POETRY PORTFOLIO:
THINGS I’LL NEVER SAY

and

MINI-DISSERTATION:
THE FRAGMENTED SELF: FEMALE IDENTITY IN PERSONAL POETRY, WITH
PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO SELECTED POEMS BY ANNE SEXTON, ANTJIE
KROG AND FINUALA DOWLING

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I herewith declare that

THINGS I’LL NEVER SAY

and

THE FRAGMENTED SELF: FEMALE IDENTITY IN PERSONAL POETRY, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO SELECTED POEMS BY ANNE SEXTON, ANTJIE KROG AND FINUALA DOWLING

are my own work and that all the sources that I have used have been acknowledged by means of complete references.

J.C. du Plessis 30 May 2011
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor David Medalie, whose thoughtful guidance has truly made a positive difference to my writing. Your suggestions, patience and encouragement made this Masters an enjoyable and rewarding experience, which I feel privileged to have had.

I dedicate this body of work to my wonderful parents and my beautiful sister. It is also dedicated to the ever-inspiring I. who is not I.
ABSTRACT:

This mini-dissertation examines selected poems by three female poets who deal with what I have termed ‘the personal’ in relation to specifically female concerns in their poetry, namely Anne Sexton, Antjie Krog and Finuala Dowling. There has been a considerable rise in personal and autobiographical writing in the last few decades, and this trend shows no sign of decreasing.

This kind of writing has provoked much heated debate, both regarding its content and its style(s). Many critics and poets, such as Robert Lowell or James Dickey, disapprove of the frankness with which female poets discuss subjects which are specific to women, and consider the poems to be too graphic or crude. Personal poems which are not graphic are also criticised as being boring, irrelevant or lacking in artistic craft. Those in favour of poetry of the personal, such as Collette Inez and Alicia Ostriker, believe that contemporary poets’ freedom to examine any topic they like is a positive development. Instead of considering these poems to be irrelevant to readers, they believe that personal poetry can be a means for both writers and readers to explore identity and to navigate various female roles.

This mini-dissertation argues in defence of personal poetry, and addresses the common criticisms of this type of writing briefly mentioned above. It highlights women’s issues and questions of female identity throughout. The different ways in which female writers approach personal poetry are also examined, and the mini-dissertation compares the controversial aspects of Sexton’s writing with Krog’s candour and Dowling’s understated humour. Through close textual analysis, the mini-dissertation highlights both similarities and differences in the work of these poets, in support of the value of such poetry for both readers and writers.

The mini-dissertation is accompanied by a portfolio of my own creative work. My poems also fit into the category of female poetry of the personal, so while I do not directly discuss my own work in the mini-dissertation, the portfolio and mini-dissertation are thematically linked.
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2. MINI-DISSERTATION

The fragmented self: female identity in personal poetry, with particular reference to selected poems by Anne Sexton, Antjie Krog, and Finuala Dowling

1. Introduction
2. Anne Sexton: A woman who writes
3. Antjie Krog: An examined life
4. Finuala Dowling: Who we really are
5. Conclusion
6. Bibliography
Things I'll never say
Polar bodies

I see you in your cell of cells
eyes flickering from neck to toe
casting uncertain nuclear spells
banishing murmurs from below
old Christmas and wedding bells
drift through the closed window

Once there were elegant hotels
where ladies with pale limbs
wore outfits in soft pastels
mauve hats with matching trims

In your cell of cells
more than a passing glance
shows what is painful to tell
the coverings draped askance
dress the solitary spells
to conceal the stark lack

Stop time, turn it back
to lovely afternoons
and graceful farewells
to decorative spoons
and finely grained seashells
outside the closed window
chime Midnight Mass and dinner bells

In a mordant faded room
things are moving beneath her skin
unfurling like black roses
eating her from within
Last girl standing

The last girl standing in the Mild Mild West
I've been abandoned, left in the flat lands
by my best bosom buddies. Their quest:
brand new mammoth mammary glands
and manlier men with gargantuan hands.
How it was

It was sweltering that day
violets shrinking in their beds
dogs and housewives panting
short skirts turning heads
butterfly wings blackening
outside, the hot tar vibrating.

Or perhaps it was lukewarm
neither cold nor hot
a fence-sitting day
with no opinions of its own.

Or no; it was icy.

Yes, that's what I like to think,
it was unseasonably cold
doves chirruping forlorn
springtime's blossoms still unborn
while Autumn's ornaments were torn
from the wrists of skeletal trees.

I can't recall how it was
I only remember that I forget
everything about the day
that day you went away,
and that I forgot my name
forgot to breathe
forgot the skies
the day that the light
left your eyes.
The gluttons

The meal remains untouched
it’s still in the same spot
that it was last week
it’s beginning to rot.

If you don’t want to eat
we shouldn’t make a fuss
you’re really quite well nourished
after eating all of us.

Your brittle frame is fat
filled up with our marrow
and your own yellow malice.
You’ve sucked our bones hollow.

You’ve gorged yourself on us
and there’s nothing we can do
but ignore the ghastly truth:
we’re as gluttonous as you.
The ties that bind

On that lucid night
time slackened and stood still
your head became reflective glass
I saw through me to you.
Your outline trembled vaguely
as we sat there back to back
my eyes slithered up your spine
and watched it slowly crack.

On that despondent night
time unravelled and stood still
in my ears there grew blood
in my mouth there rose vile mud
the air ruptured violently
in a wakeful dream
it was the silent sound
of an underwater scream.

On that friendless night
in the back of my head
I grew unsightly eyes
that imagined you were dead.
Inheritance

The crowded room
wordless as a tomb
is vermillion,
the colour of shame
and the blame
which drifts through the air
unacknowledged,
unclaimed.
Ashen-faced and red-handed
we all look away.

Smothered questions
half-hearted intentions
we could have
we should have
become hesitations
stifled, abandoned
to avoid accusations.

The room darkens
and begins to fill
with the absence of words.
The expectant silence
rises and swells
unpalatable, pungent,
reeking of blame.

These hovering questions,
their mud-spattered implications,
watch from a distance as we begin
to dissect the remains,
the murky silt
our shared inheritance
of regret and guilt.
On being a Canadian girl

Once upon a time
long before I was born
my parents pondered moving
to a continent less torn
I was almost a Canadian girl
residing on a farm
among soft mountains and lakes
with no burglar alarms.

And so I wondered if
I’d been produced and grown
in that frosty pallid haze
of land as white as bone
without this cloying heat
and the endless barking dogs
the vicious potholed streets
the loud croaking of the frogs
perhaps I’d have stuck
my chilly childhood toes
in Winnipeg Lake
abandoned poetry for prose.

Canada, from kanata,
means settlement or village
and I imagine somewhere there
lives a girl with my visage
named Chloe or Kaitlyn
living life at farm-girl pace
with a content expression
plastered on her chubby face.
Between her toque and goggles
is a ghastly gorby gap
on her head reclines
an unsightly woollen cap
she frequently says eh
instead of sorry or what
her plump arms rest comfortably
on her protruding gut.
Of course this girl is married
she blithely sips her tea
while surveying her brood
of children; she has three.

In this frigid spacious land
skulk giant grizzlies and stags
hulking lonesomely along
while in the breeze a flag
flaps flabbily away
emblazoned with pure white
and joyful cherry red.
A reassuring sight.

Somewhere in the north
in a measureless space
lives a sweet Canadian girl
who has taken my place.
There she goes now,
strolling at farm-girl pace
with an annoying smirk stuck
upon her chunky face.
An office ballad

When my colleague sidles over
with a loyal expression
I know I shall receive
her latest thoughtful suggestion.

These usually end with the dire words
“Well, hmm, don’t you think?”
which mean agree with me or else
air kiss, nudge nudge, wink wink.

She tops off her sweet advice
with a supportive smile
to let me know I have been deemed
someone almost worthwhile.

It’s almost as heartening
(but not quite as much fun)
as when the lecherous old boss
stealthily pats my bum.

Chorus
Radio Jacaranda blares
keyboards go clickety-click
Steve Hofmeyr warbles “Gatvol”
high heels go tickety-tick.

A good friend once advised me that
there is no “I” in team
words to dwell on thoughtfully
while stifling a scream.

Sometimes I stand on the terrace
for a forlorn teatime snack
then I watch the pine trees swaying,
bending so they don’t crack.

I tell myself I love my job
oh boy oh boy oh boy
and I feel so damn elated
that I could jump for joy

but for the fear that I would jump
a little bit too high
to slip right over the railing,
too light without my I

obliterating the skyline
splatting on the boss's merc
and finally succeeding in
making a splash at work.

Chorus
Radio Jacaranda in the background
the keyboards go clickety-click
Steve Hofmeyr warbles “Gatvol”
while high heels go tickety-tick.
(repeat from 8am–5pm)
A Griselda by any other name

On a sunny Monday morn
she of extraordinary DNA
came gliding up the stairs:
the director’s new PA.

Colleagues felt severely challenged
to meet her sultry eyes
their own were firmly fastened
on her chest, her hips, her thighs.

Even the bookkeepers
who barely ever moved
came over all aquiver
when she entered the room.

Best of all were her legs
objects of calculating stares
limbs to launch a thousand clerks
right out their office chairs.

But to be sure, wherever
there are desirous male stares
there will also be hushed hissing
with some drop-dead female glares.

Perhaps her parents know
that the world’s a loathsome place
and promptly bestowed on her
her name, her saving grace:

Griselda Regina Groenewald
all rasping gs and rolling rs
a name that rattles like a cat
hacking up a great hairball,

her best feature without which
poor Grizzie, belle of the ball
would be a lonely little princess
with no female friends at all.
Solace

My most beloved pet
may live for a while yet
or he may not
says the vet
but if the time comes
not if, but when
his last shaky legs
are exhausted
it’s better to let him go
far better to bestow
a last loving gift
painless and swift
than to clutch him
to your beating chest
selfish to protest
there is comfort in mercy
and nothing to regret
no unpaid debt
says that hateful vet.

These words give no solace
but make me think of her
for whom there is no easy death
drawing jagged breaths
in the white room where she lies
machines blip and sigh
while we are silent.

We clutch, and nobody
calls us selfish.

At least no one says
it’s better in the long run
and in a little while
you can get another one.
He slowly blinks

Dead is his owner, and the owner before
a bad-luck tomcat with a toothy jaw

I took him in, in a moment of madness
the leftover ruins of another’s sadness

An unloved thing with unravelling fur
which he sheds around with obnoxious fervour

There he sits, soaking up the sun’s rays
with the rattling cough he’s had since last May

The vet’s prognosis: a bad case of old age
his lifespan uncertain, he’s seen better days

Amazing, she says, that this mouldy furball
can still keep his body together at all

Amazing, she says. And perhaps it is.
But far more astounding to me is this:

At times our eyes meet and he slowly blinks
and growls and purrs and appears to wink

I feel a strange kinship and sincerely wish
that this creature, with breath like last year’s fish

who wakes me up nightly and yowls at my door
keeps hacking and moulting for many years more.
Green

Little darling, little darling
you’re lovely as can be
you’re the knees of the bees
you’ve chomped the canary

Little kitten, little lady
there’s a glint in your eye
that says what you don’t when
you breathe a charming sigh

Little treasure, little honey
you’re delightful as can be
and far more beloved
than I will ever be
Zugzwang

A chess player is in ‘zugzwang’ when every available move would make his or her position worse, and most often appears in the endgame.

God save the queen
so she can spend
another night
alone
at home
waiting for that lazy king.

The phone doesn’t ring.
The uses of mathematics

In physics and fluid dynamics
probability and analytical mechanics
statistics and biology
research and cryptography
there are equations
which can be quadratic or quintic
cubic or quartic
and come attached to impossible names like
Schwinger-Dyson and Henderson-Hasselbalch
Sackur-Tetrode and Chapman-Kolmogorov.

A complex number appears in the formula
\[ a + bi \]
When \( a \) is real and
\( b \) is an imaginary part,
and \( i \) is an imaginary unit with some or other elegant property.
This makes little sense,
except for the part about
\( i \) standing for imaginary;
\( i \) could also stand for incongruency
inconstancy
indecision or
infidelity.

If \( a = 1 \)
and \( 2 = b \)
then \( a \) and \( b \) will equal three
which is also a complex number
containing two many men
and \( a + b \)
keeps on equalling three;
the fourth Fibonacci
the first odd prime
the number of stars in the belt of Orion
a crowd, a wheel, an extra part
the main arteries of the heart
the number of points in a triangle
which is a treacherous, sharp-edged shape
equilateral, equiangular, isosceles or scalene
obtuse, acute, or sometimes even right
and yet in life, it never is.
A triangle is a traitorous, tortuous shape
From whichever angle you look at it.

In biomedical science and nuclear physics
mechanical engineering and micro robotics
there are equations
which can be differential or comparometric
biquadratic or relativistic.

None of this helps with the equation
\[ a + b = 3 \]
an answer with no solution.

When \( a + b \) adds up to three
it eventually equals misery.
Yearning

1.

They dreamt an island in the sun
where dusky groves of yew trees grew
casting shadows on the sand
dripping their oppressive glue
onto white grains below

and the soft winds swirled and blew
to sift the porcelain sand.

2.

By their feet were buttercups
forget-me-nots and columbines
a vibrant bed of flourishes
with orange lilies intertwined
all stretching out their modest arms
to touch those lofty yews

whose lengthy limbs
beseeched the sun
to raise them tall
to stroke the clouds
and curled their toes
beneath the mud
to drink the earth's
own blood.

3.

As the sun set the moon rose high
when a shade traversed the sky
to brush the moon's pale face
and conceal the lunar light
with an envious embrace.
The skies were hushed
the isle was lost
the heavens wept soft rain
as empty as a childless room
as regretful as Lot's wife
as everlasting as loss
and dark as thirst for life.
Things I'll never say

I suffered severe kalopsia
the day that I met you
not to mention my Panglossia
which I fervently rue

It’s an irrefragable fact
that you’re a man maledicent
you jactate all day long
in a manner so sailoquent

Your grandiloquence is amphigorical
and your rampant lexiphanicism
is even more irksome than
your fervent eleutherophilism

You’re a barathrum of brabbling
a macrotous monstrosity
a niminy-piminy blatherskite
you’ve exhausted my longanimity

What horripilation afflicts me now
when I recall your kakidrosis
your countenance most gliriform
and your chronic halitosis

After you called me steatopygic
I jejunated for a week
Zounds! You are a mome!
May you be afflicted with gleet!

Glossary:¹

Kalopsia: delusion that things are more beautiful than they are
Panglossian: blindly or naively optimistic

Irrefragable: indisputable
Maledicent: Given to vicious, abusive speech
Jactation: boastful display or declaration
Sailoquent: spraying saliva while speaking
Grandiloquence: bombastic or pompous language
Amphigory: nonsense that appears meaningful
Lexiphanicism: pretentious linguistic expressions
Eleutherophilism: advocate of free love
Barathrum: bottomless pit
Brabble: talk noisily, stammer, jabber
macrotous: having large ears
niminy-piminy: finicky; affectedly refined
Blatherskite: babbling, foolish person
Longanimity: patience in the face of suffering
Horripilation: creeping of flesh
Kakidrosis: smelly perspiration
Gliriform: resembling a rodent
Steatopygic: having fat buttocks
Jejunator: a person who fasts
Zounds: an archaic mild oath indicating surprise or indignation
Mome: a stupid doltish person; a blockhead
Gleet: chronic inflammation of a bodily orifice
The sadness of new beginnings

Summer nights are dire for the dearly deserted. All empty: the house, the fridge, the bed. You wouldn’t come back. I went out instead. We escape ourselves this way, to places where endless limber limbs beat out staccato rhythms in clammy rooms of clinking glasses and flattering light. Summer swelled. Somewhere, roses bloomed. Tired of being neither wrong nor right, I gave in to hollow eyes and flimsy hands the cloying need of vacant night.

But the dark withered away. Daylight swarmed in, quivered on sweaty sheets the same song droned on, stuck on repeat as the slithering summer heat licked our flesh, two pieces of rotting meat rank with cheap wine his foreign arm draped heavily over mine.

I watched us, a voyeur through your artful eyes and wished that you felt as desolate as I.
Performance art

The girl gazed fiercely at the wall
which was sturdy, strong and tall.
Friends and family shook their heads
exchanging familiar looks of dread.
“Don’t do it” all of them said.
“This wall is unbreakable.
Impenetrable, impassable”.

But she ignored the things they said
and began to bang it with her head.

It hurt.

“See,” they said, “it hurts, we know,
but all of us did tell you so.”

Gathering her zeal and gall
she once again retried the wall.

This time it really hurt.

Passers-by soon stopped to ask
the purpose of this absurd task
they gathered round and with dismay
remained to watch this strange display
this submission of head to heart
which was almost performance art.

Friends and family simply shrugged.
“Why she does that we don’t know
but we always tell her so.”

Her head throbbed and her eyes streamed
the wall was crueller than it seemed.
One last rash attempt was made
to conquer this stern barricade.
She became drenched with bloody tears
her soul leaked out through her ears
she toppled over, black and blue
and realized what they’d said was true:

It really does hurt.

"Well, you really should have known
after all, everybody told you so,"
chuckled the ghost of the
Marquis de Sade
who enjoys this type of show.

As she lay there bruised and battered
onlookers grew bored and scattered
friends and family trickled away.
She lies there still to this day.
Happy Event

For big fat happy women
there’s a magic smear-on potion
for their big fat blessed event:
Happy Event lotion.

As your stomach and thighs swell,
threatening world-wide domination
Happy Event lubricates
and allows elasticisation.

Tried and tested, it says,
best of all it doesn’t stain
your voluminous maternity wear
which you may end up in again.

I remember a girl
who shrieked, “My life is over!”
while another life brewed
as she barfed up her breakfast.
Stretch marks webbed out
over her matryoshka form
novel purple veins grown
father-to-be flown
titanic breasts sagging
morning sickness gagging
applying Happy Event,
trying not to cry.
I think we’ve all been told
a big fat happy lie.
Dating an engineer

For one night I lived
in a house in a tree.
No children's tree hut, but
a real wooden cottage
far, far above
the world's grit and debris.

This is a house
of candy-floss clocks
ornithological friends
wearing polka-dot socks
this is a house
of pink fairy cake
this is a house
where nothing can break,
not teacups, nor windows,
not hearts, nor smiles.
This is the house
of the eternal child.

Post-dream, I describe
the house that I've seen.
The sleepy response:
"Wasps would move in."
Game show booby prize

Squeeze one, squish two
oh lucky, lucky you!
Another point, no, two
double or nothing!
(ah, how true).
Now you've won
very well done.
_Am I squeezing too hard?_
Not at all, please go on,
it's attached but never mind
I've got another one
a peach and a plum
for the winner tweedledum
one plus one is two
two minus one is one
and we girls do love
a balanced midnight sum.
TV dinner

In front the television blares, sound and
light glaring over the unseeing stares
of eyes become mute and tongues grown thick.
We gnaw on salad and celery sticks.

Someone may still drop a glass,
or step on the cat,
pull out a plum,
or eat a hat.

We move on to the main course
the TV lurks like a Trojan horse.
Above the lights are growing dim
knives and forks scritch on plates
like dry twigs on a cemetery gate.
Our faces wilt, the meat is grim.

But someone may yet throw a vase,
or spit out a bat,
lop off a thumb
or skin that cat.
Sunday morning

Another solitaire game done
the screen proclaims “You Won!”
The latest score: 1 004

But anyway, it was time,
you were starting to overflow
into the extra shelves, to bleed
into the flower beds, to seep
into the air, which reeked
of your indifferent greed
and carnivorous needs.

Far worse than theatre
is the unmasked ball
the dryness, the dullness,
the not-enoughness of it all.

What of the rest of the day?
I’ll probably change light bulbs,
and park my own car
drink straight from the tap
or open a jar.
Pearls of wisdom

A black day sheds darkness
a white day sheds light
dogs don’t always show their teeth
when they intend to bite.

One does not burn a blanket
to get rid of a flea
thorns and roses grow
upon a single tree.

When digging pits for your neighbours
dig them your own size
he who sleeps with blind men
will wake up cross-eyed.

The pen is a weapon
far nastier than the sword
and hell hath no fury
like a woman scorned.

Especially when the woman is a poet,
who will remember:
the way your flabby belly flopped
over your tight, tiger-print underwear
the way you slurped your spaghetti
which clung to your beard
the hurtful things you said
that bizarre thing you did in bed.

He who sleeps with blind men
might wake up cross-eyed
but he who pisses off a poet
could wake up immortalized.
As within

a certain sombre calm floods the mottled sky
from battered clouds dismal light seeps, and rain
the drops concentrate, burst like blood clots
the blackened streets are streaming slick
in their watery beds drowned plants rot
the air sticks, dry twigs softly scratch, click

we can't stay in we don't want to go out
as above so below as within so without
let us then avoid the insulting eye-to-eye
avert furtive eyes lest they belie quiet rage
the pent-up wrath of a tiger in a cage

nightfall brings a longing for the oblivion of sleep
and the deepest desire to make someone weep
Panic room

The damn cat keeps licking
and he's crawling everywhere
I'm mummified in furry sheets
I'm drowning in his hair
rolling red lights glare out
one two three four o'clock
I dream I'm in a meeting
wearing only two odd socks
deadlines swarm out the cupboard
to surround the sweaty bed
and shriek: you should have worked,
you watched movies instead!
darkness slinks off, embarrassed,
and daylight skitters in,
clattering against the glass
and rattling curtain rings
The power of cute

The power of cute is a potent force as women and cats well know.

I admit to times in nightclubs or bars when having drank away all my money and morals, I’ve smiled coyly at Dick, Tom, or Harry fluttered my lashes, flicked my hair giggled a little and said “Hi there” to wriggle my feminine wiles between a man and his wallet. The success of this shameful mission depends largely on the target’s levels of intoxication or desperation.

In my complex there is a cat who lies in the courtyard and yowls. As he reclines there and cries with his huge blue eyes and the dainty claws of his petite, downy paws with his luxurious fur and negotiable purr with a flick of his tail to stress every wail he summons the power of cute, using those hypnotic globes which say, “Hello. My humans aren’t home and I’m too adorable to be this alone.” Within seconds a Samaritan appears to stroke his ears and dry his cat tears, to croon, “What’s the matter?” and invite him in for milk.

If I lay outside crying, face in my paws
I’d be breaking the complex laws
which prohibit excessive noise
and public displays of anguish.

I’m severely outcuted by this cat
my contrived female smiles
lesser than his feline wiles.
Sometimes, on a good night,
through beer goggles and dim light
I’m cute enough to get a free drink.
But I’ll never be cute enough
to get a free saucer of milk.
Hello Kitty

I’ve always sneered at girly girls
pink-buttoned frilly pearly girls
cashmere kittens and mittens girls
with captive ribboned twirly curls.
I’ve always yawned at cupcake girls
baking, pie-making kitchen girls
carrot and walnut grating girls
those missy prissy pumpkin girls.
I’ve always feared maternal girls
the coochie-cooing-cutesy girls
baby-hungry kangaroo girls
mothering smothering uddering girls.
I’ve always been a messy girl
a knotty-haired upside-down girl
a clumsy failed ballerina girl
a lonely cat-kissing surly girl.
I’ve always been a batlike thing
hating sunshine, dreading spring
a stringy twitchy nervous thing
trailing ashtrays and coffee rings.

I’ve never really been a girl.

And so it was until last night
I stumbled on a ghastly sight
when my head jerked up to see
reflected in the oven door: me!
With lips framed in a perfect “o”
as if frozen while saying “hello”
in a damn damsel disguise
a floral dress and made-up eyes
in the background, pots and pans
a cookbook held in manicured hands.
In dreams

In daylight dreams your hand around mine
is marble and we’re side by side, arm in arm
two cool stone statues warmly intertwined.

If you should leave for a year and a day
and return, you’d find me waiting, as still
and forlorn as one stone pine on a hill.

I’ve already seen your aged face slip through
and I love you still; and I’ve seen you see me
the most disappointing me I can ever be
but you don’t crucify with must or should
you wear a man’s face, yet when you smile
a young child’s face shines through. If I could
keep the clamorous world away, I would.

So if you should leave for a thousand years
then come back to me, you would find
me lying where once you stood.
In daylight dreams I’m yours, and you’re mine.

But at night I disgrace myself. You’re displaced.
In my dreams you wear another man’s face.
Knowing

All the while, I have known
the certainty of my pale bones
beneath this white lie.
In uneasy years, I tried to postpone
the growth of flesh, recoiled
at a foreign body’s excess,
knowing these sinews felt
no obligation towards bone.

But this was how I was grown:
a canvas ready for painting
land ripe for the claiming
and spraying. The memories of
those who came before
line up in silence,
as if for roll call.
I despise them all.

They are persistent ghosts
but they’ve been overthrown.
I’ve learnt the art of stillness.
Alone, I cackle like a crone.

This was how I was grown;
to smile and be light.
Underneath, my slight bones
remain white. They are mine.
They have turned to stone.
THE FRAGMENTED SELF: FEMALE IDENTITY IN PERSONAL POETRY, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO SELECTED POEMS BY ANNE SEXTON, ANTJIE KROG AND FINUALA DOWLING
1. INTRODUCTION

In the past decades there has been an unprecedented rise in personal and autobiographical literature, causing heated debate about the nature, function and value of this branch of writing. As Graham and Sontag state, “For good or ill, we live in the age of memoir.” They list increasing numbers of autobiographies, memoirs, fictionalized biographies, and works of creative non-fiction as evidence of the increase in writing of the personal (2001: 3). Poetry has not remained unaffected, and along with the Women’s Movement and feminism, there has been a vast increase in the number of female writers who write particularly about women’s lives, interests and concerns. As Markey notes, “From 1963 on almost every subject of importance to women’s lives has been researched and commented on by women writers” (1988: 7).

While writing about the personal may be on the rise, this kind of writing is certainly nothing new. Sappho wrote personal poetry in ancient Greece, and approximately a thousand years ago Sei Shonagon was already wittily chronicling her day-to-day life, personal likes and dislikes. Autobiographical writing abounds throughout the history of literature, and the self-portrait has long been a common theme in the visual arts. However, an important development in female poetry of the personal is the new frankness with which subjects specific to women, such as female sexuality, motherhood and previously decidedly unpoetic topics such as menstruation, abortion and menopause are discussed with varying degrees of candour, wit, hope, despair, resignation and anger. Contemporary female poets, it seems, are free to examine any topic and personal issue with as much graphic detail as they like, as is evident in poems such as Antjie Krog’s “Toilet Poem” (Krog 2000: 54) which begins:

things of course about which one would never write a poem
force their way into the territory of poetic themes
such as changing tampon and pad to pee in toilets (1-3)

Understandably, responses to this kind of writing are mixed, with some critics and poets praising the freedom this gives to writers for self-expression, and others frowning upon such mundane or crude subjects intruding into the realm of poetry.

Many critics claim that such frank female poetry began with Anne Sexton, whom Collette Inez (2001: 118) praises as “one of the literary goddesses who, along with Plath, gave women of my generation permission to write of the macabre, of bedlam, abortion,
depression.” Sexton’s work became defined as “confessional”, a label which has frequently been applied to personal writing since then.

Confessional poetry may be defined as “a term principally applied to the self-revealing style of writing and use of intimate subject matter adopted and pioneered in America by R. Lowell” (Drabble and Stringer 2003). Yet another definition is “an autobiographical mode of verse that reveals the poet’s personal problems with unusual frankness. The term is sometimes used more loosely to refer to any personal or autobiographical poetry, but its distinctive sense depends on the candid examination of what were at the time of writing virtually unmentionable kinds of private distress” (Baldick 2001).

The term has come to have many negative connotations, and has been the subject of a wide variety of criticism and debate. Erica Jong (in Anne Sexton 2009) states:

Whenever Anne Sexton's poems are mentioned, the term “confessional poetry” is not far behind. It has always seemed a silly and unilluminating term to me; one of those pigeonholing categories critics invent so as not to talk about poetry as poetry.... The mind of the creator is all-important, and the term “confessional” seems to undercut this, implying that anyone who spilled her guts would be a poet.

Sexton herself said, “it’s a difficult label, ‘confessional,’ because I’ll often confess to things that never happened … I’ll often just assume the first person and it’s someone else’s story” (Colburn 1985: 134). However, even when a persona is used it often seems to be not very different from the writer. Maio (1995: 24) states that in this case a persona is “closely associated with the poet’s public self. It is his or her mask through which a personal experience can be related with both the subjective (and often pathetic) expression of the confessional voice and the objective stance a poet takes when narrating an account of an imagined character.”

The term “autobiographical” is also an unsatisfactory one for these reasons, and even when a poem is inspired by events from the writer’s life sometimes metaphors and allusions are used so heavily that the poem hardly appears to be autobiographical at all. Poems which contain recognizable autobiographical details are no less problematic, as even autobiographical writing is much more than the simple retelling of events that the term implies. As Sidonie Smith (1987: 45-6) notes:

Autobiography becomes both the process and the product of assigning meaning to a series of experiences, after they have taken place, by means of emphasis, juxtaposition, commentary, omission. The play of seeking, choosing, discarding words and stories that suggest, approximate, but never recapture the past is what Elizabeth W. Bruss calls the “autobiographical act”: an interpretation of life that
invests the past and the “self” with coherence and meaning that may not have been evident before the act of writing itself.

Thus, even poems which appear to relate events truthfully involve a careful process of selection and the application of artistic techniques, and the act of writing imbues remembered thoughts and events with new meaning.

Because I find the above terms problematic, I will simply refer to the type of poems I will discuss as “personal”, as they tend to discuss personal issues, events and opinions. While individual female poets who write poetry of the personal differ greatly in style and topic, there are often common themes which recur throughout their work. Sexton once said, “The great theme is not Romeo and Juliet …. The great theme we all share is that of becoming ourselves, of overcoming our father and mother, of assuming our identities somehow.” Many critics would agree with Sexton on this point, and there has been a great deal of discussion regarding identity in women’s writing. Gardiner, (in Abel 1982: 177-178), for example, lists some of these arguments:

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar find “the woman's quest for self-definition” the underlying plot of nineteenth-century writing by women, while Elaine Showalter sees “self-discovery,” “a search for identity,” as the main theme of women’s literature since 1920. In a recent anthology of feminist criticism, one scholar claims that “a feminist critique … is helping women to recognize themselves”; a second says that fiction by women reveals “a fear of losing … one’s unique identity”; a third believes “feminist poets” equate “consciousness of oppression; consciousness of identity.”

While much has been written on the quest for identity and self-discovery in women’s writing, the issue thus remains complex. Although many critics have concluded that identity within women’s writing is an important concern, the question of identity in itself is also difficult. Gardiner (Ibid: 177) astutely notes:

“Identity” is a central concept for much contemporary cultural and literary criticism, which, along with its even vaguer terminological twin, the “self”, has become a cliché without becoming clear. The word “identity” is paradoxical in itself, meaning both sameness and distinctiveness, and its contradictions proliferate when it is applied to women…. It is not surprising … that the area of self-concept is especially troubled for women and that contemporary writing by women reflects these dissonances.

If notions of selfhood are frequently important in women’s writing in general, this appears to be particularly evident in female poetry of the personal. In this study, the theme of identity will be considered with regard to locating the “self” in terms of being a wife, mother, daughter and writer and of discovering “identity” in relation to family, friends and
country, as they recur frequently in writing of this nature. Beyond discussing these themes, the actual act of writing appears to be a valuable tool for exploring and defining identity, both as a woman and as a writer. However, as the ensuing discussion will show, the writing also reveals the “dissonances” mentioned by Gardiner, as the women contend in their work with the troubled terrain of identity and selfhood.

Family roles in particular are discussed extensively in female personal poetry, often depicting tension within the nuclear family and showing both the frustration and joy of the female roles of wife, mother and daughter. Bullock & Trombley (1999:308) note:

The family as an institution is as old as humanity itself; the family as an object of thought and a focus of concern is much more recent …. What in more recent years has attracted attention is the view of the nuclear family as the arena of acute personal tensions and conflicts, leading in the opinion of some radical theorists to severe mental illness and other forms of dysfunctional identity. The pressures have seemed particularly severe on women ….

The pressures on women mentioned above, along with the role of the writer in relation to these roles, will be discussed in this essay. As mentioned, these issues have been of particular interest to feminists. While this essay will frequently deal with topics which could be categorized as feminist concerns, feminist criticism has so many different branches that no particular feminist theory will be used to analyse the poems. As Rosemarie Tong (1998: 1) states:

Feminism, like most broad-based philosophical perspectives, accommodates several species under its genus…. I understand each of these to be a partial and provisional answer to the “woman question(s)”, providing a unique perspective with its own methodological strengths and weaknesses.

The focus here will therefore be on female issues of identity and “woman questions” as expressed in the poems, and not on applying any specific feminist theories or criticisms to the work examined. Bearing these issues of identity, female roles and expectations and women’s writing in mind, this study will examine the work of three female poets who deal with the personal in their poetry. Because Anne Sexton is so important to this genre, the discussion will begin with her. Selected poems of Antjie Krog and Finuala Dowling, two contemporary South African poets, will then be examined. Krog’s frankness and choice of subject matter make her work a good choice for comparison with Sexton’s, while Dowling’s work is interesting because although it is deeply personal, it is very different in tone and content from the work of Sexton and Krog. Dowling’s poetry is firmly rooted in her life and roles as mother, daughter, teacher and writer, but her work on the whole is far less controversial in terms of subject matter than Krog’s and Sexton’s. However, there are
some areas where the work of all three poets overlaps in terms of subject, including family relations and the struggle of being both a woman and a poet. These issues will be examined using textual analysis and, where applicable, biographical information or statements by the poets themselves. Throughout the essay specific criticisms of and issues regarding this type of work will be examined, taking into account both the writer and the reader and examining the multiple identities that poets navigate in poetry of the personal.
2. ANNE Sexton: A Woman Who Writes

Anne Sexton left behind a large body of poetry, along with a vast amount of biographical material in the form of letters, recordings, interviews and the controversial recordings of her psychiatric treatment sessions. Whenever Sexton’s poems are discussed, a discussion of the person behind the poetry is never far behind. This is a common concern about personal poetry in general. As W.K. Wimsatt points out:

There is criticism of poetry and there is author psychology … it need not be with a derogatory purpose that one points out personal studies, as distinct from poetic studies, in the realm of literary scholarship. Yet there is danger of confusing personal and poetic studies; and there is the fault of writing the personal as if it were poetic. (In Maxwell-Mahon 1998: 218)

While it is not strictly necessary to know a lot about Sexton herself to appreciate her poetry, some background knowledge does provide insight into her motivations in writing poetry of such a personal nature, and of the journey of self-exploration that she undertook when she began writing.

Sexton began her adult life as a young bride and mother, and the following excerpt from an early letter written to her mother provides a snippet of domestic life that is the traditional domain of women:

My cooking has taken a slight turn for the better. This morning we had coffee cake with our breakfast. We both thought it was delicious and it was. Tonight I made pineapple muffins – they are muffins with little bits of chopped up pineapple in them and they were also very edible. In fact I get two gold stars for today. (Sexton & Ames 2004: 20)

For readers who know Sexton as the outspoken and controversial female poet that she became famous for being, this homely description of baking is surprising and somewhat amusing. However, soon after this picture of domestic bliss Sexton began exhibiting drastic, unpredictable mood swings. A few years later, having given birth to two daughters, she was overwhelmed by the responsibilities of being a wife and mother. She had a breakdown and was institutionalized. Sexton then began to piece her identity together. As she wrote in a letter to her husband, “I think I am beginning, and I do mean just beginning, to find myself – you realize that I MUST find my own self and be something or someone, not necessarily in a concrete manner, but in a personal manner…” (Sexton & Ames 2004: 24). Although she had dabbled in poetry before, she now began writing poems earnestly at the encouragement of her therapist. What followed was a life-long process of disentangling the “self”, of navigating identity within the accepted female roles and expectations. It is
significant that she soon began publishing her poems as “Anne Sexton”, instead of the previously used name of Mrs A. M. Sexton (Middlebrook 1992: 65).

Early in her writing career Sexton defended her personal poetry in the poem “For John, who begs me not to enquire further”, which was a response to John Holmes’ criticism of the intimate nature of her writing. When Sexton was working on the manuscript for To Bedlam and Part Way Back, her first collection of poems for publication in one book, Holmes wrote:

I distrust the very source and subject of a great many of your poems, namely, all those that describe and dwell on your time in the hospital…. It bothers me that you use your poetry in this way. It’s all a release for you, but what is it for anyone else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release? … Don’t publish it in a book. You’ll certainly outgrow it, and become another person, then this record will haunt and hurt you. (In Middlebrook 1992: 98)

Holmes’ comment highlights a common issue in personal writing: why would anyone be interested in reading about someone else’s private distress? “For John, who begs me not to enquire further” is an answer to this question. The title refers to a letter from Schopenhauer to Goethe, in which Schopenhauer states:

It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in the face of every question that makes the philosopher. He must be like Sophocles’s Oedipus, who … pursues his indefatigable enquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. Most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God’s sake not to inquire further. (Sexton 1999: 2)

Sexton also began her first published collection of poems with this quotation, defending her whole collection with the statement that it takes a great deal of courage to pursue and reveal publicly the painful task of self-scrutiny. She reaffirmed this in an interview when she stated, “the gutsy part of me drove on. Still, part of me was appalled by what I was doing …. Yes, it took a certain courage, but as a writer one has to take the chance on being a fool … yes, to be a fool, that perhaps requires the greatest courage” (Colburn 1985: 87).

“For John, who begs me not to enquire further” (Sexton 1999: 34-35) begins with the words:

Not that it was beautiful,
but that, in the end, there was
a certain sense of order there;
something worth learning
in that narrow diary of my mind
in the commonplaces of the asylum
where the cracked mirror
or my own selfish death
outstared me. (1-9)
The first statement is already an argument about what her writing is not, a negative argument implying that any solutions this poem may present will not be clear-cut or absolute. She acknowledges that the truth may not be beautiful or pleasing, but that there is some order within the chaos, some truth within confusion, that is worth imparting to readers. The speaker also acknowledges the subjectivity of her personal writing, which comes from the “narrow diary” of her own thoughts and experiences. The reference to the asylum is a direct response to Holmes’ criticism of Sexton’s descriptions of her time in mental institutions. While the speaker acknowledges that her suicide attempts were “my own selfish death”, the rest of the poem justifies her personal poetry as an unselfish act and answers Holmes’ question, “It’s all a release for you, but what is it for anyone else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release?” The poem continues:

And if I tried
to give you something else,
something outside of myself,
you would not know
that the worst of anyone
can be, finally,
an accident of hope.
I tapped my own head;
it was a glass, an inverted bowl.
It is a small thing
to rage in your own bowl.
At first it was private.
Then it was more than myself;
it was you, or your house
or your kitchen.
And if you turn away
because there is no lesson here
I will hold my awkward bowl,
with all its cracked stars shining
like a complicated lie (10-29)

If the speaker turned away from poetry of the personal and offered something “outside” of herself, readers who suffer from similar anguish would not be able to take solace in her work. By recounting her private distress, the speaker hopes that her own experiences will become “an accident of hope” for someone else. She states that although her experiences were at first “private”, poetry of the personal can be “more than myself”. Through writing, meaning is created and order can be imposed on chaos. This is emphasized in the repetition of the opening lines:
Not that it was beautiful, 
but that I found some order there. 
There ought to be something special 
for someone 
in this kind of hope. 
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. (33-44)

An intensely personal poem may begin as something only of value to the writer, but if meaning is found while writing the poem, this may become “an accident of hope” which in turn “ought to be something special” for readers.

The image of her head as a glass bowl filled with “cracked stars shining” also gives the reader the impression of something almost beautiful, but certainly imperfect. But even a “cracked star” may shed some light, as a “cracked mirror” and a glass “inverted bowl” will show distorted reflections, but some version of truth nonetheless.

Sexton does not proclaim that her work is “beautiful” or ultimately true, but rather “a complicated lie” which contains subjective truths from which others may benefit. The poem concludes by diminishing the distance between Sexton and Holmes, between writer and reader, with the repetition and alternation of “my” and “your”. Even the most personal kind of poetry is still intended to be read by someone unless the author does not publish it, and the implied relationship between writer and reader of personal poetry is one of willing complicity. The writer’s awareness of subjectivity and the complex, co-dependent relationship between writer and reader in personal poetry are well explained by Jo Gill (2009):

Her [Sexton’s] poetry is keenly aware – and indeed flaunts its awareness – that its truths are arbitrary and its authority disputable. Crucially, it is aware that its putative originality is displaced by a discursive and productive relationship between text and reader … the confessional text takes as one of its subjects the complicity of its own audience in the generation of its meaning …. Paradoxically, the self-disclosure in her work is made always with a view to its reader; while ostensibly focusing inward, it also looks outward and turns away from the self…. In Sexton's ‘An Obsessive Combination,’ ‘The Double Image,’ and ‘For John,’ the I can only be comprehended, the self only known, by placing itself in conjunction with an other. The I alone is not self-sufficient and cannot be expressed without a you. Thus all three poems are predicated on a persistent and sustaining dialogue.
Personal poetry is thus writing which contains both inward examination as well as an outward focus, and is a tool which the writer and reader can use to find meaning and define identity. In Gill’s view, what is frequently seen as narcissism in some of Sexton’s work can be viewed as “a purposeful textual strategy rather than as a symptom of debilitating self-absorption” (Ibid).

The same strategy is evident in “The Double Image”, in which the speaker also constructs aspects of the self in relation to others. The idea of the constructed self is often important in personal female writing, and a lot of Sexton’s work is concerned with this theme. “The Double Image” could be considered to be one of Sexton’s most important poems in terms of addressing the self in relation to complex female relationships. Gardiner (in Abel 1982: 184) states:

The two main roles available to women are those of wife and of mother. They assume occupational status as well as denoting personal relationships…. Moreover, female roles often imply the possession of specific personality traits, like passivity and nurturance, that are deemed appropriate for their smooth functioning… female identity is a process…. Often they [twentieth-century women writers] communicate a consciousness of their identity through paradoxes of sameness and difference – from other women, especially their mothers…

“The Double Image” reveals the crisis of identity and feelings of guilt and inadequacy that may result when a woman feels that she has failed at the duties of a wife and mother. This poem also demonstrates the confusion between the female sense of self as an individual rather than as a mother and/or daughter. As mentioned previously, the nuclear family has recently been viewed by some as an “arena of acute personal tensions and conflicts” (Bullock & Trombley 1999:308). The great struggle for Sexton, and for many women, lies in creating a distinct sense of self that is not defined only by family. Nowhere else in life are our similarities and differences, our successes and failures, shown up more starkly than within the family. Family members may resemble each other physically, but they are often very different individuals. When we look at our family, we are looking into a “cracked mirror”. In this poem Sexton examines her mother’s death and her relationship with her own daughter, and looks at the different modes of female identity.

The first three lines of the poem begin with the words “I’, “You”, then “We” (Sexton 1999:35-42):

I am thirty this November.
You are still small, in your fourth year.
We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer (1-3)
The first lines thus immediately establish the subject of this lengthy poem as the self, the other, and the relationship between the two. The subjects of this poem are Sexton herself, her younger daughter Joyce, and Sexton’s own mother. The poem is a complex exploration of the self, the intricacy of family relationships and the guilt which arises from the failure to fulfil the expected roles of mother and daughter.

Key themes in this poem are absences and presences in relationships, words spoken and left unsaid, love given and withheld, guilt and uncertain images. This poem is highly autobiographical, discussing several actual events and relationships. The title of the poem refers to two real portraits, one of Sexton and one of her mother, which hung opposite each other. During this long poem the reader witnesses Sexton’s immense guilt at failing to be a nurturing, reliable mother to her own daughter, and her return to her mother’s house after a breakdown. There is little comfort for her there, and she finds no absolution for her attempted suicide. We are explicitly told this in the lines:

I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said.
And she never could. She had my portrait done instead. (56-58)

This poem is filled with images of and descriptions of the self, and the two portraits function as opposing mirrors endlessly reflecting images which are merely an artist’s portrayal of the real people they represent:

And this was the cave of the mirror,
that double woman who stares
at herself, as if she were petrified
in time … (178-181).

The repetition of images and reflections is echoed by the cyclical structure of the poem, with frequent mentions of months and seasons to mark the passing of time. It begins in autumn, with the speaker recalling the past three autumns. She describes “the yellow leaves” (3) and remembers winters and Christmas holiday seasons, moving from “new snow” (44) to “summer sprinklers” (73) and through to winter again. The narrative of the poem is also cyclical. In the beginning, the speaker tells of the three years of absence from her daughter’s life. She recalls the “mewling months when you first came” (14), moving to descriptions of “the holidays you had to miss” (41) and the lament “I missed your babyhood”’(119). She returns to her own mother, something which causes her substantial guilt. This is evident in the lines:

When I grew well enough to tolerate myself, I lived with my mother. Too late,
too late, to live with your mother, the witches said. 
But I didn’t leave. I had my portrait done instead. (47-51)

Later in the same stanza she states that she lived “like an angry guest” (59) with her mother, and by the last stanza her own daughter comes “like an awkward guest” (200). Far from the unconditional, nurturing love that is expected from mothers, the word “guest” implies obligation and impermanence. By the end of the poem the speaker has left her mother again and her own daughter has returned, but this provides no sense of closure. Instead, as the daughter addresses the speaker as “mother”, she thinks of her own mother, who is dying. Another repeated idea is that of having a portrait done “instead”. Instead of resolving family issues, instead of forgiveness and open communication, two family portraits are done to smoothe over fraught relationships and create a false sense of familial closeness. The portraits are thus used to present a wished-for reality rather than the uncomfortable truth.

The portraits are hung on opposite walls, with repetition once again used to emphasize their similarities. “In north light, my smile is held in place” (160) is echoed by “In south light, her smile is held in place” (166). Her mother’s portrait is described as:

… my mocking mirror, my overthrown love, my first image. She eyes me from that face, that stony head of death I had outgrown. (168-171)

The mother is the “first image”, which has to be overcome in order to develop a sense of self as separate from the primary caregiver. However, in a healthy mother-daughter relationship there should still be a bond of love even when the daughter has established a separate identity. Instead of a comforting maternal figure, the mother in this poem is depicted as an image of death, a destructive force which has been “outgrown”. The speaker’s image of herself as an inadequate mother is mirrored by her distorted image of her own mother.

In stanza 4 the speaker calls her mother’s portrait a “cave of mirror” (109) with “matching smile, matching contour”, and this image is repeated in stanza 6 when she refers to “the cave of the mirror” and the “double woman” who “stares at herself, as if she was petrified” (178-180). The portraits function like distorted mirrors, endlessly reflecting back warped images and complex emotions. The double woman is also “petrified”, suggesting that there is no progression possible in the mother-daughter relationship. The feeling of stagnation and death is reinforced by the description of the mother’s cheeks “wilting like a
dry orchid” (167-8), and the speaker’s words about her own portrait: “I rot on the wall” (176). The cyclical structure of the poem and the repetition of words and images convey an atmosphere of confusion, of endless reiterations, rather than of progress. Nothing is certain, and neither mother nor daughter can be relied upon to be present and stable. The speaker has come only “Part way back from Bedlam” (52) and is only “partly mended” (60), as her mother only comes “part way back from her sterile suite” (98-99). The speaker also says:

That August you were two, but I timed my days with doubt.
On the first of September she looked at me
and said I gave her cancer. (92-94)

Here, “You” refers to the speaker’s daughter and “she” to her mother, and both relationships are overshadowed by “doubt”. The speaker assumes guilt not only for her own mental illness and her absence in her young daughter’s life, but also responsibility for her own mother’s illness. It is interesting to note that Sexton levelled the same accusation at her mother in her diary when she wrote, “Mother makes me sick but I love her” (in Middlebrook 1992: 46-47), and the same intertwining of identity is evident in a letter to Snodgrass in which Sexton comments that her eldest daughter Linda is “just like me, which makes me alternately adore and loathe her, depending on which me she seems like (good Anne or bad Anne)” (Sexton & Ames 2004: 132).

In the poem, the speaker also addresses her daughter in terms of their similarities:

And you resembled me; unacquainted
with my face, you wore it. But you were mine
after all. (112-114)

Mother and daughter are inextricably bound up in each other’s images, in plural identities. In the first stanza the speaker urges her daughter, Joyce, to find her own identity with the words:

Today, my small child, Joyce,
love you self’s self where it lives (34-35)

In the final stanza, she repeats her daughter’s name:

I remember we named you Joyce
So we could call you Joy. (198-199)

While these lines almost emphasize the little girl’s status as an independent individual, this is negated by the speaker’s admission that she needed another girl who was “already loved, already loud in the house of herself” (205-206), and by the following guilty confession which concludes the poem:
I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me.
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
nor soothe it. I made you to find me. (207-301)

The speaker, who is uncertain of her sense of self, thus attempts to construct her identity in
relation to an other. Among the guilt tied up in being an inadequate daughter and mother is
also a brief reference to the expected role of wife. After the speaker checks out of the
mental institution she:

… visited the swan boats,
the market, answered the phone,
served cocktails as a wife
should, made love among my petticoats (132-135)

Riding swan boats at the Public Garden is considered a charming, relaxing way to spend an
afternoon in Boston, the city in which Sexton lived. The markets and telephone are the sites
of shopping and frivolous chitchat, the traditional realm of women. The words “as a wife
should” also point to obligation, to doing what is expected of a wife. Here a brief portrait is
painted of an ideal family life, of a wife and mother who has the time to take part in
recreational activities and has nothing more pressing to do than shop, talk and attend to her
husband. In reality Sexton felt stifled by domesticity, and was never able to be the happy
housewife that she felt she was expected to be. In an interview she explained:

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. I didn’t know I had any creative
depths. I was a victim of the American dream …. All I wanted was a little piece
of life, to be married, to have children. I thought the nightmares, the visions, the
demons would go away if there was enough love to put them down…. The
surface cracked when I was about twenty-eight. I had a psychotic break and tried
to kill myself. (In Colburn 1985: 84)

The search for an authentic sense of identity could be considered to be one of her chief
struggles both in her writing and her life. During Sexton’s therapy she even created a
charismatic persona called Elizabeth, although this proved to be short-lived. Dr. Orne, her
therapist, stated that the fantasy of Elizabeth allowed Sexton to “develop aspects of herself
that had been held in check” (in Middlebrook 1992: 60). Sexton’s comments about herself
also reveal bewildering confusion about her true self, and she said about Elizabeth, “I
would rather have a double personality than be a total lie” (in Middlebrook 1992: 62). She
also stated, “In fact, it comes down to the terrible truth that there is no true part of me” and
“I suspect that I have no self so I produce a different one for different people” (Ibid).
While writing poetry did not provide all the answers, Sexton found it to be a valuable tool for self-exploration, stating:

It is the split self, it seems to me, that is the mad woman. When writing you make a new reality and become whole … the creative mind is the analyst who gives pattern and meaning to what the persona sees as only incoherent experience. (In Middlebrook 1992: 64)

However, while writing was useful for creating an identity beyond the traditional roles of wife and mother, it was also deeply problematic in terms of these roles. Sexton later admitted:

I realize, with guilt, that I am a woman, that it should be the children, or my husband, or my home – not writing. But it is not –I do love my children but am not feminine enough to be all lost in their care. (In Middlebrook 1992: 63)

In a letter to her therapist she angrily went as far as to say, “You so winningly said, ‘People come first’ meaning before the writing. You forced me to say the truth. The writing comes first” (in Middlebrook 1992: 349). While this is a harsh statement, juggling the demanding roles of woman and writer is a common theme in female personal poetry, and is also evident in the work of Krog and Dowling. Both writing and being a wife and mother are time-consuming, challenging activities, and pursuing both tasks simultaneously appears frequently to lead to guilt and resentment in the writer and feelings of abandonment or neglect in members of the family. For the personal poet this dilemma is exacerbated by possible disapproval from family, friends and readers of not only the activity of writing, but also subjects which are discussed in the writing itself. Because of these contradictory impulses and obligations, female writers of personal poetry can feel as if they are split into two irreconcilable identities. Adrienne Rich states:

It is an extremely painful and dangerous way to live – split between a publicly acceptable persona and a part of yourself that you perceive as the essential, the creative and powerful self, yet also as possibly unacceptable, perhaps even monstrous …. For many women the stresses of this splitting have led, in a world so ready to assert our innate passivity and to deny our independence and creativity, to extreme consequences: the mental asylum, self-imposed silence, recurrent depression, suicide, and often severe loneliness. (In Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 114)

Sexton’s poetic successes served to create more tension in her home life, with her husband once tearing up her poetry and throwing her typewriter across the room (Middlebrook 1992: 80). However, she was not willing to give up something that was helping her to reach some idea of a separate self and personal achievement that domestic life simply could not provide. And after all, why should it be a choice between writer or wife and mother? As
Alicia Ostriker muses, “That women should have babies rather than books is the considered opinion of Western civilization. That women should have books rather than babies is a variation on that theme. Is it possible, or desirable, for a woman to have both?” (Ostriker 1983: 126). This theme will be discussed again in the chapter on the work of Krog.

Another of Sexton’s significant poems which deals with the multiple and problematic modes of female identity is “Her Kind” (Sexton 1999:15-16), which is quoted below in full:

I have gone out, a possessed witch,  
haunting the black air, braver at night;  
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch  
over the plain houses, light by light:  
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.  
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.  
I have been her kind.

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 the elves:  
whining, rearranging the disaligned.  
A woman like that is misunderstood.  
I have been her kind.

I have ridden in your cart, driver,  
waved my nude arms at villages going by,  
learning the last bright routes, survivor  
where your flames still bite my thigh  
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.  
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.  
I have been her kind. (1-21)

Witches are a recurring theme in Sexton’s work, and have both positive and negative connotations. Witches may be mad, evil or simply eccentric, alienated women who do not strictly conform to society’s expectations. But they may also be powerful, strong women with magical abilities. The tone and method of narration are very different here from “The Double Image”, and there have been many different interpretations of the poem. Several of these interpretations will be discussed and compared below, and taking them into account, my own interpretation will be included.

Middlebrook considers this poem to contain several different points of view, but doublingness remains crucial:

Through the use of an undifferentiated but double “I”, the poem sets up a single persona identified with madness but separated from it through insight. Two points
of view are designated “I” in each stanza. The witch (stanza one), the housewife (stanza two), and the adulteress (stanza three) are those who act, or act out; in the refrain, an “I” steps through the frame of “like that” to witness, interpret, and affirm her alter ego in the same line…. The subjectivity in the poem insists on a separation between a kind of woman (mad) and a kind of poet (a woman with magic craft): a doubleness that expressed the paradox of Sexton’s creativity. (Middlebrook 1992: 114-115)

If we consider Sexton’s skill in writing to be a kind of witchcraft and we take her biographical information into account then the three personae Middlebrook describes as witch, housewife and adulteress are all indeed descriptions of her various identities. Not all critics agree with this analysis though. Johnson (1984), for example, sees the witch persona as “essentially harmless … she rejects anger in favour of humour, flamboyance, self-mockery. She is a kind of perverse entertainer”, and Lombardo (2009) considers the witch as a symbol of “the reclamation of female power”.

This poem can perhaps be better understood if the reader knows something of its development. It was originally titled “Night Voice on a Broomstick”, and was later retitled “Witch”. “Witch” (in Middlebrook 1992: 113-114) ended with the lines:

Who see me here
this ragged apparition
in their own air
see a wicked appetite,
if they dare.

Lombardo believes that these lines are the key to understanding the poem in a manner which moves beyond the superficial interpretation of this poem as a representation of Sexton’s mental instability. She believes that these original lines demonstrate that Sexton is embracing a witch character which is inherent in all women, and the lines are an encouragement to women to recognize their own “wicked appetite, if they dare” (Lombardo s.a.). Lombardo also suggests that this poem is rather “an exploration of the roles of women and a recognition of the dual capacities for good and evil, security and risk, and domesticity and freedom” (Ibid).

The development from “Night Voice on a Broomstick” to “Witch”, to the final “Her Kind” suggests to me a progression from less personal narration to the identification of one type of woman to a more inclusive group, since the reference to a “kind” of women implies that there must surely be more than one of them. While the first stanza does refer to a woman who is “lonely” and “out of mind”, there also seems to be a kind of glee in the description of the witch “haunting the black air, braver at night”. It is true that the second
stanza has references to domesticity, but I would disagree with Middlebrook that this represents a housewife. The housewives would be found in the “plain houses” referred to in stanza 1, while in stanza 2 the speaker finds an alternative home in “warm caves in the woods”. She does engage in domestic activities such as filling the caves with “skillets, carvings, shelves,” and “closets, silks, innumerable goods”, and she does prepare supper “for the worms and elves”, but these activities seem to take place on her own terms. Lombardo interprets the cave as representing the female body, and sees in this stanza evidence that Sexton’s witch is in touch with “an earth-cult being hidden within her social self” (Lombardo s.a.).

A cave also has many symbolic associations. It has been recognized as an archetypal symbol of the womb (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996: 167), which strengthens Lombardo’s interpretation. It is also a symbol of the unconscious and its dangers, and Sexton was aware of the role of the unconscious in poetry as is evident in her statement, “Poetry, after all, milks the unconscious” (in Colburn 1985: 85). In the third stanza, I find little evidence in the poem itself to support Middlebrook’s interpretation of this stanza as a reference to an adulteress. Instead, a woman who is riding in a cart and waving her “nude arms at villages going by” paints a portrait of a defiant woman who is not ashamed of being stared at. Also, the word “survivor” strengthens the impression of a strong woman who will not be beaten down by life or the expectations placed on her by others. However, the lines that state that a woman like that “is not a woman, quite”, “is misunderstood”, and “is not ashamed to die” indicate that a woman who embraces these alternative roles may be alienated from and scorned by society. By examining different modes of female identity, a woman of “her kind” may find magical experiences not found in “the plain houses”, but this comes at the cost of being misunderstood. Middlebrook is also of the opinion that this poem “calls attention to the difference between pain and the representation of pain, between the poet onstage in print – flippant, glamorous, crafty – and the woman whose anguish she knew firsthand” (Middlebrook 1992: 115). If we accept this interpretation, we could conclude that a woman of this “kind” is then a woman who writes. This is explored in “The Black Art” (Sexton 1999: 88-89):

A woman who writes feels too much, those trances and portents!  
As if cycles and children and islands weren't enough; as if mourners and gossips and vegetables were never enough.  
She thinks she can warn the stars. 
A writer is essentially a spy.
Dear love, I am that girl.

A man who writes knows too much,
such spells and fetiches!
As if erections and congresses and products
weren't enough; as if machines and galleons
and wars were never enough.
With used furniture he makes a tree.
A writer is essentially a crook.
Dear love, you are that man.

Never loving ourselves,
hating even our shoes and our hats,
we love each other, precious, precious.
Our hands are light blue and gentle.
Our eyes are full of terrible confessions.
But when we marry,
the children leave in disgust.
There is too much food and no one left over
to eat up all the weird abundance. (1-21)

A woman who writes “feels too much”, which is placed in contrast with a man who writes
and “knows too much”. This reflects a common stereotype of women as more emotional
and men as more rational. The progression is similar to the one in “Her Kind”: the first
stanza begins with a description of a particular type of woman and concludes “I am that
girl”. The woman writer is associated with domesticity, with “children”, gossips” and
“vegetables”, while the male writer is associated with more active roles and objects such as
“erections”, “congresses”, “products”, “machines and galleons” and “wars”. The first two
stanzas mimic and oppose each other, with each line having its counterpart in the other
stanza. The opposing line for “She thinks she can warn the stars” is “With used furniture he
makes a tree”, once again supporting the stereotype of man as the more practical sex. The
lines which follow define the female writer as a “spy”, while the male writer is a “crook”.
Again the female is more secretive, while the male has a more active role to play. Both
these roles, however, are beyond the limits of what society expects and alienation may be
the result, and the mystical, powerful quality of writing is emphasized in both descriptions
by the words “trances and portents” and “spells and fetiches”. Writing is a “black art”, a
strange occupation with magical connotations.

The problematic position of both male and female writers is set out in the third stanza
with “Never loving ourselves”, which possibly refers to the constant self-criticism and
doubt which frequently assail those who pursue creative endeavours. Markey states that the
task of writers, in Sexton’s view, was “to report the truth, which has made their eyes ‘full
of terrible confessions’ and their co-existence too intense for normal people to cope with” (1988: 152). The poet thus exists on the outskirts of society, always playing the “spy” and reporting “terrible confessions”, and being left to deal with “all the weird abundance”. The “weird abundance” could refer to the creative impulse. Sexton once stated about creativity, “You have enough for life itself, you have a family, and then you have some left over. It always seems to me I have too much left over” (in Colburn 1985: 76).

While “The Black Art” at first highlights the differences between male and female writers, the final stanza, with frequent repetition of “our” and “we”, perhaps suggests that the sense of identity derived from being a writer is as important, or even more so, than that derived from gender. This poem could then be considered to be an investigation into and subversion of gender stereotypes, rather than an acceptance of them. On the subject of the difference between male and female writers, Sexton’s position is often contradictory. In a letter to Snodgrass in 1958 she wrote that she had “a fear of writing as a woman writes. I wish I were a man – I would rather write the way a man writes” (Sexton and Ames 2004: 40), but in a different letter written the following year to Carolyn Kizer she encouraged a community of women writers, saying “There is such a slight, small band of lady poets with guts that it is impossible not to want to draw closer and a form a band of understanding …” (Sexton and Ames 2004: 68). In yet another letter to Ted Hughes she claimed to dislike being categorized as a female poet, stating “That is another lump I dislike: ‘female poets lump’ …” (Sexton & Ames 2004: 308), while to a scholar she wrote, “I have always first tried to be human but the voice is a woman’s and was from the beginning, intimate and female” (in Middlebrook 1992: 365). When asked specifically in an interview about “The Black Art” if there was a distinction between the emotional aspect of women writers and the rational quality of male writers she responded, “I don’t think so, really. I think I was lying a little bit. It is in the same poem I said a writer is essentially a crook, and we’re quite together in that, the male and female. I don’t think that man is the rational being, and there are some marvellous women poets who are very rational …. Then there are male poets who are so emotional that I don’t think this holds true. Great poets know both” (Colburn 1985: 77).

If the speaker in “Her Kind” is ostracised and the speaker in “The Black Art” is alienated, the speaker in “Self in 1958” (Sexton 1999: 155-156) lives within society but is without an identity. The poem begins with the bewildered speaker asking:
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? (1-6)

Instead of a real woman she is a “plaster doll” who “pose[s]”. The lack of identity is
strengthened by the question, “Am I approximately an I. Magnin transplant?” I Magnin &
Company was an American fashion and luxury goods store and sold Madame Alexander
dolls, collectable dolls which predate Barbie by several decades and have the typical
feminine clothes, perfectly styled hair, large eyes and dainty red mouth of dolls of this type.
The speaker thus feels like a construction, a toy, living an inauthentic existence which is
further described in the second stanza:

I live in a doll’s house
with four chairs,
a counterfeit table, a flat roof
and a big front door.
Many have come to such a small crossroad.
There is an iron bed,
(Life enlarges, life takes aim)
a cardboard floor,
windows that flash open on someone’s city,
and little more. (11-20)

Her life in the suburban setting is as constructed and counterfeit as her self, and her house
is described as if it was a toy. The image of the “doll’s house” takes a more sinister turn,
revealing an “iron bed” and a “cardboard floor”. An “iron bed” contrasts with the previous
child-like images, and a “cardboard floor” could give way at any moment. The windows
“flash open on someone’s city, and little more” emphasizing the speaker’s sense of
alienation; it is someone else’s city, and beyond that the surroundings have little to offer
her. Despite her feelings of alienation and confusion, the words “Many have come to such a
small crossroad” imply that she realises that there are other women who may feel as she
does. This provides no comfort and does nothing to lessen her feelings of confinement.
Rather, knowing that there are possibly others like her seems to increase her despair; they
are all suffering alone, and no solace will be given.

The idea of the speaker as a toy continues in the following stanza as she states:

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 upon their straight bed.
They think I am me!
Their warmth? Their warmth is not a friend!
They pry my mouth for their cups of gin
and their stale bread. (21-30)

Someone “plays” with her, “plants” her in the kitchen like a mannequin. The reference to
the “all-electric kitchen” points to a modern home and domestic duties. We can assume that
“Mrs. Rombauer” refers to Irma Rombauer, author of The Joy of Cooking, which was a
popular American cookbook since its publication in 1931. This adds to the domestic theme
in the poem. However, the speaker does not paint a portrait of domestic bliss. Instead
someone “pretends” with her, and she is “walled in solid by their noise” and put “upon
their straight bed.” This description sounds much more like that of an unwilling, abused
captive or an asylum inmate than a happy housewife. However, the shocked “They think I
am me!” suggests that the people around her do not notice this strange condition, and that it
is only the speaker who is aware of her existence as a doll. The attentions of whoever puts
her on the “straight bed” are not welcome in light of the words, “Their warmth is not a
friend!” and “They pry my mouth” sounds like a description of violation. While bread is
commonly considered to be a symbol of nourishment and life (Chevalier & Gheerbrant
1996: 118), in this poem the bread is “stale”; there is no physical, emotional or spiritual
comfort to be found here.

The unreality of her life is strengthened by repetition in the next stanza:

What is reality
to this synthetic doll
who should smile, who should shift gears,
should spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder,
and have no evidence of ruin or fears?
But I would cry,
rooted into the wall that
was once my mother,
if I could remember how
and if I had the tears. (31-40)

The repetition of the word “should” points to expectations placed upon women in this role,
who should “smile” and play the happy housewife, while the longing for “the wall that was
once my mother” points to feelings of abandonment, and of being overwhelmed by
adulthood. The poem concludes in a despairing tone with the speaker stating that she would
cry if she could remember how, “and if I had the tears”. The concluding lines suggest that
she has been entrenched in this role for so long and so firmly that she does not remember
how to show anguish, as it is not expected from a woman in her position. Or perhaps she
simply cannot cry because she has been reduced to a doll, and such emotions and the ability
to display them are beyond the ability of such an object.

It is worth noting that Sexton worked as a model when she was young, and remained
concerned about her physical appearance and others’ perceptions of her for her whole life.
Rees-Jones notes:

Anxieties about the way in which she looked when she performed to an audience
constantly recur in Anne Sexton’s letters and it is clear that Sexton’s sense of
herself as a poet as well as a woman was being both asserted and constructed
during her poetry readings, for which she became well-known. The often taboo-
breaking content of her poems worked alongside and in juxtaposition with the
image of desirability she was also projecting. (Rees-Jones 2005: 128)

While she may have felt like somebody else’s construction in her home life, she was also
actively constructing herself as a performer for her public. This possibly created yet
another layer of uncertainty in her identity, and when art and life are so closely aligned it
may also blur boundaries between the real and the created. As Sexton stated, “I wonder if
the artist ever lives his life – he is so busy recreating it…. To create is to live. To perform
(for me) is essentially false. Only as I write do I realize myself. I don’t know what that does
to ‘life’” (Sexton & Ames 2004: 382).

A fragmented self is evident in “Self in 1958” as discussed above, which paints an
upsetting portrait of a woman who feels intensely frustrated and inauthentic in the domestic
sphere that is traditionally the realm of women. From biographical information about
Sexton we know that she did often feel stifled by her life as a wife and mother, and this
resulted in the identity crisis discussed previously. This causes the fragmentation of the
self, another “double image” in which the real self is trapped within a mannequin who
enacts the daily life of a domestic woman. Markey (1988: 150) states that the speaker in
this poem is “the prototype of the all-American woman put forward by the mass media of
the period. She, in comparison to the woman in ‘Her Kind’, does not have any sense of
identity”. Sexton also explains that before she began writing poetry, “I was trying my
damnedest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what
my husband wanted of me. But one can’t build little white picket fences to keep nightmares
out” (In Colburn 1985: 84). In “Self in 1958” these “nightmares” come to the surface,
revealing the tensions and bewilderment which individuals may experience within the
constrictions of a “conventional” life.

Today, despite feminism and the rise of career women, there remains a great deal of
pressure on women to create the perfect home and play the contented housewife, loving
wife and doting mother. This pressure becomes a theme often explored by contemporary female poets, and will be discussed again in relation to Krog’s “How and With What?”

While many of Sexton’s poems investigate female identity in relation to society, there are also several which address this subject in terms of the body. With titles such as “In Celebration of my Uterus”, “The Abortion”, “Menstruation at Forty” and “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator”, it is not surprising that these poems generated much debate and criticism at the time in which they were written. James Dickey wrote in a review, “It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience” and Robert Lowell said, “Many of her embarrassing poems would have been fascinating if someone had put them in quotes, as the presentation of some character, not the author” (in Sexton 1999: xx). However, many of Sexton’s female readers identify with these body poems, and Muriel Rukeyser names “In Celebration of my Uterus” as “one of the few poems in which a woman has come to the fact as symbol, the center after many years of silence and taboo” (in Sexton 1999: xxi). While a common complaint about Sexton’s work in general is that it is so full of despair, depression, uncertainty and death, poems such as “In Celebration of my Uterus” (Sexton 1999: 181-183) celebrate female identity. This poem was written after one of Sexton’s doctors proposed that she have a hysterectomy. In studying gender identity as linked to biology Elson states, “Long historical precedent associates women’s gender identities with their sexual reproductive organs; uteruses and ovaries have even been employed as a synecdoche for women in their entirety” (Elson 2003: 5), and Polivy (in Elson 2003: 18) states, “a threat to [sexual/reproductive organs] can easily constitute a threat to a woman’s whole self-concept”. While biological essentialist theories have justifiably been the subject of much criticism, the body does seem to play an important role in identity. In the case of “In Celebration of my Uterus”, the biological aspect of womanhood is celebrated.

As Sexton wrote to Robert Bly, “Today is a special day for me…. Day before yesterday they were going to give me a hysterectomy but yesterday I went to some big deal specialist in Boston and I can keep it. So saved is a part of the soul of the woman who lives in me” (Sexton & Ames 2004: 302). The poem begins with an image that can be interpreted as the potential for new life as the speaker says:

Everyone in me is a bird.  
I am beating all my wings.  
They wanted to cut you out  
but they will not.  
They said you were immeasurably empty
but you are not.
They said you were sick unto dying
but they were wrong.
You are singing like a school girl.
You are not torn. (1-10)

The speaker defiantly asserts that her uterus, which the doctors said was “immeasurably empty” and “sick unto dying”, is “not torn” or unhealthy. Repetition of similar lines such as “they will not”, “you are not”, “they were wrong” and “you are not torn” emphasizes the triumphant tone of the poem. Her uterus and its potential to create life are part of her female identity, and she addresses the uterus directly as if speaking to a loved one in the second stanza:

Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
and of the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you. I dare to live.
Hello, spirit. Hello, cup.
Fasten, cover. Cover that does contain.
Hello to the soil of the fields.
Welcome, roots. (11-19)

This stanza is very positive, supporting the interpretation of the poem as a celebration not of a body part but of the speaker as “woman”, of “the soul” of the woman she is, of the “central creature and its delight”. The life-giving aspect of women is affirmed with “I dare to live”, and images of fertility are highlighted in descriptions of “the soil of the fields” and “roots”. The earthy, fertile image is reinforced later in the poem with words such as “plant” (24) and “harvest” (25), and some of the images have almost primitive, ritual connotations, such as “let me drum” (47), “let me carry bowls for the offering” (48) and “let me make certain tribal figures” (54).

Women as a whole are celebrated, and a community of women is created in the words, “Many women are singing together of this” (27). The poem lists a variety of women all over the world engaged in various occupations and activities, but united by their womanhood. The similarities between women everywhere are highlighted, extending from the specific “one is straddling a cello in Russia” (33) or “one is stretching on her mat in Thailand” (37) to the more general description:

… one is
anywhere and some are everywhere and all
seem to be singing, although some can not
sing a note. (40-43)
The women mentioned range from the young “nineteen-year-olds” (47) to a mother “wiping the ass of her child” (38) to one who is “dying but remembering a breakfast” (36). In this celebratory poem, womanhood assumes more importance than age, occupation or nationality. The poem concludes with one word, “yes” (61), forming the last line. While so many of Sexton’s poems are filled with uncertainty and hesitation, this decisive, positive ending encourages women to celebrate their femaleness and their procreative powers.

This poem received mixed responses, both positive and negative. According to Ostriker (in Elson 2003: 2), this poem “finds unity where the culture propagates division: between a woman’s sexuality and her spirituality, her creativity and her procreativity, herself and other women, her private and public self.” In contrast, as noted by Otten (in Atherton 2007: 18), in writing “In Celebration of My Uterus” Sexton not only wrote “what was considered by many an outrageous poem on an unseemly subject, but she went on the poetry circuit and read this poem to mixed audiences…the first shock was felt round the world”. While this poem obviously addresses female anatomy, why is it so “outrageous”? It is no more graphic than some verses in Song of Songs, and even bears some resemblance to these biblical love poems. In Song of Songs the woman is described as having “A bowl … that never runs out of spiced wine” (7:2) by her thighs, which does not seem any less graphic than calling the uterus a “cup”. Also, “Everyone in me is a bird” and “I am beating all my wings” along with “I sing for you” bear some resemblance to “This is the time for singing; the song of doves is heard in the fields” (2:12). Furthermore, the description of a woman as “a secret garden” where “plants flourish” and trees “bear the finest fruits” (4:12-13) ties in perfectly with the fertile images of “soil of the fields” and “roots”. The only line that uses any kind of vulgar language is the one which mentions “wiping the ass of her child”, but this is crude rather than explicit and fits in with the earthy maternal feel of the poem. This poem was no doubt more shocking at the time it was written when such topics were less frequently discussed. Today, however, there are several female poets who write poems on similar topics in a much more frank and graphic manner. Maxine Kumin praises Sexton for paving the way for women to write about such subjects, stating:

Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton, who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter, which, twenty years later, seems far less daring. She wrote about menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery, and drug addiction at a time when the proprieties embraced none of these as proper topics for poetry. Today, the remonstrances seem almost quaint. Anne delineated the problematic position of women – the neurotic reality of the time –
though she was not able to cope in her own life with the personal trouble it created. (In Sexton 1999: xxxiv)

As Kumin notes, what was once considered shocking is far more common and acceptable in poetry today, although not all readers approve of such candid writing about the body. Several of Krog’s poems certainly exceed Sexton’s in terms of explicitness, and will be discussed next.
3. ANTJIE KROG: AN EXAMINED LIFE

The poems of Antjie Krog are comparable to Sexton’s in the choice of topics and the candour which Krog employs in her writing. Like Sexton, Krog often writes about specifically female subjects and examines female identity within conventional female roles and expectations. Scott (2010: 105) observes:

Krog … wrestles with the difficulty of “becoming” – of becoming a woman, a poet, a mother, a wife – and through poetry she attempts to map the ways in which it is possible to “become”, and the ways in which it is possible to resist “becoming”. In both Down to My Last Skin and Body Bereft, Krog writes the negotiation of identity and foregrounds the tension of performing many roles. Motherhood, marriage, poetry and writing are not glamorised, but are held up for scrutiny. By examining these roles and the expectations attached to them, Krog is able to write possibilities for renegotiating them and thereby create new ways of identifying within a South African context.

Selected poems from Down to My Last Skin and Body Bereft will be discussed in light of the different roles mentioned, of woman, poet, mother and wife. Krog deals with these subjects in a way which is outspoken, unapologetic and often witty. For her, writing is a means of exploring and understanding one’s own life and self. In an interview, she quotes Socrates, stating, “‘An unexamined life is not worth living.’ Literature enables you to examine your life” (in McGrane 2006). The examination of a life is certainly what Krog undertakes in her poems, documenting various aspects of her life from motherhood to poem-making, from marriage to ageing. As Scott states, the poems do not glamorise these roles, but rather examine them with a frankness that readers may either appreciate or disapprove of. As for the South African context that Scott mentions, it is true that it is difficult to escape political issues and questions of national belonging in South African writing, and both Krog and Dowling have written many poems which deal with this subject. However, this is too complex an issue to be discussed in this essay, so the discussion here will be limited to the concerns of female rather than national identity.

Another important point to note is that Krog is chiefly known as an Afrikaans writer, and that translation poses its own particular difficulties, especially in relation to fidelity to the original version. Krog (2000: 3) states:

Over the years several people have translated various poems of mine into English. Initially this was quite a disturbing experience: I felt alienated from the translations, which seemed too English and remote from their Afrikaans origins. At the same time, however, I longed to interact as a poet with South Africans who do not read Afrikaans …
The collection *Down to My Last Skin* contains poems which have been selected and translated from several of Krog’s collections, but Krog insists that she does “not want to belong to English” and that this collection “should always form part of Afrikaans literature” (in Meyer 2002: 9). Responses to her translated works have been mixed. In particular, *Body Bereft* has caused much debate, with Louise Viljoen considering what some may regard as the crude language in this collection to have value from a feminist perspective, and Stephen Gray disapproving of what he considers to be an obscene and weak translation (in van Vuuren 2009). While any in-depth discussion of the work of Krog should take translation issues into account, theories of translation and a comparative analysis of the poems are beyond the scope of this essay. As Krog (2006: 112) states of the poems in *Body Bereft*, “The English text sometimes differs from the original Afrikaans in content and/or form”. While acknowledging that there may be significant differences between the Afrikaans and English versions of poems, only the English versions of her poems will be discussed here.

The work of Antjie Krog, like that of Anne Sexton, has frequently been surrounded by controversy. Anthea Garman (2009: 103) notes:

> Within a very short time Krog became known to Afrikaans readers as the poet who used slang and swearwords, who picked up street language, threw in English words, and who didn’t shy away from graphic descriptions of the sexual and the body. As each new volume of her poetry appeared it was scanned for these hallmarks by readers and reviewers, the journalists of the day documented each of these shocking details and the debates about them in the literary world.

Unlike Sexton, Krog began writing and publishing poetry at a young age. Her work is thus a good reflection of female concerns through different stages of life. As Viljoen (2009: 191) notes:

> ’n Voorlopige ondersoek na die verskillende maniere waarop die vroulike liggaam in Krog se poësie figureer, wys sekere preokkupasies en bepaalde tendensies uit. In die eerste plek is dit duidelijk dat die uitbeelding van die liggaam in ’n groot mate korrespondeer met die verskillende lewensfases wat in Krog se sterk autobiografiese poësie uitgebeeld word. Vroulike adolessensie, maagdelikheid, menstruasie, seksualiteit, swangerskap, moederskap, menopousaliteit en veroudering kom agtereenvolgens in haar poësie…

>[A preliminary investigation of the various ways in which the body manifests itself in Krog’s poetry, reveals certain preoccupations and particular tendencies. In the first place it is clear that the depiction of the body corresponds to a large extent with the different stages of life depicted in Krog’s strongly autobiographical poetry. Female adolescence, virginity,
menstruation, sexuality, pregnancy, motherhood, the menopause and aging are successively dealt with...2]

The poems selected for discussion here are those that focus on adult female life rather than adolescence. First, poems which examine the demanding roles of mother, wife and poet will be examined before the discussion moves on to poems which examine female biological concerns and changing identity with regard to ageing.

There are several poems in Down to My Last Skin that portray the strife within domestic life, and which problematise the often contradictory roles of being a woman and a poet. “How and With What?” (Krog 2000: 36-37) is comparable to Sexton’s “Self in 1958” in that it, too, paints a portrait of a woman overwhelmed by domestic life. The speaker in Krog’s poem, however, seems less uncertain of her self and far angrier about everything she has to deal with. The poem begins:

I dig rennets from the sink sieve
oats and rinds burp into the drain outside the window
the nappy liners are being stunk out into the toilet
the dirty nappies sunlight soaped
bottoms washed powdered
the one cries with hunger
the other with anger (1-7)

This introductory stanza paints a chaotic picture of a woman who is struggling to cope with domestic tasks and demanding children. The unsavoury aspects of domestic duties and caring for children are emphasized, describing the remains of food in the sieve and the putrid smell of nappy liners. The description of crying children increases the frenetic atmosphere of the poem. The woman finds no help from her husband:

my man closes the door against us all
and turns up the Mozart piano concerto (10-11)

We are then told “and I go crazy” (12), a line which stands alone and emphasizes the speaker’s feelings of feeling overwhelmed by having to deal with domestic demands by herself. The following stanza describes her resulting outburst in terms of domestic activities and objects:

my voice yells a mixerpulpershreddermincer
my nose leaks like a fridge
my eyes quake like eggs in boiling water
my ears are post boxes pouting with calendars and junk mail
my children assault me with their rowdiness

2 All Afrikaans extracts were translated by Professor Andries Wessels.
selfishness
cheekiness
destructiveness
their fears complexes insecurities threats needs
beat my “image as mother” into soft steak on the wooden floor
I smell of vomit and shit and sweat
of semen and leeks (13-24)

Her identity is thus reduced to the unpleasant domestic activities which she is tasked with. She feels that her children attack her with their demands, and that her idea of herself as a mother is becoming worn down. Being a wife and mother in this poem is something that can turn a woman into someone who smells horribly of “vomit and shit” and of “semen and leeks”. This unappealing image is strengthened by the later description of the speaker’s legs, which are “veined like blue soap” (28) and her hands, which are “drier and older than yesterday’s toast” (32). Completely overwhelmed, angry and feeling unattractive and furious, she retreats outside and in despair asks, “how and with what does one survive this?” (37) No answer is provided, leaving the reader to speculate about survival tactics for domestic chaos.

There are also several poems in this volume of poetry that examine the difficulties of writing amidst this domestic life. “Two years this month” (Krog 2000: 52-3) is one of these, in which the speaker laments that it has been two years since her last volume of poetry. She describes the difficulties of poetry writing:

I split my ears inward
tap against the inner sides to intercept tremors
desperately I flog every wound (16-18)

Writing is a self-reflexive, inward looking process that requires some undisturbed time alone. This description of the critical self-reflective process bears some resemblance to the description in Sexton’s poem “For John, who begs me not to enquire further” (Sexton 1999: 34-35) in which the speaker “tapped her own head” (17) and at first “rage[d]” in her “own bowl” (20). However, in Krog’s poem the speaker does not get as far as writing a poem. A poem is beginning to come to her, as she describes:

… for some reason an opening suddenly pouts
something vibrates, my breath tones down (20-21)

but she is interrupted by the sound of a slamming door and footsteps coming down the passage. The poem concludes:

I grab the opening – please even a spurt will do
urgently cradle the closing muscle
but death starts at my feet I am
standing before a closed slippery inside

carefully the child enters the room / mom are you busy?(27-31)

Life and motherhood intrude upon the solitary practice of poetry, demanding her attention and preventing the creation of the new poem she desperately seeks. The unwritten poem is described almost as if it were an unborn infant as the speaker “cradle[s] the closing muscle” and faces a “closed slippery inside” that bears some resemblance to the womb and birth canal. And yet, the event itself becomes a poem, drawing attention to the solitary aspect of poetry as well as negating its own message by using the event as a subject for a poem. Scott states, “the interruption, the child, the demands of family life become the poem, and for that moment the speaker is able to become both poet and mother” (2010:107).

Similarly, in “Poem Making” (Krog 2000: 50-52) the speaker joyfully describes the act of writing poetry:
joy at once upon me
that falls looselimbed
about my desk (4-6)

Once again, the speaker begins alone and gleefully says, “nobody gets at me” (10). While she “bathe[s] in the words” (18) she is temporarily separated from her family. She happily notes, “their needs and dreams don’t touch me” (22-23). This is a joyful, celebratory moment which is described in playful terms:
I play the game with words:
escape arrange
tie up jump free
collude cheat and destroy
for nothing
a poem makes you free (24-29)

The elation brought about by poem-making is particularly evident in this stanza, where the words are described almost as playmates who provide endless enjoyment and a sense of freedom. As in Sexton’s “The Black Art”, the writing of poetry is depicted as an almost magical activity:
I stick my hand
right into the haze
that glows around me (30-32)

But yet again she is interrupted by the ringing of the phone, the subsequent topic being a children’s party. The children themselves then interrupt her. In “Two years this month” the
children “assault” (17) her, and in this poem they “attack” (35) her. However, this poem does not have the sense of chaos or frustration that the last two discussed poems have, and she kisses and cuddles her children.

“Ma Will Be Late” (Krog 2000: 45) is yet another poem which depicts a woman attempting to juggle the demands of life with the demands of family. After a trip away the speaker comes back home and “shuffle[s] in with suitcases hurriedly bought presents” (4). The description of a woman who “shuffles” quietly into the house, bearing gifts which were hastily bought, indicates the kind of guilt after absence that is evident in Sexton’s “The Double Image”. Far from being a sanctuary, the home is depicted as yet another place of demands. In the last stanza, the speaker concludes that her return makes her

… neither poet nor human
in the ambush of breath
I die into woman (19-21)

The speaker returns to her family to resume the role of mother and wife, but feels guilty about her absence and the aspects of her identity which do not involve her family. The final lines are reminiscent of Sexton’s comments on the same topic, as previously mentioned. While Sexton prioritized her status as a poet with the words, “I realize, with guilt, that I am a woman …. I do love my children but am not feminine enough to be all lost in their care” (in Middlebrook 1992: 63), and “The writing comes first” (in Middlebrook 1992: 349), in Krog’s poem the role of woman becomes more important than being a writer or being an individual. “Woman” becomes an identity in its own category, but the use of the word “die” in the last line implies the sacrifice of aspects of self beyond the roles of wife and mother.

When read in isolation, the above poems paint a rather gloomy portrait of the overwhelming demands placed on female poets in their personal lives. Conradie (1996: 47-49) points out similarities between the work of Krog and that of the American poet Erica Jong. This is particularly evident in the following lines from Jong’s “Woman enough” (Ibid):

I wish there were not a choice;
I wish I could be two women.
I wish the days could be longer.
But they are short.
So I write while
the dust piles up.
I sit at my typewriter
remembering my grandmother
& all my mothers,
& the minutes they lost
loving houses better than themselves (29-39)

As in many of Sexton’s and Krog’s poems, Jong’s poem reveals the tension between the poetic impulse and expected feminine roles. However, Krog states that the work of Erica Jong freed her from the image of the poet as a “regal woman”, and asserts that “[Jong’s] ideas rid me of a lot of complexes. I feel free to be a housewife, to be frustrated, to be myself (quoted in Conradi 1996: 47). This demonstrates that poetry of the personal can have very practical and empowering applications for both readers and writers, allowing different, even apparently opposing aspects of the self to be explored as well as integrated.

As Sexton suggested in “For John, who begs me not to enquire further” (Sexton 1999: 34-35), something private can truly become “an accident of hope” for someone else.

While Krog has written several poems which examine the often contradictory roles of woman and poet, it is also important to take her more celebratory poems regarding feminine roles into account. As in Sexton’s “In Celebration of my Uterus”, in Krog’s “First Sign of Life” (Krog 2000: 35) the speaker links procreative and creative ability as she explains with wonder how an unborn child “moved in me today” (1). She goes on to describe this experience as one which defies description, which is beyond words:

I wanted to hold you in words
how you look
how you sound
how I am going to utter you
but you drifted wordlessly in placenta (8-12)

The foetus is compared directly with a poem, being like a verse that “trembling this morning into wanting to be written” (17). The speaker feels “utterly lonely in astonishment” (20); this is not an experience that can easily be described or shared. However, it is ultimately positive as she contemplates “a yet unwritten, but most awe-inspiring poem” (22). Creating life and making art are thus equated as magical activities, with both an unborn child and a poem taking on lives of their own.

Equally positive is “Birth” (Krog 2000: 36), a graphic but joyful description of childbirth in which a baby

tumbled, no slipped out besmeared into my arms yelling birth
yelling pain yelling strength oh I throb throb throb about my boychild my onlyest my loveliest my most superlative (3-5)
Words such as “tumbled”, “besmeared”, “yelling”, “pain” and “throb” provide a good description of the dramatic, messy physical aspect of this womanly task, and the repetition of the word “throb” could refer to the physical pain of birth as well as the intense love she feels for her newborn. The words “my onlyest my loveliest my smallest” also depict the deep emotional wonder of this miraculous yet universal experience. The final line, “feed him oh free feed him from my heart” (11) reinforces the joy of new motherhood.

The poems discussed above are particularly female in their topics and perspectives, and as Krog wittily points out in “God, Death, Love” (Krog 2006: 20):

God, Death, Love, Loneliness, Man
are Important Themes in Literature
menstruation, childbirth, menopause, puberty
marriage are not (1-4)

However, she then consistently disproves this observation by writing several poignant poems on these topics. As the critical reception of Sexton’s poems shows, any writing that deals with such particularly female topics has been both frowned upon and praised. Tess Cosslett (in Atherton 2007: 2) states, "childbirth, as an experience belonging to the private sphere of womanhood, has long been marginalized as a subject for public representation", and Atherton adds, “Through writing about childbirth and pregnancy, women give voice to an act and a process previously rendered voiceless” (Ibid). Krog herself says, “Why do we assume that an epic poem about heroism or the loneliness of choice can be part of the canon, but a short poem about childbirth cannot?” (McGrane 2006). As motherhood forms such a crucial role in female identity, it seems reasonable that birth and child rearing will appear as subjects in female personal poetry and they provide a high degree of relevance for female readers. Scott believes that investigating such subjects not only allows the writer to explore the conflicts in her own life with regard to personal needs as opposed to female responsibilities and social expectations, but also provides women readers with “the opportunity to re-evaluate and renegotiate their roles and their identities” (2010:108). In this view personal poetry becomes more than confession or self-centred musings, but may assist readers to confront similar concerns in their own lives.

Another important point to note is that while Krog often problematises the conflicting roles of woman, mother, wife and poet, she does not suggest that it must come down to a choice between one or the other. When asked in an interview how she reconciles her roles of mother and daughter with being a writer, she asserts that to try and separate life from
writing is a ridiculous endeavour, and that living a full life and embracing all the roles that it offers can enhance writing:

Firstly, one has one life. It would be pathetic to try and keep it pure and bare in the hope of writing The Big Poem. In my book, The Big Poem compensates for nothing. Being embedded in a full-blooded life could enrich what one has to say; the feeding of your children could feed the writing … if the feeding of the children destroys the writing, then one should also accept the possibility that one perhaps did not have enough to say anyway. (In McGrane 2006)

Krog embraces both womanhood and writing, affirming that although they are both demanding roles they are by no means mutually exclusive and may actually be complementary, if difficult. She thus provides an affirmative answer to Ostriker’s question, “Is it possible, or desirable, for a woman to have both [books and babies]?” (Ostriker 1983: 126). Ostriker also later concludes that motherhood can add to the poet’s experiences, stating, “The advantage of motherhood for a woman artist is that it puts her in immediate and inescapable contact with the sources of life, death, beauty, growth and corruption” (Ostriker 1983: 130-1).

Krog’s poems which critically examine the problematic role of wife, mother and poet are also offset by poems such as “Ode to a Perfect Match” (Krog 2000: 22) and “For My Son” (Krog 2000: 44). In “For My Son” the speaker describes how much she loves her son:

I love him
way
way beyond heart (19-21)

In “Ode to a Perfect Match”, the speaker proclaims her love for her husband, although domestic issues and writing are still present as themes. In this poem the speaker opts to abandon her domestic duties “to write you an ode” (12). While she notes everyday aspects of married life such as “our fights our children our stuttering household” (21), she still proclaims “that I love you is an understatement” (19) and that “we are a miraculously perfect match” (23).

More problematic is “Marital Psalm” (Krog 2000: 30), in which the speaker once again addresses being a wife and poet. As in “God, Death, Love” Krog deals directly with the subject of what is or is not permissible in a poem, but this time the conflict is personal and not just literary. The poem begins fairly positively, announcing her husband as the man “who makes me possible” (5) and naming their bond as “an undivided indestructible pact” (8). However, the poem progresses to a less positive description with the following lines:

[he] persecutes me
fucks me day and night
violates every millimetre of private space (11-13)

The reason for this harsh treatment is then revealed as an attempt to smother anything “which could lead to writing” (14). It is not writing in itself that the man condemns, but the personal poetry that Krog is well known for. His irritation is graphically described in words which we can attribute to him:

“do our children successfully in respectable schools have to see how their friends read about their mother’s splashing cunt and their father’s perished cock
I mean my wife
jesus! somewhere a man’s got to draw the line” (15-19)

Here the roles of wife, mother and poet are clearly at odds, and the inclusion of this subject in such a frank poem demonstrates that the poet is not going to capitulate to her husband’s demands for self-censorship. Viljoen (2009: 214-215) notes that the above stanza is a good example of the transgressive nature of Krog’s writing:

Hierdie strofe, wat in die mond van die spreker se protesterende eggenoot gelê word, kombineer ’n hele aantal van die grensoorskrydende elemente wat kenmerkend is van Krog se poësie: die openbaarmaak van die vroulike sowel as die manlike liggaam se middeljarige verwording; die oorskryding van die grens tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die feitelike en fiktiewe deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryding van die grense tussen die private en die publieke deur die openlike verwysings na man en vrou se geslagsorgane; die oorskryving van die tematiese konvensies van die poësie wat bepaal dat ‘n mens nie oor hierdie kwessies gedigte maak nie; die oorskryding van sekere grense van dekorum deur die gebruik van kru woorde soos “poes” en “piel” in ’n gedig. Dit bevestig dat Krog voortdurend in haar poësie besig is om die grense te verlê met die temas wat sy aanvoor en die wyse waarop sy daaroor skryf. In hierdie opsig bedryf sy ’n soort “politiek van die liggaam” waarmee sy rebelleer teen die beperkinge wat daar in die samelewings en binne die estetika gelê word op die uitleef en uitdrukking van (vroulike) liggaamlikheid.

[This stanza, which is attributed to the speaker’s protesting husband, combines a number of the transgressive elements which characterize Krog’s poetry: the revealing of both the female and male middle-aged changing body, the transgression of the boundary between the private and public by references to the genitals of the man and woman; the transgression of the boundaries between the factual and fictional through the autobiographical nature of the poetry; the transgression of thematic poetic conventions that poetry is not composed about these matters; the transgression of certain boundaries of decorum by the use of crude vocabulary like “poes” [cunt] and “piel” [dick] in a poem. This confirms that Krog is continuously pushing boundaries in her poetry in the themes that she broaches and the way in which she writes about these. In this way she practises a kind of “politics of the body” by means of which she rebels against the limitations]
Krog thus continually pushes the boundaries of a number of conventions and societal expectations, continually exploring the limits of what is acceptable and what is not, between what is private and public, and thereby creating new ways of negotiating both identity and art. While “Marital Psalm” highlights the tensions in a female poet’s private and public life, this poem shows that Krog will continue with the process of life examination and documentation, as a woman and as a poet, whatever the consequences may be.

As noted previously in the discussion of Sexton’s work and life, writing personal poetry may cause a great deal of conflict in the poet’s personal life. While Kumin states that Sexton was “not able to cope in her own life with the personal trouble it created” (in Sexton 1999: xxxiv), Krog’s relentless self-examination and the inclusion of poems which examine resulting conflict suggest that she is able to cope with them. The following statement, which she made relatively early in her writing career, shows that she has always been keenly aware of the opposing impulses in women:


[While mankind suffers, loves and hates … the artist whispers to him: “reveal”; this is interesting stuff and useful material for a poem! Man resists: don’t, “conceal”, otherwise my experience, my deepest feelings gain something untrue, something false and an aim outside of the experience – and then I shall sin against my humanity. (Quoted in Conradie 1996: 43)]

However, Krog also vehemently protests against the idea that women should have to give up anything in the struggle to reconcile womanhood and writing, stating:

Male writers never had to “give up” penis, balls and beards – they turned it into the very essence of their writing. They never chose between a family and writing – they turned their singularity into the only category. Why do we assume that to be a good writer we have to be like them? (In McGrane 2006)

While Krog assures us that it is not necessary to choose between family and writing, many female poets who deal with personal subject matter nevertheless find it difficult to reconcile their writing with their life. Kimiko Hahn, for example, complains:

I struck out references to fucking. Because of my daughters. It’s wrong. Or at least cowardly…. I find myself dumbing-down (in the sense of mute) my
material instead of holding onto a detail that hits a nerve. To protect my
daughters. And then I felt incredibly annoyed. (Do men do the same?)
Sometimes I feel I need two separate writing lives: one that is risky but edited –
the published version; the other, one to be kept in that proverbial secret
chamber…. In fact I do have a secret sheaf I keep in my desk at school. I feel
nauseous admitting this. (In Sontag and Graham 2001: 220-1)

Here again the issue of courage in candid writing comes up. As noted previously, Sexton
stated that while part of her felt horrified by what she was writing, the "gutsy part" (in
Colburn 1985: 87) of her prevailed and she found the courage “to make a clean breast of it”
(Sexton 1999: 2). It not only takes courage to write with such candour, it takes further
courage to live with the consequences, and an understanding and supportive family will
certainly help. In Hahn’s comment the desire for two separate writing lives, for two selves
who are not in conflict, is once again evident. It is evidence of Adrienne Rich’s previously
noted comment about the split between a “publicly acceptable persona” and the “possibly
unacceptable, perhaps even monstrous” creative self.

However, the unashamed tone in Krog’s poems and her own comments on personal
poetry suggest that she does not suffer from this “splitting” to the same degree that many
other female writers of personal poetry do. Her poems reveal the problematic aspects of
being a woman and poet, at times portraying anger, frustration and guilt, but the speakers in
her poems do not seem to be as bewildered and fractured in their sense of self. Perhaps it is
also relevant that Krog, in contrast with Sexton, began publishing her poetry at the early
age of seventeen. Thus, by the time she became a wife and mother, her identity as a writer
was already established. Scott believes that Krog’s writing, beyond the role of life
documentation, also has positive intentions and applications for female readers, stating:

Krog suggests that not only can women re-evaluate their own roles, but that
they can actively challenge the demands placed on them by society, and thereby
create new ways in which they can become citizens, women, poets, mothers,
partners and/or wives…. It is these moments of possibility that Krog attempts to
reveal for her readers, so that they in turn might be surprised and reassured by
what is possible. (In Scott 2010: 108)

The re-evaluation of roles that takes place in Down to My Last Skin continues in Body
Bereft, in which childbirth, motherhood and sex give way to the concerns of the ageing
female body. This collection exhibits the same outspokenness and relentless examination of

3The question of courage recurs to a lesser extent in Dowling’s work, but is still as present. When discussing her poem “Where
Google has not Been” (Dowling 2008a: 14) Dowling states, “I’m glad I was brave enough to include the question, ‘Why won’t
my mother die?’ in the poem” (Dowling 2008b).
female biological issues that Krog is well known for. The poems are far more explicit than Sexton’s ever were, although as noted at the end of the last chapter, topics which were once considered to be unmentionable are far more acceptable in contemporary poetry. In *Body Bereft*, Krog discusses the graphic details of the ageing body with irreverence, wit, irritation, anger and sadness. Like many of Sexton’s poems, the poems in this collection frequently deal with issues of female identity in terms of the body. If James Dickey found Sexton’s work to be too focused on “the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience”, it is difficult to imagine what he would have made of Krog’s poetry. For example, one candid examination of bodily ageing is the poem “When Tight is Loose” (Krog 2006: 23-24,) which features descriptions such as “the vaginal wall thins” (28) and the colon “crashes through its own arse” (29). Even the cover of this collection, which shows an aged and naked female body, was the subject of much debate. Van Vuuren (2009) says of the cover, “The theme of degeneration is announced on the cover page with a photograph by David Goldblatt. It suggests the taboo and transgression which materialises in the rest of the collection (menopausal symptoms, physical decay of the ageing female body), as well as in a particularly direct, at times brutal, vocabulary of sex.” Krog (2007) adds:

> Although the cover blazingly stands out among the other books on the shelves, it was not an unproblematic cover. Bookshops had customers complaining, some people turned it upside down…. Reviewers like Stephen Gray and Lina Spies were revolted by the cover, and relished in saying so.

Along with the physical aspect of ageing body, Krog also examines the accompanying psychological effects. In “Leave Me a Lonely Began” (Krog 2006: 21-22) we witness the invisibility of a woman who is no longer young. The poem describes how a man in a coffee shop overlooks the speaker. Her invisibility in the eyes of society is emphasized in the following lines:

> he did not *not* see her, or perchance look past – he looked right *through* her. she’s vanished without tamper or trauma (10-12)

She is no more interesting than a “table-leg or chair” (13), and this diminishes her own idea of herself as a woman. Viljoen (2009: 211-212) delivers the following commentary on this poem:

> Dit lyk asof die gedig se fokus op konkrete liggaamlike besonderhede ’n poging is om die spreker se onsigbaarheid in die oë van die kafee-eienaar te besweer: daar word verwys na die hande waarvan die kneukels verdik is, die opgeheewe are en oumensvlekke op die hande en die gevoel van selfwalging
wat dit ontlok. Deur die titel word die ervaring van die menopousale vrou in verband gebring me dié van ander gemarginaliseerdes, eensames en verstotenes. Die titel “leave me a lonely began” is naamlik die slotwoorde uit Gerard Manley Hopkins (2008) se “To seem the stranger”, een van die sogenaamde “terrible sonnets” waarin hy uiting gee aan die gevoelens van selfwalging en selfkastyding wat hy op daardie stadium in sy lewe ervaar het.

[It appears as if the poem’s focus on concrete physical detail is an attempt to exorcise the speaker’s invisibility in the eyes of the café owner: there are references to the hands with their thickened joints, the swollen veins and liver spots on the hands and the feeling of self-disgust these evoke. By means of the title, the experience of the menopausal woman is related to that of other marginalized, lonely and disowned people. The title, “leave me a lonely began” is namely the concluding words of “To seem a stranger” by Gerald Manley Hopkins (2008), one of the so-called “terrible sonnets” in which he expresses the emotions of self-disgust and self-chastisement that he experienced at that time in his life.]

If Hopkins expressed feelings of isolation and alienation from his family and country in “To seem a stranger”, in “leave me a lonely began”, here we witness instead a woman who feels alienated from her own body and image as a desirable woman. As Viljoen notes, the poem focuses on unappealing physical details such as “thickened and stiffening” finger joints (24), a “swollen vein” (25) and “a brown stain” (26-27). Her body is not only unnoticed by others, worst of all, it inspires revulsion in herself. The poem ends with the lament:

nobody will ever again breathlessly peel desire from her shoulders. (31-32)

While women have long objected to being reduced to sex objects, they do not either, it seems, want to be seen as sexless objects. On the subject of being looked at in relation to female identity, John Berger (1972: 46) states:

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman’s self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself …. And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman …. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.

Once again, attention is drawn to the split in women’s identities. Interestingly, this concept is well-illustrated by a comment that Sexton made at a time when she became afraid to leave her house unaccompanied: “I hate to go to the market … it’s full of decisions and
crowds of people …. Somebody sees me, *and I see myself through them*. Then it’s all gone, the whole world falls apart” (in Middlebrook 1992: 138). If a woman is defined in terms of appreciation from others, her very existence is threatened once she no longer feels desired, or even noticed. In her discussion of this poem Viljoen quotes Tamara Slayton’s words, “the voice of the menopausal woman is feared and denied. She has been made invisible or encouraged to remain forever young” (in Viljoen 2009: 211). In “Leave Me a Lonely Began” the speaker attempts to address her invisibility, and by focusing on the physical signs of age, shows the futility of locating identity and stable notions of selfhood in the youthful body.

Another poem which addresses the aged woman’s feelings of invisibility and alienation is “Softsift of the Hourglass” (Krog 2006: 51-2). Both the content and layout of this poem, demonstrate the splitting between the remembered body and the current body. The poem begins:

half of her is somebody else
as if someone else
is standing next to her in her like
the bridge of a nose her brain
tolls and tolls and keeps on tolling (1-5)

The despair of the speaker is highlighted in the second part of the poem, which ends, “why has my body forsaken me so?”(14). Similarly, in “When Tight is Loose” (Krog 2006: 23-4) the bewildered speaker states:

it must have happened gradually, but
she feels overcome – suddenly her body
is simply loose … (1-3)

The speaker is overwhelmed by the changes in her ageing body. She describes her body as grotesque and uncooperative as “her thumbs crumble away” (12) and her knees shrink like “prunes in a bowl” (18).

If in old age a woman can no longer define herself in terms of external images or in terms of her own body, how does she define her identity? One common role of the aged woman is that of grandmother, which has similar expectations attached to it in terms of fulfilment as the role of mother. Krog problematises this role in humorous and graphic terms in “Manifesta of a Grandma” (Krog 2006: 30-32). Viljoen (2009: 217) notes:

In sommige gedigte word daar weerstand gebied teen die afgryse van ouderdom deur op energieke wyse me stereotipe spot: “Manifes van ’n oma” (V 30-32) is byvoorbeeld ’n komiese spel met die stereotipiese beelde van oumas).
[In some poems resistance against the horrors of old age is offered by mocking stereotypes in an energetic manner: “Manifesto of a grandma” (V 30-32) is for example a comic diversion focused on stereotypical images of grandmothers.]

The poem begins with a response to the question, “So how does it feel to be a grandma?” (1-2). The speaker responds:

… and I thought to myself, oh god
my child, what would you have me say?
‘… very old thank you’? or ‘I don’t
get cock past my lips anymore’? (2-5)

With this witty and outrageous imagined response, the speaker makes it clear that women do not welcome the feeling of old age and sexlessness that is associated with being a grandmother. She then asks herself why such a question makes her so angry, and concludes that the reason is the very word “grandma”:

‘Grandma’ has such a poo sound, sounds so blubber
do almost tubbery, so mumbles so cuntless, so toothless (11-12)

She laments modern society’s failure in addressing updated identities for grandmothers with the following lines:

Children’s books are full of modern moms with clogs
buying pizzas and dads bathing babies, but in the
background somewhere inevitably lurks misshapen
a grandma anachronistically in Dr Scholl’s shoes
joyously knitting – spectacled and bunned. (16-20)

While alternative images of mothers and fathers have been made available, the image of a grandmother remains that of a “misshapen” old woman. The lack of sexuality of grandmothers is again emphasized in the reference to a headline, “Grandma of three sues premier for sexual harassment” (31), and the speaker wonders if the message is that grandmothers should be grateful for any sexual attention at all, or that the accused must be desperate. It is not only sexuality that the grandmother is deprived of but also responsibility, as is evident in Winnie Mandela’s evading jail because “grandmas don’t belong in jail” (38-39). Finally, the speaker concludes that she despises the word “grandma” because of a children’s rhyme in which a grandmother and grandfather sit “on that bloody stoep with their errant sphincters” (49). In the obscene children’s poem a grandfather sits outside on the stoep farting loudly, and as the speaker says, this conveys “the very essence of grandpa- and grandmahood” (59). The speaker then returns to the
original question: how does it feel to be a grandmother? As her real thoughts are hardly appropriate to the occasion she dryly replies, “Lovely, my dear” (61).

While many female poets have examined being a woman, wife, mother and daughter, the unsexy role of grandmother has been less extensively explored. In this poem Krog shows how identity can become unhinged even during the later stages of life, when grandmotherhood potentially robs women of their sexuality, sense of responsibility and adulthood, and even their dignity. While one cannot help laughing (or perhaps taking offence) at her crude images and sense of outrage at the word “grandma” and its connotations, this poem and Body Bereft in general pose a serious question: how do women retain a positive self-image in the face of old age? Scott (2010: 110-111) suggests:

Through poetry, Krog attempts to find a way to contain this experience within the written and spoken word. In doing so she is able to seek out ways in which one can resist and challenge the undermining of identity that ageing appears to bring, and ways in which one can claim the process of ageing and renegotiate one’s identity so as to open up possibilities rather than closing down options.

Addressing these issues head-on may make way for altering perceptions about old age and female identity. Krog continues her relentless life examination, defying the contemporary world’s obsession with youth and elevating old age to a subject worthy of examination. She states, “I also need to grow old in poetry, to describe the sagging seams with affection, to find the words to love someone that I have lived with for thirty years – not as symbols or metaphors, but as blunt, untransformed body” (in McGrane 2006). Documenting the process of ageing can thus be seen as a means of asserting identity and coming to terms with the physical and psychological effects of ageing. Beyond coming to terms with her own physical ageing, Krog (in Viljoen  2009: 218) also addresses the implications that ageing may have for the poet and activist:

As jy jonk is en vat dinge aan, word jy mos beskou as ’n rebel. Maar ’n ouvrou wat dinge aanvat, is net ’n ou battle-axe, weet jy? Almal is geïrriteerd met ’n ou battle-axe. As sy haar mond oopmaak, wil mense dit toestop. Dit maak dit onsentend moeilik waar jy dink jy ’n bydrae kan maak.

[When you are young and you confront issues, you are regarded as a rebel. But an old woman confronting issues is only an old battle-axe, you know? Everybody gets irritated by an old battle-axe. When she opens her mouth, people want to shut it. That makes it very difficult where you think you can make a contribution.]

However, in Body Bereft Krog proves that older female poets can, and should, continue to make a contribution, despite mixed reactions to their work.
While the explicit language in *Body Bereft* may make some readers cringe, some female poets approve of graphic poems, and even appear to advocate them. Alicia Ostriker tells the story of her “initiation as a woman poet”, recalling the time during her university days when students were invited to show their work to a visiting male poet. She recalls:

He leafed through my slender sheaf and stopped at a tame little poem in which, however, my husband and I were lying in bed together, probably nude. “You women poets are very graphic, aren’t you,” he said, with a slight shiver of disgust. Certainly I was hurt and disappointed. At the same time, something in me was drawing itself up, distending its nostrils, thinking: “You’re goddamned right, we are graphic.” I had not seen myself as a “we” until that moment …. I had just decided “All right then, I’ll be a woman poet,” which meant I would write about the body. (Ostriker 1983: 126-7)

While identifying with and feeling part of a group no doubt lessens the feeling of alienation that poets experience at times, there is also a danger of following the perceived norms of the group at the risk of ignoring one’s own voice. Although this study has examined the controversial and at times graphic writing of Sexton and Krog, these qualities are by no means prerequisites for women poets, and female poets should not feel compelled to write explicitly about the body or any other topic. For women poets to feel obligated to write in a particular manner about specific subjects is certainly not a step forward from the times when women felt they were not permitted to write about whatever they wished, in whichever manner they chose. Finuala Dowling, whose work will now be discussed, is a good example of a contemporary female poet who writes personal poetry, often dealing with particularly female subjects and opinions, without using graphic descriptions or controversial subject matter.
4. FINUALA DOWLING: WHO WE REALLY ARE

Dowling describes her poetry as “tragic-comic” (Dowling 2008b), and she deals with the personal in her poetry with poignancy and wit which make her work highly enjoyable to read. In her poems she charts her identities as mother, daughter, sister, teacher and writer, frequently drawing on personal and family history and events. She often portrays female identity as being inextricably bound up in a community of family and friends, while men as fathers or lovers make fewer appearances. As in Sexton’s and Krog’s work, being a writer is given importance.

Motherhood is of particular concern in the work of Dowling, but Dowling deals more often with the joys of motherhood than the pains. How very different from “The Double Image” is Dowling’s poem “Not Mother and Daughter” (Dowling 2002: 13), although interestingly, this poem also refers to “our doubles – for we have doubles” (5). In this poem, there is no confusion between the doubles and people themselves. Instead of the uncertain relationships and guilt depicted in Sexton’s poem or the fraught descriptions of domestic duties and motherhood in many of Krog’s poems, “Not Mother and Daughter” insists upon the authenticity of the relationship between mother and daughter. They are described as:

Not mother & daughter, someone’s idea of us,  
but who we really are, stars in our life’s movie.  
You’ve turned up the volume and we’re rocking,  
grooving, throbbing like the Flats and the light  
through the clouds rolls the credits with our names.  
Home is behind now, we’re hanging out and loose (7-12)

The poem concludes with the repeated assertion:

Not mother & daughter, someone’s idea of us,  
but who we really are, stars in our life’s movie. (15-16)

As in Sexton’s poem, this poem uses repetition to emphasize its point, but in this case the repetition underscores an absolute certainty rather than implying endless reflections with no final resolution. This poem is a joyful celebration of their relationship and is alive with colloquial, energetic words such as “rocking”, “grooving”, “throbbing” and “hanging out”. It is similar in title but very different in tone to Sexton’s “Mother and Daughter” (Sexton 1999: 305-307). There is no affection or warmth evident in Sexton’s poem, which concludes with the disturbing, accusing lines:

and you will see my death
drooling at these gray lips
while you, my burglar, will eat
fruit and pass the time of day. (44-48)

While Dowling’s poem portrays a mother’s life being enriched by her daughter, the speaker in Sexton’s poem appears to resent her daughter and implies that her daughter has taken things from her.

There is no menace in Dowling’s motherhood poems apart from the fear of her daughter’s experiencing pain. As in “Not Mother and Daughter”, in “I don’t mind. Please don’t worry” (Dowling 2002: 14-15) the reader gets a clear sense of motherly love. Dowling lists some of the issues and fears that mothers have to deal with, ranging in seriousness from tonsils to dying. Again, there is a great deal of repetition, with the title words “I don’t mind” and “Please don’t worry” repeated several times throughout the poem. The poem is essentially an affirmation of love for her daughter, a list of the things a mother would endure to prevent her daughter from undergoing any suffering. Motherhood is portrayed not only as an opportunity to provide love and support, but also to receive them, and in “Feeling Marginalia” (Dowling 2006: 41) we are told that her daughter marks her work:

“Good!” she calls me,
“Excellent!” –
when I am not. (21-23)

This support is returned to the daughter in “Catcher” (Dowling 2008a: 58) in which the speaker affectionately notes:

You have no feel for maths or sport
but at least you’ve written a poem (1-2)

While she acknowledges her daughter’s limitations she still praises her with the words, “Your poem about earwigs is a triumph” (13).

Although Dowling’s poems about motherhood are generally very positive, the demands of being a working mother and writer do emerge as a subject. In “Last Straw” (Dowling 2006: 59) the speaker describes waking early in order to get through a list of domestic duties as well as making time for writing:

On this day when I wake at five
in order to launder and to write
before serving tea and rusks
and packing lunch, finding socks,
then stuck in slow traffic, gouging
my heart out for five hours to yawns
or jocular resistance, before returning
via the shops to answer mail
and phone calls; fetching, feeding,
empathising and in turn offloading,
about the horror of marking, preparing,
and supervising (1-12)

The activity of writing has to be squeezed in along with doing laundry, making breakfast,
getting her daughter ready, driving through traffic, working and shopping, and motherly
tasks are mixed in with the work-related tasks. The short poem is a long list of duties,
portraying a working mother who has very little time for herself, and even less to write.
Similarly, in “Found Poem” (Dowling 2002: 20-21) the speaker states that when people ask
her about the progress of her writing she wants to scream, “Where Do You Think I would
Find the Time?” (5). Between teaching and marking, shopping and attending to “domestic
duties” (25) and “study guides” (26), there is little time to indulge in writing. As in Krog’s
“Two years this month” in which a poet’s concentration is broken as “the pulse of the
fabric is emerging”, the speaker in this poem is similarly interrupted:

poised on the brink of a thought
a child interrupts (11-12)

On the whole Dowling’s motherhood poems do not imply loss of or confusion as to
identity, but rather convey an immense satisfaction in the role of mother. While she states,
“It’s not something I’ve resolved, or that I feel on top of, this motherhood-writing-teaching
thing” (in McGrane 2005), there does not appear to be any resentment towards motherhood
in her poems. The starkly contrasting ways in which Sexton and Dowling view the conflicts
of motherhood and writing are revealed when comparing Dowling’s statement, “I get up at
5 or 5:30 a.m. to write. My daughter does struggle sometimes with this unavailability,
though I make it clear that she may interrupt me at any time” (in McGrane 2005) with
Sexton’s “when I do start to write it is a very concentrated process. I don’t stop – even the
children know now that when Mommy’s writing she mustn’t be disturbed” (in Colburn
1985: 115).

If being a mother is an important concern in Dowling’s work, the role of daughter is
equally prominent. This is particularly evident in the collection *Notes From the Dementia
Ward*, in which Dowling writes about caring for her “mad mother” (Dowling 2008a: 9)
who developed Alzheimer’s disease. While many of the poems on this topic deal with the
pain of caring for an ailing mother, a poem which should not be overlooked is “Mere
Oblivion” (Dowling 2008a: 12-13). Dowling states that in this poem, she tried to correct the following imbalance:

in the collection, my mother was portrayed almost exclusively as a frail octogenarian. Yet visiting her … I always have this sense of her other selves – youthful, glamorous or brilliantly competent – being present …. One day, when I was helping my bent-double mother on one of her brief shuffles down the passageway of the nursing home, I was almost unnerved by the presence of these former incarnations of hers. They seemed to be walking along with us, watching her with concern as she clutched the hand railing. (Dowling 2008b)

This poem recognizes the mother’s many female identities, her “former selves” (3), including:

blurred box-brownie baby from Ficksburg,
skinny malinks hand-standing at the Wilderness,
buxom WAF officer in her pips,
aquiline actress, face turned to the light,
amused matriarch captioned ‘dear Octopus?’
unamused wife of an alcoholic (4-9)

Other roles include widow, drama teacher, estate agent, broadcaster and grandmother. The multiple roles that her mother played in her life are thus acknowledged, even as they are obliterated by dementia. Sexton describes a similar process in “The Division of Parts” (Sexton 1999: 42-6), in which she examines the illness and death of her mother. The speaker in the latter poem also refers to the various disintegrating selves of her mother with the words:

But you turned old,
all your fifty-eight years sliding
like masks from your skull (71-73)

While it is evident in Dowling’s poems that the speaker is suffering, there is also the unmistakable sense of her longing for the end of suffering, both her mother’s and her own. If guilt is evident in the work of other female poets when they discuss motherhood, it is in these poems about caring for her own mother that guilt and feelings of inadequacy are portrayed in Dowling’s work.

These emotions are also evident in “Shift Aside” (Dowling 2008a: 10-11), in which the speaker considers her mother’s age in relation to her own, from childhood to adulthood. Of this poem Dowling states, “I was trying to work out if there was a point at which I’d be old enough not to mind her death, but ‘the numbers toppled – / an orphan at any age’” (Dowling 2008b). These morbid calculations continue into the present, in which the speaker states:
These nights I lie awake calculating our ages:
I am forty-five to your eighty-five,
will be fifty to your ninety
sixty to your century. (18-21)

Dowling states that this poem considers the previous age calculations along with the present ones, “where I still calculate our ages, but with a somewhat different sense of dread” (Dowling 2008b). The same theme is present in “Where Google Has Not Been” (Dowling 2008a: 14-15), in which the speaker tells us, “I have asked so much of the Internet” (1), including the question, “Why won’t my mother die?” (18).

As mentioned in the discussion on Krog, Dowling stated that she was glad she was brave enough to include this question in the poem. This is reminiscent of Sexton’s comments on the courage needed for personal writing, and of Schopenhauer’s words about “the courage to make a clean breast of it” with which Sexton began her first poetry collection. However, the courage of honesty in personal writing should never be confused with blurtting out whatever is on one’s mind, or with sensationalism. Dowling herself states, “I don't advise poetry as a dumping ground for raw emotion” (McGrane 2005), and as Hahn puts it, “My students mistake blurtling something out for poetry. Nerve replaces craft.” (Hahn in Sontag and Graham 2001: 218). Graham and Sontag caution that writers of personal poetry

might indulge in the elevation of trivial or merely uninteresting detail; they may simply whine … they might ignore important aspects of the world beyond the poet’s doorstep and thus remain cloistered in the prison of self; they might mistake the tawdry or sensational for the boldly honest; and, in fact, they might fall anywhere along the deadly spectrum that runs from cocktail-party bore to megalomaniac. (2001: 5-6)

While Dowling’s poetry is filled with personal anecdotes and viewpoints, one does not get the sense that she is merely blurtting out the first thing that comes to mind, and while the word “sensational” may at times be applied to the work of Sexton or Krog, this hardly applies to Dowling’s work. As Karen Scherzinger notes with regard to Dowling’s first poetry collection, I Flying, “It has been something of a common complaint against contemporary poetry that it is obsessed with the idiosyncratic selfishness of the first person. No doubt the complaint has some merit, but it fails, delightfully, to apply to Dowling’s poetry” (Scherzinger 2004: 76).

Beyond the roles of mother and daughter, Dowling also advocates sisterhood and community. In the title poem of “Doo-wop Girls of the Universe”, she presents a hidden
identity within all women in the form of “Doo-wop Girls of the Universe”, (Dowling 2006: 78). The poem begins in a confiding, revelatory tone with:

I know something you don’t know
about the women you know –
those makers of decisions,
physicians, rhetoricians,
amiable stage technicians,
indignant politicians (1-6)

The speaker continues to list all manner of women with different temperaments and professions. All women, the speaker suggests (or at least “Almost every woman I’ve ever known” (15)) would really like to be a doo-wop girl, although she adds, “I’m known to generalize” (41). The list of a variety of women who would like to sing brings to mind Sexton’s poem “In Celebration of my Uterus” (Sexton 1999: 181-183) discussed previously, in which the speaker also mentions a variety of singing women. However, in Dowling’s poem the women are not celebrating their procreative ability as they are in Sexton’s.

What exactly is it that they are celebrating then? While a doo-wop girl would sing publicly on stage, she is still overshadowed by the presence of the male lead singer. This is evident in the third stanza:

So put her in the footlights,
put her at the backing mikes,
right up there on the dais,
maybe slightly out of focus
while some man sings his opus,
the undisputed locus
of attention. (20-26)

A doo-wop girl is still in the “footlights” rather than the spotlight, and she sings on “backing mikes” and is “slightly out of focus” while a man remains the centre of attention. However, in the next stanza doo-wop girls are described as “biding time” (35) and “waiting for the best lines” (36), and Vogt states that this picture of the patience of women “is well transferable to other situations than singing in the background on stage” (Vogt 2008: 205). The speaker encourages a community of women who are able to sing in harmony with each other, and advocates a break from domestic activities with the words:

you hang up those rubber gloves
you freeze that chicken
you unplug that iron
you come with me
we be free
we be threeness
we be supremes
we be the unforced
force of fourness (49-57)

The above words create an image of a joyful group of women who are vibrant and “free”. Beyond claiming that inside every woman is a vibrant, fun-loving “doo-wop girl”, the poem suggests that the power of women increases when they support each other, moving from the singular “doo-wop girl” to “we be threeness” and finally, a “force of fourness”.

The importance of friends and family in women’s lives is also apparent in “Straight Men of Cape Town” (Dowling 2006: 1), in which the straight men of Cape Town have twenty wives:

his own
his widowed mom
his wife’s unmarried friends
their single sisters
the spinsters and the divorcees (3-6)

The lives of women are shown to be intricately intertwined, forming a community of women which becomes like extended family. Family is also given importance in “Census Man”, in which the individual people behind statistics are celebrated, (Dowling 2002: 8-9), and in “Green House” (Dowling 2002: 10) the speaker tells us that she lives in a large green house with her family. She wittily adds:

No husband
and no cat.

People sometimes ask about the cat. (6-8)

This poem conveys no yearning for a husband, an attitude which is reinforced in “Spinster is Me” (Dowling 2006: 40). The speaker in this poem speculates how prospective suitors may be scared off by ever-present, exuberant family members. Even if a man could come to terms with her family, there is another problem:

I couldn’t put off forever the final deterrent:
This girl’s keyboard, her lifelong knight errant. (21-22)

As in the work of Sexton and Krog, writing in itself is thus an important subject in Dowling’s work. Writing is again emphasized in “Freelancer’s Lament” (Dowling 2006: 60-1), in which the speaker laments the uncertainty of the writing life, listing various occupations from bricklaying to being a chef and noting mournfully that people in these
professions all know what is expected of them on a day-to-day basis. In contrast, the productivity of a freelance writer is much less predictable. The speaker tells us:

But I might do anything today.

I could write twenty wonderful pages
or nothing at all
I could finish four commissions
or stare at the wall (15-19)

People derive a sense of identity from their occupations, but for writers this can be problematic as it is an uncertain occupation that may or may not yield positive results. On this subject Krog notes, “That is why poets are so insecure. It took me nearly twenty years of publishing before I comfortably called myself a poet. Even now I find I cannot fill in the word Poet under Occupation on a form. Maybe being a poet isn’t an occupation” in (McGrane 2006). While writing can contribute positively to the identity of a writer when it is successful, failure to produce writing of the desired quality can undermine a coherent sense of self. In “Poem as Emotional Blackmail” (Dowling 2002: 44), the identities of the speaker as a woman and writer become intertwined. The speaker’s words convey a tone of extreme vulnerability, as she repeats the plea:

If I tell you this
you must promise
If I tell you this
you must promise (1-4)

She first describes a rejected manuscript, saying:

‘Unpublishable’!
That’s like ‘fat’ or ‘unmarriagable’ (8-9)

She then confides that the man she loves is going on holiday with someone else. The poem concludes with a plea for someone to tell everyone that
I’m publishable!
I’m lovable! (24-27)

The speaker’s sense of worth as both a woman and a writer thus become linked in her mind, and are equally threatened. While defining oneself in terms of being a writer may lead to anxiety in some cases, it is also celebrated in poems such as “Servant and Daughter” (Dowling 2006: 64-6) in which the speaker proclaims:

God knows I’m a writer,
He sends me his people –
the ones so precious
he keeps them
in specimen drawers. (1-5)

This poem portrays writing as an activity far beyond the role of occupation, but rather as a
vocation. Dowling also pokes fun at public perceptions of writers in “Loving Novels”
(Dowling 2006: 69-71), in which the speaker tells us that now she has published prose as
well as poetry she is officially an author, but adds:
well, not really an
author,
but a woman author – and a certain kind of
journalist (4-7)

She wittily explains that the public want to know all kinds of “really important things” (8)
about female authors, such as:
What is my favourite colour?
What perfume do I wear?
What are my three all-time favourite novels? (10-12)

Middlebrook states that Sexton was remade as a person by her writing and the success
thereof, “turning her into someone self-created in the first-person voice of her poetry …. The
conundrum of identity lay vividly before Sexton … she spent hours smoking and
twirling her hair with a forefinger … trying to write poems that didn’t sound like poems
she had already written” (Middlebrook 1992: 166). Middlebrook also explains that Sexton
experienced the role of a contemporary American female poet “as an identity with a life of
its own, being shaped for her by the reception of her work” (1992: 172). Thus, while
writing was utilised by Sexton as a tool for exploring her identity, the controversy which
her work created in her personal life and in public reception, along with her success as a
writer, does not appear to have helped her create a unified sense of self. Juhasz concurs
with this view, and believes that Sexton’s writing ultimately increased her sense of self-
fragmentation (Juhasz 1979: 268). In “Loving Novels”, Dowling suggests that she is able to
maintain a critical distance from her success as a writer, something that Sexton was not
able to do. Scherzinger notes, “Dowling’s ‘I’ is informed by a disarming critical and ironic
distance’ (Scherzinger 2004: 77), and perhaps it is Dowling’s humorous approach to
writing which allows for this distance.

As with the personal in poetry, the use of humour in poetry is a contentious issue. The
poet Tom Henihan goes as far as to say:

Poetry should be protected from fun…. Poetry is essentially a solemn and
devotional form…. I am not saying that there is no room for humour in poetry but
I am saying that there is very little room. We need things that are serious…. Like failed musicians and actors who become children’s entertainers, I sometimes suspect that comedians that aren’t that funny decide to be poets. (In Modi 2008: 2)

This is rather a restrictive, prescriptive view of poetry and its function. Why should poetry have to be serious in order to be considered good poetry? Humour can make poetry much more accessible to readers, and the use of humour does not necessarily mean that the subject or emotions dealt with in a poem are trivial. Silke Heiss (2004: 89), for instance, believes that “Dowling’s sense of humour is legion …. The reason it (or any true humour) works is because it is essentially serious” (Heiss 2004: 89). Dowling’s awareness of the complex function of humour is evident in her statement, “laughter is complex and deep, and a form of aggression in that it disrupts patterns of breathing and thinking, often by turning ideas on their heads” (in de Kock 2008: 20). Therefore, humour can be used as a way of dealing with life and confronting issues from a fresh perspective rather than being overwhelmed by them. Another important point to note is that humour is a much more difficult technique to master than it might appear. A great deal of artistic skill is necessary for the successful use of humour, and only when it is skilfully applied does it give the impression of light-heartedness while being simultaneously thought-provoking. Taking these factors into account, Henihan’s view that comic poets are somehow lacking in artistic skill comes across as problematic and simplistic. The popularity and critical success of poets such as Billy Collins, the first recipient of the Mark Twain Prize for Humor in Poetry, suggest that not everyone shares Henihan’s prejudices against the use of humour in poetry. Dowling’s poetry is an excellent example of the successful use of humour in poetry, and her comic touch in no way detracts from the seriousness of topics which she examines in her writing.

While Dowling does explore the different roles women and writers play, on a whole her work seems to be more of a celebration of “who we really are” than an investigation into whether the selves really exist. Sexton mused, “I wonder if the artist ever lives his life – he is so busy recreating it” (Sexton & Ames 2004: 382), but in contrast Dowling states, “I do think of poems as being continuous with life (in McGrane 2005).

As both Sexton and Krog have done, Dowling addresses unfavourable reactions to personal poetry in “Not writing” (Dowling 2006: 74), in which she wittily declares:

The police have been here
the anti-intimacy polisie
paying my poetry a visit –
not the usual lit. crit.

What you are reading
is thus encrypted (1-6)

The remainder of the poem is written in a mock-encrypted style, in which the speaker dryly states that she enjoys the “anti-intimacy” police’s presence in her home and gives the following counsel:

I think we all respect
circumspect writing, artists
who are guarded,
who censor-censer
repugnant odours
caused by candour (9-14)

The “anti-intimacy” police could refer to the critics of personal poetry who disapprove of the “repugnant odours” caused by “candour”, of writing which they consider to be too frank and self-revealing. This is reminiscent of Sexton’s numerous critics, including John Holmes, who said, “she writes so absolutely selfishly, of herself, to bare and shock and confess… the self-preoccupation comes to be simply damn boring” (in Middlebrook 1992: 143). These criticisms are frequently levelled at personal poetry, and poets of the personal often feel they have to address these criticisms and defend their writing. While Sexton thoughtfully explores the value that personal writing may have for readers in “For John, who begs me not to enquire further” and Krog addresses annoyed family members of personal poets in “Marital Psalm”, Dowling addresses the topic with her characteristic humour, comparing the critics to censorship officials. The poem concludes with the rather cryptic lines:

I am not writing to you;
clearly
I am writing to you. (19-21)

The speaker does not tell us whom she is writing to, but this raises the question: who is the personal poet writing for? Sexton tells us, “Don’t kid yourself. You write for an audience (I think of myself as writing for one person, that one perfect reader who understands and loves)” (in Colburn 1985: 33). In contrast, Krog states, “There is no reader when I write a poem, only the poem that wants to be written. It dictates every action. It demands to take risks, it cares nothing about anybody (least of all about me), it demands complete loyalty” (in McGrane 2006). Dowling’s explanation bears more resemblance to Krog’s: she states
that when she writes a poem she does so because “the poem itself, or the thought that is about to become a poem, has completely seduced me” (in McGrane 2005).

While one could reasonably ask whom any kind of poetry is written for, personal poetry in particular invites a special relationship of disclosure and complicity between reader and writer. As Rees-Jones notes, “More than in any other genre, the confessional poem demands a dynamic of belief between reader or listener and poet … the confessional poem sets out to invoke a unity between poet and poem” (Rees-Jones 2005: 129). While for the purposes of this essay I would substitute “personal” for “confessional”, the same holds true. Readers of personal poetry need to believe in the authenticity of the poet, as an artist and an individual.

If the writer of personal poetry at times uses writing as a tool for exploring identity, is it fair to say that readers also derive a sense of identity from reading these poems? Ostriker, who advocates writing about particularly female topics in a personal manner, asserts that she finds reflections of her own identity in women’s poetry. However, if this kind of poetry allows for more intense reader identification with the poet, there are the following drawbacks:

Everywhere I read in women’s poems I found passages that touched my personal identity, experience and ideas, in places no poetry has touched before ….Where I disagreed with a woman poet’s ideology I was furious with her in a way that I would never be with a man, as if she were telling lies about me … (Ostriker 1983: 4)

To be furious with a female poet because she does not reflect a reader’s ideology is rather an extreme reaction, but it is an indication of the degree to which people may relate to poetry of the personal. While the work of Sexton and Krog is such that readers may either strongly identify with or disagree with views expressed, Dowling’s work is far more moderate. However, because Dowling elevates the details of family relationships and everyday activities to poetic subjects, many readers may find some reflection of their own lives and selves in her work. As Karen Scherzinger states, Dowling’s descriptions of the everyday and domestic could make a reader murmur, ‘Yes, I know exactly what you mean’” (Scherzinger 2004: 77).
5. CONCLUSION

From the controversial writing of Anne Sexton, to the outspokenness of Krog’s poems, to the tragic-comic wit of Dowling, there are many ways for female writers to approach personal poetry. Poems may be controversial and ambiguous, as many of Sexton’s are. Or they may be frank and graphic, in the style of Krog. They need be none of these things, however, as Dowling proves in her understated and entertaining examinations of self and everyday life. While there are many differences in the work of these three female poets, this essay attempted to show that there are also numerous similarities in terms of dealing with female identity and the multiple roles which women play. Personal poetry is a means for exploring personal identity with all its facets, and for contemplating the role that writing plays in the lives of women.

Postmodernists would argue that the search for any unity and coherence in identity is fruitless, and that plurality should be embraced. As Cahoone (1996:15) states:

Virtually in every kind of intellectual endeavour, postmodernism tries to show that what others have regarded as a unity, a single, integral existence or concept, is plural… the individual in question is plural as well. Everything is constituted by relations to other things, hence nothing is simple…. The human self is not a simple unity, hierarchically composed, solid, self-controlled; rather it is a multiplicity of forces or elements. It would be more true to say that I have selves, than a self.

While the work of female poets of the personal indicates multiplicity in female identities, the fact that women continue to write about and problematise these various identities suggests that accepting the existence of different selves does not solve the problems it creates in their lives. From the time that Sexton wrote to the present day a great deal has changed, and it is currently more acceptable to write about the personal and to explore topics which were once considered taboo. While today’s female poets have more freedom to write about subjects which are important to them (and arguably a wider audience of women), the work of Krog and Dowling suggests that matters are just as complex as they have always been. The contradictory impulses between preserving individuality and becoming absorbed in the roles of wife and mother have not become much simpler. While feminism encouraged women to pursue careers and independence, research shows that many women today are still opting for the position of housewife over a career, while women who do pursue careers struggle to cope with the conflicting demands of domesticity. Beyond these obvious roles, women want to create a stable sense of self that is
not completely defined by profession or family. For writers, there is a further identity crisis: that of the person, and that of the writer. Joanne Frye (1986: 74-6) believes that both the writing and reading of personal literature help women to explore their different roles and relationships without becoming externally defined by them. She states that the narrator can actively examine the enriching possibilities of human relationship without being bound by a concept of self-in-relationship as the definition of her femaleness. Through self-narration she can engage her understanding of friends, family, and lovers as a part of her self-interpretation without merging her “identity” with other people …. The speaking “I” claims her identity in process; in becoming the interpreter of her own experience, she also claims both her femaleness and her autonomous self-definition.

While Frye is speaking of novels the same theory could arguably apply to personal poetry, in which self-narration, self-interpretation and the speaking “I” are essential components. For the writer, this kind of poetry assists with asserting identity as she explores her concept of self, perhaps clarifying it in her own mind before presenting it to the public. As Collette Inez (2001: 118) states, “Although I don’t think of poetry as therapy, as a prescribed remedy for sorrows, the act of writing can bring clarity to what seems blurred, and may sometimes rescue us from the edge”. This is in line with Sexton’s comment that “the writing actually puts things back in place. I mean, things are more chaotic, and if I can write a poem, I come into order again, and the world is again a little more sensible, and real” (in Colburn 1985: 73). On the gains of writing Dowling states, “you sit down to write in a mood of utter despondency and hopelessness …. Then, as you write the poem, something is released inside you – a set of unconscious images or unexpected connections. The poem takes on the loss, but produces a gain” (in McGrane 2005), and Krog asserts that poetry had a deep affect on her as an individual, stating “it complexified and deepened my ability to love another human being; it opened me up to see injustice as if it was underlined in red, to be aware of community, of being young etc” (in McGrane 2006).

Despite Sexton’s assertion that writing helped her to “put things back in place”, Juhasz (1979: 268) sees her work in a different light. As indicated previously, it is Juhasz’s view that because it failed to offer an alternative vision, Sexton’s writing ultimately increased her sense of self-fragmentation. However, she believes that this type of writing may be beneficial to the reader:

Yet Sexton’s poetry has offered salvation to others. Personal poetry of this kind, a genre that many women, in their search for self-understanding and that same elusive wholeness, have recently adopted, must be understood to have a different function for its readers and for its writers. Art as therapy appears less profitable for the artist, who gives the gift of herself, than for its recipients. I think that I can
learn from Sexton’s poems as she never could. They project a life that is like my own in important ways …. At the same time, they are not my life; their distance from me permits a degree of objectivity, the ability to analyze as well as empathize. Possibly I can use the insights produced by such a process to further change in my own life.

While Sexton claimed that writing helped her to make sense of her reality or lack thereof, the following statement gives Juhasz’s view credibility: “Sometimes, my doctors tell me that I understand something in a poem that I haven’t integrated into my life. In fact, I may be concealing it from myself, while I was revealing it to the readers” (in Colburn 1985: 85).

In contrast to Juhasz, many critics do not see value in poetry of the personal. After one of Anne Sexton’s poetry readings, Auden reputedly spat, “Who the hell cares about Anne Sexton's grandmother?” (in Collins 2001: 82). We might as well ask, “Who the hell cares about Finuala Dowling’s mother?”, or “Who the hell cares about Antjie Krog’s menopause?” Judith Harris (Harris 1994: 267) offers the following answer:

*Why should we not?* … We read them [personal poems] because they impart truth about cruelty, about the need to unify aspects of the self, and because they show the inscriptions of collective pain as a language that can be uttered, received, and transcended. We read them because they plummet through the surface, break the code of silence, and yield wisdom. These poets touch irresistible pain, pain that unites us or tears us apart …. And we should come to recognize ourselves in them, our own vulnerabilities, in the human truth they speak ….

The debate about the value of personal poetry for the reader is probably as old as personal writing itself, but if the idea that personal writing can speak to readers on such a personal level is valid, then readers have a great deal to gain from this kind of writing. One could argue that we do care about Sexton’s, Krog’s and Dowling’s family members and personal dilemmas because we care about our own. We (as women, or perhaps even partners of women) care about Krog’s menopause because we will one day have to face our own old age, and such a candid examination of the trials of the body assures us that we are not alone in our experiences. Although writers of personal poetry write about their own lives and concerns, it does not necessarily reduce the relevance of the poems for the readers. In Dowling’s opinion, “when you are writing most personally about yourself, you are actually writing most universally” (in McGrane 2005). In the words of Adrienne Rich:

The poet’s relationship to her poetry has, it seems to me … a twofold nature. Poetic language – the poem on paper – is a concretization of the poetry of the world at large, the self, and the forces within the self; and those forces are rescued from formlessness, lucidified, and integrated in the act of writing poems. But there is a more ancient concept of the poet, which is that she is endowed to speak for those who do not have the gift of language, or to see for those who – for
whatever reasons – are less conscious of what they are living through. It is as though the risks of the poet’s existence can be put to some use beyond her own survival. (In Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 119)

Perhaps a different way to look at these arguments is to consider briefly the purpose of art as a whole, a question which has been endlessly debated by various individuals and art movements for centuries. Countless theories have been put forward, ranging from communication to investigations into truth and beauty, from social commentary to art for art’s sake. Juhasz’s statement that poetry can offer salvation to others and Rich’s theory that poets can speak or see for those who are unable to do so give poetry of the personal rather lofty aims. However, the responses of readers appear to support these views, and if we return to Krog’s statement that Erica Jong’s poetry freed her to be herself, this seems to suggest that personal poetry may have practical application in our lives that extend far beyond literary appreciation. It has value because it speaks to us of the specific obstacles women face, and, more generally, asks complex questions about identity and the ‘dissonances’ within the self. The prevalence of personal poetry and the success of several such poets suggest that this poetry will continue to play an important role, both for readers and writers. And this, I would argue, is how it should be.
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PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


