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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “fathoming its unfathomable dimensions.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

UNLOCKING THE CITY

Anne Winters acts as a poet-detective in her collection, *The Key to the City*.

By Emily Warn

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Anne Winters works Manhattan’s streets in *The Key to the City*, her first book and a National Book Critics Circle finalist for poetry in 1986, using methods similar to New York City homicide cops. Her poems condense the dizzying complexity of Manhattan into miniature scale models in order to detect the unfair social conditions that can lead to crimped lives and calamitous events. In her poem-laboratories, Winters studies points in time that in complexity theory are defined as “strange attractors.” The science writer James Gleick explains that these are single instants in time when the “complete state of knowledge about a dynamical system . . . collapses to a point” and so serve as a means to understand the system.

Fathoming New York is possible if she can register its forces, the energy of economic and social exchange that, though invisible, is contained within the city’s physical lineaments—that which is unfixed and flowing moves through the “walledup canals.” A poem’s prosodic and syntactic arrangements create its structure just as differences of class and race create a social structure. The patterns that emerge over time cannot be perfectly predicted or controlled. Difference functions within poem and system as that which motivates change. When there is little external pressure and stable, long-term relationships are present, there will be little change to patterns within the system. When difference is introduced, movement becomes possible and necessary.

A coming-of-age poem, “The Street,” opens with the speaker watching her sister watching herself in a “tilting compact mirror.”

A round eclipse, a pool-like dot of light

on my little sister's glasses, bangs, her dome-cheeked, solemn face
play-powdered in a tilting compact mirror.

Her sister is making herself up, inventing an adult self. The poet, on the other hand, is inventing herself as documentarian, mirroring events to understand what she sees. The playful freedom and predictable order and perspective of their childhood will soon be eclipsed by forces unleashed in the street. Out the window, where the two sisters knew “every crevice and lip of our stoopball, stickball street,” the unexpected happens: they witness the aftermath of a horrific murder of a “girl” from “the one brownstone, catty cornered across: / a ‘house’,” which is different than the other brownstones.

Winters records the crime with the accuracy of a crime lab technician's high-powered lenses. The violence casts a harsh light and amplifies the fixed pattern out of which it emerged, indelibly altering the speaker's perception of self and system of which she is a part. Time collapses to a point. The precipitating event in this and many other poems is often the result of crossing a class line. What had been human and orderly becomes bestial and Kafkaesque.

On the sidewalk across / a girl from the house, in stockingfeet, dark silk suit
slit and ribboned by knife thrusts, was pulling herself
through the arcs and dribbles and splashes of her blood.

Her fingertips' carmine meshed on the concrete, her elbows strained
over the wet, working shoulder blades (one still hooked
through her purse strap) and somehow her bluish felt

hat and hatpin, rolled to the curb, made me think she was pinned
to the street—pinned and moving.

The bleeding victim becomes an insect in an exhibit; the severing of her connection from the human gives the poem its disturbing urgency, mirroring its lack in the scene itself:

And last thing
before we were hauled from the window seat, we saw her
raise one terrible red-nailed arm
and wave to them, sign them to come down to her.

Winters could have ended the poem here, setting herself up as witness to a failure to respond to a desperate summons. The poem would have served as reminder and prod to change the system by helping us see its injustice. She could have signed off with this ultimate of human horror—that even murder fails to help us recognize the “other” as human. But that would not be true to the facts of New York. The unexpected emerges out of it, amplifies the system as a whole, and then settles back into its pattern. In the last two stanzas, a cop cranks closed the hydrant he'd opened to wash the blood.

Much later, and late for school, when we were sent down

onto the stoop, my sister's face still reddish
lost and bereft behind her round of glasses

the opposite walk was clear if we'd had to cross there,
only a dark calligraphy beneath a sheen of water,
one lingering cop to crank the hydrant closed.

The beauty of “The Street” is in the way its perspectives shift and collide—from the “pool-like dot of light” in her sister’s glasses to the “terrible red-nailed arm” waving at the two girls. These shifts also occur among poems in the book—from an overheard conversation in an all-night laundromat to the view from a plane gliding above Manhattan skyscrapers. Winters’s faceted forms are comparable to the stunning images produced when mathematicians invented fractal geometry to describe the irregular regularity of shapes such as twisting coastlines or turbulent water. Before the invention of fractal geometry, the dimensions and characteristics of these forms were unknown. Similarly, in exactly rendering events, Winters abstracts essential information about New York, fathoming its unfathomable dimensions.

Emily Warn’s latest collection of poetry is *Shadow Architect*. This article first appeared on www.poetryfoundation.org. Learn more about Anne Winters, and her poetry, at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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