

TRANSFORMATIONS

ANNE SEXTON

WINNER OF
THE PULITZER PRIZE
FOR POETRY

WITH A PREFACE BY KURT VONNEGUT, JR.



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FOREWORD

by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

"Death starts like a dream, full of objects and my sister's laughter," Anne Sexton says in another book. "We are young," she goes on, "and we are walking and picking wild blueberries all the way to Damariscotta."

God love her.

I asked a poet friend one time what it was that poets did, and he thought awhile, and then he told me, "They extend the language." I thought that was neat, but it didn't make me grateful in my bones for poets. Language extenders I can take or leave alone.

Anne Sexton does a deeper favor for me: she domesticates my terror, examines it and describes it, teaches it some tricks which will amuse me, then lets it gallop wild in my forest once more.

She does this for herself, too, I assume. Good for her.

I don't know her well. I met her at a party for Dan Wakefield, a mutual friend. Dan had just published a novel about the tacky and bleak love life of a young man in Indianapolis after the Korean war. She had written a lot of love poems, I knew. One of them began like this:

This is the key to it.
This is the key to everything.
Preciously.

I am worse than the gamekeeper's children,
Picking for dust and bread.
Here I am drumming up perfume.

Let me go down on your carpet,
your straw mattress — whatever's at hand
because the child in me is dying, dying.

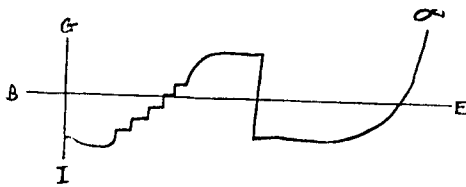
It is not that I am cattle to be eaten.
It is not that I am some sort of street.
But your hands found me like an architect.

Jugful of milk! It was yours years ago
when I lived in the valley of my bones,
bones dumb in the swamp. Little playthings.

And so on. There wasn't any woman as alive and appreciative as all that in Dan's book about Indianapolis. I, too, was from Indianapolis.

Indianapolis, by the way, is the world's largest city not on a navigable waterway.

So I tried to be delightful to Anne Sexton, and a lover of life (which I'm not), and I drew for her this diagram of the story of Cinderella:



"G" was good fortune. "I" was ill beginning. "E" was end. Cinderella v She sank even lower when her rotten the party and she stayed home.

Then her fairy godmother appeared and glass slippers and a carriage and in my chart represented those donations and chandise. Cinderella went to the party prince. She crashed at midnight, but as she used to be — because she remembered

Then the glass slipper fit her, and prince. She became infinitely happy includes now.

And I learn just now from an encyclopedia wife bought volume by volume from a I graphed the English version of the translated from Charles Perrault's teller

I learn something more from the I would have enchanted Anne Sexton the party with it, if only I'd known: translation, the word *vair* was mistake Cinderella's fur slippers became glass.

So much for lucky poetry.

Anne Sexton found it kinky that I should Cinderella, since she was then also queerer version of that story — by the She was, in fact, retelling many of the tales in poetry.

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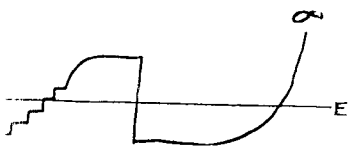
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Cinderella:



“G” was good fortune. “I” was ill fortune. “B” was beginning. “E” was end. Cinderella was low at the start. She sank even lower when her rotten stepsisters went to the party and she stayed home.

Then her fairy godmother appeared, gave her a dress and glass slippers and a carriage and all that. The steps in my chart represented those donations of valuable merchandise. Cinderella went to the party, danced with the prince. She crashed at midnight, but she wasn't as low as she used to be — because she remembered the party.

Then the glass slipper fit her, and she married the prince. She became infinitely happy forever — which includes now.

And I learn just now from an encyclopedia, which my wife bought volume by volume from a supermarket, that I graphed the English version of the story, which was translated from Charles Perrault's telling of it in French.

I learn something more from the encyclopedia, and I would have enchanted Anne Sexton and everybody at the party with it, if only I'd known: in the process of translation, the word *vair* was mistaken for *verre* so that Cinderella's fur slippers became glass.

So much for lucky poetry.

Anne Sexton found it kinky that I should tell her about Cinderella, since she was then absorbed by a darker, queerer version of that story — by the Brothers Grimm. She was, in fact, retelling many of the Grimms' fairy tales in poetry.

And here they are.

So much for mental telepathy. So much for new friends.

How do I explain these poems? Not at all. I quit teaching in colleges because it seemed so criminal to explain works of art. The crisis in my teaching career came, in fact, when I faced an audience which expected me to explain *Dubliners* by James Joyce.

I was game. I'd read the book. But when I opened my big mouth, no sounds came out.

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