

"THE LITTLE WHITE DISH OF MY FAITH":
ANNE SEXTON, THE BODY, AND SPRITUALITY

by

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Abstract

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This thesis examines how Anne Sexton pits the body and soul against one another in her poems. Her work suggests that these two facets are more than just benignly and fundamentally different: they are enemies. Her speaker continually vilifies the body by suggesting that its superficial needs obstruct the more wholesome and essential needs of the spirit. The thesis demonstrates that spirituality is the most resilient theme in Sexton’s work and argues against critics who claim that the body is Sexton’s central preoccupation.

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Introduction

Much of Anne Sexton's poetry centers around the female body, a fact discussed extensively by critics of Sexton's writing. Alicia Ostriker, for instance, writes that Sexton is "preoccupied with the flesh" and "gives us full helpings of her breasts, her uterus, her menstruation, her abortion, her 'tiny jail of a vagina'" (59). Rather than romanticizing the female form, as is common practice in art and literature, Sexton writes about it bluntly. In fact, her first person accounts of the body's natural processes (feeding, excreting, menstruating, etc.) often verge on the hyperbolic and grotesque. This is evident in poems such as "The Sickness Unto Death," in which she describes her speaker as "a side of mutton," "a defaced alter," and most derogatorily, "a house full of bowel movement" (442 lines 6, 28, 27). In this thesis I argue that Sexton's negative representations of the body ultimately serve to emphasize the spiritual nature of her work. By disparaging physicality and deeming physical acts like eating and sex unfulfilling, she creates space in her poems for more metaphysical, non-bodily concerns, like love, God, and religion. Though Sexton's conception of God is highly personal and nuanced, I argue that it is largely informed by the Christian tradition. Her poems brim with Biblical allusions. Sexton's *The Book Of Folly*, for instance, includes a lengthy section titled "The Jesus Papers," in which Sexton references important figures within Christianity such as Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Lazarus. The poems are admittedly irreverent, but Sexton assures her readers that religion is something she takes quite seriously through an epigraph that states "'And would you mock God?' 'God is not mocked except by believers'" (337). Thus, the humorous, playful tone of the poems in "The Jesus Papers" shows that Christianity is something Sexton seeks to rework or make new rather than completely disavow. In order to emphasize the religious nature of Sexton's work, I compare her poems to the spiritual visions of various medieval figures: such as saints, nuns, and devout laywomen. By doing

so, I show that Sexton's portrayal of the body as the enemy of the spirit aligns itself with Christian rhetoric and I connect her to a canon of writers with whom she is usually not associated.

My analysis of this aspect of Sexton's poems acknowledges both sides of her privileging of the mystical over the physical: the good and the bad. Though Sexton's work prioritizes spirituality, she does not portray her speaker's journey toward enlightenment as pleasant. Instead, she describes the speaker as someone filled with self-loathing who thinks that in order to find the inner peace she craves she must shed herself of her "dumb" body entirely and strip down to the pure essence of her soul (57 line 44). Often, the process of escaping her flesh involves extreme violence. She tries, with varying degrees of success, to end her physical life by eating herself "bite by bite," ingesting pills, and drinking copious amounts of alcohol (442 line 32). Her soul, even when liberated from her body, does not always find the beatitude it seeks. While Sexton's mystical poetry is not uplifting the way some other spiritual writing is, it is thought-provoking and, I argue, moderately hopeful. Rather than describing an endpoint, Sexton describes a journey. In the Second Psalm of "O Ye Tongues," a Biblically-inspired poem that deals explicitly with the body and spirituality, Sexton's speaker has yet to be saved. Instead of accepting defeat, she continues her quest, saying, "For I pray that God will digest me" (399 line 50). By investigating such instances of hope, I demonstrate that spirituality is the most resilient theme in Sexton's work and argue against critics who claim that the body is Sexton's central preoccupation. The body, while present in the poems, is disposable. It is the search for faith that the speaker refuses to give up.

In this thesis, I am primarily interested in examining how Sexton pits the body and soul against one another. Her poems suggest that these two facets of being are more than just benignly and fundamentally different: they are enemies. She continually

vilifies the body by suggesting that its superficial needs obstruct the more wholesome and essential needs of the spirit. In "Is It True?" for instance, her speaker tells a priest that her soul has become corrupt because of something she ate (ostensibly something her body selfishly craved) (447). Throughout the poem, she describes evil entering her body through her mouth. "Occasionally the devil has crawled / in and out of me," she says, "through my cigarettes I suppose, / my passionate habit" (446 lines 10-12). Eventually, she tells the priest, "I want to / pour gasoline over my evil body / and light it" (448 lines 58-60). She feels that destroying her body is the only way to liberate her soul. My focus on the interplay between body and soul sets my approach apart from the many critics who focus exclusively on Sexton's graphic depictions of the female body. Such critics, because they fail to examine the mystical tenor of her work alongside her bodily references, conclude that Sexton's negative descriptions of the female form are meant to challenge "our residual certainties that the life of the body should be private and not public, and that women especially should be seen and not heard, except among each other, talking about their messy anatomies" (Ostriker qtd. in Michailidou 131).¹ While I agree that Sexton forces us to confront the most unglamorous and taboo aspects of womanhood, I believe she does so for a different purpose: to elevate the soul and demonstrate the importance of spirituality in the face of a disappointing, often repulsive physical world. I argue, then, that stripping the female body of its mystery and mythology is not Sexton's primary intent, but a consequence of her emphasis on the spiritual. Her speaker, rather than dwelling upon "the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience," as James Dickey accuses her of doing, wants to get rid of her body entirely

¹ Critics who look at bodily references in Sexton's poetry through a primarily secular, feminist lens include Ostriker, Landau, and Gregory.

(qtd. in Kumin xx). Her physicality is presented as an obstacle she must overcome in order to continue on with the “real” or eternal life of her soul. Sexton herself felt frustrated that critics did not pay more attention to the mystical nature of her poems and insisted that her work had less to do with the physical world than the spiritual world. In 1971 she told Barbara Kevles of the *Paris Review*, “I think in time...people will be more shocked by my mystical poetry than my so-called confessional poetry” (qtd. in Shurr 348). In part, my thesis is a response to this statement. However, I do not neglect the confessional quality of Sexton's work.

Though authorial intent is usually considered problematic within contemporary academic scholarship, a special case should be (and often is) made for Sexton. Due in large part to Diane Middlebrook's widely popular 1991 biography of the poet, Sexton's work is generally accepted as autobiographic.² As Middlebrook reveals, Sexton began writing at the suggestion of her therapist, Dr. Martin Orne, who believed composing confessional poetry could help her recover from a mental breakdown. Many of her early works boldly and fearlessly describe her suicidal tendencies and life in a psychiatric hospital. To not acknowledge the autobiographical nature of Sexton's poems would be to undermine the bravery of her often unflattering and painful self-disclosure, a self-disclosure she believed might help others overcome their own struggles with mental illness. Furthermore, Sexton studied with and under some of the preeminent figures in the Confessionalist movement, such as W.D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell. Confessionalist poets made the private public by writing candidly

² Scholars who primarily analyze the confessional, autobiographical elements of Sexton's work include Rosenthal, Mills, Dessner, and Kammer. See their respective essays in Colburn's *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*.

about their most intimate life experiences. Sexton's association with this group of radical life-story writers strengthens the appeal of her work and should be acknowledged through an analysis of the autobiographical elements of her poetry. In many ways, her poems can be thought of as diary entries that are exceptionally rich in metaphor and written in verse. It would be odd, and probably unproductive, to write about a diary without considering the life of its author. Similarly it would be odd, and probably unproductive, to write about confessional poetry without considering the life of its author. For this reason, many critics assume Sexton and her poetic speaker are synonymous, and I write within this tradition.³

The critical approach of treating Sexton and her speaker as one and the same informs my decision to read the poems as if they have one consistent narrator: the poet herself. Although many would point to the fact that Sexton describes her speaker differently throughout the poems as evidence that she uses multiple narrators, I contend that these varied descriptions depict the same speaker at different points in her life. Of course, just as people evolve, important aspects of this narrator change from poem to poem (her age and immediate circumstances, for example) but my analysis works from the premise that her essential character remains consistent. By asserting that the same voice narrates all of Sexton's poems and by claiming that that voice is Sexton's own, I seek to expand the way people view Sexton as both an artist and a person. Largely due

³ Critics frequently speak of Sexton and her speaker interchangeably. In a review of *All My Pretty Ones*, for example, Dickey refers to the poetic persona as "Mrs. Sexton," writing that she "sees her stomach, after surgery, as being "laced up like a football/ for the game" (106). See also Hume George's claim that "Anne Sexton believed that evil crawled into her" based on a line in the poem "Is It True?" (357).

to her suicide, critics have repeatedly defined Sexton by her depression.⁴ My analysis of poems from various points in her career will show that she cannot be reduced to her mental illness. Throughout her life, Sexton expressed a variety of emotions through writing, including sadness and anger, certainly, but also ecstasy and love. To demonstrate the depth of Sexton's life and work I examine poems in which she represents her speaker as grappling with the relationship between body and soul, because I see this as her most resilient theme, and because it is in these poems that emotions are at their most intense and varied.

My argument that Sexton and her speaker are one and the same becomes particularly important in the final chapter of my thesis, which I devote to an examination of Sexton's live readings. I contend that during her public performances Sexton intentionally blurred the line between poet and speaker. She began each reading by stating, "I'm going to read a poem that tells you what kind of a poet I am, what kind of a woman I am, so if you don't like it you can leave" (Sexton qtd. in Middlebrook xix). In the poem she chose to read after this statement, "Her Kind," the speaker tellingly describes herself as "a possessed witch," someone who "is not a woman, quite" (15 lines 1, 6). To emphasize the association between herself and her vaguely inhuman speaker, Sexton dressed in all black, chain smoked Salem cigarettes, and spoke in the sort of voice a stereotypical witch might have (throaty, almost menacing). Interestingly, the poem she believed best exemplified the sort of person she was, was not even about a person in the traditional sense. "Her Kind" is rather about a sorceress, someone who has transcended the limits of her human body and cultivated her own brand of mysticism. In her performance of this piece, Sexton, for obvious reasons, could not literally transcend her body and become a

⁴ See, for example, Giraldi and Shurr.

witch. However, through her exacting dress and cultivated mannerisms, she did tame her body into something she may have considered more palatable, something resembling a magical, arguably numinous being. During her public appearances, Sexton inscribed on her body the same message she communicates in her poems: that physicality, at least in its natural state, is not nearly as desirable as transcendence. By demonstrating how Sexton blurred the line between page and flesh, poetry and life, I add validity to my claim that she and her speaker are inextricably linked, and show that viewing them as such is valuable since the poet herself went to great lengths to promote this alliance.

A large part of my methodology involved choosing which of Sexton's poems to analyze. I focus on poems in which the speaker's body interacts with the bodies of other people. I discovered that her perception of her body usually hinges upon the opinions and actions of those around her. In "O Ye Tongues," for example, Sexton writes, "For I pray that Emily King, whom I do not know except to say good morning, will observe my legs and fanny with good will" (398 line 29). Often, there is more at stake than just a positive bodily review; sometimes the survival of the speaker's body literally depends upon the bodies of other people. Typically, this is because the other bodies provide her food source. Poems like "Food" and "Dreaming the Breasts" are narrated from the perspective of an infant whose primary source of nutrition is her mother's breast milk. In both poems, the speaker experiences her body as a needy thing because of her mother's ostensible irritation over the child's constant hunger. This experience leads the speaker to resent her body. To broaden the scope of my study, I also look at poems in which the speaker has become a mother herself. I am interested in examining how Sexton treats the body differently when it serves as a provider instead of a consumer. Though I argue that Sexton's speaker feels she must transcend her body in order to find happiness and it is important to investigate the experiences that give rise to this belief.

In the first chapter, I examine the speaker's infantile body and its role as a consumer. I look at a selection of poems in which Sexton's speaker depends on others for food, either because she is too young or too weak to nourish herself. My emphasis is on her resentful attitude toward her dependence. I investigate how the speaker's frustration and anger over having to rely on others contributes to her bodily hatred, ultimately fueling her desire to transcend her body through self-destructive means. Sexton emphasizes the importance of independence and suggests that bodily neediness can be a hindrance to autonomy. Since many of the poems with which I wrestle in this chapter focus on the body at the beginning of life, it seems logical that this section should be at the beginning of my thesis.

In the second chapter I examine the speaker's adult body and its role as a provider. I look at two categories of Sexton's poems: those in which the speaker engages in consensual sex and those in which the speaker reflects upon her status as a mother. I argue that thanks to sex and motherhood the speaker begins to see her body as a conduit for spiritual enlightenment. Her orgasms, for instance, allow her to briefly glimpse God and she begins to respect her flesh in a way she has not previously. Similarly, becoming a mother, a producer of "motherlove/milk," helps the speaker see her body in a more positive light (Demetrakopoulos 439). Without her body she could not have brought her children into the world and she would not have known the extent of her capacity for love. Essentially, this chapter serves to show the maturation of the speaker's thoughts regarding her body. She views her flesh more positively in adulthood than she did in childhood because it has more agency and can better act out God's will. Importantly, although I trace an evolution between the poems I analyze in the first chapter and the poems I analyze in the second, this evolution is not based on the chronology of the poems' composition or publication. Instead, I argue that Sexton's work, when read in

thematic clusters, presents a story of growth. The poems in which her speaker is a young girl and in which her speaker is a more experienced woman, viewed side by side, illustrate the joys and difficulties of maturation.

In my final chapter I step away from close readings of the poems to examine how Sexton used her own body as an accessory to her work. I analyze how she added layers of meaning to her poems during public readings by dressing and behaving in an over-the-top, theatrical way. My analysis of the role of the body in Sexton's poetry in earlier chapters lays the groundwork for a more speculative discussion of the role of the body in Sexton's public appearances. I argue that the poet's penchant for performance indicates a desire to maintain ownership and control of her work. By reading her predominately first person poems out loud and declaring publicly that her work should be seen as a reflection of her character, Sexton demanded that her audience view she and her speaker as one. Sexton's live readings, I assert, offer a guide for how to read her poems.

In short, my analysis of Sexton's work is admittedly informed by the way she spoke about her oeuvre: as autobiographical and mystical. Although this ostensibly goes against the grain of much literary theory that encourages readers to ignore the author, I view Sexton as a critic of her own work. Thus, when I accept, for instance, her claim that she and her speaker are the same woman, I treat her as both poet and scholar. Because Sexton and her poems have been painted, often perniciously, as erratic and depressive, I argue that it is important to analyze her on her own terms. This thesis contributes to Sexton scholarship by looking at how two of the poet's biggest themes (the body and the spirit) interact with and inform one another. Through my study of Sexton's poems about infancy and adulthood and my analysis of her live readings, I argue that the poet's primarily negative portrayal of the female body helps her stress the importance of spirituality. In this way I show that Sexton's work, while sometimes macabre, has a larger

tonal range and variety of subject matter than previously thought and should be read within the context of other religious writing.

Chapter 1

The Infantile Body

Sexton's work is so autobiographical, self-reflective, and dependent upon the first person that many critics find her poems egotistical and without universal application or philosophical merit.⁵ Though most poets categorized as confessional are subject to extensive criticism, "Alicia Ostriker concludes, 'Anne Sexton is the easiest poet in the world to condescend to. Critics get in line for the pleasure of filing her under N for Narcissist'" (qtd. in Gill 61). Sexton unquestionably writes about her own experiences, but I argue that her decision to do so is far from masturbatory. Rather than glorifying the self, she constantly disparages the self. Her speaker repeatedly expresses the hope that her radical admissions and unrestrained confessions of self-loathing will help others feel less alone and connect her to something larger and more important than she is, namely God or Logos. In the poem "For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further," for instance, Sexton describes the Hell of being left alone "to rage in your own bowl," or head (Sexton 34 line 20). "At first it was private," she writes, "Then it was more than myself;/ it was you, or our house/ or your kitchen" (Sexton 34 lines 21-24). These lines suggest that although Sexton includes details about her own life throughout her work, her primary concern is to reflect upon the struggles faced by many. In this chapter, I argue that bodily hatred, the pressure to be perfect, and the desire to find salvation are some of the issues Sexton tackles in her poems that are common, not just to herself, but to Western society as a whole. I contend that Sexton's negative portrayal of the body aligns itself with traditional

⁵ Meyer Spacks, Williamson, and Vendler, are among those who lament the diary-like nature of Sexton's work, favoring a more overtly philosophical approach to poetry and literature. See Gill.

Christian rhetoric, which emphasizes the pure and Godly nature of the soul by describing the body as something transient, vile, and inherently sinful. In order to connect with God and the universe more deeply, Sexton's speaker feels she must rid herself of her body, which is described as the primary hindrance to love and spiritual wisdom. Maureen Flynn's research on religiously-inspired self-flagellation explains that Christian writers often prioritize the soul over the body because of its impenetrability. She writes, "although the superior soul may be encased within a human body, it is able to survive there in a pure state without somatic or mental disturbances, knowing only the sensation of God" (Flynn 261). I argue that this binary framework, inspired by neo-Platonism, influences Sexton's work.⁶ To illustrate that Sexton's prioritization of the soul reflects Christian tradition, in this chapter I look at poems in which the speaker's body is at its most weak and needy.

As stated in the introduction, I argue that Sexton's speaker remains consistent throughout her work in order to demonstrate that one of the poet's primary themes is growth. By first investigating how Sexton portrays the speaker's relationship with her flesh

⁶ Sixteenth-century Spanish mystics borrowed the neo-Platonic conception of "the human being...as a composite made up of a higher immortal soul, a lower mortal soul, and a carnal body" (Flynn 260). Within this framework, the higher immortal soul, while ultimately inaccessible, interacts with "the world of truth and eternal forms," while the lower mortal soul is capable of enjoyable "the brain and sense experiences of the body" but unable to "think beyond the obscure material substances of the natural world" (Flynn 261). This hierarchical structure causes conflict within the individual who begins to value parts of themselves at the expense of others. I argue that Sexton's speaker subscribes to this pernicious paradigm.

in infancy (or, alternatively, in an infantile state), I lay the groundwork for chapter two in which I describe a shift in the speaker's perception of her body as it matures. As a child, Sexton's speaker is hyper-concerned with the welfare of others and, as a result, she is particularly ashamed of her body when it is juvenile or sickly. As her body dwindles, her desire to eradicate her physical existence and alleviate herself and others of the burden caused by her flesh becomes increasingly urgent. The poems I study in this chapter have two very important things in common and thus deserve to be read together: they all show the speaker at a particularly vulnerable stage in her life, and they all illustrate how her frustration with her body's neediness affects her relationship with her spirit.

Poems in which Sexton writes about abnormal and intense fluctuations in appetite are prevalent in this thematic group of poems.⁷ Whether her speaker cannot eat a thing or eats everything in sight, she remains unsatisfied. Her body, with its unpredictable hunger and obnoxious neediness, prevents her from achieving physical and emotional fulfillment. Because she cannot care for herself in the most basic of ways, she is left discouraged and desperate for something nonphysical, like religion or love, to give her life meaning. One of Sexton's primary themes is mind-body dualism and her poems suggest that physicality inhibits mental happiness. In this chapter, I examine how her speaker's inability to satisfactorily feed and nourish herself exacerbates her discontent with her body and prods her hope for spiritual liberation.

Sexton's speaker often expresses a desire to satiate an appetite that she is irrevocably helpless to fulfill. Though her world is lush with fruits, vegetables, breads, and meats, she rarely partakes of any of them. This is not due to lack of want, however.

⁷ See, for instance, Sexton's "Flee On Your Donkey," a 25 stanza long lamentation on irrepressible appetites.

Sometimes she is too busy or emotionally distracted to eat, and other times she is too weak or too young to help herself to the edibles. The speaker's involuntary starvation is perhaps most pronounced in "Food," a poem in which she takes the form of a helpless infant with a negligent mother. A poem about a baby suffering from malnutrition has all the makings of a tragedy, and ultimately it is one, but the speaker's desire for food begins innocently enough - as a mere craving, nothing urgent or alarming. She notably "wants," as opposed to "needs," her mother's breast milk and speaks of it as one might candy or ice cream, some delicious but ultimately unnecessary treat. In the opening lines Sexton uses lighthearted, friendly, almost whimsical, language to communicate the speaker's sense of calm in the face of hunger. She writes, "I want breasts singing like eggplants, / and a mouth above making kisses. I want nipples like shy strawberries / for I need to suck the sky" (488 lines 3-6). The tone here is decidedly lustful and reverent. The baby almost fetishizes her mother's breasts, believing they have the ability to offer her insight into "the sky" or the heavens.

According to Freud and those he influenced, the speaker's obsession with her mother's milk is hardly unusual.⁸ Many infants experience their mothers' breasts in a practically spiritual way. Breast milk, after all, is an infant's first source of pleasure, and the soothing, nutritionally and psychically rewarding act of sucking is an experience he/she unconsciously tries to recreate throughout life. Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, who has written extensively about nursing imagery in Sexton's poetry, notes that "the gradual relaxing of the infant and mother almost into one, their conjoining during a feeding is a

⁸ See Freud's discussion of breastfeeding which he argues leads to "pleasure-sucking" and "is connected with an entire exhaustion of attention and leads to sleep or even to a motor reaction in the form of an orgasm" (n. pag.).

form of mysterium coniunctio, a blend of psychic and bodily unification” (432). Interestingly, in Sexton's poem “Food” this experience is only fantasized about or remembered by the speaker (the reader is not sure which). She never has any actual physical contact with her mother, but she somehow knows what that contact would be like and longs for it deeply. This heightens the poignancy of the opening lines because the infant recognizes on a profound level both what she is missing and that she is helpless to fulfill her desire for physical affection. She realizes that she cannot satiate her body without the consent of her mother. She also realizes that she cannot be happy without at least some physical interaction with another human. Her mother's milk is a symbol for what she truly craves: unconditional love and emotional symbiosis.

Throughout her career, Sexton wrote often of the desire for and importance of bodily contact. Though her speaker frequently lacks physical affection, she consistently and tirelessly seeks it. William H. Shurr, in an essay about *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, writes, “she sees that physical isolation is an aspect of human misery; in a poem called ‘Locked Doors’ she looks into the human hell: ‘The people inside have no water/ and are never allowed to touch’” (344-345). To further emphasize that references to lack of physical intimacy pervade Sexton's work, he cites another example, noting, “In the earliest poem in this collection she had already started this theme of isolation: ‘Then there was life/ with its cruel house/ and people who seldom touched-/ though touch is all’” (Shurr 345). In “Food,” the touch the speaker craves is even more essential than the touch she craves in the poem Shurr references. In his example, touch is certainly important on an emotional level, but the speaker of “Locked Doors” is ostensibly full grown, so touch is not necessary for her survival. In “Food,” however, touch serves a practical purpose, too. If the speaker is not allowed contact with her mother, her food source, she will surely die of starvation. By examining a poem in which touch is essential

but denied, I expand upon Shurr's argument that Sexton uses scenes of physical alienation to create an atmosphere of discontent in her work.

At no time is one body more dependent upon another than infancy, and it is usually the mother upon whom the child depends. Fathers can feed their children with formula but only mothers can feed their children with their bodies. Demetrakopoulos, too, notes that a mother has an immense amount of power, writing, "she is the giver of the primordial life-stuff, the builder of human flesh, her milk more specifically made to emanate human life than any other substance" (437). By drinking their mother's milk, or their mother's "being" as Demetrakopoulos puts it, babies engage in growth, or enter a state of "becoming." According to Demetrakopoulos' logic, by denying Sexton's speaker breast milk, the mother in the poem is ultimately, perniciously, denying her child the possibility of personhood. Personhood is typically something we think of an individual developing on his/her own. Identity is the very thing that distinguishes us from other people, so we assume that we have complete control of its formation.⁹ Sexton turns this notion on its head, showing that others play a role, often a big one, in our becoming. Bodies, especially growing bodies, are not meant to exist in isolation. A mother's body should assist and inform her child's, but in "Food" this is not the case. The infant is left to fend for herself and because she lacks all sense of agency she is doomed.

Mid-poem the baby seems, finally, to realize the gravity and futility of her situation, and her desire for food and maternal contact becomes more urgent. Here, Sexton notably replaces the word "want" with "need" and trades her lighthearted, sing-

⁹ Descartes, for example, defined personhood as an individual's ability to think about the world. This conception neglects to consider the way the world acts upon the individual. See Taylor.

songy verse for more straightforward, choppy diction. "I need to bite also / as in a carrot stick," she writes, "I need food" (488-489 line 7-8, 22). The "biting" imagery reveals the baby is not just annoyed with but mad at her mother. She threatens to bite down on her mother's supple nipple with the same force one needs to chew through a hard vegetable. Her want for vengeance, though never actualized, is warranted. We learn that the mother has not just passively let her young daughter starve, but has gone out of her way to make certain that she does. The mother's nipples are described as "stitched up like sutures" and she even goes so far as to "pour salt into [the baby's] mouth" to exacerbate her thirst (489 line 17, 16). Thus, the speaker's hunger is due more to conscious, unforgivable cruelty than to accidental neglect. It seems as though the more the baby tries to get her mother's attention, the more her mother recoils. In the last few lines of the poem the baby makes a valiant effort to assert herself. Though she ostensibly cannot speak, she wonders aggressively, "Tell me! Tell me! Why is it?" (489 line 21). Yet in spite of her anxious state, her mother leaves the scene completely to finish the much less important task of "reading the paper," implying that she would rather attend to an inanimate object than her living, breathing daughter (489 line 23). The poem ends there, on a remarkably sour note, and we are left to conclude that the speaker starves both physically and spiritually. Because of someone else, her body never has the opportunity to grow and, consequently, she will never be able to vocalize or remedy her victimization. (Again, we must assume that because the infant is young enough to be breast-fed she cannot speak. The poem, then, is a linguistic representation of a wordless but pronounced internal struggle, an inner monologue.) If food and human contact were not so essential, the speaker's troubles would have been eliminated. She could have taken pleasure in her precocious spirit and existed happily, bodilessly, independently. She seems to realize this, constantly complaining about the demands of her body and her mother's refusal to

meet them. Indeed, physicality is the primary source of conflict in the poem and I argue it remains thus throughout Sexton's work.

In the poem "The Sickness Unto Death" the speaker, ostensibly a dying adult, is just as helpless to nourish herself as the baby in "Food." However, in this instance, another person's malice is not to blame for her starvation. In fact, the people surrounding her see that she is growing weak and try altruistically to feed her. They bring her gifts meant to entice her appetite but she feels undeserving of their philanthropy. "Someone brought me oranges in my despair/ but I could not eat a one," the speaker complains. "For God was in that orange" (441 Lines 8-9). Because the oranges she is offered seem to contain God, they arguably represent The Holy Eucharist. Catholics believe that once the communion bread and wine is consecrated by a priest, they literally become the body and blood of Christ. Since The Eucharist is such a sacred thing, the church strictly monitors who partakes of it. According to tradition, communion may only be consumed by true believers, those who have gone through the appropriate rituals to publicly declare and cement their faith. In "The Sickness Unto Death" Sexton's speaker admits early on that she has lost her faith, declaring, "God went of me" (441 line 1). Her rejection of the fruit is thus motivated more by superstition, or strict adherence to the rules of Christianity, than mere self-denial. Eating the oranges would be a dishonest and heretic act. The speaker, while shaky in her belief, still respects the laws of the church and acts honorably; "I could not touch what did not belong to me," she explains (441 lines 10-11). When she says "could not," we should take her literally. Her religious obedience is so intense that she experiences literal revulsion at the thought of eating something sacred in her faithless state. Instead of using appetizing language, Sexton references disgusting things like latrines, slaughter houses, and excretions (441-442 lines 3, 7, 27). The speaker knows that she needs to eat, but her appetite is non-existent. Curiously, though

she does not fully believe in God, she evidently still believes in his wrath. Why else would she, starving, refuse the oranges? She does not feel she has the right to eat them and thinks she will be punished if she takes a bite and transgresses church law.

Because the speaker describes God as going out of her, we can conclude that he was once inside of her. Her disbelief or godlessness is apparently a relatively new and unwelcome development. At the end of the second stanza, Sexton writes, "I who wanted to crawl toward God/ could not move nor eat bread," painting a picture of desperation and futility (442 lines 29-30). Doubt has somehow overtaken and paralyzed the speaker. To satiate her stomach and replenish her soul, she must find the religion she once had but doing so seems laborious and impossible (notably, she is crawling rather than walking or running toward God). Since the speaker mourns God's absence, we must conclude that she had no hand in his disappearance. Rather, it seems she experienced an undesirable and unconventional exorcism. "God went out of me," Sexton writes, "as if the sea dried up like sandpaper" (441 lines 1-2). Against the speaker's volition, a good spirit, as opposed to an evil one, escaped her body, leaving her hungry and dejected. Determined to figure out why God left her, she seeks council, but it is of no use. "The priest came," she remembers, "he said God was even in Hitler./ I did not believe him/ for if God were in Hitler/ then God would be in me" (441 lines 12-16). By invoking Hitler, one of the most despised people to ever live, Sexton emphasizes the extent of the speaker's self-loathing. This self-hatred is not the result of having killed thousands of innocent people, however. In fact, the speaker does not seem to have done anything wrong. Her disgust centers around her body, something she cannot fully control. She describes herself brutally as "a defaced alter" and "a house full of bowel movement" (442. lines 28, 27). She blames these attributes for her fall from grace and thinks God was so disgusted by her feces and physicality that he abandoned her.

Though the speaker's hatred of her excretions is extreme, many children, as Freud has taught us, develop complexes regarding their bowel movements when they see their parent's revulsion at having to change their diapers.¹⁰ In the poem, God was the metaphorical diaper-changer. Because His words and opinions define truth, the speaker was particularly traumatized over what she perceived to be his negative reaction to her feces. Diana Hume George has investigated Sexton's obsession with bowel movements and argues that although Sexton "explores the uses of oral ingestion and anal defiance as primary sources of power in poetry" her work also reflects society's disgust with bodies. Hume George writes, "the body's unruly creatureliness is the antithesis of what is valued by civilization- well known for its discontent with anything messy" (360). The speaker of "The Sickness Unto Death" considers herself particularly messy, unlovable, and creaturely. In addition to declaring that she is filled with feces, she compares herself to an animal carcass, saying, "My body became a side of mutton/ and despair roamed the slaughterhouse" (441 lines 6-7). She concludes that it was this bloody image that repulsed God, which is not terribly shocking when we consider Christianity's zealous prioritization of the soul. Hume George writes, "The trinity's division of spiritual from bodily and human aspects of godhead becomes emblematic of that division in the civilized human creature. Even Christian culture's God, it seems, is not able to endure the body" (359). Indeed, according to Christian theology, it is the soul that goes to Heaven or Hell. The body, because of its creatureliness and temporality, is of little value to the Church and its followers; the spirit is the thing to be cultivated and prized because it is eternal.

¹⁰ See Stevenson's discussion of "The Anal Stage" in which he writes about the trauma children experience when their parents introduce them to "the practical and societal pressures to control the bodily functions" (n. pag.).

Additionally, the Bible condemns excessive eating and casual sex, both things that are pleasurable in a physical sense. To be lustful or gluttonous is to be sinful. Clearly, the speaker in "The Sickness Unto Death" was gluttonous before her fast or she would not describe herself as "a house full of bowel movement" (442 line 27). Hume George politely reminds us that waste comes from feeding (359). The speaker's belief that her body is more creaturely and needy than average, coupled with her knowledge of Christianity's rejection of the material, leads her to conclude that in order to get back in God's good graces she must learn to tame her body.

Though it ultimately had the opposite effect, the speaker's refusal of food may have begun as an attempt to purify herself of sin. Hume George writes, "Anne Sexton believed that evil crawled into her, 'something I ate'" (357). It makes sense, then, that Sexton's speaker, in an effort to rid herself of evil, would stop eating altogether. By rejecting food her gluttony might be forgotten, evil might burn off of her like calories, and God might look upon her favorably once again. I have argued that she denied the Eucharistic oranges out of respect for the church. It follows, then, that rather than masochistically denying herself other foods, she was engaging in a fairly traditional religious practice: a fast. Caroline Walker Bynum notes that medieval people, and medieval women in particular, commonly sought to declare their religious dedication or strengthen their spirituality by refusing to eat. She writes, "medieval people...often spoke of...fasting as the most painful renunciation" and "illness (often brought on by fasting and other penitential practices) was the major factor in reputation for sanctity" (Walker Bynum 123). The poem's narrator believes herself to be as atrocious physically as Hitler was morally, so she chooses fasting, "the most painful renunciation" to compensate for her gross unholiness.

Her fast, however, is ultimately counterproductive. Starving, she was left emaciated and even more desperate and pitiful than she was to begin with. In an effort to become closer to God, she refused to eat. A lean, frail body might make the soul seem more grand in some instances, but this is sadly not the case in Sexton's poem. Rather than growing spiritually, the speaker became too weak to "crawl toward" God or engage in any sort of productive spiritual inquiry. When people offered her Bibles and crucifixes, things that could potentially assist in her salvation, she was not strong enough to pick them up or examine them closely. In many ways, her counterproductive struggle for acceptance mirrors that of many anorectics. Attempts at changing or controlling circumstances, by way of not eating, are rarely successful (and, it should be noted, rarely conscious). As Susan Bordo notes, "Paradoxically- and often tragically- these pathologies of female protest (and we must include agoraphobia here, as well as hysteria and anorexia) actually function as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produced them" (177). Sexton's poem "The Sickness Unto Death" can be read as a personal account of the tragedy Bordo describes. Though Sexton's speaker is ostensibly trying to conform to an ideal (that of the civilized, kempt individual) rather than rebel against it, she, too, finds that her efforts turn in on themselves. Her body betrays her, refusing to obey her soul's volition and serve as a conduit for her relationship with God. However, the speaker is not to be deterred; she has other tricks up her sleeve.

Because she cannot control her body, she violently extinguishes it. Rather than shooting herself, ingesting pills, or tying a noose around her neck, her suicide takes a decidedly unconventional route. She gets rid of her body by doing the very thing she struggled to do throughout the poem: eating. Sexton writes, "So I ate myself,/ bite by bite,/ and the tears washed me,/ wave after cowardly wave,/ swallowing canker after canker" (442 lines 31-35). While perhaps all suicides are disrespectful to the body, in that

they seek to extinguish it, hers is excessively so. She leaves no part of herself intact. She dismembers every inch of her body, chews it to mush, and swallows. If we had any doubt that the speaker hated her body, it is gone after reading these gory, self-loathing lines. It is only after she rids herself of her body, in this brutal, cannibalistic way, that she finds God. In her bodiless state, Sexton's persona finally meets Christ, saying, "Jesus stood over me looking down/ and He laughed to find me gone,/ and put His mouth to mine/ and gave me His air" (442 lines 36-39). Sexton describes Jesus as laughing at death, implying that it is not the serious, macabre event many people believe it to be. The humor surrounding the speaker's demise can be explained by the fact that it is only her physical life that is over. Her soul, presumably, lives on. This way of thinking about death is undeniably Christian, supporting my argument that Sexton draws from Western religion to compose her work. The poem thus ends on an eerie, but relatively happy note (happy, at least, in comparison to the rest of the poem). The speaker closes by referring to Christ as "My kindred, / my brother," indicating that she, finally void of body, regards herself lovingly (442 line 40). After all, to say that Christ is her brother is to say that she is the child of God. She then hands "the yellow daisy/ to the crazy woman in the next bed," implying that she herself is no longer the crazy woman, and is passing, with relief, that "yellow daisy" of a baton to someone else (442 lines 41-42). That someone is, notably, alive and likely raging in her body. The message of the poem is grim to those of us with flesh. Sexton presents the body as the unruly enemy, the primary hindrance to happiness and spiritual fulfillment, and suggests, as she often does, that the only way to exert authority over it is to kill it.

While the speakers of the poems "Food" and "Sickness Unto Death" cannot eat, the speaker of "Dreaming The Breasts," a poem from *The Book of Folly*, regrettably, cannot stop. For this poem, Sexton returns to breastfeeding, that often romanticized act

of intimacy between mother and child. Once again she rebelliously refuses to paint a picture of beauty and peace and instead portrays suckling as an act of violence. The baby, a voracious eater, narrates the poem in a voice that is at once disturbed and innocent. Though she admits to being a parasite, the speaker is a reluctant villain. She has nothing but compassion and respect for her mother, the victim of her appetite. In fact, she practically worships her and wishes she were more self-sufficient and less needy, so she would not have to drain her mother's breasts dry. In the opening lines, the infant lovingly describes her mother's "strange goddess face" (314 line 2). Importantly, she regards her mother as a deity, perhaps because of the milk that flows, seemingly magically, from her breasts. Indeed, lactation characterizes many female religious icons. Demetrakopoulos writes that "the seventeenth-century Catholic depictions of the Virgin Mary [show her] standing in heaven and streaming milk as divine grace down onto the world" (440-441). Medieval women were sometimes lauded as saints after breastfeeding and thereby curing the sick (Walker Bynum 125). Even today breastfeeding is viewed as the noble choice, and mothers who use formula are shunned by many parenting magazines. Sexton, who is particularly fond of coupling milk and holiness, writes within this tradition. Demetrakopoulos notes, "in Sexton's vision of grace, milk does flow and moisten the universe, so that the poet unifies and consoles all creatures in motherlove/milk" (439). "Dreaming The Breasts" certainly promotes the notion that breast milk is magical, and that is arguably why the speaker makes such a grand effort to stop consuming it. It is as if she thinks her body is undeserving of such a gift. Despite her best efforts, she cannot turn off her appetite and continues to deplete this extraordinary resource. Because of her inability to independently satiate her hunger she is filled with self-loathing.

The mother's saintly status serves to heighten the child's guilt over her bodily needs. Any conscientious child would be upset if he/she accidentally hurt his/her parent, but because the speaker of "Dreaming The Breasts" perceives her mother as a goddess, she is particularly distraught over having eaten her up. She spends the entire poem apologizing for her gluttony, and, because of this, the piece reads like a particularly heartfelt confession of deviance. By failing to tame her appetite and destroying her Goddess-like mother, the speaker says that she feels she has committed an egregious sin. Perhaps, in the eyes of Demetrakopoulos who argues that Sexton was at her best when describing female deities, she has. Demetrakopoulos laments the absence of womanly mysticism in some of Sexton's later work, writing, "In her later books of poetry, Sexton unfortunately seeks connections with a masculine god; she no longer projects her own feminine images into a vision of a patterned, containing, and loving universe" (436). Her quote refers to the poems in *The Death Notebooks*, but it applies to poems from earlier collections, too. In "Dreaming The Breasts," for example, a masculine God has not yet made his way into the picture, but a female goddess has already made her exit. She was destroyed, eaten alive by her own daughter, who is sorry to see her go but helpless to bring her back to life. In the final stanza the speaker refers to her mother not as a goddess but as a "dear dead human," indicating a fall from grace (315 line 28). Because of her insatiability, the infant is left sadly with neither a female God to idolize nor a mother to love.

The speaker mourns the loss of her goddess mother deeply and is haunted by the memory of her love, saying, "The breasts I knew at midnight/ beat like the sea in me now" (315 lines 16-17). She wants her mother to know that she did everything she could to stifle her pernicious appetite. She was so committed to saving her mother that she engaged in self-harm. "Mother," she says. "I put bees in my mouth/ to keep from eating/

yet it did you no good" (315 lines 18-20). A mouthful of stinging insects would deter even the most gluttonous of eaters, but the speaker's hunger, much to her chagrin, cannot be tamed. Rather than accepting what she cannot control and allowing herself the fuel her body needs, the speaker portrays herself as a kind of ravening monster. In this way she shares a similarity with many anorexic women who are "terrified and repelled...by a certain archetypal image of the female: as hunger, rapacious, all-needing, and all-wanting" (Bordo 117). Indeed the baby is repulsed by her neediness. She accepts full blame for her mother's demise, even though her hunger was biological and not of her own choosing. On behalf of her speaker Sexton writes, "All my need took/ you down like a meal" (315 6-7). The infant's need is physical rather than emotional, and because of this she begins to think of her body as a perpetrator of evil. If it did not require so much, her beloved mother would still be alive. The poem depicts a woman in the midst of a profound, inescapable conflict between her body and soul. Her soul is selfless and desires the best for her mother, wishing to liberate the mother from parental duty and encourages her to "go galloping, galloping" freely (315. line 31). By contrast, the speaker's body is uncharitable, willing to sacrifice others for its own survival. Regrettably, the body is the more dominant of the two and its destructive impulses cause the speaker's soul and spiritual health to suffer.

"The Earth Falls Down" is another poem that examines the devastating effects of gluttony and overindulgence, but it does so on a larger scale. The piece takes place in a world on the verge of complete destruction. Sexton's speaker, determined to assign blame, spends the first twenty-three lines wondering what or who led to the earth's demise. After speculating about the culpability of the weather, trees, dogs, CEOs, and even God, she eventually concludes, "No, I'll blame it on Man/ For Man is God/ and man is eating the earth up/ like a candy bar" (424 lines 24-26). Though relieved to have solved

the mystery, she seems to wish someone or something else were the culprit. Before she names man the villain, her desperate language reveals a desire to place guilt on something else. "If I could blame it all on the weather," she says longingly, "If I could blame conditions on that" (424 lines 1, 6). Usually, her "If I could" phrases are followed closely by ellipses which further emphasize the dreamy, desirous quality of such lines. It is as if completing these comparatively idealistic thoughts would exacerbate the depressing reality that humanity is responsible for the planet's ruin. Perhaps part of the speaker's sadness over man's guilt can be attributed to the fact that she herself is a member of this destructive race. No innocent bystander, her greedy body is as much to blame for the withering away of the world as anyone else's, and she knows it. Once again, Sexton presents us with a poem about self-loathing and bodily hatred. In this poem, however, the speaker directs her anger at other people as well. This tames her self-hatred a bit, so she appears more upset with the negative effects of over-consumption than the act of over-consumption itself.

Indeed it is over-consumption, man's insufferable appetite for both resources and control, that she holds responsible for the planet's demise. In addition to believing "man is eating the earth up/ like a candy bar" she worries that "not one of them can be left alone with the ocean/ for it is known he will gulp it all down" (424 lines 26-27, 28-29). Of course, these lines are somewhat metaphorical: man can digest only parts of the earth, and though he may drink from the ocean, he cannot swallow it whole. Still, it is telling that the speaker uses words associated with gluttonous eating and drinking to describe the violence humanity inflicts upon the planet. Since the Garden of Eden, physical indulgence has been linked with evil. If Eve had not eaten the forbidden fruit, the world and its inhabitants would still exist harmoniously, in a Utopic state. In a sense, then, Sexton's

piece could be read as a retelling of that Biblical story. The earth falls down, as the title says, because man takes a bite out of it.

As with the other poems discussed in this chapter, the speaker only expresses disdain for certain human qualities: those that are physical. Intangibles like “the hearts of strangers,” Sexton writes, cannot be blamed for the world's new, unwanted chaos (424 line 7). Also innocent are “the mothers and fathers of the world,/ they of the lessons, the pellets of power,/ they of the love surrounding you like batter” (424 lines 18-20). As evidenced, while Sexton vilifies the body and its insuppressible urges, she writes of other human traits somewhat warmly. Our souls are not the problem, she seems to suggest. If we lacked bodies, those nasty, unwieldy things, we would not be so deplorable, so harmful to everything around us. Unlike in the other poems I have examined, however, in “The Earth Falls Down” Sexton allows her speaker a chance for salvation, albeit remote. “The stars (possibly) are safe,” she writes, “At least for the moment” (424-425 lines 30-31). If the speaker and her cohorts learn to tame their hunger in time, the heavens will have the possibility of survival and they will have the chance of accessing them.

Though the Sexton poems I analyze in this chapter are dismal, they each possess an underlying hopefulness. This hope, I argue, stems from the speaker's faith in God and the afterlife. Although Sexton characterizes the physical world as cold and terrible, she alludes to a spiritual world that is anything but (think of the laughing Jesus in “The Sickness Unto Death”). Thus, I contend that the morbid tone that has come to be thought by many to characterize Sexton's work arises, not from her frequent references to death, but from her disparaging descriptions of the physical world and the bodies that inhabit it. By casting her speaker as either a young girl or a powerless woman, she implies that lack of agency influences perception, and not for the better. In the next chapter, I investigate how Sexton writes about the relationship between body and soul

differently when she does so from the perspective of a healthy woman rather than a weak girl. I will argue that as the speaker's body becomes more self-sufficient she learns to recognize the various ways her physical sensations can provide her with spiritual enlightenment.

Chapter 2

The Adult Body

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, some of Sexton's speaker's animosity towards her body has to do with the fact that it is not completely self-sufficient. I looked primarily at poems in which her body is infantile or sickly, entirely dependent upon others for its survival. In this section, I examine a selection of poems in which the tables are turned. I investigate how the speaker's body serves, both literally and metaphorically, as a life source for others. Although still not fully at peace with her flesh, I argue that the speaker's physical maturity deepens and complicates her spirituality. By experiencing the pleasures and frustrations accompanying some of adult life's most intimate experiences, namely sex and motherhood, she begins to appreciate the various ways her body can offer insight into the divine and connect her to others. To some extent, the feelings of isolation she accrued in childhood are tempered by the meaningful relationships she fosters as an adult. Interacting with people who love her the way she loves them helps her understand that she was put on earth for a reason. Sharing her body with men who care about her, and providing her children with a happier childhood than her own, gives her the sense that God has a purpose for her life. Though she repeatedly wishes she knew exactly what that purpose was, she is willing to forfeit some control for the sake of enjoying the ride.

I argue that the poems I analyze in this chapter are more optimistic than those I discuss in chapter one, because Sexton turns away from dualism and begins to portray the world more holistically. For instance, rather than treating the body as a mere container for the soul, in these poems she writes about the interconnectedness of the two entities. This new framework aligns the poet with contemporary feminists like Susan Hekman, Karen Barad, Linda Alcoff, Moria Gatens, and Elizabeth A. Wilson who seek to

“overcome dualisms in a way that does not privilege either side of the opposition” (Hekman 107). By breaking down the divide between language and reality, naturalism and anti-naturalism, Continental and Anglo-American analytic philosophy, today's self-proclaimed Material Feminists show how “opposites are inextricably intertwined” (Hekman 94). Admittedly, Sexton still seems to privilege the soul over the body, but I contend that she does not do so to the degree she did in previously discussed poems and that this is because she chooses in these works to conflate these two facets of being. By examining poems in which the speaker expresses, thanks to the union of her body and soul, love for others and faith in God, I also demonstrate that Sexton's tonal range is larger than many critics think. Rather than strictly depressive, her work is profoundly complicated, exhibiting a variety of emotions, including hope, longing, and ecstasy.

To prove that the speaker's relationship with her body is not wholly negative, in this chapter I look at five poems written at various points in Sexton's career. Though thematically unique (the poems depict a broad range of relationships), the poems are similar in that each is either addressed to someone (an apostrophe) or about someone (an ode). The narrator never exists in isolation, and I argue that it is this fellowship that brightens her mood and keeps her from sliding into sadness. As previously stated, William H. Shurr cites companionship as the primary source of joy in Sexton's poetry. The thing she most longs for, according to Shurr, is human touch. Indeed, Sexton's poems become more desperate and emotionally difficult to read when the speaker feels alienated from those around her. As I demonstrated in chapter one, the speaker's adolescent despair stems primarily from lack of physical affection. Sexton characterizes the youthful speaker as someone who feels too gross to warrant her mother's touch and seeks to escape her flesh. In this section, I analyze how the speaker's relationship with her body changes for the better when she realizes that others do not find it repugnant. I

go a step further than Shurr and argue that Sexton characterizes touch as not just pleasurable but purifying. She portrays consensual sex, for example, as a redemptive act. When the speaker's male lover touches her in places she previously thought unworthy of affection, he relieves her of the shame she felt in childhood and introduces her to something beyond joy. What she experiences in the sex poems I analyze is not an orgasm so much as a religious experience.

Though Christianity historically eschewed physical contact for the sake of anything other than procreation, contemporary theologians share Sexton's belief that touch can be a source of divine inspiration. William Stayton, for instance, questions whether the body, and the activities in which it engages, is really as dirty and sinful as the church has traditionally portrayed it to be. He asserts "that 'love, spirituality and sexuality are inextricably bound together' and that where this integration is experienced, we manifest God's intention when seeking appropriate ways of expressing pleasure in all our relationships," (qtd. in Spalding 77-78). Thus, Sexton's depiction of physical acts leading to divine insight, while seemingly deviant, is actually consistent with the liberal Christianity that can be seen to inform her work. Pro-sex theology has certainly garnered more proponents in the present era, but the idea that erotic or sensual encounters can double as religious experiences has been around as early as the thirteenth-century. Though they were aberrant in their thinking, some historically important figures in the church, like St. Thomas Aquinas, believed utilizing the senses and interacting with the world could foster an appreciation for God and His creations (Flynn 265). As an adult, Sexton's speaker approaches the world with mouth, eyes, and hands wide open, ready to taste, see, and touch everything she comes across in search of God.

The poems I analyze in this chapter describe the speaker trying to navigate love, both amorous and maternal, in a Godly way that emphasizes fellowship and

understanding rather than hedonism. In each poem, Sexton describes the speaker's attempt to appreciate and enjoy the company of those she loves while maintaining her individual identity. The poems suggest that love is fleeting because of its bodily origin (bodies are inherently transient) and caution readers against relying too fully on something that can be taken away in an instant. Regardless of the anxieties that come with it, I argue that the speaker's realization that her body can offer comfort to others and lead her to God is primarily positive in that it increases her self-esteem and heightens her awareness of the divine energy that permeates the physical world. Though still cognizant of her gross imperfections, the speaker does not, as an adult, see herself as the dirty, unlovable parasite she did in infancy. In what follows, I contend that Sexton attaches certain ideas regarding the body to adolescence and others to adulthood. I argue that she does this by describing the anxieties or pleasures accompanying the activities in which the body engages at various stages in its maturity.

No poem better illustrates the way age affects the speaker's relationship to the body than "When The Glass Of My Body Broke." The poem, which Sexton wrote towards the end of her life, chronicles the speaker's journey from self-loathing infant to relatively confident adult. Although the piece is about a sexual relationship with a man, it is addressed to a woman. "Oh mother of sex," it begins, "lady of the staggering cuddle" (Sexton 517 lines 1-2). There is a prayer-like quality to these lines. A Catholic might start an orison to a saint in a similar fashion. Indeed, the speaker is asking for something: a spiritual explanation for the physical sensations she has just experienced. She is both curious and pleased by her lover's touch, wondering, "where do these hands come from?" and explaining the feel of his body against hers as "a strange wind/ from somewhere tropic" (Sexton 517, 518 line 3, 25-26). By having the speaker seek elucidation regarding these unusual sensations from a presumably divine being rather

than the mortal who helped her experience them, Sexton emphasizes the spiritual nature of passionate sex. Intercourse, she suggests, cannot be understood by reading a textbook. To grasp what happens during sex one must turn to the sky. This marks a shift in the poet's handling of the female body from the poems I discussed in the previous chapter in which Sexton portrays physicality as something more hellish than heavenly. Rather than a hindrance to spirituality, the body is now a vehicle for understanding, or at least forming, a deeper relationship with God. Furthermore, the fact that the speaker directs her questions regarding the mystical nature of sex to a female deity shows that she understands the body and its relationship with God to be female domain. In this respect she is hardly unusual. While many feminists, with valid reason, have rallied against mind-body dualism and the way it posits the body, and the women associated with the body, as lesser, Christian scholars sometimes argue that women's association with flesh can be a source of strength. Caroline Walker Bynum, for instance, points out that "women writers, equally aware of the male/female dichotomy, saw it somewhat differently. They tended to use the notion of 'the female' as 'flesh' to associate Christ's humanity with 'the female' and therefore to suggest that women imitate Christ through physicality" (132). In the poems I examined in the previous chapter, the speaker tried to reach God by depleting her body (refusing to eat, for example). By doing this, she diminished any connection she had, as a woman, to Christ. In the poems I investigate in this chapter, she allows her body to thrive and gets more profitable results. Her spiritual revelations are thus uniquely female. The byproducts of lovemaking and/or pregnancy, her religious experiences come to her by way of her womanly body.

In spite of her appreciation for her mature flesh, Sexton's speaker has not forgotten the bodily hatred she felt in adolescence. She attributes her past self-loathing to parental neglect, remembering, "I was born a glass baby and nobody picked me up/

except to wash the dust off me” (Sexton 518 lines 8-9). However, rather than angry at her earliest experiences, she now regards them as educational. In many ways the beauty of her sexual encounter was heightened by the abuse she endured as an infant. She learns that her suffering was not in vain, that it was a foil for her future pleasure. What she once thought of as a violent punishment for her irredeemable sinfulness, she now views as preparation for the delight to come. By denying her some of life's most basic provisions, God emptied her body, creating room for joy.¹¹ This realization provides the speaker a degree of comfort. At long last she sees a spiritual purpose behind the physical agonies she once believed were strictly punishing.¹²

She could never have achieved this level of satisfaction alone, however. A large portion of her unprecedented happiness is owed to another person. Shortly after describing the dust she accumulated in infancy, she tells the recipient of her prayer that her lover “has picked me up and licked me alive” (Sexton 518 line 10). While this line could be read as strictly erotic (one could say the man's tongue merely stimulated the speaker in a way she found invigorating) I argue that it should be interpreted as having

¹¹ St. John of the Cross, “a Carmelite mystic of Spain” encouraged those who wanted to know their souls to forgo physical pleasure altogether. Often this intense sensory deprivation proved painful, but the pain was believed to be an essential part of the road toward transcendence, a sign that the body was being severed from the soul. See Flynn.

¹² In the Bible God often tests people's devotion by depriving them of bodily pleasures or exacerbating their physical ills. See the Book Of Job in which, despite Job's godliness, his body looks like that of a sinner's: emaciated, filthy, and covered in red marks.

spiritual implications as well. Sexton accentuates the poem's religious nature by alluding to Genesis 2:7 which states, "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath or spirit of life, and the man became a living being." Though the speaker was alive in a literal sense before her sexual encounter, she was blind to many of life's greatest pleasures. Her lover has awakened her to these uniquely human, yet somehow Godly joys. She recognizes for the first time that glimpses of the divine can be felt on earth.

Importantly, the lines from Genesis to which Sexton alludes occur before the Fall, suggesting that the speaker now exists in a prelapsarian state, for the first time in her life, pure. By engaging in sex with someone to whom she is deeply connected, she is restored to a state of innocence, as if baptized. To emphasize the extent of the speaker's transformation, Sexton employs the imagery of a costume and scene change. The speaker credits her lover for "letting me lift the mask of the child from my face,/ while all the toy villages fall/ and I sink softly into/ the heartland" (518 line 28-31). Though "the heartland" Sexton describes is new to the speaker, it feels more real, more like home, than "the toy villages" she frequented in her youth.

Although the tone of this poem is more optimistic than many of Sexton's others, the speaker still hints at her overall dissatisfaction with the physical world. Though she no longer feels or looks like a child (the mask, after all, has been lifted) she continues to harbor some of the same self-loathing she did in adolescence. Notably, the thing she loves most about her climax is that it "excite[s] oblivion" (Sexton 518 line 23). She does not enjoy the act of intercourse so much as she enjoys the disorienting, otherworldly effect it produces. Her desire to escape her flesh, and the anxiety her flesh inspires, has not, therefore, been entirely eradicated. Sex has merely suspended her self hatred. Still, intercourse, while no substitute for complete bodily obliteration, at least offers the

speaker some relief. She has found a way to connect with God while still on earth. Importantly, this ephemeral but intoxicating feeling of transcendence is achieved, not psychically, but bodily. Ironically, it is through her flesh that she learns to temporarily forget about her flesh.

Sexton writes more directly and angrily about the transient nature of bodily happiness in the poem "When Man Enters Woman." The religious imagery in this piece is more persistent and overt than that in "When The Glass Of My Body Broke." Sexton quickly invokes the Stoic conception of Logos, writing that during intercourse, "Logos appears milking a star" and later that "Logos appears/ and unleashes their rivers" (Sexton 428 lines 8, 17-18).¹³ While the idea of coming into contact with divine order seems nothing short of amazing, the speaker is troubled by how short-lived these encounters are. She likens her bouts of sexually-induced inspiration to the ebb and flow of the ocean. Her brushes with Logos are continual but brief, "like the surf biting the shore" (Sexton 428 line 3). She nibbles at the divine, as if it is an appetizer, but the main course never comes. She is left hungry. For a short moment, presumably during orgasm, she ceases to be mortal and achieves a godlike understanding of life. At these times, she knows her partner as well as she knows herself. Her relationship with nature is equally intimate; she "climbs into a flower/ and swallows its stem" so that it becomes a part of her (Sexton 428 lines 15-16). However, as soon as she regains composure, the secrets of the universe

¹³ The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines logos as God's "eternal reason or intelligent designing fire." The definition emphasizes the fact that logos is "an endless cycle of recurrence." People participate in this cycle, but are usually unaware of it, so the fact that Sexton's speaker experiences it intimately is evidence of a religious experience, a divine encounter.

leave her. Sexton writes that the speaker and her lover “have tried to reach through/ the curtain of God/ and briefly they have,/ though God/ in His perversity/ unties the knot” (428 lines 19-27). The brevity of the lines emphasize how quickly and startlingly the speaker's joy was taken away.

Rather than happy to have experienced such spiritual insights at all, Sexton describes the speaker as furious that they were revealed to her only to be hidden again. She directs her anger at God, describing him for the first time as perverse. In many ways her description of God as taunting and capricious mirrors her description of her mother in previous poems. In “Food,” for instance, her mother, like God, keeps something the speaker desperately wants, “mother's milk,/ that good sour soup,” just out of reach (Sexton 488 lines 1-2). While God, in the Christian rhetoric Sexton seems to employ, is omniscient and just, the speaker's mother is mortal and apparently interested in inflicting pain, not just on sinners, but on innocent babies. Regardless, the speaker fails to recognize this distinction immediately. The similarities between God, in this poem, and her mother, in the poems I analyzed in the previous section, cause her tremendous anxiety. Will everything she loves eventually be denied her, as it was in childhood? While her adult body, in its adeptness, initially gave her the illusion of control, it ultimately proves to be no match for the world surrounding it. After all, in Christian rhetoric, even grown-ups are considered children of God. Similarly, the speaker is at the mercy of Logos, a force she finds remarkably beautiful but cold. It is a system that is more concerned with the greater good than with her personal interests.

Sexton's speaker's anxiety regarding her own helplessness in the face of God's capriciousness intensifies when she becomes a mother herself. She seems determined to become the kind of parent she wanted as a child (nurturing, protective, eternally present) and the realization that her humanity might prevent her from being this

superhero-like figure creates an air of disturbance in the poem. Despite the speaker's best efforts, she will make mistakes, and her authority over her children's lives is no match for God's. She can only protect them from the gritty earth for so long. In the poem, "The Child Bearers," for instance, Sexton documents both her speaker's love for her children and her fear that they will be taken from her. Interestingly, as evidenced by this poem, her feelings regarding death change dramatically when she imagines the deaths of loved ones as opposed to her own. While she often fantasizes about her own demise, she is frantic at the idea of her children's. Reflecting on her children's vulnerability leaves her "crumpled, and flyspotted" (Sexton 489 line 10). Unable to defend them against the world in any real way, she "can do nothing now but pray" (Sexton 489 lines 12).¹⁴ In other poems, she has prayed for salvation and an early death, but here she prays for life. Even though the life she wants to sustain is not her own, her children have opened her eyes to the fact that a physical existence is something worth having.

Importantly, "The Child Bearers" is addressed to another mother. This woman, Jean, shares the speaker's worries regarding parenting, which provides the speaker a degree of comfort. Her agony is not as unique as she initially thought but is, instead, part of the human condition, part of motherhood. Until the introduction of Jean, the speaker had only two mothers she could reference as models: her own, who was neglectful and generally horrid, and the Virgin Mary, who, at the other end of the spectrum, is saintly and impossibly perfect. Jean offers a third, more realistic interpretation of motherhood. Like the speaker, she is a work in progress, simultaneously devoted to her children, honest

¹⁴ The fact that her speaker expresses such concern for other presents a challenge to critics like Ostriker who feel that Sexton's work is primarily narcissistic. See Gill for more about how the poet has traditionally been conceived as egotistical.

about her flaws, and ultimately, though reluctantly, submissive to God. She provides the speaker with a sounding board rather than a role model, which is actually more helpful. With Jean, the narrator is free to speak candidly, laughing at her foibles and sharing her anxieties with abandon.

The speaker and Jean, while emotionally similar, are not exactly peers. While Jean is characterized as a novice to both motherhood and life, the speaker is portrayed as the wise sage who must show her the ropes. She begins by explaining matter of factly, “Jean, death comes close to us all/ flapping its awful wings at us/ and the gluey wings crawl up our nose” (489 line 1).¹⁵ The speaker certainly does not sugarcoat things for Jean, but she does exercise compassion. Before saying anything else, she acknowledges that death happens to everyone, which makes her grotesque characterization of dying somewhat more palatable. The speaker hopes the knowledge that most mothers suffer at the thought of something happening to their children will soothe Jean the same way it soothes her. She then quickly, as if ripping off a band-aid, lists and describes several horrifying ills that can befall children, a ruptured spleen, for instance, in order to get this messy business out of the way. After the cold hard facts are taken care of, the speaker lightens her tone. She jokes with Jean that they should send their children “in a large air net up to God,/ with many stamps, real air mail,/ and huge signs attached: SPECIAL HANDLING./ DO NOT STAPLE, FOLD OR MUTILATE!” (Sexton 489 lines 16-20). That she is able to joke about something she finds so

¹⁵ Traditionally, Christians speak of unpleasant things like death and the devil entering the body through the nose. This emphasizes the inevitability of death, since breathing is mostly involuntary. One can either inhale death, or hold his/her breath and die that way. See Loreto Lopez.

frightening by invoking this cartoonish imagery shows that she has wrestled with these feelings for quite awhile and has, at least on some level, come to terms with them. Though scared of her lack of control (she writes her message to God in all caps to guarantee it is heard), her faith is strong enough that she is willing to hand the reigns over to a higher power. She also knows that Jean will not judge her for being neurotic, and this frees her to express a range of emotions, including humor. In previously-discussed poems, Sexton showed that talking to a priest or a therapist does the speaker no good. She wants authority figures to know she understands the gravity of the situation, and does not make light of her children's lives, but with Jean, she knows she will be understood without stipulation, that she will not be thought cavalier just because she is witty. Joking about her anxieties provides relief that taking them seriously cannot.

The varied tone of the poem, the way it is dark one moment and humorous the next, can also be attributed to the speaker's ambivalence towards bodies. On the one hand, if it were not for her body she could not have brought her children into this world. She appreciates her womb for keeping her beloved babies safe. In other poems, Sexton describes the joys of pregnancy, writing, "If I could have watched you grow/ as a magical mother might,/ if I could have seen through my magical transparent belly,/ there would have been such ripening within" (Sexton 147 lines 60-63). In such lines, Sexton describes the speaker's body as an almost holy thing, divine in its ability to create life. Her children's gestation was "magical," a practically religious experience, and she regrets only that she could not watch every moment of her baby's growth. Simultaneously, she has intense guilt about bringing her children into a world she knows can be very cruel, especially in regard to the body. "Our children tremble in their teen-age cribs," she says to Jean, regretfully, "whirling off on a thumb or a motorcycle" (Sexton 489 lines 4-5). Of all the things that can befall them, though, the speaker worries that her children will be taken

down by something she involuntarily gave them, namely, “a stilbestrol cancer/ I passed on like hemophilia” (489 lines 6-7).

The theme of unfortunate inheritance is one Sexton continues in other poems. She gives us a neurotic speaker who consistently believes that if her children are diseased in any way, it is her fault. In “Mother And Daughter,” for instance, Sexton's persona becomes convinced that her body has passed on its awful legacy. “Now that you are eighteen” she tells her daughter, “I give you my booty, my spoils/ my Mother & Co. and my ailments” (Sexton 306 lines 18-20). Even though booty and spoils are typically desirable, they are accrued by illegal and immoral means. The speaker's daughter, Linda (presumably a reference to one of Sexton's own children) does not get the chance to decide for herself if she would like to possess these stolen goods. They are given to her as if part of her DNA. She is a thief by association, corrupt by no fault of her own, scarred by her mother's mistakes. Interestingly, the spoils, along with the speaker's sickness, will not be passed on until Linda reaches maturity. The illness of which Sexton writes, then, has something to do with womanhood itself, the messiness of it and, implicitly, the breasts, and buttocks, and period blood. The speaker speculates that her daughter will attempt to remedy this sickness, as many do, with “calisthenics,/ that womanly leggy semaphore” (Sexton 306 lines 38-39). Calisthenic exercises create long, lean, androgynous muscles. By engaging in this kind of workout, her daughter fights against her more fleshy womanly parts and reveals a distaste for her body and pressure to conform to societal norms that is similar to her mother's.¹⁶

¹⁶ Bordo argues that some eating disorders stem from the often unconscious desire to appear more masculine, or to be associated with the positive traits that define masculinity. See especially her account of compulsive exercising (172).

However, the speaker seems less concerned with her daughter's bodily hatred than with her daughter's inability to recognize that such hatred is problematic. Linda is caught up in and content with exactly the kind of femininity the speaker despises. When she asks her daughter to rethink her conventional lifestyle, her dwindling body prevents her from being heard. "I reach out toward it but/ my fingers turn to cankers" she says regretfully, "and I am motherwarm [sic] and used,/ just as your childhood is used" (Sexton 305 lines 6-9). Because of the failings of her body, the speaker cannot save the person she most loves from the pitfalls of womanhood. Her daughter's descent into adult life is particularly difficult for the speaker to witness because Linda's childhood was rather idealistic. She describes her daughter's old body as a "butterfly," beautiful and carefree (Sexton 305 line 3). When Linda was an adolescent, the speaker could protect her from the world, but now that she is full grown, the speaker feels helpless to save her.

The subject of the poem seems remarkably unconcerned about her new life, probably because she is ignorant of what awaits her. "Question you about this" writes Sexton tellingly, "and you hold up pearls ... Question you about this/ and you will sew me a shroud/ and hold up Monday's broiler/ and thumb out the chicken gut" (305 lines 10-11). Notably, all of the items Linda offers her mother as answers are symbols of domesticity and female submission. By clutching pearls and kitchen tools, Linda signifies that she has entered fully into the very life her mother hated and tried desperately to help her daughter avoid. Rather than spiritual, Linda's interests are bodily, a point Sexton drives home in the last few lines. She writes, "and you will see my death/ drooling at these gray lips/ while you, my burglar, will eat/ fruit and pass the time of day" (Sexton 306-307 lines 45-48). Instead of concerned about her mother's death, instead of asking questions about what happens to people after they die, Linda relaxes and eats a low calorie snack. Her appetite for normalcy is greater than her appetite for spiritual insight.

In 1964, when her daughter was approaching her teenage years, Sexton wrote a remarkably similar, at least thematically, poem called "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman." Like "Mother And Daughter," this piece is also addressed to Linda who is on the cusp of adulthood and blissfully ignorant of what being a grownup entails. However, the speaker approaches the issue of bodily change with greater tenderness this time around. Sexton begins the poem tritely, though sweetly, writing, "My daughter, at eleven/ (almost twelve), is like a garden" (145 lines 1-2). These lines, made more important by the fact that they constitute their own stanza, are followed swiftly by more characteristically mournful verse, though the speaker's mourning takes on a poignant tone. "Oh, darling!" writes Sexton, "Born in that sweet birthday suit/ and having owned it and known it for so long,/ now you must watch high noon enter-/ noon, that ghost hour" (145 lines 3-6). Though "ghost hour" typically has a negative connotation, the speaker's relationship with witches, ghouls, and the like is historically positive in Sexton's work.¹⁷ Sexton uses the phrase "ghost hour" here to signal a sort of magical transformation. Though this transformation might be frightening, it will not necessarily be bad or unpleasant. Later in the poem she describes the ghosts as buff, seductive men, saying, "and someday they will come to you,/ men bare to the waist, young Romans/ at noon where they belong,/ with ladders and hammers/ while no one sleeps" (Sexton 147 lines 45-49). It seems that part of the reason the speaker does not fear Linda's encounter with these attractive ghosts is because she has prepared her well for them by arming her with indestructible self-confidence. "But before they enter," Sexton writes, "I will have said,/ Your bones are lovely,/ and before their strange hands/ there was always this hand that

¹⁷ See, for example, "Her Kind" in which the speaker's self-identification with the word "witch" makes her "braver" (15 line 2).

formed" (147 lines 50-54). Confident in her parenting, the speaker feels more excited about her daughter's coming-of-age than scared. In this poem, Sexton describes womanhood as something new rather than something evil. It is not worse than adolescence, she suggests, in fact it offers its own unique pleasures, but it is undeniably different and it takes one awhile to become accustomed to that difference. The speaker hopes her daughter will accept her new body with loving arms and embrace everything that being a female entails. "Oh, darling, let your body in," she urges, "let it tie you in,/ in comfort" (Sexton 147 lines 55-57). In the final stanza the speaker acknowledges that such acceptance requires a tremendous amount of faith. "Darling,/ Stand still at your door,/ sure of yourself, a white stone, a good stone-/ as exceptional as laughter" (Sexton 148 lines 93-96). The final line of this piece implies that the speaker thinks that by accepting her femininity, no matter how difficult it may be, Linda will reap spiritual rewards. By entering fully into womanhood, the speaker tells Linda, "you will strike fire,/ that new thing!" (Sexton 148 lines 97-98). Fire illuminates, allowing us to see what was once invisible. As a woman, Sexton suggests, Linda's life will be enlightened, enriched, more spiritually significant.

Although everyone acknowledges that adolescence and adulthood present unique challenges, Sexton's work, when read in its entirety, exacerbates the differences between the two life stages. I argue that the poet's tendency to disparage youth and praise maturity mirrors her tendency to disparage the body and praise the soul. In the poems I discussed in this chapter, Sexton characterizes her speaker's relationship with her body as more amicable in adulthood than adolescence. Moreover, I identified this positive shift as resulting from the speaker having learned to use her body for spiritual gain. This adds to Sexton scholarship by showing that the poet's bodily references do not just exist as feminist statements. They often draw attention to issues of spirituality, too. In

my final chapter, I investigate how Sexton, in her poetic process and public performances, used her own body to communicate the importance of transcendence. By presenting herself on stage as larger-than-life, she tested the limits of her flesh. Her performances were so memorable that she became an icon in her own right. She is remembered fondly long after her death, while most people are forgotten, and because of this, I argue that she succeeded in becoming an ethereal being.

Chapter 3

The Real Body

Like her friend and colleague Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton is remembered just as much for her licentious personality and tragic life as she is for her poetry. Both scholars and fans are fascinated to the point of obsession by her tumultuous marriage, her suicide, and, perhaps most notably, her physical appearance.¹⁸ In 2010 one anonymous blogger urged readers to watch clips of Sexton on YouTube, writing, “It strikes me again that she is the Marilyn Monroe of poetry, Captivating” (Rich). While the idea that a poet’s beauty could elevate, or worse still constitute, the value of her work is enough to make many feminists cringe, Sexton consciously and methodically made her body visible to the public. Artemis Michailidou, in an essay that compares Sexton’s live readings to those of Edna St. Vincent Millay, explains that Sexton strove to be “both woman poet and marketable cultural icon” (128). In this chapter, I similarly argue that Sexton was at least partially responsible for her own objectification and that looking at her as an artifact, for lack of a better term, can be informative rather than demeaning. Since Sexton’s “notoriously theatrical,” meticulously planned, live readings suggest that she wanted her body to be read, I spend this chapter analyzing her flesh, and the way she spoke in interviews about her flesh, rather than her verse (Michailidou 119).

I contend that a thorough analysis of Sexton’s physically-driven creative process and public persona is just as essential as an analysis of the poems themselves in terms of understanding the importance of the body to her oeuvre. By looking at how Sexton

¹⁸ Pervasive interest in Sexton’s life is evidenced, and in some ways instigated, by the fact that Diane Wood Middlebrook’s biography of the poet spent eight weeks on the New York Times bestseller list.

used her body to both construct and aid her poetry, I expand upon the ideas I laid out in the first two chapters regarding her work's preoccupation with physicality and transcendence. My approach to analyzing Sexton's flesh is threefold. I begin by arguing that her decision to start writing was fueled by an emotional rather than mental impulse (clinical depression that she believed originated in her gut).¹⁹ Her poetry is therefore very literally bodily and, because she wrote as a form of therapy, indicative of her desire to cleanse herself of her more negative attributes and achieve spiritual peace. Next, I move into a discussion of her live readings, arguing that her larger-than-life, practically supernatural, public persona shows an interest in pushing the limits of the body in order to construct a spiritual identity. Finally, I end by looking critically at the dialogue surrounding Sexton's tragic death. I contend that viewing her suicide as an extension of her poetry, as many critics have, is tempting but ultimately insidious given the negative consequences it could have on the bodies of future generations of writers and artists, specifically the bodies of future generations of female writers and artists. By emphasizing the physical nature of Sexton's work, I argue that she was just as much a performance artist as she was a poet, which encourages a more complete understanding of her role in the literary world.

One of the most notable things about Sexton's career is when it began, 1955 when she was already in her late twenties. Despite her late start and lack of formal education, the poet quickly achieved notoriety, winning a Pulitzer Prize in 1967 for *Live or*

¹⁹ In "Flee On Your Donkey," one of Sexton's most autobiographical poems as evidenced by the fact that she uses her first name twice in the first line, she describes depression as a hunger that stems from the gut. She writes, "It is my stomach that makes me suffer" (Sexton 104 line 234).

Die, a book in which she names names, writing candidly about her personal relationships and stint in a mental hospital. In interviews Sexton repeatedly, even proudly, highlighted the unstudied nature of her work. “I’m not an intellectual of any sort I know of,” she said to Barbara Kevles’s of the *Paris Review* in 1971. “I have never gone to college, I absolutely was a flunk-out in any schooling I had, I laughed my way through exams...and until I started at twenty-seven, hadn’t done much reading” (qtd. in Shurr 341). Because Sexton’s familiarity with other poets was slim, I argue that she drew primarily, at least initially, upon her emotions, and her bodily responses to those emotions, to create her work. To be clear, I do not wish to imply that Sexton’s work is without nuance or depth, nor do I neglect the fact that she was a mindful editor who eventually received guidance from and formed friendships with some of the preeminent poets of her time (John Holmes, Maxine Kumin, and Sylvia Plath, for example.)²⁰ My intention here is to merely focus on the origin, rather than the refinement, of her poetry. I argue that it was her intense ability to feel, rather than her ability to think, that brought her to writing in the first place.

Sexton began taking poetry seriously after suffering a nervous breakdown that left her feeling “parasitic, helpless, [and] profoundly angry” according to her long time therapist, Dr. Martin Orne (qtd. in Middlebrook 43). He suggested she write, an activity

²⁰ Importantly, the workshops Sexton did attend were lead by John Holmes and Robert Lowell, confessionalist poets who, as such, sought to break away from the “inflated rhetoric” of their contemporaries (Molesworth 163). Thus, rather than pushing her towards formalism, Sexton’s poetic training actually encouraged her to delve more deeply into her own lived experiences. In this way her poetry never stopped being organic and bodily.

she had abandoned in favor of a more conventional, domestic existence years prior, “to help her develop any resources within her which allowed her to be a person and allowed her to form relationships on a healthier basis than before” (qtd in Middlebrook 43). Orne's quote helpfully illuminates the extent of Sexton's distress and gives strength to my argument that her poetry came from her gut, that proverbial emotional pit, rather than her mind. However, his statement is also pernicious in its assumption that Sexton, in her angst, was not a person and his words warrant critique. Orne implies that because of her highly emotional state, Sexton was more animal than human. She was irrational and moody, not normal, not calm, cool, and collected, in other words, not male, as male is read in the Western world. Susan Bordo's account of how the mind/body binary has been applied to the sexes is helpful in understanding Orne's comment. She writes that men are linked symbolically to the mind and rational thought, implying that they have risen above their brute bodies and reached a level of sophistication unattainable by their female counterparts. In contrast, “women, besides having bodies, are also associated with the body,” the source of superficiality, sensory experience, and emotions without logical basis (Bordo 166). Besides being bothersome, the body is also commonly seen as less essential to humanity than the mind in almost every respect. Again, Bordo offers clarity here. Summarizing the thoughts of Descartes, she writes, “the body is experienced as alien, as the not-self, the not-me...the body is the brute material envelope for the inner and essential self, the thinking thing; it is ontologically distinct from that inner self” (Bordo 166). If the inner self is the authentic self, then the body is the imposter self. What it wants cannot be trusted and flesh itself is seen as disposable. Bordo goes on to explain that many believe a life driven primarily by bodily and emotional impulses is not worth living and “is, indeed, comparable to animal existence” (Bordo 167). While none of this justifies or renders benign Orne's quest to help Sexton become “a person,” it certainly

helps explain his thought process. By encouraging Sexton to put her emotions down on paper, perhaps he hoped they would go away, or at least transform into something else, something less bodily and more intellectual, less female and more male.

Despite Orne's likely unconscious attempt at making Sexton more rational and masculine, her distinctly female body continued to dictate what she wrote about (breasts, blood, and orifices) and what she hoped to accomplish through her work (bodily ecstasy). Based on her comments in interviews and letters to friends, I argue that Sexton believed the purpose of art was to evoke feeling rather than thought. Sexton drew inspiration from instrumental music, which she admired for its ability to evoke sensual, abstract pleasure that is not tethered to the mind. The best evidence of the poet's preoccupation with the erotic quality of music occurred in March of 1966 when "a camera crew visited Anne Sexton's home" to film her reading her work, discussing the minute events of her life, and interacting with her children (Kellogg). About eight minutes into the first part of the edited video footage, Sexton plays a favorite musical composition for her visitors, Frédéric Chopin's Ballade 1. "This song is like making love," she says. "I think that is the most sensual thing I ever heard. I wouldn't want to have an orgasm in front of you, but no, that is it. Listen! You hear how it is like sex?...Feel it! Better than a poem. Music beats us" (Kellogg). Intermittently she tilts her head back and coos in ecstasy as the song plays. By reacting physically to Chopin's music and describing her response to the piece as orgasmic, Sexton suggests that she interprets art with her body and soul rather than her mind. In the previous chapter, I argued that in certain poems Sexton's speaker achieves her highest level of spiritual satisfaction on earth during orgasm. Because I contend that the poet and her speaker can be read as one and the same, it may be that the pseudo-orgasm Sexton has over Chopin's composition results in a religious experience,

something that rejects the “'objective' or the 'empirical'” that Orne privileged in favor of “the subjective, the personal, the private” (Sharf 267).

In a 1957 letter to her mother, Sexton divulged that she hoped to create the sensuous kind of art she liked to consume and to arouse her readers physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In the envelope, she enclosed “some forty-odd pages of the first year of Anne Sexton, Poet” as a Christmas gift, along with a note (L. Sexton and Ames 32). “A few are obscure,” she explains of the poems, “I do not apologize for them. I like them. Mood can be as important as sense. Music doesn't make sense and I am not so sure the words have to, always” (L. Sexton and Ames 32). As evidenced by her letter, she saw words as more than strictly communicative. She viewed language as a kind of music, not always logical and capable, in an almost mystical way, of evoking responses that are emotional and bodily rather than purely intellectual. Her poem “Admonitions To A Special Person,” published posthumously, succinctly and beautifully summarizes what she values in verse. The speaker warns us: “Watch out for intellect, / because it knows so much it knows nothing / and leaves you hanging upside down, mouthing knowledge as your heart / falls out of your mouth” (Sexton lines 12-16, 607).

Although Orne hoped poetry would help Sexton escape her body, it actually offered her a mechanism for plunging into and exploring her body more deeply, which provided her comfort in a different way than he intended. She wrote about her experiences as a female, her menstruation, her pregnancies, and her bodily interactions with men. Sexton's work is thus more in line with Hélène Cixous' conception of what women's writing should be than it is with Orne's. In her 1976 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous urges women to arm themselves with pens and fight against phallogocentrism by writing their own stories in their own language. “Write your self,” she famously implores. “Your body must be heard” (Cixous 880). Throughout the text, Cixous

draws a parallel between the bodily and intellectual suppression of women. She believes that by unleashing their minds and composing a distinctly, almost palpably, feminine literature, women can reclaim ownership of their bodies. Writing, she asserts, is “an act which will not only 'realize' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal” (Cixous 880). Though “The Laugh of the Medusa” was published two years after Anne Sexton's suicide, the physical, emotional, and unabashedly confessional nature of the poet's work satisfies Cixous' plea for an *écriture féminine*.

Since Sexton was primarily interested in tapping into the sensual and intuitive rather than the intellectual and studied, poetry was an ideal medium. Cixous acknowledges that it is not unusual for women to write their bodies as poetry rather than prose, “because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women, or as Hoffmann would say, fairies” (Cixous 880). While most would consider the unconscious a part of the mind, I argue that its virtual undetectability, its hidden and allusive nature, prevents it from being severed symbolically from the body in the same way that the conscious mind is. Therefore, the unconscious is not gendered. It is neutral territory, neither female nor male in association, because it evades association. Since, according to Cixous, poetry is all about the unconscious, I contend that Sexton chose a very female friendly medium. Poetry allowed her to express herself in a way that was as nonsensical, organic, original, and potent as she was. Sexton eventually gained notoriety for these emotionally charged, musical, bodily poems, receiving a Pulitzer in 1967 and marking a small but important shift in Western thought. That our culture chose to praise poems written in free verse rather than metered line, by a woman rather than a

man, and from the gut rather than the mind, suggests, if not a breaking down of the mind/body binary, a breaking down of the prioritization of the mind in favor of a more equal opposition.

It was not as though Sexton's poems were birthed from her body and then abandoned on paper, however. She made certain, by cultivating a magnetic stage presence and becoming "one of 'the best paid poetry performers in America,'" that her work was forever associated with her flesh (qtd. in Michailidou 124). Like her predecessor Edna St. Vincent Millay, who "purposefully projected a sense of being the poet in the flesh, of the flesh; the poet whose flesh was somehow the very material of her material" (qtd. in Michailidou 123). Sexton by all accounts preferred to read her poems out loud, seeing "an inextricable link between poetry and performance" (Michailidou 125). Perhaps her penchant for public appearances was, whether consciously or not, a reaction against the various structuralist texts of her time, such as Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?" and Roland Barthes "The Death of the Author," that threatened to sever her relationship to her work altogether and hand control over to her audience. Her public readings guaranteed that she would be seen and remembered. Her existence could not be denied and though her poems were written long before she stepped on the stage, her public readings brought them to life, offering a sense of "the general condition of each text, the condition of both the space in which it is dispersed and the time in which it unfolds," which Foucault believed was impossible to convey (Foucault).

Sexton began every reading the same way, so her persona was uniform and memorable over the span of her career. Each time she appeared on stage, she stated, "I'm going to read a poem that tells you what kind of a poet I am, what kind of a woman I am, so if you don't like it you can leave" (qtd. in Middlebrook xix). By doing this, Sexton asserted herself as Author with a capital A and demanded ownership of and control over

her texts, even after they had been sent out into the world. Such an introduction also allowed her to choose her audience. By inviting anyone who did not accept the kind of woman she was to leave the room, she weeded out those who wanted to make her into someone she was not, or make her poems into something they were not. Controlling who heard her poems allowed her, in a sense, to control how her poems would be heard. Access to her work was granted, at least in theory, only to those willing to accept her authority as poet. None of this would have been achievable on paper. She gained power and dominance from her physical presence. Her over-the-top readings undoubtedly left an indelible impression on those who witnessed them. She spoke loudly and forcefully, guaranteeing that she would be heard and remembered. Because of this, her body and voice are often present in the minds of her readers (or at least in the mind of this reader), like a jingle that refuses to leave your head. Perhaps this is why, in addition to the innumerable personal details she includes throughout her work, some critics, including myself, find it so difficult to separate Sexton from her speaker. Rather than trying to untangle the two, I argue that they should be read as one, since Sexton went to great pains to ensure that they would be inextricable.

That being said, Sexton's stage persona was just that, a persona. Readers have access only to the woman she wanted them to see. Her costumed stage presence suggests that she was fully aware that she could manipulate others' perceptions of herself by rewriting and editing her body. She relied on props, whether she thought about them that way or not, to alter her physical appearance and communicate poetic meaning. Her hair was pitch black, her dress was simplistic but sexual, she often grasped tightly to a bottle of beer, and, notably, she chain smoked Salem cigarettes throughout her readings. Sexton's choice of cigarette was far from accidental. Though Salems are manufactured in North Carolina, the brand name conjures images of black magic and

witch hunts in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. In a video clip, Sexton tells the camera man that she has never investigated whether or not she is related to any witches, because it would be too time consuming and she has more important things to do, but insinuates that she would be neither surprised nor offended to find such characters in her ancestry. Rather than horrified at the possibility of having witch blood, Sexton is mildly amused by the idea, smiling a bit and flippantly moving to the next subject. With a Salem cigarette constantly in hand like an extra appendage, and a temper that flared up violently without warning, Sexton did nothing to assuage comparisons to witches. In fact, she invited them, aligning herself with some of the most victimized women in history, but somehow gaining power through that association. Her at times intimidating appearance and bellowing voice commanded attention. It is as though she was speaking on behalf of those witches who had been burned at the stake, drawing attention to their subjugation by telling her audience, powerfully, about her own.

To further market herself as a witch, Sexton began each of her readings with the same poem, "Her Kind," a poem about "a possessed witch, / haunting the black air, braver at night; dreaming evil," that the speaker intermittently describes in first person (15 lines 1-3). As mentioned previously, this is the poem Sexton believed best illustrated the kind of woman she was, interestingly though, the piece is not exactly about a woman. In the final lines of the first stanza the speaker confesses, "A woman like that is not a woman, quite. / I have been her kind" (15 lines 6-7). The body that Sexton cultivated, the persona that she projected to her audience through her poems, props, and dress, was thus rebellious, resisting simple categorization as female. If what Judith Butler says is true, and, "what we take to be an essential essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body'," then Sexton's gender was incredibly convoluted (qtd. in Michailidou 124). She stylized herself

as a witch, something both female and more than female, real and mythical. If she is a sorceress, then her poems are her potions, made of magic rather than thought, the results of an innate bodily power rather than a civilized human mind. They gain power and allure because they were created ostensibly by magic rather than arduous work. We want to read them because they are marketed by the poet as supernatural and sublime. That Sexton presented herself as a witch rather than a mortal shows her interest in escaping the limits of her flesh, transcending her womanly body, and tapping into her own brand of spirituality.

Yet in spite of the fact that the protagonist of "Her Kind" "is not a woman, quite" she performs many womanly roles. Like Snow White, she "found the warm caves in the woods, / filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves, / fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves: / whining, rearranging the disaligned" (15 lines 8-12). Sexton expressed these contradictions visually in her performances as well as in her life. She was torn between exoticism and domesticity, both in her activities (she was a poet and a mother) and her appearance (she smoked cigarettes and guzzled beer like a man, but dressed like a femme fatale). Her complex lifestyle, coupled with her poetic and aesthetic contradictions, offer us a fuller, more complete woman than the one we usually see in literature and culture. Her speaker is both virgin and whore and her sex appeal on stage eradicates, at least briefly, the Emily Dickinson-esque spinster stereotype many people hold of female writers. I do not wish to promote Sexton as a womanly ideal. However, I do think her exaggerated mannerisms, hyperbolic poems, and demonstrative facial contortions were brilliant and necessary. If she were demure or even "normal" she would not have garnered the attention she did and the history books would be short a female poet. She used her body as a promotional tool, "an instrument and medium of power"

(Bordo 165). Her life was a performance more often than it was not, and she made sure that her poems were included in that life rather than seen as detached from it.

At times, Sexton perhaps did not keep her work separate enough from her body. As William H. Shurr notes, after spending years trying to reconcile her identity as both a writer and an artist, she “became totally an artist, to the exclusion of any other role, an artist whose medium, in the final event, was her own life” (353). Shurr goes on to argue that Sexton's suicide was a fundamental part of what she intended to be her final publication, *The Awful Rowing Toward God*. He presents compelling evidence, writing:

A year before she died she told an interviewer that she had written the first drafts of these poems in two and a half weeks, that she would continue to polish them, but that she would allow publication only after her death. Her published letters add the chilling information that she had then sent the manuscript to her publisher and was actually reading the galley proofs on the day she took her own life (Shurr 336).

Shurr's logic encourages us to read *The Awful Rowing Toward God* as a kind of extended suicide note, which is both difficult to stomach and tremendously limiting. Sexton's failing mental health doubtlessly affected the content and tone of the book but I argue that there exists, in *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, an element of hope that is absent in previous collections. Most of the poems discuss the suffocating monotony, constant unfairness, and unrelenting brutality that accompanies life, but there are also many positive references to God and religion. In the next few paragraphs, I show that Shurr's claim that Sexton wrote *The Awful Rowing Toward God* to explain her suicide is untenable by demonstrating that the speaker in this collection actually seems less

suicidal than she did in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, Sexton's first book, which primarily takes place in a mental hospital.

One poem in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, morbidly titled "Torn Down From Glory Daily" starts harmlessly enough, with children feeding bread to seagulls, but things quickly sour. Watching the birds fight over a piece of bread, the young speaker comes to the dark conclusion that, "The world is full of them, / a world of beasts / thrusting for one rock" (Sexton 6 lines | 28-130). Another piece from the same collection, "Said The Poet To The Analyst," follows a similar narrative, beginning on a note of positivity and then quickly plummeting. The speaker proudly tells her analyst about "that one night in Nevada: telling how the magic jackpot / came clacking three bells out, over the lucky screen" (Sexton 12 lines 13-14). Yet in spite of her good fortune she eventually confesses that she cannot find joy. Sexton writes, "But if you should say this is something it is not, / then I grow weak, remembering how my hands felt funny / and ridiculous and crowded with all / the believing money" (13 lines 15-18). Notably, in this instance, it is belief the speaker finds ridiculous. She seems almost ashamed of her momentary excitement, as if to be honest and intelligent she must be depressed and renounce faith. This is not to say that she is content in her faithlessness. Rather, she simply and unfortunately feels uncomfortable believing in anything good. To believe in her slot machine victory, for example, would require lying to herself, something she is not willing to do. Joyce Carol Oates draws a parallel between Sexton and her speaker, arguing that both long for, but have trouble locating, faith, "that larger experience, that rush of near divine certainty that the self is immortal" (qtd. in Shurr 351). It is my contention that rather than documenting her spiral into depression, as Shurr says it does, *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, chronicles Sexton's deepening faith in the final years of her life. This

collection, while still dark, is less self-centered and more optimistic about the body's relationship with the world and the fate of the soul than those that came before it.

I argue that the happier moments in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* occur when the speaker relates her bodily suffering to Christ's. Sexton references Christ frequently in book, always emphasizing his physicality and the pain it caused him. In the poem "Two Hands," for instance, she writes that we should have pity for those women "who are in prison, / even the prison of their bodies, / as Christ was prisoned in His body / until the triumph came" (421 lines 19-22). Through these lines, Sexton enters a long tradition of "woman writers... [who] tended to use the notion of 'the female' as 'flesh' to associate Christ's humanity with 'the female' and therefore to suggest that women imitate Christ through physicality" (Walker Bynum 132). The speaker's physical suffering is more tolerable when she realizes that it mimics the suffering Christ endured at his crucifixion, his "triumph," because she is able to imagine a reward at the other end of her pain. This idea aligns itself with late medieval theology. As Caroline Walker Bynum writes, "Late medieval theology, as is well known, located the saving moment of Christian history less in Christ's resurrection than in his crucifixion...no other period in the history of Christian spirituality has placed so positive a value on Christ's humanity as physicality" (Walker Bynum 132). In "Two Hands," after describing Christ's "triumph" over his body, the speaker delivers one of the most optimistic lines I have encountered in Sexton's work. In the final stanza she declares, "Unwind, hands, / you angel webs, / unwind like the coil of a jumping jack, / cup together and let yourselves fill up with sun / and applaud, world, / applaud" (421 lines 23-28). Interestingly, the things the speaker applauds in those lines are of the earth, something she could not experience fully without her flesh. The part of the poem I referenced reads like advice, suggesting that not only does the speaker want to live, she, like Jesus, also wants to show others how to appreciate their own lives and

flesh. Shurr's argument, then, that Sexton's suicide was a physical extension or manifestation of her book seems incompatible with the evidence of optimism I locate in this poem.

It feels important, at the end of my thesis, to also respond to Shurr's claim that Sexton's suicide was a sort of performance, because the romanticization of depression and suicide is an epidemic that adversely affects aspiring artists, critics, and readers.²¹ Denise Levertov laments the consequences of conflating Sexton's "creativity and self-destruction" (186). She blames Western culture's emphasis on individuality for artistic malaise. In order to create unique, iconoclastic art, people feel they must separate themselves from the rest of society. Isolation is not inherently bad. In fact, Levertov admits that if one estranges himself/herself from society in order to produce something critical of society, the results can be positive. However, she argues that the isolated individual may become "prey to the exploitation that characterizes capitalism" and that their personal struggles might be "exploited by...a public greedy for emotion at second hand because starved of the experience of community" (Levertov 189). Levertov encourages us to read Sexton as a casualty of such exploitation. She cites "The Fury Of Rain Storms" as evidence that the poet, rather than embracing or romanticizing her

²¹ Shurr writes that Sexton's suicide was "grounded in 'magnanimity'...the result of 'ardent curiosity,' the self-chosen final capstone to a structure of life and art now satisfactorily completed...Sexton's way is not everyone's, but it has its own rationale and, as artistic vision, its own extraordinary beauty" (353-354). I use Shurr's description of Sexton's death, particularly his use of the word 'beauty,' to bolster my claim that he views her suicide in an uncomfortably, insidiously romantic light.

discontent, wanted to be rid of it. In the piece, Sexton writes, "Depression is boring...I would do better...to light up the cave" (112-14).

In this chapter, I argued that, from the beginning, Sexton approached writing with her body first and her mind second. I pointed to evidence that she wanted her readers to experience her poems on an emotional rather than intellectual level, so that they might have the sort of spiritual insights she received while listening to instrumental music. The way she presented her body during her public performances similarly supports the idea that she was concerned, primarily, with transcendence, with pushing the limits of the physical world, and with being remembered as phenomenal rather than ordinary. I argued earlier that Sexton, by making her body so public, gave us her body to interpret. Because of this, while I think that Shurr's claim that *The Awful Rowing Toward God* is Sexton's suicide note is deleterious, I do not think it is completely uncalled for. Instead, I think his argument should be challenged. Sexton wanted us to read her life, certainly, but did she want us to read her life in this negative way? Should we continue to view her as a fascinating train wreck, a horror story, or can we begin to look at her as someone interested in sharing her religious journey with the world? Rather than caving under the weight of her depression, it seems Sexton fought her mental illness until the very end. I argue, finally, that readers should set aside the mythology surrounding Sexton's life and work and think about how she herself conceived of and talked about her experiences and oeuvre.

Over the course of my thesis I have pointed to evidence that Sexton's work is ultimately more about God, hope, and the body's relationship to the soul than despair. Though she plays with her speaker's age and immediate circumstances throughout the poems, Sexton makes it clear that she is writing about one woman by keeping the narrator's preoccupation with the divine consistent and by claiming repeatedly (either by

reading her poems in public or by referring to the speaker as “Anne”) that she and her speaker are the same person. My contention that Sexton and her speaker are synonymous is hardly original (many critics describe her work as confessional,) but other elements of my thesis deviate from the norm. By emphasizing the spiritual, uplifting quality of her oeuvre, my thesis fills what I perceive to be a void in Sexton scholarship. As I have demonstrated, some critics have alluded to the religious undertones of Sexton’s work but none have put it at the forefront of their analysis. Because I believe that her poetry is, more than anything, interested in the relationship between the body and soul, I argue that Sexton was first and foremost a religious poet. This broadens our understanding of her role in the literary world by linking her, not just to her contemporaries, but to some of the earliest Christian thinkers. Rather than narcissistically documenting her thoughts, as she has been accused of doing, I argue that Sexton wrote in an attempt to better understand her soul and its relationship to the divine. This analysis prevents her poems from developing a niche appeal and focuses instead on their practically universal relevance.

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