



All My Pretty Ones

Anne Sexton

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“All My Pretty Ones” is the title poem of Anne Sexton’s intensely confessional second book of poetry, *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), and it reflects that volume’s absorption with loss and death. This poem consists of five ten-line stanzas and resembles the form of most of the companion poems in the volume. The poem’s title comes from William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1606), when Macduff mourns the loss of his wife and children. In March of 1959, Anne Sexton’s mother died, followed in June of the same year by Sexton’s father. “All My Pretty Ones” is a monologue addressed to Sexton’s dead father as she sorts through her parents’ possessions.

In the first stanza, Sexton looks over her father’s meager “leftovers”: a key, some stock certificates, clothing, a car, his will, and a box of photographs. She is recording a moment that many children must endure: the closing of a parent’s affairs, the moment when the living children must literally discard artifacts not only of their parents’ lives but also of their own. She sees her task as one of helping her father to free himself from the tangles of his now past life. The stanza concludes with her decision to throw away the items that she has found. [...]

All My Pretty Ones Details

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From Reader Review All My Pretty Ones for online ebook

Bill Kerwin says

Anne's Sexton's second volume, published in 1962, is a classic of 20th Century poetry. She has absorbed the influence of Robert Lowell's groundbreaking *Life Studies* and found her voice: ironic, agnostic, mercilessly honest, yet haunted by guilt and filled with a hunger for love both human and divine. It is these poems--and the work Sylvia Plath was doing at the same time, the poems printed posthumously in *Ariel* (1965)--which would guide the movement of American verse for years to come. These poems have been so influential that, although it is hard *not* to see how good they are, it is easy to forget--or miss--how revolutionary they were at the time.

The subject matter is daring, the language spare, the metaphors continually surprising. The first three of the book's five sections--poems about her parent's deaths, a lost love affair, an abortion, and her relationship with her daughter--are particularly fine. Sample a few: "The Truth the Dead Know," "Lament," "The Starry Night," "The Dwarf Heart," "The Abortion." Artful rhetoric, sincere song, and strangled cry have seldom been so perfectly united.

I'll let you discover these fine poems yourself, and instead end with this small, sardonic feminist utterance, years ahead of its time:

Housewife

*Some women marry houses.
It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
The walls are permanent and pink.
See how she sits on her knees all day,
faithfully washing herself down.
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
into their fleshy mothers.
A woman is her mother.
That's the main thing.*

Kirsty says

I chose to read Anne Sexton's *All My Pretty Ones* for my book club's Extra-Curricular Read of April 2017. I was going to read a biography at first, but knowing little of Sexton's poetry proper, I decided to choose one of her collections at random. This is her second collection, published in 1961 after the death of both of her parents, and my goodness, is it accomplished! Every single poem is powerful, and has a wealth of things to say.

The imagery is stunning. On unearthing a photograph of her father after his death in the titular poem, Sexton writes: 'Now I find you down, my drunkard, my navigator, / my first keeper, to love or look at later'. The following extract is from 'Young': '... and I, in my brand new body, / which was not a woman's yet, / told the

stars my questions / and thought God could really see / the heat and the painted light / elbows, knees, dreams, goodnight.' 'I Remember' offers the following slice of beauty: 'one day I tied my hair back / with a ribbon and you said / that I looked almost like / a puritan lady and what / I remember best is that / the door to your room was / the door to mine.' Finally, this extract is taken from 'The Fortress', definitely one of my favourite poems in the entire collection: 'Under the pink quilted covers / I hold the pulse that counts your blood. / I think the woods outdoors / are half asleep, / left over from summer / like a stack of books after a flood, / left over like those promises I never keep.'

To conclude, *All My Pretty Ones* is a poetry collection which I cannot recommend highly enough. It is beautiful, memorable, and so important.

Magdalen says

*The town does not exist
except where one black-haired tree slips
up like a drowned woman into the hot sky
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars
oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die*

Like my beloved Sylvia Plath once said **"Surely the great use of poetry is its pleasure"** and I cannot agree more. Confessing your deep thoughts or your feelings while writing poetry is greater than just writing a simple **good poem**. Many people will disagree but I personally like raw, ironic, dark poems that don't need sugar coating or too many symbols. I like poems that aren't filled with lyricism. Some of Sexton's poems are more bittersweet than others. Most of them though are honest, sharp.. The theme of death is so familiar yet so charming. She even wrote a poem about abortion! Her poetry I guess was her salvation? Anyway, I liked ***All my pretty ones***

Steven says

What I love most about Anne Sexton's poetry is the rambunctious voice she constructs that gives the reader an unsteady feeling while reading her work. Whether tackling the brave subject of abortion or examining the depths of her isolation, the reader never knows if we will find Sexton gravely "wondering how anything fragile survives" (20) or teasing how "It would be pleasant to be drunk" (67) through her troubling bouts with depression. Either way, she is adept at grabbing and holding our attention, challenging the reader to discern when she has "invented a lie" (66) or when she is using her "born" ability for "confessing" (23). Sexton's intelligence shines through in the subtle ways she criticizes the male authority figures in her life. In the poem "The Operation," in which she details a surgery to remove a tumor from her uterus or ovaries (the same cancer that killed her mother), the "mighty doctor" is depicted as cavalier and condescending about this serious procedure and recovery, telling her in the end to "run along now,/[her] stomach laced up like a football/for the game" (12-16). This ending simile is brilliant, as it is also a perfect comment on the frame of mind Sexton sees many men existing in, that of competition and winning, and shows how it contributes to her feelings of isolation and inferiority. Overall, the structure of this book impresses me most. Each section has an easily recognizable theme, and

each poem within them stands strongly on its own. Because of this tight organization and the impeccable skill in each piece, Anne Sexton was able to stretch the boundaries of what women could write about in 1950's and 1960's. It would have been a gift to see what she would have written if the side of her that was playful, bright and a keen observer of society would have triumphed over the part that was "never loving" (65) of herself.

Steve says

Anne Sexton's second collection of poems, *All My Pretty Ones*, takes its title from MacDuff's speech (Act IV, scene iii) in *Macbeth*, when he learns of the murder of his wife and children. Outside of scripture, it's probably one of the most heart wrenching passages in all of literature. To further underscore this, Sexton also included an excerpt from the speech as an epigram for the collection:

*All my pretty ones?
Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?
What! All my pretty chickens and their dam
At one fell swoop? . . .
I cannot but remember such things were,
That were most precious to me.*

It's an interesting choice, since what makes the passage even more powerful is the harsh line that follows:

Did heaven look on, and not take their part?

Macduff then goes on to accuse himself of being a sinner, and how he must have deserved such heartbreak, but you tend to tune that out, since the Big Question is now out of the bag. Why does God allow such things? In Sexton's case, the matter is Incest. In her previous collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, I picked up a bit of this, but not enough to make me comment on it since I wanted to make sure, biographically, that there was something to this suggestion (and there is). The poem I have in mind is "The Moss of His Skin," which is, from beginning to end, totally disturbing.

*It was only important
To smile and hold still,
To lie down beside him
And to rest awhile,
To be folded up together
As if we were silk,
To sink from the eyes of mother
And not to talk.
The black room took us
Like a cave or a mouth
Or an indoor belly.
I held my breath
And daddy was there,
His thumbs, his fat skull,
His teeth, his hair growing
Like a field or a shawl.*

*I lay by the moss
Of his skin until
It grew strange.*

That's about 2/3s of the poem. I shouldn't be spending so much time on a previous collection's poem, but I'm now detecting in Sexton, poem by poem, collection by collection, a need to ratchet things up. This is probably where the haters come in with the charge of exhibitionism. I think that (so far at least) is a harsh judgment (these are great poems), but I do have to wonder what it must have been like to read Sexton as she lived, rather than looking back on the career of a suicide poet? The stuff she was writing about, mental issues, abortion, sex, etc., must have been, given Sexton's frankness, explosive at the time. It also must have been, if you were a fan, intoxicating at first. But as Sexton went on and on (she was fairly prolific), just from glancing at poem titles and poems in the *Collected* edition, you get the sense that she's trying to outdo herself with each new outing. At some point, you just know that creatively the wheels are going to come off.

Getting back to *All My Pretty Ones*, the collection opens with the death of Sexton's parents. "The Truth the Dead Know," which makes for a powerful start.

*Gone, I say and walk from church,
Refusing the stiff procession to the grave,
Letting the dead ride alone in the hearse.
It is June. I am tired of being brave.*

I don't think there's any danger of Sexton being brave – unless simple survival is what she means, then, once again, the poet is telegraphing what is to come. Instead, it is a poem about brittleness, barely hanging on.

*.....I cultivate
Myself where the sun gutters from the sky,
Where the sea swings in like an iron gate
And we touch. In another country people die.*

The closing imagery reminds me (either unconvincingly or damning, I'm not sure which) of Luke 9:60's "Let the dead bury the dead," but with more than a hint of morbid curiosity:

*And what of the dead? They lie without shoes
In their stone boats. They are more like stone
Than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse
To blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone.*

(Seamus Heaney must love that last line.) The following poem, "All My Pretty Ones" has Sexton addressing her father, as she goes through diaries, memories, etc., while the whole time skirting something darker, but is strongly hinted at in poem's closing lines:

*Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you,
bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you.*

Of what? Well, that comes out a bit more as the collection unfolds. There are of course other things going on in the collection, one of which is Sexton's religious feelings. I suppose at this point in Sexton's life, with the death of her parents (following within months of each other), she hoped (I'm guessing here) that forgiveness along with their passing would provide some closure, some peace. But it's hard not to see Sexton as someone

so broken up inside that getting traction, religious or otherwise, was next to impossible. All of which reinforces her remarkable achievement as a poet. In the end, it was all she had, and even that would not be enough.

The collection's second section (and the best), is also the most paradoxical. It starts out with a quote from the Catholic theologian, Roman Guardini, regarding the true nature of Christ (as opposed to "pallid humanitarianism"). I don't know where the quote comes from, but Guardini did write a powerful meditation on Christ in 1957, called *The Lord* (Flannery O'Connor was very high on it). Since Guardini's book was making the rounds among the Catholic literati, I can only assume that Sexton (I'm not sure she was Catholic) read it as well. But what follows is an unusual selection of poems, one of which is the much anthologized "The Abortion." "The Abortion," while a good poem, gains tremendous power, once read within the context of this section. The haunting, hallucinogenic imagery of the poem is reinforced by its placement within the section. (From what I've read so far, Sexton was a master at poem placement in her collections.)

The section's final poem, "Ghosts," circles back, more explicitly than any poem so far, to the issue of incest. It's a weird poem, and you can't help but be reminded of Shakespeare's use of ghosts in his plays (*Macbeth*, *Richard III*). Sexton's ghosts, all grotesque, are her mother:

*Some ghosts are women,
neither abstract or pale,
their breasts as limp as pale fish.
...
who come, waving their useless arms
like forsaken servants.*

Her father:
*Not all ghosts are women,
I have seen others;
Fat, white-bellied men,
Wearing their genitals like rags.*

Wow. Dante would have loved that description. And finally, a child, I assume, at least in part, the aborted one, given the imagery Sexton chooses, but also Sexton herself, impossibly conflicted, damaged, her innocence lost:

*some ghosts are children.
not angels, but ghosts;
curling like pink tea cups
on any pillow, or kicking,
showing their innocent bottoms, wailing
for Lucifer.*

I've gone on too long, but Sexton does draw you in to depths upon depths, which leave you feeling, by collection's end, that you've only scratched the surface of this disturbed but brilliant poet. Highly recommended. (Note: I read this collection as it appears in *The Collected Poems of Anne Sexton*.

Eduardo says

This was the first book of poems I read straight through and the first Anne Sexton as I read through her collected poems. This was a wonderful collection, it hits hard right from the start with the masterful "The Truth the Dead Know", I loved how this collection seemed to alternate between longer narrative poems and shorter most nostalgic bursts of imagery. There was depth and simplicity in all the poems in this collection, and it ended as beautifully as it started, with "Letter Written During a January Northeaster".

Esth r says

"Martes

He inventado una mentira.
No existe otro d a sino el lunes.
Parece razonable pretender
que pudiera cambiar el d a
como un par de calcetines.
Dicho claramente
todos los d as son de la misma talla
y las palabras no dan mucha compa  a.
Si estuviera enferma, si fuera una ni a,
sorber a mi sopa escondida bajo las mantas de lana.
Como est n las cosas,
los d as no merecen que uno se agarre o mienta.
A pesar de todo, eres el  nico
al que puedo molestar con este asunto".

"All My Pretty Ones" (en castellano "Todos mis seres queridos") contiene muchos poemas que te dejan sin respiraci n. Si le pongo una estrella menos que "To Bedlam and Part Way Back" es porque algunos tienen una estructura narrativa rimada o pomposa que no termina de gustarme.

Holly says

Wonderful. Anne Sexton is becoming another favorite poet. I posted the opening poem from this collection several years ago: "The Truth the Dead Know."

Madeline says

I'm sort of - skeptical about poetry. Especially confessional poetry, which fairly or unfairly I tend to characterize as self-indulgent and sentimental (I think these two qualities often go hand in hand, although they are not, in and of themselves, necessarily going to make me dislike something: I love *Gone With the Wind*). And poetry is, anyway, a masochistic-self-reflecting art ("I - I - I" - whether or not the I is the poet, it's inescapable).

But, Anne Sexton! Holy shit!

I mean, you read these and the sheer power of feeling (grief and despair, mostly, two admittedly debilitating emotions) behind them knocks you out, but so does the *skill* - the skill and the talent.

Does John Darnielle like Anne Sexton? I feel like he probably does.

Peter says

Sexton makes remarkable use, for just one thing, of rhyme. It frequently adds irony, without detracting from poignancy. It offers wit among the bleakness, as a kind of protest. I agree with other reviewers who feel that the poems packing the most punch here are in the first half of the collection, but I found much of interest throughout.

sydney says

Reading Anne Sexton makes me feel really tragic and introspective and epically connected to all of human history. ...What?

These poems are beautiful and honest and true. My favorites right now are "Lament," "The Starry Night," "I Remember," "The Operation," "The Abortion," "Old," and "The Black Art."

Efemia says

3.5 stars

Definitely want to read more of her poetry!

Mike Jensen says

Don't know why I resisted Sexton all these decades. I gave this book a try because it promised to interact with MACBETH. Some of the poems do, and quite wonderfully, but the real point is that in the first third of this book are some highly autobiographical works about the loss of family. I find these poems very perceptive and moving. The poems later in the book do less for me, but there isn't a single one I don't respect, or, at worst, think is worth reading. This is a keeper, and an open door to reading more Sexton. It is about time I got my Sexton act together.

Julia Conrad says

I wish I had read this in high school. I don't know, I just don't like Anne Sexton as much as I like Sylvia

Plath, although I enjoyed how violent it was. Just seemed like a lot of the work it was doing was drawing attention to its own bravado, and I just kept thinking "Ooooh, it must be really hard to be rich and beautiful!"

But I was in an unsympathetic mood when I read it, because it was while I was reading Elena Ferrante 4 and I had Elena goggles on. But apparently CA Conrad really likes her, which makes me want to try harder.

Dorotea says

Please understand that my rating reflects how much impact the book had on me personally, not the worthiness of the poems (who am I to impose a judgement, such a system would be pointless)

Valerie says

I can't believe that this is her second book. The poems are great. Out of all the audio recordings of Sexton reading, most of them have been from this book.

Steven Godin says

"I hold a five-year diary that my mother kept
for three years, telling all she does not say
of your alcoholic tendency. You overslept,
she writes. My God, father, each Christmas Day
with your blood, will I drink down your glass
of wine? The diary of your hurly-burly years
goes to my shelf to wait for my age to pass.
Only in this hoarded span will love persevere.
Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you,
bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you"

My first full reading of Sexton after picking off a few poems in the past, this was an impressive collection showcasing her innovative skill at weaving words, images and rhythm to gripping effect in its description of sorting through personal effects after the death of a loved one. There is some quirky humour here and there but essentially these are built around melancholy and acceptance. One of the saddest poems, 'The Truth The Dead Know' reveals the poet's feelings as she leaves church after the death of her father. The flowing structure of the poem and the resigned sense of finality is breathtakingly moving. The inherent beauty of life and splendour is joined at the hip with the the seemingly endless cycle of suffering, death and calamity. Her poetry is careful to never appear too cheerful, yet it can never fully condemn the heart's need for gladness.

There seems to be a desperate loathing for hope in her writing, yet the writing itself becomes redemption. Sexton longs to touch the soft and sweet underbelly of existence, but consistently runs her hands over the prickling hairs on the back of the beast. Just as the separation of twins joined by birth cannot undo that certain duality unknown by those born alone. Like Sylvia Plath in some ways, but Anne Sexton seems to carefully choose which way to shift her weight as she sits on the fence, whereas Plath is already on the wrong side, unable to climb back up. My faves were, 'All My Pretty Ones' 'In The Deep Museum' and 'A

Curse Against Elegies', it is a measure of her strength as a poet, you don't just read the lines, you read between them. This work not only depicts sorrow, but the tentative steps towards a light, shining off in the distance. Essential reading for Sexton fans.

Sarah says

The reading of these poems is as much a catharsis as I imagine the writing of them was.

Beginning with the keening of MacDuff:

"All my pretty ones?
Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?
What! all my pretty chickens and their dam
At one fell swoop?...
I cannot but remember such things were,
That were most precious to me."

and continuing on a painful poetic journey of discovery and loss, this collection combines heartbreak and calm in Sexton's signature verse.

A favourite poem:

The Black Art

A woman who writes feels too much,
those trances and portents!
As if cycles and children and islands
weren't enough; as if mourners and gossips
and vegetables were never enough.
She thinks she can warn the stars.
A writer is essentially a spy.
Dear love, I am that girl.

A man who writes knows too much,
such spells and fetiches!
As if erections and congresses and products
weren't enough; as if machines and galleons
and wars were never enough.
With used furniture he makes a tree.
A writer is essentially a crook.
Dear love, you are that man.

Never loving ourselves,
hating even our shoes and our hates,
we love each other, *precious, precious*.
Our hands are light blue and gentle.
Our eyes are full of terrible confessions.

But when we marry,
the children leave in disgust.
There is too much food and no one left over
to eat up all the weird abundance.

victoria says

Music swims back to me.

Take a walk down Mercy Street with Anne Sexton. She'll tell you how she tapped her head like an inverted bowl, that you should name your girl children Daisy. Another obsession, old and familiar.

mwpm says

Father, this year's jinx rides us apart
where you followed our mother to her cold slumber;
a second shock boiling its stone to your heart,
leaving me here to shuffle and disencumber
you from the residence you could not afford:
a gold key, your half of a woolen mill,
twenty suits from Dunne's, and English Ford,
the love and legal verbiage of another will,
boxes of pictures of people I do not know.
I touch their cardboard faces. They must go.

But the eyes, as thick as woo in this album,
hold me. I stop here, where a small boy
waits in a ruffled dress for someone to come . . .
for this soldier who holds his bugle like a toy
or for this velvet lady who cannot smile.
Is this your father's father, this commodore
in a mailman suit? My father, time meanwhile
has made it unimportant who you are looking for.
I'll never know what these faces are all about.
I lock them into their book and throw them out.

This is the yellow scrapbook that you began
the year I was born; as crackling now and wrinkly
as tobacco leaves: clippings where Hoover outran
the Democrats, wiggling his dry finger at me
and Prohibition; news where the *Hindenburg* went
down and recent years where you went flush
on war. This year, solvent but sick, you meant

to marry that pretty widow in a one-month rush.
But before you had that second chance, I cried
on your fat shoulder. Three days later you died.

These are the snapshots of marriage, stopped at places.
Side by side at the rail toward Nassau now;
here, with the winner's cup at the speedboat races,
here, in tails at the Cotillion, you take a bow,
here, by our kennel of dogs with their pink eyes,
running like show-bread pigs in their chain-link pen;
here, at the horseshow where my sister wins a prize;
and here, standing like a duke among groups of men.
Now I fold you down, my drunkard, my navigator,
my first lost keeper, to love or look at later.

I hold a five-year diary that my mother kept
for three years, telling all she does not say
of your alcoholic tendency. You overslept,
she writes. My God, father, each Christmas Day
with your blood, will I drink down your glass
of wine? The diary of your hurly-burly years
goes to my shelf to wait for my age to pass.
Only in this hoarded span will love persevere.
Where you are pretty or not, I outlive you,
bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you.

- **All My Pretty Ones**, pg. 4-5

* * *

By the first of August
the invisible beetles began
to snore and the grass was
as tough as hemp and was
no colour - no more than
the sand was a colour and
we had worn our bare feet
bare since the twentieth
of June and there were times
we forgot to wind up your
alarm clock and some nights
we took our gin warm and neat
from old jelly glasses while
the sun blew out of sight
like a red picture hat and
one day I tied my hair back
with a ribbon and you said
that I looked almost like
a puritan lady and what

I remember best is that
the door to your room was
the door to mine.

- **I Remember**, pg. 11

* * *

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

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

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

- **Ghosts**, pg. 27

* * *

I'm afraid of needles.
I'm tired of rubber sheets and tubes.
I'm tired of faces that I don't know
and now I think that death is starting.
Death starts like a dream,
full of objects and my sister's laughter.
We are young and we are walking
and picking wild blueberries
all the way to Damariscotta.
Oh Susan, she cried,
you've stained your new waist.
Sweet- taste -
my mouth so full

and the sweet blue running out
all the way to Damariscotta.
What are you doing? Leave me alone!
Can't you see I'm dreaming?
In a dream you are never eighty.

- **Old**, pg. 37

* * *

Some women marry houses.
It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
The walls are permanent and pink.
See how she sits on her knees all day,
faithfully washing herself down.
en enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
into their fleshy mothers.
A woman *is* her mother.
That's the main thing.

- **Housewife**, pg. 48

* * *

Come, my beloved,
consider the lilies.
We are of little faith.
We talk too much.
Put your mouthful of words away
and come with me to watch
the lilies open in such a field,
growing there like yachts,
slowly steering their petals
without nurses or clocks.
Let us consider the view:
a house where white clouds
decorate the muddy halls.
Oh, put away your good words
and your bad words. Spit out
your words like stones!
Come here! Come here!
Come eat my pleasant fruits.

- **From the Garden**, pg. 59

* * *

A woman who writes feels too much,
those trances and portents!
As if cycles and children and islands
weren't enough; as if mourners and gossips
and vegetables were never enough.
She thinks she can warm the stars.
A writer is essentially a spy.
Dear love, I am that girl.

A man who writes knows too much,
such spells and fetiches!
As if erections and congresses and products
weren't enough; as if machines and galleons
and wars were never enough.
With used furniture he makes a tree.
A writer is essentially a crook.
Dear, lover, you are that man.

Never loving ourselves,
hating even our shoes and our hats,
we love each other, *precious, precious*.
Our hands are light blue and gentle.
Our eyes are full of terrible confessions.
But when we marry,
the children leave in disgust.
There is too much food and no one left over
to eat up all the weird abundance.

- **The Black Art**, pg. 65
