Flee on Your Donkey
By Anne Sexton

Because there was no other place
to flee to,
I came back to the scene of the disordered senses,
came back last night at midnight,
arriving in the thick June night
without luggage or defenses,
giving up my car keys and my cash,
keeping only a pack of Salem cigarettes
the way a child holds on to a toy.
I signed myself in where a stranger
puts the inked-in X's—
for this is a mental hospital,
not a child's game.

Today an intern knocks my knees,
testing for reflexes.
Once I would have winked and begged for dope.
Today I am terribly patient.
Today crows play black-jack
on the stethoscope.

Everyone has left me
except my muse,
that good nurse.
She stays in my hand,
a mild white mouse.

The curtains, lazy and delicate,
billow and flutter and drop
like the Victorian skirts
of my two maiden aunts
who kept an antique shop.

Hornets have been sent.
They cluster like floral arrangements on the screen.
Hornets, dragging their thin stingers,
hover outside, all knowing,
hissing: the hornet knows.
I heard it as a child
but what was it that he meant?
The hornet knows!
What happened to Jack and Doc and Reggy?
Who remembers what lurks in the heart of man?
What did The Green Hornet mean, he knows?  
Or have I got it wrong?  
Is it The Shadow who had seen  
me from my bedside radio?

Now it's Dinn, Dinn, Dinn!  
while the ladies in the next room argue  
and pick their teeth.  
Upstairs a girl curls like a snail;  
in another room someone tries to eat a shoe;  
meanwhile an adolescent pads up and down  
the hall in his white tennis socks.  
A new doctor makes rounds  
advertising tranquilizers, insulin, or shock  
to the uninitiated.

Six years of such small preoccupations!  
Six years of shuttling in and out of this place!  
O my hunger! My hunger!  
I could have gone around the world twice  
or had new children - all boys.  
It was a long trip with little days in it  
and no new places.

In here,  
it's the same old crowd,  
the same ruined scene.  
The alcoholic arrives with his gold clubs.  
The suicide arrives with extra pills sewn  
into the lining of her dress.  
The permanent guests have done nothing new.  
Their faces are still small  
like babies with jaundice.

Meanwhile,  
they carried out my mother,  
wrapped like somebody's doll, in sheets,  
bandaged her jaw and stuffed up her holes.  
My father, too. He went out on the rotten blood  
he used up on other women in the Middle West.  
He went out, a cured old alcoholic  
on crooked feet and useless hands.  
He went out calling for his father  
who died all by himself long ago -  
that fat banker who got locked up,  
his genes suspended like dollars,
wrapped up in his secret,
tied up securely in a straitjacket.

But you, my doctor, my enthusiast,
were better than Christ;
you promised me another world
to tell me who
I was.

I spent most of my time,
a stranger,
damned and in trance—that little hut,
that naked blue-veined place,
my eyes shut on the confusing office,
eyes circling into my childhood,
eyes newly cut.
Years of hints
strung out—a serialized case history—

thirty-three years of the same dull incest
that sustained us both.
You, my bachelor analyst,
who sat on Marlborough Street,
sharing your office with your mother
and giving up cigarettes each New Year,
were the new God,
the manager of the Gideon Bible.

I was your third-grader
with a blue star on my forehead.
In trance I could be any age,
voice, gesture—all turned backward
like a drugstore clock.
Awake, I memorized dreams.
Dreams came into the ring
like third string fighters,
each one a bad bet
who might win
because there was no other.

I stared at them,
concentrating on the abyss
the way one looks down into a rock quarry,
uncountable miles down,
my hands swinging down like hooks
to pull dreams up out of their cage.
O my hunger! My hunger!
Once, outside your office,
I collapsed in the old-fashioned swoon
between the illegally parked cars.
I threw myself down,
pretending dead for eight hours.
I thought I had died
into a snowstorm.
Above my head
chains cracked along like teeth
digging their way through the snowy street.
I lay there
like an overcoat
that someone had thrown away.
You carried me back in,
awkwardly, tenderly,
with help of the red-haired secretary
who was built like a lifeguard.
My shoes,
I remember,
were lost in the snowbank
as if I planned never to walk again.

That was the winter
that my mother died,
half mad on morphine,
blown up, at last,
like a pregnant pig.
I was her dreamy evil eye.
In fact,
I carried a knife in my pocketbook—
my husband's good L. L. Bean hunting knife.
I wasn't sure if I should slash a tire
or scrape the guts out of some dream.

You taught me
to believe in dreams;
thus I was the dredger.
I held them like an old woman with arthritic fingers,
carefully straining the water out—
sweet dark playthings,
and above all, mysterious
until they grew mournful and weak.
O my hunger! My hunger!
I was the one
who opened the warm eyelid
like a surgeon
and brought forth young girls
to grunt like fish.

I told you,
I said—
but I was lying—
that the knife was for my mother . . .
and then I delivered her.

The curtains flutter out
and slump against the bars.
They are my two thin ladies
named Blanche and Rose.
The grounds outside
are pruned like an estate at Newport.
Far off, in the field,
something yellow grows.

Was it last month or last year
that the ambulance ran like a hearse
with its siren blowing on suicide—
Dinn, dinn, dinn!—
a noon whistle that kept insisting on life
all the way through the traffic lights?

I have come back
but disorder is not what it was.
I have lost the trick of it!
The innocence of it!
That fellow-patient in his stovepipe hat
with his fiery joke, his manic smile—
even he seems blurred, small and pale.
I have come back,
recommitted,
fastened to the wall like a bathroom plunger,
held like a prisoner
who was so poor
he fell in love with jail.

I stand at this old window
complaining of the soup,
examining the grounds,
allowing myself the wasted life.
Soon I will raise my face for a white flag,
and when God enters the fort,
I won't spit or gag on his finger. 
I will eat it like a white flower. 
Is this the old trick, the wasting away, 
the skull that waits for its dose 
of electric power?

This is madness 
but a kind of hunger. 
What good are my questions 
in this hierarchy of death 
where the earth and the stones go 
Dinn! Dinn! Dinn! 
It is hardly a feast. 
It is my stomach that makes me suffer.

Turn, my hungers! 
For once make a deliberate decision. 
There are brains that rot here 
like black bananas. 
Hearts have grown as flat as dinner plates.

Anne, Anne, 
flee on your donkey, 
flee this sad hotel, 
ride out on some hairy beast, 
gallop backward pressing 
your buttocks to his withers, 
sit to his clumsy gait somehow. 
Ride out 
any old way you please! 
In this place everyone talks to his own mouth. 
That's what it means to be crazy. 
Those I loved best died of it— 
the fool's disease.

Anne Sexton