol), to an object. From this mere piece of wood it becomes a pose and then fragments of the body, and simultaneously the whole body. The experience intimates transformation and transfiguration, but the visions fail to be more than human:

> True. There is
> a beautiful Jesus.
> He is frozen to his bones like a chunk of beef.

The reduction is startling. Again the emphasis is on images of immobility and vulnerability. Within this context, the Cross becomes symbolic of time and history, not Christ, but Jesus. She reduces him to his humanity and mortality. The qualifier "frozen" ironically connotates preservation and durability, but qualified by "chunk of beef," reduces the initial image of the body, its sensuous beauty, to a grotesque fragment that recalls the terminal vision of Francis Bacon.[1] The body is perceived in its perceptual image of the poor dumb animal, preserving in death, life's senselessness - the universal destiny. Sexton concludes the stanza with a final vision of despair and abandonment:

> How desperately he wanted to pull his arms in!
> How desperately I touch his vertical and horizontal axes!

She wishes to make contact with the spiritual dimension through the senses. Her despair is projected onto the image of the crucifix. Christ is again reduced to Jesus. The small "i" in "the" reinforces his human dimension. The poet's cross lies on the letter - a "shadow," the vertical axis is unreachable. The analogy between the man Jesus and the poet is drawn, with the intimation that she is crucified to the world being in the body, unable to go beyond it:

But I can't. Need is not quite belief.

This is the central unifying statement of the poem - the sin she is confessing. This stanza-form mimics the poet's predicament. She is caught in the dialectic of faith and doubt: faith that is qualified by an affirmation of suffering as the human condition, without the relief and release of a transcendental vision and or experience.

Stanza four shifts from the contemplative experience that ends in a confession of failure back to the reality of the letter she is writing:

All morning long
I have worn
your cross, hung with pale rose string around my throat.

The first line dramatizes the poet's consciousness of the temporal dimension. Time and its duration is emphasized.

The subsequent lines address Ruth again (recapitulating the first stanza), but now there is an implicit new recognition that makes her 'passion' distinct from her friend's and Christ's. (It is now her "cross" as well.) In accepting the offering, she has shared the friend's burden, (the burden of doubt, perhaps). Through it, she becomes a witness and participator in suffering, the crucifixion, the emulation of Christ implicit in stanza three that culminates in a failed religious experience. The "package string" is a reductive that links back to the "dog-bitten cross" of the first stanza. It sustains the imagery of the body as meat, the body being hung (she alludes to the "hanging" Christ within her), with its evocation of the butcher shop. However, the implication in line three of this stanza is that the cross becomes a talisman that seals the bond of friendship: "Ruth, I cherish the letter you wrote." The experience of having "worn your cross" terminates in an ironic affirmation:

> It tapped me lightly as a child's heart might,
> tapping secondhand, softly waiting to be born.

This may be the experience of grace alluded to in the title. Although this is not a mystical experience, the connotation of birth and renewal are nevertheless a celebration of the earthly meaning of love. The allusion is

also to the "cross" of pregnancy with the suggestion of original sin, and its redemption through the birth of Christ. It taps "secondhand," implying that she has 'adopted' the symbol and with the allusion to a clock, that this love is within time.

Stanza five concludes the poem and the confession with an existential self-affirmation in spite of the irony. The imagery, connotative of birth and renewal, is extended here in a final statement of self-realization and revelation:

> My friend, my friend, I was born
> doing reference work in sin, and born
> confessing it. . . .

Transgression is conceived of as a life-giving experience, for it is in the struggle to articulate her suffering that she has experienced birth. The further suggestion, in the context of the subsequent lines, is that her history and destiny coalesce, transformed through poetry:

> . . . This is what poems are:
> with mercy
> for the greedy,
> they are the tongue's wrangle,
> the world's pottage, the rat's star.

Poetry is expressive of the longing for transcendence. The seeming reduction implicit in "rat's star" serves to dramatize the senselessness of the struggle, the inept attempts

to articulate, as implicit in the image of "tongue's wrangle," the longing and desire, and the utter hopelessness. Sexton's poems, born in confession, imply the measure of her longing, and become a solace and a sustenance as implicit in the image of "world's pottage." The pottage also alludes to her hunger for the spirit, which is now manifest in her ability to articulate it in poetry. However, the allusion is also to Sexton putting her soul on display in the market-place of the world. The final vision of this poem is ambiguous, for in spite of the denial of transcendence, the implication is that it is in the very act of poety that grace is operative.

SELF IN 1958

What is reality?
I am a plaster doll; I pose
with eyes that cut open without landfall or nightfall
upon some shellacked and grinning person,
eyes that open, blue, steel, and close.
Am I approximately an I. Magnin transplant?
I have hair, black angel,
black-angel-starting to comb,
nylon legs, luminous arms
and some advertised clothes.

I live in a doll's house
with four chairs,
a counterfeit table, a flat roof
and a big front door.
Many have come to such a small crossroad.
There is an iron bed,
(Life enlarges; life takes aim)
a cardboard floor,
windows that flash open on someone's pity,
and little more.

Someone plays with me,
plants me in the all-electric kitchen,
Is this what Mrs. Rombauer said?
Someone pretends with me --
I am walled in solid by their noise --
or puts me upon their straight bed.
They think I am me!
Their warmth? Their warmth is not a friend;
They pry my mouth for their cups of gin
and their stale bread.

What is reality,
to this synthetic doll
who should smile, who should shift gears,
should spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder,
and have no evidence of rain or tears?
But I would cry,
rooted into the wall that
was once my mother,
if I could remember how
and if I had the tears.

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SELF IN 1958

This poem in four stanzas is a self-assessment that reveals an ontological situation which dramatizes the poet's alienation from herself and the external world. Life is conceived of as a game, the self as a toy. Both the private and public worlds are impersonal, destructive and ultimately predatory. The self feels manipulated, assaulted, imprisoned. The pattern of fragmented and synthetic body imagery actualizes this sense of violation.

At the center of the poem is the Cartesian dichotomy translated into and expressed within an inner and outer reality, equated with the body mind, body soul dichotomy. The outer reality is the "synthetic doll." The inner is encompassed by the "I." While it is this division that leads to alienation and abstraction from reality, it is also what paradoxically allows the poet to explore herself and becomes the source for the poem.

The particular date of the title emphasizes the attempt to capture and hold the reality of a persistent yet elusive experience. This poem is crucial in Sexton's development as a poet since, on one level, the over-all concern and progression of her work is the dawning of consciousness, the awakening to her existential situation,

which includes the experience of madness. "Self in 1958" documents a stage of development over a period of seven years (1958-1965). Structurally, the poem follows the pattern of question followed by statement, the experience of being an object to subjectivity and consciousness, which involves the expression of emotions.

The poem begins with the question, "What is reality?" and the answer, at this point, is that for Sexton, it is an experience of lifelessness:

I am a plaster doll; I pose

The image of the body as synthetic particularizes her self-estrangement and the sense of non-being. The body performs without sensory or emotional registering of experience:

with eyes that eat open without landfall or nightfall

As a doll, she counterfeits life. The image of the external world is both mocking and threatening but equally abstracted and synthetic:

upon some shellacked and grinning person

The poet is perhaps literally "posed" before a mirror (Sexton was once a model) and the image of the external world is her own reflection. The implication is that she feels as if she were being played with; that she is the source of amusement in her semblance of life:

eyes that open, blue, steel, and close.

The movement of the eyes opening and closing, qualified by the metallic connotations of "steel," evoke a mannequin, which, as an analogy to her body, has menacing implications. This is a vision of self-destruction - she has no sense of time or place, as suggested in "eyes that cut open without landfall or night-fall." The loss of memory is expanded and alluded to again, later in the poem. From the perspective of the artist, it is the mad vision. This is the extremity of experience, of being divided.

Am I approximately an I. Magnin transplant?

The body is alien from the self that perceives it. The vegetable and synthetic connotations in "transplant" continue the suggestions of something that is both menacing and horrific - the homuncule, the perfect counterfeit being. The implication is expanded in the next lines:

I have hair, black angel,
black-angel-stuffing to comb,
nylon legs, luminous arms
and some advertised clothes.

The repetition of "angel," qualified by "black," evokes something demonic, while simultaneously, the allusion is to a manufactured product, a magazine image. Her appearance has been defined by the popular image of the American woman. In the next stanza, the synthetically erotic 'living

doll' merges with the image of the suburban house-wife:

> I live in a doll's house
> with four chairs,
> a counterfeit table, a flat roof
> and a big front door.

The "counterfeit" table makes the whole family setting suspect. The "table," in evoking food, offering and communion, in the context of the whole setting, alludes to the experience of the absent family as false and unreal. (In the final poem of the "Live or Die" chronology, Sexton re-discovers the family.) The concrete image is commonplace, and her situation, in spite of the extraordinary implications, quite ordinary: "Many have come to such a small cross-road." This critical turning point, the poet suggests, is experienced in the context of one's limitations, one's necessity:

> There is an iron bed,
> (Life enlarges, life takes aim)
> a cardboard floor,
> windows that clash open on someone's city,
> and little more.

These lines contain a documented list of Sexton's various experiences of extremity and victimization. The image of the "iron bed" suggests a hate institutional setting - the prison, hospital, asylum, and in the context of the statement in brackets ("life takes aim"), one becomes the target, the victim of vicissitude. The "bed," in the context of

the self, suggests a horizontal position which is extended to suggest the fall into sin and madness in the subsequent image of a "cardboard floor." In another sense, this last image emphasizes the nature of the setting - a play-set for a doll. The external world takes on the restrictive and impersonal connotations of the private world. Her vision is circumscribed by "someone's city" - another manufacture, another toy.

The impersonality of people and human relationships are threatening. She experiences herself as a helpless victim, a plaything.

> Someone plays with me,
> plants me in the all-electric kitchen,

The modern, all-equipped environment of the housewife takes on the connotations of an instrument of torture - an electric chair, a laboratory. The subsequent reference to "Mrs. Rombauer," ("Is this what Mrs. Rombauer said?") further particularizes the experience as insane. The intrusion, into the synthetic world that's being evoked, of the name of a probably real housewife emphasizes the loss of a sense of reality and memory. This implication expands the initial question of the poem ("What is reality?"). The next lines continue the poet's delineation of unreality and artificiality:

Someone pretends with me --
I am walled in solid by their noise --
or puts me upon their straight bed.

The sense of constriction is expanded in the "walled in" image, there is no escape. "Someone" becomes a multiple "They." The reference is perhaps to a family setting, (the "They" extending from the "Someone" who may be the husband/father), as implied in "house," and the kitchen," where she experiences chaos, confusion, isolation and hopelessness. The final image evoked by the above lines recapitulates herself as a doll that adorns "their straight bed." In another sense, the inference is more ominous, more so because it is not an explicit reference but a suggestion of demonic experimentation. The emphasis shifts again from how she feels being used to her own sense that she is more than what she appears to be:

They think I am me!
Their warmth? Their warmth is not a friend;
They pry my mouth for their cups of gin
and their stale bread.

Human empathy and relationships are experienced as counterfeit. They are presented within the context of a game, on the one hand, and a violent act on the other. The 'living doll,' constantly being played with, is being force-fed like a prisoner. The imagery of food and drink has further ironic implications. The "gin" is to keep her in

her doll's stupor and in turn, she, like some worn-out whore, becomes a cheap source of entertainment. The image of herself as a "youth" is therefore an allusion to communication as violation, and simultaneously a reference to her poetry, with the implication that it is read without concern.

The last stanza reiterates the initial statement, confirming the experience of unreality:

> What is reality
> to this synthetic doll
> who should smile, who should shift gears,
> should spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder,
> and have no evidence of ruin or fears?

There seems to be no resolution of what she recognizes as her neurotic predicament, apart from the ambiguous note in "should." She is aware of what she "should" do - open the "doors," an appropriate metaphor for self revelation. But she is defined by the loss and fear that she can't overcome. Further, there is the implication that the 'living doll' can no longer function properly because the "I" has made her aware of her reality and the "I," dominated by the doll image, (she "should spring the doors open"); cannot free herself of it. The "doll" is a complex mechanism, shifting gears from one pole of the duality to another. The "doll" is in the "I" and vice-versa.

The final statement of the poem is a confession of limitation:

> But I would cry,
> rooted into the wall that
> was once my mother,
> if I could remember how
> and if I had the tears.

The connotations of forgetting, of being imprisoned is counter-balanced by her awareness. She is divided. The physical, visible world is mechanical. Reality is split - the body/mind antithesis without the synthesis. The image of the "wall" evokes the impossibility of reaching the outside (as in stanza three, where she is "walled in solid by their noise"). It expresses the idea of resistance, of a limiting situation, and in this limitation, the secondary implication of protection. Thus the wall is an ambiguous image. Being "rooted into the wall," linked to the "magnin transplant" image of stanza one, suggests the dichotomy of the artificial and organic selves, the false and the real, matter (mother) as opposed to spirit. The doll image is inescapable, partly because it is a refuge, a womb, where the "fears and tears" of the external world are not experienced. In the doll of "black enamel," there is the implication of a perverse transcendence of the body. However, the doll/woman does remember that she has forgotten.

SYLVIA'S DEATH

for Sylvia Plath

O Sylvia, Sylvia,
with a dead box of stones and spoons,

with two children, two meteors
wandering loose in the tiny playroom,

with your mouth into the sheet,
into the roofbeam, into the dumb prayer,

(Sylvia, Sylvia,
where did you go
after you wrote me
from Devonshire
about raising potatoes
and keeping bees?)

what did you stand by,
just how did you lie down into?

Thief --
how did you crawl into,

crawl down alone
into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,

the death we said we both outgrew,
the one we wore on our skinny breasts,

the one we talked of so often each time
we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston,

the death that talked of analysts and cures,
the death that talked like brides with plots,

the death we drank to,
the motives and then the quiet deed?

(In Boston
the dying
ride in cabs,
yes death again,
that ride home
with our boy.)

O Sylvia, I remember the sleepy drummer
who beat on our eyes with an old story,

how we wanted to let him come
like a sadist or a New York fairy

to do his job,
a necessity, a window in a wall or a crib,

and since that time he waited
under our heart, our cupboard,

and I see now that we store him up
year after year, old suicides

and I know at the news of your death,
a terrible taste for it, like salt.

(And me,
me too.
And now, Sylvia,
you again
with death again,
that ride home
with our boy.)

And I say only
with my arms stretched out into that stone place,

what is your death
but an old belonging,

a mole that fell out
of one of your poems?

(O friend,
while the moon's bad,
and the king's gone,
and the queen's at her wit's end
the bar fly ought to sing!)

O Tiny mother,
you too!
O funny duchess!
O blonde thing!

February 17, 1963

SYLVIA'S DEATH

This elegiac poem is the poet's formal eulogy of Sylvia Plath. It articulates her expression of Sylvia's death. It reflects their past relationship in the context of death, suicide and madness. It is a celebration of friendship and ironically of death. Writing about her experience of Sylvia's death, Sexton is invoking and reflecting her own relationship with death in the past and the present.

The poem is structured as a series of couplets - units of thought that guide and control her emotional response to the death in statements and queries that evoke, question and celebrate Sylvia. Intertwined with these are asides (enclosed in brackets), that are personal references, stylistically more informal, and that question and reveal Sylvia and simultaneously Sexton herself.

The first statement/question invokes Sylvia's presence, centers on her legacy, and concludes by questioning the quality of her dying. The initial line is a recall of Sylvia, an attempt to evoke her spirit and establish

communication:

> O Sylvia, Sylvia,
> with a dead box of stones and spoons,

The second line defines Sylvia in the context of an image of permanence and necessity, which on the one hand suggests burial rites - the "dead box" of her coffin equipped with "stones and spoons," the cairn and food of her last memorial. On the other hand, these images allude to Sylvia's legacy in life - her 'burden of necessity' and her 'hunger' that could not be satiated in life. There are further implications to the images: Sylvia was born with the proverbial silver spoon in her mouth - the gift of life and the gift of poetry. The "stones" suggest permanence and legacy of life.

The next couplet qualifies and particularizes Sylvia further:

> with two children, two meteors
> wandering loose in the tiny playroom,

The image of "meteors" qualifying "children" suggests that they are detached fragments from an original mass and dimension with which Sylvia is equated (mater/matter). The further implication is that her legacy also includes the fall and loss that her death has caused: her children are motherless.

The third couplet recapitulates Sylvia in life trying to grasp beyond herself and simultaneously turning in upon herself:

> with your mouth into the sheet,
> into the roofbeam, into the dumb prayer,

Her death is evoked as a poetic act, and her history is invoked, the levels of her being as a poet and as a woman. The bedsheet is also the winding sheet and in the context of the implied childlike action - seeking safety, huddling - it is a cocoon. On another level, the sheet is equated with death conceived of as a refuge. Finally it evokes the dimension of madness with its suggestion of a fearful apparition, an image of terror. The meaning of "your mouth . . . into the roofbeam" suggests, on the other hand, an attempt to articulate (perhaps as a protest) an appeal. The "roofbeam" is an ambiguous image that suggests a source of light, support and moral sustenance, perhaps alluding to the cross or merely the ceiling of the room in which she died. The "dumb prayer" extends this ambiguity. It infers a mute, inarticulate, even a stupid act, and it evokes a sense of abandonment, despair and the silence that answers Sylvia's appeal, as well as Sexton's.

The first aside is a juxtaposition, carrying over from the last couplet a note of lament with "Sylvia, Sylvia."

It is a flashback to their last communication (perhaps taken from an actual letter), implying an affirmation - a new beginning for Sylvia, an earthly concern with things growing, with fertility.

> where did you go
> after you wrote me
> from Devonshire
> about raising potatoes
> and keeping bees?)

The unanswered question alludes to a dimension of being beyond time and place, one that Sylvia may have entered. This reference becomes explicit in the final couplet of the first question/statement:

> what did you stand by,
> just how did you lie down into?

Sexton is literally trying to conceive of what Sylvia did, how she actually died. The line implies the difficulty she has articulating emotions that emerge from contemplating Sylvia's literal suicide. The reference is existentially ambiguous - was the death an affirmation or an abdication? The terms "stand" and "lie down" allude to the existential choice - death as an affirmation or a succumbing. Further, the connotations of these images suggest the vertical and the horizontal which in alluding to the cross and its' connotations questions Sylvia's death in the context of a transcendental act. (Was Sylvia a 'stand-by' in the sense

of someone waiting to be included on a passenger list?) However, the particulars of Sylvia's suicide ("where," "what" and "how") must remain questions.

With the second question, the emphasis shifts to the more distant past and on their relationship and shared conception and experience of death. This conception is simultaneously adolescent, romantic and a sick preoccupation. The reminiscence is initiated with an accusation, suggesting that Sylvia has taken something that belonged to both of them:

> Thief! --
> how did you crawl into,
>
> crawl down alone
> into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,

The emphasis shifts from Sylvia to Sexton herself, which controls the evoked emotion in the context of the connotations of "crawl" and the reality of Sylvia's suicide (her head in an oven). Sylvia is on her knees like a religious supplicant. In another sense, the image of crawling suggests something hidden and debased, alluding perhaps ironically, to Sylvia's death as an act of degradation towards the shared conception of death:

> the death we said we both outgrew,
> the one we wore on our skinny breasts,

They shared and were marked by this death, knowing its

presence in the body. In another sense this is an ironic statement alluding to adolescence and growing pains. Death was worn like a cross on a chain. However, the focal point is on the presence of death and its changing attributes defined by the circumstances of their lives:

> the one we talked of so often each time
> we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston,

This reference is to another later stage of experience and in this context, the irony is more cutting and overt. It becomes mockery. The allusion is to drunken fantasy and perverse flirtations:

> the death that talked of analysts and cures,
> the death that talked like brides with plots,

In the shared history of Sexton and Plath, death is conceived of as an autonomous presence of overwhelming power and insidious compulson: "the death that talked." Death is an obstacle. Further, the line suggests the dimension of articulate confession to each other and in poetry. In a different sense, the implications of "talked" versus "acted" re-defines the ominous connotations of actual madness and suicide to a romantic fantasy, an expression of longing. Death is also the ambiguous seducer:

> the death we drank to,
> the motives and then the quiet deed?

The last line shifts again, in tone and reference, back to

the actual death of Sylvia. The "death we talked of" is contrasted to Sylvia's "quiet deed" and the "motives," implicit in the poem, are posited to others than the ones she shared with Sexton.

The second aside, however, reverts back to the shared experience of death in the concrete image of "our boy":

> (In Boston
> the dying
> ride in cabs,
> yes death again,
> that ride home
> with our boy.)

Death is expanded here to include the experience of the external world ("Boston") as well as the private domain ("home") as a denial and negation of life. By contrast, "our boy," the link, the embodiment of death as a shared creation/projection takes on the vitality of the erotic and the orgiastic and, on an archetypal level, suggests Jung's figure of the animus.

The subsequent couplets that make up the first statement develop the shared but changing conception/experience of death. The implication is that "under (our) heart" it has matured, ripened. (Perhaps, among other things, through repeated suicide attempts):

> O Sylvia, I remember the sleepy drummer
> who beat on our eyes with an old story,

The image suggests a languorous, seductive concept of death, hypnotic and archetypal. Death is the image of the little drummer boy that kept them awake and desiring:

> how we wanted to let him come
> like a sadist or a New York fairy
>
> to do his job,
> a necessity, a window in a wall or a crib,

Superficially, he is a cynical joke. The underlying implication is sexual; death is a lover. The suggestion in the implicit invitation is perverse; the 'lover' is a "sadist" or a "fairy" and includes the awareness that their flirtation with death is masochistic and unnatural. However, the invitation is also seen as necessary because it promises through death a transcendence, as suggested in the image of the "window in a wall." The "crib" evokes motherhood and death filling an emptiness, the possibility of which suggests the expectancy of re-birth. This is extended in the subsequent image of death as a faithful lover who awaits:

> and since that time he waited
> under our heart, our cupboard,
>
> and I see now that we store him up
> year after year, old suicides

The lover who is kept hidden and provided for in the heart's store-house metamorphosizes into the foetus waiting to be born. They are seduced by death, impregnated by death. The image is horrific, cancerous but again there is the

suggestion of re-birth.

The possibilities of re-birth are under-cut by the further implications of "window in a wall." The image evokes expansion, but it also evokes a solitary room; the consequences of failed romantic love, the last refuge of madness and senility. The "fairy" lover could be a professional decorator who has arranged the room. The flirtation with death leads to suicide, conceived of as a sexual experience: "let him come." Death does a "job" and together with the mother/foetus implications, this image suggests the excremental vision of the body and its dying as waste.

The desire for death shared by Sexton and Plath was never actualized: "how we wanted." As the foetus/lover grows "under our heart," and the women age, the commitment is renewed. And "now" the longing is once more aroused for Sexton with the news of Sylvia's death:

> and I know at the news of your death,
> a terrible taste for it, like salt.

The implicit image in the couplet is of hunger and thirst, a recurrent image in Sexton's poetry. It dramatizes the unfulfilled longing and desire that is sought in death. The "taste" of death is like "salt," which is the elemental flavour of life, of the sea, the earth, the body. Salt

afflicts, salt preserves.

The third aside extends the image of death as the seducer but now it is focused in the present and on Sexton herself, and the two presences - Sylvia and death, having been invoked, merge with each other:

> (And me,
> me too.
> And now, Sylvia,
> you again
> with death again,
> that ride home
> with <u>our</u> boy.)

The "ride home" is actualized - it is the "ride home" to death with the ironic implication that Sylvia has arrived "home." She has taken the "boy," given birth to the foetus, and actualized the shared conception of their 'parenthood.'

This final section of the poem recapitulates and dramatizes Sexton's initial response to Sylvia's death, her own reaching out:

> And I say only
> with my arms stretched out into that stone place,

The image evokes Sexton as the one who has been 'cheated,' the one who has been left behind still crucified to life.

The third and last question relates death to poetry. Death has been one of Sylvia's creations:

> What is your death
> but an old belonging,
>
> a mole that fell out
> of one of your poems?

The conception of her death as an "old belonging," is also a celebration of her poetry.

The fourth and last aside acknowledges the friendship and articulates what Sylvia has left behind:

> (O friend,
> while the moon's bad,
> and the king's gone,
> and the queen's at her wit's end
> the bar fly ought to sing!)

The pattern of imagery evokes a world of chaos - of madness and death - a fairy-tale world that becomes an ironic metaphor for the experience of breakdown in hierarchy, structure and meaning in the real world. Within this setting, Sexton is the "bar fly," again the martini drinker, 'drunk' on the vision of death. The implication is that given such a condition and apprehension of existence, the self feels reduced in life, but the knowledge of death (Sylvia's "ride home") becomes the cause of celebration.

> O tiny mother,
> you too!
> O funny duchess!
> O blonde thing!

The poem ends with a celebration of Sylvia in the context of an image of creation reflecting back to her as a mother and a poet. "O funny duchess!" suggests Sylvia's uniqueness, nobility and 'style' both as a woman and a poet. Sexton is the "bar fly" who is still crawling, Plath is the "blonde

thing," the angel and heavenly body from which the "two children, two meteors" are now separated. This last image suggests immortality, intimating Plath's strangeness and ultimate vulnerability.

LIVE

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

Well, death's been here
for a long time --
it has a hell of a lot
to do with hell
and suspicion of the eye
and the religious objects
and how I mourned them
when they were made obscene
by my dwarf-heart's doodle.
The chief ingredient
is mutilation.
And mud, day after day,
mud like a ritual,
and the baby on the platter,
cooked but still human,
cooked also with little maggots,
sewn onto it maybe by somebody's mother,
the damn bitch!

Even so, 5..
I kept right on going on,
a sort of human statement,
lugging myself as if
I were a sawed-off body
in the trunk the steamer trunk.
This became a perjury of the soul.
It became an outright lie
and even though I dressed the body
it was still naked, still killed.
It was caught
in the first place at birth,
like a fish.
But I played it, dressed it up,
dressed it up like somebody's doll.
Is life something you play?
And all the time wanting to get rid of it?
And further, everyone yelling at you
to shut up. And no wonder!
People don't like to be told
that you're sick

and then be forced
to watch
you
come
down with the hammer.

Today life opened inside me like an egg
and there inside
after considerable digging
I found the answer.
What a bargain!
There was the sun,
her yolk moving feverishly,
tumbling her prize --
and you realize that she does this daily!
I'd known she was a purifier
but I hadn't thought
she was solid,
hadn't known she was an answer.
God! It's a dream,
lovers sprouting in the yard
like celery stalks
and better,
a husband straight as a redwood,
two daughters, two sea urchins,
picking roses off my hackles.
If I'm on fire they dance around it
and cook marshmallows.
And if I'm ice
they simply skate on me.
in little ballet costumes.

Here,
all along,
thinking I was a killer,
anointing myself daily
with my little poisons.
But no.
I'm an empress.
I wear an apron.
My typewriter writes.
It didn't break the way it warned.
Even crazy, I'm as nice
as a chocolate bar.
Even with the witches' gymnastics
they trust my incalculable city,
my corruptible bed.

O dearest three,
I make a soft reply.
The witch comes on
and you paint her pink.
I come with kisses in my hood
and the sun, the smart one,
rolling in my arms.
So I say Live
and turn my shadow three times round
to feed our puppies as they come,
the eight Dalmations we didn't drown,
despite the warnings: The abort! The destroy!
Despite the pails of water that waited
to drown them, to pull them down like stones,
they came, each one headfirst,
blowing bubbles the color of cataract-blue
and fumbling for the tiny tits.
Just last week, eight Dalmations,
3/4 of a lb., lined up like cord wood
each
like a
birch tree.
I promise to love more if they come,
because in spite of cruelty
and the stuffed railroad cars for the ovens,
I am not what I expected. Not an Eichmann.
The poison just didn't take.
So I won't hang around in my hospital shift,
repeating The Black Mass and all of it.
I say Live, Live because of the sun,
the dream, the excitable gift.

February the last, 1966

LIVE

This is the concluding poem of Live or Die. It is the poem in which Sexton resolves the dichotomy in a gratuitous act of self-affirmation. It is a poem that articulates the extent to which she has been defined by death and dying. It is a poem expressive of crossroads - the either/or of existence: "Live or die, but don't poison everything..."

Structurally very loose, the experience of the poem focuses on time present in the light of the events of time past, and in that context it is a self-assessment. In a series of interlinked statements that dramatize the dialectic of life and death, the poet attempts to uproot herself from madness and death.

There is no strong unified pattern of imagery in the poem. However, there are single images of great impact that have the power to crystallize the experience she is articulating. The focal point is the violence perpetrated on the body. The destruction, corruption, pollution of the flesh conveys the experience of death. These are the thematic constructs that fuse the psychological and physical dimensions dramatizing her experience of dismemberment, madness and death.

The first stanza consists of an introductory statement about death as a presence, as a fact. This is a prelude to the whole of the poem, and it establishes the tone and stance of the poet towards herself:

> Well, death's been here
> for a long time --

The prosaic conversational tone maintains a balance between detachment and involvement. The undercurrent of resignation on the one hand and of having reached the end on the other, qualify the extremity of the situation:

> it has a hell of a lot
> to do with hell
> and suspicion of the eye
> and the religious objects
> and how I mourned them
> when they were made obscene
> by my dwarf-heart's doodle.

The connotations and associations of the above images form a network of suggestion that evoke a fragmentation of experience: "The chief ingredient is mutilation." The self is divided - the killer and the mourner. However, the emphasis is on time past: "were made" suggesting that now there is a sense of convergence of the self and therefore a new awareness. The breakdown is to be understood within a religious context and an ultimate concern. Evil, guilt, judgement and condemnation, as evoked in the image "hell," have defined the poet's experience of herself.

The "religious objects" denotes an external spiritual reality that she attempted to grasp as she questioned them, and that proved inadequate, and that consequently resulted in suffering and madness. The composite image, "dwarf-heart's doodle," is connotative of diverse meanings. On the one hand, denoting the center of her being, it is suggesting sickness and distortion, an act of regression. On the other hand, "doodle" connotates the unconscious scratching against her mourning - a refusal to accept death. The image may also be a renunciation of her own poetry, that is a final confession in which her sin includes her own articulation of that sin which she is questioning.

The second half of the stanza actualizes the fragmentation experienced by the poet in a horrific image of the sacrificed child:

> And mud, day after day,
> mud like a ritual,
> and the baby on the platter,
> cooked but still human,
> cooked also with little maggots,
> sewn onto it maybe by somebody's mother,
> the damn bitch!

Death actualized in the obsessive vision defines the nature of the reality experienced religiously and ceremonially. It is primeval and cannibalistic, bare, mere existence as

suggested by the connotations of "mud." The general context alludes to the perversion of fertility and offering. It refers to the death of innocence. Motherhood stands convicted. (The personal reference to her own mother who contributed to her madness is clear and to herself as mother.)

The fragmented imagery of cooking denotes a recipe and refers back to "The chief ingredient is mutilation," qualifying madness as a witches' concoction. In another sense the reference is to the mad housewife.

Stanza two particularizes the consequences of madness by what happens to the body. The fragmentation of reality is envisioned as a kind of dying:

> Even so,
> I kept right on going on,
> a sort of human statement,
> lugging myself as if
> I were a sawed-off body
> in the trunk, the steamer trunk.

Abstracted from reality, the self feels violated. The body becomes a burden likened to the victim of a conjuring act. It is the murdered body in a trunk, like a stow-away on a journey, yet going nowhere. It became a pretence of life:

> This became a perjury of the soul.
> It became an outright lie
> and even though I dressed the body
> it was still naked, still killed.
> It was caught
> in the first place at birth,
> like a fish,

The image of the body refers back to "the baby on the platter." She becomes the mother, her body is the child. The whole spectrum of life is reduced. The sense of alienation is extreme and inclusive of the first stage of life, of being embodied. Although the analogy between the body and the "fish" is not elaborated, being born is connotative of being netted, hooked, with the further implication of pain. The "I," on the other hand, is identified with another autonomous though not clearly specified dimension of being:

> But I played it, dressed it up,
> dressed it up like somebody's doll.
> Is life something you play?
> And all the time wanting to get rid of it?

The body of a "doll" (a recurrent image of Sexton's poems), extends the split between inner experience and outer reality. The analogy is between the self and a child, the body and the doll, life and a game. And within the context, the child is perverse - the child wants to kill the doll. This is self-accusation, and the realization that in a sense she has been playing with life.

The sense of alienation is projected to include her experience of the external world that ostracizes the madwoman, that does not want to hear or see:

And further, everyone yelling at you
to shut up. And no wonder!
People don't like to be told
that you're sick
and then be forced
to watch
you
come
down with the hammer.

Although the above images allude to a scene of madness in a typical melodrama, the implication is more subtle. The victim becomes the executioner, and the world that judges and rejects the madwoman becomes a victim itself, because in its unwillingness to get involved it flees from life. The irony is overt; there are no extenuating circumstances. However, the emphasis is on her action of violence. The last sentence of the stanza is broken down into its component parts, emphasizing the drama of the arrested action, and defining the act of violence as final as well as terminal. In being actualized, it becomes an act of exorcism. Finally, the dramatic transition to the next stanza and life is affected.

Stanza three marks the transition from past to present, from death to life, from confusion and loss of self-control to recognition and clarity of commitment:

Today life opened inside me like an egg
and there inside
after considerable digging
I found the answer.

The metaphor of digging conveys the extent of her task, the quest in spite of the denial. Although the allusions are to the subterranean existence of the miner, on the one hand, and to the treasure hunt, on the other, Sexton couches her experience in the ironic hyperbole of the housewife who has been shopping:

> What a bargain!
> There was the sun,
> her yolk moving feverishly,
> tumbling her prize --
> and you realize that she does this daily!
> I'd known she was a purifier
> but I hadn't thought
> she was solid,
> hadn't known she was an answer.

She is maintaining a balance between being facetious and serious about an experience of rebirth. Hence it is ironically a find and simultaneously a gratuitous event. It is the experience of life at its most elemental, from "mud" and madness of stanza one to the egg and the "sun." The egg is the seed of generation, the mystery and irreducibility of life she had not trusted. The "sun" as the archetypal symbol of the source of life denotes the process of unity she is experiencing. It is the invisible essence which nourishes the inborn fire in man. The sun is equated with the womb; the imagery denotes the stages of birth. The sun and the egg become one and are metaphors for her own sense of being. It is a vision:

> God! It's a dream,
> lovers sprouting in the yard
> like celery stalks
> and better,
> a husband straight as a redwood,
> two daughters, two sea urchins,
> picking roses off my hackles.

She is illuminating, giving, radiating life; becoming one with the sun. It is a vision of procreation. She is affirming life in its most prosaic and extraordinary. Fertility and love redefine the food imagery of the first part of the poem within the family context. The black ritual is transformed into a family celebration:

> If I'm on fire they dance around it
> and cook marshmallows.
> And if I'm ice
> they simply skate on me
> in little ballet costumes.

She illuminates them and they transform her. They affirm her in her extremity. Anger and fear related to "hackles" is part of the life force of fire/ice. Her family experience her as alive and they transform her. She becomes the source. They transform fear and anger into love.

Stanza four dramatizes the changed perspective as an act of exorcism. It is an instance of Sexton's self-dramatization of her fragmentation in which she plays all the parts:

Here,
all along,
thinking I was a killer
anointing myself daily
with my little poisons.

The act of "anointing myself" suggests a religious ceremony over which she, like a priest, presides daily. This act of destruction, perpetuating further destruction, alludes to an inverted celebration of the mass-- the black mass which she now rejects:

But no.
I'm an empress.
I wear an apron.
My typewriter writes.
It didn't break the way it warned.
Even crazy, I'm as nice
as a chocolate bar.
Even with the witches' gymnastics
they trust my incalculable city,
my corruptible bed.

The image of "empress" suggests she is now in control of her madness. She has a distinct sense of her own being, actualized in the mundane experience: "I wear an apron." Also, she is particularizing levels of being, the woman, the wife and mother, and the artist. The reference to the "typewriter" breaking alludes to the experience of external reality as threatening, and it also refers back to "dwarf-heart's doodle," with the implication that her poetry is also now affirmed. The fairy-tale allusions merge with the ordinary commonplace images: as a "chocolate

bar" she is substance and sustenance for her family. And in spite of her transformations, the evil and darkness of her madness, she is the unexplored domain. The archetype of the woman as "city" expands the image of mother who shelters and provides for her children. It also refers back to "empress" which qualified by "incalculable" define her as an indefatigable source. The image of "corruptible bed" acknowledges her limitations and the possibility of failure. In the general context of the poem, the allusions to herself as witch recall the witch in Hansel and Gretel who deceives the children through seduction, yet here the pattern is inverted. Evil is transformed into good.

The last stanza is a summary affirmation, invocation, and celebration of her family, and fertility. And love and life are equated:

> O dearest three,
> I make a soft reply.
> The witch comes on
> and you paint her pink.
> I come with kisses in my hood
> and the sun, the smart one,
> rolling in my arms.

The black ritual of madness and death becomes transformed. She is no longer the witch in stanza one who eats children: "somebody's mother,/the damn bitch." Her

"witches' gymnastics" are now manifestations of love:

> So I say Live
> and turn my shadow three times round
> to feed our puppies as they come,
> the eight Dalmatians we didn't drown,
> despite the warnings: The abort: The destroy:
> Despite the pails of water that waited
> to drown them, to pull them down like stones,

The ritual of rebirth is made explicit in her power of transformation. Her "shadow," the symbol of her madness, is integrated and she is made whole. The incantation of "three times" implies the action of unity upon duality, hence synthesis. The colour symbolism reinforces the transformation from death to life - black to pink. The dogs are a metaphor for her own experience of destruction and death as they are also symbolic of her renewal:

> they came, each one headfirst,
> blowing bubbles the color of cataract-blue
> and fumbling for the tiny tits.
> Just last week, eight Dalmatians,
> 3/4 of a lb., lined up like cord wood
> each
> like a
> birch tree.

The imagery of birth reinforces in actual detail her own sense of life, concluding with the suggestion of the inter-relatedness of life, inclusive of life and death as suggested in the connotations of "birch tree." In another sense, the implication is of taking root.

The last half of the stanza recapitulates the poem in essence through images that refer back to the various dimensions of death and life that elucidate her experience:

> I promise to love more if they come,
> because in spite of cruelty
> and the stuffed railroad cars for the ovens,
> I am not what I expected. Not an Eichmann.
> The poison just didn't take.

This is a vow of love, inspite of her perception of reality that seems to deny it. She rejects the public symbol of evil and in so doing she is rejecting herself as the victim and the executioner. The personal and the public experience fuse in the imagery of the holocaust, as she renounces madness and death:

> So I won't hang around in my hospital shift,
> repeating the Black Mass and all of it.
> I say Live, Live because of the sun,
> the dream, the excitable gift.

The final lines conclude the poem with a classical affirmation: live because of life itself, the "excitable gift." The gift of life is axiomatic and finally unquestionable. It is "excitable," continually vibrant with its own power. The first line rejects in the implication of "hang around," the purgatory of madness, the suspended waiting suggested in the image between being and non-being. The affirmation is within time. Further, the image connects madness with the demonic, in the hovering bat-like

connotations of "hang around" in association with "hospital shift." This is made explicit with "Black Mass." The "shift" is literally the hospital gown and also ironically implies that madness is passivity in opposition to the "excitable gift," and also that madness, for Sexton, has been like an occupation. The implication, in terms of confession is that madness has been an indulgence, a notion which perhaps reflects on her vocation, defined her as it had defined her poety. The "sun" is an unambiguous symbol of life, its light in direct contrast to the connotations of darkness implied by the images for madness and the "Black Mass." It is, as implied in the third stanza, the egg of all creation, with its traditional connotations of re-birth. The "dream," while suggesting a reality other than the material world, simultaneously implies continual possibility experienced and envisioned within the natural cycle.

PART ONE

Chapter II

ANALYSIS OF NINE POEMS BY SYLVIA PLATH

"Lady Lazarus"

"Tulips"

"Elm"

"Two Views of a Cadaver Room"

"Aftermath"

"The Colossus"

"The Hanging Man"

"Child"

"Mystic"

LADY LAZARUS

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

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

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

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

LADY LAZARUS

This poem dramatizes a very extreme, personal experience of suffering, suicide, death and resurrection. It is a statement about the self rooted in history, time and place, where the personal level reflects the twentieth century historical extremity of destruction. The self is necessarily identified with the victim, within a process of reduction and degradation, with the consequent loss of identity and human dignity.

The setting is a shifting scenario: a theatre, an operating room, a circus, which coalesce into a central metaphor for the world. It is also a cosmic drama where the feminine and masculine forces are engaged in a cyclical process of creation and destruction.

The focus of the poem is on the woman who in a series of transformations like interchangeable masks, veils and unveils herself.

The poem opens with a matter-of-fact tone that is ironic. It is a statement of a fait-accompli:

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

The emphasis is not on the act, which is nameless, but on its repetitiveness, creating an ironic framework which allows for the sense of detachment and the mocking tone of the poem. This is also the creation of the necessary distance between the woman who experiences extremity and the poet who creates the experience. "One year in every ten" alludes to a cyclic re-enactment on an implied suicide, and consequent resurrection. "I manage it" suggests a deliberate action, viewed ironically as an accomplishment, and consistent with the theatrical setting. She is the 'stage-manager' of her own drama.

> A sort of walking miracle, my skin
> Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
> My right foot
>
> A paperweight,
> My face a featureless, fine
> Jew linen.

The juxtaposition of implied suicide attempts with concrete images of the holocaust has the shocking impact of a gruesome discovery. Hence "miracle" has horrific and monstrous implications. The image of the resurrected body suggests pain and torture, particularizing her experience as a direct analogy to the victims of Nazi atrocities. She is reduced to weightless skin, kept down by the "paperweight" of her "right foot." The further implication is that like them she is the "featureless" victim. But "linen"

also connotes a veil and by extension, an unveiling.

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

The "linen" is equated with "napkin," the unveiling is macabre. The image "napkin" implies simultaneously a bib and a shroud, fusing on the one hand, life and death, and on the other, suggesting that this inter-dependency is parasitic, cannibalistic, death feeding on life, and life feeding on death. "O my enemy" implies an executioner whose role is reversed, (he resurrects rather than kills), and for whom she is unveiling a terrifying vision of resurrected life. The resurrected body is a skull:

> The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
> The sour breath
> Will vanish in a day.
>
> Soon, soon the flesh
> The grave cave ate will be
> At home on me
>
> And I a smiling woman.
> I am only thirty.
> And like the cat I have nine times to die.

The resurrection of the body is not in terms of a re-birth, but rather a reversal of death and decay. The first image of the skull becomes a cadaver in an initial state of decay. In turn, the cadaver is invoked as gradually regaining the "flesh" that death has eaten and now regurgitates. The image of "sour breath" suggests death's

presence in the body, breathing as it had consumed the body. The "flesh" that is of the grave is "At home" on her, but now it will vanish to reveal the "smiling woman." This is the second unveiling, and the third metamorphosis of the body: from objects, to skull, to woman. She continues to address the "enemy," matching his perverse skills with her own. Her life emerges as a commitment to death: "I have nine times to die." The commitment becomes a triumph.

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

Each stage of her experience, each season and cycle of womanhood (child, adolescent and adult), has been defined by dying. Great energy, as suggested by the pun on "trash," has been expended to obliterate each stage and break the cycle. There have been three attempts to die and three resurrections in the opening lines of the poem. The image of "trash," in the context of "annihilate," concretizes her commitment to death and her exposure to life:

> What a million filaments.
> The peanut-crunching crowd
> Shoves in to see
>
> Them unwrap me hand and foot --
> The big strip tease.
> Gentlemen, ladies

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

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.

The dramatization of resurrection as a spectacle associated with a freak show and a circus, and within it, the operating theatre of a hospital, makes of resurrection a perverse act, which the indifferent sadistic crowd has come to watch. Further, resurrection in this stanza alludes to the popular myth of the 'big time' suicide, dramatized here as the 'comeback' of the celebrity - the "big strip tease." The winding sheet alluded to in "unwrap" is also the veil of the stripper, and the hospital sheet in surgery. Metamorphosing into a side-show barker, she addresses the crowd as "Gentlemen, ladies," conferring upon it a mock respectability. The reverberations of irony are expanded in the image of the skeleton, persecuted exhibited as evidence, simultaneously evoking the body locked into itself, with the further suggestion of a crawling posture. The implication is of reduction and humiliation, which becomes explicit with the next unveiling to reveal the "same, identical woman." The last line of the stanza is also an affirmation of her identity, which may also be on one level self - deprecation, because she stands exposed. As she addresses the audience, she is also addressing herself.

The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

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

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

The revelation takes the form of a confession; and at the same time, a medical case history. She expands and delineates the personal revelation of her suicide attempts, alluded to in stanza eight ("What a trash/To annihilate each decade."), from the first unwilled accidental experience of death to the second deliberate act. Death is here associated with elemental life. The "seashell" as a symbol of birth and rebirth suggests that death is a return to the primary life of the womb. In contrast, the resurrection that she does not will is defined in the context of decay. She has already begun to metamorphose from one state to another, as implied by the equation of "worms" with "pearls." (The "pearl" is implied by the "seashell," which is explicitly invoked in the transformed image of "worms" like "sticky pearls.") Further, she is brought back to life by an impersonal "They" who make her the subject of their will. (In the actual context of the suicide, the "They" are the doctors.) The implication is that she is not

allowed to die. She is the failed suicide who now addresses her audience:

> Dying
> Is an art, like everything else.
> I do it exceptionally well.
>
> I do it so it feels like hell.
> I do it so it feels real.
> I guess you could say I've a call.

The woman makes a statement of fact about her commitment to death, which the almost flippant tone renders macabre. In keeping with the theatrical setting and stance, these lines mockingly recall the confessional soliloquy of the tragic heroine. She is like an actress talking about a part she is playing, the irony being that she is talking about her own life and that these are also serious statements, expressing motives for suicide.

The first statement defines dying as a vocation, suggestive of devotion and singleness of purpose on her part toward suicide, which is envisioned as a creative act. Because it is associated with a creative act, completion and even fulfillment are suggested. On the other hand, this reflects back to the admission that she has failed to complete the act, and this is what makes her a devotee. The second statement ("I do it so it feels like hell.") extends the motive, in terms of suffering and the world. The reference to "hell" is suggested to be the condition

of existence, and in the context of the poem, refers back to the condition of the world, manifested in the references to the victims of the Nazi holocaust, with whom, at this point, she makes a willed identification. The third statement defines dying paradoxically as living. In dying, she experiences being alone. The last statement draws together all previous implications about suicide and dying into a higher, more comprehensive motive, implicit in the "call." The implication is that the commitment extends beyond personal necessity. She is the prophet of death. In the context of the statement, "Dying/Is an art," the allusion is to her poetry as the prophecy of death. And the "call" of this line is in ironic opposition to the "call and call" of stanza fourteen, which brings her back to life. Her 'calling' is for death, and by death, rather than by the doctors and the world. The allusion is also to the actress' "call" to appear on stage, as well as the curtain "call" that ends a play.

The next stanza extends the statement about death and suicide, given the implied condition of the world - imprisonment, which is equated with her own condition:

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

Suicide and death are natural consequences. The phrase

"easy enough" and its repetition, reduces the act to the mundane ordinary task. Implied by "stay put" is the total commitment to death, and not responding to the world or appealing for help. The traditional emotion of fear associated with suicide and death is transferred to the act of resurrection:

> It's the theatrical
>
> Comeback in broad day
> To the same place, the same face, the same brute
> Amused shout:
>
> 'A miracle!'
> That knocks me out.

Resurrection is experienced as a "theatrical" melodrama. The "Comeback" alludes to the cult of the suicidal celebrity making a live stage appearance. The phrase "broad day" is in opposition to the "cell," of the previous stanza, the secrecy and darkness associated with suicide and death. But it is ironic, since it is in the context of the "theatrical/Comeback," which implies deception (she does not really want to come back and she is contemptuous of her audience) and secrecy, since she never entirely reveals herself. The reference here is also to the suicide's "Comeback" in the operating room, an experience she is familiar with. The two references fuse in the "Amused shout" of the audience and the doctors. The implication in both of these

mocking images is to the indifference of the world to suffering, and further, to her own experience of being embodied again. She is the ironic and macabre "walking miracle" of stanza two. The "knocks," implying blows, define the resurrection as a violent act, which relates back to the first part of the poem, where her resurrected body is an atrocity. It's not death but life that reduces her to a freak, whose grotesque condition becomes an entertaining commodity:

> There is a charge
>
> For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
> For the hearing of my heart --
> It really goes.
>
> And there is a charge, a very large charge
> For a word or a touch
> Or a bit of blood
>
> Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
> So, so, Herr Doktor.
> So, Herr Enemy.

The "miracle" is reduced to a circus peep-show and she is a relic exhibiting her scars. The parody of the side-show barker, "It really goes," implies that she is a put-together being, a grotesque toy, some shoddy merchandise. In relation to the crowd, the "charge" is the cheap thrill they will experience and the money they will have to pay. The "charge" also implies that they cannot remain

indifferent, that they will 'pay' in being witnesses, and then participants.

In the context of the "very large charge," the celebrity of the "Comeback" is ironically and in a dégraded form, linked to the cult worship of saints, which becomes horrific when the 'blessings' ("word or a touch") are suddenly reduced to a "bit of blood." The implication is that she is being pulled apart. The further implication is that, as was suggested above, the price they have to pay is in their transformation from idle, curious and passive spectators (the "peanut crunching crowd") to the implicated and active participants in a drama of resurrection conceived of as murder. She is the sacrificial victim being torn to shreds and stripped, the "piece of. . . hair" and the "clothes" becoming horrible souvenirs.

In the next line, the focus shifts from the crowd to "Herr Doktor," who suddenly metamorphoses from the vague, shadowy "enemy" of stanza four. The identification of "Herr Doktor" with "Herr Enemy," linked with the images of a fragmented body, defines him as the Nazi executioner and the demonic magician who performs and experiments with the human body as an art:

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

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

She addresses "Herr Doktor," who is literally 'her' doctor who resuscitates her after her suicide attempt, in a parody of the ironic familiarity between the victim and the executioner. She is his greatest artistic achievement ("opus") that implies an aesthetic concern on his part, which is sustained by references to gold treasure. The various transformations the woman undergoes, the last being the "pure gold baby" who "melts to a shriek," is what makes the performance of the doctor a magical act. In this context she is the "valuable" that draws the crowds. "Herr Doktor" is finally symbolic of man and the destructive masculine force. In this sense, the 'magic' is implied erotic transformation of the woman's body from a desired object to the "shriek" of orgasm, suggesting that the experience of sexual consummation is a reductive, painful, humiliating violation. The emphasis shifts from the doctor back to the way she experiences the transformations. "I turn and burn" sustains the erotic implications, and further, suggests that the resurrection is the ultimate reduction. The

metaphor of burning, while it alludes to her intense experience of pain and suffering, evokes the dissolution of the body in the concentration camps, fusing the personal and the public, linking the final stage of resurrection to the beginning of the poem. The "great concern" which is clearly demonic, is an ironic reversal of the humanitarian doctor's dedication to humanity. "Do not think I underestimate" suggests her awareness of the nature of her enemy and his ultimate concern, which he denies. Ironically, for "Herr Doktor," there is nothing further than the [redacted]tion to objects.

> Ash, ash --
> You poke and stir.
> Flesh, bone, there is nothing there --
>
> A cake of soap,
> A wedding ring,
> A gold filling.
>
> Herr God, Herr Lucifer

These final stanzas re-invoke the doctor operating and experimenting ("poke") on the live body, and reducing it to its valuables. (The erotic connotations are also sustained.) The suggestion is again of the concentration camp and the continuing immediacy of that experience in the world, since the doctor here becomes the embodiment of man, who is responsible. The "cake of soap," the "wedding ring," and the "gold filling" are the literal remains of

the victims of the concentration camps and are linked to the 'relics' of the ironic saint invoked in stanzas twenty-one and twenty-two. The doctor becomes a supernatural figure, but since the reference is ironic ("Herr God, Herr Lucifer"), he is mere man who has usurped power.

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

The implication of these lines is that she finally arrives at the real resurrection, rather than the grotesque and ludicrous performance that has been invoked. Since she has been reduced to nothing ("Ash, ash"), all that is left is the prophetic voice of her poetry. In this context, the final stanza is an affirmation of the poet as woman, rising from death like a phoenix; a killer too but in the context of vengeance, the revenge of earth itself: "Beware/ Beware." On another level, she is Lilith, the terrible earth mother who swallows her own children; and in that sense, this is the last unveiling. Ultimately, the whole context of death feeding on life becomes re-defined as a final consummation (she is the flame eating air), as an erotic act (woman having risen like Venus), and as an embodiment of death to take life back into herself.

TULIPS

The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.
Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.
I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons.

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff
Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.
Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.
The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,
They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps,
Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another,
So it is impossible to tell how many there are.

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.
They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring
me sleep.
Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage --
My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

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 my loving associations.
Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley
I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.
I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be 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.

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their colour,
A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.

Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.
The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me
Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,
And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.
The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.

Before they came the air was calm enough,
Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.
Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise.
Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river
Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.
They concentrate my attention, that was happy
Playing and resting without committing itself.

The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves.
The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,
And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country far away as health.

TULIPS

The structure of the poem is based on the dynamics of correspondence between the central image - "tulips," and the experience of the "I," - the patient, (poet), in a hospital ward.

The tulips are the focal point of the poem and the patient. They are the 'eye," like the universal eye of the sun, that watches the patient's agony, reminding her like other objects in the poem that to live is to be "hooked" to association, to commitment in this world. The tulips are the nails that hold her to her cross. She has no will to live, yet they focus on what is lost, what could have been and what still is. They are the bell-shaped flowers that bring on the storm, the experience of the void. They correspond to the patient's body (its wounds and its heart). They correspond to the life forces (gift of life and gift of pain). They are predatory and life giving.

The poem opens on a statement juxtaposing two images: "tulips" and "winter," that invoke antithetical associations.

> The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.
> Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in

On the most obvious level, the allusion is to nature:

blossoming flowers and a dying season. Further, they denote opposite stages in the cycle of the year. These images epitomize the dialectic of life and death, motion and stasis, silence and noise. The "winter" particularizes the setting, a hospital where the "I" is a patient, but the focus of the poem and of the patient are the "tulips." They are introduced as "excitable," invoking them as autonomous and animate, which is in direct contrast to the physical experience of the I.

I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.
I am nobody: I have nothing to do with explosions.
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons.

"I am learning peacefulness," "laying by myself quietly," "I am nobody," are statements in a sequence that define the physical and suggest the emotional state of the patient, which is passive, inert and disembodied. Further, the connotations of these images align the experience of the patient with the setting - her perceptions and experience of the winter are one. She is "snowed-in," cut off, separated, immobile. The general context of the setting of winter alludes to death and so appropriately, though paradoxically, the patient experiences herself as dead: "I am nobody." In contrast, the "tulips" are an "explosion" of colour and substance. She is a non-entity: she has given up her formal

identity. She is divested of her appearance and her past; she has relinquished her body to the violation of the surgeons. Having suffered transformation and transmutation, she lies in quietly, like the winter.

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff
Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.
Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.
The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,
They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps,
Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another,
So it is impossible to tell how many there are.

The suggestion of fragmentation and disembodiment is developed further in stanza two. While defining her physical helplessness, the image of the "propped . . . head" also alludes to her as a doll, although not lifeless. However, the symbolism of the single eye expresses ambivalence that alludes to both creative and destructive forces, of which she becomes the embodiment. Further, the single eye is the instrument of supra-natural perception. She is also the passive observer in a state of total absorption, inert as if she were nothing but a giant eye in a state of gestation. On another level, recording all experience, the eye becomes an overly eager but dense student: "Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in."

The nurses are like seagulls, remote and silent. They are of the sameness of seagulls, as if the same one were infinitely multiplied. The image of the nurses as

"gulls" passing "inland" implies their remoteness and reflects back on the patient, as if she were lying on the seashore between earth and water. This emphasizes her state as an experience that is ethereal and elemental, neither fully conscious nor unconscious.

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.
They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep.

Stanza three develops the image of the patient and the nurses and their relationship on an elemental level: The "body is a pebble to them." The image of the stone refers back to the pupil but an inverted metamorphosis is implied; she has solidified like a fossil. She is a "pebble" that "they tend as water." The nurses in their silent activity are archetypally maternal, soothing and gentle: "They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep." The allusion is clearly a death-wish - a return to the mother. She seeks to be motionless and void of feeling like the stone, a desirable state.

Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage --
My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

In contrast to this refuge, being conscious as a woman and a mother is experienced as a negation and a loss.

As she relinquishes her identity, she rejects her possessions, which are a burden to her. Life and love are painful attachments. The photo is a symbol of her separation, loneliness and love. She is painfully lured by life. The baggage, the "overnight case," equated with the "black pillbox" and the photo have simultaneously victimized and sustained her.

> 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 my loving associations.
> Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley
> I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books
> Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.
> I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

Stanza four makes the transition from the patient's consciousness, centered on the "family photo" and the burden of her attachments, to an existential re-assessment of herself. The motif of the journey and herself as a ship adrift, expands the sea imagery of stanzas two and three. It is a return to the sea, connotative of dying. Gradually, she feels afloat; the sea takes over and she drowns as she loses consciousness and is wheeled in for the operation. "I have let things slip" refers back to the previous stanza and emphasizes her lack of control while maintaining an appearance of identity, "Stubbornly hanging onto my name and address." However, the reference is double-edged, for while she sees herself in terms of her past, "a thirty-year-

old," it is also simultaneously defining her experience under the influence of the "bright needles" of stanza four, awaiting the operation. In this latter sense, her body is like a ship being "swabbed," its cargo connotative of heaviness and possessions, pinpointing her physical state. On the "trolley," she experiences drifting into a kind of naked fear. Exposed, she feels dispossessed and victimized, and in spite of fear, she sees herself with a sense of irony. The metaphor of the ship takes on different connotations when her familiar world of personal and feminine belongings, "sink out of sight," and she loses contact with them. She experiences total immersion, a drowning.

The last image of herself as a nun focuses all the previous allusions to attachments and possessions, which have been associated with the body and physical reality. Now she has nobody and nothing (which is emphasized by the pun on "nun"). She has entered a different dimension of experience, without objects and without forms: "I have never been so pure."

Stanza five begins the second half of the poem. The emphasis is balanced between the patient and the "tulips," whereas all previous stanzas but one centered on the woman/patient. It is the direct reference back to

stanza one and the "tulips" that reveals the structure of the poem within time and space. The poem begins in a hospital room after the operation. It re-capitulates, in the first half, the patient's experience just before the operation and concludes, in the second half, with the patient's recovery.

> I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
> To lie with my hands turned up and be 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.

The first line evokes the presence of the external world in terms of a gift and, by extension, her family, and within a wider perspective, life. She then particularizes her rejection of life and her desire for death. It is, in fact, an evocation of herself as dead. Death is equated with "peacefulness," and what she "imagine(s)" as the final absolution. The reference is to extreme unction, the point where death is received like a sacrament, which has the implication that death is a renewal. Death is a sustenance for her. The further reference is to the previously suggested disembodiment, which she experiences now as a release into the spirit, which, for her, is equated with death.

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their colour,
A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.

Stanza six shifts emphasis from the self that experiences peace to the "tulips." They represent the life that she does not will, that draws her back to her attachments, as a woman, wife and mother, and away from "peacefulness." Their concentrated life is painful: They "are too red," they invoke life as the gift of pain. She experiences them as new-born, raw life: "an awful baby." The "tulips" are shocking and demanding: "Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds." They re-awaken her consciousness of herself, making an urgent demand on her as a mother who experiences love as an affliction. It is a recognition that she does not will. Yet the correspondence is unclear. The tulips are evasive, mysterious, "subtle." They focus attention to this world; they invoke gravity and at the same time "seem to float" weightless, reflecting her. She is emerging from a state of non-involvement, and the awareness of the world is emotionally upsetting and physically, a disturbance that causes pain. She is hypersensitive and therefore vulnerable. The "red lead sinkers" are a metamorphosed

image of the "tulips," suggesting a leaden wreath that is funereal and ironically festive. The "sinkers" also identify her with a caught fish, a link to the image of being "hooked" in stanza four. This image of drowning refers back to stanza three and four in the context of being alive but overwhelmed by life. Now the implications are concretized in the image of the bottom, the experience of the void.

Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.
The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me
Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,
And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,
And I have no face, I have wanted to erface myself.
The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.

Stanza seven extends the anthropomorphic connotations of the "tulips." They have an autonomy that is becoming threatening. In the first part of the poem, the "tulips" were merely a presence, now the "tulips turn" to her. But they are also a reminder. They make her self-conscious that she has no substance, she does not feel centered, she experiences life outside of herself. The image of the centre, "the eyes," refers back to the first stanza where she was the sole centre of experience. Now her attention is drawn outside herself, but she has no sense of her human identity: she has "no face." The "tulips" have absorbed her. At the same time, she is aware

of her own desire to become a non-entity, "efface myself, a reference to her personal suicidal history. Paradoxically, she is also aware that as the tulips resuscitate her, they destroy her, feeding on her "oxygen." As she grows more conscious, they become more threatening and carnivorous.

> Before they came the air was calm enough,
> Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.
> Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise.
> Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river
> Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.
> They concentrate my attention, that was happy
> Playing and resting without committing itself.

Stanza eight focuses on the "tulips" as the focal point of the changing perception of the patient. She is unwittingly drawn into acknowledging and articulating the change: "Before they came the air was calm enough." Balanced between life and death, she felt at peace: "Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss." There were no demands on her; she was uncommitted. The change is dramatic, from silence and withdrawal, back to the "excitable" world: "Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise." Ironically invoking the arrival of a new born, (expanding the connotations of the "awful baby"), the "tulips," in spite of the threat, are the source of the patient's re-awakening. They are an embodiment of sensual being, a reference back to the "explosions" of stanza one.

But they are also as unrelated to her as discarded metal. "Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river/ Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine." This statement epitomizes her sense of the change. The metaphor is of navigation; the "tulips" are an obstacle in the unconscious flow of her being. They create a whirlpool that draws her back into the void with which she equates life. Returning to consciousness is analogous to losing the freedom and spontaneity of the innocence, implied by "Playing and resting."

The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves:
The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,
And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country far away as health.

The last stanza dramatizes the reviving of the patient's consciousness by the "tulips" through the metaphor of transfusion. The "tulips" are life-giving; they reflect life and love. They are the gift of the patient's husband and child. However, it is precisely as the source of being that the "tulips" are experienced by the patient as a devouring primordial force. Yet, as the embodiment of energy that is primeval, the "tulips" also correspond to the patient's "heart." On another level, the correspondence between the tulips and her heart suggests that she,

like the tulips, is 'cut off'. They are separated from their roots, as with Plath. In this state, identification is made with both life and death. However, her victimized consciousness is focused on death and violence. It demands a state of health to heal the split and accept life.

It is the very ambiguity of the "tulips" that reflects her own ambiguous desire and longing, to die and to love. The final image suggests re-birth or self-renewal: "The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,/And comes from a country far away as health." The image evokes the swimmer who surfaces to a realization of her loss.

ELM

For Ruth Fainlight

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
It is what you fear.
I do not fear it: I have been there.

Is it the sea you hear in me,
Its dissatisfactions?
Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?

Love is a shadow.
How you lie and cry after it
Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,
Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,
Echoing, echoing.

Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?
This is rain now, this big hush.
And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic.

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.
Scorched to the root
My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
A wind of such violence
Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.

The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me
Cruelly, being barren.
Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.

I let her go. I let her go/
Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.
How your bad dreams possess and endow me.

I am inhabited by a cry.
Nightly it flaps out
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?

I am incapable of more knowledge.
What is this, this face
So murderous in its strangle of branches? --

Its snaky acids kiss.
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
That kill, that kill, that kill.

ELM

The tree is the central metaphor that allows the poet to explore dimensions of her own depth of experience. The poem focuses on the tree, as the symbol of the life of the cosmos with which the poet identifies. She is like the tree, rooted in the earth but subject to forces that ambiguously nourish and destroy her. Love and death are the polarities of her being. Suffering and madness and the consequent fragmentation of self are translated into a cosmic drama made articulate audio/visually, like a dreamscape of fantastic and elemental sequences. The poem can therefore be read as an exploration of being.

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
It is what you fear.
I do not fear it: I have been there.

The first stanza introduces the dual identity of the poet - the "I", that identifies herself naturally and instinctually through knowledge and experience of her own source of being with the elm: "I know the bottom, she says." The impersonal "you" is defined by fear and ignorance. The dichotomy between the "I" and the "you" seems irreconcilable. The "I" has penetrated to the farthest limits of her being and like the tree that taps its source of

nourishment to grow, so the "I" journeys through darkness into the unknown to the center of her being to return knowing. The image carries the suggestion of sexual consummation insofar as the tree has phallic connotations and the earth is womb-like. (This integration of masculine and feminine principles is characteristic of Plath.)

> Is it the sea you hear in me,
> Its dissatisfactions?
> Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?

In stanza two the dichotomy between "I" and "you," now phrased as a question (a self questioning), suggests a dialectic with the implication of a possible dialogue of self and the other and perhaps a synthesis. It also suggests an awareness on the part of "I" and her attempt to articulate 'knowing', and an attentiveness on the part of "you" listening. The image of the sea refers back to "I" knowing the "bottom" -- of having been submerged and now surfacing. This also alludes to the sexual implications of stanza one, in the suggested consummation of the self with the other.

The original connotation of "bottom" as the origin and simultaneously the lowest and last dimension of being is reiterated in the symbolism of the sea which qualifies the experience of "I" as a death and a rebirth. However

the emphasis is on verbalizing the nature of being, the turbulence translated as the sound of the sea, "Its dissatisfactions," which intimates a perpetual longing in the sense that it reflects the breath of desire which is the embodiment of being, concretized as the sea, the tree and the woman. Further, the sound of the word "dissatisfactions," particularly in the sibilants, evokes the literal physical presence of the sea and simultaneously, the rustling of the tree. The "I" is identified with the elemental manifestations of life and longing because unlike "you" she does not fear the void, the experience of non-being: "the voice of nothing, that was your madness."

> Love is a shadow.
> How you lie and cry after it
> Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off,
> like a horse.

Stanza three articulates the ambiguity of the extreme and ultimate human passion - love, the symbol of harmony and union, the goal towards which all things strive, and paradoxically, the cause of intense suffering and madness: "Love is a shadow./How you lie and cry after it." The emphasis on "you" is, in one sense, passive, and in another, deceitful, striving in vain desperation to hold fast to her own unfulfilled desire, unable to make the distinction between reality and illusion. The "I" admonishes

giving form to the reality of love, defining the ephemeral nature of love but emphasizing its substantiality as suggested in the symbol of the horse, that is, instinctual and of the body. In another sense, the setting recalls the passionate but shadowy world of the demon-lover, who in departing, leaves a wailing creature behind.

> All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,
> Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,
> Echoing, echoing.

Stanza four extends the dialogue and the image, evoking a nightmarish sequence where "I" fuses the identity of the horse and the rider with the further implication that love is an unconscious instinctual force that must be mastered, the way a rider achieves mastery of his horse. The movement is wild and violent, paralleling the implied metamorphosis of the "I." She is aggressive and unrestrained. She takes on the power of the male and the lover. The implied action is sexual, the symbolic connotations ambiguously suggesting a reconciliation of the self and the other - a re-integration of the passive principle of oneself by the active or the killing of the passive principle: "I shall gallop . . ./Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf." Lying down, lying asleep and dying define "you" as the weaker self that must be stilled and

re-absorbed by the stronger. The "Echoing, echoing," reiterates the implied loss of love of the previous stanza, here particularizing "you" as the reverberation of "I."

> Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?
> This is rain now, this big hush.
> And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic.

Stanza five opens with an alternative proposition suggesting the failure of union between "I" and "you," although the dialogue is still open. The "sound of poisons" implies a slow imminent death, which is sustained by the lethal connotations of the changing seasons. The "rain" as the fertilizing agent, here becomes the harbinger of destruction, an inversion which refers to the general context of inversion. This reversal, underlying the poem, becomes explicit in the following stanzas.

> I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.
> Scorched to the root
> My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

Stanza six dramatizes the nature and extent of conscious suffering through the anthropomorphic vision of the elm. The emphasis changes from "you" in the context of madness and loss, to "I" whose vulnerability is her consciousness. It is the destruction wrought by life that becomes the focal point, now articulated in images of such violence, that the images of suffering and death associated with "you" pale by comparison into mere self delusions.

The allusion is to the cyclical intensity of exposure to life where beauty, love and light are equated with heinous pain and torture. Like an elm exposed to the elements, she experiences painful transformations. "My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires." The image of the sun is predatory; the exposed fibres and nerves through the association with "hand," evoke gruesome connotations, suggesting the charred remains of flesh and the withered stump of the tree. Perhaps the most startling allusion in this image is the metamorphosis from tree to hand in a pleading and grasping gesture.

> Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
> A wind of such violence
> Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.

Stanza seven develops the identity between the "I" and the tree. The tree exposed to the elemental forces of nature that destroy it, mirrors the fragmentation of being experienced by the woman making explicit her suffering in time. This is re-inforced by the transition from the past suffering inferred in stanza six, to the present suffering and breakdown. Although the connotations of fragmentation and dismemberment focus on the physical and very visual context of the storm-tossed tree, the emphasis is on what the woman perceives and experiences, reflecting back to her

initial breakdown. It is re-enacted in the tree's devastation. She is the tree but she is also a being apart that is conscious of her suffering. The "wind" symbolically denotes the breath of life, which defined as violent and causing violence evokes a nightmarish vision of life engendering the seed of destruction. "I must shriek" is a climactic conclusion that draws together all the manifest suffering into the woman and the tree, simultaneously giving it voice.

> The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me
> Cruelly, being barren.
> Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.

Stanza eight expands on the extremity of the suffering "I" dramatized in a setting that has the fluidity of dream, where desire and pain are embodied. Like the tree, the woman is vulnerable to the dual elemental forces that vie over her. There is no respite in her suffering. Exposed alike to the day and night - to the penetrating rays of the sun, symbolic of the active masculine conscious principle, that dries up her very being. Now in stanza eight, the image of her extremity is expanded to the "moon" that has the power to dredge and also renew. The moon is also a symbol of fertility and sterility. As the embodiment of the passive unconscious feminine principle, it reflects in its phases the painful metamorphoses of the

woman which extends the theme of dismemberment of the previous stanza. However, the emphasis is on the moon's mastery over the woman. Silent and barren, giving no light of its own, the moon is yet radiant. The moon waxes, but the woman wanes; the moon's fullness reflects the woman's sterility. She feels blasted, withering. The moon becomes a symbol of a desired state of being linked to the moon's periodic renewal and her deathly power towards which the woman aspires. The forces of attraction and repulsion that define the dynamics between the earth and the sky that connect the moon and the woman are finally conceived of as an embrace: "I have caught her."

> I let her go. I let her go
> Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.
> How your bad dreams possess and endow me.

Stanza nine elaborates on this phantasmagoric identity of woman and moon: the first line is in a sense an affirmation of the woman's own identity, that though reflecting the phases of the moon, is nevertheless, autonomous. The context is reversed, the woman becomes stronger, the moon reflecting her weakness and pain. Yet the woman is nevertheless subject to her own self-reflection dramatized in the persona of "you." The line, "How your bad dreams possess and endow me," shifts the emphasis once again from the concentrated predicament of the "I" to

include "you," that other weaker self defined by madness, now revealed in a new light. The roles seem reversed. It is as if the moon has illuminated a new realization. "You" is now re-experienced as stronger, with the implicit sense of foreboding. The word "possess" connotes a taking over, of being enthralled, while "endow" suggests being given, enlarged, but defined by "your bad dreams" stresses the distinction between "you" and "I," although the initial relationship seems to have become inverted. But "you" still remains as abstract and alien as before, in spite of its growing power.

> I am inhabited by a cry.
> Nightly it flaps out
> Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

Stanza ten makes the transition from the previous stanza by particularizing the implicit new experience as a 'possession': the "you" emerges from the shadow to be given form as a creature from the realms of the night and the magic of the moon. Like a giant carnivorous bird that has made its nest in the elm, it is a creature that epitomizes the desperation of the soul that seeks love. Love is experienced as predatory in two basic senses: it grows like a disease in oneself and like a bird of prey it feeds on others. Like the elemental forces external to oneself (the sun, wind, and moon), love is life-taking.

The essence of selfhood is given the same predatory necessity that defined the external forces.

I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

Stanza eleven is an extension of the intensely felt experience of the previous stanza. The focus is on fear and the unknown in relation to "I" which is a reference back to stanza one, where "I" conceives of herself as knowledgeable, beyond fear and importuned by the fear that defines "you." This is a dramatic reversal because the "you" is experienced within but is frighteningly alien: "this dark thing/That sleeps in me." This experience is associated with consciousness equated with day but the nightmare is continuous: "All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity." Because this image of inhabitation is associated with love and the allusions to the nest and the womb, it evokes a child, or more precisely, a monstrous conception that is deadly and evil.

Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?

Stanza twelve shifts in movement, tone and emphasis from the intensely felt experience of stanza eleven to an observation of natural phenomena, which suggests a detachment intimating that the "I" has come full circle in her

experience. This may be a new cycle, another dimension in the experience of "I." The "clouds" are a metaphor that reiterates the statement, question and experience of love. They are symbolic of what is ephemeral and temporal. Love is within time. The reference is back to "Love is a shadow" of stanza three, with the further implication that love is illusory and we are forever haunted by appearances. The last line focuses and questions the ultimate meaning of love and life.

> I am incapable of more knowledge.
> What is this, this face
> So murderous in its strangle of branches? --

Stanza thirteen answers and concludes the questioning: "I am incapable of more knowledge." This is a statement of having reached the limits, and it refers back to the initial experience of "I" knowing "the bottom" in stanza one. She has completed the full cycle, the unending debate with herself, and it is an acknowledgement of the helplessness of the "I." A new distinction is suggested by "this face," an apparition that refers back to "this dark thing" of stanza eleven, but its murderous intent is made now concrete. As her own reflection, it refers back to that "you" that has finally overwhelmed her.

> Its snaky acids kiss.
> It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
> That kill, that kill, that kill.

The last stanza is an allusion to the tree of knowledge and the tree of death, denoting entanglement in the world of phenomena. The final image of love suggests betrayal and poisons and is linked to the reference to poisoned love in stanza five. Love is a temptation with the further implication that its bitter consummation paralyzes and destroys selfhood. Love and the quest for self-knowledge ends in relinquishment and bitter resignation. Desire turns to stone. The repetition and sound effects in the last line is like that of a death knell.

TWO VIEWS OF A CADAVER ROOM

1

The day she visited the dissecting room
They had four men laid out, black as burnt turkey,
Already half unstrung. A vinegary fume
Of the death vats clung to them;
The white-smocked boys started working.
The head of his cadaver had caved in.
And she could scarcely make out anything
In that rubble of skull plates and old leather.
A sallow piece of string held it together.

In their jars the snail-nosed babies moon and glow.
He hands her the cut-out heart like a cracked heirloom.

2

In Brueghel's panorama of smoke and slaughter
Two people only are blind to the carrion army:
He, afloat in the sea of her blue satin
Skirts, sings in the direction
Of her bare shoulder, while she bends,
Fingering a leaflet of music, over him,
Both of them deaf to the fiddle in the hands
Of the death's-head shadowing their song.
These Flemish lovers flourish: not for long.

Yet desolation, stalled in paint, spares the little country
Foolish, delicate, in the lower right hand corner.

TWO VIEWS OF A CADAVER ROOM

This poem in two stanzas articulates two distinct yet analogous visions of reality. Each centers on the image of lovers and the omnipresence of death. The first stanza explores the contemporary scene of carnage - the dissecting room. This is the setting for an ironic rendezvous. The first vision is gruesome, impersonal, where death is triumphant. Stanza two is Brueghel's Flemish vision. Here too the ultimate reality is death, yet the embrace of the lovers redeems the scene of violated putrefying flesh. In stanza one the images of death overshadow life and even become inverted images of death like the dead embryos and the "cut-out heart." In stanza two life and love "flourish" though they are circumscribed by death.

The central pattern of imagery of the first stanza is of the body. The body dismembered, mutilated, decaying, cut-up, examined, and exhibited. The tone and image of the opening line is matter-of-fact and commonplace. However, the connotations of "The day" and the impersonal "she" become ominous in the context:

> The day she visited the dissecting room
> They had four men laid out, black as burnt turkey,
> Already half unstrung. A vinegary fume
> Of the death vats clung to them;
> The white-smoked boys started working.

In another sense, "The day" recalls the appointed hour, the meeting with death. The dead bodies "laid out" suggests a display organized for her benefit. The subsequent analogy with food is startling. The immediate associations are to cannibalism and a butcher's shop, and further to a banquet that has been spoilt. These associations are further developed in the following analogy of the body as instrument. The body that is "half unstrung," or out of tone and tune. The reverberations of these associations allude, perhaps, to some perverse carnival. The food imagery is extended further through the implicit analogy of the body as food being preserved and decaying. The cadavers are like preserved pickles left to season. Also death is actualized in the connotations of charred bodies. In short, a hellish setting is evoked.

"The white-smocked boys," linked back to the image of "burnt turkey," become butchers and cooks, and in the context of the allusion to preserved food, shop assistants. On another level, the poet makes a distinction between the cadavers as "men" and the living medical students as "boys," which suggests that they have taken over and are going about it as in a game. The image of "that rubble of skull plates and old leather" bears this out. Her confrontation with death takes place in a background of boys studying the

anatomy of death.

With the following lines the tone shifts from the general setting to the particular circumstance - the visit:

> The head of his cadaver had caved in,
> And she could scarcely make out anything
> In that rubble of skull plates and old leather.
> A sallow piece of string held it together.

"He" and "she" becomes the focal point, and in the context the connotations are of fumbling, of being inept. The final image is of triumphant death. She is blinded and the whole thing is falling apart.

> In their jars the snail-nosed babies moon and glow.
> He hands her the cut-out heart like a cracked heirloom.

Life is arrested and preserved. The half-developed embryos are also on exhibit. Death is in the embryo and in man. The connotations of "moon and glow" make the "babies" have a semblance of life. In another sense the image is both ordinary (a commonplace detail in a hospital) and horrific (like some science fiction test tube babies).

In another sense dead babies in the context of 'lovers' undermines whatever connotations of fertility and celebration the image evokes. The stanza ends with an explicit parody of an offering of love. The gesture evoked in "He hands her the cut-out heart" recalls the butcher shop and simultaneously evokes a sacrificial rite. The qualifying image of the heart as "a cracked heirloom" makes

of the whole scene a mock testimonial of love. He offers her what has been the treasure for generations which, while it recalls some barbaric ancient ritual, in the contemporary context, it implies madness - the act is performed literally. There are no redeeming implications.

Stanza two describes Brueghel's vision of love and death:

> In Brueghel's panorama of smoke and slaughter
> Two people only are blind to the carrion army:

Although as in the previous stanza the presence of death is irreducible, it is here overshadowed by life and love epitomized in the song and embrace of the lovers:

> He, afloat in the sea of her blue satin
> Skirts, sings in the direction
> Of her bare shoulder, while she bends,
> Fingering a leaflet of music, over him,

The image of life as a battleground is superseded by the lovers who are associated with elemental and aesthetic life. And unlike the contemporary vision with its connotations of sickness and cannibalism, the medieval vision is a tragic allegory of the force of love: "These Flemish lovers flourish; not for long." (l.20). Also a significant distinction is being made between the natural, pastoral setting of this stanza and the clinical enclosed contemporary scene. In the first stanza death is manifest in all stages of life. Death is everywhere and everything.

The "white smocked boys" are as much a manifestation of death as the impersonal "He" and "she." In Brueghel's world death is personified and therefore humanized on an archetypal dimension, with the implication that it is closely akin to love: "death" is a musician:

> Both of them leaf to the fiddle in the hands
> Of the death's head shadowing their song.
> These Flemish lovers flourish; not for long:

Death woos them, though they do not hear its song, and in that, though momentary, is their triumph. Although death is closely bound up with life, it is also associated with the source of life and its harmony as substantiated by the symbolism of music. Also, death, "shadowing their song," is associated with passion in the general context of man and the lovers. Ultimately death is a mysterious figure.

In the last stanza there is a general sense of the temporality of life and death's inscrutability versus the gruesome meaninglessness of the first stanza. And again, the refrain of stanza two,

> desolation, stalled in paint, spares the
> little country
> Foolish, deli[illegible] in the lower right hand
> corner.

counterbalances the hopelessness implicit in the refrain of the first stanza and its setting of a "Cadaver Room." Here something of permanence is evoked - man in his simplicity, "the little country," attains a peacefulness that knows no

tragedy. However, the poet makes it explicit that the vision is contained. It is after all a painting.

AFTERMATH

Compelled by calamity's magnet
They loiter and stare as if the house
Burnt-out were theirs, or as if they thought
Some scandal might any minute ooze
From a smoke-choked closet into light;
No deaths, no prodigious injuries
Glut these hunters after an old meat,
Blood-spoor of the austere tragedies.

Mother Medea in a green smock
Moves humbly as any housewife through
Her ruined apartments, taking stock
Of charred shoes, the sodden upholstery:
Cheated of the pyre and the rack,
The crowd sucks her last tear and turns away.

AFTERMATH

The central thematic pattern in this poem is death and suffering. This is the "planet" that attracts and feeds the living. The setting is a burnt house, but the focal point is the crowd that has gathered to watch:

> Compelled by calamity's magnet
> They loiter and stare as if the house
> Burnt-out were theirs, or as if they thought
> Some scandal might any minute out-
> From a smoke-choked closet into light;

Although the first stanza is based on the literal description of a not uncommon occurrence after a fire, the reverberations invoked by the patterns of imagery emphasize the reaction of an impersonal "They" make the vision surrealistic and hauntingly. Plath conjures up a public which is both spectral and very concrete, in keeping with the anonymous ever-present public of the urban twentieth century. The faceless "They" suggests a dual role of witness and participant, bystanders identifying with another's calamity. The horror of their "Compelled" attraction to "calamity," and the "scandal" that a disaster might reveal, is reinforced by the inference that the "scandal" of something private made public will not only give satisfaction, in that the public disclosure involves something disgraceful, but also that the "scandal" is something skeletal, in the "closet," evoking a human body that has been "smoke-choked,"

that "might any minute ooze" from the closet like a decomposed corpse, like a secret crime, and that it takes a "calamity" such as fire to expose it to the "light" of public justice. However, the crowd is less a jury of impartial witnesses than a jury of vulturous ghouls "who loiter and stare" waiting, half merged in the surrounding darkness, to feed off the "scandal."

> No deaths, no prodigious injuries
> Glut these hunters after an old meat,
> Blood-spoor of the austere tragedies.

However, the crowd gather not to see actual death or blood. They are like a dramatic chorus, who like tracking-dogs scent out the "scandal" like "old meat" which "calamity" has ensnared. The "magnet" of fire is like the "magnet" of scandal and also blood. The crowd re-enacts man's ancient ghastly blood-lust. They are "hunters" who are "compelled" without will, purpose or direction, to witness tragedy, and to participate in the sacrificial tragic rite of blood, as it is in the "austere tragedies" of Greek drama and Christian myth. Further "austere tragedies" evokes an archetypal dimension that suggests a universality and permanence that qualifies "They" as the temporal, unchanging human condition.

In stanza two the poem's focus shifts from the crowd to "calamity's" victim and the archetypal allusions

are developed further in the context of the mythic terrible mother, Medea.

> Mother Medea in a green smock
> Moves humbly as any housewife through
> Her ruined apartments, taking stock
> Of charred shoes, the sodden upholstery:

The "green smock" she wears and the way she moves through the burnt-out ruins of the house, not only contrasts her visually against the crowd and the "charred" setting of rooms and objects, but also heightens the effect of the woman's comparison to "Mother Medea." She embodies the figure of the suffering mother, although simultaneously she is a sinister force of renewal, the terrible mother of the "austere tragedies" who kills her own children. The allusion creates the implication that the woman has set fire to her own house, and now assesses the evidence of the crime. The connotations of "green" as the most ambiguous colour in the spectrum would substantiate her double image, as would the mythic reference to her as magician and sorceress. That is, although she is the archetypal figure of destruction and death, she is in this context an ironic symbol of life.

On another level, "Medea" becomes the projection of the crowd, who, watching the drama of an actual calamity, fantasize their blood-lust and dramatize unconsciously the

events into a vision of horror.

> Cheated of the pyre and the rack,
> The crowd sucks her last tear and turns away.

They are not given satisfaction. They witness only the "Aftermath" of the event. They are too late to "Glut" themselves on images of actual torture and suffering which preceed death in the ritual of sacrifice. Starved, the crowd feeds on its own fantasies. They are like the "peanut crunching crowd" of "Lady Lazarus," depraved, sensation hunting, ghoulish humanity, who, having lost the meaning of "Blood-spoor of the austere tragedies," "turns away" pitilessly.

THE COLOSSUS

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.
It's worse than a barnyard.

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
Thirty years now I have laboured
To dredge the silt from your throat.
I am none the wiser.

Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of lysol
I crawl like an ant in mourning
Over the weedy acres of your brow
To mend the immense skull-plates and clear
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

A blue sky out of the Oresteia
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.
I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress.
Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered

In their old anarchy to the horizon-line.
It would take more than a lightning-stroke
To create such a ruin.
Nights, I squat in the cornucopia
Of your left ear, out of the wind,

Counting the red stars and those of plum-colour.
The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
My hours are married to shadow.
No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
On the blank stones of the landing.

THE COLOSSUS

The title suggests the allusion to the Colossus of Rhodes, evoking the ancient mythic world of the gods. The significance of myth is to be understood from the perspective of the contemporary experience of it. The poet is the archeologist/excavator/restorer digging up and piecing together the scattered and buried remains on the site of a ruin. The setting evokes an actual landscape as well as a mythic scenario: the ruins of the ancient world in a contemporary landscape.

The central thematic structure of the poem is fragmentation and death. The central pattern of imagery is of the broken dead body. The Colossus, the broken statue, is symbolic of man, father, god and, in the general context of the poem, it is a metaphor for the world. The "I," apart from being an archeologist, is invoked as a daughter and housewife.

> I shall never get you put together entirely,
> Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
> Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles,
> Proceed from your great lips.
> It's worse than a barnyard.

The poem begins with "I" as the restorer addressing "you," the fragments of the statue she is attempting to put together, as if the statue were animate. The address

is also a statement of failure at this task. Further, the statement expresses resignation and her inability to grasp ("get") the whole. In mid-stanza, the emphasis shifts from the fragments of ruins to the fragments of noise that emerge from them. The image "great lips" suggests that one of the fragments is now a hollow shelter for beasts and their shepherds. On another level, the implication is that the found remains reveal no articulate message to her. The grunting of animals is a mockery of her expectations. Accordingly, the tone of the address becomes, in turn, mocking, derisive. In this context, the physical fragments are symptomatic of spiritual reduction, for she is also the quester for a former wholeness and harmony of which the broken pieces are the evidence.

> Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
> Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
> Thirty years now I have laboured
> To dredge the silt from your throat.
> I am none the wiser.

Stanza two continues the address, now qualifying the cacophony of stanza one as an "oracle." The off-handed reference in line two to mythic gods (Orpheus and Dionysius as suggested by the implications of "Mouthpiece") link death and deity with revelation ("oracle") to suggest that the fragments and their 'silence' denote the failed ritual of resurrection of the buried gods. The initial statement

of failure is extended now to an existential self-assessment: "Thirty years now I have laboured." Having "laboured" suggests that she has attempted to restore (give birth) and unearth the meaning of the fragments, like the archeologist who seems to piece together the whole scheme of an ancient civilization, including the message of its gods. But she has failed: "I am none the wiser." This is the central unifying statement of the poem. It particularizes the poet's awareness of her failure at a gargantuan task. The allusion in "labour" is possibly to the tests and ordeals of the classical heroes. She is the dedicated archeologist in quest of the lost world. Further "dredge," as connotative of clearing the sediment from the bottom of the river or sea, and in the context of "throat," suggests that her quest has been beyond time, beyond history. She has wanted to awake the dead, to evoke the voice, to make the statue speak. Instead, the excavated statue reveals only the sediment of time - death. The image is of waste and silence: "the silt (blocks) your throat." The world is a wasteland, the littered fragments of "some god or other." The last allusion of the stanza to herself in the implied pun on "none" suggests that the failed quest has consumed her in the process. She has "laboured," but given birth to nothing. She is diminished; she has lost her identity.

Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of lysol
I crawl like an ant in mourning
Over the weedy acres of your brow
To mend the immense skull-plates and clear
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

In stanza three, the extremity of this experience is actualized in an image of reduction: "I crawl like an ant in mourning." The juxtaposition of her ant's size and the excavated and still buried fragments of a dead god define the poet's vision of self and the world, although it is articulated with a sense of humour and detachment. She projects herself in the image of the housewife, disinfecting and mending. The image of the housewife/ant also symbolizes the labouring and endurance of the human condition. The fragments of the landscape and the statue fuse as implicit in the imagery of the broken body and nature, to suggest that the world is the dismembered body of the god, and she the mourner. The second half of the stanza develops the imagery of death, the "skull-plates" and "white tumuli", defining on the one hand the archeologist cleaning and repairing the unearthed head of the statue, and on the other hand, suggesting the literal landscape of ruins, burial mounds and sepulchres.

A blue sky out of the Oresteia
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.
I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress.
Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered

Stanza four particularizes this landscape as the ancient mythic world with the further allusions to tragedy - the destruction, betrayal, murder and revenge of a family. The history of man is implicit. The sky (gods) then as now is indifferent, remote and finally oppressive. The mythic context of the "Orestia" becomes simultaneously the dramatic setting for the personal memory of her own father, whose fragmented memory she absurdly tries to unify. There is an implicit contemptuous reduction in the image of the father from the dead buried god that she has attempted to unearth, to a powerful yet obsolete image of a "Roman Forum." The further implication is that he is dead but obsessive, like a colossal ruin. "O father" continues the address of the previous stanzas, but now suggesting a prayer, a supplication and perhaps a lamentation. In this context, she is the mourner like Electra, connotative of the longing and desire for the lost father, performing the rites of burial on the corpse of the buried unearthed father/god. There is a further ironically gruesome suggestion in the image "I open my lunch." The eating of the corpse alludes to the ancient ritual of the dismembered god.

In their old anarchy to the horizon-line.
It would take more than a lightning-stroke
To create such a ruin,
Nights, I squat in the cornucopia
Of your left ear, out of the wind,

Stanza five extends the imagery of fragmentation and death denoting the world as a burial ground, implicit and sustained by the connotations of "horizon-line." It is also an extended reference to the Mediterranean landscape as the cradle of the gods whose "fluted bones" are little more, now, than the 'pipes' of the winds of change. Nature, the world, and the Colossus merge in an image of original chaos. The supernatural reference in "It would take more than a lightning-stroke/To create such a ruin," is ironically apocalyptic. The visible ruins are manifestations of the invisible design of creation. Death is suggested to be the groundwork of being. The archeologist catalogues the ruin; the woman is seduced by the memory of the father and the poet creates the vision and it is a vision of death. The last two lines of the stanza dramatize the vision, while maintaining the metaphor of the fragmented "Colossus" which the archeologist inhabits at night, keeping vigil over the bones. The fragment is cave-like interring her gradual succumbing to death, a submission to failure sustained by the extended diminished image of herself of stanza three. At the same time, the connotations

in "cornucopia" and "ear" are of birth, but in this context, it is an inverted image of re-birth, not into life, but out of it: "My hours are married to shadow."

> Counting the red stars and those of plum-colour.
> The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
> My hours are married to shadow.
> No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
> On the blank stones of the landing.

Stanza six develops the ambiguous connotations of death and birth. The vision is temporal. She is in time, "Counting." The imagery is predominantly sensual, denoting life, love, passion, and in their inverted sense, the loss which reflects back to the fragments of "The Colossus," symbolic now of the embodiment of the spirit. The reference to "stars," suggesting destiny, re-inforce the implied nature of the vision as death in life. This, in the context of the invoked dawn, implies that for her, the experience of the fragmented "Colossus" concludes in an inverted re-birth, not into life, but death. She has pledged herself to "shadow," ambiguously an affirmation and a denial. The final statement of the last two lines recapitulates the initial image of the failure, but the failure is in time. The allusion to the ship implies that her journey has ended. There is the sense that she has arrived, that she can go no further. The stones are "blank," there is no water. Conversely, there is the implication of a new beginning, a

different voyage and a different dimension. In this sense, the final image of the "I" is abstracted, denoting the submission of the archeologist to the broken statue and of the woman to the reductive memory of the father.

"The Colossus" is also one of the statements Plath makes about herself as a poet. The figure of the archeologist is, in part, a metaphor for the poet. As a poet, she has attempted to re-integrate the message of the classical world, now become, as she suggests ironically in stanza two, the "oracle," the "Mouthpiece of the dead." Her assessment of herself as a poet culminates in the last stanza, the image of the sun rising "under the pillar" of the Colossus' tongue, suggesting in its fused implications of re-birth and articulation, that she is ironically the oracle, whose new message emerges from the attempt to grasp the old.

THE HANGING MAN

By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.
I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.

The nights snapped out of sight like a lizard's eyelid:
A world of bald white days in a shadeless socket.

A vulturous boredom pinned me in this tree.
If he were I, he would do what I did.

THE HANGING MAN

The title evokes man in the context of suffering, torture, sacrifice and death. He is the victim. Among its numerous allusions are the Hanged Man of the tarot pack, and Christ. The wounded, sacrificed dead body is invoked. The most significant connotation is of man suspended between heaven and earth. As a poetic statement, it is a vision of man, God and death.

> By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.
> I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet...

The religious dimension of being 'called' is established with the first line. The call is a violent abduction. She is seized by the "roots," connotative of her life force, by "some" indefinite deity, some unknown god. Accordingly, the suggestion is that she has been chosen, but it is an unrevealed calling. She is acted upon by the 'wholly other.' On a primitive level, the reference is to woman dragged by her hair by the brutal male, to be raped. "By the roots" implies that she has been uprooted, which is further developed in the context of "hair." Hair is the only image of the body in this stanza. It denotes the head, and by extension, the mind. At the same time, the inference is of woman: her vitality, her beauty and her

body. Accordingly, "hair" fuses the body reference to the woman and the mind to the poet.

The second line of the stanza defines the 'call' - the experience of having been seized. The most immediate context is of the asylum. The analogy is to the helpless victim of shock therapy. The implication of "sizzled" is gruesome, alluding to the body being burnt. In the context of the asylum, she is being electrocuted, and by extension, executed. The 'god' may here be a reference to the unlimited power of the doctor (Sexton's almighty doctor, and "Herr Doctor" in "Lady Lazarus"). Madness and vision are traditionally associated, but its contemporary clinical context is horrific. However, the inference of electric shock is also in the context of lightning, and as such, it is both a mythic and traditional image of illumination. This is sustained by the analogy of her experience to that of a "desert prophet." The "desert" is the only image of actual setting defining her vision within the tradition of prophecy. Her experience of the spirit is therefore suggested to be genuine, but it is of such violence that she is both torn from her "roots" and consumed. The inference is of the body. The mind becomes a prophet in a world equated with the desert.

The nights snapped out of sight like a lizard's eyelid:
A world of bald white days in a shadeless socket.

Stanza two actualizes the consequences of the revelation. Having been seized, she is now precipitated into a state where she is annihilated. She is disconnected from all cycles. The image "snapped," in the context of "lizard's eyelid," suggests an instantaneousness that qualifies the vision as timeless and simultaneously in time. The illumination is blinding. She lives in a world of unremitting days, the suggestion being that she sees the world in a glaring light, without protection - the "shadeless socket." The unshutting eye refers back to the consequences of shock therapy and also to the eye of consciousness, the unblinking eye of vision. But "lizard's eyelid" is an image of reduction. It is what she focuses on in vision. And as a creature of the earth, the "lizard" connotes camouflage and survival. The implication is that she is reduced by the vision, (this is also reiterated in "Mystic"), unlike the desert prophet who is enlarged by his vision. The qualifier "bald" also connotes blindness and death. (This is an image that Plath uses often within a similar context.) Finally, the ambiguity of the vision is unresolved: "nights snapped out of sight" is simultaneously an implication of total illumination and total

darkness (associated with madness). Further, the implication is that she is the "Hanging Man" of the title, suspended in the void.

> A vulturous boredom pinned me in this tree.
> If he were I, he would do what I did.

The final stanza defines the condition of her existence and fate. Her body is devoured by the predatory sameness of existence, with the further implication in "vulturous," of being already dead, a carcass. The boredom as "vulturous" also denotes the nature of survival. Hunger, perverse desire and waiting are the conditions of existence. Life is therefore meaningless and horrific because it is "vulturous" (a desert-like existence). Accordingly, she is "pinned" not nailed to the tree, to life. The ramifications in the connotations of "pinned" are extensive, perhaps the most significant being the implicit reduction of the crucifixion. She is a meaningless sacrificial victim, crucified to "boredom." Through her knowledge, she is crucified for a meaningless existence. Life is equated with the vulture waiting to devour the wounded 'suffering' being.

Ultimately, her vision is of the world as the desert, peopled by the lizard and the vulture. The vision does not include transcendence. The "he" of the last line

alludes to the crucified Christ in the context of mortality. However, this is with the qualifying distinction that "he" is not "I," suggestive that perhaps, "he" had a different vision. Further her vision is now made articulate within the context of "I" and "me" - the polarities of her being. The "me" is defenceless, trapped, a victim. The "I" is analogous to the god, the "he." The "I" reflects choice with the final implication that "I" chooses death as against a life that is a dying - suspended between earth and heaven, body and mind, life and death, which is her crucifixion.

CHILD

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.
I want to fill it with colour and ducks,
The zoo of the new

Whose names you meditate --
April snowdrop, Indian pipe,
Little.

Stalk without wrinkle,
Pool in which images
Should be grand and classical

Not this troublous
Wringing of hands, this dark
Ceiling without a star.

CHILD

This is a poem that celebrates innocence and beauty embodied in the child, within the context of the natural world of open spaces and things growing. Simultaneously, the world of experience is reflected by the mother's presence and her contrasting experience of limitation and suffering. The child is symbolized by vision. His "eye," the reflection of all that is, is as limpid as a virgin pool. The mother, on the other hand, symbolized by "Wringing of hands," denotes the reality of suffering and sorrow. The structure of the poem is an interweaving of antithetical images and associations. It consists of two sentences. The pure world of the child is invoked in the opening statement. This is then qualified by the mother's recognition of the dichotomy between innocence and experience and actualized by what she wants to offer:

> Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.
> I want to fill it with colour and ducks,
> The zoo of the new

This invocation to the child evokes a vision of light and life, the garden rediscovered or never before experienced. The mother's desire is for the child's completeness of life and vision. In her offering, she is the child's teacher, the protector and provider for the child's first perceptions:

Whose names you meditate --
April snowdrop, Indian pipe,
Little--

The child's eye reflects the world the mother is offering and simultaneously, it expresses what he himself is: spring, flower, music. The vision is of flowers and the child is the stem that upholds it:

Stalk without wrinkle,
Pool in which images
Should be grand and classical

Unmarked by time, without the limitation of age, the child is like the still virgin pool, and should be the mirror of all time. What is before time and simultaneously the dawn of time is evoked, in the last two lines of the above stanza. What is ancient and of great proportions, of noble and divine consequence like the heroic mythic world, is alluded to in the context and connotations of "classical." Juxtaposed to the expanded vision of that world is the world of the mother:

Not this troublous
Wringing of hands, this dark
Ceiling without a star.

The imagery of nature is now superseded by images of enclosure, restriction, suffering. "Troublous" qualifies the "pool" with the suggestion that its stillness has been disturbed by the reflection of the hand's gesture which

obscures the vision - innocence marred by experience. The absence of the star denotes death, suggesting enclosing darkness. It also reflects back to the child's "eye," now closing. The imagery of light/life/white becomes over shadowed by the associations of dark/death/black.

MYSTIC

The air is a mill of hocks --
Questions without answer,
Glittering and drunk as flies
Whose kiss stings unbearably
In the fetid wombs of black air under pines in summer.

I remember
The dead smell of sun on wood cabins,
The stiffness of sails, the long salt winding sheets.
Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?
Once one has been seized up

Without a part left over,
Not a toe, not a finger, and used,
Used utterly, in the sun's conflagrations, the stains
That lengthen from ancient cathedrals
What is the remedy?

The pill of the Communion tablet,
The walking beside still water? Memory?
Or picking up the bright pieces
Of Christ in the faces of rodents,
The tame flower-nibblers, the ones

Whose hopes are so low they are comfortable --
The humpback in her small, washed cottage
Under the spokes of the clematis.
Is there no great love, only tenderness?
Does the sea

Remember the walker upon it?
Meaning leaks from the molecules.
The chimneys of the city breathe, the window sweats,
The children leap in their cots.
The sun blooms, it is a geranium.

The heart has not stopped.

MYSTIC

This is a definitive poem of Sylvia Plath's. It is at once visionary and personal. It articulates the dialectic of life and death, body and mind, matter and spirit that is at the roots of her poetry. The visionary experience is of the simultaneity of life and death, time and timelessness, but in the personal apprehension of vision, Plath experiences herself consumed and dismembered: "Without a part left over." It is the vision of God and death simultaneously and it becomes an affliction: "Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?" The poem begins with a setting that defines the condition of the poet. The consciousness of the condition proceeds to a series of questions, which are resolved finally in a statement that delineates the dialectic of the vision and climaxes in an ambiguous affirmation.

> The air is a mill of hooks --
> Questions without answer,
> Glittering and drunk as flies
> Whose kiss stings unbearably
> In the fetid wombs of black air under pines in summer.

In the first stanza, the mind of the poet is invoked by a graphic metaphor, the first image of the poem. The stanza proceeds to build itself in a series of images that extend from this metaphysical conceit to an actual setting.

The mind is in a state of "Questions without answer," and it perceives this state in the elemental setting of "air," concretized as "a mill of books" which, in terms of the typographical image of the question mark, punctuate the "air," as well as conferring a predatory and luring quality to it. The image of a "mill," moreover, turns the implied setting of open space inside out to suggest an enclosed space, implying a dialectic between the mind and external reality. The same image also denotes a machine-like aspect to the "air" grinding out questions. This setting, symbolic for the mind's dilemma, becomes the literal setting for the implicit vulnerability of the body. The "air" is infested with "flies"; (the suggestion that the "air" is a "mill" manufacturing "Questions" may also be an allusion to the classical infernal machine of the gods, the "flies" corresponding to the furies of classic myth, or the minions of Beelzebub, "Lord of the Flies.") The "Questions" have metamorphosed into "flies" who persistently and "unbearably" sting her, with the added connotation that they are "drunk" on her blood. In this setting, the state of her mind has trapped the body, which experiences itself being victimized. This dualistic condition characterizes the existential contingency of the poet: she is the questioner who cannot resolve the nature of experience.

The association of "hooks" and "flies" that are "Glittering," develops the metaphysical conceit at the beginning of the poem. The unanswerable "Questions" lure the questioner like a fish in a "mill" pond. They paralyse her, their "hooks" ensnaring her body as do the stings of the "flies," the physical demons of the "air," who glut themselves on her blood as they might on a totally helpless and passive body. The conception of the questioner as being lured or seduced is sustained by the stinging "kiss" of the "flies." The implication in the seduction is that the questioner wants knowledge of the nature of reality, and her "Questions" sharpen an awareness of the hostility of her surroundings.

The shade of the pines is not a solace from the "mill" of "Questions" and the heat they generate, but a stinking breeding ground for the "flies." The shadows of "black air under pines in summer" are equated with "fetid wombs," suggesting that the "air" is poisoned by the mind. The image further connotes that the body is the foetus trapped in the compost of "air," that the seduction by the stinging "kiss" of the "flies" is also into life. The literal and symbolic setting of the forest suggests the archetype of Eve in the paradise that becomes poisoned. The split between the mind and the body in the concept of

the original Fall is implicit. The questioner, like Eve, is tempted and seduced by knowledge, which poisons her essential nature as woman, which is defined by the womb. In this context, the victimization of the body and the womb implies that the questioner, inhabited by the "Questions" she cannot resolve, is both the victim and the victimizer. Ultimately, the stanza is dealing with the fundamental questions of life and death, meaning and meaninglessness. The poet focuses on one of the elements of creation, the "air," which draws together three related implications: the spirit, traditionally associated with air, the inspirational 'breath' of poetry, and the continuous, vertiginous movement of life and death, invoked by the implication of revolving motion in the image of "mill." Further, the elements of "air" and water are joined in this image which could be a wind or water mill. Earth is invoked in the "fetid wombs" of the forest setting and, as the poem progresses, fire is suggested by the repeated references to the heat of the "sun." The elements coalesce in the cross, invoked by the suggestion of the windmill, which together with the "spokes of the clematis" in the fifth stanza, implies the wheel of the world and corresponds to the consuming rays of the sun.

I remember
The dead smell of sun on wood cabins,
The stiffness of sails, the long salt winding sheets.
Once one has been God, what is the remedy?
Once one has been seized up

Stanza two draws on all the connotations of the previous one, centering them on the "I." This is the only time a direct personal reference is made in the poem, implying that the poet is meditating on the relationship between her personal experience ("I remember") and the mystical experience that she is articulating. Memory, isolated by the poet, recalls static images suggestive of death, that are nevertheless sensually concrete. The "air" of stanza one, implied by the sense of suffocating heat of line two in this stanza and the stillness of line three, smells of death. Without wind, the "sails" lose their purpose and become death shrouds, with the further implication in the qualifier "salt," that they cannot retain their original use. The perception of memory is centered in time and external reality, but what is remembered has no life. The vision resembles the 'wasteland,' where only a "dead smell" and "stiffness" remain. The elements, by their implicit reference in these images, are unregenerative. The world in memory is reduced to a state of rigor mortis, which the "sun" eternally and persistently burns up.

The experience of memory corresponds to the experience in stanza one, of the mind and the world as a "fetid womb." The dilemma implicit in this stanza and extended in stanza two is made explicit in the fundamental statement of the mystic, with its consequent ultimate question of despair: "Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?" The vision of God is so vast that there is no possibility of human fulfillment, and the insights of the vision bring only an intense awareness of pain and death. By the repetition of syntax, this is stressed in the last line of the stanza, that seeing "God" is being "seized up." The search for "remedy" therefore, is ultimate, like the vision. It is the result of the mystic experiencing God and reality as a seizure, as being unwilled and forced in extremity. This experience refers back to the "mill of hooks" that defines the experience of the first stanza. The mystical experience is seen as a victimization, a recurrent theme of Plath's, which she re-iterates in "The Hanging Man." Here, in "Mystic," there is a double victimization. She is prey to the vision itself and to the absence of a remedy to the pain it brings. Characteristic of Plath is the relinquishing of hope in the face of the fundamental question: why does man suffer?

Without a part left over,
Not a toe, not a finger, and used,
Used utterly, in the sun's conflagrations, the stains
That lengthen from ancient cathedrals
What is the remedy?

The third stanza describes with growing and painful precision, the suffering initiated by the vision. Being "seized up" has paralysed the mystic's mind and body, possessed, violated and consumed them. The body, in extremity, is reduced to nothing, "Without a part left over." The vision has "used" the body of the mystic "utterly," implying also that the will, or personal volition, has been manipulated and "used" too. The "sun's conflagrations" is an image that invokes the destructive force of the vision in which the human dimension is consumed. The suggestion is of the total annihilation of a sacrificial fire. Like the "fetid wombs" of the first stanza, the shadows cast by the sun are not a refuge. They also inflict pain. Furthermore, the "ancient cathedrals," in the context of their "stains/That lengthen," are reduced to being sun-dials of destruction, rather than symbols of the synthesis of the ecstatic and the everyday experience, the spirit and the body, the micro and macrocosm. The image also implies the "stain" or blemish of time and mortality that are the consequence of original sin and guilt. Finally, the "cathedrals" themselves are being

consumed by the eternal "conflagrations" of the sun. The vision is of affliction; the question persists.

> The pill of the Communion tablet,
> The walking beside still water? Memory?
> Or picking up the bright pieces
> Of Christ in the faces of rodents,
> The tame flower-nibblers, the ones

The various possibilities left to man are inferred but rejected in stanza four. These emerge from what Plath knows and what is known to the world. This re-assessment of alternatives alludes to the personas and paradoxical dilemmas of her other poems.

First, the "pill" of the sacrament implies the inadequacy of orthodox Christianity. The flesh of Christ, symbolized in the host, has been rendered meaningless and reduced to an escape, a sleep, an addictive sedative. The sacred is made profane. The second line of the stanza implies the retreat into the contemplative life, but as is implicit in the first stanza, contemplation leads to the irresolvable questions. (For Plath, contemplation results in madness, that in the experience of disembodiment takes the form of a split described in "Tulips," and "Ela.") The "walking beside still water" also implies the romantic withdrawal into nature related to the contemplative life, which in the first stanza, is experienced as suffocating

and imprisoning. "Memory" too is rejected. It is a curse, as stanza two suggests. The allusion in the next posed alternative is to the imminence of spirit in the fragmented "pieces" of a dismembered god. (The theme of the dismembered god with the poet in the persona of the restorer, is explored in Plath's "The Colossus.") Furthermore, the fragments of the god are in the image of "bright pieces" linked to and equated with the "Glittering" eternal questions. The "rodents" are suggestive of the orthodox who continue to feed on the fragments of the god incarnate in the "pill of the Communion tablet." In this alternative, the poet is ironically invoked in the posture of supplicant, a 'cosmic rag-picker' who in a self depreciating implication is on the same level as the "rodents."

In the next line, the image of the "rodents," is developed into the "tame flower-nibblers," those who resign themselves and their ideals, content to feed on a comfortable subsistence level. The suggestion in this reductive image is also of the romantic aesthete, who is superficially attracted to the beauties of nature. Thus the alternate 'cures' of the church, nature, and the comforts of home are inter-related in these images. They are the "pill" and "bright pieces" that can no longer nourish the spirit.

Whose hopes are so low they are comfortable --
The humpback in her small, washed cottage
Under the spokes of the clematis.
Is there no great love, only tenderness?
Does the sea

The implication of the "humpback" of stanza five is associated with the "rodents" and the "tame flower-nibblers" in the implied posture of the one who stoops to recover the "bright pieces" in their "faces." The suggestion is also that this figure is the poet, sustained by the link between the "small, washed cottage" of retreat and the "wood cabins" of the poet's memory in stanza two. The "humpback" is the one who forsakes the limited, "comfortable" existence and takes on the burden of attempting, in 'freakish' isolation from the world, to put the fragments back together. The "spokes of the clematis," the natural setting for the hermit, invoke the turning wheel of the world, linking the image of the "mill of hooks" in the first stanza. The "humpback" becomes a concretized image of the mystic. She is also the reduced and actual self "under" the "spokes." The image, also suggestive of being 'pinned,' reflects back to the "stains" of the "ancient cathedrals" and the presence of the mystic "under pines in summer." The associations between the "pines," the "wood cabins" of stanza two and the "clematis" include the cross, the fuel for the consumption of "the sun's

conflagrations." It is from the "humpback" that the poem's next question comes. If there was "great love," she could transcend the revolving wheel to the cosmic self, which would be a miracle. The last question, which leads into the final stanza, refers to Christ's walk upon the water. The implication is that the miracle is forgotten in time, and the implied question asks whether it has been forgotten in eternity. Further, the orthodox pronouncement of the miracle of the Second Coming is rejected. The final question is rhetorical. Like all the others, it cannot be answered.

> Remember the walker upon it?
> Meaning leaks from the molecules.
> The chimneys of the city breathe, the window sweats,
> The children leap in their cots.
> The sun blooms, it is a geranium.
>
> The heart has not stopped.

Nature, ritual, Christ, comfort and "tenderness" are all judged to be inadequate modes of knowledge and experience. The elements have no answer. They are divorced from human history and concern. God, as the symbol embracing all, is not beyond man's capacity to apprehend but vision is rendered meaningless because instead of fulfilling the mystic, it separates her irrevocably from the normal and inflicts pain upon her body and mind. "Meaning"

cannot be divulged from the normal meaning of life, nor from one's attempts to seek it.

Reduced, without alternatives, what is left is the base common denominator of existence, the molecular nature of the cosmos. It is the "Meaning" that the "molecules" leak that leads to the final statement, couched in a cluster of images that associate to create a setting that is at once actual and symbolic. The implication of the heated air of the city, a hot interior, excited, demanding children, evoke a world awakening to a new day. Further, the haiku-like equation between the sun and the flower denotes an explicit image of birth. The sun destroys and it gives life. It is invoked as the universal symbol, particularized in this setting. However, it is the paradox of the fusion which defines the horror and beauty implied. The delicate momentary quality of the flower is inferred on the sun and the "sun's conflagrations" are conferred on the flower. The flower, like the sun, becomes a symbol of pain and death, as well as birth.

The paradox is sustained by "The heart," again a universal symbol and particularized in the setting. Like the molecules, it "leaks," gives life to the body, which must ultimately be sacrificed to its "conflagrations." The "heart" is rooted to the body, as the body is rooted

to time. Yet the "heart" is the only thing left, the only certainty, the only point of reference. It is from the point-of-view of the "heart" that the meaning is perceived. The morning smoke of the city's 'breath,' the beads of moisture on the window, the "children" in their "cots," the drops of blood implied by the beating "heart," the cluster of petals on the "geranium," all reflect and embody the "molecules," and refer back to the revolving "mill of hooks" of the poem's initial statement. They are all kept in motion by the sun's "conflagrations" which will finally destroy them. The state is mystical, of direct apprehension through the senses, suggested by the implication of the geranium that can be grasped and understood like the "dead smell of sun on wood cabins." The final affirmation, the "remedy" that encompasses the acknowledgement that there is none, is paradoxically and with all embracing irony, an affirmation of the "mill of hooks" itself, within the womb, the body, the mind, the world. The "mill of hooks" is finally equated with the "heart," the symbol of the human and cosmic spirit, which "has not stopped."

PART TWO

Chapter I

CONTRASTS AND COMPARISONS

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The shared experience of extremity, of madness, suicide and death emerges as the culminating statement that defines the poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath on a comparative basis. Both poets focus on the body and its victimization as the given condition of existence. And both speak of the mind's struggle to transcend the limitations and affirm life through death. For both this is synonymous with the creation of poetry. The experience of death, and the ways of dying become the source of inspiration and the subject of their poetry. These poems were selected as definitive statements of the poets' vision of the self and death, the world and death, and death in the scheme of things.

The following section is a critical commentary of the previous exegesis, drawing out the poets' basic distinctions in methodology and their uniqueness, as poets. The discussion will center on their characteristic use of imagery, personal reference and poetic concept.

Sexton's characteristic distinction is her use of a narrative structure of statement, repetition, variation.

It has the informality of a personal diary. As in most of her poetry the impact of the vision is on the associations and reverberations of isolated strong images and symbols that have the power to illustrate her statements and evoke the fragmented experience she is articulating. Her images change or expand in meaning through accumulated associations, suggestions and allusions. In "KE 6-8018," for example, the telephone is itself; it is also a woman, and it becomes a lover and an idol.

Whatever the subject, Sexton is usually the center of reference to whom the event, experience or vision is happening. Her poems are largely records of her changing stages of experience. A chronology is rigorously notated. In the "Author's Note" To Live or Die, Sexton states that "'. . . they (the poems) read like a fever chart for a bad case of melancholy." (It is worth noting that she takes this image for her chronology from the experience of the sick ward.) An example of this notated chronology is "Self In 1958" which draws together the experience of seven years. Sexton's choice of imagery is predominantly defined by her personal history. The inner reality is externalized, recorded and explored imaginatively. Her poetry reflects the contemporary American milieu, particularly its conventional mundane aspects, such as, awaiting

a telephone call, drinking martinis, riding in cabs, putting on clothes.

In Sexton's poems the autobiographical aspects are explicit: personal images, references, letters, belongings, incidents. She even uses her own name. Sexton's choice of object and symbol is related to her being a confessional poet. When she was beginning to write these poems, people told her, "You can't write this way. It's too personal; it's confessional; you can't write this Anne. . . ."[1]

In Plath's poetry, the autobiographical detail also alludes to her personal history as woman - daughter, wife, mother, but the personal reference is only the germinal point for the poem. The personal detail is minimal, usually confined to a statement or line such as, "I am only thirty," ("Lady Lazarus") or, "I was ten when they buried you./At twenty I tried to die." ("Daddy" - see Appendix 4.) Sometimes the reference to the private experience is contained in a concentrated image: "My husband and child smiling out of the family photo." ("Tulips"). The personal scheme may be the source of inspiration for a poem but the figures of her personal history, including herself are transformed. In "Daddy" (Appendix 4) her

[1] Patricia Marx, "Interview with Anne Sexton," Hudson Review, 18 (1965-1966), 567.

actual father becomes a mythological character.

Unlike Sexton who is always the focal point in her poetry, Plath creates a world where she is only one center of consciousness. In Sexton's poetry the world is reflected. In Plath's poetry the world is both reflected and transformed. Plath's search is beyond herself. It is within the organic and elemental forces - the dynamics of the cosmos, reflected in her use of natural/elemental imagery. It is the essence of what is external to her that she attempts to grasp and make manifest, though it is often a haunting, predatory world. As she lies in a hospital bed, the tulips "eat (her) oxygen." ("Tulips"). Plath creates an image which becomes the poem, as she becomes the image. This is a complex process of integration. Her images are concentrated within a compact structure, used in such a manner that they intu lock in meanings in both directions simultaneously, inwards to reveal a deeply personal experience, and outwards to evoke historical connotations: "By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me./I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet." ("The Hanging Man"). In her use of holocaust imagery, the implications are at the same time, personal, historical and universal: "My face a featureless, fine/ Jew linen." ("Lady Lazarus").

Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of Plath's use of imagery is the explicit metamorphosis of the image. For instance, in "Elm": "I am inhabited by a cry/Nightly it flaps out/Looking with its hooks for something to love." The method is like a visual and verbal fission: "My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires." The initial image alludes to a burnt, broken body which metamorphoses into a hand with exposed nerves. This image in turn invokes a third - the gesture of the fleshless hand - pleading, grabbing, grasping. This composite image has many implications; the most horrific would seem to allude to the barbed wire images of concentration camps.

In a general sense, Plath's use of imagery is traditional yet unique. She evokes a mythic and archetypal dimension that she transforms into a world that is at once real and phantasmagorical, beautiful and grotesque.

Sexton, on the other hand, withdraws into private symbolism and experience, with the possible exception of the use of Christian ritual (such as prayer), and fairy-tale allusions. Although her references beyond the personal scheme are learned, they are not significant in themselves, but rather the means of evoking and invoking a larger scenario for the drama of the self; for example, "I am not what I expected. Not an Eichmann./The poison

just didn't take." ("Live") In the context of the poem the analogy seems excessive.

Sexton's choice of object and symbol is related to the confessional mode, such as the telephone in "KE 6-8018," and the allusion to the sacrament of confession in "For the Year of the Insane." But again, her use of imagery is primarily reflective of her own experience including her childhood world of fairy-tale and nursery rhymes and the contemporary world view. The nightmare of childhood and the references to fairy-tales are often linked and become a metaphor for madness as in "Live" :

> Even crazy, I'm as nice
> as a chocolate bar.
> Even with the witches' gymnastics
> they trust my incalculable city,
> my corruptible bed.

PART TWO

Chapter II

THE BODY AS VICTIM

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1. The Traditional Modern Vision

Both Sexton and Plath are twentieth century poets, and their world view is within the traditional modern vision of alienation, breakdown and fragmentation. However, they are writing long after the initial statements of this vision have been made, and thus the conditions of the contemporary vision are assumed in their poetry. The schizophrenic or 'gone' world, the wasteland, is their landscape; dying and death is their central experience. The omnipresence of corruption, decay, violence and murder in the external world is the shared conception of both poets. Alienated and faced with a world that is unapproachable and irreconcilable, they turn inward, focusing on their personal breakdown which involves the alienation of body from mind. Thus the body becomes a focal point in their poetry, reflecting both the private and universal breakdowns. The central experience of the body is victimization. This underlines the twentieth century statement about reality, that the human condition is alienated, sick, victimized in a meaningless world. The act of seeking a 'cure,' a solution produces the self-consciousness

which itself draws focus on the only certainty of existence, the body. It is the only concrete manifestation of existence because it reflects the condition of existence directly. Indeed it is the condition, which exposes the fragmented person, the wounded soul, and the broken spirit. The selected poems become a representative vision of the death of the body, death into the body, and by extension the death of the world.

2. The Private Experience

Sexton and Plath have an analogous background of extremity, suicide attempts, madness and death. Both articulate this experience in their poetry. Both speak from the perspective of woman living in the twentieth century, and both use similar patterns of images to dramatize and re-create the personal incidents, memories and dreams into a public statement. Their body imagery reflects their operations and breakdowns, the experience of hospitals and wards, and simultaneously the contemporary denial of physical and psychic wholeness, and the transcendent dimension of being. Instead, the banal, mad, mechanized, indifferent modern world is in evidence. Accordingly, the intricate pattern of imagery in their poetry has at its core the dismemberment of the body. In their attempt to articulate this situation, they can be placed within the confessional

genre; however, they are not limited to it. In fact, for Sexton and to a greater extent for Plath, a central theme and concern is the possibility of the expansion of vision of their personal situation, given the conditions and the complex network of ambiguities that this entails.

3. The Integration of Public and Private Experience

For both Sexton and Plath the experience of external reality is integrated into private experience. Images of external reality also function as images of inner reality, as inner and outer fuse. The body image defines the nature of reality publicly and privately as in Plath's "Two Views of a Cadaver Room," where the metaphor for the world is a dissecting room and the metaphor for the private experience and relationships is the "cut-out heart." The images for the world and the private experience are also interchangeable. In Sexton's "Ghosts," the image of man is lifeless, sterile, and menacing. The external world is dead and decayed. The "ghosts" of this decay become private images that haunt the poet's psyche, and also reflect her own decay. In the second stanza of the poem, the vision of the external world is completely internalized into the image of a ghost who "thumps barefoot lurching/above my bed." The reality of the external world in

Sexton's "The Operation" abstracts into a nightmarish, ghostly, private imagery: "I hear limbs falling/and see yellow eyes flick in the rain." This integration of the public and private experience can be discussed under four general categories: the public archetype of victimization, the experience as woman, the experience of objects, and the experience of enclosure.

(a) The Public Archetype of Victimization

The fusion of the private and the public takes place in their poetry through the use of certain public twentieth century archetypes of the victim. The most obvious of these is the Jew. Not the mythical wandering Jew, but the faceless victim of the concentration camps and ovens of the Second World War. He is the archetype of absolute reduction. He is the victim that is stripped of identity, history, personal possessions, and ultimately of life. The Jew as the symbol of the holocaust continues to haunt the Western consciousness as their poetry attests. Concomitant with this is the impact of the urban environment, the 'dead city' which has bred a second archetype of victimization that manifests escapism, lapse of memory, consciousness and emotion: the addict.

The archetype of the Jew and the addict fuse for Sexton and even more so for Plath in a third fundamental

twentieth century victim archetype, the patient, with its corollary the doctor. It is in the setting of the institution, the hospital, the asylum - the context of the personal breakdown - that this fusion takes place. The hospital becomes the concentration camp. The doctor becomes the Nazi-like scientist performing demonic experiments. However, the institution is also a crucible, a place where through the experience of extremity of suffering, there is the ambiguous possibility of transcending the breakdown, crossing over from the twentieth century condition of victimization into an affirmation of being. This is the implicit resolution in Sexton's "For the Year of the Insane" and Plath's "Tulips." Lastly, the archetype that encompasses these twentieth century personal and public symbols is that of the sacrificial victim. (This is discussed further under the headings of "The Institutional Victim," and "The Sacrificial Victim."

(b) The Experience as Woman

Both Sexton and Plath recreate in their poetry the degradation of the archetypes and traditional roles of woman, specifically the mother, wife, and lover, into the stereotypes of the housewife, the advertising image of woman, the exhibitionist. Sexton sees herself as a "plaster doll" in "Self in 1958," Plath as a strip-tease

artist in "Lady Lazarus." Romantic love too is reduced and even absent in "Two Views of a Cadaver Room" and "KE 6-8018." The image of woman is debased to something mechanical, an object.

Although there are poems of Sexton's and Plath's in which the family is present, the self, although defined by the traditional archetypes of woman, is also separate from it, rootless. (Rootlessness, or destruction of roots is an image that appears frequently in their work.) This simultaneous identification with and separation from the traditional sense of womanhood leads to the experience of unreality, ("What is reality?" - "Self In 1958"), and entails a tension that is one of the primary causes of personal breakdown.

Sexton attempts to re-connect herself to the archetypes and find her roots: "if I could remember" ("Self In 1958"). She continually evokes the Madonna (mother) archetype ("KE 6-8018," "For the Year of the Insane," "Self In 1958"), at the same time expressing its loss and the desire to regain its meaning and significance, to once more be "rooted into the wall."("Self In 1958"). This involves the acceptance of limitation, the "fears and tears" ("Self In 1958") of being the Mater Dolorosa, rooted to matter. The mother for Sexton is also a protector, a refuge, while

at the same time she is seen as a victim and victimizer. The desire to return to the mother archetype is actualized by Sexton's references to her real mother. In "The Operation," for example, she re-lives the physical suffering that led to her mother's death.

Plath on the other hand, in a Nietzsche-like leap of the imagination, conceives of a 'Zarathustran' superwoman who transcends the traditional archetypes, a new woman who is born from the ashes of the mother, wife, lover archetype, conceived of as completely dead in "Lady Lazarus": "Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair." She creates her 'Lady Zarathrustra' ironically and ambiguously. However, Plath's conception of a new and liberated woman, has become to a limited extent, the unambiguous political manifesto of various women's movements.

While Sexton evokes the mother, Plath is obsessed with the father figure, who only marginally reflects her actual father and represents the male principle from "Herr God" to "Herr Lucifer" ("Lady Lazarus"). The implication in "Daddy" (Appendix 4) and "The Colossus" is also the breakdown of the father-daughter and husband-wife relationships. Allusions to this breakdown re-occur throughout Plath's poetry. "Herr Doktor" of "Lady Lazarus" is ironically a protective figure, since his "treatment" consists

of humiliation and torture. Plath's super-woman is a projection of possibility beyond good and evil, beyond history and without family. It must incorporate the male principle: "Beware/Beware. . . . I eat men like air." Plath attempts to accept the rootlessness. For Sexton the transcendent dimension is accessible only through her identification with the traditional archetypes of woman. The alternative is madness.

Given the condition of the experience of rootlessness, the family for both poets, becomes a threat. Plath's family's smiles are "hooks" in "Tulips," and Sexton's family becomes a depersonalized ominous "someone" and a "They" in "Self In 1958." Her family violates her, subdues her, feeds her with "gin/and their stale bread." Accordingly, the image of woman that is most predominant in their poetry is that of the victim. She is vulnerable, and victimized by the world, by love and family, and finally by her own destiny, as Sexton recognizes in "Self In 1958;" "But I would cry,/rooted into the wall that/was once my mother." (Also reiterated in "Old Dwarf Heart" (Appendix 1): "mother, father, I'm made of.") However, it is Plath that articulates, in "Daddy" (Appendix 4), with ironic poignancy the reduction and degradation of woman: "Every woman adores a Fascist,/The foot in the

face, the brute/Brute heart of a brute like you."

(c) The Experience of Objects

The objects of their immediate experience as women are used frequently as material by both poets. They reveal the nature of their breakdown as women in a poetic scenario of familiar objects and settings: the kitchen, the mirror, the telephone, the radio, pills, alcohol, photos, paintings, a darning egg, napkins. These become a catalogue of images that also reflect the public breakdown. Some of these objects are traditionally associated with woman; "my teaset, my bureaus of linen," ("Tulips"), and along with other belongings, they become the clichés of cultural obsession, the paraphernalia of the housewife. Plath, in "Tulips," ironically refers to them as "my loving associations," implying that perversely they become animate, replacing human contact. The belongings are also a form of addiction as implicit in Plath's metaphorical equation of her "black leather bag" with a "pill box," in "Tulips."

The kitchen is an important setting, the domain of the suburban housewife. It is explicitly present in Plath's "Cut" (Appendix 3) where the domestic situation of cooking becomes the scene of self multilation, ("what a thrill/My thumb instead of an onion") and also evokes

the history of America and the world. "Someone plays with me," states Sexton in "Self In 1958," "plants me in the all-electric kitchen." The woman becomes a toy to external forces. The modern aspect of the kitchen suggests the mechanized sick world, the clinic and the laboratory. Further, "the [illegible]-electric-kitchen" implies the breakdown of the experience of the natural elements as a source of power.

The paraphernalia of the kitchen also appears in their poetry. In "The Colossus" Plath envisions herself as a reduced miniscule figure climbing up the broken statue of a deity with "glue pots and pails of lysol." Here she parodies the image of the housewife, making it absurd. At the same time she implies that whatever else she is, she is still determined by the image of the housewife, even unconsciously. The obsession with cleansing is a symptom of the breakdown related to guilt and is linked to the setting of the sanitary institution. The kitchen is also a metaphor for the world, where the body is often conceived of as meat and food. Food is an expression of the American consuming culture, its insatiable hunger, the perverted image of which is cannibalism. The devouring mouth, explicitly or as an allusion, is

recurrent in Plath's poetry. Sexton frequently refers to her "hunger" and in "Live," uses the metaphor of cooking to express, among other things, the process of breakdown: "the chief ingredient/is mutilation." In "The Addict," eating and drinking are linked to suicide and death.

Related to the images of food are pills which are equated with various kinds of substitutes such as candies, alcohol, mother. They are the socially acceptable modern 'sacraments' which dissolve all problems, and are used to transform, or escape reality: "The pills are a mother, but better,/every color and as good as sour balls." ("The Addict"). "I have taken a pill to kill," states Plath in "Cut," (Appendix 3) "the thin/papery feeling." It is interesting to note that in Plath's poetry refrains of the word 'pill' abound: ill, kill, will, mill, still, thrill. Pills are seen as the housewife's necessity, a slow enjoyable poison, and much more serious and drastic, the immediacy of wanting to commit suicide: "I am becoming something of a chemical mixture." ("The Addict"). Also in "The Addict," pills correspond ironically with the housewife's obsession with the body and keeping it fit: "I'm on a diet from death."

Another form of addiction is the telephone which

is the object that most strongly expresses breakdown, dependency and disembodiment, the lack of identity and the exploration of identity: "The black telephone's off at the root,/the voices just can't worm through." ("Daddy" - Appendix 4). "I have inhabited you, number by number/I have pushed you in and out like a needle." ("KE 6-8018"). In this poem Sexton "dial(s) the wound over and over." Here, the telephone is identified with the body, and in relation to it, with masochism and self destruction. She can communicate with herself only through pain.

Mundane objects are compared to the body with horrific connotations. Things reflect the body, become extensions of the body which makes the body a thing. The concept of the body as object is rooted in the duality of matter/spirit, body/mind, inner/outer and finally the life/death situation, the consciousness of which is expressed in their poetry as alienation and fragmentation, leading to madness and thus death. In Sexton's "Self In 1958" the metaphor she uses for herself over a period of seven years is a doll. In "The Operation," Sexton's stomach is "laced up like a football." The "cut-out heart" of "Two Views of a Cadaver Room" is an "heirloom." In

Plath's "Lady Lazarus," skin is "bright as a Nazi lampshade," a foot is equated with a "paperweight."

The mirror is also an object that appears often as a significant metaphor. In "Self In 1958" Sexton is reflecting on reality as she is reflecting on the reflected image of her body. The question of reality and body is one. Fragmented reality equals the fragmented body. In Plath's "Child," the mirror of the child's eye is made to reflect the "wringing hands" of the woman's reality.

(d) The Experience of Enclosure

The body is a victim of its immediate environment and to objects in that environment. Rooms, and houses, cages and prisons, trunks, washbowls, are some of the recurrent images that are the body, that enclose and restrict it. Moreover, neurotic identification with enclosure is made to the extent that the body is not only a victim like a prisoner, but in turn, and often simultaneously, its own prison: "I am locked in the wrong house." ("For the Year of the Insane"). "You do not do, you do not do/Any more, black shoe/In which I have lived like a foot/For thirty years." ("Daddy" - Appendix 4).

Sexton is an urban poet, hence the sense of overt enclosure is far more intense in her poetry than in Plath's.

The image of a window, sometimes spatially abstracted, is recurrent. It suggests expansion (entry) beyond the limitations imposed by the context of the poem, and simultaneously a contraction of the given reality by invoking the closed-in, claustrophobic room. One is conscious of being in enclosed settings, enclosed situations. The effect is of a room within a room in the sense that the body, as stated previously, is conceived of as an image of enclosure. The reader looks in on a scene, whereas in Plath's poetry one tends to look in and out. Even when she is literally within an enclosed space, as in the hospital room of "Tulips," she is also in the external world: "I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow/Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips."

For both poets, the world itself can become an enclosure, as for example, the "dark/Ceiling without a star" of Plath's "Child," or, "The rat's star" of Sexton's "With Mercy for the Greedy." The roof for Plath is the sky, for Sexton it is more often the ceiling. The question seems to pose itself: with Sexton, what am I doing within this body, while Plath would seem to ask, what am I doing in this world.

4. Institutional Victimization

The predominant setting of an enclosed place in their poetry, which defines their situation, and becomes a metaphor for the world, is the hospital or mental asylum. In Sexton's "Ghosts," the hospital/asylum is evoked and man, woman, and child are the patients/victims. In "For the Year of the Insane," Sexton herself is the mad patient in an asylum. Plath in "Mystic" asks the despairing patient's question: "what is [redacted]remedy?," and in "The Hanging Man," prophecy and m[redacted] allude to clinical electric shock.

Poems like "The Operation," "For the Year of the Insane," "Tulips," "Lady Lazarus," and "Daddy" (Appendix 4), are all or in part a dramatization of personal breakdown and their attempts to come to terms with their sickness - mainly to seek a cure. The principle setting in these poems, in which this is staged, is the hospital, or mental asylum. In these public institutions, their personal experience or victimization is intensified as their poems make explicit. They become the archetype of the hospitalized patient, the public casualty, linking themselves directly or indirectly to the historical victim like the Jew. The helplessness of their situation, is made concrete in the institutional setting, which concentrates the

scenario of victimization on themselves. Their poetry emerges in this context as a statement about woman and her necessity and on those moments in which she is stripped bare.

Both poets characterize the hospital as a metaphor for the world, an institution implicated in the course of universal victimization, a nightmarish sanctuary of the sick in a modern hell. The hospital is a scheduled reality of torture and experimentation, of pseudo-miracles and macabre cure. The dissecting room, the operating theatre, the wards, the white offices and walls, the "green people" ("The Operation"), "My nurses, those starchy ghosts," ("The Operation"), suggest a sterile, spectral landscape which is capable of either starkly isolating the personal experience, as it does for Sexton and Plath, or completely smothering it. The hospital operates by routine, impersonal decision and indifference: "I smile at the nurse/who smiles for the morning shift." ("The Operation"). It is a world of "science and pitfalls" ("The Operation"), of mechanized and chemical props: "the bed that runs/on power" ("The Operation") and "bright needles" ("Tulips"); "I rest on their needles," ("The Operation"). Name tags, fever charts, operating lights, needles, knives, a nurse's flashlight, the "oily rape" ("The Operation") of a surgeon's

glove, both furnish and suggest a scene of violation, threat and regimented butchery. Most of all, it is the centre of reduction:

> All that was special, all that was rare
> is common here.
> ("The Operation")

In Sexton's "Flee on Your Donkey" (a companion poem to "The Operation"), a scenario of hospitalization in a mental asylum, shows that the first act of a patient is to relinquish personal identity:

> I signed myself in where a stranger
> puts the inked-in X's

In "Tulips," after surgery, Plath describes a similar process:

> I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
> And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to the surgeons.

The experience of reduction, from one stage to the next, is epitomized in the experience of the body, and in its physical state of helplessness: "My body is a pebble to them," ("Tulips"). It lies horizontally, inert on trolleys and hospital beds, stretched out on examination and operating tables, tied down into stirrups and harness. It is from this explicit recurring image in their poetry, of the body physically reduced to being flat on the bed, that much of the imagery to express their victimization and

breakdown occurs. The body is stripped, shaved, probed, cut up, sewn up, electrically shocked, chemically numbed. It is made dependent on the external reality, which victimizes it. The self-consciousness of this produces the feeling of humiliation, degradation, fear and loneliness of the tormented patient as a victim. In their poetry this is often expressed with a sense of irony and self-mockery.

There are various forms in which the body is perceived in bed, in hospital. The most explicit pattern is that of the body as an object. It is a functional mechanism. It can be repaired, patched up and made to endure. In Sexton's "The Operation," the body is "humpty-dumpty" that becomes "laced up like a football/for the game." In Plath's "Daddy," (Appendix 4) there is a similar image: "But they pulled me out of the sack,/And they stuck me together with glue."

Related to the body's objectification is the pattern of the body as meat. "Fact: the body is dumb, the body is meat." ("The Operation"). In "Tulips," Plath by inference sees herself as meat:

> The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
> They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,

This pattern of imagery is extended to include a pervasive view of the body as cooked food. In Plath's "Two Views of a Cadaver Room," the body in the dissecting room is dismembered, mutilated, examined and exhibited as a daily routine: "They had four men laid out, black as burnt turkey,/Already half unstrung." The scene suggests a ghastly banquet;[2] the medical students become butchers and cooks, and the cadavers, "burnt turkey." Many of their images, particularly for Plath, are associated with the Nazi atrocities, the mutilations and murders of the Jews, which increase the horrific and haunting quality of the imagery. Plath, mocking her "Comeback" to the world after an operation, or suicide attempt, sees herself as

> A sort of walking miracle, my skin
> Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
> My right foot
>
> A paperweight,
> My face a featureless, fine
> Jew linen.
>
> ("Lady Lazarus")

The body as meat, cooked food, and as a grotesque ornament, underlines the recurrent themes of cannibalism and butchery becoming an indictment of the denial of the spirit, more particularly, modern man's unconscious bestiality, his barbaric indifference to suffering.

[2] E.P. Hearsey, "The Gross Eating Game," Thesis, Sir George Williams University, 1969.

There is also the pattern of the dead body, the absent body, the literal corpse. This is evoked in "Two Views of a Cadaver Room" where the "cut-out heart," a relic of a dissected cadaver, is presented as a gift of dead meat which simultaneously becomes a grotesque parody of a Valentine heart, and as banal. In "Tulips," the hospital room is like a mausoleum in which Plath's body seems to be entombed. She has completely resigned herself to the institution: "I am nobody." She wants, "To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty," but is unwittingly and hauntingly drawn back to life by the tulips.

The image of the dead body obviously implies a final reduction. However, it also indicates a resurrection that is couched in imagery suggestive of a regressed infantile state. In "The Operation," the hospital bed for Sexton, who has just experienced surgery, is an "aluminum crib," denoting the infantile helplessness and dependency of her body to external reality. In "Lady Lazarus," the most extreme instance of regression and the experience of death, Plath refers to herself in surgical operation as an "opus" of the doctor's "great concern," as if she was an abstract masterpiece conceived in an operating theatre. There is the further implication of a horrific birth as

she experiences herself melting down "to a shriek." With the institutional experience, the process of regression, together with the experience of regaining consciousness or being resurrected, leads to an ironic realization about the nature of actual birth: "Fact: death too is in the egg." ("The Operation"). Life begins with death. Birth is the first victimization. From this initial experience, the process of living is synonymous with death and dying, which, however, leads paradoxically to the experience and awareness of life. In this realization, the mind attempts to escape the condition of the victimized body. This results in a rift of mind and body that is a further victimization.

Ultimately, the great difference in Plath and Sexton's visions of the body can be summed up in two constitutive images. Sexton's "I will struggle like a surgeon."("KE 6-8018") is a statement of commitment. She will 'cure' herself. Whether she speaks of operations or of madness the 'cure' is conceived of in physical terms. In "For the Year of the Insane," her appeal to Mary is as "tender physician." Her imagery of the body as victim and the body as object are closely interwoven. She conceives of the body as a prison or at best a house, but she is

always locked in it. Even when the body has given up, "Only my hands are alive," (denoting the body's paralysis in madness), she is still in the body: "It lies, curled like a dog on the carpet." ("For the Year of the Insane"). Her commitment to find a cure is appropriately in terms of the body. In spite of its weakness and the way it victimizes her, she is willing to heal the rift, and "like a surgeon," cure herself. In this sense, the body for her, is also a strength.

Plath, on the other hand, has a more complex concept and experience of the body. Although she shares with Sexton in the experience of body as victim - the broken body, the cut-up body, the decaying wasted body, and the dead body - the mind's power to project itself and embody what it contemplates is a characteristic unique to her. This is her great poetic gift, and her affliction.

Plath does not "struggle" like Sexton. She gives up her known identity and resigns her "body to (the) surgeons." She knows no "remedy" ("Mystic"). She has relinquished the body because she knows she has to. She has been defined by a concern that is beyond the body, yet paradoxically it is also of the body. The most she can do is affirm the body, but her affirmation distills

all the paradoxes of being and non-being and the suffering these entail to the essential austere statement: "The heart has not stopped." ("Mystic").

PART TWO

Chapter III

THE CONCEPT OF SELF:PERSONA

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1. The Actual Self

The self revealed in Sexton's and Plath's poetry is a self that experiences death and dying on a physical, psychological and spiritual level. In Sexton's poetry it is a self that is divided between the mind and the body, both caught in determinisms. The body is meat/object, and in the mind "there is a thin alley called death/and I move through it as/through water." The mind struggles to heal the rift. The mind gives birth to the poet who, searching into the past of the woman (memories, events, roles), externalizes her experience into poetry.

In Plath's poetry the body is a burden to the self, "thirty year old cargo boat." (Tulips"). Accordingly, the mind divorced from the body enters a world that it simultaneously creates. This is a recurrent experience in her poetry, best illustrated in "Elm," where the nature of the self is explored, in respect to the divorce between the mind and body, through a total identification with a tree. The limitations of the body (dealt with in the previous section), become stepping stones for the mind's

journey into itself. This is the world of both madness and vision, which is haunting as well as beautiful.

From the perspective of the autobiographical self, the woman in Sexton's poetry is gradually being revealed in her limitations, her personal history ("The Operation") her madness ("KE 6-8018"), her suicide ("The Addict"), her struggle with doubt/faith ("With Mercy For The Greedy"), and in her affirmation of self, love and life, as woman, wife, mother and poet ("Live").

In Plath's poetry the woman is veiled, and in the unveiling she becomes more elusive. Behind each veil/mask is another. The spectrum is vast, (a thesis in itself). However, in the unveiling what is revealed are the fragments of a complex, sensitive, infinitely distressed human being whose vision is a burden.

2. The Persona/Self

The creation of persona from the actual self involves an act of consciousness that is also a growth and an expansion of the self. The persona functions as a dramatic vehicle that creates distance between the subjective emotional involvement in experience and its objective articulation. The self finds voice through the creation of persona. Using the technique of the persona is analogous

to looking at the self from the outside in. The persona is a protective mask. The persona is equivalent to the changing faces of the self, including caricature, parody, and irony, in looking at the self. The persona is a mediator between the actual self and the world.

There are essentially three categories of personae: The Created Persona, The Confessional Persona, and The Poetic Persona. The Created Persona includes the Tough, Freak, Victim, Patient, Depersonalized, Classical/Mythic/Archetypal persona.

3. The Created Persona

This is the means through which the nature and dimensions of the self are explored, as well as being a way of creating a self; of giving 'being' to oneself. In Sexton's poetry the persona objectifies the revelation of personal experience. The persona is an 'acting out' of fantasy and necessity.

In Plath's poetry, persona is a complex Protean figure. It is a metamorphosis of persona both revealing and creating the self from a composite image of personae. It includes the masculine principle which she projects and creates into a character and often incarnates. For example, "Herr Doktor" in "Lady Lazarus" is one of her personae.

A variation of this is illustrated in "Elm" where she integrates the male lover into her metamorphosing identification with the tree.

(a) The Tough Persona

This is the 'hardboiled,' knowledgeable, experienced 'been through it all before' persona, the urban sophisticate. It is a protective pose. Behind the mask is the vulnerable woman, who often regresses to being a child. For both poets, this is the persona dedicated to death: "I'm an expert on making the trip" ("The Addict"); "I have done it again." ("Lady Lazarus"). Death is a fact that is taken for granted; it does not even have to be stated.

The tough persona is one of the masks that Sexton uses to burlesque the enigmas of emotion. She's the tough "bar fly" in "Sylvia's Death." This is her central persona in "The Addict": "I make arrangements for a pint-sized journey,/I'm the queen of this condition." Everything is handled with a cool detachment; the emotions are masked. The commitment to death is total. The addict is also the bride, the lover and the dutiful daughter, each representing another persona. But these are all submerged under the drugged consciousness of the addict.

The persona of the tough is not as prominent in Sexton's other poems as in "The Addict," but it is always

there in tone, behind the self-mockery. It is always there putting up a front as in "The Operation": "Time now to pack this humpty-dumpty/back the frightened way she came." This is the persona of the stiff upper lip that endures and shows no pain, who is so good at playing the role, that she can be mocking: "They say I'm better./I lounge in frills or, picturesque,/I wear bunny pink slippers in the hall." ("The Operation"). The tough persona is the counterbalance of the victim/patient which is its other face.

The tough persona in "Lady Lazarus" is the 'queen' of invective. It is the 'stripper' exhibiting her wounds, and the barker calling "Gentlemen, ladies." The tough persona exposes horror and pain, but veils the emotions. This is the persona that says: "Dying/Is an art, like everything else./I do it exceptionally well."

(b) The Freak Persona

This is the fool, the madwoman, physically and spiritually crippled. The freak is the persona that is disconnected from the self, from man, from society, and from the world. Defined by images of reduction she is the madwoman. In Sexton's "KE 6-8018" she is the "drawer of blood," and the "white dog/who doubles back, not knowing his name." In Plath's "Lady Lazarus" she is the cadaverous

but "smiling woman," "A sort of walking miracle." She is the monstrous incarnation of "Herr Doktor," the symbol of man, father/god - the demonic principle that rules the world. The freak is the "ant" (housewife) in the ear of the Colossus in Plath's "The Colossus," and the "humpback" housewife in "Mystic."

In "Live," recapitulating her various personae, Sexton alludes to her "dwarf-heart's doodle," a direct reference to "Old Dwarf Heart," (Appendix 1) a poem which best exemplifies her freak persona. In that poem she is the haggish, reptilian, monstrous composite image of decay and death "breathing in loops like a green hen"; "Like an imbecile she was born old."

In Sexton's "The Operation" it is life itself that reduces one to a freak. This is reiterated in "Self In 1958": "Life enlarges, life takes aim."

In Plath's "Elm" the freak is a figure of despair and unsatiable desire: "I am inhabited by a cry./Nightly it flaps out/Looking with its hooks, for something to love." This is a horrific inference of the soul as a predatory bird, a cosmic 'hooker.' This is the freak persona that embodies disease, insanity and suffering. It is the persona conceived from the violence perpetrated on the human being which simultaneously reflects its own violence and

destruction.

(c) The Depersonalized Persona

Related to the conception of victimization discussed previously, this persona reflects the contemporary nobody or everybody, the 'faceless' persona. In Plath's "Two Views of a Cadaver Room," "she" is the young woman and the lover, both victim and witness of the contemporary scene of slaughter. In Sexton's "Self In 1958," this is the persona imposed by society, and the conditioning process of advertisement - the magazine image: "I pose/ . . . I have hair . . . black-angel-stuffing to comb,/ nylon legs, luminous arms/and some advertised clothes." This is also the persona that is created by the mind alienated from the body, the disembodied voice of Plath's "Elm," and "Tulips": "I am nobody"; "ridiculous . . . cut-paper shadow." This is the persona of the I/me dichotomy where the mind divorced from the body is also an object and an abstraction: the telephone, in "KE 6-8018," is an insect "sly beetle," that finally becomes death itself, "Black lady." In Sexton's "The Operation," the depersonalized persona, "The soul that swam the furious water/sinks now in flies and the brain/flops," is the one who articulates the experience beyond the body.

Linked to the disembodied/impersonal persona is the phantasmagorical persona that is used like dissolving masks in film. This is the persona that is divided, or mad. It is the persona that inhabits the personal dream/nightmare which, as in Plath's "Elm," becomes a cosmic dreamscape. The persona here undergoes a sequence of metamorphosis: the woman is the tree, and takes on the power of the male and the lover; she becomes a horse and simultaneously the rider. This persona explores the forces of destruction imminent in herself and external to her. This is the persona that projects the self to the farthest reaches of being and returns back: "I am incapable of more knowledge." ("Elm"). Similarly, in Sexton's "For The Year of The Insane," this is the persona that projects beyond the inert body, hovers between vision and madness and returns knowing: "I am in my own mind./I am locked in the wrong house."

(d) The Classical/Mythic/and/or Archetypal Persona

This is a persona more predominant in the poetry of Plath. A persona of great dimensions, its function is linked to the prophetic voice of the poet. Medea, Cassandra, Venus, Lilith are some of the mythic beings that the poet invokes and embodies, re-creating myth in the contemporary context. Like the sequence of personae

in "Lady Lazarus," these personae inhabit a world as large as the one they reflect, more significant than the contemporary vision acknowledges, and more destructive. They clamour for the oldest prophecy - the vengeance of earth itself:

> Herr God, Herr Lucifer
> Beware
> Beware.
>
> Out of the ash
> I rise with my red hair
> And I eat men like air.
>
> ("Lady Lazarus")

Similar personae appear in "The Aftermath,""The Colossus," and "Disquieting Muses" (Appendix 2).

Linked to this persona is Plath's persona of the scholar, the quester, and the questioner. In "The Colossus" she returns to the land of myth as the archeologist picking up the fragments. And in "Mystic" she is the questioning cosmic rag-picker. Sexton on the other hand does not make use of this persona. Instead, she draws on the witch of fairy-tales and nursery rhymes. This is the persona whereby she externalizes her fantasy, her destructiveness and her madness:

> Even with the witches' gymnastics
> they trust my incalculable city,
> my corruptible bed.

4. The Confessional Persona

This is the reflective autobiographical persona, the recorder of personal events, that keeps a diary, a calendar of confessions. The confessional persona explores and exposes the self and the various selves. It can be identified with the voice of the poet revealing and objectifying the experience of the self.

Sexton is explicitly a confessional poet: "I have this great need somehow to keep that time of my life, that feeling. I want to imprison it in a poem, to keep it. It's almost in a way like keeping a scrapbook to make life mean something as it goes by, to rescue it from chaos - to make "now" last."[3] Her personal experience is not only the ground work and source of inspiration for a poem, as it is with Plath, but also and almost always the subject of the poem. In "Self In 1958," which marks a stage (7 years) in her experience of herself, she is confessing, revealing, questioning and coming to terms with the sense of her own unreality. The confessional persona has a cathartic, therapeutic function. "Live" is Sexton's final confession in Live Or Die. Here she recapitulates and fuses the discordant selves by renouncing the destructive demonic projections and by including the destructive

[3]Patricia Marx, p. 63.

aspects into an all encompassing "I": "So I say Live/ and turn my shadow three times round/. . . I say Live, Live because of the sun,/the dream, the excitable gift."

In contrast, Plath's confessional persona is limited. The personal detail is re-created and not reflected, and the self of autobiography is superseded by the poetic self. This statement is explicitly definitive in the following line from her poem, "Kindness": "The blood jet is poetry,/There is no stopping it." With Plath, the confessional persona is a disembodied voice, interjecting, commenting: "I am only thirty." ("Lady Lazarus"); "I was ten when they buried you./At twenty I tried to die." ("Daddy" - Appendix 4). The confessional persona speaks through veils. The woman reveals herself from time to time but the self remains elusive.

In Sexton the confessional persona is the most predominant, encompassing other personae. On one level her poems are a confession of her limitations and her search for transcendence. The confessional persona talks about her guilt, her loss of innocence, inspiration and meaning. She confesses to madness - the innocence and the guilt. In "With Mercy For The Greedy," she is the penitent: "I detest my sins and I try to believe/in The Cross."

She is also the confessor: "I was born/doing reference work in sin." This poem is literally a confession structured as a letter. It is also a confession of her poetry as confession. It is significant in this respect that the constitutive symbol of her poetry is the heart as collector "cupboard" ("Sylvia's Death"), storing away the wounds and the sins. Finally, she is the mediator and must absolve herself although the absolution includes an element of self-mockery which suggests her inability to forgive herself completely.

> I'm an empress.
> I wear an apron.
> My typewriter writes.
>
> ("Live")

Through the confessional persona the world revealed in Sexton's poems is threatening, mad and faithless. It reduces one to an object, and there is no other point of reference but the self. But knowing the self involves knowing one's roots, knowing one's personal history, one's family. The woman turns back to her childhood searching for her origins and this, what she discovers, is the basis for her confession.

(a) The Child Persona

This persona is a child. The projection into the stage of childhood is, however, an ambiguous act. It can

be an affirmation of innocence and beauty as in Plath's "Child"; or a regressive and neurotic act as in Sexton's "The Addict." But regression is also a healing process whereby the woman tries to transcend the present situation by reaching into childhood and there attempting to recapture herself. Hence it is both an escape, stilling the pain of existence, "Now I'm borrowed./Now I'm numb." ("The Addict"), and a desire and need, a return to the mystery of the mother and the fascination with the father. A pattern of relationships and a vision of the family emerges from the poems. In Sexton what is revealed of her first family, her mother and father, becomes integral in her affirmation of her second family, her husband and daughters, in "Live."

Plath's childhood persona is the ironically dutiful daughter keeping up the memory of the father, as in "The Colossus," and "Daddy" (Appendix 4). With these poems, the child becomes Electra trying to recapture the power of the father. She wants to embody the father, signified by her identification with the insect in the ear of the Colossus, or marry the father, and kill him, as in "Daddy" (Appendix 4). As the child persona, she is the ill-treated, abandoned, orphaned child deprived of

love and knowledge through the death of the father. The father is the destructive sadistic man/god who "Bit my pretty red heart in two." ("Daddy" - Appendix 4). But this is the drama of the adult woman not the child.

5. The Poetical Persona

This is the articulating voice, the creative self, that defines the persona, and conversely the voice becomes articulate through defining the persona. The poetic persona transforms the mind's storehouse of the body's experience into a poem through moulding, projecting and creating from the actual self the diverse personae that act out the drama of life and death. For instance, in Plath's "Lady Lazarus" the "I" is not at first identifiable. The "I" metamorphoses into a succession of personae from a Jew, a cadaver, a freak, a stripper, a barker, behind whose masks is "the same, identical woman." This is the actual self, which is only one aspect of the "I." Accordingly, the "I" is the poetic voice or persona. Sometimes it is a voice, sometimes it is embodied. In "The Aftermath" and "Two Views of a Cadaver Room" the "I" creates the poem without becoming an actor in the drama. The "she" of the latter poem, however, is a created persona, (the depersonalized persona), identifiable with the experience of the actual

self of the poet, and not necessarily the autobiographical self.

Sexton's poetic persona, on the other hand, can be identified with the confessional persona. For example, in "Ghosts," the poetic persona is distinct from the confessional persona in the sense that the personal experience is the triager for the vision.

The composite of personae - as in "Lady Lazarus" from the cadaver to the prophetic/mythic/archetypal persona is the poetic persona. And it is also the self (as distinct from the actual self) that uses the various personae/masks. In Sexton's "Live" the poetic persona gathers unto itself the diverse personae of Sexton's other poems - the tough, the victim, the suicide, the witch - these masks of her actual self - the woman, mother and wife.

What Sexton discovers through her personae is who her actual self is. Plath on the other hand knows through her poetic self that her actual self - the autobiographical woman is only one of the aspects of the self. In other words, what she discovers is a greater self. Plath's poetic persona is beyond the experience of the actual self. In "Mystic" this juxtaposition is clear. The poetic persona is unwittingly the mystic, whereas the actual self

of the woman is identified with the persona of the "humpback" housewife. Hence her poetic persona is simultaneously a gift and an affliction. A gift in the sense that her creative powers are limitless; they transcend the limitations of life into the kingdom of the dead. This is why the poetic persona says, "Dying/Is an art," "Lady Lazarus." Each incarnation into a persona is an incarnation into death, for none can encompass the self. Plath's muses confirm her terrible commitment to death. This notion of her deathly inspiration is best formulated in her poem "Disquieting Muses" (Appendix 2):

> Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,
> They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,
> Faces blank as the day I was born,
> Their shadows long in the setting sun
> That never brightens or goes down.
> And this is the kingdom you bore me to,
> Mother, mother. But no frown of mine
> Will betray the company I keep.

Linked to Plath's poetic persona is the prophetic persona, exemplified in such poems as, "Lady Lazarus," "The Hanging Man," and "Mystic." Her 'call' is poetry and her poetry is prophecy. She is the prophet of death, and death is her "call" ("Lady Lazarus"). She is conscious of her call as is implicit in her creation of the mythic/archetypes of the prophet: "Beware/Beware/Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air." (Sexton,

in "Sylvia's Death," acknowledges Plath's 'call'.)

The prophecy in her poetry is personal and public. Possibly she prophesied her own death, the death of woman ("the boot in the face"), and the death of the world. The image of woman in her poetry is defined by death and so is her vision of the world.

In Sexton's poetry, on the other hand, the poetical persona is the confessional persona who is conscious of confessing the experience of the actual self, and writing the poem. Accordingly, the poetical persona explores through the confessional persona the dimensions of the actual self - the secrets and the wounds. The poetic persona seeks to transcend beyond the limitations of the actual self, the known self. The poetic act is a mercy:

> This is what poems are:
> with mercy
> for the greedy,
> they are the tongue's wrangle,
> the world's pottage, the rat's star.
>
> ("With Mercy For The Greedy")

Soxton's image of her muse is a mouse and a nurse. She speaks of her poetry as "a kind of rebirth."[4]

[4]Patricia Marx, p.561.

PART II

Chapter IV

THE SACRIFICIAL VICTIM

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For both poets, the condition of the body is that of the victim. The mind perceives the condition and attempts to escape or transcend it. Escape is a turning inwards, to memory, to pose the question, where did it all begin? However, the return leads to both madness and suicide, which are paradoxically ways of experiencing life; (self-destruction is an attempt at self-creation). For it is in these situations of extremity that transcendence is experienced. The mind in detaching itself from the body becomes the observer of the body. At this point in the poets' experience, and their articulation of it, the image of the body as victim metamorphoses through need and creative imagination into an image that expresses the above condition, and is analogous to the pagan, mythic, modern and Christian archetypes of the sacrificial victim.

The victim has been discussed previously as a figure within necessity. The figure of the sacrificial victim, however, implies the possibility of redemption and the transcendence of determinism. The purpose of sacrifice, as a ritual act of death, is to re-affirm life, to synthesize the opposites of life and death, body and mind,

spirit and matter. Through the figure of the sacrificial victim, the meaninglessness that Sexton and Plath envision in the image of the victimized body, is given meaning. Within the western context Christ on the cross is the archetype of the sacrificial victim. The cross and crucifixion are the central metaphors in their poetry which are woven into a network of meanings. The sacrificial victim archetype is revealed in three ways: the pagan ritual sacrifice which emphasizes pity and terror, the Christian crucifixion which manifests grace and symbolizes resurrection, and the modern reduction of the archetype to a wanton sacrifice.

Both in madness and suicidal acts, Sexton and Plath return to the experience of actual birth in an attempt to wrestle meaning from their victimized condition. Birth itself is seen as a sacrificial event. It is the first victimization: "It (the body) was caught/in the first place at birth,/like a fish." ("Live"). From this initial experience, the process of living is envisioned as synonymous with being sacrificed. For Sexton, the emphasis of sacrifice is on the body's limitations and its mortality. The body is "caught," inferring it is netted or hooked, and further, that it is to be eaten by life. The implication

of being killed and eaten, invokes the essence of Pagan sacrifice, that death and life, heaven and earth are interdependent. On a Christian level, the "fish", is equated with both the soul and Christ. The context in which Sexton deals with it is in terms of suffocation, pain and death. In "The Operation," she experiences the life of the soul momentarily, "The soul that swam the furious water," but in an anaesthetized state. As soon as she regains consciousness, the soul "flops like a docked fish," again re-iterating the vision of incarnation as a sacrifice in the context of suffocation. In spite of these experiences, she continues to contemplate the possibility of the incarnate spirit, in an attempt to synthesize the body/mind duality. In "With Mercy For The Greedy," "Jesus" fails to be more than the symbol of human suffering; she is unable despite her desperate need, to grasp his divinity. The metamorphosis from the sensual image of Christ that she invokes to the "chunk of beef" reflects her vision of the duality of the body's beauty and life, and its frailty and horror. This is her crucifixion. In "For The Year Of The Insane," she appeals again to Christ, but through a mediator - Mary. Here she reaches the limits of her madness, "the domain of silence,/the kingdom of the crazy and the sleeper." Again, she is caught in her own vision. Unable

to resolve the duality, the distance between her need and what actually becomes manifest, she sees herself as "locked in the wrong house." She articulates her position in an image of the sacrificial victim that is unredemptive: "I have been cut in two." This is madness. But the madness, ironically and paradoxically, contains grace. She is the sacrificial victim of her own vision.

In contrast to these despairing visions of transcending the body, in "KE 6-8018" and "The Addict," Sexton escapes the dilemma, aware that she is escaping and mocking herself. The escape is couched within an ironic framework of the sacramental, and she takes a masochistic pleasure in this mockery of self and her own attempts to grasp the transcendent. She evades the demands of her vision which involve the suffering of the material world and the snare of duality in a mock death, which is sleep: "Now I'm borrowed./Now I'm numb." ("The Addict"). But there is a price. The grace of awareness that she receives in the despairing vision is sacrificed on the mock "altar" of the "black sacrament." ("The Addict"). She is relinquishing choice and reduced to passivity, she becomes synthetic: "I'm becoming something of a chemical/mixture." ("The Addict"). Since everything is false, the evasion cannot last. In the

awareness of this is a further crucifixion.

In "Live," she acknowledges the evasion and that she has been the perpetrator of the despair that led to madness and suicide. Through the acknowledgement, she no longer carries the burden of indecision. She has chosen. She embraces life and the world, despite destruction and mortality. Her vision is of procreation. It is an affirmation and celebration of the natural, elemental and the family: the "sun" in her womb, her husband a "redwood," her daughters, "sea urchins." She reconciles in terms of simple things: "Just last week, eight Dalmations,/3/4 of a lb., lined up like cord wood/each/like a/birch tree./I promise to love more if they come." This is the grace of the common routine. Sexton realizes in "Live" her limitations. Knowing it is a certain intellectual realization, that life is experienced reality, the eternal now: "There was the sun,/. . . tumbling her prize --/and you realize that she does this daily!/. . . hadn't known she was an answer." She learns to live in life as life lives in her.

Plath shares with Sexton the experience of the body's victimization as well as the conception that incarnation is the initial sacrifice. One of the settings for "The Disquieting Muses" (Appendix 2), recalls a ritual sacrifice, the suggestion being that she is the sacrificial

victim in the cradle to those dollish, devilish "ladies" which shadow her life: "Nodding by night around my bed,/ Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head." But unlike Sexton who struggles to transcend the body and thus experiences being sacrificed, Plath's crucifixion is consequent on the tension between the finite self and the experience of the self as having possibilities that extend beyond the finite. This expanded self is directly related to her poetic/prophetic persona. Involved in the creation of her poetry is the experience of being disembodied. In the state of being disembodied, usually when her body is inert and prone, she creates the world she contemplates, which she also inhabits. The dreamscape in "The Colossus," for example, evokes the ruins of an ancient, classical world. The figure of the shattered Colossus becomes a world in itself within this landscape which she enters: "Nights, I squat in the cornucopia/Of your left ear, out of the wind." This world she creates and inhabits also inhabits her: "I am terrified by this dark thing/that sleeps in me;/All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity." ("Elm"). This is the horrific vision that alludes to an experience of being possessed by a demonic spirit, with the further implication that she is giving birth to it. This reflects back to the way she conceives of being

born in "The Disquieting Muses." (Appendix 2). She is fated to experience death as synonymous with life, also in the sense that she is killed over and over in her imagination. She is the killer of herself, destroying herself to find herself. Each murder leads to a resurrection, and each incarnation is into death. The repeated experience of dying and being resurrected is parodied in "Lady Lazarus": " 'A miracle!'/That knocks me out." The whole poem is about the inversion of sacrifice. She is not being killed, she is being resurrected; however, she is being killed in being resurrected. Her resurrection has no meaning. Her body is a relic on exhibit for the "peanut crunching crowd," as well as an "opus" for science. The significance of the sacrificial victim is being reduced to an entertainment and an experiment.

Plath shares with Sexton the experience of the divided self, of madness. She too turns inwards, (this state of breakdown is fully explored in "Elm"), but unlike Sexton she also turns outward, searching for meaning in man and in the world. But there she experiences the same division, the same madness. She conceives of herself, man and the world as the scattered pieces of "some god or other" ("The Colossus"), which she attempts to put together. She also searches for meaning in history, myth and archetype

type, but again there is division and fragmentation reflected by the broken pieces of the Colossus. The experience of the self juxtaposed with the experience of the possibility of expansion, through the imagination, in going outward to the world leads to an existential awareness of her limitation: "I am incapable of more knowledge." ("Elm"). The further implication is that throughout her life she has attempted to synthesize the division of her body and mind, and the body of the world and the spirit that is imminent in it, but she fails: "Thirty years now I have laboured/[. . . I am none the wiser." The only evidence of meaning is in the broken pieces. The world reflects her and she reflects the world. (Mirror imagery is central to the poetry of Plath. This aspect of her vision is explored in some depth in Eileen Aird's "Sylvia Plath".)[5]

Ultimately the question for Plath is what is the significance of her sacrifice. Sexton is consumed on the 'altar' of her need for God: "Need is not quite belief." ("With Mercy For The Greedy"). Consequently she accepts the limitations of her vision, which entails a choice: "I won't hang around in my hospital shift,/repeating the Black Mass and all of it." ("Live"). The choice involves

[5]Eileen Aird, Sylvia Plath (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973), pp.106-111.

a sacrifice, which is that she must relinquish the hope of the possibility of fulfilling this need, through the experience of the symbol of the Cross, the madonna figure and the ritual of communion. The "religious objects," she refers to in "Live" are just that, no longer immediately relevant to her. She no longer 'mourns' them. Concomitant with this is her crossing over into health. Accordingly the need to believe diminishes in her affirmation of limitation and is replaced by what is most immediate to her - her vision of procreation which is made concrete in her experience of her family.

Plath, through her poetry and the disembodiment that it entails, experiences the extremities of herself, on one hand the expanded self, and on the other, the actual self that lives in the world, that has "pinned me in this tree." ("The Hanging Man"). This poem states her ironic crucifixion. She is crucified in her body without any purpose or meaning except that "some god" has got hold of her. The condition of her existence is "a vulturous boredom." Being embodied is an experience of being devoured, which is a death and from which she resurrects herself through the imagination. In this sense she has transcended the body. However, what she enters, in the experience of

being disembodied, is horrific. This state is expressed in "Mystic" as being "unbearable." She is "used utterly." These images of self, the world and her vision of God coalesce. Her vision of God is a vision of death. It is a savage God, not because like the Romantic visions of deity, it takes into account destructive forces, but because the demands it makes are more than she can bear within her limitations. One of Plath's personae is the prophet, and indeed in several poems, she speaks with a prophetic voice. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, one of her implied questions is 'why me?' Like the prophets she is 'called' and the call entails becoming more than she can be: "I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet." This is the condition within the religious context. But in spite of it, she continues to search, attempting to synthesize the visionary poetic/prophetic self and the actual everyday self. Accordingly in "Mystic" she asks "Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?/Once one has been seized up/Without a part left over,/Not a toe, not a finger . . . ." The path of orthodoxy the contemplative life, the cosmic rag-picker, the aesthete, her cosmic self - all are consumed by the vision. Her finite self asks, "Is there no great love, only tenderness?" This is the most fundamental of the "questions without answer." Plath's response,

if not "answer," is that "meaning leaks from the molecules," suggesting that meaning is present in the world, but only in fragments and the implied vision of the "Mystic" is a fragment. She returns to the world, specifically a landscape of the city, and a room within it. The final statement is an affirmation of life: "The children leap in their cots./The sun blooms, it is a geranium./The heart has not stopped." The heart which is equated with the geranium which is identified with the sun also reflects the infinite. The beating of the heart is the bleeding of the heart. The heart bleeds because the vision of the infinite that the finite cannot bear still beats within her. The unanswerable questions, the "mill of hooks" remains. She is the sacrificial victim to life, to God, to God within life, but she accepts and affirms the condition, the vision.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

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The design of death in the poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath is in the overall pattern of image, theme and vision. Both poets weave a design of death, giving it shape through their poetry which is simultaneously an unraveling of the purpose and meaning of life. The design has at its core the inter-relationship of life and death. This correspondence is the underlying dynamics of their poetry.

The selected poetry of Anne Sexton delineates the experience of death of the self, and through it the contemporary vision of death in the world is reflected. The world is portrayed devoid of meaning, unreal and spectral; there is nothing and no one but the self. In this sense Sexton carries on the tradition of modern confessional poetry which has at its basis the conviction that one can no longer make a universal statement, one can only speak for oneself. Speaking for the self entails a confession of the self. Through the confession of death she recognizes the dialectic of life and death. The recognition leads her to affirm the experience of death as necessary. Similarly although the poems are concerned with the expression of the denial of her being, they lead her to

affirm her reality through the re-creation of herself in poetry. It is in "Live," her final affirmation through death of self, family, and nature that she makes the statement: "My typewriter writes." All in all, Sexton is the poet of personal experience who achieves making public a chronology of private struggle with existence into a statement of renewal. Although her poetic vision is circumscribed by her personal experience, that is both her strength and her weakness, for ultimately her affirmation of self is as woman and poet.

Plath's vision of death is of the holocaust. The atrocities committed by the Nazis are not, in her poetry, just symbols of a past event but an immediate and universal experience of the destruction wrought by man. The underlying principle that rules the world is demonic and consistently identified with man. Life itself is a devouring principle, exemplified by the elements as forces beyond the control of man. From the perspective of the contemporary materialistic view of reality, her vision is horrific and unredeeming. Plath herself in this sense is appalled by her own vision. Nevertheless, she is willing to affirm that she is part of that vision and the condition of horror it manifests. From a religious perspective, she wills the experience of death, taking on the suffering and the guilt,

and by doing so has a vision of death beyond the actual body and the world. In "Mystic," she recapitulates the vision of death expressed in her other poems in terms of the relative, social, historical destruction or evil. She submits to this vision and takes it to its extremity, where the vision of death is transcendental. Death is the source and fate of all things. And, this ultimate vision of death is also revealed as a vision of life. This synthesis of death and life becomes synonymous with the absolute and her vision of God. The world is only truly alive in the pieces of God that manifest his fragmented immanence. Accordingly, Plath's vision while encompassing the modern vision of poetry, belongs more to traditional religious poetry. This is why her poetry, unlike Sexton's, has a personal sense of urgency and universal relevance. On the other hand, unlike Sexton, she succumbs as a woman to the vision of death and the cosmic reach of her imagination. Her great poetic gift is her undoing. Finally her suicide and death is consistent with her vision of death.

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APPENDIXES

OLD DWARF HEART

True. All too true. I have never been at home in life. All my decay has taken place upon a child.

"Henderson the Rain King," by Saul Bellow

When I lie down to love,
old dwarf heart shakes her head.
Like an imbecile she was born old,
Her eyes wobble as thirty-one thick folds
of skin open to glare at me on my flickering bed.
She knows the decay we're made of.

When hurt she is abrupt.
Now she is solid, like fat,
breathing in loops like a green hen
in the dust. But if I dream of loving, then
my dreams are of snarling strangers. She dreams that . . .
strange, strange, and corrupt.

Good God, the things she knows!
And worse, the sores she holds
in her hands, gathered in like a nest
from an abandoned field. At her best
she is all red muscle, humming in and out, cajoled
by time. Where I go, she goes.

Oh now I lay me down to love,
how awkwardly her arms undo,
how patiently I untangle her wrists
like knots. Old ornament, old naked fist,
even if I put on seventy coats I could not cover you . . .
mother, father, I'm made of.

THE DISQUIETING MUSES

Mother, mother, what flowered aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep
Unasked to my christening, that she
Sent these ladies in her stead
With heads like darning-eggs to nod
And nod and nod at foot and head
And at the left side of my crib?

Mother, who made to order stories
Of Mixi Blackshort the heroic bear,
Mother, whose witches always, always
Got baked into gingerbread, I wonder
Whether you saw them, whether you said
Words to rid me of those three ladies
Nodding by night around my bed,
Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head.

In the hurricane, when father's twelve
Study windows bellied in
Like bubbles about to break, you fed
My brother and me cookies and ovaltine
And helped the two of us to choir:
'Thor is angry: boom boom boom!
Thor is angry: we don't care!'
But those ladies broke the panes.

When, on tiptoe the schoolgirls danced,
Blinking flashlights like fireflies
And singing the glowworm song. I could
Not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress
But, heavy-footed, stood aside
In the shadow cast by my dismal-headed
Godmothers, and you cried and cried:
And the shadow stretched, the lights went out.

Mother, you sent me to piano lessons
And praised my arabesques and trills
Although each teacher found my touch
Oddly wooden in spite of scales
And the hours of practising, my ear
Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable.
I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,
From muses unhired by you, dear mother.

I woke one day to see you, mother,
Floating above me in bluest air
On a green balloon bright with a million
Flowers and bluebirds that never were
Never, never, found anywhere.
But the little planet bobbed away
Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!
And I faced my travelling companions.

Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,
They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,
Faces blank as the day I was born,
Their shadows long in the setting sun
That never brightens or goes down.
And this is the kingdom you bore me to,
Mother, mother. But no frown of mine
Will betray the company I keep.

CUT

For Susan O'Neill Roe

What a thrill --
My thumb instead of an onion.
The top quite gone
Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,
A flap like a hat,
Dead white.
Then that red plush.

Little pilgrim,
The Indian's axed your scalp.
Your turkey wattle
Carpet rolls

Straight from the heart.
I step on it,
Clutching my bottle
Of pink fizz.

A celebration, this is.
Out of a gap
A million soldiers run,
Redcoats, every one.

Whose side are they on?
O my
Homunculus, I am ill.
I have taken a pill to kill

The thin
Papery feeling.
Saboteur,
Kamikaze man --

The stain on your
Gauze Ku Klux Klan
Babushka
Darkens and varnishes and when

The balled
Pulp of your heart
Confronts its small
Mill of silence

How you jump --
Trepanned veteran,
Dirty girl,
Thumb stump.

DADDY.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.