Elizabeth Bishop's Reticence in Flight
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I

Elizabeth Bishop's art proceeds from a lifetime flight in search of "a different world." Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1911, orphaned at age five, Bishop lived with her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia, then paternal grandparents and subsequently a maternal aunt back in Massachusetts. By 15 she was on her own. After boarding school and Vassar College, she traveled steadily for two decades: Europe, Morocco, Maritime Canada, Florida, Mexico, Cuba, South America. She lived alternately in Paris, New York and Key West before settling, at age 40, in Brazil where she resided and toured, off and on, for sixteen years. After Brazil she returned to the U.S. to teach, and continued traveling: Scandinavia, Russia, Greece, England. (She died unexpectedly, perhaps uncharacteristically, at her home in Boston in 1979.) The self-exile and fierce resistance such wanderlust implies mark Bishop's late late-Romantic project materially as a displaced but disembarrassed poetry. Even as she writes about particular, lived experience -- family, companionship, travel -- Bishop establishes her different world, not in tropes of heightened emotion or personalized drama, but by reticent self-questioning and keen observation of her surroundings and the variegated illusions they entail.

Bishop's "surroundings" are most often meditative reconstructions of travel or youthful reverie. For an example of the latter "First Death in Nova Scotia" reimagines the occasion of a cousin's death:

In the cold, cold parlor
my mother laid out Arthur
beneath the chromographs:
Edward, Prince of Wales,
with Princess Alexandra,
and King George with Queen Mary.
Below them on a table
stood a stuffed loon
shot and stuffed by Uncle
Arthur, Arthur's father.

The adult poet adroitly inhabits the child's memory, investing it with solemnity and apparent innocence in the face of mortality. Grief is illusive. Tears are muffled within a slow trimeter, glumly adorned by the first-line basso of "cold, cold," the thrice-sung name "Arthur," and the off-rhyme of "Arthur," "Alexandra," "parlor," "father," as well as of "Uncle," "table," and the homonymous "Wales."

This is recollection from childhood; so we encounter appositional logic that not so innocently, after all, transposes the deceased into an icy commemorative, co-equal with chromographs of British Royals and a stuffed white loon. The loon, we learn, was shot by Arthur's father, rendered "cold and caressable/his eyes were red glass,/much to be desired." Diminutive iconography with its attendant contrasts in color substitutes for the disastrous specificity of death. Red stands in for imagined life; white is its opposite. Arthur is "small...all white, like a doll," his coffin, "a little frosted cake,/ and the red-eyed loon eyed it/from his white, frozen lake."

Bishop's insistent miniatures and stringent coloration seem poised for collapse by the final stanza, victims of a pathetic fallacy: The Royals "were warm in red and ermine... They invited Arthur to be/the smallest page at court." Then, young Elizabeth intones these last lines:

But how could Arthur go,
clutching his tiny lily,
with his eyes shut up so tight
and the roads deep in snow?

The youth's question rehabilitates Bishop's obsessive iconography. This is no immobilized daydream, but the mind itself in flight, a credible reenactment of young Elizabeth's unresolved process of questioning the meaning of her cousin's death. This process is a trope for illusory grief. The loon, the Royals and the Arthur-doll "clutching his tiny lily" constitute the tools with which the adult poet assembles an inner landscape to replicate the sad external events encircling the observant, self-inquisitive child.

II

Poet James Merrill praises Bishop's craftsmanship where key lines seem merely to approximate themselves, and the form, awakened by a kiss, simply toddles off to a new stage in its life, under the proud eye of Mother, or the Muse. (cited in Bloom 157)

With regard to imagery, her mentor Marianne Moore portrayed Bishop's first book as "accurate and modest." John Ashbery views Bishop as a 'writer's writer's writer,' focusing on her "marvelous" picture-making, a point most commentators begin and end with. He writes of Bishop's visual sense as having "managed to create a trompe-l'oeil that conquered not just the eye and the ear but the mind as well" (7).

Bishop's pictures are marvelous, crafted from experience and reflecting both a naturalist's concern for exact detail and a lyricist's impulse to conjure up an inner life. For majestic description of the natural scene, Bishop is without parallel. Consider how she transforms the cliche of sky merging with sea: "The sky was darker than the water/ -- it was the color of mutton-fat jade." In a Brazilian poem titled "Going to the Bakery," Bishop personifies man-made confections to achieve another kind of visual mastery as well as an exemplary
eeriness:

Beneath our rationed electricity,
the round cakes look about to faint --
each turns up a glazed white eye.
The gooey tarts are red and sore.

In the same poem, the moon's reflection (another cliche) is propelled by a similar tone of the macabre:

She leans on the slack trolley wires.
Below, the tracks slither between lines of head-to-tail parked cars.

(The tin hides have the iridescence of dying, flaccid toy balloons.)
The tracks end in a puddle of mercury...

As a rejoinder to such gravid description, Randall Jarrell might emphasize Bishop's empiricism, "Everything has written under it -- 'I have seen it.'" Robert Pinsky would look to Bishop as a lyricist of the inner life, finding "a radical explorer of selfhood's very nature." He supports this assertion with a radical insight of his own:

A steady fury with the very idea of falsehood leads her to make every connection explicitly an invention, and her own invention. That a person can be known, or the intensely visible world understood, is always left partly in doubt. (62)

Not falsehood, but invention: And for Bishop this comes by concentrating on lived experience. Lee Edelman notes, "Bishop undertakes to authenticate her work...by fixing its origin on the solid ground of literality -- a literality that Bishop repeatedly identifies as 'truth'" (179). Bishop says in an interview, "I always try to stick as much as possible to what really happened when I describe something in a poem" (Wehr 324). To achieve a better sense of Bishop's concentrating on the literal, I return to the "mutton-fat jade" passage cited earlier. This is an excerpt from "The End of March."

The rackety, icy, offshore wind numbed our faces on one side;
disrupted the formation on a lone flight of Canada geese;
and blew back the low, inaudible rollers in upright, steely mist.

The sky was darker than the water
-- it was the color of mutton-fat jade.
Along the wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed
a track of big dog prints (so big they were more like lion-prints). Then we came on lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string, looping up to the tide-line, down to the water, over and over. Finally, they did end:
a thick white snarl, man-size, awash, rising on every wave, a sodden ghost, falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost....

A kite string? -- But no kite.

Bishop recaptures an unremarkable day along the beach littered with sensations one might overlook or forget -- and what she recaptures is remarkable in its precision of detail and meditative processes of restraint. Bishop does not merely claim the wind "numbed our faces"; she re-creates a causal chain of the wind's effects -- faces, geese, rollers, mist. What could be facile metaphor is dealt with literally. The sky was not jade, but a color of jade. Dog-prints are like lion prints. The "sodden ghost" is allowed only after we learn the snarl of string was "man-size, awash." In the last line cited, Bishop submits her observation to a mode of self-questioning both to contain the shock of "giving up the ghost" and to reproduce the inward speculation that would attend such an experience and such an image. In brief, what Bishop transcribes has been lived and re-lived by Bishop, a data set of experience and meditation.

III

Though Bishop's material is autobiographical, we find no ingenuous outflow of family secrets, no window to riveting interior schemes in the manner of, say, Robert Lowell. Lowell, a friend of Bishop's, popularized a journalistic, confessional strategy he adapted from Bishop's meditative landscapes of childhood. Critic David Bromwitch reasons, "Some day, a brief chapter in a history of poetry will describe Lowell's misreading of Bishop as a voice of resonant sincerity..." Bishop's aim with regard to disclosure of personal matters is to tread delicately, speak reservedly and avoid bathos. Regarding the loss of her mother, David Kalstone provides an excerpt from Bishop's correspondence and concludes with this inference:

"1916. Mother became permanently insane, after several breakdowns. She lived until 1934 [...] I've never concealed this,
although I don't like to make too much of it. But of course it is an important fact, to me. I didn't see her again. (22-23)

Bishop's reticence is fired not so much by self-consciousness or social reserve as by commitment to a methodology for observation. Bishop's biographer Anne Stevenson cites the following from Bishop:

...reading Darwin one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless, heroic observations [...] then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one feels the strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eye 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. (66)

To slide off into the unknown, Bishop might say, one needs to lose oneself. This produces an ironic exile because “useless concentration” engenders a sort of homecoming, a deliberate displacement in which one's rhetoric is weighted toward the experimental and novel insight of self-discovery rather than the flashy spectacle of self-disclosure. (Not that I, for one, would insist that disclosure and discovery are mutually exclusive, but Bishop's point is that the direction of one's observations is primary.) A stunning instance of Bishop in a concentrated search for self-discovery is the villanelle “One Art,” a possible love poem that addresses the requisites of loss. Here are the first four stanzas.

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

One can see this as a rhetoric pointed toward self-discovery by first examining how little it discloses of the self. Note, for example, the defiantly impersonal hypothesis: Loss is attractive; loss is "art" we can "master." Terse, contrarian, experimental thinking like this is what I mean by "reticence in flight" or what Bishop describes as "sliding giddily off into the unknown," an act of the displaced self looking for new answers and new questions, as well. Note also how Bishop offers chirpy advice, “Lose something every day,” leaving out the subtext, "like me!" When the first-person appears, it speaks not of "my mother," but of "my mother's watch," an echo from "First Death in Nova Scotia" of the commemorative icon sublimating the calamity of specific reference.

The villanelle's formal constraints operate here as a technology for flights of bravura and self-invention, much as the iconography of Bishop's Nova Scotia poem enables her to express a process of emotional inquiry. J. D. McClatchy suggests that the form of “One Art” does not mask the experience but strips it of the merely personal...the form characterizes the autobiography; in the arbitrary is discovered the essential. The villanelle serves as a field to explore the self's history, but also a vantage point above it. (10)

Earlier I described "One Art" as a possible love poem. It seems "possible" when we limit our reading to only the first four stanzas. When we consider the last two, there is no doubt.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

-- 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.

Again, McClatchy wonders, suggestively, whether one of the meanings here is "the loss of poetic power, the failure of mastery." If so, "the 'you' addressed in the last stanza...is akin to Apollo in Keats's sonnet -- say, the enabling god, or familiar muse." Lorrie Goldensohn argues for a less metaphysical interpretation, the you as a nongender-specific but beloved person. With reference to the parentheses in the opening of the final stanza, Goldensohn offers, "(t)his is the only time that the person who is the subject of grief emerges directly into the text..." (31).

Yes and no. We can point to other, earlier occasions of "you," the antecedent to "the joking voice," Goldensohn's subject of grief. In the third stanza Bishop refers to "where it was you meant/to travel." There are, in addition, the imperatives "And look!" and "practice losing" in stanzas four and three, respectively, along with even earlier imperatives "Lose" and "Accept" in the second stanza. I agree with
Goldensohn that we can read this poem as containing a real loss of the other, a real person. On the other hand, perhaps this is still potential loss -- "I shan't have lied," accommodates such a reading.

Moreover, one dimension of "the joking voice" and the multiples of "you" might be that beyond the loss of the other, Bishop is talking to and of herself. Bishop would not be the first to gaze upon the beloved and discover the beholder. Bishop's final imperative, the parenthetical "Write it!" seems an obvious instance of internal dialogue, the poet urging her self on.

At its core, "the joking voice" is most ambiguous, a reflexive comment that at once saturates the poem with sardonic overtones and attempts to be reassuring, a comment with respect to both an unspecified "you" and the premise, "Even losing you." The depressing idea, Bishop implies, of giving expression to the loss of you (or myself) is a joke but "a gesture/I love." In such a painful context, the joking voice is a reticent gesture, an erasure of the "you" that I love. And, finally, it is a profound consequence of Bishop's self-forgetful, experimental method by which she achieves mental flight and formulates novel propositions: Loss of the other or of oneself is no disaster; indeed, one should practice losing, far and fast; loss is not "too" hard; it leads to self-mastery, art; and yet I jest.

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Bibliography


McClatchy, J. D. "'One Art': Some Notes." Field: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics vol. 31 (Fall) 1984, pp. 10-11.


