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A Feminist Friendship Archive

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*We follow a long corridor of words
Till we arrive at the bright salons of fact. . . .*

—Diane Middlebrook, “Story of My Life”

In the fall of 2007, when she knew that cancer was rapidly shrinking her life, my friend the biographer Diane Middlebrook asked me to join her daughter, Leah Middlebrook, as the co-literary executor of her estate. Three years after Diane’s death, Leah and I sat in her mother’s study and sorted through her papers. We came upon a heavy loose-leaf binder containing typescripts of the interviews Diane had conducted when she was researching the biography of the poet Anne Sexton, published a decade later (*Anne Sexton*). The transcripts were exciting, not only as the biography’s source material but also as testimony to the work of making poetry, especially as a woman, and to the power of Sexton’s personality.

One of the longest interviews was with the poet Maxine Kumin, who was Sexton’s great friend.¹ Kumin had already written about her bond with Sexton in a personal essay titled “A Friendship Remembered,” whose first sentences boldly announced, “As the world knows, we were intimate friends and professional allies. Early on in our friendship, indeed almost as soon as we began to share poems, we began to share them on the telephone”

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(83). Kumin also wrote a personal introduction to Sexton's *Complete Poems* ("How It Was"). And of course I had read Middlebrook's critically acclaimed biography, which highlighted the importance of the relationship between the two poets.² Still, there was something in the intensity of Middlebrook's interview of Kumin that set me wondering about how narrating a friendship could be understood as an important form of life writing, usually in memoirs in which one tells about two and two become one.³

Although friendship often occupies a significant place in our autobiographical stories and although there are many well-known friendships between women—Mary McCarthy and Hannah Arendt, Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, to name two famous ones documented in letters—the role of friendship as a self-defining activity is a strangely underexamined category in theories of life writing, not to mention in psychoanalytic studies dealing with the making of identity. Juliet Mitchell observes in *Mad Men and Medusas* that while the discipline of anthropology "has long recognized the significance of these relations . . . psychoanalysis has subsumed them to the vertical child-parent relationship" (xi). What Mitchell calls transverse or lateral relations are also crucial to understanding the acts of self-fashioning at the heart of life writing. While we are familiar with memoirs constructed through the axis of the parent-child relationship in autobiography, beginning with Augustine and Monica, the narrative of a life story with an emphasis on friends (also peers and siblings—siblings being Mitchell's main focus) is both less common and less commonly analyzed. When we shift the emphasis from the vertical axis, the bonds that shape our identities through our family and intergenerational ties, to the horizontal axis of chosen relations, what kind of a story emerges?⁴

How do we tell the story of friendship between women?

The reason that "Chloe liked Olivia," Woolf's famous invocation of female friendship, has provoked so much discussion is not solely, I think, what Woolf did or did not imply by positing a friendship between two women at the heart of a new literature by women (the temperature of the emotion registered by the verb *to like*) but also what liking between women turns out to mean when combined with work. Hence the rather unexpected content of the next sentence of *Life's Adventure*, the imaginary novel by a fictitious author the narrator has started reading in *A Room of One's Own's* final chapter: "They shared a laboratory together" (87).⁵ Woolf goes on to explain why this institutional collaboration, combined with affection, matters: "Now if Chloe likes Olivia and they share a laboratory, which of itself will make their friendship more varied and lasting because it will be less personal," then "something of great importance has happened." What

fascinates Woolf is the challenge a writer faces as she sets out to “catch” the “unrecorded gestures” and “unsaid or half-said words” that might find expression when women inhabit social spaces alone, unobserved by men (88). Key here for Woolf is not simply the power of the affection that binds women but also the extraordinary, if as yet untested, power of friendship combined with work, as it might emerge in women’s writing of the future. The Middlebrook-Kumin interview brings into view the centrality of professional creativity in the expression of friendship between women—creativity tied, in this case, to making poetry, which requires only a metaphorical laboratory or, as it turns out, a workshop.⁶

Sexton won the Pulitzer Prize in 1967 for her collection *Live or Die*. She committed suicide in 1974, at forty-five. In October 1980, Middlebrook, invited by Sexton’s daughter, Linda Gray Sexton, to write the biography of her mother, visited Kumin in her home in New Hampshire. Middlebrook began the interview by asking about the friendship between the two poets and specifically about the role of the John Holmes workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education, which both Sexton and Kumin attended in the late 1950s.

DWM: Isn’t it true that the workshop was the first criticism you’d had of your work, and that was at the beginning for each other? . . . I really envy that.

MK: And I miss that! I mean, I miss the companionship, I miss the instant criticism when we met, I miss the kind of ongoing complete encouragement of whatever piece I pick up, but I feel I was lucky to have her. It was a kind of . . . unbelievable friendship.

(Interview by Diane Middlebrook)

I recognized that feeling of luckiness in what I had with Diane during our brief friendship. Sitting in her well-ordered study, sorting through the archives contained in bright-red Pendaflex files, their tabs beautifully labeled in her signature black calligraphic script, I felt again, three years after her death, how much I missed her encouragement, her criticism, and her extraordinary resilience.

In a 1975 interview with Martha George Meek, after Kumin received the Pulitzer Prize for her collection *Up Country*, she described in detail how criticism soldered the relationship between them, since their voices were “so different.” What “saved our relationship,” Kumin explained, was that we “didn’t ever try to moderate or tamper with the other’s voice. We were there as a sounding board to say: that’s very strained, that image is wretched, this is dreadful, it’s flat, that’s an awful rhyme to end on, or whatever it was we said. She was my closest contact.” Intimacy, paradoxically,

requires boundaries when negotiating both friendship and craft, hence the decision throughout the collaboration not to “intrude on each other” (29). In 1979, Kumin was asked to comment on Sexton’s views about the role of craft: “Anne Sexton has said that ‘craft is a trick you make up to let you write the poem.’ Would you agree?” Kumin answered, referencing the workshop, “Yes. You see, we learned our craft in the same school. We learned the whole gamut of rhyme scheme, metrical devices, syllabics, multisyllabic rhymes—which she was so good at—and so on. We both felt that using these tricks of craft, as she calls them, heightened the level of language of which the poet was then capable” (Interview by Karla Hammond 50).

In *The Last Gift of Time*, Carolyn Heilbrun echoes Middlebrook’s envy of the combination of work and intimacy braided together on a daily basis that Kumin evokes: “Kumin had companions in poetry while I was an assistant professor longing for the sort of world Kumin had discovered,” Heilbrun writes in the chapter called “Unmet Friends,” a world filled with the pleasures of connection that she would come to know “only later: a world of martinis, and fellow poet Anne Sexton on the other end of a telephone line” (141–42). Kumin represented for Heilbrun the epitome of what Heilbrun called an “unmet friend,” someone encountered only through reading (138). “Why do I feel,” Heilbrun wonders, “not having met her but having read all her work, that she and I are closer in the destinies we have chosen than I am to many friends personally known?” (149). The two women, contemporaries, “resemble each other,” Heilbrun decides, in that “we both began, she as a poet, I as a soon-to-be Ph.D., to find another space beyond the ‘program’ of the 1950s” (147). Their commonalities included, as Heilbrun makes explicit in the pages devoted to this imaginary relationship, family commitments (a long marriage, three children), a professional career, and the love of animals (notably horses). By identifying with Kumin through their biographies, Heilbrun provides a self-portrait of herself as a writer in her sixties (the time of writing) coming to terms with loneliness. Looking back, she also supplies a rare and touching snapshot of her physical appearance and personal style as a young woman at Wellesley, the school that she attended and that Kumin had applied to. Would they, in reality, have become friends? Perhaps not, because as Heilbrun writes, “[at Wellesley] I . . . was awkward, considered intellectual and probably off-putting (an impression confirmed by my refusal to wear my glasses, without which I could barely see two feet in front of me and recognized no one)” (140).

Heilbrun’s re-creation of the history that did not happen between the two turns to the friendship that did exist between Kumin and Sexton and

the suicide that ended it. “Many, thinking of Kumin,” Heilbrun observes, “think also of Sexton.” She quotes from one of Kumin’s poems about Sexton’s suicide, “Address to the Angels.” Kumin wanted “part of my life back / so I can do it over, / so I can do it better” (142). Sexton’s suicide leads Heilbrun to recount the suicide of a friend of her youth who she felt had rejected her, and in a circle of pain Heilbrun returns to the power of Kumin’s lines: “Kumin’s poem has given me the words for mourning” (143).⁷ These connections and identifications between friends, real and imaginary, literary and remembered, add a powerful dimension to both individual and generational life narratives. Friendship, especially friendship embodied in writing, as we see it here, constitutes a crucial category of those “invisible presences” whose acknowledgment in “A Sketch of the Past” Woolf deemed essential to meaningful life writing (80).

But if vertical bonds are naturalized through the pull of temporal gravity—what as children we inherit from our parents—what is the weight of friendship in the making of identity and in re-creating it in memory, in memoir?

Reading through my e-mail messages from Diane, messages that I had begun to save when her illness was diagnosed, I came upon a comment about our shared adventure in writing. In 2006, the year before her death, she described the project of her experimental biography of the Roman poet Ovid.⁸ At the time, I was desperately trying to create a narrative from the scraps and ephemera I had inherited from my family, and I was frustrated by the lack of a plot as I researched the memoir. Diane wrote:

I’m so pleased to be partnering you in this way. I mean, trying to find a structure for a history-based story for which there isn’t much historical documentation. As I think I told you, I was terribly excited when I came up with the idea of writing successive “days” in Ovid’s life. And I see myself as writing fiction in italicized scenes with which I project historical knowledge into occasions in Ovid’s life. Is this a work of fiction, though? I can’t really say—I do know that luckily, Ovid’s life has the shape of a fictional plot, and that helps in making a story out of it. Your material doesn’t yet yield a story, or does it? (Message)

Rereading these lines now after studying Diane’s interview with Kumin, I find myself wondering whether Diane had internalized this notion of “partnering” from Kumin’s account of working with Sexton. Or, vice versa, whether Diane’s belief in feminist collaboration made her attuned to this practice between the two poets. Certainly, the commitment to craft, central to Kumin and Sexton, and recognizing the distinctive challenges of

genre and form were also central to Diane's credo as a writer. Early on, Diane told me she could never write autobiography the way I did—too personal and chaotic for her taste; and I replied that I could never write biography—too long, too factual. After her death, I realized that her statement was not completely true, and that neither was mine. But we instinctively distinguished ourselves from each other as writers, saving ourselves in advance, as it were, despite many common interests as feminist critics of a certain age and experience.

In the Ovid project, Diane was fascinated by how a person from unremarkable circumstances becomes remarkable through artistic accomplishment. Ovid left his small provincial town of Sulmo to fulfill his destiny in Rome, and he chose poetry over the public service expected of him. This kind of dramatic self-transformation was a bright thread in all three of her published biographies. Sexton created herself as a prizewinning poet out of the autobiographical material of her housewife role and psychic suffering. The narrative arc of these transformations was equally descriptive of Diane, who wrote her way out of small-town Spokane, Washington, to become a poet, a successful academic at Stanford, and a much-admired biographer. She told her story, I think, under the cover of the biography of another. To write my book, I had to become the biographer of a family I had never known, to follow the traces of missing lives like a nonfiction detective—to become less personal, more transpersonal. Inspired by Diane, I looked for the fictional plot that would allow me to tell my story. Oddly, or perhaps not, I joined her imaginatively: the story I ultimately found to shape my memoir was also the fiction of self-reinvention that had always inspired her (*What They Saved*).

In their jointly authored *I Know Just What You Mean: The Power of Friendship in Women's Lives*, Ellen Goodman and Patricia O'Brien fix on the passage in Kumin's essay about the open phone line.⁹ They claim it for themselves, as what they name a "lifeline" for two writers who always "read their work to each other" (41). But the shared belief in the importance of craft was not on its own what made the friendship relationship seem attractive, enviable. It was critique combined with the homely detail of what else went on in the course of the sometimes day-long phone calls Kumin described: "interrupting poem-talk to stir the spaghetti sauce, switch the laundry, or try out a new image on the typewriter" ("A Friendship" 83–84; qtd. in Goodman and O'Brien 42).

Envy is one of those "ugly feelings" that are supposed to be bad for women (and that women are highly susceptible to), even feminists, or especially feminists, since penis envy typically is assumed to be the backstory

of feminism.¹⁰ But the responses to Kumin's evocation of the open phone line suggest that it's also possible to enjoy the fantasy of what other women have and identify with its pleasures. For women like Kumin and Sexton, who wrote before the women's movement took hold, having the luck to combine friendship and work is perhaps what moved Kumin to say that her friendship with Sexton was "unbelievable," an ideal of collaboration, private and public, fueled by love and admiration. Two decades later, the open phone line for Goodman and O'Brien, as for Heilbrun and Middlebrook before them, continues to figure the perfect form of communication between women friends, who, unlike Chloe and Olivia, happen to be writers. "We would stay with each other," Goodman and O'Brien recall, "thinking and feeling out loud" (43).

In the closing lines of "A Friendship Remembered," Kumin observes that poetry saved Sexton's life when, encouraged by her therapist, Sexton began writing poems in the mid-1950s. But Kumin adds that Sexton was only "on loan to poetry, as it were," and loans, by definition, require repayment. "We always knew it would end," Kumin concludes, "we just didn't know when or exactly how" (92). Friendships do not come with ready-made plots, even if some denouements seem inevitable, especially in retrospect. But the plots of friendship are not the same as its life stories, which continue to be told beyond their ending.

NOTES

In theory, publication rights to an agreed-on interview are jointly shared by interviewer and interviewee, suggesting not only joint ownership but also joint authorship. In practice, the interviewee (typically the more powerful figure in the literary marketplace) is the one who decides whether or not the interview can be published, edited, quoted from, et cetera. I am grateful to Kumin for giving me permission to edit and publish her interview with Middlebrook and to quote from it. I am also grateful to my friends Marianne Hirsch and Victoria Rosner for their comments on this essay.

1. The interview will appear in *PMLA* in 2012. This essay is part of a work in progress titled "Lateral Lives: A Feminist Friendship Archive."

2. On the link between reciprocity and criticism in the Sexton-Kumin bond, see especially *Anne Sexton* 142–43.

3. Recent examples of friendship between peers who are also writers are Ann Patchett's memoir of her friendship with Lucy Grealy and Gail Caldwell's memoir of her relationship with Caroline Knapp.

4. The act of connecting sideways, in this instance through friendship entwined with the work of writing, is part of what I mean by the *transpersonal*, a term I've found useful for investigating other categories of significant others, those to whom one is related by affinity (profession, passion, politics) but not (or not necessarily) by blood

or marriage (Miller, "Getting"). The term has also been used, perhaps originally, by Estella Lauter to describe Sexton's use of a persona and her formal principles of design (25) and by Alicia Ostriker to characterize Sexton's belief that "personal truth is also transpersonal" (*Stealing* 205) and to describe the crossing of domains from private to public ("Anne Sexton" 157; cited by Nelson). See Nelson on Sexton's "transpersonal" as political (106).

5. Sharon Marcus, reviewing the legacy of Woolf's "Chloe liked Olivia," argues that the sentence continues to function "as a symptom of exactly the problem [Woolf] hoped it would correct: our lack of knowledge about women's relationships" (258).

6. To focus on the cathexis of friendship and work, I limit myself to reading the representation of the relationship between these friends, Sexton and Kumin, postponing the discussion of how a study of the genre of the interview might enrich the field of biography and autobiography studies.

7. On Heilbrun's long and entangled fascination with death, suicide, friendship, and literature, see the poignant and insightful epilogue in Susan Kress's *Carolyn G. Heilbrun: Feminist in a Tenured Position*.

8. The Ovid manuscript has been deposited in the Feminist Theory Archives of the Pembroke Center at Brown University.

9. I am grateful to Judith Wilt for bringing this book to my attention.

10. For magisterial analyses of envy, see Ngai; Gallop.

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