

Cecil Hemley on: "The Truth the Dead Know"

There is no doubt that the poet wants us to associate herself with the "I" of the poem; it is Anne Sexton who has not driven to the cemetery. This identification with the writer has the advantage of intensifying our feelings, but the disadvantage of embarrassing us slightly. There were good reasons why past eras were reticent on such matters. However, the poem rises above the confession and achieves great beauty. For one thing the serious tone of the verses shows that the refusal to mourn is not successful. The mourner does not escape her grief. She is haunted.

Mrs. Sexton has a fine gift for metaphor and in this poem she is at her best. "In another country people die," she tells us. It is not only forcefully said, but true. The death of the psyche, if indeed it does occur, is never witnessed. She goes on to ask:

And what of the dead? They lie without shoes in their stone boats. They are more like stone than the sea would be if it stopped.

These lines I think are an example of Mrs. Sexton's power of creating images that are amazingly suggestive. She is on the Cape looking out at the sea. The dead are in stone boats, and actually they are enclosed. Presumably then they are sailing. But not on the sea that she is watching. They are surely sailing away from her in time. And this in a sense is what she wants. But she remains haunted by their stillness and their unknowability. The sea that she is watching could become dead also but its calm would not be as frozen as the stone faces she has looked upon.

Anyone who has experienced the shock of bereavement will realize that Anne Sexton has captured the feelings of the recent mourner marvellously. The landscape becomes infected with death; death enters the brain. But yet the fact of death remains incomprehensible. The corpse that one viewed is not one's loved one. So Anne Sexton writes of ghosts, of the search for religious consolation which she rejects because "need is not quite belief." No wonder she suffers nervous collapse. She is the mourner who cannot stop mourning.

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