

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

ELIZABETH BISHOP

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IF I were to begin by telling you this was 'An Introduction to Elizabeth Bishop', it would imply something bland in me and something ignorant in you. But if I begin by asking 'Does Elizabeth Bishop need an Introduction?', it raises what turns out to be an interesting question about the size and character of her English readership. Over here she has been overshadowed by her two great American contemporaries Robert Lowell and John Berryman. When her *Collected Poems* was published here in 1970, the respect with which it was received failed to secure it a wide audience. When she died nine years later, we took virtually no notice—there was nothing in *The Times* or *The Guardian* or any of the literary weeklies, only an excellent piece in *Quarto* by Blake Morrison which remarked on, among other things, the silence surrounding his own praise.

What was the reason for this silence? Questions of audience are famously complicated—the relationship between writers and readers is about as clear-cut as that between the chicken and the egg. Most of the explanations, though—her slim output, her lack of strong rhetoric, her self-effacement—are hinted at by the fact that she has always been known as a 'writers' writer'. John Ashberry cleverly even went so far as to call her a 'writers' writers' writer'. In as much as either of these phrases suggests an especially subtle craft and tone, they are apt—but since they also carry associations of being *recherché* and restricted, they are misleading. Just how misleading—and just how apt—was graphically illustrated when her *Complete Poems* came out in 1983 (her *Collected Prose* came out the following year). Few books of poems in recent years have stimulated so many poets to celebrate and promote it (in reviews, articles, and so on), and few—largely as a result of this—have met with such a warm general welcome. But this reception is not simply late proof of Bishop's ability to combine the virtues of being a writers' writer with those of being a readers'

writer. It says something, too, about a shift in literary taste which has made the proof recognizable. It is now a commonplace to say that many of the young poets who have made their names during the last ten years or so, and who are conspicuous in their praise of Bishop, have championed a revival of interest in highly pictorial, abundantly metaphorical styles. The most obvious coherent group are the 'Martians'. Bishop, whose eye was clearer, more feeling, and wittier than any of her contemporaries' (and most of her predecessors'), has entered a literary climate in which at least some of her special strengths are likely to be best appreciated. Or perhaps that's putting the chicken and the egg the wrong way round. To put it the other way: five years after her death, she has emerged as the founding mother of a new generation of poets; quietly but thoroughly, she has helped create the taste by which she wished to be judged.

So it would appear, anyway. But these young English poets have also, of course, wanted to legitimize the taste by which they wished to be judged themselves—the taste, that is, for metaphors and sharp-eyed ingenuities. They have had, in discussing her work, ample opportunity: in a letter written to James Merrill in February 1969, thanking him for a copy of his new collection, she said, 'I kept being surprised, and that is my favourite emotion in poetry these days', and throughout her work it is easy to trace a continually developing wish to seem surprising by visual or visualizing means. Her late prose poem, '12 O'Clock News', is a spectacular example: the de-familiarizing of ordinary objects (a typewriter into a terraced escarpment, an ashtray into 'a sort of dugout, possibly a shell crater, a "nest" of soldiers') exactly parallels the Martians' playful transformations. Further evidence of a less riddling but no less intense watchfulness is plentiful: the fireflies in 'A Cold Spring' 'drifting simultaneously to the same height, / —exactly like the bubbles in champagne'; the mist in 'Cape Breton' 'like rotting snow-ice sucked away / almost to spirit'; and the water waggon in 'Love Lies Sleeping' 'throwing its hissing, snowy fan across / peelings and newspapers. The water dries / light-dry, dark-wet, the pattern / of the cool watermelon.' Given the thrilling accuracy of these examples, and their power to satisfy one of poetry's prime requirements—reminding us of things we had forgotten we knew—her English advocates did well to dwell on them so intently.

But these brilliant images constitute much less than the whole story of Bishop's poetic character and range. Even those who praise her most fulsomely for her image-making admit that, for

all its self-sufficient virtue, it can dazzle in a way which obscures other qualities and concerns in her work. Specifically, her images both agitate and confound the question of how her poetry expresses her *self*. Since they are brief, astonishing recreations of things that are external, are we to leave them as that, or to calculate their personal symbolic value? Also—and slightly to refine the point—since they so repeatedly deflect our attention away from Bishop herself on to the things she is observing, are we to feel that they perform a concealing function even as they set about their task of revealing the world at large? It is at this stage that the second reason for asking ‘Does Elizabeth Bishop need an Introduction?’ becomes clear. Many of her typical tones and strategies suggest a deeply withdrawn, private sensibility, loath to introduce itself at all obviously into her poems, yet knowing that their power and potential audience depends on the quarrying of acute and often wounded emotions. The images are ways of buying readers’ attention with a bright and valuable coin; they are also a kind of bribe paid to prevent readers from turning their gaze on to her. It is this tension in her work—between a suppressed self which fights shy of the world, and a self which, largely by looking, is closely involved with its pleasures and pains—that I want to talk about. And it is one which makes the matter of Introductions more complicated than probably at first appeared. For her, the question was not simply whether she needed to be introduced, but whether she could bear to be introduced—to a world which (though she would never have put it this candidly) contained so many opportunities for hurt, disappointment and loss.

Some of the reasons for her reserve are not hard to find—though naming them offends the spirit in which her poems were written. In an unpublished review of a biography of Emily Dickinson, written in 1951, she admitted to finding biography ‘finally just unpleasant. And why—but perhaps it is rather exactly because: in order to reach a single reason for anything as singular and yet manifold as literary creation it is necessary to limit to the point of mutilation the human personality’s capacity for growth and redirection.’ This belief stayed with her throughout her life—a version of it crops up in her late poem in memory of Robert Lowell, ‘North Haven’—and it led her, at every available opportunity and with Larkin-like glee, to run down attempts by critics or writers themselves to delve into the causes and effects of art. In 1955 she told Merrill ‘probably one should just sit back and enjoy things and not say anything much except “thank you”’; in

a three-year stint as poetry critic for the *New Yorker* she did not write a single piece; and in a late interview she said, 'The analysis of poetry is growing more and more pretentious and deadly. After a session with a few of the highbrow magazines one doesn't want to look at a poem for weeks, much less start writing one.' So-called 'confessional' poets—like, from time to time, Lowell and Berryman—were given especially short shrift: their unflinching accounts of private domestic distress made her, she said, 'just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves'. There is, of course, an irony in this, since Lowell was one of her most devoted friends and admirers. But her continuing to respect him while disapproving of any 'tendency . . . to overdo the morbidity' is a prelude to a more significant paradox: the often painful facts of her experience (Lowell said, 'She really has risen from the ocean's bottom'), which are so assiduously guarded in her poetry, are retailed with comparative openness in her prose. Although the *Collected Prose* is split into two sections, 'Memory: Persons and Places' and 'Stories' (there are eight of them), the division is hardly warranted. Virtually the whole book works and reworks autobiographical material. And since our appreciation of her poems' methods—let alone her subjects—depends so greatly on the way in which she simultaneously registers and represses strong feeling, it is as well to pass on at least those details of its sources which the prose allows us to know.

Bishop was born on 8 February 1911 in Worcester, Massachusetts, the only child of William Thomas Bishop—who died when she was eight months old—and Gertrude Bulmer (Bishop)—who, after a series of disastrous breakdowns following her husband's death, was permanently committed to an asylum in 1916. Several of her stories, most famously 'In the Village', describe the often desperately unhappy circumstances of her early childhood—the first five years with her mother's parents in Great Village, Nova Scotia, then a spell with her Bishop grandparents in Worcester, where she developed the whole gamut of nervous diseases—bronchitis, asthma, St Vitus's dance, eczema—then a time with her mother's older sister in Boston. These repeated and dramatic upheavals clearly connect with her poems' obsessed treatment of travel and exile, and with notions of what might constitute 'home': although she was careful to avoid accusing her various guardians of actual unkindness, she was equally scrupulous about recording her unsettledness. 'I was always a sort of guest', she told one interviewer, 'and I think I've always felt like that'; and in her story, 'The Country Mouse', she tells us that during 'the whole dismal

time' in Worcester 'I felt myself aging, even dying'. She was, she says, on the same terms in the house as the terrier Beppo. When she got to Vassar College in 1930 (via Walnut Hill boarding school in Natick), she had already cultivated a fiercely introspective personality—something she later, characteristically, made light of by recalling that she arrived with a Roquefort cheese of which she ate chunks before bedtime, hoping to induce dreams which she would then record in a notebook.

At Vassar, though, she found her first congenial society. She also began, in 1934, one of her life's most important friendships: with Marianne Moore. Their meeting was arranged by the college librarian, Fanny Borden, an old friend of Moore and of Moore's mother, and Bishop quickly exploited its opportunities. (The relationship is lovingly celebrated in her prose memoir 'Efforts of Affection'.) For one thing, the Moore household in New York gave her a taste of the family life she had never had (Bishop's mother died the same year that she and Moore met), and for another it exposed her to literary influences which decisively shaped her poems. Not only Moore herself, but—with Moore's encouragement—the Metaphysicals and Hopkins. Twenty years later, Bishop wrote to Moore, 'I know . . . that when I began to read your poetry at college I think it immediately opened up my eyes to the possibility of the subject matter I could use and might never have thought of using if it hadn't been for you.' ('I can't see that', Moore replied.) In all the estimations of the relationship, this emphasis on her debt to Moore's scope and clear-sightedness is steady—'Why had no one ever written about *things* in this clear and dazzling way before?' she asked elsewhere—and judging by the imprecision of her early student poems, which occupy a fairy-haunted twilight, she was right to feel grateful. But as well as being toughened by Moore, and made to embrace a wider range of subjects—including, or perhaps even concentrating on bizarre and exotic subjects—Bishop also proved responsive to Moore's tone. 'Although [her] tone is frequently light or ironic', Bishop wrote, 'the total effect is of such a ritualistic solemnity that I feel on reading her one should constantly bear in mind the secondary and frequently somber meaning of the title of her first book: *Observations*.' A late Bishop poem like 'The Moose', in lightness and ritual, in wealth of detail, and in subject matter (animals, after all, are part of Moore's staple poetic diet) clearly shows the influence in operation. What Moore gave her, in a nutshell, was a way of making the quirky seem humane, a way of uniting a wincingly sensitive *persona* with the world it necessarily had to

inhabit, and a way—sometimes—of simultaneously releasing and containing her graver concerns by delivering them in a frankly humorous or at least *faux-naïve* tone of voice.

Once Bishop left Vassar her life reads, even in outline, like a deliberate variation on Moore's. Instead of cultivating a thrifty stability, she was energetically nomadic. Moore, who had admired Bishop's later student poems, persuaded her to abandon her original intention to study medicine and devote herself to writing instead. In 1935 Bishop travelled to Belgium and France, and in the next four years visited England, North Africa, Spain, Florida, Ireland, Provence, and Italy. In 1939 she moved to Key West, Florida, then in 1943 spent nine months in Mexico. For much of the late 1940s she was based in New York—in 1949 she was Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress in Washington—then in 1951 she visited Brazil, which became her permanent home (for much of the time with Lota de Macedo Soares, whom she had first met in New York in 1942). As well as being a base, Brazil was also a point of departure for further, shorter travels, including 'the two trips I liked best . . . down the Amazon and to the Galapagos Islands', until, for the final years of her life, she moved back to America—to Lewis Wharf, Boston, for the winters, and for the summers to the Maine island of North Haven. She died on 6 October 1979.

It is difficult, contemplating a life of such sustained restlessness, not to assume that it represents a search. But when asked, once, whether she was looking for 'the perfect place', Bishop was unimpressed by the self-aggrandizing aspects of the idea. 'No', she said, 'I don't think so. It just happened that I had a small income from my father.' The same kind of innocent-seeming dismissal was her usual response, too, to any glamorous accounts of her work or of herself as its author. 'There's nothing more embarrassing than being a poet, really', she once said, and when she was roped in to give a creative writing class at Harvard in 1970 she admitted, 'I try to discourage [the students]! I tell [them] they'd be better off studying Latin. Latin or Greek.' Such an attitude is, among other things, a way of insisting on the gap between herself and her work—allowing both to float free of each other and be as secretive as they like. Yet it would be wrong to feel that it implied a complete lack of the egotistical sublime. Although Bishop protested, 'I've never really sat down and said to myself "I'm going to be a poet"'. Never in my life. It never occurred to me and I'm still surprised that people think I am', she also admitted, 'No matter how modest you think you feel or how minor you think you are,

there must be an awful core of ego somewhere for you to set yourself up to write poetry.' Like her remark, 'One almost envies those Russian poets a bit—who feel they are so important and perhaps are', this suggests, in knowingly low-key conversational terms, a version of her conflicting wishes to commit herself to the world and yet simultaneously to withdraw from it. By the end of her life the two impulses had reached a Romantic truce which, though tense, allowed her to be herself—or both of her selves—in a way which wonderfully rewarded the poems. In 'Santarem', for example, at 'that conflux of two great rivers, Tapajós, Amazon', all opposites are united:

I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place.
 Two rivers. Hadn't two rivers sprung
 from the Garden of Eden? No, that was four
 and they'd diverged. Here only two
 and coming together. Even if one were tempted
 to literary interpretations
 such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female
 —such notions would be resolved, dissolved, straight off
 in that watery, dazzling dialectic.

The tone and rhythm in this passage suggest a conclusion so easily attained that it is almost hard to credit the disparities with much power to generate pain. And the key to understanding her inclusiveness is turned by noticing the confidence with which she registers both the place and 'the idea of the place' in the first line: actual and imaginary (or theoretical) overlap, so that the self and its circumstances can combine. But her journey towards this reconciliation was lifelong and arduous. In a student essay she anticipated the route she would take when she insisted, 'The crises of our lives do not come, I think, accurately dated; they crop up unexpected and out of turn, and somehow or other arrange themselves according to a calendar we cannot control'—indicating, as her best American critic, David Kalstone, remarks, a plan to deflect 'her energies from narrative to description', and also gesturing towards the ways in which the self could be disguised in the process. If the self can be precisely characterized at all in the book she began working towards soon after this essay was written, *North and South* (eventually published in 1946), its qualities never emerge from self-revelatory statement, but from apparently detached argument and description, and from avoiding any contact with an individual—a 'you'—in favour of imaginary figures like 'The Man-Moth' or 'The Gentleman of Shalott'. It amounts, for her readers, to a sense of privacy which plays fast

and loose with itself (or as Mary McCarthy said, Bishop's mind hides 'in her words, like an "I" waiting up to a hundred to be found'), and is forced on our attention not only by suppressions and silences, but by a cunningly calculated array of formal and stylistic devices. There are, for instance, an abundance of images which suggest containment and hermeticism—rooms, cells, cages, boxes (in 'The Monument', for example); and repeated references to tears, off the glittering surfaces of which readers can only, so to speak, glance (in 'The Man-Moth', conspicuously). The effect of these things is powerfully supported, too, by her exploitation of techniques she learnt from the surrealist poets she read 'a lot of' during her time in Paris during the mid 1930s. Their appeal to her was less as guides to the pure well-springs of the unconscious mind than as reinforcers of Marianne Moore's advice to investigate what is apparently bizarre or disparate. George Herbert, incidentally, the Metaphysical poet with whom she felt most affinity, had the same effect: 'Some of his poems', she said, 'strike me as almost surrealistic.' All such traits have a sufficiently obvious common interest in creating impressions of reticence to seize our attention even without assistance from her preferred forms. But these, again, contribute enormously to the same end. Throughout her work she regularly uses short gliding lines which seem intent on slithering past our understanding, and in her early poems, especially, she uses forms—like the sestina of 'A Miracle for Breakfast'—which either slam themselves shut or swallow their own tails. (It is worth saying here, though, that while these enclosed forms remained available to her until the end of her life—the late vilanelle, 'One Art', is a case in point—the evolution of a more open approach to the world is reflected and permitted by a parallel growth of interest in more easy-going structures and metres. The majority of her late poems adopt what Helen Vendler calls 'delicate wavering rhythms, which tremble on the brink of regularity and then withdraw lightly from it'. The effect, typically, is a kind of relaxed intentness—a way of suggesting that her mind is actively thinking while she writes, rather than delivering itself of concluded and fully achieved opinions.)

Detailing these devices runs the risk of making them seem not much more than a means of promoting secrecy. But this is only a part—or rather a half—of their function. Her two most elaborately surrealistic (in her qualified sense of the word) poems, 'The Man-Moth' and 'The Weed', indicate that it is not simple self-effacement that she seeks, but a means of healing the painfully divided self we have already seen to be reconciled to itself by the

time we reach 'Santarem'. In 'The Man-Moth' (the title was given to Bishop when 'an oracle spoke from the pages of the New York Times, kindly explaining New York City to me' by misprinting 'mammoth') she coalesces various received versions of the Romantic artist to demonstrate art's struggle with what cannot be expressed or at least stubbornly resists the attempt. The shy, imaginary creature repeatedly emerges:

from an opening under the edge of one of the sidewalks
and nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings.
He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,
proving the sky quite useless for protection.
He trembles, but must investigate as high as he can climb.

These brave attempts are always failures—he is fated to fall back to street level, travel the subway facing backwards, and 'be carried through artificial tunnels and dream recurrent dreams'. His 'only possession', 'if you catch him', is 'one tear', which he will swallow 'if you're not paying attention'. It is 'cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink', the poem tells us in its last line, indicating (though Bishop hardly wants us to be sure) that the artist's inner resources are sufficient satisfaction, since the world—particularly the urban world—is too unassuageably painful or demanding to deal with. Another early poem, 'The Imaginary Iceberg', tackles the same issue: 'We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship', Bishop says, because the iceberg exemplifies the values of solitary self-containment—it 'cuts its facets from within. / Like jewelry from a grave / it saves itself perpetually and adorns / only itself.' But the price for 'having' it is 'the end of travel'. And admitting the value of travel means recognizing the social, responsible world which she cannot wholly avoid or deny.

'The Weed', which is modelled on Herbert's 'Love Unknown', puts this dilemma even more explicitly. In a dream, the speaker is lying 'upon a grave, or bed', and sees a young weed shoot from a heart, splitting it, and allowing 'a flood of water' to emerge. This forms itself into two diverging rivers, battering the weed, which flicks 'A few drops' on the dreamer's face and grants her a vision of innumerable 'racing' images in the water. Then her attention returns to the weed:

'What are you doing there?' I asked.
It lifted its head all dripping wet
(with my own thoughts?)
and answered then: 'I grow,' it said,
'but to divide your heart again.'

In all its goriness and peculiarity, the argument of the poem is clear. The physical world demands attention, even though it continually interrupts a mental condition which is valued for being profoundly withdrawn. It is the same dilemma, and reaches the same reluctant conclusion, as other poems through *North and South* (and elsewhere: 'Sandpiper', for instance, in *Questions of Travel*). In 'Large Bad Picture' the conflict appears in terms of the world of commerce as opposed to the world of contemplation; in 'The Gentleman of Shalott' it appears as the world of the mirror as opposed to the 'real' world; and in 'The Unbeliever' it is the world 'secure in contemplation' at 'the top of a mast' as opposed to the cruel world of the sea below the speaker: "'The spangled sea below wants me to fall. / It is hard as diamonds; it wants to destroy us all.'" Time after time the poems admit and are appalled by the claims of the world, and are driven to construct allegorical, fabulous, or avowedly fictional contexts in which the terms of the argument can be rehearsed, and an effort made to create a design for feelings which can be transposed, once they are complete, into what is generally familiar, palpable, populated, and factual.

Once we have been alerted to it, this debate in the early poems is not difficult to extrapolate. But however clearly its terms can be defined, what remains mysterious is quite what it is in the world that comprises its pain. We know from the prose that the circumstances of Bishop's childhood were often agonizing, but within the closed world of the poems themselves we are given no indication of this cause. We are simply told the world is too distressing to enter easily, and left to believe what we read. There are, though, a few poems in *North and South* which are more forthcoming, and they tend to be those which benefited from Moore's encouragement to Bishop to 'open her eyes'. They are, as you would therefore expect, also the poems which her English critics have pinpointed as examples of her image-making capacity and not much else besides. 'The Map' is one of their favourites—though Susannah Clapp, in her shrewd review of the *Complete Poems*, was acute about virtues other than its good visibility. It advances, she wrote, 'and changes through details of diction and observation, with no reference to a flailing or forging ego'—thereby implying that the speaker's ego is just as likely to be made as unmade by what it perceives. The map is not simply an opportunity for visual high-jinks: it is a conventional image of fixity and knowledge which reveals—for all its sensuous beauty—Bishop's edgy insecurity. In only the second word of the poem we are told (punningly, admittedly) that it 'lies', and thereafter its simplicities and excitements are repeatedly

beset by a variety of possible compromises: uncertainty ('is the land tugging at the sea from under?'); over-reaction ('The names of seashore towns run out to sea, / the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains / —the printer here experiencing the same excitement / as when emotion too far exceeds its cause'); and positive distress ('Norway's hare runs south in agitation'). The poem's final line ('More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors') may, in its faintly whimsical fashion, express a social truth—but it also shows that Bishop's inclination to lean towards art (printing) and away from the distressing world of actual events (history) is bolstered by the evidence of instability that the map affords.

Instability—the way in which land- and sea-scapes keep changing their appearances and roles—is a predictable pre-occupation for someone of Bishop's upbringing. But perhaps, since we do not all—and some of us do not ever—read poems for their biographical revelations, the point is of dubious value: better to accept the fear of instability as given, and concentrate on the way it shapes her imaginative methods, and becomes their subject. At the risk of converting criticism into voyeurism still more obviously, however, it is worth considering one other aspect of 'The Map'. The images it shows are not exclusively male ('These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger / like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods'), but they do nevertheless belong to the male-dominated world of power. The observation would hardly seem to justify itself were there not a number of other poems in which its being male-dominated emerges as a crucial element of the world's unpleasantness. The most obvious of these is 'Roosters'. The 'horrible insistence' of the birds, with their 'cruel feet', 'stupid eyes' and 'uncontrollable traditional cries' represent a specifically male 'virile presence' which imposes a dismayingly 'senseless order'. As in the later poems, 'View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress' and 'Brazil, January 1, 1502', this order intimidates, even seeming to deform and devalue the bright pictorial pleasures she can take in the world: the roosters' 'crown of red' is an 'excrescence' which shows only 'the vulgar beauty of iridescence'. Yet while deploring the roosters' domination, Bishop is also quick to establish ways in which she can restrain or overcome it—not by complaint or opposition, but by discovering in it qualities which are pitifully pathetic or even, sometimes, valuable. For all its obvious horrors, the birds' 'screaming' seems to tell her "'Get up! Stop dreaming!'"—as if encouraging her to overcome, as she knows she must, her reluctance to grapple with

the real. In the second part of the poem, too, when she turns from the birds in her immediate vicinity and contemplates others which crowed for Saint Peter, she insists that the 'cock-a-doodles' might 'bless' or 'mean forgiveness', and not only "'Deny deny deny'", creating a balance very similar to the one established in 'Cirque d'Hiver', where the male toy mechanical horse, in spite of absolutely controlling the little female dancer on his back, is regarded as a heroic striver:

The dancer, by this time, has turned her back.
He is the more intelligent by far.
Facing each other rather desperately—
his eye is like a star—
we stare and say, 'Well, we have come this far.'

The conclusions of 'Roosters' and 'Cirque d'Hiver', though explicit, might seem too consciously manipulated to feel fully confident. The insights and arguments Bishop ranges against maleness are coherent, but lack imaginative conviction. In 'The Fish', the most famous poem in *North and South*, the resolution is more definitely realized. The 'tremendous fish' she catches and holds beside the boat 'half out of the water' (so many of Bishop's subjects, like herself, live between worlds and elements) is an object of intense examination and provokes sharply divided feelings. While she domesticates him by calling him 'homely' and by saying that his skin 'hung in strips / like ancient wallpaper', this effort cannot disguise his unregenerate aspects. He is 'infested', 'coarse', packed with 'shiny entrails', 'grim' and 'weapon-like'. For all the relish of her observations, the balance between admiration and disgust is fine. In his lip, though, are 'five old pieces of fish-line' which appear to the speaker 'Like medals with their ribbons'—one might almost say that they identify him with the conquerors who decided the shapes of 'The Map', or the invaders who pursue native women into the jungle in 'Brazil, January 1, 1502'. Once she has scrutinized these things, a sense of 'victory [fills] up / the little rented boat', and the poem's commentators have usually referred to this as an expression of the triumph of fellow feeling. It is—but not simply between hunter and hunted, or human and creature: it also makes clear that what is male and aggressive can be comprehended so sympathetically by the sentient female speaker that its threats do not need to be answered with other threats, but with generosity:

I stared and stared
and victory filled up

the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

Bishop wrote 'The Fish' shortly before completing *North and South*, and although it grapples memorably with a number of themes which run throughout the book, its methods and manner are more typical of poems in subsequent collections than of its immediate neighbours. It should be evident by now that a surprisingly large number of these—surprising, that is, given her present reputation—are arguifying, Metaphysical and fabling ('The Imaginary Iceberg', 'The Man-Moth', 'The Gentleman of Shalott', and 'The Weed'). They are sharp-eyed, certainly, but not with the sustained attention to authentic detail which became her hallmark. In 'The Fish', though, clear-sightedness *is* sustained, and operates as the means by which the tensions provoking her imagination become recognizable and bearable. Sight is a go-between, not because she uses it to shuttle to and fro between the secure and respected inner world, and the unavoidable but dangerous outer one—sight mediates by combining opposed (or divergent, anyway) qualities in a single apprehension. 'The Fish' brilliantly exemplifies this gift for paradox: the speaker 'stared and stared' in order to achieve her victory. To achieve a similar result, the early poems bristle with injunctions to 'look': sailors would 'give their eyes' for a sight of the iceberg in 'The Imaginary Iceberg'; 'The target center' in 'The Colder the Air' is the 'eye' of 'this huntress'; 'If you watch' the man-moth will hand over his tear; 'Watch it closely' we are told at the end of 'The Monument'; again, we are told 'look down' in 'Paris 7am'; and 'we stare' to gain wisdom in 'Cirque d'Hiver'. In her second book, *A Cold Spring* (1955), sight's rewards are, so to speak, plain to see—not just because the wonderfully precise observations give us pleasure, but because they demonstrate how, without being able to rely on a system of meaning such as we find in Yeats, say, or Stevens, she is able to respond to experience in a way which is both searching and relaxedly all-embracing. This extract from a

letter to one of her earliest diligent critics, Anne Stevenson, is instructive:

There is no 'split'. Dreams, works of art (some) glimpses of the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy (is it?), catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important. I can't believe we are wholly irrational—and I do admire Darwin—but reading Darwin one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless, heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic—and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one feels that strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.

Given this slowly developed belief in the value of sight, and the equally slowly developed ability to adopt its values in poetic practice, it's difficult not to read the title poem of *A Cold Spring*, the first in the book, as a kind of discreet statement of poetic intent. As she painstakingly records the gradual growth of warmth and colour in a Maryland landscape, she picks out a series of young awakenings—calves, deer, oakleaves, sparrows, lilacs, grass, frogs, moths and fireflies—which embody her own development. It is these fireflies which we heard earlier rising 'exactly like the bubbles in champagne'—and the image is significant not just for its accuracy but for its implications of celebration. The host of details which constitute the world, the poem says, are as capable of seeming nothing at all, or beautiful and rewarding, or a plethora—it all depends on how you look:

your shadowy pastures will be able to offer
these particular glowing tributes
every evening now throughout the summer.

These are the poem's final lines, and at the same time as they raise a question about whether or not the tributes will be accepted, they answer it: acceptance is looking. But what sort of looking? Is it simply a matter of accuracy? The 'perfectly useless concentration' recommended in the letter to Stevenson seems to suggest an innocent receptivity, and for 'A Cold Spring' this seems an appropriate phrase—except that it is a receptivity informed by an excited sense of release. Elsewhere in the book, though, and throughout the rest of her work, the way of looking is characteristically determined by something which registers a more

complicated emotional relationship with its subjects. There are clues to its nature in another of the more sheerly descriptive poems from *North and South*, 'Florida', where the mixed beauties and uglinesses of the land- and sea-scape are assimilated by a gaze which reduces the state in size. It appears to the speaker as if it were seen from inner space, or, as the poem itself says, as if it were 'a postcard of itself'. This sort of shrinkage occurs in much of her work: her eye habitually transforms scenes which are dangerously proliferative and random into contained versions of themselves—into the boiled-down scale of 'Florida' or 'The Map'; into paintings ('Large Bad Picture', obviously, but in 'Brazil, January 1, 1502', for instance, the jungle also looks 'fresh as if just finished / and taken off the frame': 'I like painting probably better than I like poetry', Bishop once admitted); or into theatrical scenes: in 'Little Exercise' a storm 'goes away again in a series / of small, badly-lit battle scenes', in 'The Imaginary Iceberg', we are told, 'This is a scene where he who treads the boards / is artlessly rhetorical', and in the later 'Questions of Travel' she asks, 'Is it right to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theatres?' In all these reductions things that threaten her by seeming overpoweringly abundant become comprehensible and fixed often by being turned into an artistic version of themselves. Their effect, one might add, is endorsed by the tendency I have already noticed for her eye to pick out objects, details, and animals which are themselves diminutive—tears, crumbs, toys, and so on. Since they are a way and means of steadying her sense of herself in the world, they are relished and acknowledged to be beneficial; but as her work develops they are joined by another—related—sort of reduction which is of more ambiguous value: the reduction of herself to a child.

We are still accustomed to poets using a child's-eye-view to suggest innocence and receptivity. But if, like Bishop, childhood is associated with loss and confusion, the old Romantic equation will not quite work out. It is really only in late poems like 'In the Waiting Room' and 'First Death in Nova Scotia' that she presents herself directly as a child, but the tone of voice she uses in these poems—to express their point of view—is one she used widely, and had already begun to develop in the 1950s. We can hear it, for instance, in this letter to Merrill written from Brazil in 1955—which carefully translates unfamiliar objects into familiar ones as if it fears it might not otherwise be understood: 'Things are very much out of scale, too, like a Rousseau—or out of our scale, that is. The "Samambia" . . . is a giant fern, big as a tree, and there are

toads as big as your hat and snails as big as bread and butter plates, and during this month butterflies the color of this page [air-mail blue] and sometimes almost as big flopping about.' It is useful to compare this (though it disrupts chronology) with the tone of, for instance, 'Filling Station':

Oh, but it is dirty.
— this little filling station,
oil-soaked, oil-permeated
to a disturbing, over-all
black translucency.
Be careful with that match.

What we can hear is something usually called *faux-naïve*, and in so far as the word means to imply an innocence which cannot quite believe itself, and which we cannot quite believe either, it is probably the best one to use. The purpose is not only to provoke and legitimize the kind of watchfulness that children are supposed to have, but at the same time to register mildly baffled, humorous surprise at the look of things. These things have qualities—often of sadness—which children can reasonably be imagined not to know—but which the adult speaker understands only too well. The filling station, for instance, is the small theatre for a degraded life which stubbornly refuses to give up the effort to decorate and enjoy: by writing about it as she does, Bishop can both keep up her guard against the sadnesses that it embodies, and admit that they exist. It is the same technique as she adopts throughout her most potentially painful treatment of childhood: 'In the Village'.

Exploring these reductions of scale and comprehension might easily seem to be leading to an accusation of escapism—and they probably would, if her naïvety were truly naïve. But its falsity is its saving adult grace; even in the most obviously child-like poems we are allowed to know what would be lost on someone of limited experience—and in others which use a moderated version of the same tone, the chance of escaping into a world of merely bemused watchfulness is even more obviously curtailed. In a poem from *A Cold Spring* which is directly (but quietly) concerned with growing older, and therefore with the loss of childhood—'The Bight: on my birthday'—we are given what is frankly a proud possession of the inclusiveness she had striven to achieve in *North and South* and actually caught in 'The Fish'. After surveying the shore with great clarity—ingeniously combining a relaxed and unflappable tone with brilliantly energetic perceptions (water is 'the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible'), 'The Bight' ends:

Click. Click. Goes the dredge,
and brings up a dripping jawful of marl.
All the untidy activity continues,
awful but cheerful.

This affirmation of the need to partake of the world, and of the potential pleasure in it, is one half of the paradox that governs the rest of her work. Indeed, 'awful but cheerful' (the words are carefully chosen to sound neither too awful nor too cheerful) invites itself to stand as her motto. But while creating the paradox obviously affords her some comfort, and allows a greater degree of poetic freedom than she found possible in *North and South*, it hardly amounts to an easy imaginative or intellectual resting place. The balance of tensions which make up a paradox are always hard to maintain, especially if the definitions of its constituent parts keep changing in the wake of experience—and throughout *A Cold Spring* her understanding deepens and develops steadily. The threats posed by instability and maleness remain, and they are joined by a tormenting wish to find a coherent pattern in the phenomenal world, which might indicate that some principle other than randomness is governing existence. In 'Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance' the immaculately rehearsed details are rewardingly fascinating, but 'Everything [is] only connected by "and" and "and"'; in 'Cape Breton' the relished forms and figures, however accurately observed, remain mysterious and unattached; and in 'Faustina' 'Our problems [become] helplessly proliferative'. The difficulty is not simply one of disparateness, but of neglect: no matter how much attention she lavishes on the world, and no matter what (solipsistic) pleasures she might take in it, nothing will look back at her. 'Cape Breton', for instance, tells us 'these regions now have little to say for themselves', and again:

Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears now
to have been abandoned,
unless the road is holding it back, in the interior,
where we cannot see.

Having solved the problem, in other words—whether or not to face the world head-on—Bishop is then confronted by two other problems of equal gravity: how to make sense of it, and how to establish her own place in it (or reconcile herself to her own singularity).

'At the Fishhouses', one of her very finest poems, brings these issues together with subtle force. After a long opening description

of the place—which is both absolvingly dreamy, and full of sharp reminders of impending death—she moves herself into the scene by offering the old fisherman a Lucky Strike, and finally turns to address ‘you’ (the reader) with a summary of the ‘knowledge’ that the place has given. The bitter truth of mortality—represented by the run-down port, the lack of work, the shimmering evidence of dead fish, and the old man’s own feeble antiquity—are not diffused or confined by analysis because they are endlessly threatening and endlessly in need of re-examination:

If you should dip your hand in,
 your wrist would ache immediately,
 your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
 as if the water were a transmutation of fire
 that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.
 If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,
 then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
 It is what we imagine knowledge to be:
 dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
 drawn from the cold hard mouth
 of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
 forever, flowing and drawn, and since
 our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

The only information that ‘At the Fishhouses’ can give Bishop about her place in the world is to tell her that she is, strictly speaking, a fellow mortal. Everything she sees persuades her. But if the natural world, and the world of casual acquaintances like the fisherman, can bring no more solace than a resigned acceptance of the disagreeable facts of life, what about more intimate liaisons? Love poems are few and far between in Bishop’s work, and the clutch at the end of *A Cold Spring* helps us to see why. Apart from the marvellous ‘The Shampoo’—which generates the tenderness it does by avoiding explicit passion in favour of tender domestic familiarity (the excitedly amorous associations of the moon are tamed first by being conferred on lichens, then by the moon being turned into ‘this big tin basin’)—the love poems can find no argument to resist powerful instinctive feelings of despair and impending loneliness. The ‘you’ which appears in ‘Varrick Street’ (‘And I shall sell you sell you / sell you of course, my dear, and you’ll sell me’) or ‘Insomnia’ (only in ‘that world inverted’ will ‘you love me’) exists to underline the point made by the less obviously intimate poems in the book: Bishop is certain she does not live in a reciprocal universe. Even if she did, an earlier poem (the second of ‘Three Valentines’)

indicates that the same deplorable lack of self-definition would reappear in different terms:

Nor does an eyelash differ; nor a hair
 But's shaped exactly
 To you I love, and warns me to beware
 My dubious security,
 —Sure of my love, and Love; uncertain of identity.

Bishop's third book, *Questions of Travel* (1965), makes no attempt to cure the feelings of vulnerability which surround the self by identifying it with another person. Yet in it her evolving commitment to the real is not only maintained, but strengthened, largely because, for the first time in her work, she is able to entertain a comparatively secure idea of home. The book is divided into two parts—'Brazil' (where she had moved in 1951) and 'Elsewhere' (which in fact turns out to be, more often than not, the 'elsewhere' of her childhood landscapes in Nova Scotia): the title of the former, and the exact memories of the latter suggest both stability and continuity. That much is obvious—and so is the fact that their implications quarrel with the book's title, which is clearly determined to bring wondering and wandering to the front of our minds. This tension stands at the heart of the book: 'home' consists more in travelling than arriving. Lowell made this point well in an interview in the *Paris Review*: 'In Elizabeth Bishop . . . you don't know what will come after any one line. It's exploring. . . . She seldom writes a poem that doesn't have that exploring quality', and Bishop, in a rare moment of self-analysis, said of herself in 1976 that she 'lived and behaved very much like . . . [a] sandpiper—just running along the edges of different countries and continents "looking for something".' She is no more forthcoming about what the 'something' might be than she is in the poem 'Sandpiper' itself, which begins by telling us the bird is 'finical, awkward, / in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake', and ends:

The world is a mist. And then the world is
 minute and vast and clear. The tide
 is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.
 His beak is focussed; he is preoccupied,
 looking for something, something, something.
 Poor bird, he is obsessed!
 The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray,
 mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.

On the evidence of the opening lines, the poem seems keen to convince Bishop that, in order to assuage the terrifying 'roaring'

of the shaken and unstable world, she has to study the details which comprise it in the hope that they will impart a sense of coherency and relatedness. But by the close, it is obvious that microcosms offer no satisfactions other than their own limited selves: they are emblematic of an effort to reconstitute the world, but intransigently—albeit beautifully—remain fragmentary. The perpetual disappointments implicit in this are, however, never so crushing as to make the effort seem pointless—and throughout the rest of the book the process of ‘looking’ takes a more dramatic and directly personal form. ‘Arrival at Santos’, for instance, the first poem in ‘Brazil’, signs off by determinedly announcing ‘we are driving to the interior’, and those following describe a kind of heart of darkness, in which the original terms of her central concern—whether or not, in the words of ‘The Gentleman of Shalott’, ‘Half is enough’—is recreated in ways which let us know that her commitment to the world is less equivocal than before, but never wholly confident. In the title poem, for example, she is confronted with a lush landscape which has ‘too many waterfalls’, streams hurrying ‘too rapidly’, ‘the pressure of so many clouds’, as well as a carelessness of time and individuality, and yet still continues to seem memorable and delightful. The paradox translates easily into questions about how best to acknowledge and yet refract the painful aspects of existence. ‘Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?’ she asks early in the poem, and later:

*Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
about just sitting quietly in one's room?*

*Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?*

The poem makes a virtue of not being decisive—like the later ‘North Haven’ it insists that the power to choose is an essential part of our humanity, and the price we have to pay for this power is to remain restless. ‘Crusoe in England’, from *Geography III*, makes the same final point: once Crusoe has been rescued from his island, and returned to the safety of England, he has no alternative but to accept the Tennysonian conclusion that it is ‘dull to pause, to make an end’. Home, as a permanent place, is an ideal fiction.

This point in the growth of Bishop’s argument with the world runs, in theory, the risk of becoming repetitive. It embodies a vow

to continue the search for coherence, yet admits that the search is bound to be fruitless. 'I find it impossible to draw conclusions or even to summarise', she said late in life. 'When I try to, I become foolishly bemused'—and it is undeniably true that her eye remains sharply but submissively inclusive, and her mind accustomed to randomness, for the remainder of her writing life. Eye and mind together, informed by the lessons they have learned about incoherence, provide—in *Questions of Travel* alone—the structure and attitude for poems as apparently diverse as 'Manners'—a well-mannered justification of attentiveness; 'Manuelzinho'—an affectionately exasperated portrait of a neighbour's servant; and two of her best poems—'The Riverman' and 'The Armadillo'. In their various forms and contexts, they all rehearse reasons for finding the world chaotic or disappointing or actually dangerous, and take delight in many of the physical appearances of these dangers. 'The Armadillo', for example, which the dedicatee, Lowell, thought 'Surely one of your three or four very best' and admitted to taking as a model for his own poem 'Skunk Hour', recognizes the illegality and fickleness of the fire balloons sent up at carnival time in Rio, and encompasses these qualities by scrutinizing them. The poem's last three verses—the first two of which clearly demonstrate the protective value of her *faux-naïve* tone—protest at the panic and destruction caused by the crashed balloon, while at the same time keeping their eyes peeled, so to speak, for its visible rewards:

The ancient owl's nest must have burned.
 Hastily, all alone,
 a glistening armadillo left the scene,
 rose-flecked, head down, tail down,
 and then a baby rabbit jumped out,
short-eared, to our surprise.
 So soft!—a handful of intangible ash
 with fixed, ignited eyes.

Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!
O falling fire and piercing cry
and panic, and a weak mailed fist
clenched ignorant against the sky!

As well as reminding us how regular these kinds of oscillations and combinations are in Bishop's mature work, 'The Armadillo' also helps us to see why the theoretical possibility of repetitiveness is never realized. It is not simply a matter of dramatic narrative or descriptive excitement, or the collusive skill of her

formal expertise, but of the suspense engendered by our being made to wonder how the things she sees in the world define her. We have already heard her described, by herself and others, as a secretive and reticent person, and seen how this aspect of her personality helped to shape the central paradox of her work. But in defining the paradox, there is a danger of implying that it adequately describes her controlling presence in the poems. In a sense, of course, it does—but it's hard not to feel, as her work develops, that by placing herself at the exact mid-point between opposing arguments—let alone between different physical forms and states (land and water, waking and sleeping)—she makes herself invisible as she tries to get the best of all possible worlds. In *Questions of Travel*, and in her last book *Geography III* (1976), there is, for her readers, a persistent sense that she is concealed, apparently insisting that her poems have no hidden depths, and likewise obscuring the connections between her self and the characters—like Crusoe—in her narratives.

The point of saying this is not to try and reconstruct a biography from the poems, or even to try and attach some characteristics to the poetic personality she carefully veils, but to identify one of her late poems' most intriguing features as their making her seem an exemplary kind of chameleon poet. She is everywhere and nowhere in the poems, but we feel that our sense of her being nowhere is one of her main subjects, and should be one of our major concerns. The first poem in *Geography III* addresses the question with untypical candour: as it recaptures her childhood memory of sitting in a waiting room, in February 1918, while her aunt visited the dentist, she is straightforward about the several losses—of objects, people, and places, as well as states of mind—which are summarized by the things she remembers seeing. But this heartfelt nostalgia is only the prelude to the poem's main subject: the crisis of identity which is precipitated by her aunt's 'oh! of pain' as the dentist goes about his business. (The mother's mad scream in 'In the Village' serves a similar function.) Her first reaction is to feel that the idea of herself as a distinct entity has been sabotaged, and that this is entirely to be lamented:

What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me*:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt.

In order to toll herself back to her sole self 'I said to myself: three days / and you'll be seven years old. / I was saying it to stop / the sensation of falling off / the round turning world / into cold, blue-black space.' But this effort at resumption cannot succeed: the person who was, initially, self-contained and self-possessed has been changed for ever into someone who has to strive to retain a clear sense of herself. 'I felt: you are an *I*, / you are an *Elizabeth*, / you are one of *them*. / *Why* should you be one, too?' she says, and again, later:

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities . . .
. . . held us all together
or made us all just one?

The poem, obviously, centres on a loss of innocence—but what makes it so dramatic and painful for 'an Elizabeth' is that the summons to identify with other people seems a direct challenge to her own personality, and to excite questions about the existence of human community, or separateness, which the poem finds too difficult to answer. When, in the final lines, she returns to a precise place, time and climate, she blankly records the factual details as if submitting to them were an act of self-abnegation, and self-abnegation were the only tenable kind of worldly existence.

Elsewhere in *Geography III* the theme of invisibility—its benefits as well as its deprivations—is embedded or recessed in the poems rather than being projected as the obvious, ostensible subject. In the entrancing bus ride which makes up the story-line of 'The Moose', for instance, the unnamed, unregarded speaker only admits to being a passenger with extreme tentativeness—with a discretion, in fact, which allows and resembles the epiphanous, unifying moment of the moose's appearance. In 'Poem', the speaker who inspects and recognizes a 'little painting' of Nova Scotia, for all her willingness to wax autobiographical, finds that the precise and actual details of her own memories are freshest when she sublimates them to the coincident vision of the painter. In 'The End of March', the prospect of a 'proto-dream-house' on a remote stretch of coastline promises a contentment which is only possible in reclusive self-effacement: 'I'd like to retire there and do *nothing*, / or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms'. And in 'Crusoe in England', it is only on his island, and not in England, that Crusoe can be creatively watchful.

All these poems, in other words, refer to the challenge issued by the drama of 'In the Waiting Room': they abolish the self, in general social terms, in order to preserve it in other more private ones. Many reasons for this reticence have already been adduced—the threats posed by evidence of randomness, instability and disparateness—but there is, in these late poems, another and extremely guarded reason put forward. When we remember poems like 'Roosters' and 'View of the Capitol' we remind ourselves that Bishop's fear and dislike of the social world has something to do with her—admittedly qualified—dislike of its dominantly male elements. So what do we make, in 'Crusoe in England', which is so centrally concerned with escaping from society, of the relationship between Crusoe and Friday? It is a relationship between men, and therefore might be imagined to be threatening—not least because it is exclusive. Yet in fact it is of such price that it cannot speak its value. Friday's appearance is marked by a departure from detailed and lavish description to emotionally charged plainness:

Just when I thought I couldn't stand it
 another minute longer, Friday came.
 (Accounts of that have everything all wrong.)
 Friday was nice.
 Friday was nice, and we were friends.
 If only he had been a woman!
 I wanted to propagate my kind,
 and so did he, I think, poor boy.

This silence surrounding Friday is profoundly expressive—the only other mention of him is in the similarly tight-lipped final two lines of the poem: 'And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles / seventeen years ago come March.' The point of mentioning it isn't to stir up some Sunday-paperish homosexual intrigue in the poem; rather, it is to try and elucidate further, and account for in more detail, Bishop's preoccupation with her own ambivalent relationship with the real. In her everyday life, she made no secret of her lesbianism, but in her poems she rejected it with the most intense discretion. Indeed, it would seriously misrepresent their tone and intentions to imply that some of them were at all openly homosexual—not because she would think the subject *de trop*, but because—particularly in the context of a love poem—to tackle it would be to court precisely the kind of emotional vulnerability she spends most of her time trying to avoid or counterbalance. Whatever intimacy is implied between Crusoe and Friday is hushed up

not because it is an unmentionable subject for her, but because it is a relationship she can identify as being—in theory—highly satisfactory, and its satisfactoriness is likely to produce a proportionate amount of emotional distress.

This reserve, and the reasons for it, are the substance of one of her last and best poems, 'One Art'. Unusually for her late work, it is in a strict form (it is a villanelle), and like her earlier, tighter constructions, the repeated rhymes create a sense not only of rigorous emotional control, but of self-defensive enclosure. In the light of what we have already discovered about her reticence, this is hardly surprising: the poem is a catalogue of all those things and places which crystallize emotional involvement—'lost door keys, the hour badly spent', 'places and names, and where it was you meant / to travel', 'my mother's watch', 'my last, or next-to-last of three loved houses', 'two cities', 'some realms', 'two rivers, a continent'. Appropriately—the poem being such a late one—these losses provide a miniature résumé of her life, and her reaction to their disappearance is never more than ambiguous. 'The art of losing isn't hard to master', she says, and again, 'I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster': both phrases embody a stoical and unruffled acceptance of life's transience and its randomness, while at the same time containing a passionate regret that these things cannot be altered.

Thus far, for all the protective subtleties of its tone, the poem is comparatively open about its losses. In the final verse, however, the syntax becomes more convoluted, and the tone more desperately restrained, as Bishop approaches a less easily assimilated deprivation:

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

The poem's emotional force here depends more on its implications than its admissions—she insists that the loss of some loved person (someone only individuated by the same sort of 'joking voice' she so often uses herself) is not a disaster, but at the same time tells us that it 'looks' like one. For a poet who cared less about appearances, this might be an adequate consolation. But for a poet for whom looking means quickening and releasing the emotions, it cannot console at all. In spite of the lines' brave face—or rather because of it—we feel the full force of the disaster they describe. The truth of this, and of her expressive refusal to spell out its full significance, is borne out by the poem's draft. This

is not in verse, is written straight on to a typewriter, and very closely follows the same plan as the poem until its conclusion. Here, what is so affectingly restrained in the poem is explicit:

One might think this would have prepared me
for losing one average-sized not exceptionally
beautiful or dazzlingly intelligent person
(except for blue eyes) (only the eyes *were* excep-
tionally beautiful and
the hands *looked* intelligent)

a good piece of one continent
and another continent—the whole damned thing!
He who loseth his life, etc.—but he who
loses his love—never, no never never never again—

There are not many better ways of measuring the difference between Bishop's poetic manner and that of her two great American contemporaries, Lowell and Berryman, than to put, in our minds' eye, the reticence of 'One Art' next to the confessional candour of *Life Studies*, say, or Berryman's *Dream Songs*. And since much of her writing was produced at a time when explicit self-revelations commanded the closest critical attention and the highest general praise, she has had to wait a while—in England, at least—to receive the praise she deserves. In trying to clarify the paradox at the heart of her work, and in simultaneously trying to use this as a way of discussing her own presence (or absence), there is a danger, of course, that she might be made to seem more like her contemporaries than she in fact is: more desperate, and more autobiographical. She is, undoubtedly, capable of seeming and being both these things—but unless they are constantly held in balance with their opposites, the tantalizingly elusive manner of her poems, and their inclusiveness, get undervalued. In a letter to Lowell, speaking about *Life Studies*, she gave an opinion of the book which catches the combination of virtues in her own work exactly—its power to celebrate as well as to convey distress, its enormously broad attentiveness, and its ability to inform immediate and precise perceptions with the weight of thought and feeling acquired in the past. The poems, she said, 'have that sure feeling as if . . . everything and anything suddenly seemed material for poetry—or not material, seemed to *be* poetry, and all the past was illuminated in long shafts here and there, like a long-awaited-for sunrise . . . It seems to me it's the whole point of art, to the artist (not the audience)—life *is* all right, for the time being.'

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