When I was in college, I had a terrific crush on the poet Anne Sexton, dead twenty years at the time. I was smitten by her confessional verse, the recordings of her voice inflating those tortured words.

Sexton’s story of morphing from suburban housewife to Pulitzer Prize winner to asleep forever in the front seat of her car, the drunkenness, hospitalizations, affairs, family abuse, suicide, all throttled my imagination.

I moved on; she stayed fixed in time. But like a one-time high school flame friending me on Facebook, we recon- nected a few weeks ago. At 236 Bay State Road, second floor, Room 222.

Room 222, or the Robert Lowell Seminar Room, is the central classroom for BU’s venerable Creative Writing Program. Legend has it that Lowell, considered the father of confessional poetry, taught Sexton in this small room, along with Sylvia Plath and George Starbuck, in what is considered poetry’s most famous class.

“There was a period when many people would have said Lowell was the major poet of the post–World War II era,” says Bonnie Costello, a College of Arts & Sciences professor of English. “He had a major impact on the poets who came through Room 222. Sexton, Plath, W. D. Snodgrass, Starbuck — they had a lot in common. They all had breakdowns, were all in treatment. It’s hard to know whether these people came to Lowell’s class because they recognized themselves in his work or it was coincidence.”

I met Robert Pinsky, a CAS professor of English and former U.S. poet laureate, in Room 222 to ask what the space “with a little glimpse of the Charles” means to him.

“I’d bet Lowell did teach a class here,” he says. “It might have been some weird outrider that this was consigned as a space.”

Starbuck went on to become director of the program, and his one-time colleague and successor, Leslie Epstein, supports 222’s pedigree. “This was the room,” he says. “That’s what George told me, and as far I know, it’s the truth.” Then again, Epstein points out, more often than not the class met at the Ritz Lounge over drinks, parking their cars in the “loading zone,” as Starbuck, who died in 1996, used to joke.

Regardless, the whiff of mystery feels appropriate. Art is about reconciling perception and reality, illuminating the truth rather than defining it. The lessons taught in 222 apply to itself.

Icons Among Us: Room 222
It is the most famous classroom of all. Or was it?

WEB EXTRAS
Watch poet Carl Phillips (GRS’93) read from his recent collection at bu.edu/bostonia.

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