

**Talking to Myself: An Exploration of Women's Confessional Poetry**

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English.

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April 2023

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this thesis, I use confessional poetry to explore my own identity and the identity of confessional poetry itself. I assess the differences between autobiography and confessional poetry that critics so often muddle. I also explore the space women specifically take up in this genre. While doing this, I will also be showcasing my own work that fits within the genre of women's confessional poetry.

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## **Talking to Myself: An Exploration of Women's Confessional Poetry**

It is said that "... we have art in order not to die of the truth" (Kumin and Sexton xix). Art, at times, offers an escape from the constraints of reality and the ever-evolving and individually defined concept of "truth." However, there are certain types of art that refuse to separate from some of the constraints of reality. Confessional poetry is an art form where parts of "truth" intersect within the writing. While some may argue that confessional poetry is nothing more than a romanticized autobiography, one must question if these authors are using a constructed version of self to comment on the society that creates that identity. Even looking at the definition of confessional poetry, one can see the complex way these authors' personal perspectives shape their art and the perceptions surrounding it. According to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*:

Confession in religious, psychoanalytic, criminal, and legal settings refers to the revelation of a shameful secret, as in a sin, crime, moral failing, social transgression, or neurosis. In a literary context, confessional poetry refers to a group of poets writing during the 1950s and 1960s (Robert Lowell, W. D. Snodgrass, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton), who often employed the first-person\*voice to explore transgressive autobiographical subjects incl. mental illness, familial trauma, gender and sexuality, and moral and political iconoclasm. (Greene et al. 296)

While parts or portions of confessional poetry are, in a sense, autobiography, there are many differences that separate the two. Both require a relationship between the writer and the audience and may manipulate the concept of "truth." Writings of the "self" can sometimes "perpetuate acts of deliberate deceit to test the reader or to hint at the paradoxical 'truth' of experience itself"

(Smith and Watson 15). This is the case with confessional poetry. The definition above provides the word “autobiographical,” which could be a misuse of the term concerning confessional poetry or oversimplifying a very complex artistic endeavor. While many attributes of the “self” are explored within the writing, there are even more parts that are characterized, appropriated, mocked, exaggerated, and destroyed. This exploration can be beyond the understanding of “truth” an audience brings to writing regarded as autobiographical. The audience of confessional poetry must instead fit into the role and “...adjust [our] expectations of the truth told in self-referential writing” (Smith and Watson 16). Confessional poetry is not “...a means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior, lived experience, but rather a ‘technique...for producing truth’” (Gill 432-433). By authors in this genre manipulating both self and truth, the appropriation of both concepts produces a unique art. In confessional poetry, truth is not a concrete, tangible object but a subjective agreement of what both the writer and audience consent to. It provides an experience for both parties to have an “...intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of life” (Smith and Watson 16). Through this distortion of self and truth, confessional poetry, “...raise[s] the never-solved problem of what literature really is, where you draw the line between art and documentary” (Kumin and Sexton xxi). Both author and audience must come to a metaphorical agreement that confessional poetry is not an account of “truth” but a somewhat fictitious and at times dramatized performance of their own life and a way for them to explore the “self.” The way a person experiences life and their self ties directly into the way that society perceives them. Due to the ways that one can satirize and exaggerate their position in society and self using confessional poetry, it became an outlet for many women to express their dissatisfaction with society. Confessional poetry allowed and still allows women to express dissatisfaction with their

place within the patriarchy where their experiences were often discounted. This hyperbolic expression of the female self more clearly allowed those trapped within femininity and those outside of it to loosen the bonds of restrictive gender roles in society overall.

While authors like Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson used their personal perspectives in a way that was less than autobiographical, they were considered prolific and were often praised. Each of these men dramatized or even mythicized their individual experiences to extend the ideas in their writing. Women in confessional poetry like Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, and Anne Sexton have adopted a similar tactic in their writing and were met with backlash. Even though topics of confessional poetry were considered “taboo,” so were the writings of the men listed. Whitman, Thoreau, and Emerson challenged perspectives of god, defied laws, critiqued the government, and discussed masturbation and even sex (not heterosexual) over a hundred years before the confessional movement even began. Perhaps some of the misinterpretation of the confessional genre as autobiography comes from the inability of critics to “...separate lived experience from text” (Gill 428). Nevertheless, readers were able to suspend part of this belief for the male Transcendentalists who used their writings to take literal and metaphorical journeys into their concept of self. The purpose of confessional poetry is not to serve as an extension of the author but instead as an outlet for self-discovery like the transcendentalists. An explication of Sexton’s work finds, “...this literal and metaphorical loss of self is also, and paradoxically, a ‘technique’ for finding oneself” (Gill 433).

Anne Sexton is often thought of as a defining voice in the genre of confessional poetry. While the genre itself was somewhat controversial, women's participation within it was even more of a topic of contention. It is said of Sexton that:

no other American poet in our time has cried aloud publicly so many private details.

While the frankness of these revelations attracted many readers, especially women, who identified strongly with the female aspect of the poems, several poets and critics - for the most part, although not exclusively male, took offense. (Kumin and Sexton xix)

Sexton and the other poets of this genre distort, satirize, fictionalize, brutalize, and even lose themselves within their poetry by using the first-person perspective as a means of discovering their actual selves. By exploring topics that seem confessional in nature, confessional poets use their writing to aid in “the process of introspection” (Gill 434). The “self” is everchanging, almost undefinable, and could not be contained in the fixed form of a poem. Confessional poets are using the cathartic act of writing poetry and the “release” that comes from confession to explore taboo topics and attempt to find the elusive “self” similar to the transcendentalists before them. Confessional poetry permits women the opportunity to find themselves outside of the narrow societal definition of womanhood. While some criticized confessional poetry for the use of first-person, these critiques were even more amplified for women confessional poets. Although authors have distorted the use of first-person and discussed controversial topics before, much of the pushback that fell upon women in confessional poetry was because of the ways they were challenging the patriarchal society and their roles within them.

Like most feminist and literary movements, confessional poetry was a reaction to the society that created the desire for inhabitants to express themselves in this way. Examining the society in which this genre was forged is crucial. Kumin discusses the conditions in which Sexton and other women confessional poets were writing within. She writes:

We must first acknowledge the appearance in the twentieth century of women writing poetry that confronts issues of gender, social role, and female life and lives viewed

subjectively from the female perspective. The earlier worldview of the poet as “the masculine chief of the state in charge of dispensing universal spiritual truths” has eroded since World War II, as have earlier notions about the existence of universal truths themselves. Freed by that cataclysm from their cliched roles as goddesses of hearth and bedroom, women began to write openly out of their own experiences. (Kumin and Sexton xxxiii)

The twentieth century brought many changes to society, which is reflected by the act of women even finding a voice in the genre of confessional poetry. Poetry no longer had to be defined by the overwhelmingly masculine poetic voice. Confessional poetry gives insight into the everyday lives and experiences of women even if the writing is not an exact reflection of the truth. As more women began writing in the early twentieth century, they found places to express their dissatisfaction with their roles in society.

Faced with these kinds of concrete gender roles, female confessional poets ponder on the idea of changing or even appropriating them in their writing. Feminist scholar Judith Butler theorizes the idea of “gender performativity.” Butler argues that gender is not something that naturally occurs but is instead a product of a patriarchal society that must be “produced and maintained” (Butler 6). There are roles men and women are expected to fill in society and certain boundaries that each gender is not expected to challenge. Butler writes, “The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (Butler xv). There are even sorts of “costumes” each gender is expected to wear as they enter the center stage of their daily lives. Many women confessional poets appropriated the roles they were expected to play within society. They use somewhat violent and shocking language in



their writing, not to be a spectacle, but rather to critique the overwhelming spectacle of femininity or even gender as a whole. Elizabeth Bishop often explores the bounds of gender in her own writing. In her poem “Exchanging Hats,” she talks about the accessories that contribute to gender performance. She writes, “Costume and custom are complex. / The headgear of the other sex/ inspires us to experiment” (Bishop 200). She aligns both “costume” and “custom” with one another. Bishop is suggesting the connection that culture has with the ideas of gender and how costume helps individuals fit into the identity that culture has placed upon them. In the poem, both aunts and uncles flirt with their gender performance by trying on different hats not attached to the gender ideals that society has given them. Bishop ends the poem by musing on what aunts and uncles must experience when wearing their unassigned hats. She writes, “unfunny uncle, you who wore a/ hat too big, or one too many, /tell us, can't you, are there any/ stars inside your black fedora?” (Bishop 201). Bishop acknowledges that the uncle may have been wearing the wrong hat the entire time; being forced into the wrong role in society. She wonders what exists under the uncle’s costume by questioning if there are stars underneath it. The uncle may be an entirely different person and have an entirely different life under the masculine black fedora. Bishop continues, “aunt exemplary and slim, / with avernal eyes, we wonder /what slow changes they see under/ their vast, shady, turned-down brim” (Bishop 201). Bishop does not even use feminine pronouns for her aunt while seeing the aunt in a different hat, assigning them no gender at all in this sentence. She wonders if the aunt sees the world with new eyes once wearing the hat of a yachtsman. Both relatives are seen in a new way outside of their traditional “hats” or costumes of gender. Bishop even states, “we share your slight transvestite twist/ in spite of our embarrassment” (Bishop 200). They still have the desire to transcend the bounds of gender. However, societal expectations prevent the speaker from switching hats

themselves, leaving the speaker to wonder what the aunt and uncle know now that they are outside of the societal expectations of gender performance. Women were outliers in society, especially if they expressed wanting to exist outside of the roles that were already determined for them by society.

In society and confessional poetry alike, women have faced an “othering” like the “othering” often faced by women taking up space in general. This has caused the creation of women’s confessional poetry as a subgenre. Poets like Sexton and Plath were often defined as “hysterical” because of the way they used a first-person perspective to discuss taboo subjects. Their works were separated from the genre and often demeaned for not utilizing the same techniques and writing about the same subjects as the male confessional poets. Furthermore, women of this time were held to a different standard. Sexton specifically existed within the era where “...the idea of ‘Occupation: Housewife’ was to be uniquely sanctified and celebrated...” (Pollard 1). Women were expected to tie all identities to this role of housewife. To push back against the expected role of women, female confessional poets explored alternate versions of their “self” to go against the reductive nature of viewing women exclusively in this way. Both Plath and Sexton explore themselves (in the same way as other poets) as both the subject and the object of their works. Their works are no more autobiographical than others in the genre. However, as Pollard argues, the work “...has a lot to say about not just her own inner struggles, but of those of the era in which she lived” (Pollard 2). While confessional poets are both “subject” and “object,” women in this society are objectified to an even greater extent. Donna Haraway explores a similar concept in *Cyborg Manifesto*. She writes, “The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation” (Haraway 5). In a similar way, these poets are creating

imaginary or “cyborg” versions of themselves to explore the position that society has placed them in and express dissatisfaction with their reduction and objectification. Confessional poetry serves as a performance for them to comment on their dissatisfaction with their actual roles in society and in turn, make their “cyborg selves” destroy, dismantle, and redefine themselves outside of the expectations of their world. In women's confessional poetry they are not actually brutalizing themselves but instead destroying the man-made impositions of gender performance. Thus, making this art a political act in defiance of patriarchal society.

Sexton perhaps best creates these “cyborg” versions of herself in her poem entitled “Hurry Up Please It’s Time.” In the first stanza, she discusses the differences between her woman's body and the bodies of men. She writes, “I dream that I can piss in God’s eye / I dream I’m a boy with a zipper. / It’s so practical, la de dah” (Kumin and Sexton 385). Sexton describes changing her body to that of a boy. She is not unsatisfied with her gender; however, she is unsatisfied with the way that society has made feminine bodies an inconvenience. This also shows the power of masculinity that a masculine figure can have. Even if Sexton transforms herself into a younger boy, she can challenge authority in a way she could not in her adult female body. Sexton continues, “I have swallowed an orange, being a woman. / You have swallowed a ruler, being a man. / Yet waiting to die we are the same thing” (Kumin and Sexton 385). This “orange” this version of herself has “swallowed” could represent the fertility that is an all-encompassing role of womanhood. The roundness of the orange emulates the symbol of pregnancy. Connecting this to “being a woman” represents the role of motherhood and the identity of housewives’ women are expected to let overtake their entire identity. While men “swallow” a “ruler,” their identity is outside their reproductive role (even with an item that could symbolize a phallus). The ruler can represent the identity of an actual ruler in a patriarchal

society both as the head of the household or in the larger world outside of the domestic sphere. Or the ruler could represent the empowerment of education, ascribing the identity of poets and thinkers primarily to men. Nevertheless, Sexton acknowledges that both bodies face the inevitability of death. As society places both masculine and feminine bodies into gender roles, they all face the same ending without bias because of their gender.

Sexton continues to create versions of herself throughout the poem. One version of herself is being interrogated as if she is under investigation. The voice she assigns as “Interrogator” asks the voice Sexton calls “Anne” a series of impossible questions that interject in stanzas of the poem. Both characters represent Sexton. She is challenging herself, questioning the truths of the universe by asking herself seemingly impossible questions and upset that she has none of the answers. The Interrogator asks, “What goes up the chimney?” and Anne responds, “Fat Lazarus in his red suit” (Kumin and Sexton 390). She follows this section of interrogation with the line “Forgive us, Father, we know not” (Kumin and Sexton 390). With this interrogation, she is acknowledging her own helplessness in discovering the meaning of death and using this appropriation of herself to display the culture that is all-consuming. Instead of Lazarus being a man raised from the dead by Jesus in the New Testament, Lazarus gets mistaken for Santa. This shows Lazarus as a miracle of capitalism instead of God. The larger American culture is swallowing both the ideas of religion and gender and turning them into something completely distorted. Sexton continues with another appropriation of herself throughout the poem, Ms. Dog. Maxine Kumin writes of this trend in her writing, “she began to speak of herself as Ms. Dog” (Kumin and Sexton xxx). Sexton commits violent actions against this version of herself in this poem. She threatens, “The cup of coffee is growing and growing /and they’re gonna stick your little doll’s head into it /and your lungs are gonna get paid /and your clothes are

gonna melt” (Kumin and Sexton 388-389). Sexton baptizes the lady in the lifeblood of society, coffee. She is drowning in a sea of societal expectations. There is a violent reality in this metaphor. The dominant patriarchy is forcing her to participate and fill her role even to the detriment of herself. This creation of self that is destroyed by society can also serve as an act of resistance.

Adrienne Rich was another widely heard voice in the genre of women’s confessional poetry. She even advocated for this expression of self as a feminist act. This is why much of her work fits in strongly with the canon of confessional poetry. Rich championed this idea of “taking responsibility towards your selves” (Lee and Shaw 29). Rich wanted to emphasize women's abilities and identities beyond the traditional roles their gender confined them to. She writes, “we have been offered ethical models of the self-denying wife and mother” (Lee and Shaw 29). Through expressions of self beyond reality in confessional poetry, women can use the appropriation of or even their ability to see beyond their reality of marriage and familial bonds to reject those roles even while they are within them. Rich continues, “Responsibility to yourself means refusing to let others do your thinking, talking, and naming for you” (Lee and Shaw 29). There is an empowering element that comes along with anyone being allowed to share their voice.

Additionally, the way that confessional poetry offers women the opportunity to dissect their lives adds another degree of empowerment. Using the first-person perspective allows women to take up space in both the poetic and actual world around them. Confessional poetry lets women share their frustrations and experiences that are personal often in a satirical way that is not an exact reflection of themselves. Viewing confessional poetry as an “exploration of the self” rather than a direct reflection of the lives of those who participate within the genre is

especially important to consider when regarding the women who first established their portion of the genre. Within these falsehoods of self, women can explore the various opportunities that their societal position has inhibited them from, express their discontent with the patriarchal prisons they feel trapped behind, and project emotions that would easily make society define them as “hysterical.”

Rich explores the role of motherhood in her poem “To a Poet.” She describes the labor of motherhood and how it overwhelms mothers from even having a voice. She writes, “and I have fears that you will cease to be before your pen has glean’d your teeming brain” (Rankine and Rich 454). Consumed by the expectations of motherhood, some of these women may never express themselves and find their own identity outside of their expected roles of mother and wife. They may even die before they have the chance to express themselves. She continues, “for you are not a suicide/but no-one calls this murder/ Small mouths, needy suck you: This is love” (Rankine and Rich 455). Rich compares the ways mothers give their bodies and lives to their families with murder. Although mothers seem like willing participants, this self-sacrifice is not necessary when raising a family. However, by keeping all the labor of women in the domestic sphere they will have to fall into the role given to them by society and will have no larger contribution to culture overall. She even alludes to a different kind of intersection with motherhood. Rich ends the poem with the powerful lines, “abortion in the bowl” (Rankine and Rich 455). This abrupt image could be considered controversial, or graphic furthers the poem as an act of protest. Claudia Rankine credits Rich with “abandoning the illusionary position of objectivity and finding their way to the use of the first person and gaining access to their emotional as well as political lives on the page” (Rankine and Rich xlii). The image of a woman having an abortion is both emotional and political. As many define womanhood through the

ability and willingness to have a family, Rich is looking at a woman outside of this thin definition that society has allotted for women to fit within. She is picking this controversial act of abortion to see value and empathy for women who do not or even cannot choose the path of motherhood. Writing about topics that directly impact women, especially often debated acts like abortion, normalizes the procedure and brings the personal into the poetic. She is showcasing women who choose to see themselves outside of the role they are expected to follow as an act of protest and empowering all women to find their voice even if they fit within the roles assigned to them by society.

Confessional poetry and autobiography are not synonymous genres. Instead of writing about themselves in an autobiographical way, confessional poets are using constructed versions of self to comment on the society that creates their identity. In this genre, the author and audience must come to a metaphorical agreement that confessional poetry is not an account of “truth” but a somewhat fictitious and at times dramatized performance of the poet's own life and a way for them to explore the “self.” Confessional poetry has proved to be a genre that has use outside of the world of poets. While some may struggle to separate the genre from autobiography, the writers who have shaped it have changed the world with their use of the first-person perspective. The influence of women in confessional poetry is invaluable. Women have left a mark on the genre of confessional poetry and use this form of expression to challenge gender roles, express the ways they have been ostracized by society, and protest.

## Poems

### I



## Appropriated Excrement

I stuff the poems  
Of others  
Down my throat  
In hopes  
That I will digest  
Their alphabet soup  
And shit out genius.  
All that exits  
Is appropriated excrement.

I am not  
A slot machine  
(A loose slot  
At that).  
I will not be  
A Sexton.  
Or a Plath.  
Or a Rich.  
Or a Bishop.

I can barely  
Be myself.  
I do not correct  
Those who choke  
On my tiny  
Two-syllable  
Name.  
I blame  
My mother.  
I blame phonetics.  
I blame Hinduism.

I was born  
The wrong color  
For power.  
The only  
Death and destruction  
I bring about  
Is my own.  
I wear my heads  
On my belt.  
I birth  
New selves  
For sacrifice.

### Rhizome

Watching the angels  
With their golden glory  
Tumble step by step by step by step  
All the way down to my mother's home  
(It can't get worse than here).

The taste of you in my mouth still.  
Water couldn't wash you out  
(My grandma would've said "warsh").  
Not being sprayed with a water hose in the backyard.  
Nor could the dry cleaner handle you.

The bones of barren poems litter  
My brain and my notes and the corners of my books.  
I hold the bones in my hands and examine their hideousness like a villain  
(I do not dare engage with the vomit-colored failures).

I've abandoned the half-hated beings.  
The ugly inside manifests on the outside.  
A crooked tooth.  
Premature wrinkles.  
Dirt jammed into the pores.

The legs of a tarantula are no longer sexy.  
Do angels have a bush?  
Or are they just fat babies and eyeballs with wings?  
(Scrape you off like plaque)

You're too sweet anyway and I don't deserve the cavities.  
The cheap perfume only receives the compliments  
(Everyone loves the smell of a pink whore).  
So cheap that I probably absorb the lead that child laborers place into the package.  
The filthy fucking commies  
(And yet, capitalism kills me every day).

Money wars and money homes and money families and money church and money sex and  
money men and money lesbians and money warts and money friends and money coworkers and  
money time and money mouths and money class and money poems and money mothers and  
money disease and money mountains and money eyeballs and money milk and money calluses  
and money menstruation and money god.

Anne Sexton would've hated you.

### **Fishbowl**

I'm all out of thoughts.  
Any good ones have been taken out with my week-old leftovers and crumpled bills I should've  
paid sooner and some used tampons and forgotten fruit.

Utterly blank and unimpressive.  
The poems can't help but inherit it from me.  
I cannot strain the words into something new.  
Letter by letter.

The Muse vacates from me if she ever was here to begin with  
(But women never like me back anyway).  
My skull is a fishbowl.  
I am nothing more than a mannequin for a mediocre head of hair  
(Even that is fucking falling out).

I say "fuck" in every poem and recycle lines.  
Repetition is all I have.  
I'm all out of thoughts.  
Enjoy this poem.  
I'm sure you've read it a hundred times.

## II

**70 degrees (the Sun makes me question if i should still be diagnosed with clinical depression)**

“The sun is a god and we should fall on our knees and worship.” D.H. Lawrence

i want to do a line of the goddamn Sun  
  (it's more addictive than prescriptions)  
i want to stuff all of its golden goodness inside of me  
  (until the only thing I can be is light)  
i want to move into its shimmering beams  
  (like a rich man having his vacation home)  
i want its warmth to feed me forever  
  (learn to photosynthesize myself)  
i will crumble to ashes  
  (like the tip of a Marlboro)  
when Winter inevitably comes  
  (men make their own artificial gods)  
a celestial being cannot be replaced with a lightbulb.

## Dead Slugs On the Sidewalk After a Godawful Rain

Tears stream  
Down my face  
Leaving sticky  
Slug trails.  
I am mucus.  
I have no bones.  
I would give them  
All away  
If I did have them  
To become  
A creature  
Destroyed by salt  
And cry myself  
To death.

Eat me like Escargot.  
Swallow me  
Down as do  
The rich.  
Hold your nose  
And then you, too,  
Can seem refined.

Maybe god  
Loves the creatures  
That resemble snot.  
Maybe his  
Sovereign shoes  
Will spare me.

## Lavarse

How long do you spend in the shower?  
My thirty minutes melted an entire ice cap.  
Ruining the world with the turn of a knob.  
The poor penguins  
(it's all your fault).

The poor polar bears  
(it's all your fault).

To melt. Melt. Melts. Melted. Melting.  
The world is nothing more than ice cream.  
Temporary and fleeting existence.

This is as close as I will get to heaven  
(it's all your fault).

Boiling like a potato, making my skin slip off.  
What if you always walked around with your organs exposed?  
Would you know where to find your digestive tract?  
Would you be able to see the processed cheese and the Halloween candy and meat (that's not beyond) and applesauce?  
Would you be able to find your uterus?  
The one that cannot house a Diva cup and can't afford organic tampons.  
The one that cannot ethically reproduce due to the impending doom.  
Would you see your heart?  
You're inciting a Revelation of carbon monoxide.

How can you spend your time shaving, slaving, studying, searching, salivating, shitting, singing, slapping, sucking, shucking, smoking, spotlighting, stabbing, sheltering, surviving, and sinning when the world is ending?  
Become a biodegradable bitch who has organic orgasms and relishes in recycling.  
The climate is changing  
(it's all your fault).

The rainforest can blame you for its demise.  
The ozone has more holes than a teenager's jeans.  
The plastic population outnumbers the plants.  
It's all your fault.  
They're going extinct because of you.  
You.

The one who works two jobs and drives a Volkswagen the size of a Hot Wheels car and cooks twice a week and mostly walks to school and has never lived in a place with a recycling 23 slot and she gets her insurance from a coal company, and she regularly consumes dairy products and doesn't always use a metal straw and damnably takes 30-minute showers.  
She alone is ruining the world  
(It's all your fault).

### **Shells**

*The snail in his museum  
Wears his mother all day.<sup>1</sup>*

A matronly muppet.  
A child caricature.  
A daddy disguise.  
A shell that one sheds  
That gets passed down  
To the next righteous relative  
Erase the exterior  
To be eradicated  
From grandfather's will.  
And the family cell plan.  
And the half-decent insurance policy.  
Carry their voices  
On your back.  
You also inherit  
Their scoliosis  
And predisposition  
For ovarian cancer(s).  
Crush the eggs  
By the thousands.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Sexton, "Snail"



## I Have Crabs

“I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas”-T.S. Elliot

I wish I were a lobster  
So, I could mate for life.  
And be smothered with butter  
And shoved into the mouth  
Of a couple celebrating  
Their 20th anniversary.  
And my tail and limbs  
Would be dissected  
To free my precious parts.  
And my worth would be  
Measured by the pound.  
And my claws would crack  
Until they were cracked themselves.  
And I would be plated and presented  
To those whose wallets were worthy.

Instead, I am a hermit crab.  
Living life in steady isolation.  
Harboring the soft and ugly parts  
Deep within a decorative covering.  
I am peddled to tourists  
And sold to 12-year-olds.  
And they will feed me pellets.  
And tap the plastic prison walls.  
And poke and prod  
Until my ten legs  
Are no longer a spectacle.  
They will mostly remember me  
By the smell  
Of my neglected habitat.

### III

## The Immortal Twenty

I think now  
We were  
Always twenty.  
Mummified by our  
Disgusting and vain youth.  
Stuck in an amber prison.  
Frozen until freezer burnt.  
Kept alive with retinol.  
The faces we were born with  
Shall be the ones in the casket.  
Embalmed at our peak.  
*I think now*  
*We were*  
*Never twenty.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Levine, "You Can Have It"

## Alex

Lie next to me  
And kiss me for a while.  
I'll pretend I love you.  
And you pretend I'm her.

We'll talk about our dreams.  
"That's phallic and that's phallic, too"  
Everything has been phallic from the beginning.  
Fucking Freud and his mommy infatuation.  
Oval-headed Oedipus and his complex.  
Guided only by their thoughts from the wrong head.  
You don't even understand the definition of psychoanalysis.  
And I envy you and the space in your brain.  
More room for happiness that Jung needn't occupy.

"What's your name again?"  
It better not be fucking Alex.  
I'll never trust an Alex.  
I write off the species as a whole.  
I'd rather not play the name game.  
*What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet*<sup>3</sup>.  
Except for fucking Alex.  
Alex is the exception.

Anne Sexton would've hated him, too.

---

<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

## Excess

A half-eaten bagel stares  
Vaguely back at me.  
A clementine  
Is only 35 calories.  
Surviving off  
Sugar water  
Like an insect.

“Why do all the pretty girls  
Always have boyfriends?”

(I think you just answered  
Your own question).

That’s why I haven’t  
Had a boyfriend since 120 lbs.  
Are organs supposed to  
Be this heavy?  
Maybe if I gave away my brain.  
It’s mostly for decor.

I can’t ever bear  
To actually use my fingers

(What a fucking pussy).

I step backwards.  
They still send me  
Home with paperwork  
That tells my fleshy secret.  
I cook and yet  
I cannot swallow anything

(Spitters are quitters, they say).

And when I eat  
I swallow before I can taste.  
I eat like a hound.  
I am voracious.  
I am cavernous.  
I am the unfillable hole

(Pun intended).

*Eaten or rotten.  
I am all mouth.<sup>4</sup>*

I don’t eat enough  
To keep a cat alive.  
My eyes are bigger

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<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Plath, “Who”

Than my stomach.  
Or is my stomach  
Where my eyes live?  
Julia Child herself  
Has trapped me  
In a Dutch oven  
To do her French cooking

(I always knew the French were cannibals).

I am tired of  
My Appalachian fat.  
My butter body.  
The genes that survived  
A potato famine.  
I want to take scissors  
And trim off the excess

(Most of me is excess).

Maybe while I'm dicing  
My yellow fat  
Some of the ugliness inside  
Will leak out  
With the rest  
Of my fluids.  
Maybe I should  
Peel my skin back  
Like the clementine.  
Everything tastes  
Like piss anyway.

## Self-Help

Sometimes I wish  
We still solved  
Women's mental health issues  
With vibrators  
And lobotomies  
And electroshock therapy.  
But instead  
I have Wellbutrin  
And Lexapro  
And white ladies  
Teaching mindfulness  
On YouTube  
And three hundred dollar  
Therapy sessions  
And this overwhelming feeling  
Of manufactured emptiness.  
While all of my family,  
Holds their breath  
Feeling as if I am on  
The precipice  
Of self-destruction.  
Maybe I should  
Try ketamine.

## Appalachian Holiday

Drowning in a cornucopia of butter and isolation.

Google said the population was 151.

Crush up cornflakes, crackers, and breadcrumbs to sprinkle on your wounds.

The only person you speak to from high school has already traded you out for new private school friends.

But they're all in hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of debt for theater degrees

(Oh, shut the fuck up. You're an English major. And a mediocre one at best).

But there are other people from your high school,

Ones with children that you see committing acts of domestic terrorism in your local grocery store.

Ones, now married, who still message you on Facebook during the ungodly hours of the evening.

Ones who have fake tits and still claim that "gay marriage is unnatural."

Ones who have literally married their distant cousins.

Ones who have joined cults and pyramid schemes.

Ones who have real adult jobs and live in double-wides and never desire to make it past Myrtle Beach.

But you can't help it.

Just play college kid forever.

See if degrees make you more likable

(They won't. You're a cunt. You'll die alone in a nursing home. While all these people you feel superior to will die peacefully. Surrounded by people who love them. Blood babies bound to their names).

Cry on every holiday.

Every New Year, Valentine's, St. Patrick's, Easter, Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

And especially on your birthday (Your mother doesn't even really want to celebrate).

Continuously drowning in a cornucopia of butter and isolation.



## Play Pretend

Here I am  
Washing your hair  
Down the drain  
Pretending I can  
Remove the remnants  
Of you.

Pretending that  
My being  
Isn't conjoined  
With yours  
Like Siamese twins.

Pretending that  
It wouldn't take  
A team of  
Surgeons with  
Their antiseptic  
Appendages to  
Pry me from you.

Pretending that  
You aren't amphetamine.

Pretending that I  
Wouldn't let you  
Wear my skin  
As an overcoat  
If you gave  
A slight shiver.

Pretending I am  
Not your pathetic  
Dog waiting at the door  
At the mere mention  
Of you dropping by.

Pretending it wouldn't  
Take bleaching  
My brain to  
Forget the one time  
You called me "pretty."

Pretending that I don't  
Make mosaics

And shrines to  
You in my mind.

Pretending I wouldn't  
Eat your dead skin  
Just for my mouth  
To touch a part of you.

I play pretend.  
I am the housewife  
(That I never  
Intended to be).

I dote upon you  
As if you're  
My only child.  
I clean up  
After the mess  
You make of me.

And you pretend  
That you don't  
Notice how  
I lick the ground  
Beneath your feet.

You pretend  
You don't  
Know that you're  
*The God I continue*  
*My awful rowing towards.*<sup>5</sup>

And I pretend that  
You want the rat  
Inside of me.  
*The gnawing*  
*Pestilential rat.*<sup>6</sup>

I pretend that  
One day you  
Will embrace my  
Rat body  
With your

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<sup>5</sup> Anne Sexton, "Rowing"

<sup>6</sup> Anne Sexton, "Rowing"

Two hands  
And ingest  
Me whole.

I pretend  
The rowing  
Will not be  
Incessant and ceaseless.

## Hooks

I wish I could have your chubby-cheeked babies.  
Have them ripped and removed from inside me in a gorgeous way.  
But motherhood bites back.  
And I can't handle rabies or babies.

It's foaming mouth.  
It's jagged teeth.  
It's hungry cries.  
They leave me scared, stretched, and saggy.

I am afraid my soul can't be husband-stitched back together.  
I cannot sacrifice myself to the beast.

*My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;  
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.<sup>7</sup>*

My body is the bait.  
Domestically trapped and tamed into a part I cannot play.  
I was born for this.

My great-grandmother and 12 children and her early death and my grandmother and her husband who beat stillbirths and miscarriages out of her and my mother and her suffocating grin and her forcing the plastic doll in my hands.

And my great-grandfather and his 12 farmhands and my grandfather and his hateful hands and my father and his desire to have enough grandchildren to form a baseball team.

I pray to pay my sacrament monthly with blood.

---

<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Plath, "Tulips"

## Skinny As a Rail

Just like babies,  
Love is disturbing  
If it lacks  
The fat rolls  
That are so mountainous  
They must be  
Separated when washed.

When will I find  
My sumo wrestler?  
Where is love  
So wide  
It can't get through  
The front door? Where are  
The heavyweights?  
Where are the lovers  
In line for Lipo?  
Where is the  
12,000-calorie care?  
Why isn't it supersized  
With a milkshake  
And extra sauce  
In the bag?  
Where has  
The world  
Of plenty gone?

*Sugared sonnets*<sup>8</sup>  
Should dance  
From every tongue.  
Love should be  
Soft and padded.  
*Thin love*  
*Ain't love*  
*At all.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Francis Mere, *Palladis Tamia: Wit's Treasury*

<sup>9</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

**Le Petit Dieu**

*No matter whose bed you die in  
The bed will be yours  
For your voyage  
Onto the surgical andiron  
Of God.<sup>10</sup>*

And yet I try to die in a  
Thousand beds.  
By crucifixion.  
By suffocation.  
By stabbing.  
By hanging.  
By electrocution.  
And none wear my skin  
Like a prize pelt.

I only seem capable  
Of killing myself  
Over and over again.  
God himself  
Cannot smite me.  
No bed  
But my own  
Will accompany me  
On the antiseptic journey.

---

<sup>10</sup> Anne Sexton, "The Saints Come Marching In"

*“Maybe I’ll give birth to a pill”*  
“Maybe I’ll give birth to a pill”<sup>11</sup>

No epidural.  
And then I’d feel something.  
All I feel now is catatonic.

I am wallowing in Wellbutrin.  
I am now defined by an apathetic numbness.  
Is that better than being a sarcophagus?

I am the American Dream.  
Wearing prescription-colored glasses.  
My diamonds are round and orange.  
And I swallow them twice a day.

---

<sup>11</sup> Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*

## Baby Doll

I am a Russian doll.  
I never have more  
Than one tiny shoe  
. My mouth is painted on;  
Not meant for use.  
My eyes are heavy  
And close on  
Their own accord.  
I am not Barbie  
Or baby.  
But something gross  
And in-between.  
Not the tan  
Long leggedness.  
I carry no beauty  
At all but  
Plenty of sex appeal.  
And yet,  
There is no  
Baby here.  
Although my cries  
Sound the same.

The ugly puppets  
Fight in my chest  
For just a bit of space.  
Some extra  
Breathing room.



**Enola Gay, Homemaker**

*I see your cute décor*

*Close on you like the fist of a baby*<sup>12</sup>.

You get spider web tangled in every crocheted  
Grandma blanket you buy from Goodwill  
Because you are too lazy to learn by yourself.  
You drink from vintage glasses lined with lead,  
And you lick the gorgeous, green uranium plates.  
You huff bleach while scrubbing  
Every square inch of bathroom linoleum.

You must remember  
To not make mustard gas.  
You must remember  
To not slip  
And crack your skull  
On the clean tiles.  
You must remember  
To clean out the lint trap  
And not start a housefire.  
The stove puts out a warrant for your head.

---

<sup>12</sup> Sylvia Plath, "Lesbos"

### **Makeover**

Lick my whole body with your cat's tongue.  
Continue exfoliating my skin until I'm raw.  
Scrub off the dead and dry particles.  
Use the bones as a canvas to stretch new skin over.  
Hollow out my head and use it for a birdhouse.

Make sure there are no parts of me that remain  
Except for muscles and organs.  
Make sure I own no part of what's new.  
Make sure I can't ruin its purity.  
Make sure it's a temple that I cannot desecrate.

Take the old yellow fat and liquefy it.  
Use it for anointing the heavenly body.  
Write the new name in a book and make sure nobody knows.  
There is a genesis all the way to the toenails.

## Reflection

I have been interested in poetry for most of my life, even more so as I entered college and began studying the works of other great poets. Having the opportunity to further explore my own poetic voice through a thesis has provided an opportunity to dissect my writing and forward my interest in creative writing. However, writing a creative thesis has proved to be the most challenging and rewarding things I have had the privilege of attempting in my academic career. The past year I have tried to pinpoint exactly what I wanted to say in my writing and find a theoretical lens to view it through. One of the more challenging parts has been trying to refine my creative process in order to make a somewhat cohesive collection of poems. Writer's block has been a very apparent hurdle in my writing process, proven by the poems wondering why I cannot write poems. Although there have been many challenges, there has also been some success in refining my writing and learning alternative ways to create. This project is a culmination of various learning experiences I have had at Radford University. For my creative thesis, I have spent countless hours trying to define confessional poetry, pouring over the words of other confessional poets, and trying to find my own voice among the other influential women in my genre.

An inspirational component in my writing was the writing of other confessional poets. I had felt drawn to the various works of Sylvia Plath long before I even knew exactly what confessional poetry was. Much like the way Plath wrote, I often found it hard to remove myself from writing. No matter what topic I explored with my words, I always collided with myself. I often emulated or was accused of emulating her style. After a prolonged interest in Plath, I finally found a name for her genre: confessional poetry. This genre was attractive to me for many 44 reasons. I love the way that confessional poets discuss the more "private" elements in their

lives. They seem to have no boundaries with their subjects. Confessional poetry can borderline be grotesque. This style of poetry shows the extremities an author can push the image of self through duplication, appropriation, or mutilation of self. As someone who has struggled to find a solid sense of self, creating various versions of my own writing has allowed for immense expression, exploration, and partial discovery of some facets of who I am.

While I have been a fan of Sylvia Plath for a while, it was only at the start of graduate school that I discovered Anne Sexton. Sexton is often coined as the “mother” of confessional poetry, so I am unsure of why it took me so long to investigate her writing. I purchased *The Awful Rowing Towards God* on the recommendation of a friend (thanks, Corey). I enjoyed the book so much, I decided to dedicate an entire research project to Sexton in my English 600: Introduction to Scholarship course with Dr. Kellogg. Sexton has been the poet that has been most inspiring to me throughout grad school. I purchased *The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton*, and it was the best thing for the writer’s block that I experienced a bit later in the process of writing poems for my thesis. I began pouring over her words and deeply connecting to her images and emotions. The way she questions religion and creates absurd images is something that I wanted to replicate in my own way. Drawing on the work of others is something I do regularly in my writing. I often also dabble with found poetry so in several poems it is easy to cite my direct influence by looking in the footnotes.

I was also inspired by authors outside of the confessional poetry genre. Found poetry is the genre I have dabbled in the longest. I completed a project for my undergraduate thesis using some of my found poems with Dr. Keck. Using the lines of others was another factor in breaking out of my writer's block, especially looking outside of poetry. I found a lot of success with my 645 playwriting class with Dr. Beach. Not only was I able to write a brief play, but I also found

other muses for my poems. My poem "*Maybe I'll give birth to a pill*" was directly inspired by a recommendation from his course. Tony Kushner is one of the more influential playwrights in the twenty-first century. He explores and creates his own interpretation of religion that mirrors Sexton's approach. His works are profound and boundary-pushing that fit in with some of the images I wanted to invoke in my writing. In a similar way, I was also inspired by women writers in general while focusing on women writers in confessional poetry. In Dr. Ren's course based on women's literature, I was able to see the way women in other genres challenged the dominant hegemonies that suppressed them and the ways they expressed their voices despite their challenges. Toni Morrison is another author whose influence on literature is far-reaching. Having the opportunity to read through her complex writing and discuss it on a graduate level aided in my understanding of the opposition Morrison's characters faced and the journeys they went on to discover themselves. Dissecting different types of misogyny and seeing how it impacted women of all identities helped me draw that out of the works of women's confessional poets. This course also gave me the opportunity to familiarize myself with feminist theorists, which was a crucial element in writing my critical chapter. The works of others were not the only place where I discovered fuel for my fire.

In the depths of my writer's block, I had a lot of anxiety about writing (or the lack of it). I was worried that I would not have enough poems to make a decent-sized creative chapter, which is arguably the most important part of a creative thesis. During this writer's block, I did write. However, there was very little of that writing that contributed to this project overall, which further spurred my anxious spiral. During periods of stress or anxiety, I often have dreams 46 reflecting my state of inner turmoil. During one of these dreams, I was writing poetry and a few lines of the dream poem somehow stayed with me. I rolled over and wrote them down only to

doze back off. I woke up the next day and discovered the most absurd lines that I was somehow able to form a poem around. The opening lines from “Makeover” are from my dream. This poem is one of the ones I am most proud of and where I decided to end the creative chapter of my thesis.

This project has proved to be a very rewarding challenge. My writing has taken me on a journey in an attempt to discover my ever-changing self and my own place among confessional poets. While I still attempt to find myself through my writing, I feel assured that I have an outlet where I can replicate, mutilate, and appropriate different versions of myself until I figure myself out. My inspirations are directly from my own experiences and perspectives. I have been able to apply the knowledge I have learned at Radford University which makes up a large contribution to my creative thesis. My time here has been integral to my work as a poet and a key factor in who I am. There are a wide variety of sources I have drawn inspiration from ranging from obvious to bizarre; hopefully, all these sources come together to add both scholarly and creative contributions to my field.

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