Privacy Lessons

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Just a piece of privacy lattice away, my maniac neighbor is attacking 2-by-4s with a buzzsaw. I would be happier hearing birdsong, but that savage is not interrupting me. I have turned my back to him. I have gone through the mirror. I am out to sea. Nothing is going to stop me from whispering what I have to say to you.

I learned privacy at my mother's knee, thinking of the word itself as a participle, derived fiom her very active verb: ***to private.*** I should correct myself and say that I learned to private at her ***back,*** not her knee. Desperate for an emotional life of her own, my mother, Polly, unpredictably and mystifyingly would turn her back to me, sinking into a sudden current of her own needs. At these moments she seemed to be drowning — or I seemed to be drowning without her. Come ***back,*** I said, tugging at her sleeve, but inward — or rather, seaward — she went. Years later when I took Poetry 101, my professor described metaphor as language that "passes through a mirror," and instantly I knew I had found my vocation as a poet. I realized Polly had disappeared through her own reflection.

Writing poetry requires huge amounts of privacy.

Mere being requires huge amounts of privacy, my mother felt, and passed on a fortune of privacy skills to me.

Yet when she crossed the boundary line of death, she suddenly felt free to intrude on my solitude. The first time she popped up, I spied the top of her steely haired, 60-something head cresting the high back of an upholstered chair next to a reading lamp. Swiveling the chair partway around to acknowledge me, she said, "Not now, Molly," then turned toward the reading lamp again to perfectly position her book

under its beam. The second time she visited, she came as a 6-year-old with shiny, dark bangs and a Buster Brown haircut, what used to be called in novels for girls "a tanned hoyden." She romped through a meadow near a creek, her pony tethered nearby, waiting for her grandparents to come back from town with their team of horses and wagon, bringing her a book. The year was 1925, three years before the poet Anne Sexton, whom she vaguely resembled physically, was born. Polly faced me obliviously, not recognizing me in my 21st-century clothes — or perhaps I was invisible. Certainly she didn't know that she would become my mother. She was busy becoming herself. In both of these moments, she was completely inside her own privacy, one in a pleasure of becoming, the other in a pleasure of maintaining.

Becoming and maintaining are the basic acts of privacy — the cornerstones of a life. Developing a room of your own in your head leads to a delicious and necessary distance from any intrusive environment, and it provides, as well, a blueprint for existence because, in the privacy of your own mind, you always know who you are. And if you know this, choice opens to you, even in the severest circumstance.

For several years I held a position at Friends Seminary School in Manhattan called "learning-disabilities specialist," teaching reading, writing and study **shlls,** but the fact was that I was employed teaching my adolescent charges how to pilot emotional waters and pirate their identities, indeed, to private. By the time kids are juniors or seniors in high school, they attain Olympic levels of daydreaming. But the ones I taught had somehow been prevented from finding this out for themselves, probably because they had parents who watched them every minute, who never turned their backs on them because their children were not high achievers and, therefore, in the parlance of achievement, "disabled." One exasperating day I found myself teaching them how to daydream by extorting daydreaming instructions from them for use by an extraterrestrial who suddenly had to attend Friends Seminary. How was the being to sit? What expression was it to form on its so-called face? They humored me by answering that it was to stare at a place a little bit above and behind the teacher's head, half close its eyes, but not all the way, let its mind go blank, let sounds filter out as if a big fan were whirring in its head.

If your mind is a pie, they told it (the invisible extraterrestrial was one of **us** now; we were sharing our thoughts with a blank chair), save one piece, about one eighth, to listen to the teacher. Then let the rest of your whole mind wander, like to a place where you can French-**hss** your girl/boyfriend.

These are instructions for the kind of relaxed interior wandering that promotes mental and imaginative growth, allowing you to come into loose contact with who you are. De-focusing on the outside world through the construction of interior walls paradoxically creates an atmosphere for creative focus, or concentration. My students took to their list of instructions, originally the property of my mother, Polly, the original back-turner.

Polly grew up as a kind of child barbarian, indulged in her privacy. She was allowed to spend every weekend on her grandpa's farm, even going to school on Monday morning from the farm, spending the weekday nights ruefully at her parents' home, the house, general store, and gas station called "LaGrange Garage." Her independence was legendary, both in my family and in the hamlet of LaGrange, where she grew up as a teetotaling Baptist. On the eve of America's entry into World War II, she left home for Buffalo, the nearest city.

There she became intoxicated by the glamorous Anchor Bar, where Ted, her future husband, had begun drinking boilermakers when he was 12. I think now my father may have fallen in love with her because she treated him with the casual egalitarianism that those who have developed a truly private, inviolate self treat others. But the farm girl he loved didn't have a clue about how alcoholism worked, nor did she have a clue about the wild, alcoholic family she would marry into — and live with in a small, side-by-side duplex. In that house, where I was born, the former tanned hoyden had no room of her own, no meadow, no farm, no horse, only a pleasantly drunk father-in-law, a happily drunk brother-in-law, a warily drunk mother-in-law and a weepingly drunk husband who had a sexy aura of frustrated violence about him.

How would she create a mental room of her own? Fortunately and unfortunately she would turn her back on it all.

Both my parents were the less preferred of their siblings, and each was a middle child. My father's older brother died in infancy, and

my dad took on the terrible burden of carrying his brother's exact name. He never could measure up to the divine, dead, other Edward. Whereas my mother was ignored by her mother but cherished by her grandparents, my father was actively blamed by his mother and father. He never had any privacy. My grandmother judged, disapproved, and interfered with every decision he made, and he lusted for her approval with such a deep, child's desire that he never gave up hope of making her happy. Just as his mother could not work her way through the loss of her first baby, he could not work his way through the loss of her fond gaze. (This focus on her led to a profound spiritual neglect of himself, just as my learning-disabled students profoundly neglected themselves in the atmospheres of intrusive supervision in which they lived.) Unfortunately, since my mother frequently dislodged her gaze from everyone, he did not have this focus from his wife, either.

When I imagine the first kiss shared by my mother and father, it burns with the intensity of two neglected beings who have found each other. Yet how would each of them create the intimately distant space to make a sanctuary of their marriage? "So," John Bayley says in his memoir, "Elegy for Iris," "married life began."

> *And the joys of solitude. No contradiction was involved. The one went perfectly with the other. To feel oneself held and cherished and accompanied, and yet to be alone. To be closely and physically entwined, and yet feel solitude's friendly presence, as warm and undesolating as contiguity itself.*

Neither of my parents knew how to cherish the other by granting each another solitude. My dad had nowhere to turn for a moment to himself except to the glow of Black Velvet in a shot glass at a bar. (I think of that bartender as the benign parent who does not intrude or interfere, leaving the patron-child to his own inner resources.)

Every third week my dad left for his job at 4 in the afternoon. On this shift my mother, sister and I entered a peaceable kingdom of dinnertimes. We each sat in front of our Melmac plate, then in imitation of our mother, we turned our chairs to the side. Polly did this so she could read and smoke while she dabbled at her food. She was teaching us to sit at the side of the main activity, to establish, even at a blessedly quiet mealtime, even more privacy. We turned our chairs as she did, trying to continue to cut out paper dolls or color in coloring

books, but we were messy, and she made us turn our chairs back to the table. "I'm setting a bad example to you, I know," she said, so of course we knew it was a great example and aspired to it.

Much later on in life, aspiring to be a poet, I read Emily Dickinson's advice, "Tell it slant," and knew that Polly had set up a kind of poetic concentration by turning her chair from its direct relation to the table. And still later on, I taught poetry to seventh-graders. Every Friday we disengaged the chairs from the desks, and some kids went to lounge on the wide windowsills with a huge, liver-colored, stuffed corduroy worm that uncoiled to about 15 feet. We turned the lights off, got comfortable, and followed this recipe: Close your eyes, let your pen fall loosely in your hand, let yourself go blank, or if you can't go blank, watch yourself going toward your thoughts. Keep telling yourself your thoughts until words push through your arms, down into your hands, and through your fingers where the pen will begin to write them.

When Robin Byrd, the Manhattan Sex Channel duchess, repeats the same mantra to her audience every show, "Now get your condoms and dental dams, and get comfortable, and remember, if you don't have a loved one, you always have me, Robin Byrd," I think of it as a variation on the recipe we developed. Ours led to learning, reading, writing and concentration, and Robin's leads to sex, but sex is a huge part of privacy, and eros drives poetry, as all the kids knew.

Having goals requires you to concentrate. But the ability to concentrate, like sex, takes a certain amount of athleticism.

My mother could cook a meal with her nose in a book while she was tying my sister's shoelaces, pouring my father a beer, putting me on the potty seat, handing the newspaper to my grandmother, laughing at my uncle's dirty joke, taking endless ribbing from them all about her reading habits in a household where no other adult did.

By the time I was 12, I also could cook a meal, do my homework, supervise my sister, be on the lookout for my father, watch TV, and read a novel at the same time. I didn't have the experienced dexterity of my mother, but I'd passed my basic lessons. But wait—where was my mother? She had gotten in her car and gone to the back room of Peacock's Superette, our grocery store, where she spent every day of the week from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., except Sunday, when

the store opened at 1. She had physically ensured her privacy. That was her goal, but it might not have been a goal she would have admitted.

About this time, at the age of the learning-disabled adolescents I taught years later, I read my first Shakespeare play, "As You Like It," and loved memorizing the lines from Act 2, Scene 1, that articulated a rescuing motto for living:

Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,
*Wears yet a precious jewel **in** his head.*

Much later, in college, when it was dawning on me that one of my goals might be becoming a poet, I would hear Marianne Moore's definition of poetry as real toads in imaginary gardens and think of my amateurish, inchoate, toad-like poems as bejeweled attempts. But it was back in Buffalo that I learned that one could use adversity. My father's threats and my mother's abandonment could be put to use: I could generate a precious jewel — something creative — out of it all.

My enthusiasm for generating jewels has never dampened. I am creatively energized all the time, and part of that is simply my personality, but an essential part of that energy is the set of privacy slulls that allows for unfocused wandering and its flip side, concentration on one thing to the utter exclusion of all else. My mother concentrated on her goal of removing herself from our house to the utter exclusion of her daughters and husband. That was the point for her, really. Yet in achieving it, she modeled a possibility for me. She was turning the forehead of the toad adversity into a jewel. She was creating a way out when none had seemed possible. Writing a poem requires both this exclusive concentration and the unfocused state that allows you to be surprised by your ideas. It provides a way out of doorless conundrums by becoming, paradoxically, a way in.

After Polly achieved her goal, I had to learn a special trick: to maintain the concentration of daydreamy privacy while being hyperaware of signals that something might be wrong with my father. My dad was capable of sudden violence, but there were a few warning signs that one might heed. He could be headed off with a certain kind of placating. Or you could get way out of his way.

Thus skills of vigilance supplemented my privacy fortune. Because my sister and I were all alone with him, and because Polly warned us

that he could do something dangerous and we should always be on guard, I had to enter my own world, leaving my eyes turned like sentinels toward the source of possible attack. Now this requires extra flexibility, and I trained hard. One part of my mind had to be turned toward my father at all times, the way mothers cock an ear toward their young children. This was complicated by the architecture of our suburban house. My bedroom had no door. If I were sure my father were occupied or passed out, I could leave the living room and go to my room, but only if I were sure. Obviously this was stressful. But what I learned from it, a technique of vigilant privating, also allowed me to write three books of poetry while I was worlung full time teaching children as "difficult" as my family was. I got out of that house and with more than the clothes on my back. 1 knew how to concentrate; I knew how to create; I knew how to re-create privacy in my head.

I could not now tell you if my neighbor has stopped his vicious saw.

That hypervigilance also provided me with a capacity to notice details around me that hardly anyone else noticed. When a poet describes such details, she can fill her poems with shocks of recognition for readers. Everyone knows what the poet is talking about, yet it all feels original because it is so sharply perceived that the imaginary garden comes to seem as real as the toad squatting in it.

When I have thoughts of privacy deprivation — say, when I imagine myself all alone in a nursing home, helpless against the repeated jabbering of my roommate and the sharing of everything: clothes, teeth, eyeglasses — I comfort myself with the knowledge that I might still be able to create a precious jewel in my head. Mental privacy has a spiritual dimension. It is recuperative, and it generates health.

Yet by watching my mother completely turn her back on us, I learned the final, ugly skill of privacy: If she had the capacity to turn away completely, I probably do, too. And what she did was bad. It is immoral to leave your girls with their increasingly dangerous father fallen prey to the last stages of a terrible disease. My mother overdeveloped her privacy skill the way I think muscle builders overdevelop their biceps. What she did was immoral, and I felt its immorality just at the point when I was entering that most moral stage of development: adolescence. I was becoming an ethical being, and my father

(sometimes I just can't see alcoholism as a disease, no matter how hard I try) did questionable things by verbally abusing us and weeping and demanding a love from us we could not possibly give. I wanted my mother to use that other meaning of ***back.*** I wanted her to ***come back.***

If my mother could have gone this far, as the inheritor of her privacy treasure chest, could I? My anxiety over becoming a privacy monster has contributed to my lifelong urgency to connect to others. I am afraid of what my mother became, but I love her methodology. As far as creativity is concerned, it suggested that there may be an actual art of neglect.

For the last 15 years, I have worked one-to-one with serious writers needing advice, encouragement and instruction about their writing. Many of these writers are poets, and to my pleasure, most of them are publishing in literary journals, and some of them have published remarkable books. I devised this peculiar way of making a living during my years as a learning-disabilities specialist when I had a small, private practice working with indlvidual students outside the school. This practice imitated the form of psychotherapy, yet it wasn't psychotherapy at all. I shudder at the thought of being a psychotherapist because I personally need too much privacy ever to be on call to patients 24 hours a day. I know that therapists take special training to develop boundaries which allow them to handle these occasions, but I run even from the prospect of such training. I do not want a phone call from an emergency room at ***3*** a.m.

While I do not want to be a psychotherapist, I love the ***situation*** of intimacy between two individuals, one guiding, the other needing guidance, focusing on a subject at hand that both continue to discover in conversation. ***That*** is my idea of malung a living, and that is just what I do. About 10 hours a week, I engage in just such conversations. They are too intense for me to do more of and leave time for my writing. My "students," for lack of a better word, are often women at crucial junctures in their lives, and one of the issues at hand is how they are going to get time to write, in other words, how they are going to achieve the necessary privacy to devote to their writing life. Many of the middle-aged students have husbands and children whom they have "put first," but the younger, single women also feel challenged

at malung this time for themselves. And as I think about the men who study with me, I realize that this issue is prominent for them, as well. It also has to do with bargaining for time from their families and jobs.

So with both subtle and obvious means, I model ways to private time and space. Some of this modeling comes in the form of appointments I schedule sometimes many months in advance, allowing that goal to develop on the horizon in more sophisticated landscape than I inhabited with my learning-disabled adolescent students, but similar terrain. You can't develop goals until you claim who you are, and writers know best who they are when they are alone. Somehow they must find hours alone in which to accomplish what they need for that appointment.

The type of privacy I enjoy with my students is a lovely, boundaried intimacy, the focus of hours on a subject that emerges and changes with our wandering glances and thoughts. It is a form of mental writing, a form of concentration, and it has the classic shape of mentoring, whether it's Obi Wan Kenobi and his student, Luke Skywalker, or Nadia Boulanger and her student, Louise Talma. One experienced person and one less-experienced person embark on a private tour of a designated terrain, the experienced one noticing the landscape with a trained eye yet remaining focused on the learner, the learner thriving in the focus and gradually shifting his or her eye to the whole terrain. This is the intimacy of Dante and Virgil, or Heidi and her grandfather, or Arthur and Merlin, or Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore. All the Zen-like lessons lead to the moment when the rules no longer apply and the student pulls the sword from the stone. In other words, the student claims her own. The mentoring intimacy then dissolves, although the memory of the private lessons seems lifelong, intensifying as the student turns into the experienced one who must take on that opposite role.

This type of learning is a lush form of privacy because the boundaries are as clear as garden walks, and the growth is as measurable—and as ravishingly beautiful and astonishingly unpredictable—as the seasonal growth of flora for a knowledgeable gardener. The gardening metaphor is completely apt because once you prepare ground and plant the young plant, you have simply got to leave it alone and wait for it to grow. Of course you water and mulch and do the appropriate chores, but your job as the gardener is to watch and wait,

to encourage, and ***not*** to ***interfere.*** The student, the flora, must grow in its own, private way. That is growth's substance and habit. Intrusion, breaking the privacy, damages the plant. I feel completely responsible toward my students when I turn away from them to do my own writing. I am not simply a teacher. I am foremost a writer, with my own books and projects. I do not return phone calls in an instant. I do return them but after I have finished my creative work. I keep the world out, and my students know that after the lesson they become the world. I turn toward my private world of malung just as they must turn toward their own. It is Polly's lesson with the spoiled parts of the peel removed.

Though ***privacy*** conjures up an image of sitting in a garden, ***secrecy*** provokes an image of overturning a rock, spying on the wet, maggotty, squirming world of its underside. The secret garden, most girls remember, was actually a walled garden, locked because of a death. A girl finds the key after a crow has shown it to her, ***unlocks*** the garden and begins renewing it with two boys, Colin, an invalid, and Dickon. The minute she unlocks the garden, it becomes private. Though walled—if one went in uninvited, one would be an intruder—it is no longer secret. The private garden nurtures the souls of the beings inside its walls, to the point of Colin's health returning. Above all, it is creative. The children re-create what once was there, and the garden shows a healthy resurgence. Privacy always suggests freedom, while secrecy closes down possibility.

I had a bit of a private garden myself. In the golden summertimes, I went to live with my grandparents in the hamlet of LaGrange, down the road from where my mother grew up. I had no responsibilities and entered a kind of shock of displacement, which led to that requisite state of childhood growth: boredom. Only privacy can generate the glory of this boredom. One day, lying on my back in an apple orchard, I was too bored even to daydream. Looking up into the tangle of gray branches above me, a word came to me: ***latticework.*** It was a latticework of branches. ***Pretty good,*** I thought, ***better write that down.*** Privacy at my grandparents didn't mean shutting out the world as I handled infinite numbers of activities; it meant being all alone in the world, observing it, and taking it in, reforming it, and putting it out again—not a wall but a lattice between me and the world. Why

read a book for escape as my mother did, when you can escape and write a book?

But so much for mental chambers. On to the bedchamber.

Because my parents paid me no mind, I spent hours alone in the house when they weren't there, and as I paraded naked in front of the full-length mirror of my doorless room, I thought of a new word to write down: ***ripe.*** I lay down and learned to masturbate when I was 15 or so, and the first time I had an orgasm, my parents were in the living room not 20 feet away, so occupied with themselves that I had no fear, even though I felt for sure the bed was shaking. I thought I was having some sort of heart attack I wouldn't survive. But I did. And I tried it again the next night. And the next. Using the privacy skill—being present without being present—I became a sexual being under their noses.

As I drew a bubble bath for myself and my boyfriend, who became my husband decades later and with whom I have achieved a blissful state of married solitude, I drew it with the confidence that even if we were to be discovered, my parents were too preoccupied to do much about it. Years later my mother told me that during an argument with my father, she reached absently beneath the chair cushion (half turning away again) only to find my bra and underpants buried there. (My boyfriend and I had made a mad dash to the backyard when their car came up the driveway.) She never told. That's part of my privacy legacy, too.

By the time I left for college, I had a luxurious sense of my own sexuality, all because I spent so much time in my own head enjoying myself. It's fun to be private! And to have private parts, too.

The upside of not having intrusive sexual value judgments thrown at you is that sex is your own. Your own smell, your own taste, your own touch. I'm not saying I went on to have a perfect sex life. But it had a perfect beginning. And so did my imaginative life. I know I grew up in a so-called domestic hell, but as a sexual being and a writer, I was given an excellent, excellent start.

At college, privacy began to play a literary role in my life. The poets in vogue were the Confessionals, Anne Sexton among them. She was the Confessional I liked least but who, of course, influenced me the most. I detested the way she jumped from metaphor to metaphor,

not staying with an image for more than a line or two. I hated the way my professor, the one who defined metaphor as disappearance through a mirror, pointed to her picture and said breathlessly, "She was a model, you know." When Sexton visited our campus, she descended on the party thrown for her and stalked, mockingly, each of the flustered, flattered, uneasy English professors who were her prey Finally, Bengal-tiger style, she closed her jaws over our local antelope of a novelist who later became famous in another country and is still probably dining out on his Night with Anne. Even though he was only a throwaway line for her. Her raw need—she was drunk—appalled me. But after I read the Diane Wood Middlebrook biography of her, I wrote the only letter I've ever written to the New York Times Book Review, in complete support of Middlebrook's use of Sexton's psychiatrist's tapes and in complete support of the psychiatrist for releasing them. That was one biography I felt sure did not invade Sexton's privacy because Sexton was a poet who actually built boundaries by unloosing secrets.

Sexton wrote straight out about subjects that were supposed to be kept under wraps: love affairs, abortions, her loathsome '50s wifehood. In a paradoxical way, by revealing secrets she was protecting her privacy—insofar as privacy creates identity. When I considered what I would take for my subjects as a poet, I knew that my sexuality would be one of them. That, in another way, was what I found beneath the latticework of branches. Why had I never read a poem about masturbating? I would write one. (In fact I must have read such a poem—Anne Sexton had written one, but I conveniently forgot it, as conveniently as I forgot her intense formalism in my hatred of her metaphorical flightiness.) I liked poems with distinctly developed, sustained conceits; Sexton was undeveloped, inchoate, always becoming. The voice kept sliding, disappearing as the speaker slipped behind the mirror of metaphor, like my...my...oh, dear.

Born nine years after my mother, Sexton shared some of Polly's coloring; both had dark hair and a bold, tanned look. Sexton learned to write poetry not at a university but from watching afternoon television, where a poet came on the local channel and taught how to write a poem, like teaching watercolors to the Sunday painting crowd. If my mother had ever learned how to write a poem, that would

probably have been how she'd have done it, too. Aside from my wanting to distance myself from my mother, I also wanted to "write like a man," not like a flibbertigibbet or like a suicide. Yet I pored over "Transformations," Sexton's book of poem fairy tales when it came out, connecting intimately with that metamorphosing, fairy-tale world, where toads turned back into princes and imaginary jewels became real fortunes.

Why, I wonder, was Sexton called a Confessional poet when Allen Ginsberg could howl out the details of his sex life and be called avant-garde! Why could Frank O'Hara write about a party while sitting at the party itself, naming names, and be called New York School? I didn't get it then and still don't, except perhaps that Ginsberg and O'Hara, by their homosexuality, had already "trespassed" in critics' views, and Sexton was a traditionalist verse-wise, who trespassed in subject matter only Sexton had sex built into her very name. Her style, I noticed, as I have noticed about other women poets who use their own experience (whose experiences should they use?), was often preceded by the adverb *merely*. Anne Sexton was merely Confessional. Great warnings were sent out to me by friends and teachers that merely writing the stories of your life in poetry was not poetry at all. Poetry required transformation of experience, not just blurting it out, unmade as a bed from which you've just leapt. *Don't be like **her**.* Well! I sniffed, insulted. I never intended to be like her at all. I was going to be like Emily Dickinson, that private poet Polly taught me to be. Or like Marianne Moore, reconstructing a world through shadow, allusion—and illusion.

But a poet's subjects are given to her. Like our bodies our subjects are inherited, genetic, almost on the substance level of biology and fate. Our only choice is how to employ that given, and this is the realm of technique. I think of Sexton's formal style as an answer to the fugue states she is reported to have entered both on the couch and in the course of daily life. A psychological fugue state is unbounded, one's personality amorphous. A poem, especially intensely formal poems with rhyme schemes and specified line lengths, which Sexton chose to write, supplies boundaries. And boundaries, by surrounding a subject, even a wild one (especially a wild one!), reinforce privacy.

Technique can obscure subject or reveal it. Obscuring techniques never appealed to me personally because I could only learn from what I examined and brought to light. Years later, when I was about the same age as Sexton would have been at that party—38—I had an abortion, and I wrote about it, because not to write about it meant keeping it secret, and through writing about it, I felt I would understand my action better. Sometimes to expose an intimate detail about your life does not destroy privacy. It builds it. Exposing a secret, coming clean, so to speak, allows a subject to step into the light while the former secret-keeper steps back, the walls of the self rebuilt, since secrecy tears them down. "The brief pregnancy showed us,/ its father and me," I wrote in a poem called "The Ghost,"

these choices, nut shriveling

*but choice alive with choice, for as **our** brief*
parenthood dislodged our parents' anchor
*and set **us** anxiously adrift, more*
of our lost natures appeared.

To bring a secret to light is not the same as destroying your privacy. A so-called confession fosters a sense of the personal boundaries that are requisite for a zone of privacy. There is a way in which not speaking about a secret subject comes to feel dishonest. Dishonesty is the cornerstone of secrecy. Forthrightness is freeing—freeing especially because the truth allows the teller truth's integrity. To honor yourself by telling the truth is to make yourself as substantial as telling falsehoods makes you insubstantial, even invisible. This is why, private being that I am, I found my blabbermouth side and became a tell-all poet and memoirist—and I did not find it inconsistent with my privating.

I haven't published anything that I felt intruded on other people's privacy—and haven't heard murmurs to the contrary from my friends or ex-lovers. Forthrightness leads to discovery, and discovery to defining the social boundaries required for privacy—maybe I should call this "trued" privacy. Although my mother developed the habit of depending on her best friend to read my work first and to let my mother know if she could take the shock (something like a queen who employs a poison taster), in the end nothing I said breached our

relationship. Polly did not believe in washing your dirty laundry in public, but she believed in truth more profoundly.

It interests me to note that around the same time Sexton was dragging that novelist off for her late-night snack, I was touring the tables at the college snack bar with an envelope, collecting for a friend's abortion. This was in the days before Roe v. Wade, and Sexton's poem about her abortion, called simply "The Abortion," is about a trip to Pennsylvania to an abortion doctor, also pre-Roe. The legal debates about abortion in this country sparked a new interest in privacy—privacy defining a woman's right to choose.

Confessionalism in poetry—which is substantially composed of the telling of the stories of two women's lives, Sylvia Plath's and Anne Sexton's—flourished at the same time as female privacy rights surfaced in the courts. It is the underpinning of women's issues and women's lives that has brought privacy into national and literary discourse. One aspect of this discourse is the pitting of poets who write discreetly or sometimes in disguise against poets who write more nakedly and accessibly. Critics, who are always in disguise because they are always behind a text, tend to mistake those who tell all for slobs who don't know what art really is. Therefore poets like Sexton get drubbed, even by sympathizers like me. My consciously chosen favorite, a poet both critics and poets adore, was Elizabeth Bishop, a fiercely reticent poet. She was an observer, whereas Sexton posed as the one observed. But observers do not break apart worlds as Sexton aesthetically did, breaking subject taboos. Bishop, who protected her lesbian life and the shame of her mother's insanity and institutionalization at all costs, lived a lot longer. But interestingly both Sexton and Bishop shared the same goal (they also shared an addiction, alcohol), and that is accuracy—the discovery of the truth as they deeply perceived it, usually a truth about a situation for Sexton and about a place or an animal observed for Bishop.

I have the feeling Marianne Moore would have gagged at Anne Sexton's poetry (though I don't know for sure). And Moore's successor, Elizabeth Bishop, would never have dreamed of going to Sexton's territory of menstruation and masturbation. Yet the famously retiring Bishop used the equally, infamously flamboyant Sexton's construction at the end of "The Abortion" at the end of her own magnificent villanelle, "One Art."

Sexton spends six stanzas describing the landscape, suggesting that a pregnancy will be terminated but never stating so outright. Finally in the last tercet, she writes:

Yes, woman, such logic will lead
to loss without death. Or say what you meant,
you coward.. .this baby that I bleed.

Fifteen years later Bishop writes in her last stanza:

Even losing you (thejoking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing isn't hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

Both writers, the inhibitor and the exhibitor, exhort themselves to tell the truth. In both poems the writer is a witness to experience who urges herself as the experiencer to "Write it!" (Bishop) or "Say what you meant, you coward," (Sexton).Each poet divides her voice into both mentor and mentee, into teacher and student, guide and innocent, each creating an intimate conversation with herself, and in the privacy of this conversation,comes to the same lifesaving conclusion, to write the truth. To state specifically what one really means, not to obscure it with words, which is secrecy, but to employ those words with clarity, germinates poetry itself, makes the poem worth reading because it is defined and quite separate from the life of the writer. Truth always forms its own integrity, separate from whatever emotional and social context generates it. Truth lifts experience out of the personal into the universal, exploding secrecy and by doing so, grants the personality of the writer her integrity,her privacy, even if she hasjust used an intimate detail of her own life.This is the age-old concept of everywoman,and it is the thin line that every writer who uses her own experience in her writing walks, even two poets as utterly at the far ends of the spectrum as Bishop and Sexton.

Sheering off the secret from the private first exposes deceit, then allows the subsequent revealed integrity of the truth its modesty. For the truth is modest. However once bold or once buried, one's profoundly held truth possesses modesty because by its nature it can't be either underestimating or grandiose.It is itself.It is bounded, and that

which is self-containedis private.This brings me back to "The Secret Garden," which in fact becomes a private garden.The sour little protagonist, Mary Lennox, finds the key that unlocks the garden door, and this opening up of the secret place allows the family secret (the reason it was locked) to be aired. Her cousin Colin's mother (Mary's aunt) was killed by a falling branch of the tree in the garden, and his father (Mary's uncle) was cast into such deep mourning that he locked the garden and abandoned his house and his duty to his infant son, who became chronically ill, virtually locked up in his bedroom by servants and his doctor.

The banishment of the secret allows the walls of the garden to reassume their relation to a door, which opens and closes, balancing interior and exterior in a well-proportioned privacy. That door which opens and closes is the necessary foundation of healthy privacy. Colin becomes well. Mary becomes a moral being, aware that there are others in the world besides herself—and therefore capable of love. And all this upon learning the truth. Truth creates privacy, I say to you from behind the lattice, which separates me from my neighbor, who has blessedly gone in for lunch, and which provides the entrance to my own garden, my floral ocean, from which I cast out to sea.

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