

# Her kind: Anne Sexton, the Cold War and the idea of the housewife

## Introduction

I have been MONSTROUSLY busy cooking, washing ... cleaning, giving parties that don't happen etc, etc. Doing all my little wifely duties [...] My heart's desire is an electric "mix-master" (with the orange juice squeezer on top) [...] My cooking has taken a slight turn for the better. This morning we had coffee cake with our breakfast [...] Tonight I made pineapple muffins – they are muffins with little bits of chopped up pineapple in them and they were also very edible. I get two gold stars for today.<sup>1</sup>

So writes Anne Sexton to her mother in 1948, soon after her marriage. The 1950s, an era when the idea of 'Occupation: Housewife' was to be uniquely sanctified and celebrated, were just about to begin, and Sexton appears to assume her role with enthusiasm – but it is, explicitly, just a role. This letter, composed twelve years before the publication of her first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, already hints at themes which Sexton's poetry will obsessively reiterate – the 'MONSTROUSLY' suggesting her excess, that 'weird abundance'<sup>2</sup> that in the future will prevent being a housewife from being *enough*; her tongue-in-cheek, self-mocking 'I get two gold stars for today', telling us that this is a game she is playing, a discourse with rules, that she doesn't accept unquestioningly. Referring to the general sense of dissatisfaction many women felt in this era, Betty Friedan writes in *The Feminine Mystique*: 'In 1960, the problem that had no name burst like a boil through the image of the American Housewife'<sup>3</sup> – and Sexton's book could be seen as this 'boil'. It argued that the suburban house with the all-electric kitchen offered no shelter from the darker side of human experience. Whilst Sexton celebrated the domestic, and the woman's role within that, she would also use her incarnation as a beautiful, muffin-making, mother-of-two to reveal the nightmare at the core of the family – and in a period when Nixon and Krushchev's 'kitchen debate' was positioning the middle-class home as the key to the superiority of the American way of life, this was a subversive and dangerous gesture. Sexton

turns the carefully constructed propaganda of the American Housewife against itself.

'Confessional' poetry has been out of critical favour recently, and as the poet most closely associated with the 'movement', Sexton's reputation has suffered. Typical attacks assert that her poetry 'suggests no more than a non-stop diary reading'.<sup>4</sup> However, taking James Merrill's claim for confessionalism – that 'to *sound* personal is the point'<sup>5</sup> – I would argue that Sexton is often punished by critics for her success at this task. Her poems actually frequently engage with a breadth of subjects, and take on a number of dramatic personae, but such is her ability to pull the reader into an entire and intimate world – to *sound* personal – that it is easy to assume everything is sourced from biography. The work of Sexton's contemporary, Sylvia Plath – with whom she attended Lowell's writing seminar at Boston University – met with similar accusations during her career, and she commented:

The issues of our time which preoccupy me at the moment are the incalculable genetic effects of fallout and a documentary article on the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America – 'Juggernaut, the Warfare State', by Fred Cook in a recent *Nation*. Does this influence the kind of poetry I write? Yes, but in a sidelong fashion.<sup>6</sup>

I will argue that in a 'sidelong fashion' Sexton has a lot to say about not just her own inner struggles, but those of the era in which she lived. As she observed: 'We're all writing the poem of our time'.<sup>7</sup>

Although the area I am investigating is, of course, gendered, simplistic feminist readings of Sexton's work abound and I feel that these are inappropriate. When *The Feminine Mystique* came out Sexton was already in her mid-thirties, and in many ways the new wave of feminism this ushered in remained alien to her – as she said in 1965 to Patricia Marx: 'Maybe modern woman is more conscious now, more thinking. I can't tell . . . I can't be a modern woman. I'm a Victorian teenager – at heart'.<sup>8</sup> Her need to be accepted by society is visible in her letters, which as late as 1965 are at pains to stress that she is 'a normal American housewife';<sup>9</sup> in her modelling career; in the manicured nails and careful, glamorous costumes she wore to readings. In a 1959 letter to Snodgrass she explained: 'I want everyone to hold up large signs saying YOU'RE A GOOD GIRL'.<sup>10</sup> It is also, however – as I hope I will show – wildly inappropriate to posit Sexton as a simple victim of patriarchy. Whilst she never fully escaped from pressures to conform, and she often had to battle against them in order to produce poems – jokingly writing in a 1959 letter: 'Dear Mr Guggy – I need money

because I must pay someone to be a loving substitute while I write, an apron with arms would do' – she also revelled in her persona as 'housewife-poet', spending the longed-for Guggenheim grant, when it eventually came, on that suburban status symbol, the swimming pool.

### The role(s) of the housewife

Sandra Gilbert has written much about the way in which Sexton and her female contemporaries were concerned with self-definition, observing that they write poetry characterised by 'recurrent self-defining statements' and citing the many examples from Plath's work ('I am your opus,/ I am your valuable', 'I am a nun now', 'I am dark-suited and still, a member of the party').<sup>11</sup> Sexton's work, for those anticipating unmediated confession, is surprisingly full of costumes – she is a farmer's wife, a girl at an abortion clinic, an old woman, Jesus buried alive. Whilst trying on these many personae could indeed be linked to the struggle for a female identity, as Gilbert suggests, I feel that Sexton is also engaged in parodying and subverting the cultural expectations of her time, and particularly those of advertising.

Adverts and magazines of the 1950s commonly used the rhetorical tactic of viewing American Woman as the sum of her various activities. Friedan perceives 'The prototype of the innumerable paeans to "Occupation: Housewife"' as the scolding given by Dorothy Thompson in a 1949 *Ladies' Home Journal* to an unfulfilled housewife, who is asked why she doesn't realise she is an expert in dozens of careers: 'You might write: business manager, cook, nurse, chauffeur, dressmaker, interior decorator, accountant, caterer, teacher ...'<sup>12</sup> Similarly, an advert for Bell Telephone in *Look*, 1957, showed a single woman cast smiling in several roles with the caption 'This is Your Wife' and the text:

This is the pretty girl you married.  
She's the family chef. And the nurse. And the chauffeur and maid.  
And when she's dressed up for an evening out – doesn't she look just wonderful!  
How does she do it?  
Of course she's smart and it keeps her busy, but she never could manage it without the telephone ...<sup>13</sup>

This rhetorical device, of displaying the different aspects of women's lives as a sequence of clearly defined and separate 'roles', is continually used by Sexton – in 'Sylvia's Death', for example, when she declares: 'O tiny mother,

you too! / O funny duchess! / O blonde thing!' (CP 128). Or in 'Christmas Eve', which begins:

O sharp diamond, my mother!  
I could not count the cost  
of all your faces, your moods –  
that present that I lost.  
Sweet girl, my death bed,  
my jewel-fingered lady.

(CP 139)

In both these examples, the division into roles highlights the absence of a true self – the 'present' of actual presence is lost. Both women are figured as a sequence of attractive roles – duchess, blonde, femme fatale – but the dazzle of all these 'faces' is an illusion to detract from lack. In other work, Sexton uses the 'Division of Parts' enacted upon housewives to introduce other, more dangerous selves and 'roles' into the model of woman. In 'The Black Art', the plurality praised by *Ladies' Home Journal* takes on a life of its own, becoming a disturbing excess, the speaker overwhelmed by a continual desire for *more* lives: 'As if cycles and children and islands/ weren't enough; as if mourners and gossips/ and vegetables were never enough' (CP 88).

In her famous signature poem 'Her Kind', Sexton puts on three costumes in three verses – witch, housewife and adulteress – mirroring and mocking 'This is Your Wife' rhetoric with the line 'I have been her kind'. However, what is perhaps most notable within the poem is the way the roles blur into each other and the subscribed boundaries are transgressed. 'I have gone out ...' it begins, articulating the threat of the woman who steps out of her accepted sphere – as Sexton is doing as a poet – taking with her the secrets of the household. In the second verse, the housewife consumes, cooks and rearranges – a good suburban mother – but a trace of the witch remains, tainting the scene:

I have found the warm caves in the woods,  
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,  
closets, silks, innumerable goods;  
fixed the suppers for the worms and elves:  
whining, rearranging the disaligned.  
A woman like that is misunderstood.  
I have been her kind.

(CP 15–16)

Her children become 'worms and elves' evoking corruption, mischief and malevolence. In the final verse, the adulteress is 'misunderstood' like the housewife, and burnt like a witch – all three roles infect the others

surrounding them. The poem embodies that fear of woman as indefinable which popular culture's technique of suturing them into the helpmates of mother, wife, cook etc is supposed to dispel. 'A woman like that is not a woman, quite', we are told: she is woman but not, unknowable, melting away boundaries.

## The ghastly gift

Another interesting aspect of Sexton's work relates to the *economic* function of the housewife as consumer – what Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* called their 'ghastly gift'. The closeness with which women's identities were caught up with their purchasing power in this era is perhaps best shown via the phenomenon of the Tupperware party, where Party Susans (a segmented hors d'oeuvre dish) and TV Tumblers were sold in tones such as frosted crystal and sapphire blue to housewives visiting each other's homes. During these social occasions they were encouraged to play games devised by Tupperware such as 'Clothes Pin', 'Waist Measurement' and 'Game of Gossip', which reinforced supposedly 'feminine' concerns.<sup>14</sup> That Sexton's own identity was tied up with *things* is illustrated by the story of her writing space. Diane Wood Middlebrook describes how: 'She measured progress by changes in the furniture supporting her work. At first she used a card table "Because I didn't think I was a poet. When I put in a desk, it was in our dining room [ . . . ] Then I put up some bookshelves – everything was tentative"'.<sup>15</sup>

For Sexton, the way in which womanhood is so often associated with the material is sometimes the cause for celebration, but more often negative. In 'Consorting with angels' she declares, wearily: 'I was tired of being a woman,/ tired of the spoons and the pots [ . . . ] tired of the cosmetics and the silks' (CP 111). There is a great urge to consume in Sexton's works, one articulated by her cry in 'Flee on your Donkey' – 'O my hunger! My hunger!' (CP 99). But the horrifying effects of this consumption are also documented. 'Self in 1958' is perhaps her best-known attack on the 'ghastly gift', beginning:

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

nylon legs, luminous arms  
and some advertised clothes.

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

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

(CP 155–6)

The title here itself is interesting, as it seems to alert us to a typical example of 'confessional' poetry, with the writer's true 'self' spilling onto the page, but at the same time it suggests an exploration of the difficulties of pinning down what constitutes a self ('They think I am me!' could easily be a jeer at her more simplistic critics). Sexton had a habit of obsessively dating her poems, and the *year* of the title is also crucial – it points out that this voice is not just personal but a *voice of its time*, with its references to suburban culture pinning it to the moment just as clearly. This is a poem about the disconnectedness and inauthenticity of 1950s life – she is an 'I. Magnin transplant', her true identity exchanged for one bought in a swanky department store. There is reference to Woolf's 'angel in the house' but this one is full of 'black-angel-stuffing' like a toy or sofa. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* also seems a reference – interestingly, in *The Feminist Mystique*, Friedan cites a 1960 American televised version of the play as a cultural turning point, and she quotes at length from Nora's final speech:

You have always been so kind to me. But our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll wife, just as at home I was papa's doll child; and here the children have been my dolls. I thought it was great fun when you played with me, just as they thought it fun when I played with them.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, in 'Self in 1958' the speaker feels distanced from the objects that surround her – the 'advertised clothes' and 'counterfeit table' – that are rendered inauthentic and somehow a lie by their mass production. We are in a fashionable, modern house – the flat roof, the electrical appliances – but

the reference to Mrs Rombauer, author of classic fifties cookbook *The Joy of Cooking*, is ironic, as this is a place without joy (or even tears). All-electric means no humanity and no spark. This is an all-out attack on a culture of consumption that Sexton is aware works both ways – prying her mouth open to take back all it has given. In her description of ‘nylon legs’ we see the awful double-bind – in buying the desired object (tights, so sought after during the war) the newly affluent housewife also becomes an object herself – the synthetic doll that they ‘play’ with, her life no longer her own. Like the woman in ‘Song for a Lady’, this ‘self’ is a ‘national product’ (CP 204).

The commercialisation of culture, and Sexton’s mixture of attraction and repulsion towards it, is explored most wittily in Sexton’s collection *Transformations*, a series of slangy, pop-cultural reworkings of the Grimm fairytales. Shellaby Jackson observed of 1950s TV that it was ‘a kind of frenzy’ of advertising – ‘Sell, sell, sell – dozens of men with white teeth, pushing packets of cigarettes at you, dozens of well-groomed women batting their eyes and pushing packets of soap at you’.<sup>17</sup> Sexton’s *Transformations* carries over this aesthetic into poetry, constantly parading brand names before us – Kleenex, Bab-O, Lysol. These anachronistic references are not merely fun – a wink to the audience – but imply that the American home shown in adverts is itself a fairytale. Constantly in *Transformations* images of the kitchen and the shopping list become tainted and grotesque. Snow White’s ‘heart’ is eaten ‘like a cube steak’, a hunchback’s hump is like a ‘bag of onions’, a witch’s blood boils like ‘coca-cola’. In ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’, the narrator tells us, in her slangy voice:

No matter what life you lead  
the virgin is a lovely number:  
cheeks fragile as cigarette paper,  
arms and legs made of Limoges,  
lips like Vin Du Rhone,  
rolling her china-blue doll eyes  
open and shut.

(CP 224)

‘No matter what life you lead’ then, the logic of capitalism is unavoidable, and taints our relationships to others – the virginal girl becomes something to be consumed: ‘filled’ or ‘rolled’ like a cigarette paper, drunk down like French wine, coveted like expensive china. Elsewhere, looking for his love, in ‘Cinderella’ after the ‘marriage market’ of the ball, the prince begins ‘to feel like a shoe salesman’ (CP 258).

In the horrifying late poem ‘The Death Baby’, perhaps one of the most iconic images of 1950s America is taken on – that essential purchase for all

new housewives, the refrigerator. Sexton appropriates it in the most horrific way possible, recounting how:

My sister at six  
dreamt nightly of my death:  
'The baby turned to ice.  
Someone put her in the refrigerator  
and she turned hard as a Popsicle.'

I remember the stink of liverwurst.  
How I was put on a platter and laid  
between the mayonnaise and the bacon.  
The rhythm of the refrigerator  
had been disturbed.  
The milk bottle hissed like a snake.  
[...]  
I moved like a lobster,  
slower and slower.  
The air was tiny.  
The air would not do.

(CP 354)

This is bourgeois gothic – Sexton's own 1950s fairytale in which the refrigerator has become a Bluebeard's room of horror, a suburban closet replete with skeletons. The images of the 'Popsicle' and 'bacon' stress the banality of this story, but there is something sexual about the imagery that adds to our distaste – the child 'laid' between the 'liverwurst' and 'mayonnaise'. The refrigerator being 'disturbed' along with the idea of the child as a lobster moving 'slower and slower' suggest abortion – one of the many things that had to be hushed up in suburban society – and anger certainly seems directed towards the mother with the line 'The milk bottle hissed like a snake'. It is, perhaps, because the milk is 'bottled' – human nourishment has been exchanged for clean and efficient product, the snake imagery suggesting this is a tempting but also dangerous exchange.

### **Sexton and suburbia**

By 1960 a quarter of the American population had a car and a home in the suburbs, and cultural representations of suburbia veer wildly. On one hand it was an idealised image of middle-class life with green space, cocktails, swimming pools and a sense of community, but its uniformity was soon mocked, as in Malvina Reynolds's 1962 anti-suburbia song 'Little Boxes':

And they all play on the golf course  
And drink their martinis dry,



And they all have pretty children,  
And their children go to school,  
And their children go to summer camp,  
And then to university,  
Where they are put in boxes  
And they come out just the same.<sup>18</sup>

Such currents of discontent are clearly taken up by Sexton in poems such as 'Funnel':

Back from that great-grandfather I have come  
to puzzle a bending gravestone for his sake,  
to question this diminishing and feed a minimum  
of children their careful slice of suburban cake.

(CP 21)

'Minimum' here suggests the pressure on woman to appear maternal, whilst the title 'Funnel' seems to indicate a radical narrowing of opportunities, as well as a fear of anyone making a 'splash'.

Friedan felt suburbia was particularly hard on women, labelling it 'a comfortable concentration camp' – a phrase which perhaps foreshadows the domestic nazi-drama of Plath's 'Daddy', or Sexton's weaker, posthumously published sequence 'The Divorce Papers', where husband is figured as 'Panzer-man' (CP 510). Sexton explores the difficulties of women in suburbia more subtly in her sixties poems such as 'Housewife'. This begins with a wry pun – 'Some women marry houses' – and continues: 'See how she sits on her knees all day,/ faithfully washing herself down' (CP 77). It is an image of subservience, suggesting housework has become almost a religion, whilst also evoking those *House Beautiful* magazine articles that conflated decor and personality, asking: 'What *is* your house saying about you? [...] Does your house express the serenity and self-assurance of a person living in a democratic society where Everybody is Somebody?'<sup>19</sup>

In the 1950s Hal Humphrey joked that 'The people who have lived next door to me never have looked anything like those I see in movies or on TV commercials. I've got to do something about getting out of these lousy neighbourhoods'.<sup>20</sup> It is a joke that taps one of suburbia's real anxieties – the judgement of neighbours if you failed to be a 'model' family. One of the most noticeable design features of the suburban home was the picture window or 'window wall', an innovation that could be seen to make the lines between public and private blur, and so came to represent anxiety about this new element of performance in suburban life – the issue of what the neighbours might say – as in the title of John Keats's famous *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1957). Similar concerns to these are clear in Sexton's 'Self

in 1958' where the narrator feels she should be able to 'spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder,/ and have no evidence of ruin or fears' but is instead intimidated by her windows that 'flash open on someone's city' – 'flash' carrying with it connotations of a particularly extreme and shocking type of exposure (*CP* 155).

In her monstrousness – imaging herself as 'middle-aged witch', 'Old Dwarf Heart', or one of the mad 'foxy children' – Sexton also refers to another form of cultural commentary on suburbia. Spigel has spoken of how sitcoms of difference such as *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family* emerged at the time, in which the abnormality of these families terrified their fellow suburbanites – they playfully exaggerated the battle-lines drawn between prurient neighbours and those they perceived as different or deviant. In *Bewitched*, the witch Samantha tries to 'efface [her] potential in return for the "rewards" of family life' through 'exaggerated forms of self-imposed containment' – a narrative Sexton could perhaps empathise with.<sup>21</sup>

### **The spy in the house**

But is Sexton as witch only a reference to such sitcoms of suburban abnormality? With Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, first produced in 1953, turning witch-hunts into vivid political allegory, it seems unlikely. My first ideas about the political resonance of her poetry came out of this remark in an interview:

Until I was twenty eight I had a kind of buried self who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies [. . .] All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children [. . .] But one can't build little white picket fences to keep nightmares out.<sup>22</sup>

The last line has a resonance beyond the personal, as in a way this is precisely what the American political project was trying to do at the time – represent the suburban home as part of the fight against the nightmare of communism. The communist threat was frequently imaged as an insidious force warping American values: in his pamphlet *A Statement on Communism*, Hoover argues America 'must recognize the communist effort for what it is – an effort to inject poison into the bloodstream of America, to confuse, obscure, and distort America's vision of itself'.<sup>23</sup> With the dangers couched in such terms, both utopian figurations of American suburbia and attempts to entrench America's cultural 'values' become highly politicised. Clifford Clark sees the growth of suburbia as 'a central part of a larger perfectionist impulse that swept through post-war society'.<sup>24</sup> In an era when anyone

asking questions about anti-communism could be labelled a 'pinko', 'phoney' or 'queer' the standardised uniformity of them seemed almost patriotic. Meanwhile, in the famous Nixon–Khrushchev 'kitchen debate' of 1959 – which took place on the recreation of an iconic American kitchen at the US exhibition in Sokolini Park – Nixon held up modern homes as a symbol of his country's superiority. The basis of his argument was that capitalism enabled individuals to have better lives, observing: 'You may be ahead of us in the thrust of your rockets . . . We may be ahead of you . . . in colour television'. Later, pointing at a panel-controlled washing machine, he observed: 'In America, these things are designed to make things easier for our women'.<sup>25</sup> This was a defining event in Cold War politics – one that shows how vital the myth of suburbia and the propaganda of the housewife had become to the government's arguments, and how deeply the political and personal had become entwined. The battle-lines for hearts and minds were being drawn on the kitchen tiles.

In Sexton's work, then, simply the act of exposing dark secrets in the suburban home takes on political connotations. In 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further' we see the discomfort her work causes to her contemporaries, and Sexton's reply:

This is something I would never find  
in a lovelier place, my dear,  
although your fear is anyone's fear,  
like an invisible veil between us all . . .  
and sometimes in private,  
my kitchen, your kitchen,  
my face, your face.

(CP 35)

This takes the 1950s atmosphere of paranoia, that 'invisible veil', and attributes it not to the threat of communism but to an unwillingness to confront the truth. The title's allusion to Schopenhauer's letter to Goethe in which he talks of how: 'Most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to enquire further' – a quotation which begins the collection – richly suggests the link between the personal and the political, as we recall how, through lack of self-knowledge, Oedipus brought a plague upon his land. In exposing 'my kitchen, your kitchen', Sexton subtly refutes the rhetoric of the kitchen debate, with its assertion that things are now 'easier'.

That Anne Sexton *was* interested in politics is clear from her letters, most interestingly in one in which she recounts how her husband Kayo has a sign on his car saying: 'Register Communists, not firearms', and calls him 'politically repulsive'.<sup>26</sup> It also becomes more explicit, often less success-

fully, nearer the end of her career, as in her 1969 poem 'Eighteen Days Without You', which touches on the Jack Kennedy assassination and Vietnam – her distaste for the official language of war apparent on 'December 9th' when she explains of a corpse: 'Manual Minus Number/ Sixteen Handbook/ prefers to call this/*the human remains*' (CP 212). But it is when, to use Plath's expression, she looks at politics 'sidelong', that Sexton is most interesting, observing in an interview that:

People have to find out who they are before they can confront national issues. The fact that I seldom write about public issues in no way reflects my personal opinion. I am a pacifist. I sign petitions, etc. However I am not a polemicist. [...] In one of my love poems, I say that my lover is unloading bodies from Vietnam. If that poem is read in a hundred years, people will have to look up the war in Vietnam. They will have it mixed up with the Korean or God knows what else.<sup>27</sup>

If this seems rather naïve and wishful – today's critics seem far more prone to ignore Sexton's political references than to use them as a springboard for investigation into the period's politics – it does give an example of how her political references occur, sporadically as asides, where they seem to mesh with personal concerns, rather than dominating the content. In 'The Black Art', for example, she casually declares herself a 'spy' in the house (CP 88), whilst in 'Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn', a poem about madness, the cry: 'The world is full of enemies./ There is no safe place', is a symptom of insanity (CP 28).

In 'Rumpelstiltskin', a Freudian reworking of the fairytale, Sexton's introduction playfully takes the idea of the spy in the house a step further, and posits a spy *in the self*:

inside many of us  
is a small old man  
who wants to get out.  
No bigger than a two-year-old  
whom you'd call lamb chop  
yet this one is old and malformed.  
His head is okay  
but the rest of him wasn't Sanforized.  
He is a monster of despair.  
He is all decay.  
He speaks up tiny as an earphone  
with Truman's asexual voice:  
I am your dwarf.  
I am the enemy within.  
I am the boss of your dreams.

No. I am not the law in your mind,  
the grandfather of watchfulness.  
I am the law of your members,  
the kindred of blackness and impulse.  
See. Your hand shakes.  
It is not palsy or booze.  
It is your doppelganger  
trying to get out.  
Beware . . . beware . . .

(CP 233)

But this enemy within is not communist – quite the opposite, he represents the hierarchical rule, the old white men who fill the White House. Speaking like Truman, the president who dropped atomic bombs and started the war against the ‘red menace’ in Korea, his voice ‘tiny as an earphone’ makes us think of listening devices and Cold War paranoia – FBI wiretraps had only been authorised as late as 1946. This evil presence is revealed by a leakage into the physical – ‘your hand shakes’ – evoking the climate of fear but also the artificialities of diplomacy and power games. This ‘dwarf’ seems also to refer to the hit 1957 movie *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, where Robert passes through a mushroom cloud on a boat and becomes a ‘ludicrous midget’ who lives in a dollhouse, muttering: ‘Every day it was worse, every day a little smaller and every day I became more monstrous in my domination of Louise’<sup>28</sup> – a reference that links this ‘doppelganger’s’ size and bossiness to the dangers of atomic power. This is a radical overturning of standard US propaganda, where the enemy becomes the government – repressed, emotionally stunted, driven by ‘blackness and impulse’ – and the force of resistance placed against it is that of the female body. By perceiving this ‘boss’ from the perspective of the housewife, we can see his ludicrousness. His body hasn’t been ‘Sanforized’ – treated with a laundry product that makes cotton shrink to fit – but he’s no bigger than a child whom the projected woman would tenderly term ‘lamb chop’. The female body can contain this ‘dwarf’ if they ‘beware’ and resist its attempts to escape. It is a bold and hopeful rewriting of contemporary cultural representations of power and the communist threat.

Peter Biskind has said that ‘It was Sci-Fi, more than any other genre, that caught the hysteria behind the picture window’<sup>29</sup> – and there also seem to have been a lot of links made between the space race and the All-American home. The launch of Sputnik in 1957 was a huge blow to Cold War America’s self-image, giving rise at the time to such comments as that of Dr Edward Teller, father of the H-Bomb: ‘America has lost a battle more important and greater than Pearl Harbor’.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, however, popular culture attempted to neutralise, domesticate and Americanise sci-fi

images through TV shows and adverts for household products. Shows such as *The Jetsons* and *Lost in Space* transplanted suburbia into the future, whilst the popular orange drink 'Tang' sold itself as the 'Breakfast drink of astronauts'.

Within this context, it also seems worth reassessing Sexton's neglected minor poems such as 'Venus and the Ark', where 'Two male PhD's' fly to Venus and are defeated in their mission by the planet's fertile 'Dark crotch'. Refusing to domesticate space travel, Sexton persistently sees it as male and destructive, mocking international power games with lines such as: 'The missile to launch a missile/ was almost a secret' (CP 13), and hitting out at machismo with the unattractive image of 'Rival nations, angry and oily' (CP 14). Elsewhere, in 'Moon Song, Woman Song', the astronauts are equated to the patriarchy, domineering and conquering woman, as she addresses 'My cold, cold/ coverall man' who will 'Walk into me like a barracks' (CP 196).

## The bombshell

'Science fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster'.<sup>31</sup> So says Susan Sontag of the 1950s sci-fi genre, and disaster was certainly felt to be a palpable possibility during this period. Atomic iconography, like that of the space race, was also inextricably linked to the iconography of the housewife. Suburbia was actually built with atomic warfare in mind, with the idea that its scattered citizens were less of a bomb threat, the *New York Times* recording suburban property booms prompted by bomb fear throughout the 1950s, and green belts nicknamed 'life belts' as they would serve as firewalls. During the 1950s and 1960s propaganda also concentrated on the idea of personal responsibility for atomic defence, with President Kennedy calling for a fallout shelter in every house, and ads such as that of the Portland Cement Association in 1955 promising: 'Houses for the Atomic Age! . . . The blast-resistant house design is based on principles learned at Hiroshima and Nagasaki . . . interiors of a blast-resistant house have all the charm and liveability of conventional house'.<sup>32</sup> The image of the suburban dream destroyed by atomic bombs was burned onto the national psyche through schemes like the Federal Civil Defense Administration's 1953 'Operation Doorstep' and 1955 'Operation Cue', which submitted 'average' homes, including cars, back yards, food, appliances and a mannequin family, to blast and fallout. Laura McEnaney notes:

In glossy detail, an FCDA report depicted the family's plight in Doorstep: two 'before' pictures feature the family relaxing and entertaining dinner guests, but in the 'after' photos, furniture is overturned, dishes are broken, and family

members and guests are twisted, chipped and mangled . . . These tests were as much public relations morality plays about the dangers of family apathy as they were scientific experiments.<sup>33</sup>

The FCDA's slogan for these campaigns, 'Will you, like a mannequin, sit and wait?',<sup>34</sup> again evokes Sexton's 'Self in 1958' – the doll-woman for whom 'Life takes aim' and whose windows 'flash' – as well as adding a layer of possible connotation to the dolls and mannequins that scatter many other of her poems. The chief of the FCDA also liked to explain that the home front of the Cold War 'actually exists in our homes, right in our living rooms' and that a failure to incorporate civil defence into the household would be like a 'fifth column' action.<sup>35</sup> This meant housewives became crucial to the Cold War effort – front-line soldiers for the first time. In her poetry we can see Sexton adopt this idea of house as front line – as in 'Man and Wife' where she explains: 'A soldier is forced to stay with a soldier/ because they share the same dirt/ and the same blows' (CP 117).

In poems such as 'The Road Back', awareness of the new vulnerability of life is palpable:

Today we will  
not think to number another summer  
[. . .]  
Today, all cars,  
all fathers, all mothers, all  
children and lovers will  
have to forget  
about that thing in the sky,  
going around  
like a persistent rumor  
that will get us yet.

(CP 30)

In a poem published in 1960, the 'thing in the sky' cannot help but suggest an atomic weapon, with the comparison to a 'persistent rumor' reminding us what a nagging presence the threat of nuclear war was at that historical moment – Cuba had just fallen and the Cuban Missile Crisis was only two years away.

Elsewhere though, Sexton's voice is less resigned and more defiant, refusing propaganda's call to participate or shoulder responsibilities in the Cold War – mocking the suggestion that she can keep her family safe, in 'The Fortress' (a title which itself suggests the language of civil defence), when she asks her daughter: 'What ark/ can I fill for you when the world goes wild?', and has to admit: 'Darling, life is not in my hands,/ life with its terrible changes/ will take you, bombs or glands' (CP 67).

Zarlengo has observed that: 'In Atomic Age public information, American housewives were symbols of serene goodness and capability, of attractiveness rather than sexiness, and control rather than decadence – what Elaine Tyler May calls “contained threats,” powerful forces circumscribed within the household'.<sup>36</sup> And what of the woman who couldn't be contained? This was also the era of the 'Bombshell'. Sexton, especially in *Love Poems* positions herself as a threat; a force that could strike at the American Dream. In 'The Breast' she tells us: 'I burn the way money burns' (CP 176). In 'The Addict', meanwhile, she attacks the suburban home by attacking herself with pharmaceuticals, blowing 'Eight at a time, socked in the eye/ hauled away by the pink, the orange' in 'A kind of war/ where I plant bombs inside/ of myself' (CP 165).

Sexton is often accused by her detractors of hysteria, but the political discourse of America *was* hysterical. As a fellow 'confessional' poet, Sylvia Plath has also often been accused of grotesque exaggeration, in particular by linking her personal domestic pain to the holocaust, but – like Sexton – she was echoing the dominant propaganda of her time. When the booklet on 'fireproof housekeeping', *Survival Under Attack*, was published in 1950 it advised that: 'Radioactive particles act much the same as ordinary, everyday dust' and could be wiped away with a rag.<sup>37</sup> The rhetorical device being used varies little from that in Plath's 'Mary's Song', where the fire cooking the Sunday roast in the oven is 'The same fire/ melting the tallow heretics,/ ousting the Jews'.<sup>38</sup> In 1960 Mary McCarthy recounted how she heard of the Hiroshima bombing whilst shopping for groceries on Cape Cod, and asked herself: "What am I doing buying a loaf of bread?" The coexistence of the great world and us, when contemplated, seems impossible'.<sup>39</sup> Confessionalism could be said to contain attempts both to dramatise this coexistence and to highlight its absurdity, often using metaphor as its medium – from Plath comparing herself to a Jew in 'Daddy' to Lowell's picture in 'For the Union Dead' of a decaying South Boston where:

on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph  
shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the 'Rock of Ages'  
that survived the blast.<sup>40</sup>

When Anne Sexton compares a night nurse to 'a ballistic missile' (CP 278), it seems wrongheaded to discount links between her extreme language and the culture of political hyperbole in which she lived.



### 'Adventures in Acting Out'<sup>41</sup>

There is perhaps, also, another source from which the 'housewife-poet' drew her language of intensity. Interestingly, the film genre most associated with housewives during the 1950s – the melodrama – has recently undergone a huge critical re-evaluation, with Thomas Schatz suggesting that they 'are actually amongst the most socially self-conscious and covertly "anti-American" films ever produced by Hollywood studios'.<sup>42</sup> That Sexton might have used some of the devices of melodrama to make her political points therefore seems fitting. Elsaesser has noted that melodramatic often means 'an exaggerated rise-and-fall pattern in human actions and emotional responses', adding that when a novel is adapted to a ninety-minute movie 'such a more violent "melodramatic" graph almost inevitably produces itself'.<sup>43</sup> Now imagine that this story is adapted to a one-page poem, and Sexton's violently intense enactments of family dramas are the natural result. In this context, critics that insult Sexton by labelling her work melodrama are inadvertently revealing both their contempt for an art-form associated almost entirely with women, and a rich starting point for further investigation into Sexton's work.

In 'The Breast', Sexton laments: 'I measured my size up against movie stars./ I didn't measure up. Something between/ my shoulders was there. But never enough' (CP 175). On one level this is the kind of cry of female insecurity about body image still found in modern women's magazines, but it also seems to be deliberately ambiguous – the 'thing' between her shoulders could perhaps also be her heart, and the lines articulate that yearning for more, for *enough*, that is typical of the poet. A yearning, perhaps, for that emotional excess enacted by the movie stars that most 1950s housewives were watching. Elsaesser's description of melodrama is particularly useful:

Iconographically fixed by the claustrophobic atmosphere of the bourgeois home and/or small-town setting, its emotional pattern is that of latent hysteria, reinforced stylistically by a complex handling of space in interiors . . . to the point where the world seems totally predetermined and pervaded by 'meaning' and interpretable signs.<sup>44</sup>

A typical example of an 'interpretable sign' might be that during the opening of Sirk's *Written on the Wind*, where we see autumn leaves whirl through an opulent hall, suggesting both the infertility and imminent death of Robert Stack's Kyle.<sup>45</sup> Sexton gives us this same suburbia of predetermined meaning. 'The Fortress', about her home, is a good example, in which her daughter's mole is 'a spot of danger', and the wind moans

'like a dying woman' (CP 66–7). In melodrama, the emotional content is underlined by other techniques such as strong colour – in Plath's *The Bell Jar* Esther notes: 'Everybody in a Technicolor movie seems to feel obliged to wear a lurid new costume in each new scene . . . with a lot of very green trees or very yellow wheat or very blue ocean rolling away for miles'<sup>46</sup> – and similarly Sexton's poem overflows with colour images: 'pink quilted covers', 'bottle green' trees, the 'orange nipples' of the bittersweet. Another technique Elsaesser draws attention to is the use of music to heighten emotions – again, one that can be well illustrated by a scene from *Written on the Wind* in which Lucy is not in the room Kyle has arranged for her, and the music conveys a tragic, hysterical urgency not implicit in the event itself (or script). The music of Sexton's poetry performs similar emotive tricks, 'The Fortress' being structured around a subtle rhyme scheme; for example: 'My child, since July/ the leaves have been fed/secretly from a pool of beet-red dye' (CP 66). Such rhymes, when they register, give a sense of inevitability to the sorrows she describes, as well as a touching quality when we take into account that the poem is addressed to her daughter Linda – they evoke nursery rhyme or lullaby.

The entry in 'Eighteen Days Without You' for 'December 5th' is – like 'The Fortress' – about a woman looking out of a suburban window, a trope melodramas continually used to suggest women both caged and on display. The poem reads:

This is the last picture page  
of the calendar.  
Now I feel my age,  
watching the feverish birds outside  
pocketing grain in their beaks.  
The wind is bizarre.  
The wind goes *boo, boo, boo* at my side  
and the kitchen faucet leaks.

(CP 209).

This, then, is poem as mini-melodrama: the picture window, the calendar (echoing the flapping pages of one at the beginning of *Written on the Wind*), the 'interpretable signs', the unearned, lurid tone (birds are 'feverish'), the musical effects ('beaks', 'leaks', the onomatopoeia). Sexton is also, simultaneously, poking fun at the genre, mocking the over-sensitivity with which the female narrator greets this essentially comfortable domestic set-up ('*boo, boo, boo*'). Meanwhile, by mimicking melodrama in showing housewives frustrated and miserable in their role, Sexton – like directors such as Douglas Sirk – hits at the very basis of the American Dream. As Robert Warshaw observed in 1948: 'America, as a social and political

organisation, is committed to a cheerful view of life. If an American or Russian is unhappy, it implies a certain reprobation of his society.<sup>47</sup>

### **Conclusion: note on the housewife as ‘camp’**

If in the cultural commentary of the 1950s there was a strong strain of contempt for what Dwight MacDonald called ‘the spreading ooze of mass culture’, it was usually related to a sense that popular culture had become feminised. Now that it entered the home through television, to some commentators it became part of the feminine sphere, with women taking on the role of its gatekeepers. A 1955 advert for *TV Guide* offered light-hearted tips to keep a husband at home that included: ‘You might try drugging his coffee . . . But by far the best persuader since the ball and chain is the TV set’<sup>48</sup> – but for many this sense of mass cultural product as emasculating was very serious. Most famously, Philip Wylie’s popular *Generation of Vipers* railed against the ‘Momism’ communicated through soap operas and radio – the ‘matriarchal sentimentality, goo, slop’.<sup>49</sup> But, simultaneously, another sensibility was gradually diffusing into mainstream culture: camp – a process that could be said to culminate with Susan Sontag’s wonderful 1964 essay ‘Notes on Camp’. Rudnick and Anderson have observed: ‘Sontag’s essay was like a thrilling, open-ended mother’s excuse note to a whole generation of gifted children: *To whom it may concern: Johnny has my permission to enjoy TV and Jacqueline Susann books.*’ Melodrama is interesting as a site where female and camp tastes intersect – and so, I would argue, is Sexton’s work. As she constantly references popular culture: from movies, to cartoons, to ads – there is something very ‘campy’ detectable in her vulgar, slangy, OTT style, and perhaps, finally, it is worth taking note of this if our reading of her work is not to be too serious. Camp is an ‘excuse note’ for Sexton, allowing her to smuggle supposedly trivial female concerns and influences into the predominantly male, ‘high art’ world of poetry.

Camp is notoriously difficult to define, and one of the reasons for this is the difficulty of deciding whether it resides in the object or the viewer. Sontag proposes a distinction between knowing and ‘Pure’ (naïve) camp, with the latter containing art that: ‘proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is “too much”’.<sup>50</sup> This sounds very close to much of the criticism of Sexton’s work over the last few decades, and indeed, as the aesthetics of 1950s suburbia and housewives have always, with their artificially perfect veneer, attracted a knowing camp audience – from Sirk’s movies through *Stepford Wives* to *Desperate Housewives* – we could legitimately ask whether the camp in Sexton’s work only exists, in Thomas Hess’s words, ‘in the smirk of the beholder’.<sup>51</sup> Lowell

seems to support this view, insinuating, in his observation that her poems 'would have been fascinating if someone had put them in quotes',<sup>52</sup> that the camp perspective that might make Sexton's poetry more palatable has to be brought to the work by 'someone' else.

However, this all suggests a lack of awareness or distance in Sexton's poetry, and for me doesn't sit with her strong sense of herself as performer – she was a self-confessed 'little bit of a ham'<sup>53</sup> whose presence at readings 'dazzled with its staginess, its props of water glass, cigarettes and ashtray'.<sup>54</sup> Sexton was committed to 'fake it up with the truth'.<sup>55</sup> – a statement of artistic intent not that dissimilar to Philip Core's definition of camp as 'The lie that tells the truth'. Similarly, the epigram from Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* that Sontag uses to encapsulate the knowing camp sensibility – 'It's absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious'<sup>56</sup> – reminds me of the notice pinned up above Sexton's desk: 'Whatever You Do, Don't be Boring'. Pamela Robertson has also argued persuasively that there is an implicit sexism in writing off all female camp as 'naïve', claiming:

Most people who have written about camp assume that the exchanges between gay men's and women's cultures have been wholly one-sided . . . This suggests that women are camp but do not knowingly produce themselves as camp and, furthermore, do not even have access to a camp sensibility. Women, by contrast, are objects of camp and subject to it, but are not camp subjects.<sup>57</sup>

This leads her to ask: 'Do gay men automatically have a critical distance from roles and stereotypes that women blindly inhabit?'<sup>58</sup>

From drag through to exaggerated macho posturing, camp draws attention to the artifice of gendered roles. In a 1975 interview, Sontag herself backtracked on her claim that camp was apolitical, and admitted that the diffusion of camp taste could be credited 'with a considerable if inadvertent role in the upsurge of feminist consciousness in the late 1960s', as the fascination with 'making something corny of femaleness' helped to undermine the 'credibility of certain stereotyped femininities – by exaggerating them, by putting them between quotation marks'.<sup>59</sup> Using examples such as Mae West and Madonna, Robertson goes further and proposes a deliberate role, through the category of 'Feminist Camp', and it is within this strand that I would position Sexton.

Cecile Whiting has pin-pointed good taste as a key quality expected of the housewife in the 1950s, it being 'a sign of reaffirmation and distinction [...] a standard for defining the middle class lifestyle without making explicit the economic basis of that standard',<sup>60</sup> and Sexton seems to derive a

deliberate thrill from flouting this in poems parading their 'bad taste' – from the cartoonish grotesquery of refrigerated babies to in-depth descriptions of masturbation, menstruation and Jesus's penis – the 'it's good *because* it's awful' aesthetic of camp giving her the creative daring to challenge assumptions about the appropriate subject matter for a housewife's verse in ways that still seem extreme. At the same time, with her imagery of Bobbys twins, Duz and martinis, and the dedication of a poem to her uterus, Sexton exaggerates the assumed essence of woman – fleshy, over-emotional, domestic, swimming in pop-culture's 'matriarchal goo'. When Sexton stresses that she is 'an actress in my own autobiographical play',<sup>61</sup> we can begin to see her self-proclaimed pose as 'housewife-poet' as containing an element of drag – especially as we know that after her breakdown, Sexton basically ceased to do most domestic duties. (Her husband Kayo was affectionately known as 'mother'.)

Irigaray claims that to mimic is to 'assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it'.<sup>62</sup> In the process of this mimicry, Sexton seems to have been able to gain a measure of control over that role of housewife and mother that brought her to a breakdown in her 20s. At the same time, she drew attention not only to the artificiality of gender roles, but to that of the American Dream itself, with its pretence that Tupperware could be a 'defensive bulwark against communism',<sup>63</sup> and that its panel-controlled washing machines and 'little white picket fences' could 'keep nightmares out'. Like the mock-up in Sokolini Park, she showed its shiny kitchens to be stage-sets that belied the reality of America. Jacqueline Rose has rightly called Anne Sexton 'The mistress of the "I" as fiction',<sup>64</sup> but we must also recognise her expertise in revealing the fictional basis of the 'Us' her society constructed. From this perspective, Sexton can be seen to play the 'housewife' with gusto to thwart, to reclaim, to subvert, to undermine, to shock, to question, to continually reimagine both herself and her country. It was quite a performance.

## Notes

- 1 Anne Sexton, *Anne Sexton – A Self-Portrait in Letters*, ed. Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames (New York and Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), 19.
- 2 Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (New York and Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981), 89. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Anne Sexton's poems are to versions from this volume, hereafter referred to as *CP*.
- 3 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 19.

- 4 Jon Rosenblatt, 'Plath and Sexton', in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 167–9 (p. 167).
- 5 Marjorie G. Perloff, 'Realism and the Confessional Mode of Robert Lowell', *Contemporary Literature*, 11:4 (1970), 470–87 (p. 470).
- 6 Lynda K. Bundtzen, *Plath's Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan press, 1983), 157.
- 7 Gregory Fitz Gerald, 'With Gregory Fitz Gerald', in *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews and Prose*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Michigan and Rexdale: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 180–97 (p. 187).
- 8 Caroline King Barnard Hall, *Anne Sexton* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 90.
- 9 Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, 270.
- 10 Hall, *Anne Sexton*, 21.
- 11 Sandra M. Gilbert, "'My Name is Darkness": The Poetry of Self-Definition', in *Contemporary Literature* (1977), 443–57 (p. 446).
- 12 Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 36.
- 13 Cecile Whiting, *A Taste for Pop* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 225.
- 14 Alison J. Clarke, 'Tupperware: Suburbia, Sociality and Mass Consumption', in *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. Roger Silverstone (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 132–43 (p. 141).
- 15 Diane Wood Middlebrook, 'Housewife into Poet: The Apprenticeship of Anne Sexton', *The New England Quarterly*, 56:4 (1983), 483–503 (p. 484).
- 16 Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 73.
- 17 Lawrence R. Samuel, *Brought to You By: Post War Television Advertising and the American Dream* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2001), 59.
- 18 Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 112.
- 19 Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*, 65.
- 20 Samuel, *Brought to You By*, 143.
- 21 Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 124.
- 22 Barbara Kevles, 'The Art of Poetry: Anne Sexton', in *Anne Sexton: The Artist and her Critics*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978), 3–42 (p. 3).
- 23 Cyndy Hendershot, *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America* (Jefferson and London: McFarland and Company, 2003), 1.
- 24 Beuka, *SuburbiaNation*, 5.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 942.
- 26 Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, 366.
- 27 Kevles, 'The Art of Poetry', 29.
- 28 Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture – Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 105.

- 29 Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: Or How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the 50s* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 103.
- 30 Martin Walker, *The Cold War: A History* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993), 114.
- 31 Susan Sontag, 'The Imagination of Disaster', in *Against Interpretation* (London and Sydney: Vintage, 1994), 209–25 (p. 213).
- 32 Jim Heimann (ed.), *All-American Ad: 50s* (Köln and London: Taschen, 2003), 38.
- 33 Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 54.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 940.
- 36 Kristina Zarlengo, 'Civilian Threat, the Suburban Citadel, and Atomic Age American Women', *Signs*, 24:4 (1999), 925–58 (p. 943).
- 37 Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home*, 74.
- 38 Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1981), 257.
- 39 Thomas Hill Schraub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 65.
- 40 Robert Lowell, *For the Union Dead* (New York and Toronto: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 72.
- 41 This was one of the chapter titles Sexton proposed for a 'commercial' little 'whiz-bang piece' she was planning to write on psychiatry, see *Anne Sexton, A Self-Portrait in Letters*, 241.
- 42 Christine Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation', in *Home Is Where the Heart Is – Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 5–39 (p. 5).
- 43 Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', in *Home Is Where the Heart Is – Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 43–69 (p. 52).
- 44 Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', 62.
- 45 *Written on the Wind*, dir. Douglas Sirk, Universal, 1956.
- 46 Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 43.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 48 Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, 52.
- 49 Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991), 165.
- 50 Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', in Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (London and Sydney: Vintage, 1994), 275–292 (p. 284).
- 51 Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 145.
- 52 Robert Lowell, 'Anne Sexton', in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 24.
- 53 Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, 163.
- 54 Maxine Kumin, 'How it Was', in *The Complete Poems, Anne Sexton* (New York and Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981), xix–xxxiv (p. xxi).

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- 55 Jacqueline Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003), 18.
- 56 Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', 283.
- 57 Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 5.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 59 Susan Sontag, 'The Salmagundi Interview', in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Hardwick (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1982), 329–46 (p. 339).
- 60 Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*, 59.
- 61 Kevles, 'The Art of Poetry', 27.
- 62 Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*, 228.
- 63 A claim made by a Methodist preacher at the 1954 Homecoming Jubilee celebrations – see Clarke, 'Tupperware', 147.
- 64 Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep*, 23.