Kathleen Spivack: Shaping What You Write [1]

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TW Interview by Jennifer Jean

Why Mental Illness Doesn't Guarantee Good Poetry



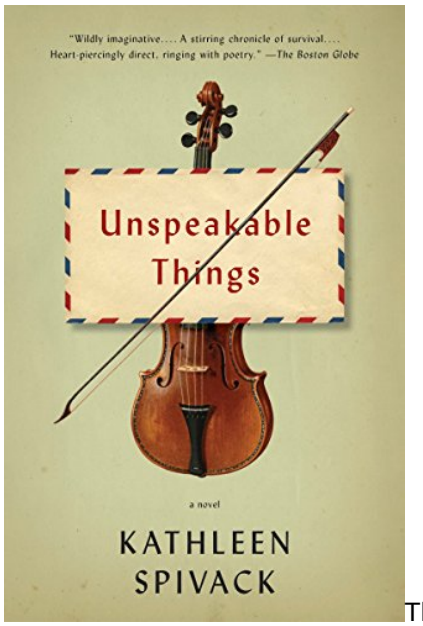
Kathleen Spivack is a prizewinning poet, a Pulitzer Prize-nominated short story writer, and a prolific book reviewer. She's taught creative writing in France, the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Barbados, Greece, and all over the US. Those are the bare facts of a long intellectual life in which she's rubbed elbows with everyone from Noam Chomsky to Ram Dass when he was still Dick Alpert.

But for Spivack, who is now 79, Robert Lowell remains one of her biggest literary influences. In 1959, she came to Boston to study with him (part of a Boston University workshop that also included Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton) and knew him later as a teacher when he was at Harvard in the late 1960s. Her connection to Lowell and these women poets drew me to Spivack, too, after reading her 2012 memoir *With Robert Lowell and His Circle: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Stanley Kunitz, and Others* (University Press of New England).

I first saw her in person when she gave a lecture titled "Heartbreak in the Work of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath" at the Massachusetts Poetry Festival in 2015. At the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Spivack moved up to the stage rather slowly—her head of short curls bent toward the ground. When she spoke, however, she stood up straighter. Her voice was strong and warm. And I could see her eyes sparkle from the back of the auditorium when she said she hated Ian Hamilton's 1982 biography of Robert Lowell. I'd also thrown that book across the room when I read it, because Lowell came off as such an ass and a user.

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“Hamilton never liked Lowell, so he only wrote about the terrible things Lowell did,” Spivack told us, providing context for her own book. Throughout her chat with the Mass Poetry audience—it was more chat than lecture—we were like family members wandering into the kitchen late at night, leaning up against the counter as she shared juicy secrets about “our kind.”



The following year at the same festival, Spivack sat behind me at a panel called “Sylvia Plath on the North Shore,” and she gently corrected some of the presentation’s factoids during the Q&A. I approached her afterward to let her know I’d enjoyed her 2012 memoir. We hit it off. When I contacted her about an interview for *Talking Writing*, she assented enthusiastically.

The original impetus for the interview was her Lowell memoir, especially as it concerned mental illness and the arts. Spivack also talked to me about her novel *Unspeakable Things* (Knopf, 2016), which is about Jewish refugees in 1940s New York City. We began the interview in 2016 and ended it this past summer. I spoke with her by phone several times, met Spivack twice at her home in Watertown, Massachusetts, then followed up with a few more questions by email.

During our first visit in July 2016, we sat on her back porch facing a lush vegetable and flower garden, drinking iced tea with fresh mint leaves. “I feel like we’re kindred spirits—don’t you feel that?” Spivack asked me, smiling widely.

This TW interview has been condensed and edited.

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TW: **Your friend Anne Sexton famously heard a radio program and began to write—and then her psychiatrist at the time encouraged her to continue to write. Has it been your experience that writing helps heal mental illness?**

KS: A lot of people keep journals for that very reason. Does it heal them—absolutely not. If you write your guts out and you get rejected, that's not going to heal you. I'm not an art therapy or writing therapy person at all. I love that Julia Cameron book *The Artist's Way*, but she's using the recovery model. People just do their "morning pages," like automatic writing. Well, I don't want my students to do automatic writing. I want them to have their energy really focused to shape what they're writing. I don't want all their writing energy to be defused by pages and pages—and then they brush their teeth and move on. Who wants to be dabbling and have someone lie to you and say it's wonderful? So much unnecessary lying goes on.

You're dealing with your inner self when you're writing, one way or another, and you want to be in touch with it, you want to save it. And I think that's what was so important about Anne Sexton. She was in touch with her inner self at the deepest level, but then you look at her first book of poems, and it just wasn't enough to get it out. It had to be shaped. It had to be communicated. Mental illness doesn't guarantee you're going to be a good poet.

TW: **Does writing poetry hurt people with mental health issues? Literary critics have posited that Anne Sexton's later work was harmed because of it.**

KS: Lowell definitely felt that way [about Sexton's work]. She started with formal poetry like "You, Dr. Martin," "To

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Bedlam and Partway Back," and "Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman." And then she went on to *The Book of Folly* (1973), and her poetry seemed to lose its center. But looking back on it now, I don't know. Because if you look at Adrienne Rich's poetry, it was the same journey from the very formal to the more open— like her *Diving into the Wreck*, which seemed a more fragmented work. I'd have to look at Anne's later poems now, as a mature person, and see. Because a young person couldn't see. It was all so autobiographical. I don't think I realized how autobiographical.

Anne was very glamorous. She was a "heroine" poet. And mental illness, in Anne's version, was just so beautiful and submissive. She had horrible psychiatric help. Horrible. First, Anne was seeing the mother of this guy, and the mother turned Anne over to another young guy who had never worked with anyone. (That happened to Sylvia, too—she was in McLean [a psychiatric hospital in the Boston area], and they gave her to some resident who never had a patient before.) Apparently, Anne was complaining about her husband beating her, and her therapist said, "Maybe you should put on more lipstick, and wear a sexy nightgown." Even a few years ago, when I gave a reading from the Lowell book, some people showed up who said they were relatives of Anne's, and they went, "Oh, she was always writing, and she didn't do the housework." Still!

TW: **I know you originally wanted to study with Allen Ginsberg. Do you think "Howl" glorifies mental illness?**

KS: I just think that "Howl" is a great poem. And Lowell thought so, too, and he was different from Ginsberg, a very different kind of poet.

I don't think the poem was about mental illness, no. It was about being different. About being incarcerated. Sure, it was about Peter Orlovsky and others, and about drugs, too. You could be destroyed for being different or seeming different or going too far.

I think mental illness is really complex. When I worked in the field in hospitals, I would think, "Why are these people in here, and I'm not?" You know, "I am them." If you're a poet, you know how to dissolve your boundaries. It's easy to walk a little farther than you should be walking. And if you're hurt in some way, you brood about it. Right? You just go on.

When Diane Middlebrook's biography of Anne Sexton came out in 1991 using Sexton's tapes [from her psychiatric sessions], I didn't want to read it. I wouldn't be interviewed for that book. I could tell it would be a violation, and it was. And then another book came out with excerpts from the actual transcription of the tapes with Dr. Martin Orne. That book was written by Dawn Skorczewski [and titled *An Accident of Hope* (2012)]. Again, I didn't want to read it. But then, I looked at it, and there were good and bad things he did. For instance, Anne started writing poetry as a way to get love. And he said something like *Look, you have to have self-esteem independent of the poems. It's not what you do if you're praised. It's the inherent you.*

TW: **That is good advice.**

KS: That is good advice, and she couldn't do it. Then the second or third psychiatrist—the one who abused her—he was writing love poems to her. I mean, *bad* love poems. And there were no boundaries with him. And one day, he decided to go back to his wife and throw Anne out of therapy, and a few days later, she killed herself.

TW: **Sylvia Plath's letters to her psychiatrist Ruth Barnhouse have been recently "discovered" and may soon be available—though their ownership is in dispute, and there's a lot in them about Ted Hughes physically abusing Plath. So, the literary community is now asking, "Why wasn't Sylvia believed?"**

KS: Dr. Barnhouse has a son who's been in touch with me. He wanted to tell me about the moment his mother found out Sylvia had killed herself. I've always felt that Dr. Barnhouse held onto Sylvia obsessively instead of trying to find someone for her in London—they were too symbiotic. I felt that was selfish.

Poor Sylvia, she needed to talk to someone every week! You know, she was violent herself. Like biting Hughes when first meeting him. Maybe she was sadomasochistic. I don't know, but I think it was a mutually abusive relationship. When he was in America, he didn't have a job and he was miserable, she was leaning on him—I'm sure she was pushing him and taunting him—probably driving him to the point where he'd abuse her. There are two sides to the

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abuse. I'm sure she had a mouth on her. She definitely could be provoking and probably knew just how far she could go. She was very smart. Smarter than he was, really. She would provoke with words, and he would respond with the physical. And then she'd say, "He's terrible! He's abusing me!"

TW: **What do you think is the fascination with their relationship? You're saying they had a destructive dynamic, which is a more complex way of looking at it.**

KS: They were two creative artists who ideally could have helped each other, like Elizabeth and Robert Browning or Leonard and Virginia Woolf. They both adored poetry. And they had incredible memories for reciting poetry. They could argue about it all night. There was a huge amount of passion in that relationship. It was very exciting to be with them when they were talking poetry—it was electric. I think that they had incredible companionship—like soul mates—which is incredibly romantic. Even if you believe her mother's white-washed version of Sylvia—she was an enormously passionate, very talented woman. He was very talented, too. He was extremely handsome and magnetic.

Sylvia had at the time most of the things attributed to men: intelligence, mental illness, attractiveness, and rage. She expressed her anger, and women didn't do that in the '50s. And the rage that came out was absolutely raw—that a woman would dare to do that was astonishing. If a woman did that, usually she was punished for it. She was locked up. Women were supposed to smile.

Look at Anne Sexton. When I read excerpted transcripts of her psychiatric tapes, I found out that Dr. Orne didn't want to tell her he was married because it might destabilize her—which, of course, infantilized her. At the same time, he thought he was "saving" her with his magnificent penis! When she found out he was married, she started hearing voices. But I think hearing voices is rage unexpressed, not "crazyness." It was a way to say what she really thought.

Alcoholism also played a huge part with these writers. With Lowell, Berryman, and Sexton—I don't know about Plath. Lowell would be taking his Lithium with his Antabuse in my house. He'd bring it in a milk bottle in a big brown bag, and he'd ask for some whiskey and put it in there.

TW: **That doesn't even sound like it tastes good!**

KS: I don't know! And Anne, too, she was taking medication and drinking. I do feel they were poisoning themselves. I didn't even know it until much later in my friendship with her.

Then there was the other thing. The gay-straight business. James Merrill had a lot of money, so it didn't matter for him. But Elizabeth Bishop was substituting at Harvard, and she never could use the word *lesbian*. She told me all about her life, but if she had talked about her friendships with women, she would have lost her job. I mean, you couldn't be pregnant, you couldn't be gay, you couldn't be anything if you were a schoolteacher.

TW: **So she was treated differently than, say, Lowell.**

KS: Well, his family endowed the place, and he had an ancestor that was president…so. He flunked out as his big rebellion—then he became a papist and went on to write *Life Studies*. They didn't really like him at Harvard, because he could go on benders and not show up for two months. But they didn't take his job away. Bishop was permanently adjunct. No health insurance. She actually hated teaching. Didn't like it at all. She would dread it. She had a small trust fund, but not enough.

After the women's movement, men began to write about tenderness and love and fatherhood—it changed men's poetry. It was no longer T.S. Eliot up there writing about history with not one personal word uttered. But affirmative action was being rammed down their throats, and [male academics in the '70s and '80s] didn't like it. So, when a woman applied, they'd ruin her career. They'd call her a "castrating bitch," which was the worst thing you could be called then. Unlike in France, where women are prized for their intelligence, we have a frontier mentality, it's very thuggish—men aren't interested in women smarter than they are.

Back then, they had faculty wives doing all the lowly work. This was one of Adrienne Rich's criticisms at the time. She argued about this with her sister, who worked as an adjunct when she was a faculty wife. Adrienne felt her sister

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Cynthia shouldn't be doing this, and Cynthia felt she needed work and should take what she could get. Adrienne's husband was a Harvard professor, so she didn't need to work, but she felt so bottled up just being a mom. She would have been a wonderful teacher at Harvard. Eventually, she began to give readings and decided only women could go to them. She would not read until every man had left. One time, one man wouldn't leave. He really wanted to hear her. But she wouldn't read until he'd left. It took three hours!

Adrienne and other feminists like her were very hard to take—they were sure they were right. My way or the highway. They were insufferable. I mean, why shouldn't Adrienne's poems be available to this guy?

TW: **It sounds like performance art, like making a statement—which is a reading.**

KS: It's a temper tantrum! Look, we're talking about someone who'd been so tread upon for so long, as Adrienne was, that now that she had the upper hand, she was going to get her vengeance. This happened within the women's movement, too, at that time. Eventually, there was a schism between the lesbians and the non-lesbians.

TW: **But those male department heads—they were open about discrimination?**

KS: Yes, and I'm sitting there because they liked me a lot, but it was always, "Kathleen, you'll never get a job. Too bad."

TW: **I know that from personal experience. I'm an adjunct teaching English, and my husband is a housepainter—he's also a composer who doesn't have time to compose because he's providing for our family.**

KS: Universities never supported writers. Lowell was eccentric, but he had the name, so he was in, or they created a position for Seamus Heaney—he's famous, so he's in. It was always this separation between town and gown. When I was coming up and wanted to be a writer, I wanted to experience everything. It was a given that you had to do other work. You had to support your art otherwise.

TW: **(laughs) So I'm on the right track!**

KS: Yes. And this sort of false sense of security, because a few writers get jobs—for the rest of us, there are only a few scraps.

TW: **Before I turned on the recorder, you mentioned that you created a support system with other women back then—a younger generation of women whom Lowell introduced you to.**

KS: We didn't use the word *support system*, but definitely Lowell created that among the writers. I'd say once or twice a week, I was with Anne, or with Anne and Maxine Kumin and Lowell. Sylvia was here for only a brief time; I didn't really get to know her. Adrienne Rich, well, I was her babysitter—a babysitter from hell, because all I wanted to do was read. And I was used to kids as the oldest of four—I was used to ignoring kids!

Later, when I was at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe, between 1969 and 1973, I joined a bunch of women who all just had their first babies, and this was pre-daycare. We were modeled on a society of junior fellows—you know, they'd invite people to Harvard just to come and think. So, there was Alice Walker and her daughter, Fanny Howe and her baby, and me with a new baby. We had an office and were supposed to go to meetings, but none of us had any help. At the first meeting, I was holding my son in my arms, and he's crying, and I'm crying—because I couldn't get to the meeting on time. So finally, we formed a group with other women. It was a great time to have kids, because there were all sorts of collectives forming. The institutions did nothing.

TW: **Tell me about your novel, *Unspeakable Things*.**

KS: I wrote two earlier novels that I wiped off my hard drive.

TW: **On purpose?!**

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KS: They were horrible! I love writing prose. I have a book of short stories about women with children. I wrote it when I was a caretaker for a wildlife reservation on Cape Cod. I had a sailboat, a garden, two kids I had to lug up and down a cliff, and I was just so lonely. Poetry didn't do it for me. I thought, "At least I can talk to my characters."

I didn't think [any publisher] would take *Unspeakable Things*. It's about intellectual refugees coming to New York during World War II. They've lost themselves. They've lost family, and it's about their search to put themselves back together. A lot of it takes place in the New York Public Library. In some ways, it's based on my own family, because we were living in one little cold-water room on the Lower East Side, and all these amazing people from Europe would come through. I'd share my little cot with these lovely ladies who would tell me wrenching stories—maybe their children had died right in front of them. Or there was one that I modeled my character the Rat on—not only her children died, but she told me later she sold herself to Rasputin. At a certain point, she'd say—about Rasputin maybe—"We did unspeakable things...." And then she'd turn over and go to sleep. But I was a kid, and I wondered, "What were these unspeakable things?"

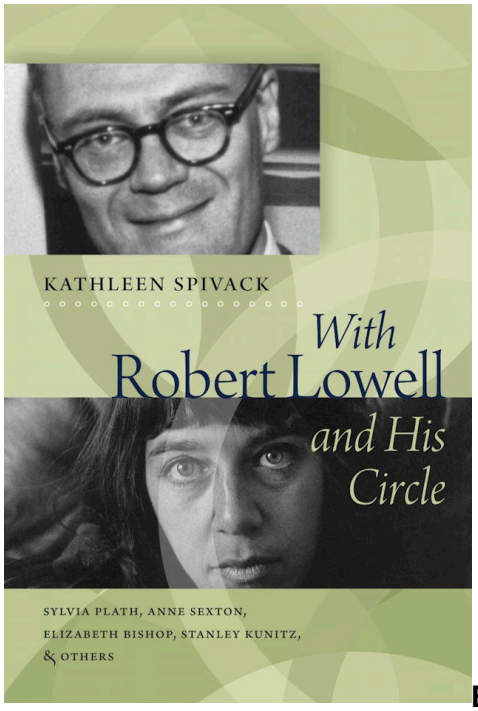
TW: **Did you start out as a poet?**

KS: No. When I was at Oberlin [as an undergraduate], I worked with John Gardner. I wrote short stories with him, and he said, "You have to choose!" I'm not a narrative poet; I don't think a poem can sustain a narration for too long. But a short story has a longer momentum. And with a novel, the road opens for me. But there are problems, too. As a poet, you have an associative mind, that's the making of it, but a novel offers maybe too many opportunities.

The more you write, the closer you get to how you really think, the closer you get to a kind of freedom. It was that way with the Lowell book; there's a freedom that I didn't have when I first wrote it. At first, I spent time remembering them all, admiring them, and it took a long time to put myself into it. Gradually, it became also the story of myself as a young poet—a "coming of age."

Writing is very close to the state of being with children. There's a flow to writing, and there's a flow to being with children. I didn't find it hard at all. I would just get up, take care of the kids, start to write, then face the world. But like Adrienne's poem "Diving into the Wreck," you really have to swim down into yourself when you're writing. Which is why people confuse it all with mental illness. Mental illness means you're down in the layers, not on the happy surface. To be an artist, you have to be able to go down to those layers, to stay there—but you can't decompress like a diver. You need to come up right away, with your armor around you, and deal with life.

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Excerpt: *With Robert Lowell and His Circle*

Lowell always started his writing classes by going around the table, asking the students to introduce themselves and to name their favorite poet. Once, in response to this, a woman sitting to Lowell's right fastened her hand on his thigh. 'Robert Lowell is my favorite poet,' she said.

Edna St. Vincent Millay was my favorite poet of the moment, I offered, when it came my turn. Lowell cleared his throat, there was a long and awkward silence, and without comment the class proceeded as if nothing had been said. At that time Millay was out of favor. She was considered too romantic, too direct and 'out there'—a girl might have a passion for her poetry. But I was in the land of oblique, incomprehensible words, words one had to struggle to understand. I was in Boston, the Land of Harvard, with sophisticates who spoke of poets I had never heard of.

—From "First Classes at Boston University, 1959–1960,"
With Robert Lowell and His Circle by Kathleen Spivack
(University Press of New England, 2012)

For more information, visit Kathleen Spivack's website *[5].*

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