

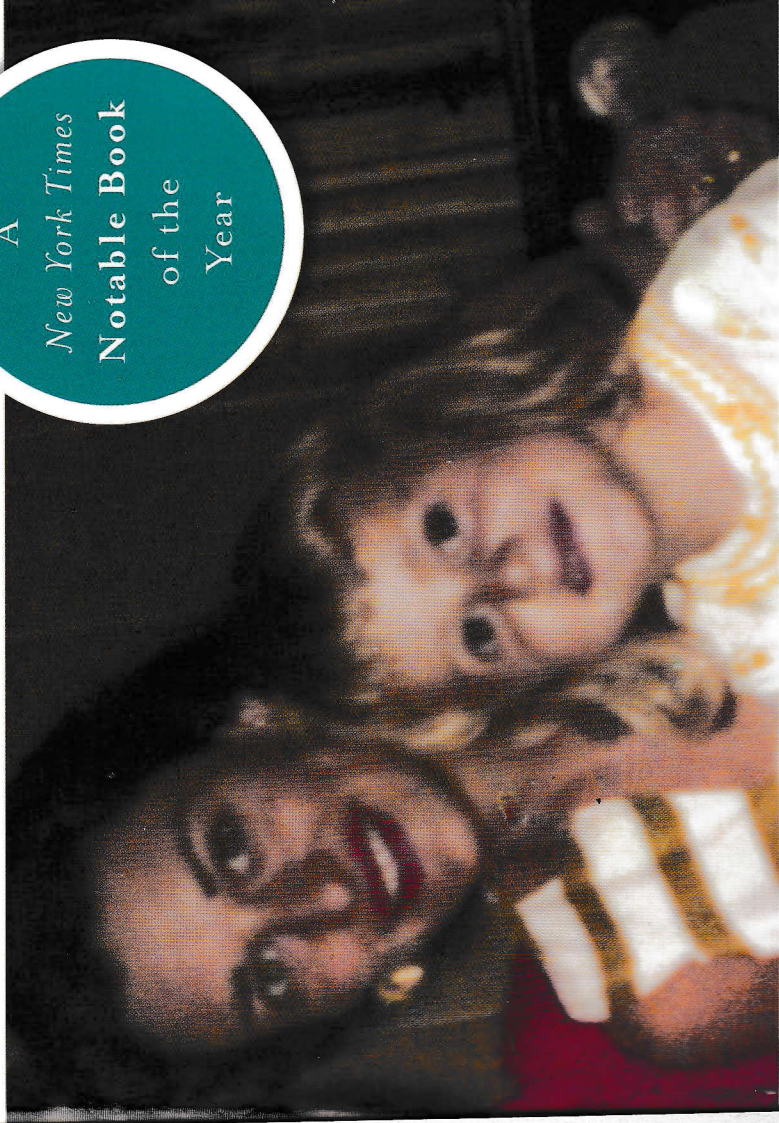
"Powerful and affecting . . . a candid, often painful depiction of a daughter's struggles to come to terms with her powerful and emotionally troubled mother."

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Searching for Mercy Street

My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton

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Mercy Street

My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton

Linda Gray Sexton

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*For Gabe,
who kept watch as I typed,
with love for your love*

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sexton, Linda Gray

Searching for Mercy Street: My journey back to my mother, Anne Sexton / Linda Gray Sexton.—1st

ed.
p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-58243-744-6

1. Sexton, Anne—Family. 2. Sexton, Linda Gray. Family. 3. Women poets, American—20th century—Biography. 4. Mothers and daughters—United States—Biography. 1. Title. PS3537.E915Z86 1994
811'.54—dc20
[B] 94-8889

Jacket design by Gerilyn Attebery
Interior design by MeganJonesDesign.com

Printed in the United States of America

COUNTERPOINT

1919 Fifth Street
Berkeley, CA 94710

www.counterpointpress.com

Distributed by Publishers Group West
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Metaphors

I give you the images I know.

Lie still with me and watch.

—ANNE SEXTON, "THE FORTRESS"

THE PAST is a deep drawer in my mind, filled with a clutter of memories, dreams, fantasies, and images. When I open that drawer I learn about myself and about the others I have lived with and loved. It seems to me now, at this midpoint of my life, that all of us must experience the strong wish that accompanies every act of remembering: the desire to believe that whatever we remember is the way an event actually happened—the truth of one particular moment, one particular day. Intellectually we accept that the nature of truth as we experience it must be subjective, yet we insist, quite emotionally, that our version is the only one possible: I remember, therefore it was.

Mother defined her truths, interior and exterior, through her poetry, in which she naturally took a great deal of literary license. My mother imparted to me her enduring belief: what actually happened is not nearly so important as how you *feel* about what happened. Emotions are the bedrock upon which she built, with craft and artistry, her poetry—a poetry dubbed by many as “confessional,” for in it she spoke baldly of the intimate and private aspects of her life.

For example, in *Mercy Street*—Mother’s autobiographical play, which was eventually produced off-Broadway in 1969—she explored an image she could

never pinpoint definitively as memory, but that she could never quite dismiss as fantasy either: her father, a bottle of Scotch in his hand, sitting on the side of her bed late one night, kissing her lewdly and rubbing his hand between her legs. If it didn't actually happen exactly this way, surely the scene stood as a metaphor for the ways in which she feared her father and yet craved his love.

To write about such an event required only that she could *feel* it; thus she learned about herself, and, as a part of that process, perhaps she could also learn something about humankind. Her memories and fantasies were important to her, above all, in this way. Like Freud, she was her own laboratory.

We transcend many experiences—angry parents, fierce teachers, the taunts of both enemies and friends—particularly if we write of them. Whether captured in language or not, these experiences ultimately toughen the soul; to them we owe our mettle. Mother was not interested in castigating her father for a transgression that she freely admitted might have been only fantasy in her mind. She was captured by the idea that through the process of writing about a memory the poet can make it *more* real, *more* significant, than the actual event would have been in any case. What is told—as opposed to what is known—becomes the central concern. Or, as Mother told Dr. Orne in a therapy session in 1961: “What you write is better than what you are.” Words can capture truth or promulgate lies. Words can clarify or disguise. Words can cleanse or make one’s soul more filthy. Words have magical powers.

If childhood is the place and the time in which language wakes and allows us to begin capturing our reality in an enduring fashion, then the deep drawer filled with early memories should overflow with all manner of treasure. I open this drawer now to see, in one corner, half-hidden, a snapshot. I pull it out, unsure if it is memory or fantasy, dream or metaphor. Such distinctions no longer matter, however, when what I seek is only the truth of how *I felt*, a truth far more revelatory *about me* than any exact history.

Here is Mother, sitting at the kitchen table in our small kitchen, elbows propped on the rectangular pine table with iron legs. Sunlight slants through the window, signifying midmorning. The air is hazy with smoke. Between her

fingers a cigarette angles, making a yellow stain on her skin. The ashtray full, she smudges her butts in the saucer of her coffee cup. The other hand drifts up to her head, as if forgetting what it was meant to be doing, as if determined to put something right. Smoothing and patting her hair one minute and then beginning to twirl curls the next. Ropy twists around the long bony fingers, her rings snagging. Sparkling and twisting. Smoke rises. Dishes from breakfast are still on the table. All morning long she is silent, staring. I sit at the table like a watchdog. I make pictures with my two-tier box of crayons: the colors are solid and bright—azure, forest green, magenta, carmine, and harvest gold. I am afraid to leave her.

“Mommy, can we have lunch?”

“Not now.”

“I’m hungry.”

When she turns to me I see her locked inside herself, staring out at me from another world. Her eyes are smoking, as if she has stuck her finger in an electric socket and all that jittery juice is burning its way out through her eyes. Her hair snakes up from her head. She looks at me with hate. I look away fast.

Time passes. My thumb’s in my mouth, but it doesn’t help my tummy. “I’m hungry,” I say again, getting up to come around the table.

“Go away.”

I stand there and stare at her. I am so scared. Her eyes flare, a jolt, a flash, her hand strikes. My cheek burns with the long print of her fingers. I start to cry.

As A CHILD I already felt I was my mother’s watchdog—a gatekeeper of sorts. When I was twenty-five, I drew a pair of eyes, black and threatening, on a piece of paper while attending a lecture; this felt-tip sketch frightened me so much that I hid it. Those eyes evoked in me the most intense anxiety. They were smoking as surely as Mother’s eyes in the scene described above.

What did those eyes mean? I sweated it out for days, arriving finally at a single association: *the eyes are behind bars*. At first this meant nothing either. But gradually I began to think of my own eyes, those eyes whose vision was too dangerous to be borne. As a child I had witnessed that motherhood, womanhood,

and adulthood were hazardous states. Adults were often out of control, burning up, electrified. Sometimes mothers and fathers were violent, sometimes women were insane. Sometimes a mother slapped her little girl. Sometimes a mother wanted to kill her to make her stop crying.

At the front of the drawer is another snapshot that brings with it a flood of intense, precisely detailed memories. I am in my parents' bedroom with its gray-and-yellow flowered wallpaper. The twin beds are joined by a single gray headboard, on the wooden bedside tables stand lamps with mirrored bases. I have been watching television, while my mother lies on the bed behind me, staring off into space. I turn to ask her a question and she doesn't answer. I stand up and go over to her. Naked from the waist down, she is making noises and her fingers curl through her crisp black pubic hair. She pushes her long clitoris back and forth against the thick lips of her vagina. I drop my eyes, ashamed. She does not stop even though I am in the room. Her eyes don't seem to see me or know I am here. I am scared. Maybe she is having some kind of fit? Maybe they will take her away to the hospital again?

I close my eyes on this scene and try hard not to see it, though it happens again other times, once in the bathtub, more times on the bed. I shut my memories up in the prison of my mind; I know without being told that I shouldn't see things like this. This is bad. If I am to take good care of my mother, then I must make sure no one knows. The watchdog must keep quiet.

And so, for a long time, I keep my eyes, and my voice, behind bars. I am determined not to be like my mother, spilling secrets like water from a cup, writing out a family's shame. I will lock our dirt up tight.

To write these words frightens me. What sin do I commit by remembering and speaking at last? Like some long-craved-for food finally in my mouth, words have power. Mother used to own all the words. Now I own some of them too. Once I hated her for using her voice. Now I understand why she did.

PULL THE DRAWER open again, Linda. The drawer will give you the fuel to continue. I bend slowly to look, and suddenly I see it there square in the middle,

next to the yellow balloon of first grade: summer, the beach. An expanse of white, fronted by rolling blue, backed by dunes high as cliffs. Mother loves the sun more than food, and the beach provides heaven for us all: sun for her, a family outing for us; we are relaxed; everything is "all right," a phrase that embodies, at that time of my life, safety and therefore happiness. The ocean tumbles at our feet, and Joy and I, best buddies, build mud castles in a race with the tide. Crane Beach, just north of Boston—packed with other people and their children, normal people doing normal things. The bright orange, red, and yellow of beach blankets. The green canvas umbrella that no one ever sits under. The strong wind that can bring goose bumps even when it is ninety degrees, that fills our heads with a muffled roar indistinguishable from the sound of the sea.

Dad has packed the round red-plaid Scotch cooler with ice and bottles of beer without their labels. "Pass me the brown soda," Mother jokes, mindful of the lifeguards sitting atop their tall white chairs and the signs that forbid alcohol on the beach. We eat potato chips and egg salad sandwiches on white bread. Mother and Dad let us sip the brown soda. Copertone on the back, sand up the butt, the sound of the waves pounding the rhythm that would never leave my head, that would soothe me for years to come whenever I heard it, carrying with it the contentment of days such as these. Above us the gulls wheel, shrieking their raucous joy at the pickings we leave. Mother smiles. We are content. For a while we, too, are normal people doing normal things.

SUMMER AGAIN: THIS photo does not fade with time. My parents, hand in hand, walk out the front door and down the walk. From my bedroom above, I watch them, strolling down our street in Newton Lower Falls after Sunday supper. Mother is dressed all in white to accentuate her deep tan, her long legs finished in flat white sandals, her toes painted with bright red polish. Tonight she looks like the nickname my father has given her: "Princess Anne." My father, in chinos and a madras shirt, is as slender as she, just Mother's height, his blue eyes sparkling, his hair lightened near to blond from the hours spent on yard work under the sun. This summer he has landscaped and planted a brand-new