

DRIVE

Elaine Sexton
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What is it
with women

and cars? We are old,
old enough,
to equate mobility

with independence.
(from "Drive")

In Elaine Sexton's newest book, readers will find comfort and inspiration by getting on the road alongside the poet, exploring fragments and memories through stoic verse. *Drive* is a collection of endearing yet critical poems that follow the poet's sense of wanderlust across ethereal landscapes and cathartic moments. Sexton's mental positing, combined with a dutiful sense of observation, yields a refreshing poetic voice that walks the line between the concrete and the abstract.

The book is divided into two sections. In the first, we are introduced to the protagonist of the poems, a woman whose queer independence emerges with the partnership of the automobile. There is a settled and esteemed quality to poems like "The Motorist," which demonstrates that letting go can be filling and empowering: "her free arm open, / her hand is catching and letting go / atoms and atoms of that // which shall remain / nameless."

The sense of movement is a prevalent theme across poems. We see the speaker behind the wheel, and we see her move forward on her feet, as in "Run": "I am walking & / talking at first / then humming / picking up the pace." This method is reminiscent of other poets on the go, such as Frank O'Hara moving across the blocks and beaches of New York, but Sexton's explorations are uniquely her own:

I don't expect the end
to be like the din of a river,
a sound
with no beginning.

I'm certain the end is the sea.
Not the sound of the sea,
but the sea itself,
the part that expires

After it heaves.
(from "Transport")

In most of the poems, the poetic voice is alone with the world. Sensuality and intimacy are formed through bonds with the car, with

the object, with environs great and small. In Sexton's brief and uncanny "Ignition," for example, we watch the poet's hand moving through the car only to emerge with memories of a dead father and a mother's learning how to drive. The poetry is crisp and chilling as it moves from distilled image to the excitement of transition: "I remember my hand / on the car's smooth blue // lining, the Rambler's / door as it opened // to the damp grass / of the lawn // to the new house."

We can observe Sexton's range of description in the second half of *Drive*, which feels more like a collection about movement and motion. The images that flicker across the book's second half display a wonderful, if not slightly chaotic, selection of experiences. "Landscape with Power Lines" starts with a meditation on the lines themselves: "The twisting chords, no longer / bother me. As I see it, / they heighten the light." Many of these poems feels like enigmas, small puzzle boxes akin to Emily Dickinson or Susan Howe. "Listening to Cement Dry" offers another mysterious opening: "I'm stealing the sound / from the sand." Other topics include a Rothko's "Dark Palette," Rome, and pumping gasoline.

Drive is not a dense book, and not a very long one, either, but it is mesmerizing; to follow a woman who is searching for meaning, and whose mature words are rooted in lone adventure, both captivates and restores. It is a fantastic introduction to Sexton's growing body of work, and one that holds and shares a wisdom of motion, a framework for the unstuck, for those who need it.

—Greg Bem