

Memory and Discovery

By Luke Gerwe

Book Review:

Sleuth, by Elaine Sexton. *New Issues Poetry & Prose*, 2003.

In her debut collection, Elaine Sexton takes up the spy glass and dusting powder of her childhood hero, Nancy Drew, and scrutinizes her own past and present. These poems follow a distinct narrative arc, with the speaker weaving images from a childhood on the New Hampshire Shore and perceptions from contemporary life in New York. Individual poems never prove opaque, and consistently showcase Sexton's formal range.

"Undressed in the Cloisters" sets out a declaration of aesthetic intent: "I am showing you everything as it occurs / to me, so it comes out unfinished, / the truth, before the hoop skirt of fiction / covers its long legs, concealing its shape." Taken together, poems of her early life reveal a world as benignly adventurous and fundamentally nice as Nancy Drew's: ice-fishing with boys, sewing with mom, picnicking on the beach. Yet the child in these fragmentary narratives possesses a strange, prescient awareness of the fragility of those idyllic moments:

Her free arm held me on her lap.

I wedged myself between her

and her unnamed unhappiness,

and pulled the white cotton

thread through an opening so small

only a child could see through it.

("Sewing, a Sonnet")

The sonnet form suggests order, a reaction toward a chaotic mother-daughter relationship. Other poems in which the speaker recalls her childhood invoke curiosity about the life outside suburban New Hampshire—the life of literature, and the life of urban sophistication. Unlike Nancy Drew—eternally 17—the speaker in these poems has the capacity for aging and change.

The final third of *Sleuth* breaks from the exploration of childhood and focuses on vivid, in-the-moment perceptions. In “Subterraine,” Sexton fashions, haiku-like, a single striking image:

A dachshund in a pouch on the F train
stares blankly at a baby slung over
her mother’s lap. We stand between them
rocking. You fit your hand in my
pocket. The infant has just noticed
the dog. Her eyes aroused, her lips
open as we enter the tunnel, leaving the sun
on the tracks of the bridge for this
deaf racket below.

Here, form mirrors an act of spontaneous discovery, as if the speaker had jotted these observations down in a field notebook. This poem celebrates, as do many of Sexton’s entries, the joys of seeing the world with fresh eyes. Although lacking the emotional intensity or sense of mystery of earlier pieces, the humor and transparency of the final poems balance the collection. Rather than puzzle out the meaning of memories, here Sexton strives to fix in place new discoveries in a Whitmanesque embrace of city life.

Together, *Sleuth*’s two major perspectives—memory and discovery—mark an identity in flux, still defining itself, still developing. Sexton has a talent for capturing the mechanics of self-exploration. Though intensely personal, she never slips into sentimental introspection, thanks in part to a detached, forensic mood, and to a detective’s eye for the all-revealing detail that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.