

High Seas

Elizabeth Bishop Returns Home

I

In September 1917, Elizabeth Bishop took a train ride from the small Nova Scotian village she had grown up in, Great Village on the Bay of Fundy, to Boston. She was six and a half years old, and an orphan. Her father had died less than a year after her birth in Massachusetts, and her mother, deeply affected, had recently been committed to the mental asylum in Dartmouth N.S. where she would die seventeen years later; Bishop would never see her again. Now her paternal grandparents were taking her back to Boston “unconsulted and against her wishes” to raise her properly—to save her “from a life of poverty and provincialism, bare feet, suet puddings, unsanitary school slates, perhaps even from the inverted r’s of my mother’s family”, as she described it in a memoir written in Brazil in 1961 (*Prose* 17).

That memoir, entitled “The Country Mouse,” begins with Bishop’s paternal Grandfather, unable to sleep in his upper berth, snapping on an overhead light in the compartment as the train rattles through the black, seemingly endless night, through some black hairy forest. Through the young child’s eyes, we see her very stiff, new, nineteenth-century grandfather descending half-dressed to climb into the lower berth with her grandmother. Then the light is flicked off. There are obvious hints of dark goings-on, of a child’s first inklings of sex, as the train plunges through the woods and the Grandfather growls “savagely” (14)—their formality only makes such embraces seem more mysterious, more wild. More like the woods outside. Darkness, then light, then a greater darkness.

But there is also another image, another experience that lurks behind the scene, one Bishop doesn’t describe but one that anyone who has travelled

on trains or buses by night knows. You've put your book aside to look out the window. Someone flicks a reading light on; the landscape you've been trying to make out, dark pines, a desolate gas pump, whatever, is suddenly replaced by a face staring. The window has become a mirror. Where are you coming from? Where are you going? you wonder, trying to get to know this unfamiliar reflection. And as you wonder, as you reflect, you look harder: now where your face was, there's the night again, darker pines, a more desolate gas pump, all speeding past.

This experience I associate with Bishop, not just because of her descriptions of train and bus journeys by night, and not just because she was pre-eminently a poet of observation and landscape—one who, like Wordsworth, finds herself in nature. Bishop once titled a series of poems “Geographical Mirror”: the idea of the momentary reflection, no sooner glimpsed than dissolving, revealing a deeper truer darkness (common to us all), serves to illustrate something about the self we perceive in Bishop's poetry. No poet illustrates more clearly David Hume's famous assertion:

When I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception [. . .] Setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind [who think they can perceive a self], I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. (228-29)

Bishop possessed many identities—American, Nova Scotian, social outsider, literary insider, Vassar girl, country mouse, lesbian, lover of men, alcoholic, snob, feminist, reactionary. What is exceptional or unusual about her poetry is that she never sought to reconcile them all in a grand narrative, a myth, a persona. Instead she offers only glancing reflections of herself, her various identities (plural, provisional, contradictory, North *and* South in one book) over the darker, constantly changing geography. Even the most obvious markers of identity (gender, nationality) are questioned and qualified; she famously refused to be a “woman poet,” and, as Helen Vendler has argued, she “resists the label ‘American poet’” (*Music* 295).

Bishop wouldn't falsify her plural identities (American, Nova Scotian, woman, poet); she acknowledges them but denies their claim to exclusivity, to explaining all of her. The whole is greater, and more mysterious, than the parts. Thus she reminds us of her difference—a female moose, Maritime place-names on her maps, “A dollar bill / American or Canadian,” a frisson

of recognition felt when Canada geese fly overhead (“The End of March”), a pink dog with nursing teats—but never accedes to a single label. Like Auden—the only other poet in English whose reputation has experienced a similar ascent in the last decade—she is not a poet of personality, of a signature style; each poem gets the poet, the style it requires. If we wish, we can connect this effect with postmodern notions of personal identity (social constructs, subject position); most of all, it reminds us that poetry is not primarily about creating a self, a persona, a heroic, romantic narrative; it’s about writing poems.

“The Country Mouse” ends with Bishop learning “three truths,” the first of which is a lesson about just this myth-making. The six-year-old Bishop is sitting with Emma, a young girl who has been assigned to be her new friend in Massachusetts:

She asked me about my parents. I said my father was dead; I didn’t ever remember seeing him. What about my mother? I thought for a moment and then I said in a sentimental voice: “She went away and left me . . . She died, too.” Emma was impressed and sympathetic, and I loathed myself. It was the first time that I had lied deliberately and consciously, and the first time I was aware of falsity and the great power of sentimentality—although I didn’t know the word. My mother was not dead. She was in a sanatorium, in another prolonged “nervous breakdown.” I didn’t know then, and still don’t, whether it was from shame I lied, or from a hideous craving for sympathy, playing up my sad romantic plight. But the feeling of distaste, whatever it came from, was only too real. I jumped up, to get away from my monstrous self that I could not keep from lying. (*Prose* 31-32)

It is a characteristic gesture, shedding an untrue self: correcting a simplification.

In praising Bishop in this way, we of course create a counter-narrative, perhaps just as mythic as any persona: she becomes the meticulous, impersonal artist. There is another problem: if what we find admirable in her work is her resistance to simplifications, her attention to detail, to the truth of disparate moments, how are we distinguish these qualities from the failure to create something bigger, more unified? The “lack of a larger vision” (34) Joseph Epstein lamented in a recent article in *The Hudson Review*? The traditional answer is to stress her powers of observation, her reserve and understatement, to make her into a painterly miniaturist.

I would instead like to look at one of her favourite devices—repetition—and how it reflects the larger concerns and vision of the self that I have outlined. Bishop uses repetition in many forms throughout her poetry: repeat-rhymes of “The Map”, repeated adjectives (“iridescent”; Yeats), repeated lines. She also shows a predilection for forms that require repetition (villanelles,

sestinas, songs with refrains). For someone as homeless and estranged as Bishop was, the device has a significance that is more than just formal. If the self is just that momentary image in a train window, a glancing reflection that covers a deeper moving darkness, then only through finding the same image (or the same landscape) repeated there can a feeling of identity, of continuity begin. In Bishop's work, verbal or poetic repetition is a prelude to the more urgent and necessary forms of repetition we desire (a home, a self); ultimately, it leads her to recognize their absence, their impossibility. At the same time, it seeks to compensate for this lack by offering something we can repeat: words, lines, art.

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 loo! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

So she writes in her villanelle ("One Art"). That is, repetition becomes a way of creating a continuity (a self, a home) in words that acknowledge and assuage other inevitable losses.

II

In 1946, while her first book, *North and South*, was being published in New York, Bishop returned to Nova Scotia for the first time since her childhood (and her mother's death in 1934). "The Moose" was triggered by an incident on her journey back, described in a letter to Marianne Moore that year (*One Art* 139-41, dated August 29th, 1946); the poem, however, was not completed until 1972. It retraces (repeats) at a great remove the traumatic journey described in "The Country Mouse"; this time, we travel by bus, not train, and the poet hardly figures in the account. Nor do we get all the way back to Boston; nor do we dwell *à la* Moore on the moose that appears only at the end. Instead, the poem traces the bus's passage around the Bay of Fundy and a passage from outside to inside—from the externally verifiable facts of a lovingly

described geography to the more mediated and questionable ones of history.

The poem begins with a spectacular syntactical evocation of the landscape—one sentence beginning with “From” that takes us *to*, that mimicks in its movement, its stopping and starting “down hollows, up rises,” the bus it finally leads us to. We have been watching the bus approach along the far shore to the east (the setting sun over our shoulders glances off the windshield); it arrives, a lone traveller boards and the poem says goodbye. To the day (with two stanzas of microscopically imagined detail: fog crystals on hens’ feathers), and to the towns, to the Tantramar marshes. Night falls: A woman hails the bus, and climbs aboard: we learn where the bus is going (Boston) and, halfway through the poem, discover who the lone traveller is (we—first personal pronoun). Night has fallen and we are travelling through the woods again towards Boston. But just as we are leaving (“goodbye to the elms / to the farm, to the dog . . .”) we also begin to return to something:

In the creakings and noises,
an old conversation
—not concerning us,
but recognizable, somewhere,
back in the bus:
Grandparents’ voices

uninterruptedly
talking, in Eternity:
names being mentioned,
things cleared up finally;
what he said, what she said,
who got pensioned;

deaths, deaths and sicknesses;
the year he remarried;
the year (something) happened.
She died in childbirth.
That was the son lost
when the schooner foundered.

The hallucination is the poet’s own—what she imagines hearing. Having entered the bus, we now enter the poet’s mind, her past. The particular calamities that marked Bishop’s life—death, madness, alcoholism—are retold here as general human sorrows “not concerning us / but recognizable, somewhere, / back in the bus. . . .” Bishop brings the diction and speech (the indrawn “Yes,” inverted r’s) of these characters (imaginary or remembered) into the poem to describe their own (and her) sorrows: as Wordsworth

wished in *Lyrical Ballads*, their diction and speech express and are wholly adequate to expressing their emotions. There is no metropolitan irony: this is the way things are (like the tides) and talking establishes it that way, lessens the hurt, lulls us.

But just as we're about to fall asleep (listening to the ancestors—or descendants talking about us), the bus stops; the moose appears. Both fantastic and real, it issues from both the geographical reality ("it's awful plain," "homely as a house") and from the world of reverie ("grand, other-worldly," it might have walked out of a child's storybook we'd been reading before bed). More surprises: it's no trophy, no trophy wife, "Look it's a she!" It's easy to freight the animal with all kinds of meaning (even, like Vendler, "pure phenomenological meaninglessness" ["Moose" 8]); it's hard not to see in this further surprise Bishop subtly underlining her own sexual difference. The moose is described largely in terms of its effect on the passengers; "Look! It's a she!" is the equivalent of that old "would you believe a woman did/made/wrote this?". We might also join others in finding a pun in the title: the Moose, the muse. Also significant is how the moose is perceived: it is seen, heard about, and finally smelled. We move slowly towards the more intuitive senses, to a final mixture of reverie and reality: "a dim / smell of moose, an acrid / smell of gasoline."

Until we meet the moose, the poem about returning from a return visit has turned back, towards the old conversation, the grandparents. The wonderful unhurried feel of the trimeters and stanzas, the random, almost accidental rhymes all contribute to this turning back; what really marks the rhythm, what really lulls us into the poem's reverie, are the repeated words and phrases in the first half of the poem. In each of the first five stanzas, in nine of the first fourteen, we find a word or a phrase repeated. We're leaving but we're in no rush to do so, and we keep returning to the same words, the same phrases: long tides, long rides; the bay coming in, the bay not at home; red sun, red sea; clapboard farmhouses, clapboard churches. The repeated phrase is tagged on casually—an addition, a correction, almost an afterthought, as if it were one more thing to say, one more possibility to prolong this lingering on the doorstep.

All the little returns these words make in the first half of the poem (stanzas 1-5, 8-10, 14), the geographical, descriptive section, prepare us for, carry us, lull us into the larger return to the past in the poem's second half. Here the repetition is explicit—the old folks are repeating things, and probably repeating themselves. Things are repeating themselves:

What he said, what she said,
who got pensioned;

deaths, deaths and sicknesses;
the year he remarried;
the year (something) happened [. . .]

Talking the way they talked
in the old featherbed,
peacefully, on and on. . . .

But there's no tedium: returning to the same words, we return to a place. It's a dream of home (where things are repeated) which the moose's appearance (however "homely as a house") abruptly ends. All of a sudden the mirror becomes a window, the familiar reflection (the cosy world) vanishes, and in its place, we see something new and strange, a creature from "impenetrable wood." We can't return, can't go home again—but the moose creates a sense of camaraderie ("Why, why do we feel / (*we all feel*) this sweet / sensation of joy?") among the passengers on the bus that can perhaps momentarily replace what has been lost. (Do any of us really know what moose smell like? We are initiates now, the poem seems to say, to joke.)

III

"The Moose" tries to leave Nova Scotia but keeps lingering—at least, until the moose actually appears. The other poem that arose from that 1946 vacation in Nova Scotia, "At the Fishhouses," moves with equal trepidation and slowness but in the opposite direction. Not away from but towards—not necessarily towards home (featherbeds and families), but towards something before that, before the "from"—origins. (For someone who loses her or his parents at an early age, origins are always different from home—Where do you come from? Who created you? These are difficult questions, the ones we ask on the train, the bus).

We begin, however, with a slow approach—a description of the scene (evening, shoreline, old man, fishhouses, sea) by an apparently impersonal observer who slowly, slowly comes into the picture. We move slowly through the pronouns from the most impersonal ("makes one's nose and one's eyes water") to "my," "we," "I" and finally "you." As the description unfolds, we also move down towards the old man, the shore and finally to the sea. Like the old lady boarding the bus, the encounter with the old man makes the speaker reveal her- or himself—it gives us a character, a narrative:

The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.
 He was a friend of my grandfather.
 We talk of the decline in the population
 and of codfish and herring.

He might tell the speaker something, we feel, something of where she came from and evidently left—she however soon falls to observing him and moves on, drawn somewhere else, drawn by something else. She has been enumerating and distinguishing the various hues of silver she sees (translucent, opaque, iridescent) and continues doing so, looking at the fish scales on his vest, the thin silver tree trunks on the ramp. . . . She follows her eye, drawn by something mysterious, or impelled by some strange purpose, some idea, and like hapless devotees we follow her:

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
 element bearable to no mortal,
 to fish and to seals. . . .

She is drawn to the sea but also hesitant about approaching it. Her fear is perhaps partly artistic: how will she describe its silver? But there's more than that. Twice she invokes the same description ("Cold dark deep and absolutely clear") and then, like someone afraid to dive in, turns back, digresses. Each repeated line is a wave: she seems to be steeling herself, waiting for the wave that will carry her off, dislodge her. Finally she turns to face it, and arrives:

I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
 slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
 icily free above the stones,
 above the stones and then the world.
 If you should dip your hand in. . . .

"Above the stones and then the world"—the phrase repeated, repeated, builds up; the water carries her off. Of course, literally, all she has done is walk down to the shore and contemplate the sea—although "a believer in total immersion," she hasn't even dipped her hand or toes. (Note the progression of pronouns throughout: "One," "My," "I," "You," "we"). The poem is a version of what Karl Kroeber calls the "visionary lyric"—a poem that begins with the poet or "pensive traveller," in an unusual state of mind, needing or lacking something, and going out into nature to find it, in a vision that has no clear rational meaning but resolves her or his quandary; nothing dramatic happens (51-53).

It is also, we learn, like “The Intern Abbey,” like Sir Charles G. D. Roberts’s “The Tantrammar Revisited,” a romantic poem of return—the poet has been here before and has now come back to find some enduring value, some part of her younger self in the landscape. In such poems, there is always a caveat: “That time is past” (or: “Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?”); this, however, only prepares the way for a vision of what endures, the continuing unity revealed beneath the surface differences: “Therefore am I still / A lover of the meadows and the woods / And mountains”. (In the Intimations Ode, it’s “Our souls have sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither, / Can in a moment travel thither. . .”). Just as we return to the sea and it remains the same, so we can return to our earlier selves and remain the same. For Bishop, however, the model is reversed: the caveat becomes the revelation. The sea appears the same yet any attempt to possess it is futile—like fire it will burn us, like fire it is always changing, “flowing, and flown.”

The poem works up to this revelation slowly and by repeating certain key phrases (“iridescent,” “Cold dark deep,” “above the stones,” “icily free,” “flowing and”); here, the repeated phrases acquire a new force, not lulling but incantatory. The revelation we arrive at, though, is that we can’t repeat past experience, we can’t return:

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 like 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.

Behind the imagery of the last lines there is obviously a female presence—again Bishop is gently but firmly underlining a sexual difference at a point in the poem where we can’t possibly object. More obviously, it is maternal: the mouth (speaking mouth or vagina), the “rocky breasts” that Robert Lowell found “too much” (Millier 192). Remembering Bishop’s own mother, we can understand the coldness of the images and the poet’s reluctance to

face, to confront the sea, our mother. In some sense, she is making a different journey—the one she never made in life, to visit her mother in the mental asylum those seventeen years she lived on. The searing knowledge is of her origins in the briny wash, her flawed progenitors.

But the poem is also about origins in a broader sense. The final lines invoke Heraclitus in so many ways it is a wonder so few critics have noticed it: the idea of dipping or stepping into same water, water as a transmutation of fire (Heraclitus thought fire was “the primordial element”), the idea of constant flux or flowing (Incidentally, the transmutation of the “element bearable to no mortal” is enacted in the final past participle: we move from “flowing” to “flying” to “flown,” water to fire). In her art, Bishop may try to create a receptive enduring landscape, a home by meticulous observation; nonetheless, it takes time for her to evoke each detail (a poem, unlike a painting, begins and ends in time) and as she works on one, the others grow obsolete. Trying, say, to build a dike across a stream, you get almost to the far shore only to realize that the stones you started with have been washed away; you go back, replace one or repeat a line, and while you’re doing that, more are swept away. In other words, even recreating geography, its lateral expanses, we fall prey to history, and its onward rush. The sea is not immortal or constant; it will not flatter us in our illusions of selfhood; it will only give the momentary truth, one that will smart and hurt, and like the reflection on the bus window, vanish. Because there will always be more reflections, more truths to hurt us.

This is a sad realization—understandably so, given the story of Bishop’s mother and the association with the sea and her origins (In fact, we might even connect the speaker’s mysterious attraction to the sea with Bishop’s alcoholism—it is literally firewater that reveals the truth). Nonetheless, there is something triumphant in the way the poem manages to articulate all this. It doesn’t withstand or stop the flood, the onward rush—somehow, it manages to stay on top of it, to ride it, and like a toy ship launched on a wave, to illustrate by its exemplary progress the power of the waves.

I began by talking about Bishop’s fragmented, provisional sense of identity. Bishop, who was called “the Bishop” at school, would have known that every bishop has a see; it’s his official seat or centre of authority, his ecclesiastical home, so to speak. We may add that her see, the one that comes up, that swells and crashes across the meticulous structures of her best poems, was the the Bay of Fundy. But we should remember that the phrase “high

seas” has another meaning, one that suits Bishop, her background and subject matter well: “open seas not within any country’s jurisdiction” (OED).

But I’d like to close on a different note, one that stresses her artistry not her origins. In “At the Fishhouses,” Bishop writes of scales as “the principal beauty” of the fish and describes singing hymns to a seal:

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
element bearable to no mortal,
to fish and to seals . . . One seal particularly
I have seen here evening after evening
He was curious about me. He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
I also sang “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

Hymn-singing, she said, was something she grew up with in Nova Scotia. In one of her last letters, to her lifelong friend Frani Muser, she tells her of an evening spent out, spent trying to repeat the pleasure of an earlier evening: “We had a very different hymn-singing last Sunday . . . We sang a lot of nice hymns, but there weren’t enough of us and either the piano was tuned an octave too high—or I can’t get any higher than middle C any more” (*One Art* 637, August 30th, 1979). The lines of “At the Fishhouses” remind us that she once did get higher—that, in poetry, at least she could return:

I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
icily free above the stones,
above the stones and then world.

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