

Ralph J. Mills on: "The Truth the Dead Know"

In "The Truth the Dead Know," an elegy for both parents, she leaves the place of their death and burial in an attempt to regain, by geographical change and the play of the senses, her awareness of being alive:

We drive to the Cape. I cultivate myself where the sun gutters from the sky, where the sea swings in like an iron gate and we touch. In another country people die.

Nature seems barely to agree with human wishes in these lines: the guttering sun, the mechanical motion of the sea are, at best, indifferent; at worst, sinister. Human contact does, however, provide momentary relief before the final stanza puts us back where we began with the disquieting question, "And what of the dead?" That stanza ends with the poet's realization of her small comforts of the flesh that her mother and father, by dying, have relinquished: "They refuse / to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone."

The truth the dead know in the poem of that title contributes an integral part of the knowledge with which Mrs. Sexton tries to meet her experience. Such recognition of mortality colors the whole of her vision, even though she is still quite capable of salvaging images of beauty from the prospect of general destruction.

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