Anne Sexton: 1928—1974
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In 1966, in a letter to Elizabeth Bishop about a week after Randall Jarrell’s death, Robert Lowell wrote, “There’s a small chance that Jarrell’s death was an accident...[but] I think it was suicide, and so does everyone else, who knew him well.” Jarrell’s death (at fifty-five) occurred the same year as Delmore Schwartz’s death (at fifty-two), and three years after Theodore Roethke’s death in 1963, which was the year Plath killed herself. Berryman killed herself in 1972, Lowell died in 1977, and in 1974, when Anne Sexton killed herself, I was a student of Adrienne Rich at City College in New York. 1974 was a tumultuous year for Rich and for her students. In 1975 she had published her pioneering work Diving into the Wreck. Around this time, as well, she had come out as a lesbian feminist.

In fact, the year of Sexton’s death, Adrienne had tried to have her graduate workshop so that she would teach only the women in it. Under pressure from the university, she relented and the graduate workshop proceeded with both men and women present. However, she started to hold, in my apartment, not far from the secondary to the “real” revolution made by men, that “our worst enemies are the women present. However, she started to hold, in my apartment, not far from the university, she relented and the graduate workshop proceeded with both men and women present. However, she started to hold, in my apartment, not far from

A n n e S e x t o n w a s a p o e t a n d a s u c c i d e . S h e w a s n o t i n any narrow or politically “correct” sense a feminist, but she did some things far ahead of the rebirth of the feminist movement. She wrote poems alluding to abortion, masturbation, menopause, and the painful love of a powerless mother for her daughter, long before such themes became validated by a collective consciousness of women, and while writing and publishing under the scrutiny of the male literary establishment. In 1961 I organized a read-in against the Vietnam war, at Harvard, and asked her to read. Famous male poets and novelists were there, reading their dia-
tributes against [Richard] McNamara, their napalm poems, their ego-poetry. Anne read—in a very quiet, vulnerable voice—“Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman”—setting the firsthand image of a mother’s affirmation of her daughter against the second-hand images of death and violence hurled that evening from men who had never seen a bombed village. That poem is dated 1964, and it is a feminist poem. Her head was often patriarchal, but in her blood and her bones, Anne Sexton knew.

Many women writers, learning of her death, have been trying to reconcile their feelings about her, her poetry, her suicide at forty-five, with the lives we are trying to stay alive in. We want no more suicidal women poets, no more suicidal women, no more self-destructiveness as the sole form of violence permitted to women.

I would like to list, in Anne’s honor and memory, some of the ways in which we destroy ourselves. Self-trivialization is one. Believing the lie that women are not capable of major creations. Not taking ourselves or our work seriously enough; always finding the needs of others more demanding than our own. Being content to produce intellectual or artistic work in which we imitate men, in which we lie to ourselves and each other, in which we do not press to our fullest possibilities, to which we fail to give the attention and hard work we would give to a child or a lover. Horizontal hostility—contempt for women—is another: the fear and mistrust of other women, because other women are ourselves. The conviction that “women are never really going to do anything,” that “a woman’s revolution is second-

A D R I E N N E R I C H (1929–2012) was one of America’s foremost poets. In her lifetime, she published over thirty volumes of poetry and criticism and received numerous awards, including the inaugural Ruth Lily Poetry Prize, the Frost Medal, and the Wallace Stevens Award.