ONE ART:

A STUDY OF THE LIFE AND WRITING OF ELIZABETH BISHOP

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I have included illustrations with this thesis as suggestive visual signposts, and in keeping with Bishop's own strong interest in visual representations.

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ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Bishop was as powerfully discreet about the facts of her life as she was about the genesis and motives of her writing. Her life was forged from an orphaned and potentially debilitating childhood and her poetry is implicitly constructed out of this history.

This thesis is divided into two parts, prefaced by an introduction. The Introduction discusses the difficulties in defining Bishop's situation: her equivocal place within American twentieth-century poetry, her conservative but fiercely independent position as a woman writer, and the ambivalent intimacy between her life and her writing. She never denied the connections, but neither did she make them.

Part One, "Life Study", offers a provisional biography. There is still no published biography of Bishop and my study is based on unpublished and archival material as well as published critical works, memoirs and interviews. I have attempted to situate her art within the contours of her life, as I understand them.

Part Two, "Writing It", is a critical study in six chapters of the development of Bishop's writing. The first chapter acts as a bridge between Parts One and Two of the thesis. It is a reading of her story "In the Village", which Bishop herself placed between the two parts of her book "Questions of Travel", and it presents the story as a paradigm of central questions that recur throughout her writing life. These might be described

as, on the one hand the effort to recompose landscapes and homes which are fraught with anxiety and dissolution; and on the other, to celebrate increasingly the essentially precarious security she discovered in a vantage point which never ran the risk of arrival or fixity. The other five chapters of Part Two are organized chronologically: they explore her development as a poet by looking in turn at a sample of her early work and then the four books of poems published in her lifetime.

In a short afterword I reflect on the relationship between Bishop's art and her biography.

INTRODUCTION

QUESTIONS OF RECOGNITION

PLATE 1: Elizabeth Bishop in profile

I

'THAT RARE FEELING OF CONTROL'[1]

In her most anthologized poem, "Sandpiper", Elizabeth Bishop depicts in the bird's gestures both the ambivalence and the frenetic curiosity towards his landscape which is characteristic of her own art

> The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
> and that every so often the world is bound to shake.
> He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
> in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.
>
> The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet
> of interrupting water comes and goes
> and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.
> He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.
>
> -Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,
> where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
> rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,
> he stares at the dragging grains.
>
> 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.[2]

Two years before she died Bishop said: 'All my life I have lived and behaved very much like that sandpiper - just running along the edges of different countries and continents, "looking for something."'[3] It is a rare admission from this poet, who, resolutely, said little about her life, and adroitly rebuffed attempts to make her poems signify.

Octavio Paz said that the great lesson of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry was the 'enormous power of reticence'.[4] His remark was made in an issue of World Literature Today which began with a fifty page 'Homage to Elizabeth Bishop, our 1976 Laureate', and it draws our attention to a rare quality. Reticence is an appropriate term to use about Bishop, suggesting that she withheld things, not that they were absent. Marianne Moore, Bishop's early mentor, proclaimed that 'we must be as clear as our natural reticence allows us to be'.[5] Bishop always strove for clarity in her writing and this clarity seems extraordinarily at ease with the 'enormous...reticence' that readers have found so difficult to construe. Her life, too, was marked by the same quality: she courted privacy and said very little directly about her life, even in letters to her closest friends.

We can read the sandpiper's search for 'something, something, something' as a figure for Bishop's prose and poetry, as she does. But the sandpiper is also 'a student of Blake', bringing to mind Blake's "Auguries of Innocence":

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.[6]

Bishop makes comparisons like Blake's throughout her life, worlds in grains of sand, heavens in wild flowers, but her comparisons are phrased in ways which refuse to include the language of the sublime or the transcendental. Bishop's poem begins at the same point as Blake's, but it remains with the grain of sand; she has more conviction in finding a world here than Blake,

who creates mythological systems and new worlds in his attempt to catch his own convictions.

Like the sandpiper's beach, with its millions of coloured grains, Bishop's poems are packed with bright particulars. She is concerned with the forms made out of bits and pieces. Her characters often exist on the border between two worlds, or two landscapes, like another sandpiper in an early poem, "The Flood", which pecks its food from the tideline, where sea and land meet. Bishop's writing discusses the importance of the marginal; the world she sees is one of boundaries and ellipses; she makes marginal characters and landscapes the central focusses in her work.

Her poems are descriptive, not prescriptive; anecdotal rather than philosophical in their overt design. They disarm the casual reader with unlikely metaphors and strange attentions, including details that might go unnoticed by another observer, such as the pitch of clogs in a Brazilian filling-station (in "Questions of Travel") or how the dogwood's petals looked as though they had each been 'burned, apparently, by a cigarette butt'. (C.P.55) But we can finish Bishop's poems without often being put off by their difficulty. They do not draw attention to their own demands, either formally, as the Objectivists do, or by the use of abstract ideas, like Wallace Stevens. They are not packed with obscure allusion like Ezra Pound's or, more recently, James Merrill's, nor do they use long and strange specialist words as Marianne Moore's do. Bishop's poems demarcate worlds which can be visualized, but they are not, because of this, easy to understand. In each poem readers must acquaint themselves with a landscape never previously noticed though it may be based upon one as familiar as a

dentist's waiting room (as in "In the Waiting Room") or a beach (as in "Sandpiper" and "The End of March").

Bishop's writing is characterized by verbal conceit and visual dexterity. And in her work no boundaries are assumed, whether between the real and the imaginary; or between space and time; or between the subjective and the objective self; or between what is familiar and what is other (or strange). All these juxtapositions are challenged and continuously redefined. It is hard to make Bishop's poems represent anything beyond themselves. As James Merrill remarked: 'she doesn't go about on stilts to make her vision wider '.[7] The worlds she draws are literal and fabulous, but the poems are not formulated so as to allow metaphorical readings. They are beautiful, but what else are they? They rarely contain grand statements; any metaphysics is buried deep. They compel us to ask: what lies beneath and behind the fragments which compose them? What are the fragments shored up against? They provoke us to question the notion of something "lying behind" at all. Bishop's sandpiper is 'preoccupied' in his search amongst innumerable grains of sand. I am preoccupied with what lies beneath or between the grains of Bishop's poems.

My study of Bishop is both a biographical and a critical one and is divided, somewhat schematically, into biographical and critical parts. The biography looks at the development of her life, and the criticism at the development of the writing that came out of that life, though it will become increasingly evident that life and writing exist in symbiotic relationship to one another and neither part can be discussed without implicating the other. Between these two parts I have set my analysis of

Bishop's story "In the Village". It acts as a bridge, drawing powerfully on her early life as well as offering a frame within which to discuss her art. The story is about a small child in a Nova Scotian village and clearly derives from Bishop's own memories. It deals with the crux of Bishop's life, arising out of her early relationship with her mother. Its plot and the manner in which it is told suggest to me that Bishop knew this period of her childhood had been formative for both her life and her writing.

Bishop changed country, city, even continent, during her life, living from one end of the American seaboard to the other. But one aspect of her childhood never left her. Wherever she lived, she always felt like 'a sort of a guest'.[8] To be a guest is not to be part of the family, but not to be a stranger either, and her formulation raises the question as to whether she felt herself to be invited or uninvited. The root of this feeling lay in her early life, and in her paradoxical dilemma as a child: she felt herself to be an outsider in the very places that were named as home to her. Bishop's writing grows out of this same axis. Its subjects and style changed greatly during her life, from her beginnings in North & South (1946), with its surrealist performances, its improbable figurative characters (like the hermit in "Chemin de Fer" or the lighthouse in "Seascape") and its air of fastidious detachment. By the time she published her last book, Geography III (1977), Bishop had exchanged her earlier poems' defensive strategy, which deflected the reader's attention away from the poet, for one which explicitly confronts the questions that had absorbed her all her life and shaped her writing from the start. During the thirty years that separated her first book from her last Bishop continued to

explore what seemed to her her curious relation to the world. She did so in a poetry whose ostensible subject, style and form altered and matured, and which became a sustained and eloquent articulation of what was, for Bishop, unsustainable - the idea of '<u>home, / wherever that may be</u>'. (C.P.94)

My study looks at Bishop's poetry as she published it book by book, tracing the changes in her writing as she found new language and landscapes within which to formulate her ideas. The poems are not as deliberately interrelated within each book as they are in, say, Robert Lowell's or John Berryman's work. They are directed by each book's title, but they do not form a distinct order within it. In order to do justice to the kind of poet that Bishop is, I have not tried to give a systematic account of everything she wrote. Instead I have chosen to foreground those poems, in each book, and those stories, which most vividly express her distinctiveness, and her changing stance towards her material. My reading of Bishop's writing is not biographical, but I have allowed her history to inform my analysis. I have used close readings of Bishop's poems and stories as a way of elucidating the vital characteristics of her particular talent, and so of characterizing what I believe to be the unique genius of her art. I want to look closely at the poems and stories in which that sense of tangible, but fragile, involvement with a world whose contours remain uncertain, yet paradoxically brittle is most fully developed.

I have organized my chapters around the <u>Complete Poems 1927-1979</u>, which was published two years after Bishop's death and contains each of her four books of poems in her own revised form. It also contains some of her early and uncollected work, and her translations, which on occasions

highlight her poetic development. Since her death fragments of unfinished poems and manuscripts of finished poems have become available, but these do not appreciably modify our sense of her achievement. At her death Bishop seemed to have left remarkably little unfinished business, and it is on her poetry as it stands, in its finished state, that she will be judged.[9] Bishop never collected her stories, though she was planning a collection when she died. Some of her stories have been posthumously collected in a Collected Prose (1984), and by looking closely at some of them it becomes clear how much Bishop's writing was of a piece, though she recognized that she could do different things in poetry and prose.

From infancy Bishop's life was characterized by a sense of displacement. It began with the loss of her father, followed all too soon by her mother. Paradoxically, her poetry, for all its obliqueness and reticence, was greatly enabled by a potentially disabling life. The solitude she experienced from early on and her profound childhood concentration on the texture of the physical world, which perhaps seemed more reliable than her emotional environment, gave her the grounding she needed for her art. Detail became company as her trauma compelled her to find what was missing in words and in the outside world.

Bishop's books of poems were published at quite long intervals. From an early interest in figurative characters in North & South (1946), like the Gentleman of Shalott and the Man-Moth, and in surreal and dream landscapes, in poems like "The Weed", "Paris, 7 A.M." and "Sleeping Standing Up", her attention has shifted when she publishes Poems: North & South - A Cold Spring nine years later. By then her eye is on more

plausible landscapes (as in "A Cold Spring", "Cape Breton" and "At the Fishhouses") and her surreal, figurative focus has given way to a search amidst the Northern landscape of her early childhood and in tortured love poems for coherent and cohering images on which to rest. It was 1965 before Bishop's next book appeared: Questions of Travel. Her residence in Brazil had provided her with an obvious focus to counterpoint against her early landscape of Nova Scotia, and she picked out this difference by dividing the book into two parts: "Brazil" and "Elsewhere" (they were originally divided by the story "In the Village"). Geography III, Bishop's last book of poems, came out in 1977, two years before her death. It contains some of her greatest poems. They are more overtly self-reflective as Bishop considers the idea of loss within a topographical framework. Although many of her earlier poems are concerned with the search for an ungraspable interior, with the physical landscape acting as a metaphor for the mental one, only in Geography III does Bishop allow herself to acknowledge her own losses so directly. Unlike Wordsworth, whom she resembled in writing about people whose lives may or may not sustain their loss, Bishop lost none of her imaginative capacity towards the end of her life. Though her body became increasingly tired, and she was beset by a series of illnesses and accidents, her last book of poems contains the vitality of someone who, though still asking the same questions, has discovered that after half a century of effort the art of losing is possible to master, at least in her poems.

During her life, Bishop said very little in interviews or reviews about her own work, or about the wider debates going on in American poetry. She was in different ways eager to acknowledge certain influences on her

work, but even these were sharply circumscribed, as I will show in this introduction. Unlike many of her contemporaries, she issued no manifestos, made no statements of a particular poetics and wrote no "private but public" letters about the state of the art. Asked whether she thought it was 'necessary for a poet to have a "myth"...to sustain his work', she replied: 'It all depends - some poets do, some don't. You must have something to sustain you, but perhaps you needn't be conscious of it.'[10] Her reply suggests that it is the people who believe they can explain their myth who are being evasive. But despite her characteristically evasive reply, Bishop did elaborate specific philosophical, aesthetic and autobiographical terms, around which she organized her writing. But she chose not to broadcast them. Instead she has forced her critics, like so many Rachels, to glean what they can from her work, while critics of her more forthcoming contemporaries carry off the bushels of the day.

Bishop was horrified by much literary criticism. She was not 'opposed to all close analysis and criticism' but she was 'opposed to making poetry monstrous or boring and proceeding to talk the very life out of it', loathing the kind of conversation, it seems, that made poetry more intimidating or difficult to read.[11] This helps to explain why she so rarely reviewed her contemporaries, except for her friends' work in private correspondence. She remarked late in her life: 'I find it impossible to draw conclusions or even to summarize. When I try to, I become foolishly bemused.'[12] Where W.B. Yeats had called for the balloon of his mind, which bellied and dragged in the wind, to be brought into its narrow shed, Bishop's critics must forever tug her mind out of its confinement, in the

effort to construct its different shapes.[13] By using her remarks, made in interviews, essays, reviews and correspondence we can establish a putative terrain within which Bishop perceived herself to be writing.

II

THE 'COMPLETELY AMERICAN POET'

In 1960, at a time when Bishop was writing some of her finest poems about Brazil, she declared that she was worried by 'all this accumulation of exotic or picturesque or charming detail'.[14] She was concerned that she might 'become a poet who can only write about South America, etc', and was anxious to find a way to continue living her expatriate life 'and yet be a New Englander-herring-choker-bluenoser at the same time '.[15] Bishop regarded herself as 'a completely American poet' and was upset by the idea that her lengthy absence from the United States would somehow modify her claim to that title.[16]

Her under- representation in collections of American poetry seems, at first, to bear out Bishop's fear that her expatriate life would marginalize her as an American poet. But her unwillingness to declare an allegiance to any particular school of poetry has been a more important factor. Some of her critics have included her in the Modernist canon (such as Jerome Mazzaro), while by others she has been seen as a formally conservative poet. She has been inadequately anthologized in collections of American

poetry, usually omitted from Modernist anthologies, and badly represented in catch-all collections like Geoffrey Moore's Penguin Book of American Verse. Helen Vendler's generous inclusion of Bishop in her highly contentious Faber collection of Contemporary American Poetry places Bishop firmly in a conservative school of American poetry (in which Vendler also includes Allan Ginsberg and Sylvia Plath); but by ignoring all Modernist or Objectivist poets, Vendler fails, or refuses, to acknowledge the influence of Modernism on Bishop's work, giving a falsely limited view.[17]

Bishop took in more of America during her life than many of her contemporaries. She was brought up in Nova Scotia, spent her early adult life in North America, and her middle (seventeen) years in Brazil. The borders of her art extend across two continents and three American countries. Although she was often diffident, even unwilling, to acknowledge her part in an American literary tradition, her writing is indebted to forbears like Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. For Bishop, the countries she wrote about played a vital part in forming the geography of her imagination.[18] Though her mappings of that geography are very different to those of her predecessors, their examples compose an ineluctable legacy for all their successors, Bishop included. Bishop was in the American grain, however far she tried to go against it.

Ever since Emerson published his essay on "The Poet" in 1844, Thoreau his Walden in 1854 and Whitman his "Song of Myself" a year later, American writers have explored the possibilities held out in Whitman's assertion (an echo of Emerson's) that 'The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.'[19] In his essay, Emerson declares that:

Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boats and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres. If I have not found that excellent combination of gifts in my countrymen which I seek, neither could I aid myself to fix the idea of the poet by reading now and then in Chalmer's collection of five centuries of English poets.[20]

Whitman and Thoreau, though both influenced by Emerson, offer two different, but overlapping, models for the American poet. In "Song of Myself" Whitman can declare that 'One world is aware and by far the largest to me, and that is myself', but his real excitement might be described as a kind of democratic voyeurism:

The little one sleeps in its cradle,
I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush
away flies with my hand.

The youngster and the red-faced girl turn aside up the bush hill,
I peeringly view them from the top.

The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom,
I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair, I note where the
pistol has fallen.

...

Arrests of criminals, slights, adulterous offers made,
acceptances, rejections with convex lips,
I mind them or the show or resonance of them - I come and I depart.[21]

Whitman's imperative is to see and to describe America in all its diversity, with himself as part of it. He called for 'the expression of the American poet...to be transcendant and new [and] to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic'.[22] He was the first American poet to write an epic of America, though he would not have regarded it as such. His call

for a new poetry has been taken up by other American poets who have also sought what William Carlos Williams called an 'American idiom' for their poetry and have created epic, sprawling poems which play with different forms and interweave very different narratives in their attempt to articulate 'the Myth of America'.[23] Hart Crane's The Bridge, William Carlos Williams's Paterson and Charles Olson's The Maximus Poems (and, more recently, Robert Pinsky's An Explanation of America) are examples of this aspiration towards American epic (which has its prose versions too, as in John Dos Passos's U.S.A.). These poets are vocal about their belief that American poetry must equal the American continent in scope, and must find a form - or formlessness - equal to the task. Williams declared that 'The poem alone focuses the world. It is practical and comprehensive and cannot be the accompaniment of other than an unfettered imagination...To limit is to kill it.'[24]

Bishop, however, never believed in this assertively masculine fantasy of mastering the continent. There were other ways of being in a place and without giving any ideological push, she gives a different account of belonging. She believed in restraint. She was clearly at odds from the start with the advocates of the American "inclusiveness" Dream, begun by Whitman. She was never interested in telling the whole story of America, nor in making her subiect out of whatever was at hand. She never approached America as an epic, and instead some of her best writing works through restriction, of subiect and form, making a conceit out of limitation.

Bishop's life and her writing reflected Emerson's creed of self-reliance, with its dictum that 'Every new mind is a new classification'.[25]

She never minded public opinion nor took the fashionable views, whether politically or poetically. She was as stubborn as either Emerson or Thoreau could have wished in sticking to her own views whatever. Her attitudes to women's writing provide a good instance of this. Bishop detested the distinctions made by male chauvinism and feminism between men's and women's writing. She made no distinctions for sex (I will come back to this later), and resented others doing so. Boundaries, for her, are shifters and the boundary between the sexes is difficult for her, or her critics, to figure out. When each mind was a new classification, why create additional and unnecessary ones which only detract from the important question, which is: Is this poet good?

Thoreau's Walden, his declaration of independence, proposes an ideal life as solitary as Whitman's is gregarious. His minimal shack by Walden lake is like a prototype for 'the idea of a house' which formed one of Bishop's life-long preoccupations.[26] In poems like "Chemin de Fer", "Jerónimo's House", and "The End of March" and stories like "The Sea & Its Shore" and "In Prison" Bishop builds her own series of shelters, less for living in than for thinking in, or thinking with. (C.Pr.172) It soon becomes apparent to Thoreau's reader that both his house and life as described in Walden represent a 'symbolic identity' more than an accurate transcription of the life he lived.[27] So for Bishop's reader it quickly becomes clear that her fantasy must remain just that. Her fantasy comes close to Thoreau's in her wish for solitude and a pared-down life.

In his conclusion to Walden Thoreau insists that the voyage around one's own mind is the most exciting version of the art of travel:

"Direct your eye sight inward, and you'll find
A thousand regions in your mind
Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be
Expert in home-cosmography."

What does Africa, - what does the West stand for? Is not our own interior white on the chart? black though it may prove, like the coast, when discovered. Is it the source of the Nile, or the Niger, or the Mississippi, we would find? Are these the problems which most concern mankind? Is Franklin the only man who is lost, that his wife should be so earnest to find him? Does Mr Grinnell know where he himself is? Be rather the Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clarke and Frobisher, of your own streams and oceans; explore your own higher latitudes, - with shiploads of preserved meats to support you, if they be necessary; and pile the empty cans sky-high for a sign. Were preserved meats invented to preserve meat merely? Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought. Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state, a hummock left by the ice.[28]

Emily Dickinson, for whose poetry Bishop seems to have had much respect but not much liking, also used the discovery of America as a metaphor for the mind:

Soto! Explore theyself!
Therein thyself shalt find
The "Undiscovered Continent" -
No Settler had the Mind.[29]

This conception is central to Bishop's work; she too believed that her inner topography was more vital than any new continents she could travel to. But there is a dialectic which informs her work, between her desire to map out this inner topography, and her need to evade it. One resolution she finds for this is to speak about the spiritual landscape of the mind through her description of physical landscapes (as clearly happens in "In the Village" and the poem "In the Waiting Room"). This conceit was used by Robert Frost, and deceived many of his readers, who failed to perceive

anything in his poems beyond graphic, comforting descriptions of rural New Hampshire. Bishop's readers, likewise, have sometimes been deceived into reading her poems simply as careful descriptions of the natural world, or travelogues.

Bishop need not have worried about losing her American poetic credentials amid the Brazilian profusion. She could no more escape them than she could escape her childhood. She was unwilling to say much about which American writers influenced her, acceding only that Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore influenced her early work and that Robert Lowell's writing was always of great importance to her. She alleged that she 'got more from Hopkins and the Metaphysical poets than [she] did from Stevens or Hart Crane'.[30] But in her ideas, not her phrasing, she is clearly a descendant of those American fathers Emerson and Thoreau.

Bishop named more English than American poets as influential, but I think this was partly due to her perverse inclination to avoid seeming simply in the American, or any other, grain. She always cited the sixteenth-century poets as amongst those important to her, and in particular, George Herbert, whose poetry she continued to esteem most highly from her teenage years to her death.[31] She frequently mentioned John Donne, as well as Ben Jonson, Thomas Crashaw and Thomas Campion. Bishop was 'extremely fond' of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, though, she said, 'I don't know if they've had an influence on me exactly'. Old nursery rhymes, with their emphatic metres, were influential, as her poem "Visits to St. Elizabeth's" shows, which is explicitly modeled on the nursery rhyme, "This is the house that

Jack built".[32] But Bishop's admiration for these English poets was not part of any Anglophile disposition, like T.S. Eliot's. She was scathing about contemporary English poetry when she visited the country in the 1960's, giving a swingeing critique in a letter to Lowell:

> Oh so many poets - all the names at the bottoms of columns in those reviews, or at the bottoms of reviews - and most of whose poetry I can't tell apart. And all I'm afraid not terribly interesting...There is a deadness there - what is it - hoplessness [sic]...That kind of defiant English rottenness - too strong a word - but a sort of piggish-ness! As if they've thrown off Victorianism, Georgeianism, Radicalism of the '30's - and now let's all give up together. Even Larkin's poetry is a bit too easily resigned to grimness don't you think? - Oh I am all for grimness and horrors of every sort - but you can't have them, either, by shortcuts - by just saying it.[33]

For a poet who disliked categorization, either of herself or of others, these are strong words. Dismayed at these English poets' stodge and lack of ambition, she was free as an American to be the grandiose arbiter she refused to be about American poetry. When asked about American poetry, she was more inclined to reply tantalizingly, as she did to George Starbuck in 1977:

> Int: What do you think about the state of American poetry right now?
> EB: Very good. We have lots of fine poets. Perhaps I'd better not mention any names, but I really admire and read with pleasure at least seven of my contemporaries.[34]

Although Bishop said so little about what it was to be the 'completely American poet' she felt, unambiguously, that she was one. In the notes to a talk on three American poets in 1968 or '69 she wrote, about Stevens:

> Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning" - about the life of the soul - without religion, to put it very crudely - finding its salvation in

> "intense sense-perception" - or poetry. This might apply, I think - crudely again - but roughly - to almost all contemporary U S [sic] poets - ...certainly anyone writing today has felt his influence in style and vocabulary[35]

Emerson is as much behind Bishop's analysis of Stevens, as Stevens is behind 'contemporary U S poets'. In his essay on "Nature" Emerson describes the concentration of self he experiences when walking alone and gazing at the natural world:

> Standing on the bare ground, - my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God...The poet, the painter, the sculptor, the musician, the architect, seek each to concentrate this radiance of the [natural] world on one point, and each in his several work to satisfy the love of beauty which stimulates him to produce. Thus is Art a nature passed through the alembic of man.[36]

In a poem called "Blight" Emerson laments the loss of an age of men whose 'clear eye-beams' could catch the footsteps of God through their concentration on the natural elements.[37] Stevens's secular version of such concentrated perception in "Sunday Morning" and Bishop's many versions in her writing, from "The Fish" onwards, are descended from Emerson's as part of one version of an American tradition.

III

THE TOURIST

American writers have long had strong opinions on the rights and wrongs of travel abroad. Emerson believed that 'The soul is no traveller' and that 'the wise man stays at home':

> Travelling is a fool's paradise. Our first journeys discover to us the indifference of places. At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty and lose my sadness. I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea and at last wake up in Naples, and there beside me is the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from...My giant goes with me wherever I go.
>
> But the rage of travelling is a symptom of a deeper unsoundness affecting the whole intellectual action. The intellect is vagabond, and our system of education fosters restlessness. Our minds travel when our bodies are forced to stay at home. We imitate; and what is imitation but the travelling of the mind? Our houses are built with foreign taste; our shelves are garnished with foreign ornaments; our opinions, our tastes, our faculties, lean, and follow the Past and the Distant.[38]

Advocating self-reliance as the true creed, Emerson saw travel of mind or body back to Europe as an act of unnecessary dependency. It marked a return to the old land, not a discovery of the new, and a desire to escape the consequences of one's own self.

In his essay on the poet/tourists from America since the Second World War Robert Von Hallberg discusses the questions that travel abroad has raised for Emerson's successors, including Bishop. He points to the traditional distrust of travel poems, citing W.H. Auden's remark that:

Travel is the most difficult subject...because it restricts freedom of invention while it offers the lure of journalism, of superficial "typewriter-thumping."...The danger is that the serious writer, whose work is not done until the meaning of new experience has been suggested, will, like a reporter, be too quickly satisfied[39]

Von Hallberg remarks that for American writers 'earnestness [rather than lightness] is more their game'. He suggests that American poets writing descriptive poems about foreign places, who are motivated only by the desire to describe but are 'writing in a tradition that disapproves of superficiality, sometimes have guilty consciences over such things', and rarely escape the 'wagging finger of Emerson'.[40]

Though he realizes that Bishop was 'a traveler and descriptive poet always', Von Hallberg does not recognize that vital detail which makes her "tourist" poems into something different from those of her contemporaries'. His discussion of "Questions of Travel", which he regarded as the best poem on this subject, ends with his own question:

If the Brazilian character shows in those local details, and if she has faith in the life of those details, why has she given up the physical proximity to American details? This question of travel goes unanswered at the end, which is what makes the poem deadly serious and finally sad.[41]

The reply to his question is that Bishop found herself to be that rare thing, though one familiar to so many American writers: a tourist, or stranger, in her own land.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, Bishop's characters often exist on the border between two continents, or two landscapes, like

her sandpiper. They offer refractions of what Bishop saw to be her own curious situation. She never had the apparent confidence that her fellow American poets had, from Emerson and Whitman to Frost, Williams, Olson, Moore and Lowell, that she belonged to North America, and conversely, that North America belonged to her. This awareness plays through her life and her writing; for her, being an American Abroad was what she had always been, and her expatriate life in Brazil codified the estrangement she always felt into the tourist's natural sense of dislocation. At least in Brazil she need not expect, or be expected, to feel at home. What was a temporary state for other American poets travelling abroad was permanent for Bishop and accounts for what Von Hallberg identifies as 'deadly serious and finally sad' in poems like "Questions of Travel".[42] Paradoxically, although she felt herself to be a 'completely American poet', she never felt at home in America, or anywhere else.

IV

THE 'POETRESS'

In a letter to Lowell Bishop joked about the problem of title for a woman poet:

> "Woman" poet - no - what I like to be called now is poetress. I was at a friend's house here the other day and he introduced me to a Brazilian lady - he murmured to her in Portugese [sic] that this was the American poet, etc. and the lady, determined to show off her English, shook my hand enthusiastically and said, "You are the famous

> American poetress?" So I allowed I was. I think it's a nice mixture of poet and mistress...[43]

All her life Bishop resented being praised as a woman poet. She soon came up against sexual prejudice when she started publishing poems in the 1930's, and recalls how quickly she set her face against it:

> One gets so used, very young, to being "put down" that if you have normal intelligence and have any sense of humour you very early develop a tough, ironic attitude. You just try to get so you don't even notice being "put down."
>
> Most of my writing life I've been lucky about reviews. But at the very end they often say "The best poetry by a woman in this decade, or year, or month." Well, what's that worth? You know? But you get used to it, even expect it, and are amused by it.[44]

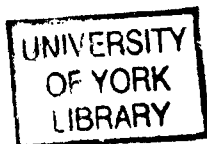
Bishop always considered herself to be a 'strong feminist'.[45] Since her college days she had felt it to be 'a lot of nonsense, separating the sexes [and she supposed that] this feeling came from feminist principles, perhaps stronger than [she] was aware of'.[46] She refused to allow her work to be ghettoized by being published in any "women only" anthologies, even while she was at college, believing that this perpetuated the division of the sexes, with women being seen as the second class. Having always fought for her right to equality, particularly as a poet, Bishop was bemused to find her principled non-segregation labelled as reactionary by other feminists in the 1960's and '70's.

During Bishop's life, the situation of women in America changed drastically. In 1920, when she was nine years old, women's suffrage was achieved and by the time she was sixty women had won the right to birth control, equal wages, political office, and so on. However, her experience

of these important changes, as a member of the oppressed and newly-liberated sex, was modified in important ways. She had been left an annuity by her father, who died when she was a baby, which left her economically independent. Apart from very brief stints in jobs after leaving college, she managed to live off it, supplementing it with money she earned through writing. So she never did the same work as a man, but for less money, and never found her sex to be a bar to advancement. She suffered reviews which insisted on mentioning her sex, and which placed her beside other women poets rather than in a broader canon of American poetry, but these never hindered her publication, and she received as many prizes and awards as any of her male contemporaries. Living in Brazil for sixteen years limited her experience of North American sexual prejudice. Though Brazilian women were no better off than those in the United States, Bishop was a foreigner there, living with a highly educated, aristocratic woman from a liberal-minded family. She was not subject to the male hegemony which is commonplace in Brazil and she never seems to have suffered from any prejudice directed at her for her lesbianism.

Notes that Bishop made for reviews in 1970 manifest both her ignorance and intolerance of the plight of many (heterosexual) women. As an adult she had never been economically dependant on a man, nor lived within a patriarchal household. Women's poetry concerned with the domestic, or the plight of being a "home-maker", bored her:

> I am sick of "domesticity" - men don't constantly write about shaving, having to go to work, whatever it is men do all day long - they go out and take walks, mostly, in their poems, and I wish women would, too - ...Male poets often seem to be taking walks when they write poems. A wild generalisation...Women, unfortunately, seem to stay at home a lot, to write theirs. There is no reason why the home, house,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> apartment, or furnished room, can't produce good poems, but almost all women poets seem to fall occasionally into the "Order is a lovely thing" Anna-Hemspetad-Branch category, and one wishes they wouldn't. Sylvia Plath avoided this when she wrote about babies, ovens, etc. - but sometimes one extreme is almost as bad as the other.[47]

These remarks demonstrate Bishop's ambivalence about any definition of women's poetry, whether it be poetry of protest or of passivity. For someone who 'didn't believe in propaganda in poetry [because] it rarely worked', much of the poetry which came out of the feminist movement of the 1960's and '70's must have seemed banal.[48] Though Bishop knew and liked at least one lesbian feminist poet of that period, Adrienne Rich, I have found no hint of what she thought of Rich's, or any other feminist's, poetry during that time. For herself, Bishop wanted to be thought of not as a woman poet, but simply as a poet. She would, she said 'rather be called "the 16th poet" with no reference to my sex, than one of 4 women - even if the other 3 are pretty good...'[49]

Feminist criticism has been slow to appropriate Bishop for its canon. Even after Adrienne Rich's interesting but slight piece on Bishop in 1983, "The Eye of the Outsider", which ends with an invitation to lesbian / feminist critics to start writing about her, they have been slow to take up the challenge. The reasons are clear. Her poetry does not lend itself to definition; many critics have found it very hard to pin down what Bishop's poems are about, and feminist critics are no different. They have had an easier time with Sylvia Plath and even Edna St-Vincent Millay than they have with Bishop. Her resistance to and distrust of ideological identification may also help to account for the degree to which she has been

ignored by critics otherwise intent upon affirming women's writing. Rich ends her essay by explaining that :

> it is only now, with a decade of feminist and lesbian poetry and criticism behind us and with the publication of these Complete Poems, that we can read her as part of a female and lesbian tradition rather than simply as one of the few and "exceptional" women admitted to the male canon...It is important to me to know that, through most of her life, Bishop was critically and consciously trying to explore marginality, power and powerlessness, often in poetry of great beauty and sensuousness. That not all these poems are fully realized or satisfying simply means that the living who care that art should embody these questions have still more work to do.[50]

It is not clear whether Rich is calling for today's lesbian poets to be more explicit than Bishop, or whether it is a call to lesbian critics to draw out what she would describe as Bishop's lesbian self from her poetry. At any rate, she has claimed Bishop as one of her own, in a way that Bishop would have detested.

Rich's argument is 'concerned with [Bishop's] experience of outsiderhood, closely - though not exclusively - linked with the essential outsiderhood of a lesbian identity; and with how the outsider's eye enables Bishop to perceive other kinds of outsiders and to identify, or try to identify, with them'.[51] But her argument provides a partial and ultimately unsatisfactory reading of Bishop's poems, because it makes them all too simple. Reading them only as examples of a silenced lesbian identity or of outsiderhood diminishes them just as much as describing them as 'matters of personal, strange, but mild and affectionate brooding over what she has seen', or poems of 'clear-eyed observation, absolute and lovely simplicity, and a gentle flickering humor ', or as 'calm, but often beautiful and

witty, and good to be with'.[52] She did her best to avoid single definitions, whether of agonized outsiderhood, or of graceful femininity.

Bishop's sex (as a female) and her sexuality (as a lesbian) are obviously important to her work; they inform and influence her expression throughout her life. But her lesbianism does not provide an organizing motif around which we can fit her writing, any more than her femaleness. She had no sense of collective oppression and would have found ludicrous the notion that her sex or her sexual preferences should determine either her political attitudes or her writing. Yet none of the critics above seem able to look beyond her gender. To Rich, as well as to Alvarez, Davison or Fuller, she is constrained by her sex, despite her life-long denial of exactly that distinction. She wanted to be taken on her own terms without telling anybody what those terms were.

By the time Bishop went to college, in 1929, lesbianism was established as a dirty word, and the last breath of innocence in women's love for one another had expired. Women's colleges, it was thought:

> took women out of the home and kept them out by virtue of the feminist indoctrination they gave to their students. In those women's colleges, according to some writers, a female is led to homosexuality because she is taught to engage in athletics, encouraged "to masculine ways of feeling, dress and sentimentalisms," and permitted to "muscularize her mind beyond the harmonious vigor to make her man's companion."...Both fiction and nonfiction confirmed that women graduate from women's colleges "into life long homosexuality."[53]

The time of "Boston marriages" was over, and Bishop's silence about her own sexuality and her lack of interest in sexual politics were positions taken

in the face of increasing candour from many lesbians and the swell of a women's movement for equal rights.

Mary McCarthy makes it very plain in <u>The Group</u> that lesbianism had a proper name in Bishop's youth. The discussion of such behaviour was no longer only the province of the sexologists, but had entered the public domain:

> Every now and then [the Baroness] would go over and say something to Lakey; they heard her call her "Darling" with a trilled <u>r</u>. It was Kay who caught on first. Lakey had become a Lesbian. This woman was her man.[54]

The Vassar-graduated young women who make this discovery seem less surprised than put out by the sexual behaviour with which their friend has returned from Europe. But they still regard the relationship as 'perverted', and wish their friend's new companion 'could have finished with a tail, like a mermaid!' (- or like a man!).[55] McCarthy's satire on the elite Vassar graduates of the thirties, of whom she was one, only partly conceals the more general prejudice, as strong now as it was then. Lesbianism, like Fascism, Communism and finally the Second World War, was an import from the corrupt Old World of Europe, and could not be truly American. Bishop however was covert about her lovers, but not because she was ashamed. Had her lovers been mainly men, I doubt she would have been any less secretive.

She would probably have read William Carlos Williams's story, published in 1932, in which he described lesbianism as 'the knife of the times'.[56] Although she never spoke about her lesbianism in interview or

essay, from her early adulthood authorities like Havelock Ellis, Krafft-Ebing, and, most importantly, Sigmund Freud, had made it quite clear that desires like hers were perverted and socially dangerous. There was virtually no affirmative literature for lesbians' experiences until the feminist revolution in the 1960's, and even then many lesbians found it hard to dispel the belief that their behaviour was unnatural. Bishop gave no sign that she thought herself unnatural, but neither was she interested in writing heroic poems about lesbian love. Perhaps because it was still stigmatized she was freed not to write about her lesbianism. This contrasts with a poet like Rich, who only discovered her lesbian identity in 1970 and who has bowed to the pressure for polemic which faces her as an overtly lesbian poet. Rich demands pity and outrage in her poems, on her own and many other's behalf:

> They cán rule the world while they can persuade us
> our pain belongs in some order.
> Is death by famine worse than death by suicide,
> than a life of famine and suicide, if a black lesbian dies,
> if a white prostitute dies, if a woman genius
> starves herself to feed others,
> self-hatred battening on her body?
> Something that kills us or leaves us half-alive
> is raging under the name of an "act of god"
> in Chad, in Niger, in the Upper Volta -
> yes, that male god that acts on us and on our children,
> that male State that acts on us and on our children[57]

She assumes a collective voice, antithetical to Bishop's. Bishop asks pity of no one, nor do her poems ever speak on behalf of a collective identity.

During an interview George Starbuck asked Bishop about her poem "Filling Station" which had been 'used as a feminist tract':

GS: [Your poem] did seem a nice wry study of the "woman's touch."
EB: But no woman appears in it at all.
GS: But the pot, the flowers, the...
EB: Crocheted doily, yes.
GS: The woman who is "not there," she's certainly an essential subject of the poem.
EB: I never saw the woman, actually. We knew the men there...
GS But the evidence is...
EB: I never...Isn't it strange? I certainly didn't feel sorry for whoever crocheted that thing! Isn't that strange?[58]

Bishop's replies are like a series of ripostes. Her deliberately literal understanding of Starbuck's remarks perfectly demonstrates her intolerance of that kind of criticism.

Bishop appeared to resist sexual or explicitly ideological identification, unlike so many of her female contemporaries. Her poems are engaged with other problems of differentiation. Male rapacity and female subjugation rarely figure in her work, and she is unusual in this. Although writing during a century of extraordinary change for women, she remains very quiet on the subject. Unlike such important American contemporaries as Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, she makes very few remarks about what it is to be a woman writing in a patriarchal world. She is determinedly not interested in the question, perhaps fearful that any kind of alliance is also compliance.

Plath and Sexton are outraged by the world in which they write. Plath never considered herself to be a feminist (perhaps partly because she died before feminism became the acceptable term for what she felt). But even she was more overtly concerned with the idea and the difficulty of being a woman than Bishop ever was. In her extraordinary, shifting drama of self-

representation in her poetry, with its statues, mannikins, maenads, mothers and witches, she is always self-obsessed and self-dramatizing, endlessly carving new graven images of herself. Bishop, who never dramatized herself, but rather tried to hide herself behind other figures, found Plath's death 'a tragic loss...although' she declared, 'I can scarcely bear to read her poems through, they are so agonized'.[59] Plath makes her poems out of violence against her own vulnerability, and out of a self-exposure that Bishop's poems carefully guard against.

Plath read Bishop 'with great admiration. Her fine originality, [she found] always surprising, never rigid, flowing'.[60] Although Bishop admired what Plath was able to do 'when she wrote about babies, ovens, etc.', Plath's confrontational, exclamatory rhetoric is exactly opposed to Bishop's language.[61] Bishop rarely writes about her own tragic losses, and only does so elliptically (in the story "In the Village" and poems like "Sestina" and "One Art"). Contrast this with Plath's poems about the death of her father, her own "craziness", and her wish to die. Bishop allows her memory of her mother's madness to find its voice only in the echo of a scream which frames her story "In the Village". And in "Sestina" the child's loss - of her parents? - is unspoken, expressed instead in the picture she draws:

> With crayons the child draws a rigid house
> and a winding pathway. Then the child
> puts in a man with buttons like tears
> and shows it proudly to the grandmother.(C.P.123)

Plath, by contrast, hurls her language furiously against the memory of her dead father in a poem like "Daddy".

Bishop's remarks about confessional poetry sum up her unease about what Plath and others were doing:

> Now the idea is that we live in a horrible and terrifying world, and the worst moments of horrible and terrifying lives are an allegory of the world...The tendency is to overdo the morbidity. You just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves.[62]

She felt she knew 'too much about' a poet like Anne Sexton from her poems even though she liked 'some of her really mad ones...those that sound as though she'd written them all at once'.[63] To Sexton Bishop's poetry seemed 'to have beautiful ordered clarity...[and to shock her] into being more alive'.[64] However Bishop established this clarity and order at great cost, to hide precisely what Sexton would have broadcasted.

Although Bishop's mother was alive and in a mental hospital for nearly twenty years of her daughter's life (from 1916 to 1934), Bishop never published a poem about her. Her poem about Ezra Pound, "Visits to St. Elizabeths" (first published in 1957), is the only one to enter an asylum; it is as close as she ever comes to this part of her own history:

> This is the house of Bedlam.
>
> This is the man
> that lies in the house of Bedlam.
>
> This is the time of the tragic man
> that lies in the house of Bedlam. (C.P.133) [65]

Sexton's poem "Ringing the Bells" (published in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, 1960) uses the same nursery rhyme form (surely no coincidence) - "This is the House that Jack Built" - but its subject is herself and her own craziness:

> And this is the way they ring
> the bells in Bedlam
> and this is the bell-lady
> who comes each Tuesday morning
> to give us a music lesson
> and because the attendants make you go
> and because we mind by instinct,
> like bees caught in the wrong hive,
> we are the circle of the crazy ladies
> who sit in the lounge of the mental house...[66]

Insofar as Sexton's poem must have been a deliberate echo of Bishop's, and, behind that, of the nursery rhyme, it acts as a rejoinder to the older poet's 'ordered clarity'.[67] Sexton's belief, for all her elegant praise of Bishop, must have been that her crudely stylized, brutally allegorical writing represented her experiences more powerfully than Bishop's careful artifice ever could. Confessional poetry became a trend in the late 1950's and '60's. It suited a poet like Sexton very well, with her yearning to be heard and to tell all. She wanted to violate the taboo cultural acts and found various ways of doing so, like taking the lid off insanity (To Bedlam and Part Way Back) or subverting the supposed innocence of traditional fairytales (Transformations). Her poetry, like both Plath's and Rich's, was often critically directed against the prevailing cultural assumptions about women (as in "Self in 1958" and "Her Kind"). Bishop was not interested in this kind of subject.

Compared to the fury experienced by Rich, Plath and Sexton Bishop seems calm in her poems. There are no tirades and few tears, and there is very little evident perplexity. The child's house in "Sestina" is an emblem for what she does with her histrionics, forming them into expressive but controlled poetic structures which only hint at their chaotic source. Her successors often write their poems in the female first person, as if they themselves might be speaking. But Bishop's, extraordinarily, almost never are. It is one of the most signal differences between her and her female contemporaries: she never uses that indicator.

Bishop's abstemiousness may have been fed by Marianne Moore's rigorous exclusion of any indicators of gender in her poems (her first person need never be a woman). But unlike Moore, Bishop conveys a strong sense of self-reference in her poems, and they are often concerned with the human situation. Moore makes up encyclopaedic concatenations, creating poems out of newspaper reports, scientific studies, photographs, odd remarks, dictionary defininitions - anything with an authority beyond her own. Bishop is interested in human vectors, not outside authorities, but virtually never identifies them with herself too keenly.

V

QUESTIONS OF RECOGNITION

Bishop's published body of work is small in bulk for a lifetime of writing. It comprises a Complete Poems of 270 pages, including early work and translations, and a Collected Prose (published after Bishop's death), containing seventeen stories. But this paucity does not account for the small amount of criticism that has been devoted to her.[68] Much of her most generous criticism has come from an astonishing range of other poets, such as Marianne Moore, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, John Ashbery, James Merrill, David Kalstone, Octavio Paz, Anne Stevenson, James Tate, Robert Duncan, Richard Wilbur, Adrienne Rich, Eavan Boland, Seamus Heaney, Sandra McPherson, Andrew Motion, Robert Pinsky and J.D. McClatchy. Ashbery described her as a 'writer's writer's writer', and acknowledged the somewhat arch audacity of his compliment: it implies, he said, 'that her writing has sophistication - that somehow unfortunate state of felicity in whose toils most of us wallow from time to time even as we struggle to cast them off '.[69] This somewhat double-edged praise ascribes to Bishop the urge towards sophistication and the effort to escape it that we might attribute to Ashbery's own work. It demonstrates a recurring feature of other poets' praise very well, namely, that they find in her poems the very features they aspire to themselves, amongst them perhaps a way of dealing with hysteria, but in a form that is curiously inimitable.

Although Bishop acknowledged different influences, her work declares no forthright allegiances. Feminist critics have made little purchase upon

her as yet, and other critics have also had difficulty in trying to define the peculiar character of her work. She does not make philosophical pronouncements and has often left critics at something of a loss in their search for whatever it is that motivates her writing. As a result she has often been described by that pejorative phrase, "a descriptive poet". Martin Dodsworth, Christopher Ricks and Howard Moss, for example, have all used this peg, as a way of praising, not derogating, the poet:

> Insight [Moss has declared] is not this poet's thing; the world revealed is everything, its immediacy, its exactitude, but not necessarily its significance.[70]

Charles Tomlinson uses one of Bishop's own phrases, from her poem "Brazil, January 1, 1502", to make exactly the metaphor that she refrains from:

> Setting often remains something of a hanging fabric, an embroidery for Miss Bishop, reality retreating behind it. She ask s the big questions... and gives resolutely minor answers while detailing the look and feel of the the fabric[71]

Tomlinson is aware that something more is going on, but he seems infuriated by what he perceives to be Bishop's refusal to couch her debate with the world except in terms of its geography and physical texture. Paradoxically, he says, Bishop's poems are enigmatic despite their engagement with a real world, really seen. But the word "enigmatic", which might imply vague suggestiveness, is unfaithful to the vigorous, peculiar and specific world which emerges within Bishop's work.

One reason it has been hard to place Bishop is that she did not have an articulated poetics. One of the most sustained insights we have into how she thought about art comes in a letter she wrote to Anne Stevenson, (who wrote the first book about Bishop):

> There is no "split" [between the role of consciousnes and subconsciousness in art]. 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.[72]

She might almost be talking about her own undertaking, not the lonely young man's. Her art is built out of 'endless, heroic observations', making up what Ashbery referred to as the '"thingness"' of her work.[73] She examines the world through its particulars and for the characters in her poems what she sees is all there is. Though the homes or landscapes are often described as makeshift or temporary, they engross all the attention of Bishop's protagonists, as though nothing beyond the poem's locus exists. In "Jerónimo's House", published in Bishop's first book of poems, North & South, Jerónimo celebrates his house 'of perishable / clapboards' as his 'fairy palace', his 'love-nest'. The poem is threaded together with a description of the intricate arrangement of his minimal affairs, as though nothing else existed for him in the world. But then, in the final lines, the engrossed reader is suddenly reminded of the fragility of this home:

I take these things,
    not much more, from
my shelter from
    the hurricane. (C.P.34)

"The Moose", which was published over thirty years later in Geography III, Bishop's last book of poems, is a very different poem, but here too the protagonist is caught up in a revery, during a long bus journey. Listening to an old couple discuss their affairs the protagonist is reminded of her own grandparents and how they talked. For a moment, that recollected scene is more vivid than the bus journey itself, as the overheard and the recollected images become entangled in her mind:

Talking the way they talked
in the old featherbed,
peacefully, on and on,
dim lamplight in the hall,
down in the kitchen, the dog
tucked in her shawl.

Now, it's all right now
even to fall asleep
just as on all those nights.
—Suddenly the bus driver
stops with a jolt,
turns off his lights. (C.P.172)

For a moment, only, the protagonist is entirely elsewhere, like Bishop's young Darwin, suddenly relaxed and sinking giddily away before she is brought back to heroic observation by the bus's jolt to a stop. In her finest poems Bishop achieves what she so admired in Darwin: 'a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration'.[74]

Like Darwin, the implications of how Bishop sees around her go beyond the simple objects of her eye. She recognizes this when she talks of the 'peripheral vision' achieved in works of art and dreams. She seems tantalized not only by the elusive face of dreams but also by that of art, which can touch upon the 'enormously important' without ever catching it 'full-face'. This has tantalized many of her own critics just as much, Tomlinson among them, who feel that she must be doing more than describing the scenery, but cannot decide quite what. Although I am interested in what I think Bishop might be saying beyond the 'hanging fabric', I am more interested in how she erects these screens and in what the 'fabric' itself tells us. Bishop describes landscapes whose features allude to their 'interior', as she calls it in "Arrival at Santos", but which never quite allow one in to it. Her protagonists seek out the interior by mapping the exterior. The act of mapping provides a bulwark against the risk that any good observer runs - that what is seen will become not a picture, but a heap of fragmented images out of which no sense can be made, and within which there is no coherence, as one of the voices in "The Monument" observes. The observation of the visible world becomes both a way in to the significance of it all, but also a defence against what 'it all' might be. Bishop's poems often have a voyeuristic quality, as though voyeurism were a safer way of seeing what usually remains hidden, but without being implicated in the consequences of what one finds.

Although many critics have found it hard to say how Bishop's poetry worked, or why her poems were so good, Robert Lowell recognized Bishop's brilliance at once. He knew at first hand how difficult it was to achieve

the work of that perfectly contrived utterance. He ends one of his poems to Bishop:

> Do
> you still hang your words in air, ten years
> unfinished, glued to your notice board, with gaps
> or empties for the unimaginable phrase -
> unerring Muse who makes the casual perfect?[75]

This suspension meant that it took her years to finish some poems. She thought that "The Moose", for example, had taken her at least twenty years to finish because she 'could never seem to get the middle part, to get from one place to the other'.[76] But Lowell's words also recognize the kind of poetry she wrote. She noticed things and gathered the details into her poems, just as she stuck fragments she had written onto her noticeboard. And the noticeboard with its 'gaps / or empties' also becomes an implicit metaphor for the elision we often sense in her poems and stories. There seem to be many unspeakable, rather than unimaginable, phrases in Bishop's mind, in contrast with her friend Lowell.

Bishop's restrained "casual perfection" could not be further from Lowell's continually revised and constantly enlarged poetry. Their friendship was a paradoxical relationship between poetic opposites. During a correspondence which lasted over thirty years they frequently exchanged drafts of their poems, each offering fulsome criticism of the other. But they remained very different poets, despite their reciprocated and acknowledged debt to one another's influence. Lowell's work was grandly schematic, historical and sprawling. It was written in and about the public realm, naming famous people, buildings, ceremonies, places and so on. He

wrote about the familiar Boston landmarks in poems like "For the Union Dead" and celebrated the great, both good and bad, all through his life, but perhaps most sustainedly in his book History. The range of his attention stretched from Alexander the Great to Lincoln to Stalin to Kennedy and from Dante to Thoreau and Hawthorne, to Bishop herself.

It is much harder to pin down Bishop's recognitions. Like Emerson and Thoreau, her art reflects a belief that anywhere can be the centre of it all. She avoided subiects which had public recognition or definition, the stuff that Lowell loved to celebrate. Instead she wrote about anonymous cities in poems like "The Man-Moth" and "Night City" and described landscapes full of specificity but which are often left unlocated, as in poems like "The Bight", "Twelfth Morning; or what You Will" and "Little Exercise". The places she does identify, such as the beach at Duxbury in "The End of March" or a village she lived in as a child in "Poem", are made important through her personal recognition; they carry no load of public recognition as Lowell's so often do. She wrote in that American tradition already established in the work of Sarah Orne Jewett, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, even Hemingway, about 'obscure destinies'.[77] Her characters are often obscure, local, vernacular figures, like the Cuban naive artist Gregorio Valdes, or her great-uncle who was an unknown Royal Academy painter, or Ruy, the poor, shy poet from Belem in her story "A Trip to Vigia". The people to whom she pays tribute are sometimes named, but they are unknown beyond the bounds of the poem itself: there is Faustina the black servant, Jerónimo in his fragile house, Manuelzinho the tenant farmer in Brazil, Miss Breen the retired police lieutenant from New York.

Lowell spared neither names nor details in his poetry. He not only wrote about already well-known figures, but made the names within his own family public, even famous, through his poetry. Bishop was very impressed with his autobiographical Life Studies and wrote for its jacket blurb:

> In these poems, heart-breaking, shocking, grotesque and gentle, the unhesitant attack, the imagery and construction, are as brilliant as ever, but the mood is nostalgic and the meter is refined...Somehow or other, by fair means or foul, and in the middle of our worst century so far, we have produced a magnificent poet.[78]

But although she was never impersonal in the way that, for example, Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore were (two poets she greatly admired), neither did she permit herself to handle her own life as Lowell did his. She always distrusted the public domain, avoiding it as far as possible in her life and her work. She was more interested in people who were outside it. She found Lowell's description of his own breakdowns thrilling though painful to read, but came to epistolary blows with him when he sent her the drafts for his book of poems The Dolphin. The book uses Elizabeth Hardwick's letters, written during the breakup of her marriage to Lowell, and Bishop wrote to Lowell in the strongest terms asking him to reconsider its publication. He had taken his license too far for her fastidious discretion.

Despite their powerful differences, particularly over what of their own lives they were prepared to publish in a poem, Bishop sometimes shares with Lowell a rhythmic formality within a free verse form which is allied with a strangely rhetorical informality of utterance. Lowell's description of Bishop as an 'unerring Muse who makes the casual perfect' captures the

poise he so admired in her poems and which he knew came only through hard, frequently agonizing, labour.[79] Lowell often made his revision process explicit, publishing successive versions of the same poem in different books. Bishop kept hidden this sense of process, which Lowell had seen on her noticeboard, and once she had published a poem she rarely changed a word.

We do not find that sense of the mediating, authoritative poet as strongly in Bishop's poems as we do in the poems of Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens or Robert Lowell. Unlike Moore she is not an exemplarist, and she is exhibitory rather than expository; she has none of Stevens's solemn philosophy; and, unlike Lowell, she is unwilling to expose that subject in which she is the undisputed mistress: the fabric of her own history. We might say that Bishop's art occupies a strange middle ground, somewhere between the stately impersonality of Marianne Moore and the autobiographical rhetoric of Robert Lowell. Bishop's poems do emerge as studies out of her life, though they are not studies _of_ it. They reflect some of the preoccupations which recur in her life, and we can see the life _in_ the poems.

Bishop offers almost no evidence in her poems of the nature of her own life. One of the striking things about her work is the degree to which her poems and stories are autonomous, creating self-sufficient worlds. Compared to Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell Bishop's art has a resistant quasi-impersonality. Both Plath's and Lowell's lives become vivid through their poems. Unlike Bishop's, theirs engage us with their lives all the time. But our recognition of Bishop is not on biographical lines at all, though her poems and stories often leave the reader with a sense of roots, origins and analogies which suggest a very original and shaping artist. Her description

of Gregorio Valdes's pictures, with their 'peculiar and captivating freshness, flatness, and remoteness' reminds us of her own poems and her effort to describe the fabric and not what might lie behind it. When she describes the problem and thrill of his originality, she might be one of her own critics:

> surely anything that is impossible for others to achieve by effort, that is dangerous to imitate, and yet, like natural virtue, must be both admired and imitated, always remains mysterious. (C.Pr.58,59)

Bishop works hard to prevent her reader from making facile equations between the life of the poet and the life of the poems. She almost always avoids the first person when it is clearly self-representative and she rarely makes her poems or stories specific to her own life, though she often bases them on what she has seen. But in researching the life of the poet, I found myself increasingly confronted not only with the shield that Bishop placed between her biography and her writing, but also with the connection between them. In the course of my quest to define Bishop's art, I became alive to the living analogies between the writing and the disguised life within it, even while Bishop so carefully focusses her reader's attention away from her own biography. The connection is constructed out of the marginalized figures peopling her writing, such as Edwin Boomer living in a hut on the beach, the hermit in "Chemin de Fer", the "Prodigal" in his pig sty, the burglar of Babylon on the Rio hillside and Crusoe returned to England. The places she describes are often provisional, like Jerónimo's house, or the boat in which someone is sleeping in "Little Exercise", and her characters are often situated on the

edge of an unknown realm, as in "Sleeping on the Ceiling", "At the Fishhouses" and "In the Waiting Room".

Our difficulty in recognizing and placing Bishop may have to do with her own problems of recognition. She was always wary of any language of placing and importance and opted for a style of conceptual abstemiousness both in her art and in criticism. In her life she always regarded herself as a stranger in a foreign land and her homes, like those of many of her characters, were always provisional. Her early history and itinerant, expatriate life, left her with a difficult internal legacy as well as shaping the estranged intensity with which she looked at the external world. In drawing attention to the relationship between Bishop's poetry and her life as I have been doing, there is a danger of reducing the poetry, for all its apparent engagement in the outside world and the lives of other people, to no more than a disguised expression of her own biography. In fact her poetry is distinguished by a self-effacing fascination with other people's incongruous constructions of the world, and this is one of the things for which we celebrate it. At the same time Bishop's sense of being 'a sort of a guest' informs her sense of the ways in which we are <u>all</u>, to some degree, guests in the world - the natural world and that of other people - and her vision of how people make themselves at home there.

However much Bishop's poetry developed and the subjects of her poems changed, she came back to the same questions. The first asked: Where is home? The answer, which Bishop enacted in her poems, was always that it is to be found in the imaginative appropriation of any place. But to hold onto one's home - that is where the difficulty lies. To do that one must sustain

the act of imagination, and when that imagination fails, or the imaginer becomes bored, as Bishop did, then that home becomes just another part of the foreign land in which we live.

The second question Bishop returns to in her writing is what, if anything, lies beyond the visible fabric of the world? And, moreover, can it be caught in the writer's gaze? There is a sense in which Bishop is always a Wordsworthian poet, committed on the one hand to the most ordinary of worlds and words, and on the other to the possibilities of extraordinary revelation they might hold. Again and again Bishop describes a tangible world whose frail, shaky, fragmented structures continually threaten to crumble and to expose the hidden interior, only otherwise glimpsed. These two questions are linked in Bishop's effort to keep at bay the chaos and dissolution she felt was always so close at hand, and they enabled her to set up in her art the lineaments of what she felt was her own life-long exclusion and loss.

Both Bishop and her friend Robert Lowell made their art out of what they could not escape. But whereas Lowell could not escape his family and its history, and even his personal implication in American and world history, Bishop's predicament was different. She could not escape her sense of exclusion from the family, and this ordered the world she saw. By contrast with Lowell's grand sense of autocratic and controlling figures, including his mother, she was constrained throughout her life to describe the world as a multiplicity of fragments. Bishop's figures are all unknowns, playing negligible minor parts on local stages by contrast with Lowell's parade of notables. They exist in landscapes which often seem

about to disintegrate, and which are held together as much by conviction (Bishop's or her character's?) as by concretion. The comparison she made of herself to a sandpiper, which I quote at the start of this Introduction, picking up disparate fragments of a landscape and inspecting them characterizes her own peculiar poetic stance towards the world. Such careful attention was, she said, her attempt to defend herself from intolerable pain.[80]

PART ONE

LIFE STUDY.

PLATE 2: Bishop, studio portrait

The past
at least
is polite:
it keeps out of sight.[1]

I

EARLY YEARS

The early drafts of one of Robert Lowell's poems about Elizabeth Bishop give us a memory of her early life that Bishop herself never spoke of, or only to her closest friends - her mother's attempt, whether real or imaginary, to kill her. This draft of the poem is titled "Soliloquy", and is spoken by Bishop:

> My uncertain fingers floated to my lip,
> I kissed them to you, and our fellowship
> Tore free from its encroachment like a star;
> Starlike the eagle on my locket watch,
> Mother's sole heirloom. I hear her, "All I want
> To do is kill you!" I, a child of four;
> She, early American and militant.
>
> Wholly Atlantic, though half fugitive
> From Nova Scotia, I have tried to live
> Our country's egotistical sublime.
> I raised the great sail, and there came a time
> Unanchored and unmoored to any hope
> My total memory lashed me fast with rope;
> The four bad Georges ruled my horoscope.[2]

Lowell has his own way with Bishop's history in these drafts of what would finally become the second of the "Four Poems for Elizabeth Bishop". He describes a figure who is curiously 'fugitive', struggling both to contain and to flee her sense of abandonment. He makes her say things that she

always refused to say in her own poems. His use of rangy, expansive lines, of vigorous and confessional images, and of the stuff of personal history, has a dialectical relationship to Bishop's own poems. Where Lowell makes a study of his life in his poems, Bishop's poems, with their careful metre and oblique, suppressed passions, often read as if at one remove from their writer. Whereas Lowell plays up the drama in his poems, Bishop plays it down; where the accent falls upon the death, tirade, or kiss in his poems, in Bishop's poems it is more often on the awkward gestures which surround a dead person (as in "First Death in Nova Scotia"), or the ordinary rituals which carry on in the face of an unspeakable grief (for example "Sestina").

Bishop once wrote to Lowell:

> Do please write an autobiography - or sketches for one, - The two or three stories I've managed to do of that sort have been a great satisfaction, somehow, - that desire to get things straight and tell the truth - it's almost impossible not to tell the truth in poetry, I think, but in prose it keeps eluding one in the funniest way'[3]

By keeping almost entirely to prose when telling the story (or rather stories) of her life Bishop seemed not to have wanted the truth to come out about her own history. It is as if she didn't trust her powers of concealment when writing poetry. Lowell's "Soliloquy" above refers to an event to which Bishop never alluded, even in her 'entirely... autobiographical' story "In the Village".[4] In a recent interview for a television programme Mary McCarthy remembered Bishop telling her that her mother had tried to kill her. But as the information was unverifiable, and McCarthy's dealings with the truth were held to be not entirely trustworthy, her anecdote was dismissed as interesting, but too inventive.[5] But would Lowell have made up

the same fact? Bishop asked him at about the same time as he was writing "Soliloquy":

> While I remember it - one small item that I may have mentioned before. If you ever do anything with the poem about me - would you change the remark my mother was supposed to have made? She never did make it; in fact I don't remember any direct threats, except the usual maternal ones - her danger for me was just implied in the things I overheard the grown-ups say before and after her disappearance. Poor thing, I don't want to have it any worse than it was.[6]

Bishop could not tolerate the idea of Lowell doing to her what she admired him doing to himself. Whether or not Bishop's mother ever did threaten her, it was clearly important to her never to let her story, or her memory, out.

In an interview in 1978, Bishop said that she had 'always tried to avoid' writing about her childhood, and she did in fact keep the story of her early life very much to herself.[7] Her story "In the Village" tells us more about the trauma of that early life than the few facts we can glean. In her interview with Elizabeth Spires, she responded to Spires's coaxing about her childhood with a resumé whose brevity suggests a stern attitude towards her infancy:

> INTERVIEWER: Your childhood was difficult, and yet in many of your stories and poems about that time there's a tremendously lyrical quality as well as a great sense of loss and tragedy.
>
> BISHOP: My father died, my mother went crazy when I was four or five years old. My relatives, I think they all felt so sorry for this child that they tried to do their very best. And I think they did.[8]

Bishop's brief disposal of her parents here supports her criticism of "confessional poets": 'You just wish they'd keep some of these things to

themselves'.[9] But this largely-silenced infancy left her with a peculiar legacy:

> I was always a sort of a guest (as a child), and I think I've always felt like that.[10]

Although her poetry cannot be described as autobiographical, this legacy has infiltrated Bishop's writing at every turn.

Bishop kept what Lowell calls her 'total memory' of her childhood to herself (though, as Lowell's drafts show, she must have talked to her friends).[11] But we know something of her early life beyond her bald statement above. She was born on February 8th, 1911, in her father's home town of Worcester, Massachusetts. When she was eight months old, her father, William Thomas Bishop, who came from a wealthy Boston family, died of Bright's disease, and her mother, Gertrde Bulmer Bishop, wore black ever after. The only legacy that Bishop's father left her with was a financial one. The small annuity she had from him enabled her as an adult to escape what would have been for her the terrible round of so many American poets, teaching in order to write and writing in order to get the teaching. By living in a country with a comparatively low cost of living, Bishop was able to live off the income provided by her father's early death.

Bishop's mother suffered a series of breakdowns after her husband's death, and spent a period in McCleans Sanitarium outside Boston. After her disastrous return to Great Village, Nova Scotia, to live with her parents, Bishop's grandparents (described by Bishop in her story "In the Village"),

Gertrude Bulmer Bishop entered the mental hospital in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia in 1916 for life. After this Bishop never saw her again. Bishop never modified this stark-sounding narrative except to suggest that she believed her mother had shown signs of mental illness before her husband William's death.[12]

Bishop describes her final parting from her mother in her story, "In the Village". The story begins with the description of a scream:

> [It] hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies...[it] hangs like that, unheard, in memory - in the past, in the present, and those years between. It was not even loud to begin with, perhaps. It just came there to live, forever - not loud, just alive forever. (C.Pr.251)

We find out later that the scream is her mother's. It comes to signify her rejection of her child; it repulses those around her (who dread its repetition) and it signals her flight into madness. As this image of the scream suggests, Bishop never freed herself from this rejection; it formed 'a slight stain' in her sky, an eternal echo that would reverberate throughout her life. She almost never referred to her mother, either in her work, or in letters to her friends. But some of her poetic and narrative fragments show us that while she kept quiet to others about that formative part of her history, she tried privately to make something out of their distressing and brief relationship. In one such fragment, and like the child in "In the Village", Bishop tries to construct her mother out of her attributes:

> A mother made of dress-goods
> white with black polk[a]-dots,

black and white "Shepherd's Plaid."
A mother is a hat
black hat with a black gauze rose
falling half-open

a long black glove
the swan bit
in the Public Gardens[13]

But Bishop could compose her only as items of clothing, or dress-goods; and even the swan's tangible violence could only touch her mother's glove, not her actual, hidden self. In this fragment, and in Bishop's much later story, the protagonist seems to be searching for some evidence of her mother's palpability - the truth behind the hat and gloves.

In the years between her mother's entry into the Dartmouth mental hospital and Bishop's arrival at Walnut Hill boarding school, Natick, Massachusetts, when she was sixteen, Bishop travelled between her maternal grandparents in Great Village, Nova Scotia, her paternal ones in Worcester, Massachusetts, and a maternal aunt in Boston. She was removed from her Nova Scotian relatives by her Worcester ones apparently because it was felt that their prosperity would benefit her more than the simple rural life she was leading in Canada. She was moved on to her Bostonian aunt because the life in Worcester left her racked by psychosomatically-intensified illnesses. Bishop describes the early part of this period in three of her stories, "Primer Class", "Gwendolyn" and "The Country Mouse". Apart from these and the story "In the Village", Bishop says very little about her early life, though each of these shows how vital this period was for her poetry. That she chose this early period of her life as the locus in quo for her most sustained, and most powerful, pieces of autobiography indicates how

important those early, orphaned years were to the adult Bishop, writing about them over thirty years later. Bishop describes her time in the small, Nova Scotian village with her maternal grandparents, and its 'hymn-singing-Baptist backwards village life', with a nostalgia that she seems aware of but is unable wholly to guard against.[14] She attended her first school there, and remembers gazing at the world maps, which were the property of the classes above hers. She recalls wanting to 'touch all the countries and provinces with my own hands'. (C.Pr.10) This childish inquisitiveness seems like a metaphor for her life-long obsession with travel, and her artistic fascination with the boundaries and overlappings which made up her world. Life with the Nova Scotian grandparents revolved around the village community: school, the Baptist church, church picnics (whether Presbyterian or Baptist), funerals and baptisms (as Bishop's early story, "The Baptism" suggests). Bishop describes herself as a child who was aware of the strange ways in which the world was connected, and she finds tropes for her life in all kinds of places. The arrangement of building blocks, the death of a playmate, and the discovery of a once-shiny, now dirty, marble, are all implicated in the child's search for the basis of her own self.

In the story "The Country Mouse" Bishop describes her unwilling departure, aged about seven, from her maternal grandparents in Great Village to live with her paternal grandparents in their large, respectably middle-class house in Worcester, Massachusetts:

> I had been brought back unconsulted and against my wishes to the house my father had been born in, to be saved 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 (C.Pr.17)

As far as the 'inverted r's' went, these grandparents were successful: Ashley Brown remembers his first meeting with Bishop in 1964, and hearing her 'cultivated New England schoolgirl's accent...[a] voice nearly always soft and uninsistent'.[15] As far as the child was concerned, the nine month stay was a disaster. She was thrust into a world in which she felt an outsider, and was expected to act up to a fictive little-girlishness. These new grandparents seemed unhappy and formal, and could give their new charge only the standard attentions: piano lessons, good clothes, and the American national anthem, which the small Canadian-bred child was compelled to learn. They were ignorant of the peculiar attentions and the intimacy that made her other grandparents vital to her. Only one episode in the story provides relief, when the child was roused from her sleep to discover, 'two little hens and one rooster...Golden Bantams' that her Grandpa had brought back for her, so that she 'could have cried with pleasure'. (C.Pr.30)

Bishop has said very little about the period between her stay with these paternal grandparents when she was seven years old, and her arrival at Vassar college in 1930, aged nineteen. What she does say is contained in what are (probably) unfinished, unpublished pieces of prose. Her unhappiness with her Bishop grandparents ultimately manifested itself in an array of different illnesses, including symptoms of St. Vitus's dance, asthma, bronchitis and eczema, which made her 'scratch and roll' together with the neurotic bull terrier. (C.Pr.29) These finally persuaded her concerned relatives that she would be better off elsewhere. She went to

live with her mother's elder sister, Aunt Maude, in a poor suburb of Boston, going from a large house in Worcester with 'wings stuck out here and there' which had a conservatory, 'fifteen acres of land, an old apple orchard...and tall chestnut trees' to an 'upstairs apartment' in a dirty yellow clapboard house, on a steep, unpaved street in Boston. (C.Pr.17-18)[16] Aunt Maude and her husband had no children, so the arrival of a parentless niece in their house must have suggested a convenient kind of surrogacy for all parties. But although Bishop remembered late in her life that Aunt Maude 'was devoted to [her] and awfully nice' she felt herself to be an 'orphan... living [there]...just temporarily'.[17]

Though she recalled a sense of alienation during her childhood Bishop seemed undecided as to whether it was something she courted, or something intrinsic to her own history. She remembered that as a child, back in Nova Scotia, she 'always felt that the parlor belonged to me...[because] it seemed much more secluded than any other place in the house. It seemed removed from the whole house and village, and [it]...was the one place where I could think about the village people and my own family as from a distance.'[18] In Boston a little later 'Everything seemed new & strange to me...almost everybody, except babies, seemed grown-up and foreign.'[19] This sense of foreignness, of difference, is something that stayed with Bishop all her life. Her residence in Brazil, and her travels around the world would later form a trope for her estrangement, and her poems and stories offered her endless possibilities and subjective resolutions for it. The language in which Bishop describes her aunt is affectionate: she was 'small, worried, nervous shy...a clean housekeeper but not a very good

one...[and we] loved each other and told each other everything and for many years I saw nothing in her to criticise...'.[20] But it is hard to believe that Bishop, even as a traumatized little girl (or perhaps especially as a traumatized little girl) would not have kept her internal search for her real, her tangible mother to herself. Although Bishop lived with Aunt Maude until she was sixteen, apart from long summers back in Nova Scotia, or at summer camp, when she looked back on that period she concentrated on what she read at the time, rather than how she lived. Books made for more vivid recollections than her fragmented family.

PLATE 3:
Vassar College group portrait, Bishop seated in middle of bottom row

II

SCHOOL AND COLLEGE

Bishop 'missed a lot of school' because of the asthmatic, bronchial and other ailments which beset her from the age of six or seven, and which stayed with her throughout her life.[21] As a result, her reading, like her education, was voracious, but sporadic. She was, she recalled, 'crazy about fairy tales - Anderson, Grimm, and so on. Like Jean-Paul Sartre...I also read all kind of things I didn't really understand.'[22] She recalled being given Harriet Monroe's anthology of modern poetry when she was about thirteen, which was 'an important experience', and going through various 'phases': 'a Shelley phase, a Browning phase, and a brief Swinburne phase'. These books travelled with her, in her suitcases and in her head.[23] She formulated her own continuities and allegiances from early on, and she then set them against the discontinuities of her family history. She discovered George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins in her teens, and kept their poetry close throughout her life.[24] Bishop's apparent self-sufficiency, learnt at an early age, depended on an interior companionship with writers, rather than with parents or siblings.

All Bishop has said about her schooling before the age of sixteen was that she received little formal education, and that even this was continually interrupted by illness. However, a magazine called The Owl (with her signature on the cover) shows that she did attend another school in the year before beginning at Walnut Hill. The magazine claims to be 'A Collection of Poems, Stories and Other Articles written by the Boys and

Girls of the North Shore Country Day School'. With five different pieces by Bishop in it, it is, possibly, an example of Bishop's most prolific period of publication. In a review entitled "Women in 'Idylls of the King'" Bishop spoke directly of the difficulties of the noble woman's lot in Tennyson's patriarchal society:

> All women of noble birth in those days were surrounded by the same influences. They spent their lives behind walls ten feet or more in thickness, swathed in voluminous clothing and surrounded by ladies in waiting. Their only occupations were spinning and embroidering; their only excitements, an attack on the castle where they lived, or being kidnapped and then rescued by some dashing knight. Of course it all depended on the character of the women themselves what effect this monotonous mode of living had on them...[25]

She offers a brief analysis of how Guinevere, Lynette and Elaine fared under such strictures. Even in this juvenile context she is proposing that a woman's capacity to make something of her life depends on her own determination. It was a belief which she kept all her life, and it made her intolerant of the demands of feminism. She never saw the point in anthologies of women's writing, nor of literary criticism that concerned itself with the historical and continuing oppression of women. Bishop's other pieces in The Owl included a short story whose title, "Slightly Warmer with Heavy Rain", anticipates the textural quality of poems like "Little Exercise" or "Florida"; a poem in Latin ("Commūtātiō Opiniōnis"); and a poem entitled "The Ballad of the Subway Train" which is a premonition of her later fable-poem "The Man-Moth". When God sees that the sporting 'dragons...among the moons' have 'chanced to eat / A swarm of stars new-made', he utters the terrible curse: 'Be changed to subway cars':

No more for you infinite space,
 But in a narrow hole
You shall forever grope your way,
 Blind-burrowing like the mole![26]

This horror of being trapped and contained runs throughout Bishop's writing, but it is at its most explicit in her early pieces.

In 1927 Bishop entered Walnut Hill boarding school in Natick, Massachusetts. During the three years that she spent there, she was a regular, and very productive, contributor to the school magazine, The Blue Pencil. She wrote stories and poems about giants ("Giant Weather", "Thunder"), fairies ("For C.W.B."), holy ghosts ("Into the Mountain"), knights ("I meet a knight") and the mysteries of the nether world ("Three Wells"). Although she had read both Herbert and Hopkins by this time (the two poets whose influence she acknowledged throughout her life), these school poems, and those she wrote at Vassar, seem to be more under the influence of Walter de la Mare, Christina Rossetti, and Tennyson than Hopkins or Herbert. Some of the stories tried for the haunting quality of folk tales like those collected by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory (as the title of Bishop's short play, "Three Wells", suggests); some for an indigenous Canadian or American tenor, perhaps with Washington Irving's or Nathaniel Hawthorne's tales in mind. Other stories, like "A Flight of Fancy" or "The Thumb", tried for a more Jamesian, cultured drama, with the eighteen year-old Bishop making a somewhat heavy-handed attempt at the subtleties of significant drawing-room conversation. Many of these stories were set in a world clearly, sometimes explicitly, modelled on the landscape of Nova Scotia; it formed an important imaginative vector for

Bishop, and she returned there, both literally and imaginatively, throughout her life.

After reading Mary McCarthy's novel The Group, which was based on graduates in the 1930's, some of whom were Bishop's 'oldest friends, alas', Bishop remarked to Lowell, 'I just don't get that interested in college days any more'.[27] Given that she had graduated twenty-nine years previously and was now involved in a country racked by revolutions, her remark must have been intentionally ironic. However, during her time at college Bishop seemed to discover her own true North; although she thought of becoming a pianist and would have loved to have been a painter, poetry was what she made. She was humorously self-deprecating about her college life and adventures, such as her secret, New Year assignation with a boyfriend; or spending most of the night up a tree with another girl; or the keeping of a huge pot of Roquefort cheese in her shared bedroom, because cheese eaten at night helped one to have interesting dreams; and she spoke with amused condescension, as well as respect, about her part in the starting of an alternative magazine, Con Spirito, with Mary McCarthy and others, meeting up 'in a speakeasy and drink[ing] dreadful red wine and get[ting] slightly high'.[28] Bishop was asked in several interviews when she first thought of becoming a poet, or writer. In each case her reply betrayed her scepticism of any Wordsworthian idea of "becoming" a poet; she did not, she declared, discover her vocation and act upon her discovery, so much as find herself doing it. Ashley Brown asked her about this in 1966:

> INT: In those days did you think about becoming a poet or a novelist?
> EB : I never thought much about it, but I believe I was only interested in being a poet.[29]

And over ten years later Elizabeth Spires asked her almost the same question:

> INT: As a young woman, did you have a sense of yourself as a writer?
> EB : No, it all just happens without your thinking about it... I'm afraid everything in my life has just happened... I never really sat down and said to myself, "I'm going to be a poet." Never in my life. I'm still surprised that people think I am...[30]

But her passive, non-volitional self-representation (which she carried into many other parts of her life) in no way modified her passion for achievement, nor her ambition. In an editorial for The Blue Pencil in 1929 the eighteen year-old Bishop wrote:

> we have in ourselves...a kind of burning, unceasing energy of some sort that will not let us be finished off and live in the world like the china people on the mantlepiece. This energy, this fire, is always there, ready to explode or to burn fretfully, to show itself surprisingly in our work, our games, our looks and actions...We must not go to sleep and become bores and dullards; we must keep alive this fire whether it is dangerous or beautiful.[31]

The exuberance, which soon became modified, even to the point of effacement, in interviews, never left Bishop; but she abandoned the tone of explicit zeal. The language in which she learnt to speak of herself, in her letters to Marianne Moore, or later to Robert Lowell, had lost none of the confidence of her eighteen year-old tirade; but it had acquired a subtle, almost perverse forthrightness, as though it was spoken in spite of and in the face of the difficulty of ordinary life. In her interview with Elizabeth Spires Bishop mused:

> I think 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.[32]

This was what her schoolgirl exuberance had become in the year before her death. In their oblique way, the words affirm the sentiments she expressed nearly sixty years previously, while recognising that in her 'awful core of ego' lay her need to write.

Mary McCarthy makes much sardonic play out of the Vassar social conscience during the Depression thirties in her novel The Group. Vassar girls were synonymous with privilege, and in McCarthy's novel, socialist idealism almost never goes so far as to offend against the established order; the girls never lose their furs. Bishop, too, recalled the hypocrisy of the over-privileged students of her Vassar days. On the one hand, she recalls 'how they worried about their clothes; endless discussions of new spring outfits - & pathetic interior-decoration schemes'. And on the other she remembers that the 'atmosphere in Vassar was left-wing; it was the popular thing. People were always asking [her] to be on a picket-line, or later to read poems to a John Reed Club'.[33] Yet although she felt, as she said, that 'All the intellectuals were Communist except me', 'I felt that most of the college girls didn't know much about social conditions.'[34] Bishop recalled several factors which set her apart from the socially-concerned naifs around her at Vassar. She suggested that, unlike most Vassar girls, she 'had lived with poor people and knew something of poverty at firsthand' and for this reason she knew the futility of the rich girls' gestures. She also recalled:

> Politically I considered myself a socialist, but I disliked "social conscious" writing...[indeed] I was all for being a socialist till I heard Norman Thomas speak; but he was so dull. Then I tried anarchism, briefly.[35]

In fact, Bishop admitted in 1966, 'I'm much more interested in social problems and politics now than I was in the '30's.' At the time, she was moving in another direction intellectually from her contemporaries: 'I'm always very perverse so I went in for T.S. Eliot and Anglo-Catholicism'; 'I stood up for T.S. Eliot when everybody else was talking about James T. Farrell.'[36]

The creative side of Bishop's contrariness while at college, far from being conservative, as her political 'perversity' might suggest, was influenced by the radical new ideas put forward in surrealism. Although this influence would become most powerful during her first visit to Paris, in the winter of 1935/36, shortly after her graduation, the magazine Con Spirito provided a forum for Bishop's, and other students', early experiments with surrealism that the 'old-fashioned' Vassar Review had denied. Bishop had her first poem published in her senior year, in 'something called The Magazine, published in California': as she recalled, 'I remember my first check for thirty-five dollars and that was rather an exciting moment'.[37] But perhaps the most significant event for the young, would-be poet was her meeting, also in her senior year, with the great and eccentric Modernist Marianne Moore.

PLATE 4: Marianne Moore with her mother, Mrs Moore

III

MARIANNE MOORE

Bishop indicated how important her friendship with Marianne Moore was by writing a poem to her, "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore", and a memoir, "Efforts of Affection", in memory of her. She published no other poems about friends, though she dedicated "The Armadillo" to Robert Lowell, and she wrote no other memoirs of friends until "North Haven", the year before her death, in memory of Robert Lowell.[38] Although she mentioned to Lowell in the 1950's that she was working on 'a complicated poem about Hopkins and E. Dickinson', and also a long poem 'to you and Marianne, called "Letter to Two Friends"', of which a very rough draft survives, neither poem was ever published.[39] In the "Letter" she appeals to her two friends to help her compose, because, she says, 'the poem I was trying to write / has turned into prepositions: ins and aboves and upons':

Marianne, loan me a noun!
Cal, please cable a verb!
Or simply propulse through the ether
some more powerful meter[40]

But only in her "Invitation" to Moore does she print any of her friends (rather than parts of speech) flying like a fairy godmother through the air.

The detail with which Bishop writes about her first meeting with Moore provides an arresting contrast to another important biographical event of

1934: her mother's death. Bishop says nothing about this; it is mentioned only in chronologies of her life:

> 1934 Met Marianne Moore, who became a lifelong friend. Death of Bishop's mother. Began publishing poetry and prose in "little" magazines. Graduated from Vassar; B.A. in English Literature.[41]

When Lowell first sent her a draft of his poem about the death of his mother, "Sailing from Rapallo", with others that were to become part of Life Studies, Bishop wrote:

> "Sailing from Rapallo"... is almost too awful to read, but a fine poem - [All those you have sent me] have that sure feeling, as if you'd been in a stretch (I've felt that way for very short stretches once in a long while) when 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-waited for sunrise. If only one could see everything that way all the time![42]

But Bishop could never have written her own "Sailing from Rapallo". Her mother lived in her memory beyond the bounds of illumination, and the wistfulness she expressed in her letter to Lowell would surely not have extended as far as the almost-unmentioned death in 1934, twenty-three years earlier. Her fulsome description in her memoir of early meetings with Marianne Moore strikes me as an act of aversion, from the horror and impossibility of that other, real mother, as well as being a tribute to a second and elective mother. During the first twelve years or so of their friendship, Moore took it upon herself to act as a kind of sponsor to Bishop's budding talent. She promoted and chided Bishop, praising the drafts of poems that the young poet sent her, and frequently rewriting

large parts of them, often in conspiracy with her own mother. Although Bishop eventually stopped sending Moore her work-in-progress, their friendship continued right through to Moore's death in 1969.

Bishop's first meeting with the older poet was set up by Fanny Borden, the college librarian and an old friend of Moore's, and, as Bishop chooses to record in her memoir on Moore, 'the niece of the Fall River Lizzie Borden'. Bishop was to 'find Miss Moore [on the agreed Saturday afternoon] seated on the bench at the right of the door leading to the reading room of the New York Public Library.' On this first occasion, Bishop recalls, 'I sat down' beside Moore on the bench 'and she began to talk. It seems to me that Marianne talked to me steadily for the next thirty-five years'. (C.Pr.121,123,124) Bishop knew that this was 'nonsensical', given the long intervals at which they saw one another once she had gone to Brazil. But Moore's conversation, with its elaborately careful phrasing and its idiosyncratic and precise vocabulary, powerfully impressed the young poet. It became so much part of Bishop's life, that when she heard in 1959 that Moore had had a slight stroke, she remarked: 'Incredible to relate it affected her speech for a few days'.[43] Although Moore's influence on Bishop's writing seems to have been confined to a period which had already ended by the time North & South was published in 1946, her correspondence, which carried on for another twenty-two years, provided Bishop with one of her most important, particular and precise conversations. Bishop enjoyed many separate friendships, and Moore enabled her to have a unique conversation.

The year after they met, Moore wrote to the twenty-four year old Bishop:

> You spoke of letting me see verse you have been writing and I hope that you will. Even if you should have a typewriter, do not take time to type the poems. For myself I should prefer handwriting[44]

Moore's request shows the mix of importunity and authority with which she framed her desire. She is not offering Bishop a favour, but framing her own wishes. Bishop's response was to start sending her drafts of poems, which Moore replied to at length, and with extensive alterations and suggestions. In return, she sent Bishop her own drafts which Bishop in her turn cautiously and admiringly criticized, to Moore's delight:

> I am so glad you like the Pangolin, and am helped by what you say not to mind the difficulties that I attract to myself in connection with anything I write or even contemplate writing.[45]

Bishop turned to Moore for advice about her future in the first years after her graduation, when she was seriously debating the direction her life should take. She recalled that she 'had all the forms' for enrollment in Cornell Medical School' shortly after her graduation, but that she was discouraged from pursuing medicine for a number of reasons:

> I discovered I would have to take German and I'd already given up on German once, I though it was so difficult. And I would have had to take another year of chemistry. I'd already published a few things and I think Marianne discouraged me, and I didn't go. I just went off to Europe instead.[46]

Moore wrote to Bishop in 1936, not so much discouraging her from studying

medicine, as affirming her belief that Bishop would find it hard to give up writing:

> What you say about studying medicine does not disturb me at all; for interesting as medicine is, I feel you would not be able to give up writing, with the ability for it that you have; but it does disturb me that you should have the feeling that it might be well to give it up. To have produced what you have - either verse or prose is enviable, and you certainly would not suppose that such method as goes with a precise and proportioning ear is contemporary or usual.[47]

A fine precedent existed at this time for the doctor/poet in the shape of William Carlos Williams, and Moore's concern is not about the possibility of being both. Her argument rather takes a stern, moral line; she is concerned not with Bishop's desire, but with her obligation to her talent. Moore's high-toned Christian self, often characterized as part of her eccentricity, coloured all aspects of her life, as Bishop sympathetically and humourously describes in her memoir.

Moore's sense of Bishop's talent led her to sponsor the younger poet, sending her poems to different quarterlies and magazines and helping her into publication in a volume called Trial Balances (1935), in which she introduced Bishop as a new, young talent. Yet the same moral imperative which made her support Bishop to the full also compelled her to declare her reservations wherever they arose. Bishop recalled Moore's remark in her Trial Balances introduction regarding some sparrows:

> I had two or three feeble pastiches of late seventeenth-century poetry called "Valentines," in one of which I had rhymed "even the English sparrows in the dust" with "lust." She did not like those English sparrows very much, and said so ("Miss Bishop's sparrows are not revolting, merely disaffecting") (C.Pr.145)

Bishop sent Moore drafts of her poems, and occasionally of her stories, for five or six years between about 1934 and 1940. Moore returned them with precise and exacting praise and criticism.[48] She delighted in Bishop's eye, and 'the creativeness and uniqueness of [her] assemblings' but by 1940 Bishop found the extent of Moore's creative interference too much to tolerate, and stopped sending the older poet her drafts.[49] Although this termination must have been on the cards, it was apparently provoked by Moore's pedantic comments on a specific poem, "Roosters".[50] Moore telephoned Bishop to say that she and her mother had sat up late writing a revised version, which she sent Bishop almost by return of post. Moore had renamed the poem "The Cock" (apparently unaware of its colloquial usage), changed the triple-rhyming three line stanzas to stanzas of varying length and rhyme, cut out words and expressions that she felt were unseemly, such as 'water-closet', and even eliminated some whole stanzas. She had instituted her own corrections which rode roughshod over the very texture and character of Bishop's poem.[51] Bishop's anger at these "corrections" was emphatically worded in the scrupulously polite reply that she immediately wrote to Moore, and although the two women remained close friends, this exchange marks the close of their friendship's first period. Bishop was bucking the reins of influence as early as 1940, and although critics still continue to attach her to her early mentor, there was a world of unlikeness between them even before Bishop had published her first book.

The differences between the two poets can be described in many ways; but the most profound lay in their system of beliefs. Moore lamented to Bishop back in 1938:

> I can't help wishing you would sometimes in some way, risk some unprotected profundity of experience, some characteristic private defiance of the significantly detestable. Continuously fascinated as I am by the creativeness and uniqueness of these assemblings of yours - which are really poems - I feel a responsibility against anything that might threaten you; yet fear to admit such anxiety, lest I influence you away from an essential necessity or particular strength.[52]

By contrast, Bishop recognized that Moore had 'no particular "myth," but [saw that] a remarkable set of beliefs appears over and over again, a sort of backbone of faith'.[53] Yet in a letter to Joseph Summers, commenting on his description of herself, she describes the background to Moore's poems somewhat differently:

> I think the beginning part...about "meticulous attention...a method of escaping from intolerable pain" - is awfully good - and something I've just begun to realize myself - although I did take it in about Marianne Moore long ago. (It is her way of controlling what almost amounts to paranoia, I believe - although I handle these words very ineptly.)[54]

Bishop valued Moore's poems for something that she recognized in her own later, and which Moore had dedicated herself to avoiding; Moore's fastidiousness, like Bishop's, was a life-long defence against panic.

Moore became not only a "mother" to Bishop but also one of the grand figures in Bishop's literary pantheon. She exempted her from criticism and compared her, as a celebrated public figure, with Robert Frost:

> Even Marianne has somewhat broken down in this way lately [- not being as honest in her writing] - but not that I'd criticize her! She is old enough to have the right to indulge her eccentricities, surely - even after struggling with Carnegie Hall and Yul Brunner [sic] I still think she is behaving better in her old age than Frost and his ancient cautious stingy (not in quantity -) wisdom - He really advises one to

do all the meanest bourgeois things, if you think about it[55]

Although Bishop admired Moore so highly, Moore was never immune from Bishop's tempered but ironising eye. Writing to Lowell in 1962 Bishop compared her with another (very dissimilar) friend, Mary McCarthy. They stand together most uneasily beneath her clever yoke:

> I've been reading [Mary McCarthy's] "On the Contrary" - also Marianne's "Reader"...strange contrast - Mary so sane and mean; Marianne so mad and good - which do you choose? And they both lie like rugs - at least I shouldn't say lie, but anything I know at first-hand their impressions aren't mine at all. Marianne admiring the Duke of Windsor's style! Mary giving her poor dead 1st husband another beating still...But Marianne can astound, and there are always some of those marvellous poems - Mary seems like all the rest of us, striving, striving.[56]

Moore's eccentricity, her refusal to be co-opted by any fashions, whether material, moral or poetic, impressed Bishop throughout her life. The older poet was never a role model (their wishes were too far apart), but she showed Bishop that a woman could succeed in her own right, just as a man could (even if her national fame came more through her pronouncements on baseball, and the naming of cars, than through her poetry!). After Moore's public support for Eisenhower in 1965, Bishop refused (in letters to friends) simply to chastise her. This refusal showed both the concessions she was prepared to make for her sixty-nine year old friend, as well as her dislike of judging people by any single criterion. She wrote to U.T. and Joe Summers:

> Yes - I saw Marianne's name on that dreadful pro-Eisenhower list. But that's nothing - she did some campaign writing for Hoover once - around 1929. Well - it's sad but true that many of the best poets

> have been reactionaries. In her case I think it's also part of the general masochism - Whatever is, is right for us, even if it's wrong, and it's somehow wicked to combat; virtue means endurance. (I don't believe she has ever forgiven me for going to a psychoanalyst.) Also, she has a surprising respect for wealth, as such - is apt to think that rich people are all so "good & kind." but it is hard to judge her - work, life, or opinions - by one's usual standards. And I feel I don't know enough about psychology yet to see much deeper into someone so really strange - She also worships Henry Kaiser & Eddy Rickenbacker.[57]

And she wrote to Lowell in the same month:

> I suspect that Marianne's Ladies' Home Journal poem was about Eisenhower...But sometimes I think that that dogmatism works in her poetry - sometimes, of course, not. I think (a simple thought) she must represent reassurance to all the audiences who hear her - a kind of family-feeling, and that if you'll be good you'll be happy - combined with intellectual chic! But heavens, what a wonderful old age she really is having - and deserving.[58]

Bishop had lifelong problems with her health, suffering badly from asthma from early childhood. She was hospitalized periodically throughout her life because of the condition, which must also have been exacerbated from quite early adulthood by a drinking problem, which Bishop later recognized to be alcoholism.[59] Bishop refused to let her poor health deter her from any activity and must have drawn amused comparisons between herself and Moore early in their friendship, when Moore and her mother appeared to suffer innumerable maladies in the defence against travel. For Bishop, of course, the home she first remembered was one shrouded in the most frightening kind of illness, her mother's madness. Perhaps her determination even in her sixties to conduct her life in a way that brought repeated cautions from her doctor was a defence against her fear that illness might rob her, too, of her mental and physical liberty. Moore took

a proprietorial interest in Bishop's health, and her asthmatic problems, causing Bishop to write in 1956, 'Marianne is wonderful, that's all. If I don't mention my health she writes implying she knows I'm concealing my dying throes from her. If I say I've never felt better in my life (God's truth) she writes "Brave Elizabeth!"'[60] And Lowell wrote to Bishop in 1958, six years after she had arrived in Brazil, that Moore was delighted with her friend's life, knew the whole of her lover Lota's history, and all the names of her "grandchildren" (Lota's various nieces, nephews and other adoptive relatives) and had 'no end of praise for her competence and kindness and charm'.[61] In turn, Bishop worried about her friend, particularly after Moore had had her first stroke. When Lowell and Elizabeth Hardwick were planning their trip to Brazil in 1962, she wrote, 'I am worried about Marianne...she doesn't sound well at all. I wish you could bring her along for us to take care of'.[62] During a trip to the United States in 1967 Bishop found her friend 'so old and frail it [broke her] heart' and took to baking her tasty meals in an effort to make her eat.[63] Bishop saw Moore in 1969, shortly before she died, and a letter to Lowell soon after records her sense that her friend's life was nearly ended. Her matter-of-factness, about Moore's financial security, vulnerability, and tears at their parting, concealed her knowledge that with Moore's death, she would lose not only a friend, but also another mother.

PLATE 5: Bishop and bicycle, Key West 1940/41

IV

A POET, BUT NOT YET IN PRINT

After graduating from Vassar college in 1934 Bishop lived briefly in New York, during part of 1934-35. She 'didn't know a soul. That is, no one "literary" except Miss Moore'.[64] During this time, she took a job for a short time with a correspondence school, recorded in the story, "The U.S.A. School of Writing". Her motives in taking it, she wrote, were partly 'virtuous in working for much less a year than [my education] had been costing...real need for a little more money than I had, idle curiosity, and, I'm afraid, pure masochism'. (C.Pr.35) She never again let masochism force her into any job she need not do, and did not stand this one for very long. Her duty at the "school" was to take the name and duties of Mr Fred G. Margolies, a predecessor to whom the correspondents still believed they were sending their assignments. Her assumption of this male part is an early, witty reflection on her fierce belief that men and women should not be distinguished from one another professionally, in the cause of either male chauvinism, or of feminism.

Under the guise of Mr Margolies, Bishop had to 'write an analysis of each lesson in five hundred words' which had been returned to her by her students, and 'write a short personal reply to the inevitable letter that arrived with each lesson '.(C.Pr.35) Bishop's students were cowboys, ranch hands, sailors, domestics, a sheepherder, a shepherd, a janitor, a lady cattle-rancher, and so on. In her story she implicitly contrasted her own, privileged college education with their ignorance and incompetence, sparing

neither herself nor them in the telling. She described herself as a figure like Nathanael West's Miss Lonelyhearts, writing futile answers to the questions people asked her from within their impossible lives. However in the end, the story was not about this jaded writing school and its hopeless correspondents, but about what one must confront to be a writer. It was probably written in 1966, but Bishop seemed to be trying to capture something of her earlier period as a lonely, and unpublished, writer. In a passage ostensibly concerned with the ranch hand correspondents, Bishop wrote:

> Henry James once said that he who would aspire to be a writer must inscribe on his banner the one word "Loneliness." In the case of my students, their need was not to ward off society, but to get into it. Their problem was that on their banners "Loneliness" had been inscribed despite them, and so they aspired to be writers. Without exception the letters I received were from people suffering from terrible loneliness in all its better-known forms, and in some I had never even dreamed of. Writing, especially writing to Mr. Margolies, was a way of being less alone. To be printed, and to be "famous," would be an instant shortcut to identity, and an escape from solitude, because then other people would know one as admirers, friends, lovers, suitors, etc. (C.Pr.44)

Bishop's poetry is about marginal figures and she represented herself as just such a figure, always outside the established social framework. The fantasy she puts into the heads of her 'students' was partly her own: would she become "famous" if she were a successful writer, and 'escape from [internal] solitude', and did she want that to happen?

Bishop's love affair with travelling began long before her first trip to Europe. In an unpublished biographical fragment, she traces it back into her own pre-history:

My mother's family seems to have had a taste for wandering, also for writing and the arts. Two great-uncles were Baptist missionaries in India and one of them wrote the first novel to be written in Telegu... Their father, my great-grandfather, was master-owner of a bark in the West Indies trade. He also wrote a small text book on navigation. He was lost at sea, with all hands, off Sable Island in a famous storm'[65]

Early in her own life Bishop remembered gazing at the pull-down world map in her primer class schoolroom, and wanting to 'touch all the countries and provinces with my own hands'. (C.Pr.10) But the travelling she did then was mainly between different parts of her family. Perhaps journeys came to signify her own importance as a connective, as the figure who joined disparate elements - whether of her own family, or of her own self. She recalled taking long walking tours as a teenager, around Cape Cod and in Newfoundland, but her real travels began in 1935.[66] Between 1935 and 1939 Bishop travelled to France, (spending nearly a year in Paris, at different times), Ireland, Italy, Spain and Morocco. She travelled with friends, like her old school friend Louise Crane with whom she made her first trip, and alone, living cheaply off the annuity left her by her father. What Marianne Moore identified and praised as bravery was, for Bishop, necessity. She had to travel, both to escape from and to search from home, and she continued both to do so, and to talk about it, for the rest of her life.

From 1939 to 1948 Bishop spent most of her time in Key West, living off her father's annuity. She had discovered the place during a fishing trip in 1938 and, although it did not offer 'any special advantages for a writer', she found that the 'light and blaze of colors made a good impression on me, and I loved the swimming'.[67] She bought a house in Key West, and by the time she left in 1948, had spent longer there than any-

where else in all her thirty-seven years. The people she met there included writers such as John Dewey, Charles Olson and Ernest Hemingway.[68] She made use of the local figures she befriended in some of her finest pieces. Faustina, the lottery-ticket seller, appears in her poem "Faustina, or Rock Roses" and she wrote a marvellous tribute to Gregorio Valdes, a Cuban naive painter, from whom she bought several pictures. She continued her travelling during these years, spending nine months in Mexico in 1943, where she became friends with Pablo Neruda, and making trips to Nova Scotia and New England, as well as spending periods in New York, where she kept a '$40/month "garret" in Greenwich village'.[69] She had no job during this time, apart from five days as an industrial worker for the Navy's optical department, which she quit because of eye strain and eczema; instead, she continued writing, and occasionally publishing, poems and a few stories. Bishop's epistolary relationship with Moore was especially important during this time, as Lynn Keller points out:

> Bishop relied on Moore to keep her apprised of literary news, including what she might have missed in periodicals. The shop talk the two women exchanged - about books, writers, magazines, publishers - must have been particularly helpful before the publication of North & South in sustaining Bishop's sense of professional identity - her sense that she was a writer[70]

PLATE 6: Watercolour by Bishop, drawn at Key West during the 1940's

V

NORTH & SOUTH

Bishop found it difficult to get a publisher for her first book. As early as 1937, James Laughlin had suggested that New Directions publish her, but she chose to hold out for a better known publisher (New Directions had started publishing only the year before). When she returned to Laughlin in 1939, after failing to find someone to publish her work, his offer of a place in an anthology of women poets sparked a reply from the unpublished Bishop that became part of a characteristic defence. She wrote to Moore, 'I haven't answered him yet, but I somehow feel one should refuse to act as Sex Appeal, don't you?'.[71] This fear of what Keller summarizes as 'sexual tokenism' ended in definite action from the young poet, who wrote a week later that she had declined Laughlin's offer, 'although I'm afraid he must think I have great pretentions'.[72] Bishop's fear of being subsumed within the category of women's writing lasted all her life, and it has survived her death, in the form of an embargo in her will on being included in any anthologies of women's literature.[73] In her interview with George Starbuck, she was at great pains to be clear about her position on women's writing, unchanged since 1939. She altered the transcript of the interview substantially, so that the published version emphasizes not so much the narrow stubborness of her original remarks, as a thoughtful solidarity with, if difference from, the feminism of the 1970's.

Bishop's writing and search for a publisher took place against the backdrop of America's resistance to and then entrance into the Second World

War. She resented the change that America's war involvement had produced in the place she had chosen to live. Key West, which she loved for its shabby quietness, became an 'overcrowded, noisy industrial center'. These upheavals interfered with her writing, as did wartime's 'terrible generalizing of every emotion'.[74] However, Bishop was quite capable of keeping the war out of her writing. In her first book, North & South, which came out in 1946, the year after the end of the war, only one poem, "Roosters", shows any preoccupation with the War.[75] Bishop described another poem, "A Miracle for Breakfast", as 'my Depression poem...written shortly after the time of souplines and men selling apples...my "social conscious" poem, a poem about hunger'; and these two poems form Bishop's only concession to the political generalities which were not, in her opinion, the stuff for good writing.[76] Instead Bishop made her poems out of material she had garnered during her trips to Europe and her sojourn in Key West. The terrible childhood was still out of bounds, and would only be exploited for creative use once Bishop was securely established in Brazil.[77] The sliding bounds of surrealism, discovered by Bishop during her visits to Paris in the 1930's, provided, paradoxically, a frame of organization, within which Bishop set many of the poems in North & South, while her imagery was gathered from Europe, Florida and even a little from New York and the northern Atlantic shores. North & South received immediate critical acclaim; it won the Houghton Mifflin Poetry Award and was reviewed by Marianne Moore (not surprisingly), and such rising stars of the new generation of poets as Robert Lowell and Randall Jarrell. Its publication also set in motion the inevitable trappings of poetic success - readings, reviewing, recordings, teaching. Bishop's response, then as always, was to avoid as much of it all as possible.

PLATE 7: Bishop and Robert Lowell, Rio de Janeiro, 1963

VI

ROBERT LOWELL

Soon after she had entered this public domain, Bishop made one of the most important friendships of her life. She met Randall Jarrell, as she recalled, in '1945 or 1946...I can't remember how or where' and he introduced her to Robert Lowell, six years her junior early in 1947.[78] A letter from Bishop in 1974 reveals that, in contrast to her first meeting with Jarrell, Bishop had a very particular memory of her first meeting with Lowell:

> What I remember about that meeting is your dishevelment, your lovely curly hair, and how we talked about a Picasso show then on in N.Y., and we agreed about the Antibes pictures of fishing, etc - and how much I liked you, after having been almost too scared to go...You were also rather dirty, which I rather liked, too.[79]

The shyness that Bishop recalls, nearly thirty years after her first encounter with Lowell, soon became a kind of celebrated trope between them, standing in for her wilful and exploitative diffidence. Not that Bishop remained shy with Lowell for very long, but he became her newest and most enduring mediator with the world beyond, as Moore had been for the previous ten years. The two young poets were close friends very quickly, and the correspondence that immediately developed was full of celebrations of mutual difference, gossip, criticism of what others were writing and discussion of their own work. Moore's moral and civil politeness and her belief in a particular poetic decorum had compelled her to chastize Bishop for her looseness, even while celebrating her talent and her eye. Lowell's

celebration of difference, and his ingenuous scepticism made for a very different correspondence and friendship.

Lowell, like Moore, took upon himself the job of finding Bishop career openings. He put her forward for prizes and fellowships throughout his life, and in 1949 he successfully encouraged her to take up the Library of Congress consultantship, which Moore had just turned down in order to finish her La Fontaine translations. He himself was holding the post around the time that they first met (1947-48), and he introduced Bishop to many poets including Ezra Pound, then in St. Elizabeth's. Bishop described herself as 'endlessly grateful' to Lowell for this introduction and continued to make the occasional visit to St. Elizabeth's until her departure for South America in November 1951.[80] Like many of Pound's admirers, she hated the great poet's anti-semitic and fascistic beliefs and later, when Pound was threatening to visit Brazil in 1958, Bishop knew that the poem she wrote out of this earlier experience, "Visits to St. Elizabeth's", might have left him hostile to her.[81] Its 'carefully' dancing 'Jew in a newspaper hat' and its part-impudent, part-tragic nursery-rhyme representation of 'the poet' cocked too much of a comic snook at a man who took himself and his beliefs relentlessly seriously. (C.P.135)

During the summer of 1948 Bishop borrowed a house in Wiscasset, Maine.[82] She needed to be alone if she was to give any shape to the poems forming within her (poems like "The Prodigal" and "Cape Breton"). Her poet's eye had gone back to the Northern landscape of her early childhood, after her recent visits to Nova Scotia, and she found this first impulse to touch the sensitive geography of her unhappy early life exciting. But

although she had established herself as a marginal figure, living outside family groups, literary cliques, or academic establishments, Bishop still felt her seclusion keenly. She wrote to Lowell in September from her Maine retreat:

> I think you said a while ago that I'd "laugh you to scorn" over some conversation you & J [?Jean Stafford] had had about how to protect oneself against solitude & ennui - but indeed I wouldn't. That's just the kind of "suffering" I'm most at home with & helpless about, I'm afraid, and what with 2 days of fog and alarmingly low tides I've really got it bad & think I'll write you a note before I go out & eat some mackerel...[83]

The 'suffering' is interrupted with talk of eating mackerel and a fantasy of finding a gasping mermaid trapped and famished under one of the docks close to her house. But nine lines later she is back to the subject which preoccupied her all her life:

> Sometime I wish we could have a more sensible conversation about this suffering business, anyway. I imagine we actually agree fairly well - it is just that I guess I think it is so inscrutable & unavoidable there's no use talking about it, & that in itself it has no value, anyway - as I think Jarrell says at the end of "90 North", or somewhere.[84]

Unlike Lowell who liked to worry suffering like a dog worrying a bone, Bishop preferred to see herself as not particularly interested in 'this suffering business'. After a moment's interest in the subject ('Sometime I wish we could have a...conversation about this suffering business'), her stratagem in this letter, to avoid what she could not bear to articulate, was simply to declare it all to be 'inscrutable & unavoidable' as though by doing this she could keep not only herself but also her friend off the

subject. Bishop almost never talked explicitly about her own suffering, either to her friends, or in her writing. She never allows herself to be seen out of control, as though that would be too great a concession to the chaos lurking behind. In her letters she often ironized it, or diverted attention elsewhere, and in her poems and stories she often seemed to take the words of Dickens's dying Mrs Gradgrind to heart:

> I think there's a pain somewhere in the room...but I couldn't positively say that I have got it.[85]

Like the scream in "In the Village", the pain seems to hang over her stories and poems, its Munch-like echoes only occasionally audible, or it is hidden back in an interior, present but unseen and unexplained.

David Kalstone describes well Bishop's response to Lowell's 'apparent self-discipline', and the 'aplomb' with which he managed his creative life:

> Bishop began to sense the buried links between her writing peculiarities and what she felt as the isolation and anarchic drift of her life. She began to feel her very waywardness as a matter for nourishing poetic investigation - an instinct still shadowed, about an imagined weakness yet to be unmasked as a strength.[86]

This new sense is identified by Kalstone in a letter that Bishop wrote to Lowell at the beginning of 1948. She confesses in it that she is somewhat fearful of doing her first reading. But in the process of confiding, she ends up by celebrating, tentatively, the very isolation that she had identified as the problem:

This is in confidence - I'm sort of scared. But I remember the little you told me about your speaking experiences in Washington cheered me up tremendously and I suppose I should or must begin sometime...
...I seem to be talking to you like Dorothy Dix but that is because Seldon Rodman has written and wants me to come to Haiti...He has a jeep and knows all the little villages where the painters and poets live and I know it would be beautiful...
...you apparently are able to do the right thing for yourself and your work and don't seem to be tempted by the distractions of travelling - that rarely offers much at all in respect to work. I guess I have liked to travel as much as I have because I have always felt isolated & have known so few of my 'contemporaries' and nothing of 'intellectual' life in New York or anywhere. Actually it may be all to the good.[87]

Bishop was frequently anxious and frustrated at being so often and for so long outside the cultural focus. In her letters to Lowell and other friends she thirsts explicitly for literary gossip and discussion, making light of her demands to be kept in touch, but returning often enough to the same subject to leave her correspondent in no doubt as to the seriousness of her demand. Lowell became the audience and the public ear for Bishop's ironic, bitchy, humorous and often enraged self; he licensed her precise ferociousness and applauded observations in her letters that she, unlike him, would never make to a wider public. She could confront in her letters what she often simply avoided in the rest of her life, either by being literally elsewhere, or by being self-effacingly polite in public. In her early letters, between 1947 and 1951, before she left for Brazil and Lowell for Europe, Bishop's criticism touched on people as diverse as Randall Jarrell, Stephen Spender, Aldous Huxley, Somerset Maugham, Alfred Kazin ('The worst thing I've read in a long time is a prose poem sent around by Alfred Kazin as a new Year's present'), Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Richard Eberhart ('oh dear, I have an old teacher who writes to me a little like that, too. If not nearly so bad'), Malclom Cowley and

Archibald MacLeish ('mellifluous and meaningless as usual')[88] Bishop's closest friends and most revered artists, such as Moore and Auden, were as liable to feel the sharp edge of her tongue as people like Eberhart and Spender, for whom she never had anything good to say. Perhaps only Lowell himself was exempt (though she was unstinting in criticism later on when she saw the poems he planned to publish as The Dolphin)

Bishop had never felt as free with Marianne Moore as she did with Lowell to discuss her friend's writing. He provided her with her first, and possibly only, opportunity to dispute and praise the work of someone who was, in her opinion, both a great poet and a great friend. (Though she did something similar with both James Merrill and Frank Bidart, the friendship was never as strong with either, and she never had the same unswerving admiration for their work.) The two friends arranged meetings as often as possible in these early years of their friendship, spending sometimes just an evening together, and occasionally managing weeks, such as the two weeks they spent together in Maine in August 1948, which Lowell remembers in his poems for Bishop. Kalstone reconstructs the character of these early days between the two convincingly, declaring:

> The two poets could not have met at a better moment. Their friendship must in retrospect always have been colored by the immunity of those first two years. They were never lovers, but they had, then, something of the freedom of lovers with each other.[89]

Bishop's comments after reading a draft of "Thanksgiving's Over" give us an idea of the free play that she allowed herself when writing to Lowell about his work. She seemed to write her thoughts as they came to her, unhurried

and impressionistic, and allowed herself to range far from her usual exacting specificity into a realm of textures and motions, which infiltrates the very tempo of her own creativity:

> I like the poem more than I can say - it has the most unbearable, grayest New York atmosphere for me. In fact I can shed tears on it very easily & I hardly ever do that except on trash, frequently, & on something at the other extreme, very rarely. I think one weeps over two kinds of embarassment [sic] - & this is so embarassing [sic] in the right way one wants to read it without really looking at it directly - that damned celluloid kind...The rhetoric is wonderful, swaying back & forth - what I don't see is how you manage to get that effect with that metre that is so heavy the words seem to be jostling each other's shoulders - I made the mistake of reading it when I was working on a poem & it took me an hour or so to get back into my own metre[90]

The only way Bishop can cope with the powerful 'embarassment' that Lowell's poems work on her is by not looking at them directly. She copes with the unmanageable feelings they provoke, as she does in so many other areas of her life, by refusing to confront the poems directly, and approaches them, intstead, by her own circuitous route. The intimacy that the two friends had found would be sustained in the future precisely by the kind of freedom and expansiveness that they allowed themselves over one another's work. Even when living on different continents, the exchange of work and ideas (as well as gossip) continued. Lowell enunciated its importance in his third poem for Elizabeth Bishop, "Letter with Poems for a Letter with Poems", in which, not merely imitating, but actually copying out, Bishop's prose, he distils their epistolary exchange in its last two lines:

> Your last letter helped
> like being handed a lantern or a spiked stick.[91]

Throughout 1948 and into the early part of 1949 Bishop and Lowell were speculating on a trip to Europe together. Bishop had been examining freighter timetables that summer and wanted to get away for a year at least, and Lowell was enthusiastic to accompany her, if he was allowed out of the country as a convicted felon, after his imprisonment during the war as a conscientious objector. But, with his first breakdown in the spring of 1949, and her decision to take the Library of Congress consultantship that fall, their trip together never took place. The catastrophe of both her mother and one of her closest friends suffering serious breakdowns and being institutionalized could not have been lost on Bishop, and this would be compounded later in her life when two more lovers suffered terrible mental breakdowns.

Bishop went to Yaddo in the summer of 1949 for two weeks, but 'didn't like it' because of the atmosphere left over from the McCarthyite affair in which Lowell had been centrally involved earlier that year. That autumn she took up the consultantship post in Washington. She 'didn't like it much [either and] hated Washington', finding it an ugly place. 'There were so many government buildings that looked like Moscow.'[92] She recalled that although 'some of the poets fitted in rather well ...I didn't really earn my keep - I didn't give lectures and readings, in fact never do. But for the only time in my life I saw bureaucracy functioning, and it certainly contributed to my education.'[93] Her letters to Lowell at this time were full of gossip, but this may reflect more on Lowell's breakdown than on Bishop's state of mind (whenever she wrote to him after hearing of another breakdown, she always made her letters very cheery and full of "news"). Their friendship continued right through until Lowell's death in 1977. If

anything, it was fostered by their physical distance from one another, as Kalstone has observed:

> [Lowell's] friendship with Bishop - so removed from the scene and the fray [of his breakdowns] - had special easing powers. With her as with Peter Taylor, he writes, he never has to be diplomatic - there is 'no one else I can talk to with confidence and abandon and delicacy'.[94]

By the time Bishop set off for Brazil, Lowell was already in Europe, with his new wife Elizabeth Hardwick. From their vantage points, the two friends continued a conversation which was already important to them, and which became indispensable to their writing lives.

PLATE 8: Lota Soares

VII

WOMEN

Even in her letters to her closest friends, Bishop said little about her love affairs. Her decision to extend her visit to Brazil to an indefinite stay must have been largely due to the friend she met out there and whom she still insisted on calling 'my hostess' three months after she had arrived.[95] Bishop had first met Maria Carlota Costellat de Macedo Soares in New York, five or six years earlier according to Bishop, where they had 'known each other well', but they had not seen each other since then.[96] After their reacquaintance in Brazil, they lived together for the next sixteen years until Lota's untimely death in 1967. Bishop, as we might expect, describes her lover very little, even to friends she must have known were fiercely curious. The best account I have found of Lota comes from Elizabeth Hardwick, who provided this description for David Kalstone:

> [She was] witty indeed, civilized — and yet different from the women I had known. She had wonderful, glistening, dark eyes and wore glistening dark-rimmed glasses. You felt, or I felt, in her the legacy or curse of the Spanish-Portuguese women of the upper classes. Some of the privileges and many of the restraining expectations were there, and they were not altogether in balance because she was not smug and not naturally tropical and indolent. She spoke French and had lived in France, I think. Her English was fluent, fractured, and utterly compelling. [She was also] somehow melancholy too, the Iberian strain. I think there was great shyness also, and the rather unbalancing combination of the proper and misfit...
> L. was very intense indeed, emotional, also a bit insecure as we say, and loyal, devoted and smart and lesbian and Brazilian and shy, masterful in some ways, but helpless also. She adored Elizabeth and in the most attractive way, in this case somewhat fearfully, possessively, and yet modestly and without any tendency to oppress.[97]

Bishop never declared herself to be a lesbian, though neither did she make any secret of it. But she was so discreet that many of her acquaintances never knew (Adrienne Rich, for example, whom Bishop knew and liked, only found out after Bishop's death).

Although she had a few boyfriends, one of whom she mentions in her interview with Elizabeth Spires, Bishop only lived with women. She had close men friends, like Lowell, James Merrill and Frank Bidart (indeed, she seemed to need a close, male, poet-friend as muse more than she ever needed a female equivalent). But she spent most of her life in the company of women. When she was nineteen, while still at the Walnut Hill boarding school, she wrote a story which seems to articulate her disquiet about her feelings towards other women. The story is told in the first person, and the narrator describes falling in love with Sabrina, a beautiful and articulate woman. She seems perfect in every way except for one, Hawthorne- or Poe-like 'monstrosity': she has 'a man's thumb!':

> a brute's - a heavy, coarse thumb with a rough nail, square at the end, crooked and broken...It was a horrible thumb, a prize fighter's thumb, the thumb of some beast, some obscene creature knowing only filth and brutality...[98]

After their first meeting over afternoon tea, the narrator cannot help visiting more and more frequently, despite the horror and disgust which the thumb arouses, and the two characters fall in love. Unable to say anything to Sabrina about her peculiar deformity, the narrator finally touches it for the first time:

> I felt that rough, swollen knuckle, those stiff, coarse hairs against my palm...I have never felt the disgust, the profound fear and rage of that moment...
> ...Anyway, I got up and left her without a word and I never went back.[99]

Bishop never identifies the sex of her narrator. It could be man or woman. Whichever Bishop intended it to be, the narrator's horror at the beautiful woman's hideous part must touch upon Bishop's fears at that time about her own powerful emotions towards women, which would certainly have been regarded as unnatural in the 1930's. Sabrina is like one of Sherwood Anderson's grotesques; perhaps most like the figure of Wing Biddlebaum (in "Hands"), whose hands have a nervous life of their own, and who has fled to Winesburg, Ohio to live out in private the torment of his homosexuality. It seems likely that Bishop would have read Winesburg, Ohio, though this story is the only occasion I have discovered on which she used such an explicit figure to question sexual difference.

In contrast to her friend Lowell, Bishop was consistently discreet about her lovers. Her letters do not read like his, with his (almost weekly) new objects of affection and of desire. She talked about affairs of the heart in very offhand ways, even to him, and almost never named names. An unfinished poem that I believe she may well have written during her time at Key West makes the object of her erotic desire very clear. It is hard to believe that she would ever have published so explicit a sexual declaration, however good the final version. The poem is titled, "VAGUE POEM (Vaguely love poem)", and it turns on the image of Rock Roses.[100] The first three or four stanzas are occupied with a discussion of the crystal forms

which comprise the roses, and in the final stanza Bishop uses this image to turn the poem to her lover's body:

> Just now, when I saw you naked again,
> I thought the same words: rose-rock; rock-rose...
> rose, trying, working, to show itself,
> unimaginable connections, unseen, shining edges,
> forming, folding over,
> Rose-rock, unformed, flesh beginning, crystal by crystal,
> clear pink breasts and darker, crystalline nipples,
> rose-rock, rose-quartz, roses, roses, roses,
> exacting roses from the body,
> and the even darker, accurate rose of sex -[101]

This and other unpublished poems (for example "It is marvellous to wake up together", discovered by Lorrie Goldensohn in Brazil) demonstrate that Bishop was covert rather than coy, placing fierce constraints around what she decided to publish.

PLATE 9: Bishop with cat, Sítio da Alcobaçinha, Petrópolis

VIII

BRAZIL

The freighter, headed for Tierra del Fuego, that carried Bishop to Brazil, on the first leg of the tour she had planned, following the route taken by the sixteenth-century explorer Magellan around South America, in November of 1951, had little to recommend it, as she reports in a letter to Lowell, written after seventeen days on board:

> This is a very small freighter...it's Norwegian, and hired by the Duponts - to take an enormous cargo of jeeps, combines, etc. There are 9 passengers; that includes a sad young missionary - "Assemblies of God" - and wife and three little boys. The rest of us are an Uruguyan consul from N.Y., a refined but sea-sick lady, and another lady whom fortunately I like very much...a 6 ft. ex-police woman who has retired after being head of the Women's Jail in Detroit for 26 yrs. She's about 70; very gentle and polite - tells how she accidentally solved such and such a murder, in an apologetic way & dreams of going down through the Straits & up the West Coast - has also invited me to inspect a few jails with her en route...[102]

Who knows, Bishop might have accepted the gentle giant's offer had she not been struck down with a violent allergy to some caçhu fruit she had bought from a street vender in Rio on her arrival in Brazil.[103] Instead, she had to be content with putting the police-woman into her first poem about Brazil, "Arrival at Santos":

> Watch out! Oh! It has caught Miss Breen's
>
> skirt! There! Miss Breen is about seventy,
> a retired police lieutenant, six feet tall,
> with beautiful bright blue eyes and a kind expression. (C.P.89)

Synopses of Bishop's life have always cited the caçhu fruit allergy as the reason she did not continue with her journey in Magellan's footsteps, but stayed in Brazil. Although she presumably offered this piece of information for use in a chronology (such as that in World Literature Today) Bishop seems never to have mentioned the illness directly, in letters or interviews. Perhaps she saw almost immediately that her fortuitous stay had left her in a country that could become more than an accidental extension of her itinerary. It could become her own new found land, her Brazil to Donne's America.[104] Bishop's poetic eye would rove just as far as Donne's amorous hands. And so, rare amongst her fellow poets from either continent, she made her America out of both its North (the United States) and its South (Brazil).

About three months after her arrival, Bishop remarked to Lowell, who was still roaming Europe, 'I've seen so little of the country, actually, and it is so tremendous - probably it is all too formless for you, and not nearly enough people.'[105] For Bishop, however, it was perfect. As Ashley Brown noticed, the Brazilian landscape has an 'unexpected surrealist quality', and it offered up what Bishop had previously had to search out (in poems like "Paris, 7 A.M.", "Large Bad Picture" or "The Man-Moth").[106] And far from finding too few people, Bishop was soon living within a family whose scale and complexity matched anything Lowell could attempt.

By leaving North America for South America in 1951 Bishop avoided the inquisitive and proprietorial gaze of the literary establishment. Although the society she entered in Brazil was, if anything, more nosey than the one she had left in the United States, it asked different questions and had

different assumptions. Bishop forfeited her planned 'trip around the Horn' with alacrity, and soon described herself, with little apparent irony, as a 'Brazilian home-body'.[107] The woman who had never really had a home finally discovered its engrossing power by changing continents and starting out in a different culture to the one she already knew. Although she says very little about her relationship with Lota, a remark she made to Lowell a year and a half after her arrival in Brazil hints at the importance it held for both of them. As so often, Bishop disguises her desire, here explaining the event first in terms of Lota's practical needs, as though she herself were passive:

> I arrived to visit Lota just at the point where she really wanted someone to stay with her in the new house she was building. We'd known each other well in New York but I hadn't seen her for five or six years. She wanted me to stay; she offered to build me a studio...I certainly didn't really want to wander around the world in a drunken daze for the rest of my life - so it's all fine & dandy.[108]

In this same letter to Lowell Bishop explains:

> I don't feel "out of touch" or "expatriated" or anything like that, or suffer from lack of intellectual life, etc - I was always too shy to have much "intercommunication" in New York, anyway, and I was miserably lonely there most of the time - here I am extremely happy, for the first time in my life.[109]

Bishop's new life in Brazil offered her a kind of paradox. As Ashley Brown observed: 'She knew exactly who she was, and she knew how to live in a foreign country'.[110] Living in Brazil legitimated Bishop's sense of herself as an outsider, as though she found it easier to be one in somebody else's homeland than in her own.

Being an American abroad was a role to which Bishop was accustomed long before she arrived in Brazil. Never at home, and always a guest, like so many fellow-American writers, Bishop had always felt somehow abroad. Paradoxically, she came closer to establishing a home in Brazil than she did anywhere else in her life, but without ever needing to forfeit her visiting rights. Set against her feeling as an outsider was Bishop's newly-discovered absorption in a family life that caused her pleasure, at the start, and not pain. Setting up house with her new lover meant taking on Lota's huge extended family, "grandchildren", godchildren, adopted sons, servants' children. Brought up as an only and lonely child, such profusion must have been quite new to Bishop, both exhilarating and bewildering in the demands it made upon her affections and her need for solitude. She was engrossed by the daily, domestic details of her life, like fetching the kerosene, playing with the various babies and small children who lived in the house at any time, and cooking when the cook was away:

> for about a month I did the cooking - I like to cook, etc., but I'm not used to being confronted with the raw materials, all un-shelled, un-blanched, un-skinned, or un-dead...Well, I can cook goat now - with wine sauce - And we have a new cook[111]

She celebrated these acts as though they were her rites of passage into a new world, as indeed they were. She relinquished her imitation of another's voyage (Magellan's) for the pursuit of her own, more important one. This new voyage of discovery not only put her in touch with a new landscape, but also with that old, most painful, one of her childhood.

Within two years of her arrival in Brazil, Bishop had written and published two stories about her childhood. Both deal with the period before she was removed from Great Village, Nova Scotia when she was about seven, and the second, "In the Village", tells of a small child's loss of her mother to insanity, and her attempt, in the face of such impossible loss, to construct her world around her. Bishop had avoided writing about her own history in any direct way up to now. But the new life she discovered in Brazil must have offered her the security and reassurance against which she could set her memories of most profound disruption.

Lota introduced Bishop to Rio society, which she jokingly described to Lowell in 1953 as 'Proust in the tropics with a samba instead of Venteuil's [sic] little phrase - no, that's cheap, - but sort of.'[112] She fast got to know 'through Lota, most of the Brazilian "intellectuals"' and quickly immersed herself in Brazilian literature, particularly the poetry.[113] Periodically she expressed her frustration over the isolation she had chosen, usually in remarks to Lowell which compared his articulateness with her tongue-tiedness and his wealth of intellectual friends with her dearth:

> I wish I were more articulate and I suppose I'll never be now, living off in the mountains and meeting only Brazilian intellectuals who got stuck at Valéry, and with whom I really am silent, necessarily...[114]

But she would probably have felt herself to be inarticulate and outside the centre wherever and whatever it was, and wherever she had ended up living.

Bishop's new companion came from a highly prestigious, aristocratic liberal family, with a long political and intellectual tradition. Lota

seems to have had no job when Bishop arrived in Brazil, but she later worked, unpaid, as a town planner and administrator (a highly political job, as the affairs leading up to the 1964 revolution were to prove) from 1961 until her death six years later. Bishop never makes quite clear in the correspondence I have seen where Lota's income came from. Though she was clearly well off, the constraints Bishop described on their lives throughout her time in Brazil suggest that Lota was not rich. Possibly, like her sister, her wealth was tied up in land and the annuity she lived on may, like Bishop's, have become smaller over the years in real terms. (After her death, Bishop had to deal with various pieces of Rio real estate, that must have belonged to her lover.) She had a large library with particularly good collections of psychoanalytic, architectural and French literature, and Bishop once described their life together as one in which 'both Lota and I read from 7 A M intermittently until 1 A M every day'.[115]

When Bishop arrived in Brazil, Lota was just supervising the completion of a house for herself above Petrópolis, a fashionable mountain resort, two hours drive from Rio. Sítio da Alcobaçinha, in the Samambaia section, was designed for her by Sergio Bernardes, one of Brazil's leading architects. Built of glass and steel, split-level, it was 'ultra-modern... [and stood] up on the side of a black granite mountain, with a waterfall at one end, clouds coming into the living room in the middle of the conversation, etc.' Dos Passos had someone describe it as 'a little like the model of an oldfashioned railroad station' in his American propagandist book on Brazil, Brazil On the Move.[117] But Ashley Brown, who did not have the same investment in disparagement of Brazilian culture as Dos Passos, described the house as a pleasurable, invigorating place:

> [It was] long and low [going] off in several directions from a room, open much of the time, where people breakfasted or dined. Indeed, most of the house could be open, and I remember with delight the humming-birds that darted through...you could go forward onto a great stone terrace that overlooked the valley towards Petrópolis...If you walked up from the house you came to Elizabeth's study [the one Lota promised to build her], a small cottage. This was situated above a waterfall that rushed down the mountainside [and which Bishop had] dammed, just momentarily, to make a tiny swimming pool, and you could descend there from the study through a clump of bamboos.[118]

Bishop and Lota spent much of their first nine years in Samambaia. When Lota got her job in 1961, they were forced, much to Bishop's dismay, to spend increasing amounts of time in Rio. Lota also had an apartment in Leme (a district of Rio) which overlooked one of Rio's famous beaches. Bishop based her poem, "The Burglar of Babylon" on her own experience of watching soldiers hunt down a wanted man on the morro of Babylon, 'through binoculars from the terrace of the apartment'.[119] The poem points up the unease she often felt in Rio, with its prosperous streets overlooked by the 'fearful stain' of the poor who live on the hills surrounding the city, in their frail favelas. Bishop almost never wrote directly about poverty and social conditions, though poems like "Manuelzinho", "The Burglar of Babylon", "Squatter's Children" and "Pink Dog" and stories like "Gregorio Valdes", "Mercedes Hospital" and "A Trip to Vigia" form various kinds of exception. Nevertheless, as her letters testify, she was painfully affected by what she saw in Rio, and often made spontaneous acts of generosity. Brown recalls how:

> After an evening at [the nightclub] Zicartola I would escort her home to Leme, a seaside district where she lived part of the time in a shabby but convenient penthouse. At the entrance to the apartment building, as likely as not, an abandoned child would be huddled asleep on some newspapers. Without saying a word, Elizabeth took a sweater

from her bag, placed it over the child, and let herself into the building.[120]

But high up on her granite mountain, far from the spectacle of human poverty, Bishop was where she wanted to be: away from everyone, and surrounded by the excesses of Brazilian flora, fauna and animal life that she so revelled in.

The small trust fund established for Bishop out of the money her father left her went much further in Brazil than it had done in the United States. Bishop never had to take on a job during her years there, though she received the awards and fellowships that came her way occasionally very gratefully. She lamented the constraints that her financial situation put on her ability to travel, but always celebrated the privilege her history had endowed her with: the freedom to write. Although she was often self-disparaging in her letters to Lowell about the small amount she achieved compared to him, there lurked beneath even her most bitter lament an awareness that she could write no other way, and that her dedication to her art was as intense as Lowell's to his.

PLATE 10:
Bishop's photograph of thatched houses by the Rio São Francisco

IX

WRITING IN A FOREIGN LAND

As well as continuing to write, Bishop embarked on translations almost as soon as she arrived. In September of 1952 she was already quizzing her friends, the Summers, about possible publishers for a translation she had decided to do of the Brazilian classic, Minha Vida de Menina, or "My Life as a Little Girl". Two years later she was 'about half through it' and it was finally published in the States in 1958.[121] Bishop described it to Lowell as

> the diary of a little girl - sounds awful, I fear - a girl from 12-15, living in a mining town called Diamantina, in the [18]90's. There's a huge family of aunts and uncles and ex-slaves, ruled by a grandmother, all very poor and religious and superstitious, and the girl really wrote extremely well. She is funny and hard-headed and the anecdotes are very full of detail about the life, food, clothes, priests, etc. - I sort of think you'll like it. She is now a rich old dowager in Rio[122]

Bishop's translation of this diary, written by a gregarious, flirtatious teenager, who is surrounded by her large family and living in a close-knit community, isolated from the rest of Brazil, began at just the time that she was writing her own stories, about her bereft and dislocated childhood. Her introduction praised the diarist's fluency and natural sense of 'the right quotation, or detail, the gag-line, and where to stop.'[123] She compared her to La Fontaine in that 'she winds up her stories with a neat moral that doesn't apply too exactly [and] sometimes, for variety's sake, she starts off with the moral instead'.[124] Bishop admired a style which was

acutely different from her own, in her admittedly retrospective, account of her childhood: a snappy and appositely punctuated rhetoric, as opposed to one in which definitions break down, or cannot be sustained. Helena is pragmatic, optimistic and vain about her evident beauty; she represents the antithesis to Bishop's memory of her own, childhood self. In Brazil Bishop found a way to celebrate the familial life that she never had. She did it by living as a foreigner there, both part of yet separate from the family she shared with her lover for sixteen years; and she did it by translating this homely diary, whose author is beset by none of the dangers with which the young child in "In the Village" has to contend.

In 1955 Bishop's second book of poems came out, Poems: North & South - A Cold Spring. Lowell had written a blurb for it which even he remarked might strike the publishers 'as rather glibly lavish'.[125] His praise must have given her intense pleasure, but perhaps the remark that would have thrilled her most was Jarrell's, also quoted in this blurb: 'all her poems have written underneath, I have seen it'.[126] Throughout her life Bishop testified to the value she placed in things actually seen, and she celebrated accurate transcription (something she rated most highly in the work of Marianne Moore). By translating other people's work, she enabled herself to write about things she had not seen, allowing herself, indirectly, to make things up. Bishop did not start to publish her translations until 1963 (apart from the Diary), though she offered to send Lowell a translation of one of Camões's sonnets as early as July 1953. In 1956 Bishop was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and given a Partisan Review fellowship. North America may have found her residence in Brazil

hard to understand at times (certainly her friends did on occasions) but it continued to recognize her as one of its finest contemporary poets.

Although she made occasional trips to the United States during the 1950's and '60's, and talked of making many more, Bishop seemed engrossed in her Brazilian foster-home. She repeated her declaration of happiness to Lowell in 1955, after three and a half years in Brazil, adding to it her astonishment at her own alteration:

> I am extremely happy here, although I can't quite get used to being "happy", but one remnant of my old morbidity is that I keep fearing that the few people I'm fond of may be in automobile accidents, or suffer some sort of catastrophe...The word for even a small accident here is "desastre" so I often have false alarms.[127]

There is no reason to doubt Bishop's claim of happiness, even though she clearly suffered from homesickness for the old culture (if homesickness could ever be the right word). Writing to her in September of 1956 Lowell pleaded with her:

> Miss Moore says that you hunger for news from America and keep up a correspondence with people that would ordinarily bore you to tears. Please put me back on your list.[128]

Bishop's letters to close friends were packed with domestic incidents, local gossip, and laments over her own idleness. Her life was taken up with the daily affairs of her Brazilian household, with its cook, gardener and occasional maids, and with the trials and celebrations of her large adopted family. At the same time she wrote of her difficulties with writing and her excitement over new ideas; she made requests for articles she had missed,

or books she couldn't get hold of; and she gave her opinions about recent articles, books read and the goings-on of mutual friends, and foe.

Here is a typical mixture from one of her Brazilian letters. When Lota's sister became suddenly ill, her nephew came to stay with Bishop, while Lota went to Rio to care for her sister. Bishop became particularly close to this quasi-nephew, Flavio, and described him to Lowell as a fifteen year old, 'very neurasthenic gangling boy, with big horn rimmed glasses, who reads twenty hours a day and has asthma'.[129] The association with her own, teenage self is not hard to find, as she found: 'He reminds me a little of myself at the same age except that I combined being asthmatic with also being athletic'.[130] In this same letter, Bishop told of the long-awaited arrival of a hi-fi system at Samambaia, and talked of the Webern record she had bought, of which she listened to parts every day, still not being able to 'take very much of the songs'. She bragged:

> I think I'm so smart, because when you played me one piece I immediately thought it seemed like the musical equivalent of Klee - now, according to the notes [on the new record] Webern was actually a member of the Blue Rider group[131]

And at this moment, as she was writing the letter, it seemed to occur to her that Webern epitomized something that was characteristic in artists who were important to her:

> [it is to be found] in almost everything contemporary one really likes - Kafka, say, or Marianne [Moore], or even Eliot, and Klee and Kokoschka and Schwitters...Modesty, care, space, a sort of helplessness but determination at the same time.[132]

But, as often happened, she seemed unable to take her own pretentions too seriously, and immediately after cast off her idea with the dismissive, 'Well, maybe I'm hearing too much.'[133] The rest of the letter is filled with anecdotes about her ordinary life - running out of food, the dangers of Brazilian buses, and the appealing ignorance of the maid - as well as with earnest questions about her friend's health. Much of her correspondence with Lowell is characterized by this fluid, witty mix of genres, in which her astonishment and pleasure at the peculiar diversity of the ordinary world combine with musings about her art, with humour and despair chasing and chastening one another through her sentences.

Bishop's residence in Brazil meant she could allow herself to be quotable. It has provided her critics with far more direct quotation than we would ever have had if she had remained in the United States, as her conversations with American friends became, of necessity, epistolary in form. As I mentioned earlier, in letters to friends, and especially in her correspondence with Lowell, she let her tongue roll as never in interview. Although she was an absentee American poet from 1951 until the late 1960's, she kept a close eye, and gave a sharp commentary, on American letters in her own letters.

Brazil suited Bishop's eye. Its landscape offered her in excess 'the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life' which was part of the world she saw.[134] To her Brazil was 'as beautiful as a Rousseau jungle'. It had 'an awful lot of weather' and she found things to be 'very much out of scale...or out of our scale, that is...there are toads as big as your hat and snails as big as bread & butter plates'.[135] She celebrated the pro-

fusion of this new world, often describing the season in her letters to friends:

> Right now here is the week or ten days in which all the grass, the "Mato" goes to seed, all over the mountains. First it turns paler, and then white, then silver, then red at the tops - it's really quite incredible with the sun on it, a sort of translucent rose-red[136]

In a letter to Lowell at a time of political uproar and personal difficulty Bishop still couldn't help admitting:

> I have never seen the damnable country look lovelier...All the flowering trees are in blossom, delicate patches of color all up the mountains, and nearer to they glisten with little floating webs of mist, gold spider-webs, iridescent butterflies - this is the season for the big pale blue-silver floppy ones, hopelessly impractical, frequently frayed, in vague couples. They hover over our little pool, and pink blossoms fall into it, and there are so many dragon flies - some invisible except as dots of white or ruby red or bright blue plush or velvet - then they catch the light and you see the body and wings are really there, steely blue wire-work...Well - you missed this dazzlingness - Lots of rainbows - a double one over the sea just now with three freighters going off under it in three different directions[137]

While other North American artists found what they desired in the landscape of their own, newly-discovered continent, Bishop finally found what she wanted elsewhere.[138]

PLATE 11:
Bishop's photograph of a steamship on the Rio São Francisco

X

TRAVELS AT HOME AND ABROAD

Bishop's plans to travel the rest of the world remained unfulfilled in the late 1950's and early '60's, largely due to lack of funds, and despite receiving several fellowships like the Amy Lowell and the Chapelbrook. She did continue to visit New York occasionally, including an extended visit of eight months in 1957 and two months there in 1963. Lota's decision in 1961 to take on the job, unpaid, of "Chief Co-ordinatress" of the creation of a new, huge public park in Rio called "The Fill" also made it very difficult for the couple to leave the country; they were compelled to cancel plans to travel to Europe on at least two occasions. They made two trips to Europe in the 1960's, the first shortly after the revolution which toppled Goulart, which I will discuss later. This journey was mainly in Italy, with an itinerary around the paintings of Piero della Francesca. Bishop took great delight in his pictures, more than twenty years after she had last seen them, but she found the Italian countryside 'all a bit too bland and pampered for my taste'.[139] Unlike her companion, she had developed a particular love for the vast, uncontrolled space of Brazil. They based the second trip, in 1967, around London. Lota, who had recently suffered a nervous breakdown, became increasingly ill, hating London more and more, and although Bishop loved the city, she, too, was relieved to leave, and return to Brazil.

Although her travel abroad was constrained by money and personal affairs, Bishop travelled widely in Brazil. She visited Diamantina, high up

in the mountains of Minas Gerais while researching the Diary of Helena Morley, and travelled deep into the interior with Aldous Huxley and his wife in Air Force 'planes to 'see some Indians', the Uialapiti tribe.[140] The tribe was, she said, 'quite naked, just a few beads; handsome, plump, behaving just like gentle children a little spoiled.... Sometime I hope to go back there and spend a few days'.[141] In 1960 she finally made her first trip up the Amazon, not with Lota, who disliked travelling within her own "uncivilized" country, but with a hypochondriacal friend called Rosinha and her nephew. Bishop's account of the trip in letters to friends described a river world in which, as in her own poems, the bizarre is part of ordinary life. And she celebrated its profusions - whether of dogs, people, babies, turtles or birds:

> The birds were marvellous - I never dreamed there were so many in the world - imagine huge dead trees, all silver, standing in the river and laden, covered, with hundreds of white herons, each like a candelabra, just at sundown. Also egrets, flamingos, all kinds of water birds - parrots[142]

She wrote to Lowell on her return that she wanted to go back to the Amazon, and that she dreamed dreams every night about it, but she never did. Instead, she assuaged her need to move about by making short, exploratory trips of a few days. She made two trips by herself up the Rio São Francisco, ~~both by herself~~, the first in 1962 and the second in 1967. For one of these trips she wrote an unpublished journalistic piece, "A Trip on the Rio São Francisco", which she probably hoped to include in the collection of essays on Brazil that she was planning to publish. Bishop had

a very low opinion of travel books about Brazil, and wanted to contribute something worthwhile:

> The old naturalists are the only good writers on the subject I've ever read - and perhaps Lévi-Straus. I look at them all, out of curiosity, and I haven't seen one decent travel-book in years. Mine should be more of a "memoir", I think[143]

But her plan also seems to have been devised to offset her disgust at the Time/Life Brazil, for which she had written the text, though she never says so. Unfortunately she never completed this book of essays, and all that survives of it are the short pieces published after her death in The Collected Prose.[144] Until her letters are published, Bishop's readers have been left to find her account of Brazil in her poems, and, more dubiously, in her Time/Life text.

After the trip up the Amazon, Bishop seemed anxious about how she was to read her foster-country:

> I worry a great deal about what to do with all this accumulation of exotic or picturesque or charming detail, and I don't want to become a poet who can only write about South America, etc - it is one of my greatest worries now - how to use everything and keep on living here, most of the time, probably - and yet be a New Englander-herring-choker -bluenoser at the same time.[145]

One solution was to write the text for a projected Time/Life book on Brazil. It would make money, and would necessitate a down-to-earth narrative. She would have to "cover" the Amazon culture, the natural landscape, the old rituals, as well as industrial development, the building of the new capital, Brasilia, the history of the country and its politics. She

would also have to deal with the poor: 'the poor processed by style', Charles Tomlinson called them.[146] The book came out in 1962 amid Bishop's cries of shame, directed at both the editors, and at herself. She did not put Lowell on the mailing list because, she told him, she 'was hoping you'd never see that damned - really damned - book':

> They made changes in my text even after I left...I don't think there are more than 20 sentences of mine left unchanged...I am writing them that LETTER they want - but I suspect all their writers did and then didn't send it. It's like mailing a snowflake to Devil's Island, more or less[147]

Bishop added the words 'more or less' to the sentence describing her as the author of the book's 'interpretative text' in her own copy, and wrote at the top of the Contents page: 'I am not responsible for chapter headings or captions - although I tried to correct captions.'[148] What she objected to, she said, was:

> not the opinions - I agreed with most of them pretty much, then...But it is such a mess, as far as style goes - full of grammatical mistakes - half-sentences, "howevers" that don't mean anything etc - ...However - a lot of people coming here [to Brazil] have told me they found it "useful", and that's something to be grateful for. - And it isn't really <u>too</u> distorted.[149]

The friends who praised the book either could not hear, or they chose not to mention, the tone of condescension that runs through much of the text. Bishop's attempt to celebrate her foster-country as broadly as possible suffers from inaccurate generalization, and, possibly, the effort to please the kind of public who read Time/Life books. Although she celebrates the country's extraordinary landscape, the arts, diversity of

culture and race, the people's 'belief in tolerance and forbearance' and the importance of the family, Bishop is naive about the racial and class differences.[150] She asserts, for example, that 'Such [racial] discrimination as does exist is based on economic, social or educational grounds rather than on racial ones. The country has no anti-Semitism'.[151] Yet on the same page she describes the racist attitudes that Brazilians have for the 17,000 or so Portuguese immigrants to Brazil each year. They are to the Brazilians what the Irish are to the British, suffering as the butt of jokes about absurd literal-mindedness. She chooses to remain silent over the appalling decimation of the country's original Indian population by the colonizing peoples - perhaps she felt sensitive about the Indians in her own, almost native, land. Instead she describes them as 'Brazil's most fascinating minority group...whose protection and well-being the Brazilian Government has for many years tried to ensure.'[152] But the area in which Bishop's own prejudice is expressed most clearly is in her account of the contemporary political situation. She makes no attempt to hide her loathing of communism, and in this she must have endeared herself to the Time/Life editors. In letters, Bishop comments on the differences between communism in Brazil and the United States. In her opinion Brazilian communists are corrupt whereas those in the United States are not. But she makes no such distinction in the Time/Life book, destined for the North American market.[153] Since it came out at the height of the Cold War and a year after the Bay of Pigs crisis, such an omission seems politically naive. Bishop's naivety, however, pales to nothing beside Dos Passos's chauvinism, expressed in a book published the year after Brazil.

Bishop wanted to celebrate the Brazilian people. Dos Passos (whom she had met and disliked) had a different brief for his contemporaneous book about Brazil. By 1958, when the two met, he had relinquished the communism that partly motivates his great novels of the 1920's and 1930's, Manhatten Transfer and the trilogy, U.S.A., for a Cold War cynicism, marked by disbelief in the capacity of communism to deliver its promises anywhere in the world. Brazil on the Move (1963) tells a story in which the poor and ignorant cousin, Brazil, is lifted up by its bootstraps by its kind, generous, wise, patient and tolerant relative, the United States. In Dos Passos's account, the Brazilians are almost all lazy, indolent fools, save only those who have been educated by the United States, and, if the United States does not teach them otherwise, then they know no better than to welcome the terrible communists with open arms. His book is little more than American anti-communist propaganda; Bishop's, at least, is ingenuous. When they met at a lunch party in 1958, Dos Passos was in Brazil at the invitation of the Brazilian State Department, 'to see Brasilia and write a piece about it for Reader's Digest' and, Bishop went on, 'that should have been warning enough...as our opinions on Brasilia were violently opposed that best subject of conversation had to be steered clear of.'[154] Bishop's "politeness" ensured that there was no violent public disagreement; unlike her fiery-tempered lover, Bishop deflected her passions and quietened them so that only she could hear them. She used decorum as a defence against exposing her real feelings. Dos Passos not only mentioned this meal in his book, but also Lota's appointment by Carlos Lacerda, then Governor of Guanabara, to superintend his plan for a huge public park in Rio. When the book was published, he sent a copy to Lota. Bishop dismissed it in a letter to Lowell, declaring that it was:

> so shoddy I can't even read it - and so superficial. He sent it to Lota - mentions her various times, once as "a small woman in striped pants" - L. is furious; says she has never had a pair of striped pants in her life.[155]

Dos Passos's description of Lota as a woman who drove those who worked under her fairly but very hard was not mentioned by Bishop, perhaps because it reflected something of her lover's determined, even obsessive, nature.

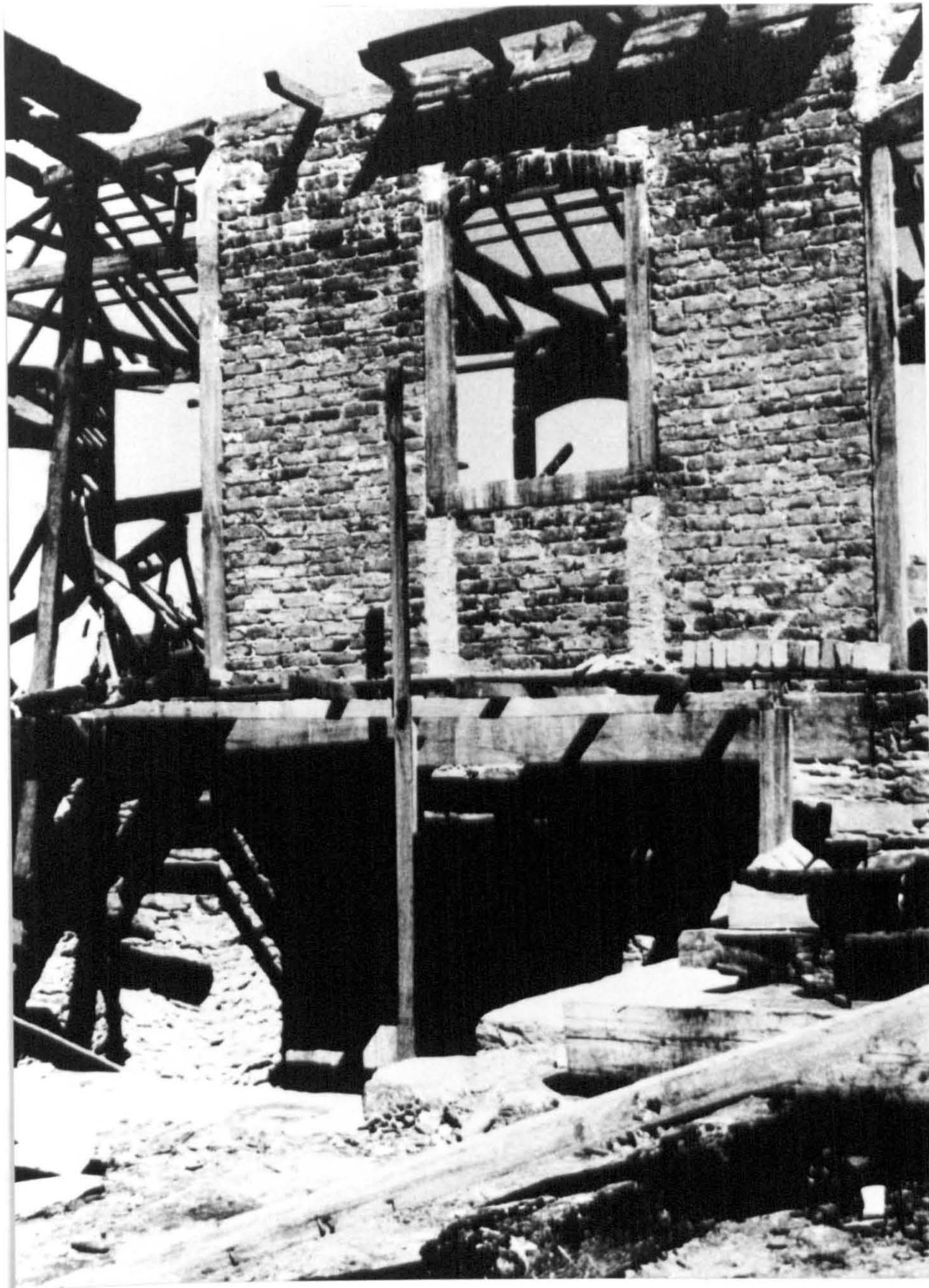

PLATE 12:
Casa Marianna, Ouro Prêto, before Bishop began its restoration

XI

THE TERRIBLE YEARS

During the sixteen years that Bishop lived in Brazil, a number of political dramas took place. Bishop always thought that politics, like religion, should be part of the background, rather than the foreground, and her position as a politically apathetic democrat stook her in good stead for her life in Brazil. In this foreign land she was free to watch but freed from participation (though her own North American government often meddled covertly in Brazilian affairs). From this perspective she pitied Lota: because her 'family has been in politics, etc for so long, she has been...depressed about the state of the country ever since I've been here - (Thank God I don't have to take the U.S. elections so personally - although they are depressing enough.)'[156]

Brazil's republic had been firmly established in 1889, with the flight of Dom Pedro II, the last of Brazil's Braganza monarchs.[157] Stability was harder to achieve. Between 1889 and 1930 Brazil experienced see-saw shifts in governments and their home and foreign affairs. The country swayed between economic booms and recessions, and between one foreign ally and another. Forty years after limited democracy had been established, the New York Wall Street crash of October 1929 made way for Brazil's first lengthy dictatorship. After being defeated in the elections of March 1930, Getúlio Vargas, governor of Rio Grande do Sul, seized power, with the help of the military and with grandiose promises of economic and social change. Though he had not shown any strongly dictatorial instinct, in 1937 he made himself

into one, declaring a state of siege in the country, and suspending the imminent presidential elections. He held power for the next fifteen years, standing down at the end of the Second World War when he sensed 'that the population was about to boil over' as riots, demonstrations, and illegal strikes abounded and people expressed their frustration at the corruption and indolence surrounding the dictatorship.

In 1950, the year before Bishop arrived in Brazil, Vargas was democratically re-elected, aided by his highly efficient political 'machine'.[158] This 'opportunist and...shrewd politician' was finally defeated by the determination of Carlos Lacerda, Bishop and Lota's journalist friend.[159] He stridently denounced Vargas on every opportunity, and when an attempt was made on his life by someone close to the President, the call came for Vargas to resign. After agreeing to stand down, he shot himself through the heart. The man elected in 1955 to succeed Vargas was Juscelino Kubitschek. He undertook the building of the new capital, Brasilia, and expanded Brazil's industrial base while continuing the graft of corruption within which Brazilian government functioned. He was followed by Janio Quadros, who promised to sweep away the corruption and graft of the Vargas and Kubitschek years.

Quadros's enthusiastic beginning was soon tainted, for Bishop and Lota, by his increasingly strong Communist gestures (such as awarding Che Guevara the Order of the Southern Cross, Brazil's highest award for foreigners). When his aspirations for greater executive control were discovered and publically denounced on radio and television, he resigned. His Vice-President, Joao Goulart, was left to pick up the Presidency in August,

1961, only eight months after Quadros had won it. Bishop described Goulart as 'demagogic, opportunistic, Left-wing, and a political uncertainty'.[160] She mistrusted Brazilian Communism, which she thought was more often 'political opportunism which in a crisis might easily turn in either direction, Left or Right, whichever seemed to promise the most personal power or gain'.[161] Goulart certainly had radical reforms in mind, such as 'land expropriation on a large scale, and the virtual confiscation of foreign investments. He wanted to give illiterates the right to vote and to legalize the Communist Party...[and] he called for a stronger president who would deal directly with the people and not congress.'[162] But he also had to deal with appallingly slow economic growth, a huge foreign debt and social and political disorder in the impoverished north.

Bishop gives a vivid account of Goulart's overthrowal in her letters to Lowell and the Summers in the early months of 1964. She was not concerned about his national policies or economic strategies. But she was convinced that he was a Communist, intent on overthrowing Brazilian democracy and in league with China and Russia. She even wished that the United States President would intervene. And she was anxious for Lota's safety. Lota's job as Superintendent of Lacerda's public park project (a pet concern of his) meant that she was in the thick of the political fray which surrounded Goulart's last days in power.

When Lota took on the job as Superintendent, Bishop's letters were regularly filled with admiration at her commitment to the job, and at her ability to fight her corner. But she was also concerned about the long

hours Lota insisted on working. Where Bishop was apathetic over politics, Lota came from a family which had been closely involved in Brazilian politics for generations. Although intense in manner and seemingly prone to depression, Lota seemed to thrive on publicity. Unlike Bishop, she enjoyed being in the public eye. As Bishop remarked proudly in 1963:

> Lota is flabbergasting me more every day - Her latest triumph is too long to go into - but she has really saved a big hunk of the city, done a crook out of a few extra millions, all in about 48 hours - and while she saves the doomed city of Rio, I shut my self up with my air-conditioner and try to forget it'[163]

Despite the melodrama, Bishop was not exaggerating the differences she saw between them. She was free to celebrate in someone else what she hated in herself. During the revolution of 1964, which toppled Goulart, Lota was working right in the midst of all the furore. To Bishop she seemed 'wonderful these days - thinks clearly, says what she thinks, and gets away with it. - She and one man have the reputation of being the only people who aren't afraid to yell at Carlos'.[164]

Carlos Lacerda was Governor of Rio in 1964. He had been involved in the demise of at least two earlier Presidents, and was using his considerable oratory to brilliant effect as usual. He was campaigning in the newspapers and on television, for the overthrowal of Goulart and the defeat of communism, as well as in pursuit of his own political advancement. Both Lota and Bishop supported Lacerda, though with important reservations. They believed that though he had megalomaniac tendencies, he was the best hope Brazil had for defeating Communism and helping to ensure democracy. Bishop had described him in 1959 as 'a good example of the

power-type'.[165] As the opposition to Goulart mounted in the 1960's, and the political situation got more unstable and chaotic, she became more uneasy about him. In 1963 she affirmed:

> Lota and I] do NOT approve of C. in many ways - and he is dangerous, when there is no one else...he is scornful of the men who work with him, and shows it - and so he may never accomplish anything, or [he may] do something "dangerous", like try to be some sort of dictator[166]

But when the revolution broke out on April 1st, 1964, he was the only man able to control or direct the situation at all, and Bishop found herself impressed with his extraordinary impromptu speeches and his powers of oration. And despite her qualms about her lover's health, she was proud that Lota worked till all hours, often alongside her powermongering friend. It is ironic that Bishop's first piece of strong political support, her pragmatic support of Lacerda, should be for a revolution which led to the first Brazilian dictatorship for almost thirty years.

The letters Bishop wrote during the spring of 1964, mainly to Lowell, were unlike any she wrote at any other time. For the first and only time, she found herself unavoidably engrossed by the political affairs around her. Clearly Lota's involvement, not only before and after the revolution but during it, strongly affected Bishop's interest in what was going on. She saw it all happen from the inside. One early draft survives of a poem she began about the situation, tentatively titled, "Small Revolution, or April Fool's Day." It mocks at the stubborn, almost childish behaviour of the president (Goulart) and the governor (Lacerda) sitting in their res-

pective palaces, while the parrots give out a refrain which is absurdly outdated:

> The president sat in one palace
> The governor in another
> ...
>
> Tanks under the palm trees
> and the birds in the aviary
> shrieked unfortunately
> some very out-of-date slogans
>
> two revolutions back
> poor parrots - embarassing [sic][167]

Her letters described graphically the pandemonium of March and April 1964, as the pressure rose for Goulart to resign, and the contenders for power tested out which groups' loyalty they could command.

Despite the horror she felt about the situation which immediately preceded the revolution, Bishop believed that it had all happened too fast, and might all have been to no avail:

> The trouble is, it was over too quickly - it gives some of the really rotten old reactionaries the chance to get right back in again. Which they are doing their best to do. I don't imagine you have any idea of what the atmosphere has been like here the past few months - but it really was a wonderful feeling to wake up those first few mornings and realize there was not going to be a bloody civil war after all, and that we didn't have to leave the country in a hurry, as we'd been thinking we might...I am horribly depressed about what's going to be happening here and my one thought is to get away for a while.- England's the best place, I think - I can speak the language, more or

> less, and I think they really don't give a damn about Brazil, so no one will ask questions.[168]

She was outraged by the United States's response, which Lowell appears to have taken too, and wrote to Lowell in a fury exactly two weeks after the revolution:

> I'm in a RAGE about what the U S papers are quoted as saying...what DO the Americans want, for God's sake? Imagine their reactions if things had gone the other way! - Imagine the shrieks, the blockades, the criticisms of the weak and naughty Brazilians...Even on April 1st itself everyone began head-shaking, and being - if they only knew it - fearfully rude to, after all, innocent Lota...What in HELL does the N Y Post know about?...It's funny - the Americans rave about "democracy" for years - a big general principal - then rave again when Chinese spies are arrested, or a dozen known crooks and stooges are driven into exile...It's an odd sense of proportion about countries, to say the least -
> Forgive me - I won't say any more, but confine myself to Wordsworthian notes from now on. But please try to see it fairly...[169]

More extraordinary than the ignorance and hypocrisy of the United States was Bishop's surprise at the behaviour of her own country. Her illusions about North American goodwill had survived the country's involvement in the Second World War, the beginning of the Cold War, the implementation of the Marshall Plan, the Korean War and the escalation of involvement in Vietnam, quite apart from the covert, but known, operations of the CIA in many countries, including Brazil. Her bitterness over the response of the United States to the crisis in Brazil led her to declare that not only was it 'awful to be a Brazilian' but 'awful to be anything at all, at present'.[170]

Although Bishop made much in her letters of her lover's fortitude and bravery during the 1964 revolution, the reader today can make little of Lota from Bishop's praises. Despite the inevitable curiosity of friends mainly living on a different continent, she wrote remarkably little about the woman with whom she shared sixteen years of her life, until the trauma of Lota's death. Bishop seems never to have criticized her lover in her letters to friends. She praised her wit, determination, intellect, and her familial solidarity, which she had identified in her Time/Life Brazil as a Brazilian trait. Lota's emotional instability, remarked on by Elizabeth Hardwick in her letter to Kalstone, reached a critical pitch after the events of 1964. A year later Lota was still working all hours on the park construction, and falling ill through exhaustion. She was approaching some kind of serious emotional breakdown. Bishop's attention was torn between her ailing friend and the prospect of her third book of poems. She was anticipating its publication with a mixture of pleasure and, as usual, intense dissatisfaction. Like A Cold Spring, Questions of Travel (which came out in October 1965) carried a tribute from Lowell, which Bishop declared she wished the book deserved.

Bishop agreed to take on her first teaching job in 1965 as a way of funding an old ambition of hers. She and Lota had long wanted to "do up" an old house, where they could spend a month or so each year. The one Bishop bought dated from the colonial period of the 1690's and was situated in the town of Ouro Prêto, a beautiful, eighteenth century mining town, full of churches and situated high up in the hills of Minas Gerais. It was unhabitable and needed total renovation; Bishop planned to use the money

made by teaching for this and she undertook the supervision of its restoration, lodging in a friend's house nearby.

Throughout 1965 Bishop brooded on whether or not she would be capable of, and whether or not she could bear, to teach. By April she had decided to accept a creative writing post for two terms at the University of Washington in Seattle (Theodore Roethke's old job), though she declared:

> my feet are cold...[although I] should really get away from Brazil for a while...I don't think I'm a teacher at all. I don't have the slightest desire to set people right about anything - even when they say perfectly idiotic things about English & American writers or poets...I can't seem to feel [that enlightenment] is important - although it undoubtedly is[171]

This dislike for instruction connects with Bishop's profoundly anti-didactic poetry. The purchase she has on things is personal, she has no wish to make others do the same. In May she declared to James Merrill that she was more worried by the idea of impoliteness in her students than of possible lack of talent, and a month later she lamented:

> I am losing my nerve more all the time about teaching. Every time I think about what on earth I could say about Ezra Pound, my mind goes blank. I may decide the climate would kill me - as well it might[172]

Despite her qualms, she took the job, and in January of 1966, amidst the critical acclaim for her new book, Bishop arrived in Seattle for two terms of teaching.

Wesley Wehr summarizes the state of mind experienced by the fifty-five year old novice teacher when he first met her in Seattle:

> She had just arrived in Seattle from Brazil. The prospect of teaching a poetry class terrified her; she had never done such a thing before...It was January. It was pouring rain. Already she was desperately homesick. Every other day she was on the verge of cancelling the whole thing and going back to Brazil.[173]

But she stayed, though she intensely disliked the creative writing course she had to teach. Although she 'had some very good graduate students in the "Types of Poetry" course', she was astonished by the combined ignorance and confidence of the students who came to her to learn how to write poetry.[174] Given her own extreme diffidence as a young poet, and the degree of reassurance she needed first from Marianne Moore, and then from other friends, all through her life, perhaps her astonishment is not so surprising. Even at college, Bishop wrote with precision, formal control and rhetorical diversity, though she was never as sure of her talent as her friends Lowell and Jarrell were from early on. When she finally became a teacher, she was astonished to find that many of her students had no idea about 'the difference between a colon and a semicolon' but were, nevertheless, extremely confident about their ideas, and their capacity to express them in poetry.[175] She had never had such confidence.

When Bishop found her young, well-off students writing "poetically" about suffering, she was astonished:

> I don't think most of them know <u>anything</u> about suffering, but their poems are just filled with it. I <u>finally</u> told them that they should come to Brazil and see for themselves what <u>real</u> suffering is like.[176]

And she was similarly horrified by their complacency about insanity:

> Going insane is very popular these days, and it frightens me to see so many young people flirting with the idea of it. They think that going crazy will turn them into better poets. That's just not true at all! Insanity is a terrible thing...a terrible thing! I've seen it first-hand in some of my friends, and it is not the "poetic" sort of thing that these young people seem to think it is.[177]

Her amazement reflects less on her students, and more on Bishop's absence from the United States during its most properous post-war period. She was incapable of understanding the dilemma for the materially prosperous, but morally uncertain, generation she was facing in the University of Washington. She was bewildered by this generation's need to distance itself from the foreign policy decisions of its government, and yet also signal its personal anxiety and moral preoccupation. She had been living in a third world country, where the problem was not whether or not to give aid or arms to another country, but how to provide its own citizens with rice and black beans, and a stable, democratic government. Bishop could only allow things to impinge if they did not belong to her and she did not feel tied to them. So by her own admission she had largely ignored the political trauma of the Depression in her own youth, and kept the political chaos she had experienced at such close quarters in Brazil out of her published work. She was mystified by her students' incapacity for such distance as they searched for a language in which to express their disquiet directly. Bishop had identified the second-handness of their experience, but without understanding its source.

Bishop 'never wrote [to] anyone much except Lota' while she was in Seattle, who was still working hard but was in bad physical and mental shape when she left.[178] When she returned to Brazil in July she found Lota in worse shape, and suffering from 'what they used to call a "nervous breakdown" I think'.[179] Soon after this they made their unhappy trip to London, and they were back in Brazil in the first months of 1967. Lota entered a clinic on their return, and Bishop joined her for almost a month, suffering herself from the 'most spectacular attack of asthma in years [as well as] general exhaustion and worry about L'.[180] By March Bishop was able to say to Lowell that Lota was 'much better', though she hoped her lover would give up her job entirely, particularly since Lota's old friend Lacerda had betrayed her, collapsing his crucial support for the park project:

> after all these years of fighting the old Vargas gang and corruption he has suddenly, for political reasons, gone over to them (and the communists) again...since he really left her "park" defenseless, and now it may very well just go to pieces - she is still very bitter and I don't think will ever change.[181]

For herself, Bishop declared that she felt better than she had in years and was doing a lot of work. She dismissed a rumour Lowell had heard that she would be coming to New York soon, and said that she wanted to stay in Brazil 'for a year and a half more, at least') to work on her book about the country.[182] Although at this point she told Lowell that she had three and a half chapters written, photographs arranged and two possible publishers set up, little trace of the book remains.[183] Perhaps this was because later in the same year Bishop's life was forced onto a very different course.

PLATE 13: Watercolour by Bishop of a cemetery, undated

XII

'LOSING YOU'

In July of 1967 Bishop arrived in New York. The decision seems to have been taken quickly, and she wrote to her old friends Joe and U.T. Summers that 'the doctors both agreed it was a good time for me to get away for a while for both of us' (that is Lota and herself).[184] There have been suggestions that Bishop had a number of other lovers while in Brazil and that her sudden removal to New York was connected with an affair of the heart. She had met Roxanne Cummings by this time (while in Seattle), with whom she would live for a few years, but not surprisingly, she makes no mention of this woman, or of any other possible lover in her letters to either Lowell or the Summerses, so I must leave her departure as a mystery. She explained to her friends that Lota would be coming to New York as soon as she was well enough, probably in September, and after a few weeks they would travel back to Brazil together. Indeed, by the time she wrote to the Summers on July 14th Lota had written to say that she had booked her flight for September.

Bishop had been lent a studio in Greenwich Village by her friends Loren MacIver and Lloyd Frankenberg, who were in Paris for two years. She had always felt alienated and lonely in New York. Her arrival, as a middle-aged expatriate (she was fifty-five), in the bosom of the hip, bohemian counter-culture of the late sixties must have accentuated her sense of isolation. She found that almost everyone she knew was out of town, but rationalized her regret by saying that it was, therefore, 'a good time to

work'.[185] Her intention was to continue with her book on Brazil in New York and even allow 'the Village [to] rejuvenate me, no doubt. I never appear without earrings down to my bosom, skirts almost up to it, and a guitar over my shoulder'.[186] She was afraid, she quipped, that she would 'start writing FREE VERSE next'.[187] She had found the year between July 1966 and July 1967 one of the worst of her life, and New York could at least offer up old friends in the flesh for consolation, like Marianne Moore, James Merrill, and occasionally the Summerses and Lowell. At the end of August Bishop sent Lowell an early draft of her poem, "In the Waiting Room". She told him that she 'woke up one morning at Jane's with almost the whole thing done' but now found herself incapable of judging it.[188] Bishop had mentioned the incident which formed the subject of this new poem many years earlier, at the end of her story, "The Country Mouse", which she wrote soon after her arrival in Brazil. Her return to the same event over fifteen years later suggests that the child's anxiety over the status of her self was something that Bishop saw not only as an important childhood experience, but also as a dilemma which was central to her adult life. The previous few years, in which she had borne the political mess in Brazil and her lover's emotional chaos, must have tested to the limit Bishop's belief in the sustainable stability of her self.

Lota flew to New York on September 17th. She 'was exhausted', Bishop told her friends the Summers:

> we passed a quiet afternoon, no cross words or anything like that. - but I could see she was in a very bad state of depression and didn't know what to do, really, except try to get her to rest. Well - sometime towards dawn she got up and tried to commit suicide - I heard her up in the kitchen about 6:30 - she was already almost unconscious ... I'll not go into details except that within about 20 minutes...we had

> her in the ambulance and off to St Vincent's...I never though I'd be glad to see 3 cops in my bedroom but I certainly was. She has been in a coma ever since, but now they think she is <u>probably</u> going to live - although still unconscious she has opened her eyes and moved her arms and legs a bit, etc...If her heart holds out they think she will pull through-[189]

After relating the facts so barely, Bishop broke down on the page. The brilliant letter-writer, who had used her words so successfully to contain and control her experience of the world, could not hold her script together any more. Her mind shifted back and forth, sometimes forgetting who she was writing to, and then suddenly remembering and thanking one or the other of her friends for something or other:

> I'm just stunned that's all - this is all so totally unlike the Lota of the 1st 15 years of my life with her -
> ...
> Thank god [sic] for our wonderful doctor.
> I'm afraid Joe found me very nervous and unlike myself - but we have had a very bad year; I didn't want her to come unless she was really well - and I feel now I had a certain premonition - I know I had - I have been feeling panicky ever since I got here and couldn't work, just wanted to drink, etc. -
> That's all for now - I wanted to tell you and please forgive my sounding hysterical -
> At least today I can write and read better, etc and I have some HOPE...[190]

She went on to thank Joe Summers for his book before her mind again drew back to her to her own terrible affair:

> It is awful - to love someone so much and not be able to do the right thing or say the right thing, apparently - One thing - I think she came because she wanted to be with me, anyway, no matter what - even if she had this in mind - [191]

On September 25th Lota died without regaining consciousness. Her heart had given out. The letter that Bishop wrote to the Summerses three days afterwards had a terrible candour to it, as she tried, but soon failed, to observe her habitual reserve over the thoughts and emotions besetting her:

> ...I had the 12 or 13 happiest years of my life with her, before she got sick - and I suppose that is a great deal in this unmerciful world.
>
> ...Oh WHY WHY WHY didn't she wait a few days? Why did I sleep so soundly? - - why why why - I can't help thinking I might have saved her somehow - go over and over that Sunday afternoon but honestly can't think of anything I did especially wrong - except that I have done many wrong things all my life - Please try to keep on loving me in spite of them, won't you. I am clinging to my friends desperately.[192]

A few days later Bishop again wrote to the Summerses. She described the arrival of Lota's body in Rio, and the pomp with which it was received into the bosom of that culture which Bishop felt had helped to destroy her, before being laid beside her father's in the family tomb. Bishop described herself, by contrast, as entirely uprooted. She did not know where she wanted to live, nor what she was going to do with her life. She ended by making a love vow to Lota that she would never have made in her letters to friends during Lota's life:

> now that all the work is done [of arranging for the body to be flown home, etc] I find I just feel worse & worse all the time - but I suppose this will wear away - but don't think for a moment that love does, because it doesn't.[193]

Bishop returned to Brazil on November 1st to sort out Lota's will, and decide what to do about her own affairs. It was possibly at this point, or perhaps a little later, that she began a poem about her lover's death.

Though she never finished it, it may have been a beginning to what finally became "One Art", almost ten years later. Tentatively calling it "Aubade and Elegy", she tried to capture the substance of her lost, shared life. Although the poem is only fragmentary, the fragments are expressive of the particular, and moving, displacements, with which Bishop always tried both to articulate and accommodate her loss:

> For perhaps the tenth time the tenth time the tenth time today
> and still early morning I go under the crashing wave of (your) death
> ...
> (Your) Not there! & not there! I see only small hands in the dirt
> transplanting sweet williams, tamping them down
> Dirt on (your) hands on (your) rings
>
> No coffee can wake you no coffee can wake you no coffee
> No revolution can catch your attention
> You are bored with us all. It is true we (are) boring.[194]

Bishop's abandoned fragment echoes some of Berryman's elegiac, agonized dream songs, like 'The weather was fine', 'Life, friends, is boring' or 'A Strut for Roethke'. It suggests how she might sometimes have used another poet's model to begin her own poems with. Here she echoes Berryman's tragic, flat, prosaic, observations. But by the time she came to publish anything, any origin had been transformed beyond recognition. In earlier versions she speaks of 'the umbrella ants', the 'light of morning on the grasses', 'the seven lines of hills shouldering each other', 'the field of diamonded pink week outside your window / and the tree full of metallic steel blue birds eating the bitter red fruits', conjuring the light, shape and texture of the landscape in which she lived with Lota at Samambaia.[195] On the edge of one of the pages, Bishop adds almost an inventory of loss, reminiscent of the later "One Art", and also of the earlier story, "In the

Village". Having lost her lover, Bishop tries to list some of the consequences of the loss:

> ...the flowers you abandoned, and the pets,
> and the small children you loved, the copper pans
> the colored linens
>
> the top drawer
> the 42 pairs of small shoes, the boots
> the yellow hat, oh god, the yellow hat[196]

But the effort to control her loss by "Writing it!", as the last line of "One Art" commands, did nothing to contain her grief, and Bishop's letters during the next two years or so tell of a passive existence, in which she could, seemingly, initiate nothing and write nothing.

By early January she was back in the United States, this time in San Francisco. She wrote to Lowell from there describing the hostility she had encountered in Brazil from many of those she had thought were friends, who used her 'as a sort of scapegoat' for their own guilt.[197] Despite this experience, Bishop still hoped to get to Ouro Prêto in the summer, which was the only place she wanted to live in Brazil now. She mentioned in her letter the arrival in San Francisco of 'my young friend Roxanne...down from Seattle' (whom she met while teaching there in 1966), which gives us a hint at the well-concealed complexities of Bishop's personal life.[198] Bishop set up home in San Francisco with this new friend Roxanne Cummings and her little son Boogie (whom she was pregnant with when she met Bishop). She quickly found herself looked after and organized by this new companion:

> [she has] enrolled me in Blue Cross, [and she] types business letters for me, [and] shortens my skirts above my knees[199]

Bishop seemed to recognize that she could not bear to live alone just yet and declared herself happy with this new domestic arrangement.

Between the summer of 1968 and spring of 1970, Bishop lived with Cummings and her son, shuttling between San Francisco and Ouro Prêto. She seemed unable to settle to any writing, whether poems, translations or the "scrapbook" (as she now called it) of essays that she had begun on Brazil before Lota's death. Though she knew she needed to write for the sake of her own health, she could not. The despondency that her lover's death had thrown her into was hard to shake off. She confessed, two years after Lota's death: 'I just don't seem to have any talent for protecting myself or my working time the way I should'; it was as if the death had robbed her of her defenses.[200] The 1960's American counter-culture, with its rock music and protests, the authorities, with their moralizing, tear-gas and rubber bullets, and the media with their endless coverage, swamped the poet who had been up to her neck in Brazilian revolution until recently:

> [I] certainly feel re-patriated now. If this is the U S A, I have been right in it for over a year and feel deafened, blinded, gassed, beat-up, and everything else that goes on constantly: newspapers, T V, conversations, everything.[201]

Although she made the loss of her dearest companion the main pretext for her misery in her letters to friends, Bishop broke her characteristic censorship of her personal life in a letter to her friend Mariette Charlton from Ouro Prêto in June 1970. She revealed to Charlton that Cummings had

had a breakdown in Brazil that April, which 'had been coming on for months, if not years'.[202] The person Bishop feared most for was Cummings's small son, Boogie and the whole affair must have seemed like a terrible echo of her childhood, though, of course, she made no direct allusion to her own history. But the weary resignation with which she summed up her own perspective must have run back not only to the breakdowns suffered by her friends, but also to her mother's when Bishop was so young:

> I have been through this too many times, I feel - but I suppose I don't take it quite as hard as I would if it were the first time.[203]

After that terrible, formative 'first time', how could it ever be as terrible again? But each future breakdown must have seemed like a repetition of her mother's rejection and betrayal. Up until this point Bishop had only mentioned Cummings's efficiency, her love of opera and pop culture and her practical supportiveness. And although she was 'worried sick' by her lover's breakdown, she kept it to herself.[204] When Cummings and her son returned to San Francisco Bishop stayed on in Ouro Prêto. Although she invited Cummings back to stay with her, the breakdown seemed to mark the end of their relationship. With this departure, Bishop found she was able to begin writing poems again for the first time in three years.

PLATE 14: Bishop at Harvard University, 1976

XIII

FINAL YEARS

Before leaving Ouro Prêto to take up an invitation to teach the Fall term at Harvard (taking Lowell's place temporarily) Bishop received an eagerly-anticipated visit from James Merrill. She wrote him elaborate and excited letters about her extensive preparations for his arrival, about what he should or should not expect, and about the things she would like him to bring, for himself and for her. Though she was suffering from the terrible emotional strain of the past few months and years, and was tearful and suffering from what she described as 'a small - or big - nervous breakdown', afterwards she assured him that she was 'so glad [he had come] even if it may not have looked that way at times.'[205] Merrill seemed to offer her the kind of friendship that she had had with Lowell back in the 1940's: one of intimacy, which verged on but never broached the realm of sexual desire. Both friends recalled Merrill's Brazilian visit in a language close to that of lovers. Bishop declared to Merrill:

> You are without doubt the World's Best Guest and I never realized before how much I really love you. There. In fact I might say I adore you.[206]

While Merrill, on his return to Greece, wrote feelingly to Bishop, after he had emerged from the depths of some peculiar illness:

> I wake up suddenly feeling, for the first time since getting home, that I know who I am; and wake, as it were, with your name on my lips...I keep on missing you, and imagining that I'm still there.[207]

With Lowell now in England, and living not with Bishop's old friend Elizabeth Hardwick, but with Caroline Blackwood, the two friends fell almost entirely out of correspondence in the early 1970's for the first time in their twenty-five year friendship. Bishop found in Merrill someone with whom she could conduct the same kind of conversations. He, too, was a poet she respected; she admired his poems' capacity to surprise her, the ease with which he used difficult formal arrangements and the way he made it seem 'as if [he] found rhyme or assonance the easiest thing in the world'.[208] Frequently she declared that she could not understand his poems, but her bewilderment was often accompanied by admiration of particular lines, felicitous phrases and elegant conceits. In return, Bishop sent Merrill her own work, and quizzed him for his thoughts on it. Although she never admired his work as much as Lowell's, she respected what he did, and worked hard to find what she really liked and understood in it. Probably, too, her strong reservations about the intimately biographical poems Lowell was putting together in The Dolphin made her turn her attention elsewhere.

After a semester's teaching at Harvard, with 'all that sociability and deference', as she put it to Merrill, Bishop spent a considerable part of 1971 in Ouro Prêto, where she was still having work done on her seventeenth -century house.[209] By July her new lover and companion, Alice Methfessel, whom she had met in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was living there with her, and Bishop had started to arrange her life around this new relationship. She was anxious to rent her Ouro Prêto house, or even to sell it, despite the pain of cutting her last material connection with Brazil, and was set to teach the Fall semester in Harvard once again. The year before Bishop had written to Merrill about his latest book of poems, which 'has made me

determined to write a lot of things I suppose I just lacked the courage to before', and in July 1971 the New Yorker printed "In the Waiting Room", the poem Bishop had begun before Lota's death, but had not been able to touch for so long afterwards.[210] With the appearance of "Crusoe in England" in November it was apparent to everyone, Bishop included, that she had begun a new phase in her poetry, what could be described here, in Bishop's words, as poems with 'more of "you" in [them]', and with 'a wider emotional range'.[211] Writing poems so closely concerned with loss became possible for her, not after her first and most devastating loss (that of her mother), but only after she had survived the loss of her lover. Though her childhood is behind all her work, it is only in her last poems, written in the 1970's, that Bishop allows the language of loss to become clearly indivisible from the language of her poetry.

With her gradual separation from Brazil, which she visited for the last time in 1972, Bishop began to indulge in the other travels she had dreamed of for so long. She visited the Galapagos islands, which was surely an inspiration for her poem "Crusoe in England", Sweden, Finland, Leningrad, Norway, and the North Cape, as well as spending time with friends in New England and Maine. Her teaching at Harvard became a regular part of her yearly schedule, though it never came easily to her, and if she had not been in need of the money, she would have given it up immediately. In 1972 an Anthology of Twentieth-Century Brazilian Poetry was published, selected, edited and introduced by Bishop and Emanuel Brasil. She had provided a number of the parallel text translations, some of which had been published before. Seeing her Brazilian translations together in one volume, one cannot help being struck by the extent to which she found and appropriated a

language of the family and family history through translation that she had never been able to find in her own language or her own history. She began this process when she first arrived in Brazil in the 1950's, and never relinquished it, even after her departure on Lota's death. Having lost Brazil as a foster home, Bishop ensured through translation that she retained its language of familial and historical intimacies.

Carlos Drummond de Andrade was one of Bishop's favourite Brazilian poets. The poems of his that she chose to translate centre on births, deaths and family reunions. Like the family table he describes, his poems are weighed down: with the history of family grievances, loves, bitterness, past events, hopes and so on. In his poem "Family Portrait", which describes the dated and yet timeless properties of an old family portrait, he ends, in Bishop's translation, with these lines:

> I only perceive
> the strange idea of family
> travelling through the flesh.[212]

And his other poems flesh out this notion of heredity, which can be ignored, but only for so long. In "Travelling in the Family" he tells of his father's ghost, which forces him to travel across his memories:

> In the desert of Itabira
> the shadow of my father
> took me by the hand.
> So much time lost.
> But he didn't say anything.
>
> ...
>
> Stepping on books and letters
> we travel in the family.

Marriages; mortgages;
the consumptive cousins;
the mad aunt; my grandmother

...

What cruel, obscure instinct
moved his pallid hand
subtly pushing us
into the forbidden
time, forbidden places?[213]

Another of his poems, called "Infancy", pictures a mother who sighs over her infant, and a father who rides through the fields at the beginning and end of the poem. His action somehow surrounds, provides and protects the family in between. The powerful father in all Andrade's poems is antithetical to the absent father of Bishop's childhood world. Although the Brazilian father in Andrade's and other poets' work is often portrayed as an overbearing patriarch, surrounded by a large family, he must have seemed part of a desirable and unattainable fantasy to the woman who had been an orphan for so long. Bishop was aware, too, that her lesbianism had prevented her from creating the family for herself that she had missed out on as a child. She never seems to have considered adopting a child (as a single, woman-friend in Brazil had done) and paternal surrogacy was out of the question. She wrote to Lowell in 1960, when she was forty-nine years old, that her 'worst regret in life' was not having had a child, 'although [she] would have been such a nervous over-devoted mother probably.'[214] She could only speak of this desire once it was impossible, just as she could only be eloquent about her love for Lota once Lota was dead. Living in Brazil would have made Bishop more, not less conscious, of her familyless state, as the self-mockingly mournful postcard she wrote to Ashley Brown while on her 1967 trip on the Rio São Francisco made clear: everyone else

on the boat was very 'nice and polite, but each and every one asked if I had a "family" and when I said no, they all commiserated with me, but also, I felt, rather avoided me as being not quite all there '.[215]

Now that Bishop's base was no longer in Brazil, but in New England, she found herself more exposed to the consequences of being a poet than in the past, particularly as she was becoming increasingly well-known in the United States. For the first time she was inundated with unsolicited poems by aspirant poets and was called upon more and more to give readings, make recordings and answer fan-mail, as well as having to defend herself from at least one would-be biographer. Even at nineteen, Bishop had had a nascent horror of biographies, as she shows in this sympathetic treatment of Katherine Mansfield's prescient wariness:

> they are intimate letters, chiefly to her husband and a few friends, and in them is revealed with a strange closeness her courage and gayety and frank humor. One feels in spite of the enjoyment they bring, that these letters are almost a betrayal, and this one sentence bitterly reproaches the reader: "I get overwhelmed at times...that these letters will one day be published and people will read something in them, in their queer finality, that 'ought to have told us'.[216]

Her emotion had not changed in the intervening fifty years, and she wrote ferocious letters to a woman called Linda Ledford-Miller, whom she suspected of trying to pry into her life, with the aim of writing a biography. Bishop even told Ledford-Miller that she was already 'committed to a future biographer...and naturally...couldn't give...any help [to her] with a project of that sort '.[217]

She continued to receive awards, like the Harriet Mornroe Poetry Award and the World Literature Today laureateship. In 1973 or '74 she gave the Phi Beta Kappa poem at Harvard, when she read out "The Moose" and at this time she finally bought an apartment in Lewis Wharf, Boston, into which she moved the possessions she most treasured from her Brazilian homes.[218] She dedicated her last book of poems, Geography III, which came out in 1977, to Alice Methfessel, to whom she was indebted for the book's appearance. As well as accompanying Bishop on all her travels, encouraging her and acting as foil to her depressions, Methfessel was instrumental in enabling Bishop to assemble Geography III, and then see through its publication.

The sudden death of Lowell in 1977 devastated Bishop. He was her longest-surviving and most intimate of friends, with whom she had conversed and confessed for over thirty years. Although they had corresponded less frequently in the early seventies, they had remained inextricably implicated in one another's lives, and seemed to have re-established something of their former intimacy in the years just before his death. She wrote a poem in memory of him, "North Haven", which proved to be almost her last. Only two more were published with her specific authorization, the first, "Pink Dog", in February 1979, and the second "Sonnet", which was published in the New Yorker on October 29th, almost exactly three weeks after her death. Bishop was only sixty-eight years old when she died. She was writing some of her finest poems ever and seemed as determined as ever to live her life fully. But her sudden death on October 6th, 1979, was the terrible, final exaction of ill health that she had spent all her life either coping with or ignoring. The liberation that her last poem envisaged, when the 'broken / thermometer's mercury' is allowed to run where it will and is no

longer 'Caught...[as] a creature divided', might almost be read as a celebration of death; the spirit finally released from its tight constraint. (C.P.192) Despite her grandparents' Baptist home, and her immersion in the great Baptist hymns, which she sang to herself all her life, Bishop was always an unbeliever. She could only peer at the watery pillars of her own reflection.[219]

PART TWO

WRITING IT.

CHAPTER ONE

"IN THE VILLAGE".

PLATE 15:
Bishop with her mother and another woman (possibly her aunt)

When Elizabeth Bishop decided at the last minute to include a patently autobiographical story in her book of poems, Questions of Travel, she opened up a new possibility.[1] The inclusion enabled her reader to question the relation between the shape of her life and the formation of her art. The story, "In the Village", is situated at the beginning of the second part of the book, but it acts as a bridge between the two sections, "Brazil", the first, and "Elsewhere", the second. Bishop remembers that early period of her history as part of somewhere else, another continent almost, even though her art feeds from this memory all her life. When she puts together Questions of Travel, Brazil is her immediate world, but the shapes in which Bishop sees this country have their source in a place which, though no longer home, still provides her with her template.[2]

After Bishop's 'adult reawakening' in the "Brazil" poems, "In the Village" describes a very different, but prototypical, awakening, in which she reaches back to her early childhood.[3] It offers a history to set beside the experiences in the "Brazil" poems, which alters our first reading of them. The vagueness of the title of the second group of poems, "Elsewhere", is countered in the story by a child's terrible, specific observations and her memories of a particular place. Against this remembered place, perhaps, every other region might be seen as an "elsewhere". The story frames the poems which follow so that, like the scream which echoes through it, the child's dilemma extends into "elsewhere". It cannot be contained within the confines of the story's narrative, but continues to resonate through the poems.

Taking my cue from Bishop's structure of Questions of Travel, I will use my reading of "In the Village" as the bridge between the two parts of my thesis. Bishop returns to one of the most traumatic and formative events of her life in this story: her separation as a young child from her mother in a small village in Nova Scotia. In the story this experience colours the child's observations and her capacity to organize what she sees. This moment corresponds closely to the crucial experience in infant development explored by D.W. Winnicott and termed by Jacques Lacan the 'mirror stage', and, to the extent that these terms are useful to me, I will frame my discussion within them.[4]

The child's preoccupations throw light upon Bishop's life and her art - her sense of foreignness, her need to travel, her reticence about herself and her diffidence in the face of the world. These preoccupations appear to have their first and most vital source in the history which provoked "In the Village". The story also offers a matrix within which to read Bishop's art. As she says in her late villanelle, "One Art", 'The art of losing isn't hard to master' and the idea of loss is at the centre of this story about her early life. (C.P.178) But as the poem goes on to recognize, it can take a lifetime to master such a loss.

Analysing the "poetics of space" by way of what he called 'topo-analysis', Gaston Bachelard writes:

> if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.[5]

Bachelard is convinced that

> all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home... the house is not experienced from day to day only, on the thread of a narrative, or in the telling of our own story. Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days. And after we are in the new house...we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all Immemorial things are. We live fixations, fixations of happiness.[6]

Bachelard's bourgeois and entirely benign version of childhood memory fails Bishop, with her agonized and estranged childhood. In his record 'the house is a large cradle...Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house'.[7] But for Bishop the cradle itself is threatening from the start. However Bachelard does elucidate brilliantly the intimate recalling of and effort to remodel the earliest home by so many writers. He recognizes both acts as important characteristics of the adult imagination. We can trace both of these acts in Bishop's writing, as she asks: Where is home and how can it be held on to? This story shows us why home was so hard for Bishop to keep her grip on, and why it remained a central preoccupation of her writing. The second question that runs through Bishop's writing is causatively related to the first one: How can the fragmenting fabric of the world be held together, in the effort to see what lies behind it, especially as this very effort _is_ what holds it together? Although Bishop often addresses the two questions separately, and they each have different consequences, they have the same source. "In the Village" suggests that Bishop first formed them when she was still a very small child and confronted with the appalling breakdown and then loss of her mother.

The story begins and ends with an unheard scream. It is described almost as a physical presence, and it carries with it a past history which will always colour the future. It imbues the story (echoing throughout) and circumscribes it:

> A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies...The scream hangs like that, unheard, in memory - in the past, in the present, and those years between. It was not even loud to begin with, perhaps. It just came there to live, forever - not loud, just alive forever. Its pitch would be the pitch of my village. Flick the lightning rod on top of the church steeple with your fingernail and you will hear it...(C.Pr.251)
>
> ...Now there is no scream. Once there was one and it settled slowly down to earth one hot summer afternoon; or did it float up, into that dark, too dark, blue sky? But surely it has gone away, forever... ...All those other things - clothes, crumbling postcards, broken china; things damaged and lost, sickened or destroyed; even the frail almost-lost scream - are they too frail for us to hear their voices long, too mortal? (C.Pr.274)

At the start of the story the scream is a staining penumbra on the skies. It seems to absorb the complexion of the landscape, becoming 'the colo r of the cloud of bloom on the elm trees, the violet on the fields of oats; something darkening over the woods and waters as well as the sky'. (C.Pr.251) If the lightning rod were a tuning fork, it would vibrate to the scream's note, as though the scream were a constant, specified pitch beneath everything else.

The story begins in a curiously implicated third person narrative. Someone is recollecting their history but also, it seems, continuing to live it out. A woman has returned to the village from Boston. It is the latest of many such departures and returns, some with and some without her

child. She has been ill and is no better. She is having her first dress fitted after two years in mourning. It is purple. So far the story has been told in a stilted but literal manner. But the appearance of her young child provokes narrative confusion:

> Unaccustomed to having her back, the child stood now in the doorway, watching. The dressmaker was crawling around and around on her knees eating pins as Nebuchadnezzar had crawled eating grass. The wallpaper glinted and the elm trees outside hung heavy and green, and the straw matting smelled like the ghost of hay. (C.Pr.252)

What had been the bare bones of recollection are suddenly fleshed out by a reliving of the child's experience. What the child knows later is implicit in her observations now: the madness of Nebuchadnezzar and the ghostly presence of the hay stand in for the mother's madness and the ghost of the scream which will echo in the child's world forever. The child represents Bishop, and the story seems to be closely based on a critical moment in her early childhood. For a writer who had mastered her own narrative displacement and distancing in her art so well, the proximity between the child and the third person narrative at the start of the story is startling.

Although the third person narrative continues, informed recollection and vivid experience are mixed up, making it unclear where the child ends and the recollecting adult begins. The child's revery is interrupted by a 'Clang' from the blacksmith's shop, a noise which becomes the antithesis to the scream that she dreads:

> Clang.
> The pure note: pure and angelic.

The dress was all wrong. She screamed.
The child vanishes. (C.Pr.253)[8]

The child understands the noise the blacksmith makes. It signals a process of creation, as 'Nate does wonders with both hands'. (C.Pr.253) But the scream uttered by the mother is inexplicable. Its cause is mysterious and there is, it appears, no resolution to it. It presents the child with an impossible demand, one which she cannot even understand. An opposition is set up in the story between what is going on in the house and what happens in the village. By the close of the story it is clear that the child's actions in the village are a product of her internalized history, whose roots lie within the house, in her relationship to her mother.

The village is an important potential space for the child (as the story's title suggests). It is the place to which she escapes. She walks and runs around it, by contrast with the house, in which her travelling is done mainly with her ears, in overhearing, and with her eyes, as she tries to understand events left unexplained. The to-ing and fro-ing between house and village in the story is part of a familiar pattern of behaviour for Bishop. Her lifelong compulsion to travel and her sorties in her art in search of different homes (for herself and others) perhaps originate in the early need she identifies in the story to leave her family and search for models of coherence elsewhere. The places she describes in her writing always resemble this model in one vital way: they are precarious and often somehow circumscribed.

The two sounds, scream and clang, are like leitmotifs in the child's vision of the landscape. They recur through the story, the first as an echo of that first scream and the second as part of the blacksmith's cycle of creation. The child is torn between them, escaping from the scream by taking refuge in the clang. She vanishes from the house and visits Nate the blacksmith:

> In the blacksmith's shop things hang up in the shadows and shadows hang up in the things, and there are black and glistening piles of dust in each corner. A tub of night-black water stands by the forge. The horseshoes sail through the dark like bloody little moons and follow each other like bloody little moons to drown in the black water, hissing, protesting. (C.Pr.253)

David Kalstone observes how the outside world in this story not only refracts the young girl's anger and helplessness, as in the 'bloody little moons', but also becomes the source of restoration for her:

> Feeling is deflected, refigured as the child becomes absorbed in the outside world, here Nate's blacksmith shop. The scream is never totally banished from this story, but it is repositioned by Bishop's insistence on the present tense. It is not simply a question of reproducing the past with some immediacy, as in the sudden overpowering recall of a moment, in Proust. With Bishop it is also the "surround" that she tries to recapitulate, the things we failed to notice in our concentration on pain - the equivalent of the backdrop of a conversation, audible to us only when we play it back on a recording. Writing, she attends not to a single obsessive tone but to the "skein of voices."[9]

While I agree with Kalstone that Bishop's eye captures the surround as well as the centre of an event, the crisis that this story describes is her discovery as a child that the centre will not hold. What Bishop recalls is the moment when the centre of her world was dispersed, put to flight in that

scream and what followed it. The child's attention to what Kalstone calls the "skein of voices" is not simply her recapitulation of the things she failed to notice at the time; it is the only way in which she is able to focus on the thing itself. She wants to recompose the fragments she sees all around her into objects that will bear the weight of her gaze, and not disperse beneath her eye. Although beginning in this curious third person, Bishop gives up the pretence of narrational distance with a decisive shift into the first person after the child's first flight from her mother.

The child observes her grandmother and aunts unpacking her mother's "things" as though her mother were a concatenation of different parts:

> Before my older aunt had brought her back, I had watched my grandmother and younger aunt unpacking her clothes, her "things." In trunks and barrels and boxes they had finally come, from Boston, where she and I had once lived. So many things in the village came from Boston, and even I had once come from there. But I remembered only being here, with my grandmother..."Here's a mourning hat."..."There's that mourning coat."..."here are some housedresses."..."Look. She forgot to take [the pin] off." (C.Pr.254)

Bishop has the child itemize herself as one of her mother's "things" from Boston, allowing herself one of those twitches of humour which characterize even her most painful tales. The joke is double-edged: we laugh at the child's self-perception only to realize that her shattered self-regard is the core of the story's tragedy. Pity is often subtly sabotaged like this by Bishop, as though to prevent us from too closely identifying with her dilemma. In her letters she often makes a mockery of her own despair, and her poems are full of similarly tragi-comic characters, like the Gentleman

of Shalott, Manuelzinho, old Crusoe returned to England and the Strayed Crab.

The child soon takes over the naming game from her relatives, coming as near as she ever does to describing her mother, as though she dare not look closer than the clothes her mother wears:

> A white hat. A white embroidered parasol. Black shoes with buckles glistening like the dust...A silver mesh bag. A silver calling-card case on a little chain...Handkerchiefs with narrow black hems...A bottle of perfume (C.Pr.254-55)

Neglected by her deranged mother, who fails to give her even the barest attention, the child resorts to her own, self-protective ploy. She describes, not her mother but her mother's "things". This enables her to take two kinds of control: firstly, control of her own rage in the face of her neglect. She cannot risk looking too closely at her mother, and dare not name her, in case she gets no response. When an aunt calls out to the child's grandmother, '<u>She's</u> calling for you, Mother', we are arrested by the word 'Mother'. (C.Pr.269) It has been withheld throughout the story, and its utterance here, even though addressed to the grandmother, seems like an indiscretion, a naming of the unnameable. The mother is such a potent figure for the child, who has never been able to hold her attention, that to concentrate too strongly on her and to receive no response could only diminish the child's sense of coherence. She fled from the scream which marked her mother's refusal to leave her mourning and to reenter the world of others' demands because it was the only way for her to cope with her mother's rejection.

Secondly, the indirectness of the child's gaze means that, although she is unable to perceive her mother directly, she can describe her obliquely, by referring to her clothes and possessions. This act of appropriation is repeated throughout the story; it forms the centrepiece of the child's attempt to master the world she finds herself in. Picking through her mother's "things" the child notices 'A big bundle of postcards. The curdled elastic around them breaks.' (C.Pr.255) She gathers them together, as she has gathered together the different fragments of her mother. The postcards' 'curdled elastic' provides a superbly distressed image of the child's incapacity to hold together the different parts of her world: her own bundle of impressions repeatedly tumbles apart, as their elastic breaks. Like the pictures on the postcards, the child draws vivid outlines to her landscapes, and as happens on the postcards, she cannot make the outlines stick:

> some have lines of metallic crystals on them - how beautiful! - silver, gold, red, and green, or all four mixed together, crumbling off, sticking in the lines on my palms. All the cards like this I spread on the floor to study. The crystals outline the buildings on the cards in a way buildings never are outlined but should be - if there were a way of making the crystals stick. But probably not; they would fall to the ground, never to be seen again. Some cards, instead of lines around the buildings, have words written in their skies with the same stuff, crumbling, dazzling and crumbling, raining down a little on little people who sometimes stand about below...What are the messages? I cannot tell, but they are falling on those specks of hands, on the hats, on the toes of their shoes, in their paths - wherever it is they are. (C.Pr.255)

Bishop's art is also in some part her lifelong attempt to make the crystals stick. She is not trying to repair things, but to create intelligibility. It seems to me she knows that reparation is not viable, nor therefore an interesting way of looking at things. She makes her poems out of images and

figures as frail as the glitter on the postcards. The child's study of 'cards like this' marks the beginning of a lifetime's work.

The child repeatedly flees the house and takes refuge in the village, particularly in the blacksmith's shop. Nate the blacksmith becomes a Vulcan-like figure to her, her fantasy of the father she never had, who creates form out of the chaos of his forge. When she commands him to make her a ring, he makes one instantly, and it is hers. Denied the mastery of her own internal chaos of parts, the child is engrossed by figures in the village like Ned who appear to have mastered their environment, and who produce whole forms, which she lacks in her own home. Her envy emerges in the metaphors she uses to describe their actions. The seamstress, like Nate, makes whole things out of bits and pieces even though her house is 'littered with scraps of cloth and tissue-paper patterns, yellow, pinked, with holes in the shapes of A,B,C, and D in them, and numbers' and is covered with 'threads everywhere like a fine vegetation'. (C.Pr.258) She has made 'the very dress' that the child has on and, most importantly, she 'has a bosom full of needles with threads ready to pull out and make nests with'. (C.Pr.258) Similarly, Nate's shop is a place where both men and horses, but not the child, feel 'perfectly at home'. (C.Pr.257) Even the wholeness of the animals' manure fascinates the child. Bishop's strong desire to be a doctor when at Vassar may have had its origin in her wish since early childhood to be able to remake as whole what had been shattered.[10] The child knows that no object, not even something with such perfect continuity and apparent wholeness as the ring has, can compensate for her internal need. Even as she receives the ring, she is aware of the

familiarity that she lacks. She can never be 'at home' as the men and horses are who wait around the forge.

As the narrator of her own tale, the child occupies a position of autonomy, so far as the telling goes. But the story does not read as the expression of a single, controlled voice. Much of her attention goes on her effort to assemble the disparate images that characterize her village and home lives. Though the child flees from the image of her mother's fragmented body into the village, her own inward confusion and lack of coherence informs that landscape too. Even her description of the forge is fraught with potential dissolution:

> In the blacksmith's shop things hang up in the shadows and shadows hang up in the things, and there are black and glistening piles of dust in each corner. (C.Pr.253)

The child is never free from the anxiety that things might not be as solid as they appear, or that within them might lie another, furtive history which could disrupt their sure physical outlines.

Ordinary routine in the village acts as an interlude from the elusive and threatening drama going on in the house. The child visits the blacksmith, looks in the windows of the stores, takes the cow to the pasture, carries messages for her grandmother, buys sweets, and, ultimately, takes a package each week to the post office to be sent to the sanatorium. She tries to fix this outside world in her mind's eye by naming its inhabitants (as she can never do for her mother):

> We pass Mrs. Peppard's house. We pass Mrs. McNeil's house. We pass Mrs. Geddes's house. We pass Hills' store...We pass Mrs. Captain Mahon's house...We are approaching Miss Spencer's house...We pass the McLeans', whom I know very well...(C.Pr.261-263)

She takes the family cow to the pasture each day, not because the cow needs supervision, but because their daily journey helps her believe, if only for a moment, that she is in control of her environment:

> She, Nelly, could probably go by herself just as well, but I like marching through the village with a big stick, directing her. (C.Pr.260)

She describes their interrupted, stopping and starting progress with almost military emphasis. But when she gives up her vital, if imaginary, control of Nelly, she relinquishes her last barrier of defence from the 'immense, sibilant, glistening loneliness' which is her mother's unavoidable legacy. (C.Pr.265)

The dress-fitting that is to take her mother out of mourning black becomes the focus for the child's dilemma again later in the story. She turns her eye to her mother slowly, concentrating at first on the seamstress, 'cheerful and talkative today', then on the dress, which 'is smaller now; there are narrow, even folds down the skirt; [and] the sleeves fit tightly', and then even on some scented sachets, whose collective smell perhaps reminds the child of her own rush of impressions:

> Each is a different color; if you take them apart, each has a different faint scent. But tied together the way they came, they make one confused, powdery odor. (C.Pr.266)

But her attention is compelled when her mother catches sight of her in the mirror. It is the only time she looks at her mother directly, helped by the mirror's refraction. The mother sees first her own, distracted self and then her child, who is desperately seeking distraction in the sounds coming from Nate's shop:

> Light, musical, constant sounds are coming from Nate's shop. It sounds as though he were making a wheel rim.
> She sees me in the mirror and turns on me: "Stop sucking your thumb!"
> Then in a moment she turns to me again and demands, "Do you know what I want?"
> "No."
> "I want some humbugs. I'm dying for some humbugs. I don't think I've had any humbugs for years and years and years. If I give you some pennies, will you go to Mealy's and buy me a bag?"
> To be sent on an errand! Everything is all right. (C.Pr.267)

This encounter is the crux of the story, and yet very little is said. In the mirror you get a silent, unspeaking picture of demands, which explains the disparity between what the child sees, and what the mother says. Both are faced with impossible demands, but neither understands the other's need. The mother suddenly finds her child's lack, and the way she has evolved to cope with it, reflected back to her in the mirror. She is unable to cope with her own failure as a mother ('Stop sucking your thumb!') and in the face of her irretrievable and failed responsibility, becomes a child, demanding humbugs and for a brief moment evading her own failure. The child's clipped sentences as she fetches the humbugs reflect her excited response to a demand she can sustain. At the sweet shop, she speaks to herself in rushed imperatives: 'I must not take too long...I must get back quickly, quickly, while Miss Gurley is there and everyone is upstairs and the dress is still on.' (C.Pr.268) The child still represents her

mother's response indirectly, via everyone else, circumventing the figure she most needs to hold on to and to gain a response from. Neglected by her mother, she has schooled herself in how to view the world around her, and her mother's brief reflection cannot make her dispense with her own survival strategies of evasion.

Other places, like the seamstress's "nest", the blacksmith's shop, the pasture, even Mealy's shop, lure the child to them because they offer, though so briefly, holding environments for her. Her perception (of their landscapes) - so attentive and exacting while it lasts - is like a flight into reality. It is an escape from apperception and the internal chaos to which her mother has abandoned her. On her way to the pasture, the child sees in the store window 'big cardboard easels, shaped like houses - complete houses and houses with the roofs lifted off to show glimpses of the rooms inside, all in different colors'. (C.Pr.262) 'But', she observes,'they are an old story'. (C.Pr.262) What she sees is something terribly familiar and at the same time outdated. The cardboard easels are like a metaphor for her own young history. She has glimpsed all the rooms in her home long ago, and knows that she cannot discover its secrets so simply. In her writing, Bishop returns again and again to this predicament, inventing a whole series of homes around the world.

As the child takes her mother's weekly package to the post office, with the address of the sanatorium hidden by her arm, she looks down into the river from the bridge:

From above, the trout look as transparent as the water, but if one did catch one, it would be opaque enough, with a little slick moon-white belly with a pair of tiny, pleated, rose-pink fins on it. (C.Pr.273-4)

She is like the caught fish. She longs to fit herself to an environment in which she is transparent as the water, and she creates moments of intensity for herself in which, by looking, she can almost enter into it. But her unmetabolized, internal self, its gaze unreturned by her mother, is in chaos. It is opaque to her understanding, and she can only see, hold for a moment in her mind's eye, her predicament, which is as absolute as that of a fish out of water. When she absconds from the unpacking of her mother's possessions early in the story, she takes with her:

a little ivory stick with a sharp point. To keep it forever I bury it under the bleeding heart by the crab-apple tree, but it is never found again. (C.Pr.257)

The stick is a poignant metaphor for the painful gift that the mother gives her child. Burying it deep in her heart, she will keep her wound forever but never fully discover it, touching it only obliquely in her defence, through her writing, of its intolerable pain.

The child's dilemma in this story provides us with a particular insight into the performing eye which lies behind the rest of her work. In the village the child continually strives to make the world she sees cohere. When, for a moment, this happens, it is like what Lacan described as the baby's 'jubilant assumption' at its primary vision of completeness, whether it finds it in the mirror or reflected in the mother's face. A moment later Lacan's baby is overwhelmed by its motor incapacity, and

together with its image, it collapses into its previous chaos of different parts. The child with a good-enough mother finds this chaotic self metabolized into a coherent form in time. But this process of coherence has been denied to the child in the village. She finds chaos inside herself and outside. Like this childhood version of herself, Bishop continues to try to hold herself together by fixing and trying to master what she sees. But even in such careful compositions as her poems and stories, the world, nevertheless, persists in fragmenting before her eyes and refusing to remain fixed in form.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY WORK: 'UNCERTAIN OF IDENTITY'.

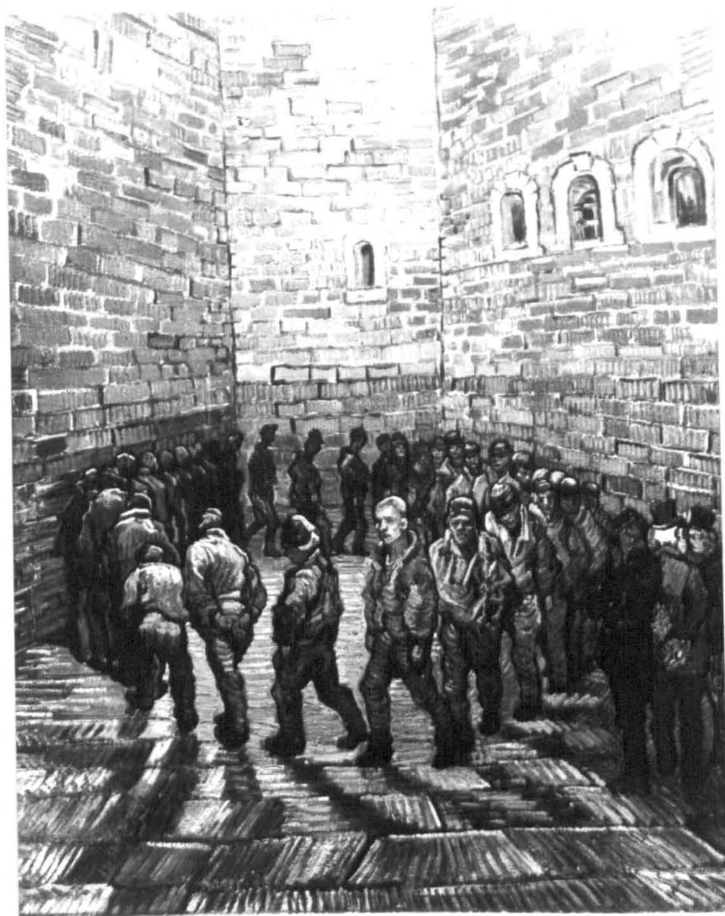

PLATE 16:
Vincent Van Gogh, The Prison Courtyard (Saint-Rémy, 1890)

i

THE QUEST FOR SELF-DEFINITION

Travelling up and down the North American seaboard, spending time in Europe and in Mexico, Bishop's journeys during the 1930's and early '40's parallel her search in her writing for her own true North. Her first book of poems, North & South (1946), takes its bearings from all over the place, as Bishop appears to head off in different directions. The book betrays diverse influences, such as George Herbert, Thoreau, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, W.H. Auden and the surrealist poets, Bishop giving away more than she ever did later about which writers affected her. The poems range from sestina and ballad to rhyming triplets to unrhymed, tightly orchestrated free verse. But with all this we discover the preoccupations which lay at the heart of her writing throughout her life.

In North & South Bishop pursues her questions by inventing characters who seem to be figures of ideas, rather than, as she did later, inventing characters that seem to come out of a life being lived. They are new-coined, shiny images of one idea: one-off catches, like the catch made in her poem "The Fish". By the time she published her second book of poems nine years later, she had relinquished these two-dimensional characters and their specific but implausible landscapes, but not the questions she addresses through them. In North & South she is already fascinated by what she called 'the almost-more-successful surrealism of everyday life', and uses dreamscapes and surrealistic settings to capture the idea.[1] She is

intrigued by the notion that if she concentrates on something for long enough, even if it is her own invention, it will yield up a significance invisible at first sight. In her poem "The Monument" she acknowledges the anomaly of this position, recognizing that any significance must be as artificial a construction in a poem as the poetic subject itself. Even so, her wish that the poetic subject should reveal itself to be a manifold and stable source of meaning remained a central one all her life. This sustained attention to the subject marked an important early difference between the young Bishop and her mentor Marianne Moore. Moore plays around the apparent subject of her poem, making analogies and comparisons, diverting our attention from it and turning it into discourse. She makes her subject, whether it be a jerboa or the state of marriage, out of allusion, innuendo and comparison, so that the subject itself comes to be a multifarious figure. But Bishop rarely moves her eye from its first focus. Her subject is singular: a place, a character, even a particular moment in time. She relies on the way things change when we regard them closely, and the context these changes give.

The extraordinary continuity within Bishop's writing from first to last, for all her equally considerable development, goes back much earlier than her first book of poems. When we consider the childhood history that she recalled in "In the Village", this continuity may seem less surprising. What is surprising (as it so often is when we look back at a writer's early work) is that she had to break out of the shell of so many old manners to become the poet we now remember.[2] Bishop's early poems were only collected and published after her death in the Complete Poems 1927-1979. Her

exaggerated perfectionism prevented her from ever doing so herself (though five were published in Trial Balances in 1935). Many of them have that gangly awkwardness we associate with adolescence and their conceits and influences are often obvious. Their awkwardness, however, makes it easier for us to discover, in nascent form, the quest for poetic definition which runs beside the quest for self-definition.

ii

TWO EARLY POEMS

One of Bishop's earliest known poems, "To a Tree", dated 1927 when she was sixteen, flirts conspicuously with a transcendentalist conception of things:

> Oh, tree outside my window, we are kin,
>   For you ask nothing of a friend but this:
> To lean against the window and peer in
>   And watch me move about! Sufficient bliss
>
> For me, who stand behind its framework stout,
>   Full of my tiny tragedies and grotesque grieves,
> To lean against the window and peer out,
>   Admiring infinites'mal leaves. (C.P.212)

Bishop's poem is an elliptical reply to Emerson's essay on "Nature", a brief response to Thoreau's voyeuristic excitement in Walden for the natural world. Thoreau recalls waking from a sleep tormented by a mysterious question only to find:

dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on *her* lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight.[3]

One reading of this passage would have Nature revealing herself to Thoreau as a source of 'sweet and beneficent society...an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me'.[4] But Thoreau is as ingenuously cunning as Bishop. Like her he tempts his readers at first to think there is nothing on tenterhooks in his prose, but that all is simple affinity. But if there is no question on Nature's lips, how can there have been any answer? Emerson, on the other hand, is less convinced of Man's capacity to respond to Nature than Thoreau pretends to be, with his self-congratulation. Emerson demands the impossible:

> The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth becomes part of his daily food.[5]

His Nature demands imitation from her 'lover':

> Nature stretches out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness. Willingly does she follow his steps with the rose and violet, and bend her lines of grandeur and grace to the decoration of her darling child. Only let his thoughts be of equal scope, and the frame will suit the picture. A virtuous man is in unison with her works, and makes the central figure of the visible sphere.[6]

Bishop is Emerson's legatee in the same way that English writers since Wordsworth have been Wordsworth's. She has to address Emerson's legacy in order to establish her own poetic ground, just as Frost, Williams, Moore, Stevens, Ammons and her other contemporaries had to.

Bishop's early differentiation from Emerson marks her off from two other so-called "Nature" poets. Frost and Ammons have their own replies to Emerson's vision of the intimate correspondence between the 'virtuous man' (that is, the poet) and Nature. But in their own ways they align themselves less equivocally beneath Emerson's star than the young Bishop. Frost's poem "Tree At My Window" (published in the same year as Bishop wrote "To a Tree") puts tree and protagonist in the same posture as Bishop's poem does. But Frost's protagonist is unconcerned by the window which divides them. Instead he is excited by their intimacy:

> But, tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,
> And if you have seen me when I slept,
> You have seen me when I was taken and swept
> And all but lost.
>
> That day she put our heads together,
> Fate had her imagination about her,
> Your head so much concerned with outer,
> Mine with inner, weather.[7]

Frost follows Emerson's injunction to 'let [man's] thoughts be of equal scope' with Nature's. He allows man's mind and Nature's experience to mirror one another, as the storm suffered by the tree modulates into a metaphor for the sleeper's agitated dreams. As 'Fate had her imagination about her', so Frost has his wits about him, realizing Emerson's grandiose rallying cry in a studied but playful conceit.

A.R. Ammons's poem "Reflective" exchanges Emerson's picture and frame of man and Nature for a mirror between them. Though both possess the mirror, it be<u>tr</u>ays each's likeness to the other:

I found a
weed
that had a

mirror in it
and that
mirror

looked in at
a mirror
in

me that
had a
weed in it[8]

Ammons's poem is a rebuff to the dubiously 'serene and satisfied face' of Thoreau's Nature, changing Thoreau's arch pleasantries into something more explicitly ominous, but it accepts Emerson's vision of coherent correspondence between Nature and man.

Voyeurism, not correspondence, is the condition celebrated in Bishop's poem. Its two brief stanzas turn around the window which separates protagonist from tree. Unlike Frost's poem, Bishop's enforces this separation, rather than dissolving it. Mutual recognition between tree and protagonist lies in their mirror action, one peering in through the window and the other peering out. But the protagonist keeps her 'tiny tragedies and grotesque grieves' to herself, finding it 'Sufficient bliss' to 'lean against the window and peer out'. The window proves to be a 'framework stout', which offers not just an ungainly rhyme to go with 'out', but a peculiarly robust image for something as vulnerable as a pane of glass. The window enables the protagonist to 'peer out' at the tree at the same time as mediating between them.

The protagonist addresses the tree as her 'kin', a curious term to use given their measured distance. But, as we saw in Bishop's life, kinship came to be signified by both geographical and emotional distance. The window acts as a metaphor for Bishop's writing. It is her bulwark against the world, yet it enables her to lean up to things and look closely, to skate well on the surfaces of the world, as Emerson has it in his essay on "Experience".[9] But even as she looks, what she sees dissolves into 'infinites'mal leaves', fragmenting before her gaze. The brevity of this poem (it is her shortest, except for three conspicuously impromptu pieces) and the phrases upon which the protagonist's pleasure in the outside world turns remind us of Emily Dickinson's brief, fragment-like poems. Like Dickinson, Bishop focusses on the world outside her mind to divert her, if only briefly, from the world within. Peering out of the window, her attention, and the poem, move from her 'tiny tragedies and grotesque grieves' to its rhyming alternative: 'infinites'mal leaves'. The poem is emblematic of the posture she adopts as a poet throughout her life, with its centrifugal rhythm, taking the eye from self to tree, from inward distress to the momentary coherence that the outer world offers. By contrast to Emerson's confidence, Bishop is ambivalent and constrained in her gestures as a poet towards 'Nature'. But in her later poems this ambivalence is disguised by her extended, brilliant visual engagements with a landscape.

Bishop was preoccupied from early on with the idea of the ideal place to live, a version of her quest for home. This search also manifested her quest for the right place as a writer. "For C.W.B." (1929) sketches a dream-like fairy idyll, in the manner of Christina Rossetti or Walter de la Mare. It compares with Rossetti's early poems ("Twilight Calm" or "A

Birthday") and with poems by de la Mare like "The Stranger" or "The Isle of Lone", though it has none of their mournful or foreboding glints. Its rarefied and shapeless musing, so unlike anything Bishop went on to write, gives it a parodic air, as though she cannot quite believe that anyone could think that this was a viable fantasy:

> Let us live in a lull of the long winter-winds
>   Where the shy, silver-antlered reindeer go
> On dainty hoofs with their white rabbit friends
>   Amidst the delicate flowering snow.
>
> All of our thoughts will be fairer than doves.
>   We will live upon wedding-cake frosted with sleet.
> We will build us a house from two red tablecloths,
>   And wear scarlet mittens on both hands and feet. (C.P.216)

The elegiac stanzas, and the regular succession of new images, one per line, mark a rare excursion by Bishop into formal and visual facility. The poem is an experiment to see how far from the truth she can go. She uses tight formal constructions like the sonnet, villanelle and sestina in other, later, poems, but she uses them to describe a self-reflexive, imaginatively restrained landscape. The landscape in "For C.W.B." is fairytale-like and unproblematic.

Unlike her other imagined ideal lives (such as in the story "In Prison" or in "The End of March") the fantasy life in this poem is to be shared. But the other invitee is as nominal as the life imagined, and is left entirely unrealized (except perhaps in the mysterious title dedication). Bishop had no real interest in such romantic, shared fantasy

lives, so far were they from her sense of what was possible or what was interesting.

The fairytale elements from this poem do not entirely disappear in her later writing, but Bishop goes on to use fairytales in an ironic, or distorted form, as in her story "The Farmer's Children", the dream poems of North & South and poems like "Manuelzinho", "Twelfth Morning; or What You Will" and "12 O'Clock News". Neither does Bishop relinquish her early preoccupation with the details of an ideal landscape. But this poem's fairy pastoral gives way to vivid figurations of a tumultuous, cloyed, often perplexed world - a world that is really seen - and this momentary fantasy is quickly put aside for what becomes a life-long attempt to envisage, and then to appropriate the "good place", at least in the imagination.

Tracing the imagery from this poem into Bishop's later work shows how overtly naive Bishop's strategy is in this early, banal attempt to articulate her fantasy of the right place to live. The 'shy, silver-antlered reindeer' seem fey before the later moose, 'Towering, antlerless, / high as a church, / homely as a house' and the reindeer's 'white rabbit friends' will become aghast figures touched by the festive frenzy of Brazilian fire balloons in "The Armadillo", transformed to 'a handful of intangible ash / with fixed, ignited eyes '.(C.P.173,104) Doves, dulled by long association with ideas of purity, are exchanged for more graphic birds: 'flashy tanagers', 'clowning pelicans' or even the 'big, symbolic birds' with 'beaks agape' of the Brazilian jungle; and the whistle-playing gnome makes way for the beggar in the park of "Anaphora" and the bizarre Balthazár (in "Twelfth Morning; or What You Will"). (C.P.32,91,110) The

'idea of a house' makes one of its earliest appearances in "For C.W.B." as a 'house from two red tablecloths'. (C.Pr.171) This hints at the comic, fragile materialism of "Jerónimo's House", but not at the austere specificity of Edwin Boomer's house which has 'no window, no door set in the door frame, and nothing at all inside'. (C.Pr.171) Nor can it match the concerted vision of the squatter's children's rain-soaked mansions, or of Bishop's 'crypto-dream-house', her 'crooked box / set up on pilings'. (C.P.95,179) The Owl and Pussycat-like 'scarlet mittens' are exchanged for moth-bitten relics in "Crusoe in England". (C.P.166) Whispering trees become 'impenetrable' or a 'sooty, scrub affair', while the 'pale, sea-green breeze' is exchanged for a 'rackety icy, offshore wind'. (C.P.166, 216,179) 'Star-flower rosaries and moss banks for church' are replaced by a more elaborate 'celestial seascape, with white herons got up as angels' and 'suggestively Gothic arches of...mangrove roots', while dreams which are 'clearer than glass' in this poem soon become murky, camouflaging their dreamer's dangerous thoughts. (C.P.40,30) The whole poem reads like an unsuccessful exercise in imaginative containment. Bishop pretends to make up a fantasy, but its implausible tone and absurd, lightweight imagery allow it no purchase on its reader's imagination.

iii

TWO EARLY STORIES

In fairytales the real world is fantastical. The prince, or pauper, is given his impossible task, his magical weapons, and the prospect of marrying the girl if he returns successful. His trip to reclaim the lost land or scale the ice mountain, to kill the dragon or witch, takes him beyond the familiar landscape and into a world where he has to guess at the meaning of things. His danger lies not in the dragon's glare, but in his ignorance of what will discompose (kill) his adversary. Things cohere differently in this strange place. Bishop's prose tale "The Sea & Its Shore" (1937) begins as something like a fairytale, but its hero never works out how to read the different bits of his magical landscape, and so never finds his way home. Edwin Boomer has his weapons and his task. His weapons are a 'staff, with a long, polished wire nail', 'a lantern to carry', 'a big wire basket... a box of matches... and a house'. (C.Pr.171) His task is 'to keep the sand free from papers'. (C.Pr.171) But he never completes it because even with his weapons, he cannot make head nor tail of the strange land.

Edwin Boomer is like the peculiar 'simple and natural man' Thoreau celebrates in Walden.[10] Thoreau's man, a wood-chopper and post-maker, acts out a parody of knowledge. He delighted in Homer though 'what his writing was about he did not know', and, at two removes from knowledge, he used his almanac (one of his only two books) as 'a sort of cyclopaedia... which he supposed to contain an abstract of human knowledge'.[11] Thoreau declares,

with some irony, that his wood-chopper is a man of genius, an archetypal hero of the natural world. Bishop's Boomer is like a Modernist version. Her litter-collector cannot construe his own experiences, let alone the 'cyclopaedia' he makes out of the scraps of paper he picks off the beach. He is like the child in "In the Village", trying to understand 'himself, his occupation in life' and 'other people' by assembling the scraps of paper which seem most interesting. As it was for the child, Boomer's quest for self-definition becomes an endless act of recomposition.

Edwin Boomer is a solitary figure, living alone in his tiny hut on the beach, that margin between land and sea. He is a crude prototype of many of Bishop's later protagonists, the first in a procession who stand in particular isolation, occupying their place explicitly on the edge of a landscape. And he is part of a much larger procession within the canon of North American literature. Behind Boomer stand Crèvecoeur's Letters From An American Farmer, Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking novels or Thoreau in Walden, Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter and Twain's Huckleberry Finn. Like Crèvecoeur's Farmer James, Boomer is a prototypical American. He is an outsider to all communities, yet he characterizes the American pioneering spirit. He makes his home in a place where he has to invent even the conventions of the landscape. Like his literary predecessors, Boomer makes up his own historical, cultural, even aesthetic rationale, the privilege of being a stranger at home in a new land.

Like the Man-Moth and the Gentleman of Shalott in North & South, Boomer characterizes certain ideas that are important to Bishop. As Jerome Mazzaro suggests, he represents her ambivalence towards her own position as

writer.[12] Bishop wrote the story at a time when she still had not decided whether she could or would become a writer, and in it she characterizes her own anxieties. Is she, like Boomer, an avid reader who is unable to produce her own text out of the multiple texts she is reading? Does she have the authority to write, or only to read? Boomer also carries her desire for the ideal place to live and his bizarre night-time readings on the beach give distinct shape to her conviction that the world is composed of fragments, which are held together only by conviction in this beholder.

In The Poetics of Space Gaston Bachelard places the hut at the core of his topo-analytical study. His account of it is like an echo of Boomer's 'idea of a house'. He describes the hut as the 'tap-root of the function of inhabiting':

> The hermit's hut is an engraving that would suffer from any exaggeration of picturesqueness. Its truth must derive from the intensity of its essence, which is the essence of the verb "to inhabit." The hut immediately becomes centralized solitude, for in the land of legend, there exists no adjoining hut...The hut can receive none of the riches "of this world." It possesses the felicity of intense poverty; indeed, it is one of the glories of poverty; as destitution increases it gives us access to absolute refuge.[13]

Edwin Boomer's house on the beach measures 'about four by six feet' and has 'no window, no door set in the door frame, and nothing at all inside'. (C.Pr.171) It fits Bachelard's description of a hut very well:

> As a house, it was more like an idea of a house than a real one. It could have stood at either end of a scale of ideas of houses. It could have been a child's perfect playhouse, or an adult's ideal house - since everything that makes most houses nuisances had been done away with.
>
> It was a shelter, but not for living in, for thinking in. It was,

to the ordinary house, what the ceremonial thinking cap is to the ordinary hat. (C.Pr.171-172)

Boomer's minimal house is a different kind of focus to Bachelard's hermit and hut. Rather than a place of solitary reassurance, it is the site of Boomer's endless trawl in his search for self-explanation. He retires to it each night with the scraps of paper he has preserved from his beach cleaning, in case they bear on his own situation. What he collects is an arbitrary miscellany, which he threads together using his own experience as common denominator. He reads his world from these bits of texts, and finally he reads the world as a text, or texts.

Bishop's comic undermining of the notion of the single text, through Boomer's absurd compilations, prefigures writers like Thomas Pynchon and Robert Coover. Boomer's life is made contingent upon fragments of writing, whose meaning within the story is in turn contingent upon Boomer's life, each meaning turning on the other. Bishop's text provokes a wild range of allusions in her reader, from the pioneering predecessors already mentioned, for whom the mystery lies in the strangeness and newness of the land, to her post-modernist successors with their dislocation, paranoia and confusion between the signifier and the signified. Just as the profound confusion between perception and representation leaves the child of "In the Village" unable to represent her own mother to herself, so this same confusion keeps Boomer from ever completing his fairy task. Bishop's ambivalence about what can be done with words (or images) is more discreet in her poems, but it lies behind the strange composure of her best work. She lifts the veil only occasionally, in poems like "In the Waiting Room" and

"Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance", when we glimpse the strong scepticism about the efficacy of writing which is so apparent in "The Sea & Its Shore".

Boomer concentrates on the textures of the landscape revealed by his lamp at night, trying to read its shapes just as intently as he studies his scraps of paper. As in the later poem, "The Map", the line between the printed and the actual world becomes as fluid to Boomer as the line between sea and land in his beach domain, each appearing in the other's guise. The harder he gazes, the less able he is to distinguish between the boundaries of either realm. Both take on the other's forms:

> Either because of the insect armies of type so constantly besieging his eyes, or because it was really so, the world, the whole world he saw, came before many years to seem printed, too.
>
> Boomer held up the lantern and watched a sandpiper rushing distractedly this way and that.
>
> It looked, to his strained eyesight, like a point of punctuation against the "rounded, rolling waves." It left fine prints with its feet. Its feathers were speckled; and especially on the narrow hems of the wings appeared marks that looked as if they might be letters, if only he could get close enough to read them...
>
> The sand itself, if he picked some of it up and held it close to one eye, looked a little like printed paper, ground up or chewed. (C.Pr.178-179)

The sandpiper is a beachcomber, finding sustenance between sea and shore and Bishop repeatedly finds in its actions a metaphor for her own. She, too, will learn how to control her panic and appear a 'student of Blake'. (C.P.131) But in "The Sea & Its Shore" she rushes 'distractedly this way and that' in her writing, still unsure which part she should be playing. Is she, like Boomer, only the reader, searching among the endless grains of

texts, or can she also be the writer, composing her own text? The sandpiper here plays both parts, but incoherently.

Boomer 'made many careful comparisons between [the flight of the papers he collected] and the birds that occasionally flew within range of the lantern'. (C.Pr.174) He found that unlike the 'often pigheaded birds', the scraps of paper 'made more subtle use of air currents and yielded to them more whimsically', seeming 'unconscious of the bravery, the ignorance they displayed, and of Boomer, waiting to catch them on the sharpened nail '.When he burned them they became 'frail sheets of ashes, as white as the original paper, and soft to the touch, or a bundle of gray feathers like a guinea hen's '.(C.Pr.179) He embodies the conviction Bishop held all her life, that constructing any meaning out of the world is an arbitrary act; it is an imaginative composition made out of fragments. But although Boomer has to continue picking up papers left on the beach, he finds no answer to the questions they pose for him, except the imperative to go on looking. One fragment, 'written in pencil on letter paper,' concludes:

> "Mr Margolies, I am thinking of how those Authors write such long stories of 60,000 or 100,000 words in those magazines, and where do they get their imagination and the material./I would be very pleased to write such stories as those Writers." (C.Pr.177)

Bishop is playing on her own ambition and frustration as a writer, as well as on that of her imaginative alter ego. (It is no coincidence that Edwin Boomer has the same initials as his creator.) The name Mr. Margolies, as she explains in "The U.S.A. School of Writing", was given her when she

taught a correspondence course in creative writing after leaving college, and its appearance here seems an ironical gesture towards her own difficulties as a young writer. Although Bishop had not decided whether she wished to be a poet or a novelist (or a doctor) when she wrote this story, she soon found that she could compose her imaginative reckoning of the world better in poems which were rarely more than three pages long than in stories.[14] Boomer, unlike his creator, 'had no such childish desire' to write. But he did feel that the question posed to Mr Margolies 'was one having something to do with his own way of life':

> it might almost be addressed to him as well as to the unknown Mr. Margolies. But what was the answer? The more papers he picked up and the more he read, the less he felt he understood. In a sense he depended on "their imagination," and was even its slave, but at the same time he thought of it as a kind of disease. (C.Pr.177-178)

Boomer is as gripped by the anxiety of reading as Mr Margolies's correspondent is by the anxiety of writing. Overcome by the profusion of other people's writing, he represents the dilemma of the would-be writer. How is he, or his young creator, to separate himself from the endless texts he reads and to make his own? He is trapped in an apparently endless and random search for meaning. Alone on the shoreline between land and sea, collecting the paper tatters of the civilization he lives on the margins of, Edwin Boomer is like an unnoticed and uncomprehending Miss Lonely-hearts, and one of the first of Bishop's protagonists who stand on the edge of different realms, gazing out or gazing in. He is an emblem of Bishop's writing self. The more he tries to compose, the more things decompose, like the papers which drop into the sea, refusing to signify as anything beyond arbitrary conjunctions and partial formulations.

"In Prison" (1938) forms a companion piece to "The Sea & Its Shore". Its protagonist, too, is in search of his place in the world, and he opens his monologue with a reference to one of his great literary predecessors:

> As Nathaniel Hawthorne says in The Intelligence-Office, "I want my place, my own place, my true place in the world, my proper sphere, my thing which Nature intended me to perform...and which I have vainly sought all my life-time." (C.Pr.181)

Though Hawthorne is invoked, the story is told with the parodic, perverse, elegant, even supercilious manner of a Poe story and with the unpredictable allusions which characterize some of Melville's stories (like "I and My Chimney" and "The Piazza"). Uniquely in Bishop's writing, her carefully-identified male protagonist displays his (and by extension, her) extensive reading as he explains his quest for self-definition, to be found only through incarceration. He is antithetical to Boomer but in search of the same thing. Where Boomer strains to see and understand the visual and written landscape beyond his hut, this protagonist displays his worldly erudition, but declares his need for absolute constraint. Paradoxically, this constraint will facilitate his inward freedom. In prison life he can encode the constraints that are implicit in Boomer's life. His prison cell will be as limited as Boomer's 'house'; the view from his window as constrained as the arc of beach caught in Boomer's lamp-light; and his desire for liberating incomprehension as a reader mimics Boomer's ponderings over his scraps of paper:

> I hope I am not being too reactionary when I say that my one desire is to be given one very dull book to read, the duller the better. A book, moreover, on a subject completely foreign to me; perhaps the second volume, if the first would familiarize me too well with the terms and purpose of the work. Then I shall be able to experience with

> a free conscience the pleasure, perverse, I suppose, of interpreting it not at all according to its intent... From my detached rock-like book I shall be able to draw vast generalizations, abstractions of the grandest, most illuminating sort, like allegories or poems, and by posing fragments of it against the surroundings and conversations of my prison, I shall be able to form my own examples of surrealist art! - something I should never know how to do outside, where the sources are so bewildering. (C.Pr.187-188)

The tone of detached self-confidence masks another, subtler tone, both wistful and anxious.

The story is palpably a fiction about reading and writing, rather than imprisonment. It is like the protagonist's ornately wall-papered hotel room. In both his room and his narrative he can momentarily make-believe, almost imagining himself, 'if it would do any good, in a large silver bird cage! But that's a parody, a fantasy on my real hopes and ambitions.' (C.Pr.182) His imagined prison is one of the mind, in which the walls are covered with other inmates' writing, and on which he must make his own marks. He seeks, like Boomer, to shut himself up in a small space which is inscribed with other people's words, as if only through this kind of physical enclosure and literary exposure, this anxiety of influence as Harold Bloom would term it, will he produce his own sentences. He will add to the 'Writing on the Wall' of his cell, adapting his 'own compositions, in order that they may not conflict with those written by the prisoner before' him, and his "works" 'will be brief, suggestive, anguished, but full of the lights of revelation'. (C.Pr.188,189) In this worldly-wise and worldly-weary protagonist Bishop mocks herself and what she knows to be both her intellectual scope and arrogance. But she also acknowledges the burden of responsibility she feels upon her as a young writer, and the

responsibility of her predecessors' influences, which threaten, in her protagonist's contrived rhetoric, almost to weigh her down.

David Lehman recognizes the story as an allegory about the freedom needed to write, and remarks, using a Bachelard-like turn of metaphor, that for this 'What is desired, after all, is not an escape from, but an escape into, the unadorned cell of consciousness':

> Justice is beside the point. It is clear we are talking metaphorically, not about guilt and punishment, but about the self and its need to make peace with the certitude of loss. To volunteer for prison is to plan a journey into the interior, confident that in the exchange of physical liberty for imaginative freedom one has, philosophically speaking, struck a good bargain, given up the apparent, embraced the real.[15]

Bishop soon realized that imaginative freedom relied not only on making a successful journey into the interior, as Lehman puts it (echoing the end of Bishop's poem "Arrival at Santos"). It was also contingent on the same flexibility that her protagonist was so keen to escape from, and formulate for himself, in this story.

But the allegory goes behind and beyond simply the need to write. This fairytale fantasy of escape into, not out of, prison represents another, early response by Bishop to the precariousness she identified in her attempt to belong somewhere or identify anywhere as home. Her mother, who had died four years before this story was published, had spent her final eighteen years in an asylum. Though Bishop last saw her in her grandparents' house in Nova Scotia when she was five years old, the association of her mother with an asylum - and perhaps with asylum - must

have been deeply engrained all her life, the two senses of the word always closely allied. In this story she describes a visit (the visit she never made to her mother) to 'the Asylum of the Mausoleum where the painter V [presumably Vincent Van Gogh] had been confined for a year'. (C.Pr.185). For a moment, in the guise of her male protagonist, she allows herself to thrill at the view from his window:

> A row of cypresses stood at the right. It was rapidly growing dark... but I can still see as clearly as in a photograph the beautiful completeness of the view from that window: the shaven fields, the black cypress, and the group of swallows posed dipping in the gray sky —only the fields have retained their faded color. (C.Pr.186)

Then she calls herself back to the project at hand, rapidly qualifying the asylum's capacity to offer her the refuge she needs. Though Bishop never let her memory of her mother surface fully, this mention of the asylum suggests how complex her debt to her mother was. Perhaps she recognizes in this story that her need and ability to write rise out of her mother's insanity as much as out of her own sense of estrangement and dissolution.

The primary condition for the protagonist of "In Prison" is to be <u>in</u>, and he criticizes those prisons where 'the prisoners are not really imprisoned at all!' (C.Pr.182) As the child of "In the Village" could neither remain in the house nor in the village, so these prisoners' status inside and outside their captivity appears badly compromised:

> I have known of isolated villages, or island towns...where the prisoners are...deliberately set at large every morning to work at assigned tasks in the town, or to pick up such odd jobs for themselves as they can... [For] the prisoners, if such they could be called - there must have hung over their lives the perpetual irksomeness of all half-measures, of "not knowing where one is at."...this shortsighted

> and shiftless conception of the meaning of prison could never satisfy me; I could never consent to submit to such terms of imprisonment, - no, never! (C.Pr.182-183)

The story is directed against precariousness and against responsibility. It is a fantasy of belonging absolutely. Its protagonist needs to be the passive recipient of his sentence, just as a child is the passive recipient of its home. Once that inviolable security is achieved, he will be free to act out his independence, and, as another of Bishop's alter egos, free to write. In the final lines of the story Bishop acknowledges the contradiction which lies at the heart of the story:

> You may say - people have said to me - you would have been happy in the more flourishing days of the religious order, and that, I imagine, is close to the truth. But even there I hesitate, and the difference between Choice and Necessity jumps up again to confound me. "Freedom is knowledge of necessity"; I believe nothing as ardently as I do that. And I assure you that to act in this way is the only logical step for me to take. I mean, of course, to be acted <u>upon</u> in this way is the only logical step for me to take. (C.Pr.191)

The radical homelessness which characterized Bishop's life, and out of which she wrote, seems momentarily at odds with the argument in this story, that only by belonging absolutely are you free to imagine. But her poetry is made out of the desire to belong and the knowledge that <u>she</u> cannot make herself do so.

Bishop's protagonist is like a version of her unacknowledged self. He expresses her unspeakable desires and intellectual pretentions. The figure he wishes to cut in prison and the writing he wishes to put on the wall point to the kind of poetry Bishop was working on when she wrote the story.

He wants, he says, to 'be able to draw vast generalizations, abstractions of the grandest, most illuminating sort, like allegories or poems, and by posing fragments of it against the surroundings and conversations of my prison, [to] be able to form my own examples of surrrealist art!'. (C.Pr.188) His "works" 'will be brief, suggestive, anguished, but full of the lights of revelation', the product of a mind which is unconventional [in prison], rebellious perhaps, but in shades and shadows'. (C.Pr.189) In North & South (1946), Bishop finds illumination for the ideas and concerns she has given voice to in her early poems and stories. She discovers it not in the pomp of abstraction or generalization, but in specifically local reflection and characterization. Influenced by the surrealism she had encountered in Paris and New York during the 1930's and '40's, she writes her only examples of surrealist poetry, in poems such as "Paris, 7 A.M." and "The Monument". In poems like "The Man-Moth", "Sleeping on the Ceiling" and "Sleeping Standing Up" she pictures landscapes whose topography is composed of shadows and shades. The involuted voyeurism of "To a Tree" is transposed into poems like "Large Bad Picture" and "Seascape" and the rarefied landscape of "For C.W.B." is emphatically relinquished for others more emphatic though equally fragile. The grand gestures in her two early self-reflective prose fables, "The Sea & Its Shore" and "In Prison", about writing and reading, are exchanged in North & South for other kinds, as the grown-up Bishop finds other momentary stays against the confusion and chaos of the world.[16]

CHAPTER THREE

NORTH & SOUTH: 'CONSTANT READJUSTMENT'.

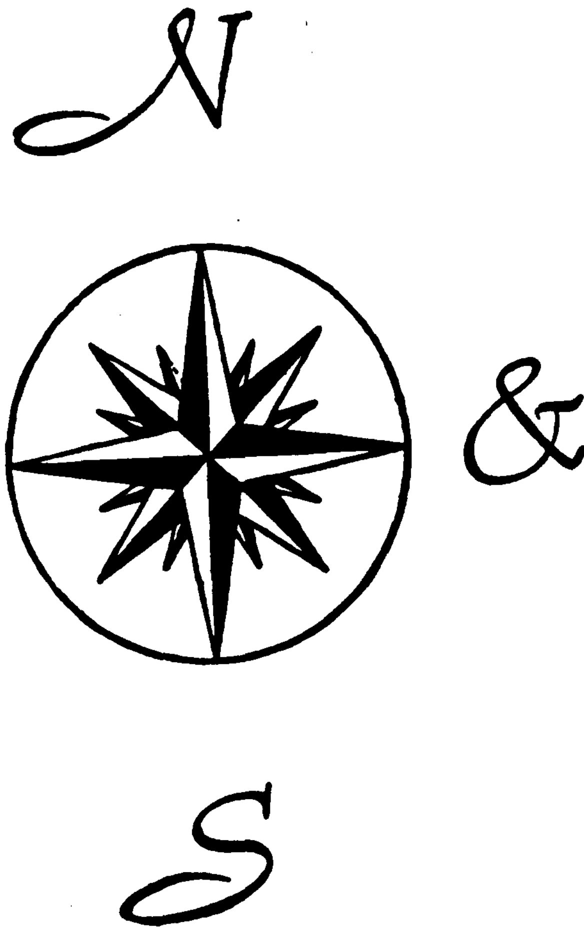

PLATE 17: Compass points, frontispiece to North & South
(Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1946)

i

"THE MAP"

In his "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" Wallace Stevens describes an intimacy of opposites:

> Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
> On one another, as a man depends
> On a woman, day on night, the imagined
>
> On the real. This is the origin of change.
> Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
> And forth the particulars of rapture come...
>
> And North and South are an intrinsic couple
> And sun and rain a plural, like two lovers
> That walk away as one in the greenest body.[1]

The close relationship that Stevens marks between North and South is one of the central ideas in Bishop's first book of poems, as its title makes clear. In <u>North & South</u> (1946) the proximity between the two cardinal points frames all the poems. Bishop never mulls over such a question as Stevens does, but she uses the apposition as well as opposition of North and South as a central trope in the book.

Without alluding to the book's title, Robert Lowell picks out this intimate dialectic in his 1947 review:

> I think that at least nine-tenths of [the poems] fall into a single symbolic pattern. Characterizing it is an elusive business.
> There are two opposing factors. The first is something in motion, weary but persisting, almost always failing, and on the point of

> disintegrating, and yet, for the most part, stoically maintained. This is morality, memory, the weed that grows to divide, and the dawn that advances, illuminates and calls to work...the echo of the hermit's voice saying, "love must be put in action" [sic]; it is the stolid little mechanical horse that carries a dancer, and all those things of memory that "cannot forget us half so easily as they can forget themselves." The second factor is a terminus: rest, sleep, fulfillment or death. This is the imaginary iceberg, the moon which the Man-moth [sic] thinks is a small clean hole through which he must thrust his head; it is sleeping on the top of a mast, and the peaceful ceiling: "But oh, that we could sleep up there."[2]

Bishop's first letter to Lowell is written in response to this review. She describes herself as overwhelmed by what he wrote:

> It is the first review I've had that attempted to find any general drift or consistency in the individual poems and I was beginning to feel there probably wasn't any at all. It is the only review that goes at things in what I think is the right way...[3]

Lowell had cleverly identified what other critics could not see. While admiring 'the splendor and minuteness of [Bishop's] descriptions', as so many have, he also detected, to her delight, the grander, symbolic movement of the poems.

Lowell's configuration of North & South is brilliantly perceptive. His remarks have a blithe confidence that Bishop never possessed herself, either about what her own poems, or other people's, meant. She never had that uncomplicated confidence in her own capacity for representation that her friend had about his own writing. When asked to explain her poems, Bishop almost always did so in literal terms. Her poems, she said, were simply descriptions of bus journeys she took, or of a map she was looking

at one New Year's Eve, or of catching a particular, ancient fish.[4] She begins her first book of poems by using as a trope the confusion between perception and representation which lies at the heart of "The Sea & Its Shore". The first poem in North & South, "The Map", has offered a convenient but often misleading rationale for a critic such as Honig. He feels that the poem's last line 'states the poet's aim: a scrupulous representation of the world reduced in scale and line to something like a cartographer's depiction of geographical areas. It is a plan for suppressing rather than compressing contours, dimension, tonality, emotion.'[5] While I agree that the poem makes a useful frontispiece to her work, I disagree with Honig's reductive reading. The poem turns upon the map-maker's thrill about what it calls 'conformation', that is, the way the map makes the forms of the world conform to its own conventions. If "The Map" is taken to be a guide to Bishop's poetry, as critics have alleged, then it is more sceptical about such models than it, or she, is usually taken to be.

Bishop asks what kind of geography we expect from a map. The poem questions the borders it sets up:

> Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
> Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges
> showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges
> where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.
> Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,
> drawing it unperturbed around itself?
> Along the fine tan sandy shelf
> is the land tugging at the sea from under? (C.P.3)

How are we to read the lines drawn in the map? What kind of intimacy is it between sea and land that is shown by a simple piece of shadowing? How is the onlooker to interpret the lines marking off one terrain from another? The poem provokes questions, and answers them by suggesting that the thrill of the map lies in what it conceals, or in what it suggests in its literalness and in its vulnerability to the imagination, despite its distinct and systematic method of representation. Under the guise of making a public geography with strict limits and rules of representation (the map), the map -maker can touch the gap between that formal geography and the agitations that it both maps and conceals. Maps represent heights and depths, though they are, of course, completely flat. Even so a whole world of perturbations is apparently held at bay by mapmaking, though the map itself can betray them.

The easy intimacy between sea and land of the first stanza gives way to more disturbed movements in the last stanza, as though the viewer had discovered different contours to her map in the process of gazing. Where before the land drew the sea 'unperturbed around itself', now its 'profiles investigate the sea'. The land which lay in water, with its fringes dipping the sea, has become as undulating as the waves, with 'Norway's hare [running] south in agitation'. Though the map is the same, the viewer now envisages a different mapped world. The change between the first and third stanzas is explained by the middle one. Here the map's viewers intervene. Its bays can be stroked; the peninsulas are compared to 'women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods' and the towns and cities intrude, under the printer's excited touch, running 'out to sea' and crossing 'the neighboring mountains'.

The auto-rhymes which begin and end the poem (land/land, water/water, shadows/shadows, green/green, under/under, is/is, colors/colors) are almost suspended in the middle stanza, which has no rhymes. The map which began by representing nothing beyond itself, even in its rhymes, is infected with just that instability of the world that it is meant to be stably representing. This is the poem's, and Bishop's, joke. Though the auto-rhymes return in the third stanza, the questions have been asked, and the poem ends with an ambivalent celebration of the art of map-making:

> Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West.
> More delicate than the historian's are the map-maker's colors.

Not only are imaginary geographies more delicate than the historian's colors, but they appear to disguise the agitated waters to which the historian is committed. The power of their reticence, however, like that of Bishop's, lies in their capacity to give away their agitations, despite their formal disguises. The historian's secret agenda, which lies behind the geography she makes, shows through in Bishop's poems, even in the formal, contrived contours of her lines. The excitement lies in the capacity of what is mapped to extend the borders of its own expression.

History always remained a tricky, two-edged notion for Bishop. Her own early history carries a terrible potency for her all her life. It is one source for the turbulence we detect beneath the careful surfaces of her writing. However, at odds with this view is another which surfaces throughout her writing. In this second view history offers only a banal account of the past if, like Crusoe's knife, 'The living soul has dribbled

away' from it and what it records are merely the relics of memory. (C.P.166) History lives not in important dates (such as January 1, 1502) nor in politicians' speeches (which sound like so much rain in "Questions of Travel"). Instead it survives in the local continuities of the landscape, such as 'the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages' which hang in Brazilian gas stations, or in the texture of jungle foliage, unchanged since it was first broached by colonial tourists over four hundred years ago. (C.P.94,91-2) Bishop never resolves this conflict between her fear on the one hand of the power of her own history and her scepticism on the other about the status of the broader historical narratives of which public history is often composed. If she gave too much credence to the broader, historical narrative, she would have to give too much credence to her own history. In "The Map" she alerts us to this conflict which would be inherent in her writing to the end.

ii

'A REAL VIEW'

In a memoir for a little-known naive painter, "Gregorio Valdes" (1939), Bishop recalls the first occasion she saw one of his paintings:

> The first painting I saw by Gregorio Valdes was in the window of a barbershop on Duval Street, the main street of Key West...
> It was a view, a real View, of a straight road diminishing to a point through green fields, and a row of straight Royal Palms on either side, so carefully painted that one could count seven trees in each row. In the middle of the road was the tiny figure of a man on a

> donkey, and far away on the right the white speck of a thatched Cuban cabin that seemed to have the same mysterious properties of perspective as the little dog in Rousseau's The Cariole of M. Juniot. (C.Pr.51)

Valdes, she discovers, is as naive as his paintings on the question of perspective. He has no difficulty with representation, painting precisely what he sees: so simple. Only on one occasion, Bishop records, does he apologize for misrepresenting what he has perceived. He takes the liberty of painting a particular palm tree with seven branches on each side 'to make it more symmetrical', when the tree he had taken his drawing from had seven on one side but six on the other. (C.Pr.53) In Gregorio Valdes's art we find another model for Bishop's art. Like the map-maker, his passion is to represent things exactly as they are, down to the last palm branch; and like the excited map-maker he violates his own code in the execution of his picture, allowing himself to put in an extra branch as the map-maker's labels violated the boundaries of his map.

What Valdes accomplishes in his best pictures is something that Bishop tries for in some of the poems in North & South. Unlike the intimacy achieved in "The Map" between the land's profile and the mapped waters, Valdes's best pictures have 'a peculiar and captivating freshness, flatness, and remoteness'. (C.Pr.58) They give Bishop the same sensation as his house with its 'apparent remoteness of every object...from every other object'.(C.Pr.54) However, like the printer in "The Map", Valdes infringes his own codes of exactitude in his best pictures to achieve this effect. He manages on these occasions 'to make just the right changes in perspective and coloring' to transform a picture from 'the worst sort of "calendar"

painting', which accounted for most of his pictures, into the paintings that Bishop celebrates.

Bishop admired the structure of Valdes's landscapes and enjoyed his precise enumeration of a landscape's different parts:

> I liked one picture of a homestead in Cuba...with two of the favorite Royal Palms and a banana tree, a chair on the porch, a woman, a donkey, a big white flower, and a Pan-American airplane in the blue sky. (C.Pr.52)

She enjoys envisaging the different parts of landscapes and the boundaries between them. But unlike Valdes, she perceives the world as endlessly fragmenting, its parts losing the separate composure that Valdes gives them. She constructs fictional unities, only to point out that such coherence is a mirage, simply the artist's myth-making privilege. In North & South Bishop uses fabulous characters, or describes another art-form within her own, or elaborates surrealist and dream landscapes, to construct, and then unravel, her own "real views". North & South is a concert of different imaginings, the most miscellaneous of all Bishop's books. She uses visual rather than verbal models for many of the poems, giving some titles like "Large Bad Picture", "Seascape", "The Map and "The Monument", rather than "Letter to" or "Essay on" or "Conversation between". She is intrigued by what happens to what she sees when she obeys the injunction at the end of her poem "The Monument", to 'Watch it closely.'

Bishop was always more interested in the composition of the everyday, banal parts of the world than she was in dramatic or historic acts or in high art. Her great-uncle's bad picture provides her with a commonplace seascape with cliffs, birds and boats. It could be anywhere. What Bishop finds in the canvas is that combination of the literal and the absurd that she celebrates in Valdes's pictures. Her uncle has painted a picture whose naive stylisation seems to take it beyond its creator's aspirations. Bishop fills in the canvas stanza by stanza. The picture has sides of 'overhanging ...cliffs', a middle on which sits 'a fleet of small black ships' and high above, 'hundreds of fine black birds', while a 'small red sun' shines down 'in perpetual sunset'. (C.P.11) The picture is very neat, even regimented with 'perfect waves', a 'fleet of small...ships' with 'sails furled', ranks of cliffs, and 'birds / hanging...in banks.' As in "The Sea & Its Shore" and "The Map", so here Bishop quizzes the relation between the picture's different parts and the scene it maps.

In the first part of the poem Bishop describes a scene of suspended animation. The adjectives she uses are static and, if not reductive, then washed-out: the sky is 'flushed, still', the cliffs 'pale blue', the never -named ocean forms a 'quiet floor', the ships are 'motionless' and have their 'sails furled' and the birds seem like scribbles. The picture has the formal contrivance we associate with children's paintings, with the waves done in symmetrical regularity, the ships looking like matchsticks and the distant birds being drawn, as we learn to when young, like hundreds of 'n's in the sky. The sentences are distended, as though the picture's separate elements could be strung together within the same breath. They are awkwardly formed, as though made up of entirely of extra clauses added on

as one detail reminds of another. With the poem's adroitly awkward rhymes, these sentences seem designed to be the product of a vivid but unreconstructed memory. What excites and amuses Bishop is that despite the confinement of such crude, formal mannerisms of image and of expression, executed in the attempt to achieve a formal landscape, the great-uncle's picture is a real view.

Bishop alters her observer's perspective in the fourth stanza to give expression to the picture's curious immediacy and mystery. The silent canvas, its borders as carefully marked as those in "The Map", is transformed under her gaze. Like the printer's excited over-extensions in "The Map", here the viewer crosses the formal boundaries of the great-uncle's picture and almost slips into it. Gazing at the birds high in the sky:

> One can hear their crying, crying,
> the only sound there is
> except for occasional sighing
> as a large aquatic animal breathes.
>
> In the pink light
> the small red sun goes rolling, rolling,
> round and round and round at the same height
> in perpetual sunset, comprehensive, consoling,
>
> while the ships consider it.
> Apparently they have reached their destination.
> It would be hard to say what brought them there,
> commerce or contemplation.

The picture changes suddenly. Its firm outlines shake as the poem undergoes a stylistic jolt. From observing scrupulously only what can be seen on the

canvas, all at once the viewer hears the 'crying, crying' of the scribbled birds and from beneath the 'quiet floor' of sea detects the 'sighing' of a comical Kraken, Bishop's 'large aquatic animal'.[6] The great-uncle's mimetic efforts have given way to a different kind of envisagement. All at once his painting holds a queerer version of the artistic efficacy of Keats's Grecian Urn — the power to maintain a continuous present, with the birds still 'crying, crying' and the sun still 'rolling, rolling, / round and round and round...in perpetual sunset'. Paradoxically, this makes the picture less the precise record that the great-uncle seems to aspire to in his painting. It suggests that the potency of art for Bishop lies in its capacity to take in its viewer's, or reader's, eye and be redefined beneath that look.

"Large Bad Picture" might be a response to W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts".[7] Bishop explores the fineness of failed fine art, in reply to Auden's Museum of Fine Arts. To her eye, her great-uncle's bad picture can conjure a scene just as vividly as a painting by Brueghel. In fact Bishop objected to Auden's version of Brueghel's picture on the grounds that it was implausible. It is less plausible than her 'large aquatic animal' because the action of Brueghel's ship, represented on the canvas, is unlikely, whereas a gentle, invisible Kraken is imaginable, submerged beneath her great-uncle's placid picture. In Auden's poem the ordinary world turns away and ignores 'Something amazing', while in Bishop's poem, she senses that there seems to be something amazing in the ordinary world, just below the surface.[8] In a wonderful letter to Robert Lowell about suffering, Bishop alludes at one point to "Musée des Beaux Arts". Her

comment elucidates one aspect of what she perceived to be artistic integrity:

> What I really object to in Auden's "Musée des Beaux" Arts [sic] isn't the attitude about suffering... - it's that I think it's just plain inaccurate in the last part — the ploughman & the people on the boat will rush to see the falling boy any minute, they always do, though maybe not to help. But then he's describing painting so I guess it's all right to use it that way.[9]

In "Large Bad Picture" Bishop is describing a painting too, but its significance is left unfocussed. There are no small bodies falling from the sky, nor any babies being born in one corner of the canvas. Where Auden's 'expensive delicate ship...had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on', Bishop's 'fleet of small black ships' 'have reached their destination'.[10] The poem's last sentence seems to answer a question which, though unasked, is implied. Though questions of travel fill Bishop's writing, this poem ends with a sense of resolution - for the great-uncle, the ships, and the poet - even the ships occupying their place through contemplation.[11]

iii

'DISTORTED AND REVEALED' (C.P.17)

Bishop is sceptical about the accuracy of any "real view" when it is mediated by art. She recognizes from early on that such accuracy is both a fantasy and something she has no wish for. Her poems celebrate the process

of distortion with which the artist composes what he sees. In North & South she is fascinated by the naive paintings of Gregorio Valdes and her great-uncle, by the unique perspective available to the map-maker and by the multiple ways of describing a shoreline. She also responds to the strange new ideas about the fabric of the world and the distortion of what is seen formulated by the surrealist movement. Bishop became interested in the surrealists' projects during two long trips to Paris in the 1930's.[12] Their emphasis on the automatic, the unforeseen and the spontaneous creation of art, all adjectives which could be applied to Bishop's early childhood, would have jarred on a poet who was always exacting, committedly self-conscious and rigorously restrained. But their interests offered the young Bishop new ways of expressing her own preoccupations. Their fascination with dreams, with the arbitrariness of their compositions and with the divide between conscious and subconscious, figure markedly in Bishop's North & South world and though she claims not to have known 'any of the surrealist writers or painters', she admitted having 'met 2 or 3 painters, [though] that's all'.[13] We must assume that with her loathing of dogmatism and doctrinaire beliefs, Bishop would have ignored André Breton's totalitarian demands and have taken as much or as little as she chose from his Surrealist manifestos.

In "The Monument" Bishop plays with the surrealist project more conspicuously than anywhere else in North & South. Influenced by a set of Ernst frottages, the poem focusses on familiar surrealist concerns. We do not know whether a real view is being described, or an imaginary one; a real monument, or an imaginary one. It is hard to imagine that a monument of this kind could have been composed before surrealism.[14] Like "Large Bad

Picture" and "Seascape", the poem is explicitly concerned with another work of art. But unlike these, it is unusually oracular and opaque for Bishop. The poem is as hard to decipher as the object it describes. We are given a precise description of a monument, but the precision crumbles this time as the distinction between the monument and its frame blurs, and with it our early confidence in the monument's exact form. As in "Large Bad Picture" or "Seascape", Bishop makes it clear how any view or work of art depends on its viewer for its existence. But here she is also captivated by the idea that the meaning and even the form of any such object rests solely in the mind of each onlooker:

> The monument is one-third set against
> a sea; two-thirds against a sky.
> The view is geared
> (that is, the view's perspective)
> so low there is no "far away,"
> and we are far away within the view.
> A sea of narrow, horizontal boards
> lies out behind our lonely monument,
> its long grains alternating right and left
> like floor-boards spotted, swarming-still,
> and motionless. A sky runs parallel,
> and it is palings, coarser than the sea's:
> splintery sunlight and long-fibred clouds. (C.P.23)

Where does the artifice stop? As the onlooker's eye is drawn from the monument to the 'view' the space between the 'piece of sculpture' and its setting diminishes until we are unsure whether the sea, sky, sunlight and clouds form the natural surroundings to the monument or whether they are part of the original piece.

From her earliest work to her latest, Bishop makes her poems into collages or friezes, the pieces gathered together within the impetus of the poem and brilliantly recomposed into new shapes. Such compositions, however, last for only as long as the reader's concentration. When the reader's attention is broken, the seascape, the house, the beach, the bus ride, or the water, may dissolve, we feel, into its many parts again. Bishop made use of the surrealists' concern with 'the imaginative apprehension of an object rather than the object itself' (as Ernst described his discovery of the frottage) as a way of exploring the limits of the aesthetic act.[15] "The Monument" is self-reflexively concerned as much with the act of perception as with what is perceived. It commemorates its own making, rather than a person or an historical moment.

The second voice in the poem (marked out by inverted commas) acts as devil's advocate to the first. It tries desperately to construe the construction, asking why this monument does not conform to the conventional spatial and aesthetic constraints placed around art:

> "Why does that strange sea make no sound?
> Is it because we're far away?
> Where are we? Are we in Asia Minor,
> or in Mongolia?"
> "...[the monument's] piled-up boxes,
> outlined with shoddy fret-work, half-fallen off,
> cracked and unpainted. It looks old."

The reader is diverted briefly from the somewhat comical portentousness of the first voice, which attempts a language of precision about something

which resists interpretation. As so often in Bishop's work, holding together is the thing, the search for coherence, even in unlikely objects:

> It is an artifact
> of wood. Wood holds together better
> than sea or cloud or sand could by itself,
> much better than real sea or sand or cloud.

As though supporting Oscar Wilde's remark that 'Life holds the mirror up to art', Bishop for a moment makes art the better cousin of life.[16] The poem ends with an injunction which carried through all of Bishop's writing, long after her interest in the surrealists had waned:

> It is the beginning of a painting,
> a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,
> and all of wood. Watch it closely.

The first voice refers to a history of art and of monument-making quite different from the home-made monument described by the second, with its flaking paint and 'shoddy fret-work'. But though it uses a language of Ozymandias-like romance, with an artist-prince and his 'melancholy or romantic scene', and employs a classical aesthetic language about the monument, referring to its 'ecclesiastical' 'fleur-de-lys', its 'whittled ornament' and its 'scroll-work', it also offers us the paradox of making makeshift monuments. The poem marks off a new tradition. The 'beginning' heralded at its close might imply Bishop's own beginning as a poet, finding her own materials and her own shapes for poetry, even as she makes use of what tradition she needs. The command with which the poem closes warns us

only to watch - the best we can do for ourselves. Perhaps to do any more would be to presume too much about the shape of things to come.

Bishop's brief but intense interest in surrealism gave rise to a number of dream poems. She used dreams as sources of poetic inspiration for her work and was, she said, 'pleased to have that gift', though 'it [was] not very reliable'.[17] 'Quite a few lines of Fishhouses came to me in a dream', she said, but by the time she wrote this poem her interest in explicit dream scenarios, along with her interest in surrealism, had waned.[18] The poem has no obviously dream-like atmosphere. By contrast a number of poems in North & South have a palpable, even explicit, dream aura. In "Paris, 7 A.M.", "Sleeping on the Ceiling" and "Sleeping Standing Up" protagonists roam around landscapes of their own imagining, making strange the familiar geography of daytime. The poems are shaped by the surreal, unpredictable musings of the half-awake or sleeping eye. By inverting the familiar shape of day, they reveal how the imaginative distortions of sleep can expose the obfuscations of the waking mind.

Though often seen as a descriptive poet, writing, as Sybil P. Estess has described, with 'the exactitude and tenacity of a naturalist', Bishop began as an explicitly inventive one.[19] Far from describing with exactitude, Bishop transfigures what she describes. She makes metaphors out of her landscapes, rendering them strange and arresting. Though one of the world's greatest naturalists was her favourite writer, she never attempts to record, as Darwin did, every observable feature. Instead, she addresses herself to drawing landscapes which are as much a figure of her imagination

as of her memory or recording eye. "Paris, 7 A.M.", for example, describes a specific Parisian landscape: an apartment building, decorated with ornamental urns and with mansard rooftops, set around a snowy courtyard. But the poem's early-morning setting and its surreal atmosphere give it a dream-likeness, one very like Léon Daudet's account of daydreaming with its 'constant procession on the mental horizon of fragments of memories, [and] of all sorts of images', which is at odds with Estess's version of naturalism.[20] "Paris, 7 A.M." describes the flow of associations in the mind of someone who seems just half-awake. The effort to make sense of the view is as laboured as the onlooker's in "The Monument" and as qualified in its success. Like "The Monument", it is the movement of the observing mind, not the physical contours of what is described, that gives the poem its shape.

An opening gambit establishes time as a spatial, rather than temporal, construct:

> I make a trip to each clock in the apartment:
> some hands point histrionically one way
> and some point others, from the ignorant faces.
> Time is an Etoile; the hours diverge
> so much that days are journeys round the suburbs,
> circles surrounding stars, overlapping circles. (C.P.26)

Ignoring the 'ignorant faces' of the clocks, attention is caught by the histrionics of the hands. Their shapes provoke the idea of time as an Etoile. The capitalization of 'Etoile' suggests the Place de l'Étoile, a symbolic centre of Paris paved with a star whose points stretch out towards boulevards, which in turn reach out towards the distant suburbs. The dif-

ferent shapes (stars, circles and squares) and the lines of divergence between images which recur through the poem reinforce the notion of time as something that is spatially measurable, in Paris at 7 a.m. at least.

The poem charts the movement of the mind, brooding upon the shape of time and history, and the movement of the eye, casting a glance first at the clocks in the apartment and then beyond:

> Look down into the courtyard. All the houses
> are built that way, with ornamental urns
> set on the mansard roof-tops where the pigeons
> take their walks. It is like introspection
> to stare inside, or retrospection,
> a star inside a rectangle, a recollection

Looking into the courtyard is to look both outwards, from the interior of the apartment towards the external world, with its pigeons and snow, and inwards, because though outside, the courtyard lies at the heart of the building. The border between perception and thought is confused. As earlier in "To a Tree", Bishop uses the world outside her mind as an alternative focus to that within, only to find that the two are intimately related. The protagonist moves between alliteratively connected thoughts (introspection, retrospection, recollection) and associatively connected images of the courtyard: a 'hollow square' 'snow-forts', 'houses', 'sand-forts' with 'grayed and yellowed' stone like that in the courtyard. These structures reflect the confusion of the mind; snow melts and sand dissolves in the tide, leaving no marks. Such forts are dubious edifices with which to compare the courtyard below.

In an early essay called "Time's Andromedas" (1933) Bishop describes the flight of a flock of migrating birds, whose motions set up 'a sort of time-pattern, or rather patterns, all closely related, all minutely varied, and yet all together forming the migration'.[21] She ends the essay, however, with the disintegration of her conventional understanding of time:

> Yet all this motion with its effect of precision, of passing the time along, as the clock passes it along from minute to minute, was to result in the end in a thing so inevitable, so absolute, as to mean nothing connected with the passage of time at all - a static fact of the world[22]

In "Paris, 7 A.M.", too, time dissolves into a series of disparate yet connected images in the final stanzas, which echo the first two but whose sense seems to lie inaccessible in a half-remembered past and in the city impressions of an early morning. The war-like imagery which permeates the poem ('forts', 'ammunition', 'carrier-warrier-pigeon', capture) is hard to understand, though perhaps it is connected to the capitalized 'Etoile' and a notion of Napoleonic monumental time. This time, radiating out in a star, is undone by the surreal, spatial time of the poem with its physical overlappings, different shapes, recurrences and recollections:

> When did the star dissolve, or was it captured
> by the sequence of squares and squares and circles, circles?
> Can the clocks say; is it there below,
> about to tumble in snow?

What has the star become? The poem ends with a childish, playful gesture, as though we have done no more than watch a game in the snow.

"Sleeping on the Ceiling" and "Sleeping Standing Up" find more overt postures for their sleeping protagonists than "Paris, 7 A.M.". Both postures are unlikely, alerting us to the dreamlikeness of their respective poems. The interest in each lies in the relationship between the sleeping and waking realms, as Bishop explores the fragility of our daytime construction of the world.

"Sleeping on the Ceiling" has a tone of matter-of-factness which has the absurd plausibility and suasiveness of a dream:

> It is so peaceful on the ceiling!
> It is the Place de la Concorde.
> The little crystal chandelier
> is off, the fountain is in the dark.
> Not a soul is in the park. (C.P.29)

The noise and clamor of the actual, Parisian Place de la Concorde is lost in the dream connection made between the manifest meaning of the name and the peaceful ceiling. The geography of bedroom and of city are collated with neat precision and the stanza is rounded off with a rhyming couplet. This dream seems to be under control.

The dream-geography broadens as photographs become animals, and the 'mighty flowers and foliage' of the Jardin des Plantes rustle on or in the wallpaper.[23] The gates of the Jardin are locked and suddenly the dreamscape has the sinister aspect of a public place after the public has gone. The final stanza introduces an epic encounter between the protagonist and an 'insect-gladiator' and the poem ends with a wistful return to the exclamation of the first line. As though reluctant to capitulate entirely to

her own dream -work, the protagonist concludes by wishing, 'But oh, that we could sleep up there...'. The dream-world in this poem seems more clearly understood by its protagonist than the half-formulated correspondences between recollection and observation are by the protagonist of "Paris, 7 A.M."

I think it very likely that Bishop drew the title of her second explicit dream poem, "Sleeping Standing Up", from a poem by the French surrealist, Robert Desnos which was published in the first number of Eugene Jolas's Paris-based transition.[24] He laments a dream which has been so real to him that the reality could only be a pale comparison, a 'living illusion' beside it:

> I've dreamed so much about you
> that you lose your reality
> ....
> I've dreamed so much about you that it is doubtless too
> late for me to wake. I sleep standing up, with my
> body exposed to all the appearances of life and love[25]

This dreamer has none of the reassuring repose of a man asleep lying down. Desnos's poem questions what reality is when the dream presence is more real than the waking absence. In her poem Bishop questions the partition which gives reality to the waking world and illusion to the sleeping world, by taking Desnos's line as its title.

Sleeping and standing are two present participles we would normally regard as mutually exclusive. The poem begins by suggesting that waking and sleep exist at tangents to one another, connected by an angle of incidence:

> As we lie down to sleep the world turns half away
> through ninety dark degrees;
> the bureau lies on the wall
> and thoughts that were recumbent in the day
> rise as the others fall,
> stand up and make a forest of thick-set trees. (C.P.30)

Bishop toys briefly with the idea that these dream poems might enable her to see beyond the fabric of the visible, waking world and catch the underside of her own thoughts. Sleep involves a tilting act, a half turn of the world. Daytime's 'recumbent' thoughts rise up in a new guise, offering the sleeper an uncharted forest for investigation. But, of course, dreams, too, crumble and disappear beneath the dreamer's gaze.

Bishop tells a kind of "Hansel and Gretel" story in the rest of the poem, though with her dreamer encased in an 'armored car'.[26] This rigid and unyielding dream/car acts as intermediary between the forest of thoughts and the protagonist; the dream is made into an aggressively protective metaphor, protecting the dreamer from her newly-risen thoughts. But when the armored car goes 'too fast', it also grinds them, transformed into 'crumbs or pebbles', beneath its tracks. The poem captures the dream's excitement and its frustrating constraints. It describes the dreamer's dangerous explorations, 'ready to go through / the swiftest streams, or up a ledge / of crumbling shale' and her discoveries:

> — Through turret-slits we saw the crumbs or pebbles that lay
> below the riveted flanks
> on the green forest floor,
> like those the clever children placed by day
> and followed to their door
> one night, at least

The "Hansel and Gretel" story encapsulates the child's conscious, the adult's unconscious, fear, which lay at the centre of Bishop's history: of being lost by your parents and never found again. The journey's purpose - to find 'out where the cottage was' - is disabled in the dream, as so often happens. Its protective mechanism functions efficiently to thwart the dreamer and the poem ends on a plaintive note reminiscent of a child's frustration with a story that has no proper ending. In her later poems, Bishop continues to take long journeys, but she makes her discoveries out of the journey itself, finding questions to ask of travel rather than of travel's destination. She abandons these early excursions into the dream-world (encouraged by the new territory uncovered by the surrealists) for other kinds of exploration. But the subliminal, wished-for destination, which we might crudely describe as '<u>home, / wherever that may be</u>' remains the same and, as always, out of reach. (C.P.94)

iv

'HALF IS ENOUGH' (C.P.9)

Bishop's Gentleman of Shalott concludes his debate with the adage, 'Half is enough'. His sphere is defined by his own imaginative deficiency. Unable to establish the borders of his own body, his attention never reaches beyond. The poem is composed of humorous and euphemistic cogitations on his fate, which is the knowledge that he is half reflection, though he is 'in doubt / as to which side's in or out / of the mirror.'

Bishop seems to make light of the Gentleman's existential crisis by describing his predicament with popular, even banal, expressions. She finds phrases like: 'To his mind'; 'what we call the spine'; 'He felt in modesty'; 'There's little margin for error'; 'thought, he thinks, might be affected'; 'he's in a fix'; 'He wishes to be quoted as saying at present'. These have an awkward, prosaic rhythm which combines with the varied, short lines to give the poem an interrupted, unbalanced tone, as though reflecting the Gentleman's sense of his body. The ungainly humo rousness of his dilemma - his absurd duplicated physiognomy, for 'why should he / be doubled?' - diverts our attention for a moment from the gravity of the vital question, first raised in the poem's title.

In Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott", his Lady's only recourse to the world outside her tower prison is through a mirror. She can see 'Shadows of the world', its reflection, but if she looks directly at the uninverted world, she will die.[27] So when she does look directly, she dies of it. Was the world in her tower, then, the real one, or the world beyond? Was she more real on one side of her mirror than on another? Tennyson is concerned with the implication of too much unmediated reality; Bishop is interested in how we distinguish reality from its illusive (or elusive) reflection. Her inversion of Tennyson's gender makes her Gentleman a mirror-image of his Lady: the debate is turned around and it is a Launcelot who must debate the margins of his own reality.

This poem raises a question that preoccupied Bishop all her life. Unable to distinguish between his real and mirrored halves, how can the Gentleman fix his own form? He is like the child in "In the Village" whose

internal self is in chaos. The Gentleman 'loves / that sense of constant re-adjustment' which rises from his uncertainty as to which half of him is real, and which reflection. Like the child, he cannot form a stable image either of himself or of the external world, because he is unable to distinguish the end of one or the beginning of the other, and so he makes a virtue out of necessity: 'The uncertainty / he says he / finds exhilarating.' The Gentleman of Shalott is at pains to shore up his own fragmented sense of things, like so many of Bishop's characters, and to celebrate it. The poem describes a definitive act of voyeurism. The Gentleman as narcissist cannot differentiate between his own, subjective self and the object he observes, because there is, of course, no difference. He invents a mirror in an effort to distinguish, but inevitably finds no resolution for his dilemma. His self-voyeurism is indistinguishable from introspection.

Bishop makes another of her "half"-figures out of a piece of misprision. "The Man-Moth" was born out of a newspaper misprint. It is Bishop's most surreal poem, describing a specific, though unidentified, city landscape through the eyes of an entirely imaginary and fabulous figure.[28] Freud and his slips of the tongue apart, its genesis is as arbitrary as that of Ernst's _frottage_ series, _Histoire Naturelle_. From this "coincidental" inspiration Bishop builds up a parody of a plausible narrative and gives it the tone of some nature documentary, her own natural history. The Man-Moth is a compulsive, paranoid and fearful creature, who enacts his obsessive gestures in an eerily empty cityscape. Inhabiting this urban world at its edges, he acts through a series of imperatives. A marginal figure, he takes centre stage in the poem.

The 'cracks in the buildings', 'battered moonlight', shadows, and the Man-Moth scaling 'the faces of the buildings', with his 'hands in his pockets in 'the silent trains', ultimately handing over 'one tear, his only possession' as it slips from his lids, conspire to give the poem the atmosphere of an early silent movie, with the Man-Moth taking Buster Keaton's or Charlie Chaplin's part. (C.P.14-15) As Thomas Travisano says, 'the Man-Moth is also Pierrot', a tragic clown.[29] A wraith-like figure, he appears only at night, paying 'occasional...visits to the surface' in pursuit of or in flight from different hopes and fears. But the repose he seeks lies beyond his grasp. Perhaps the only repose to be found in the poem lies in the tear the Man-Moth hands over as his finale:

> If you catch him,
> hold up a flashlight to his eye. It's all dark pupil,
> an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens
> as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids
> one tear, his only possession, like the bee's sting, slips.
> Slyly he palms it, and if you're not paying attention
> he'll swallow it. However, if you watch, he'll hand it over,
> cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink.

We were enjoined earlier to 'Watch [the monument] closely' and now we are advised that to those who watch, the Man-Moth will hand over his tear, 'his only possession, like the bee's sting'. Like the bee's sting, it is his only rebuff, though unlike a sting what the Man-Moth most wants to do is consume it himself. The end of the poem interrupts and jeopardizes his self-absorption, as though that were the function of the reader. For a moment we can intervene in other figures' lives, however fragile they prove.

The Gentleman's conclusion that '"Half is enough"' would fit equally as a title to poems like "Chemin de Fer" "The Imaginary Iceberg", "The Unbeliever" and "Cirque d'Hiver". Not only are the figures in these poems deliberately partial, but they also have a two-dimensional quality. They are like experiments, as Bishop offers us representations that are incomplete by design. These poems which make no pretence to representation soon give way to those which aim to construe a real world, really seen. In North & South the disjointed, fantastical figures in their strange settings, like the Gentleman, the "Imaginary Iceberg" and the cloud in "The Unbeliever", or the hermit of "Chemin de Fer" by his echoing pond, give a theatrical, even hyperbolic accent to the introspection and fragmentation of the volume. In the poems which follow them, Bishop paints more elaborate landscapes and peoples them with characters who have a stronger commitment to the notion of the real world. The preoccupations she wore on her sleeve in her first book become part of a more subdued and intricate interior region, though it is one often concealed by the external terrain. Both the Map and the Iceberg are apt metaphors for Bishop's later poems, their reticent, imaginary contours concealed by those already mapped out and gazed upon.

V

A PRECARIOUS SHELTER

Three very different poems will sum up the curiously mixed character of North & South, exemplifying how Bishop experimented with different subjects even as her history and her imaginative eye constrained her increasingly to pursue a particular, if only partly-formed, vision. In "Roosters" Bishop takes on violent male virility and Christianity, making the rooster a heavily symbolized creature. Such flat-out symbolism is rare in her writing; she does not go in for allegory. It is not hard to understand why critics, particularly feminist critics, have latched onto this poem with glee. The question that this poem raises is what do you do with the visible world if you do not allegorize it, or make the furniture of the room, or the trees of the landscape, into symbols? Its extended consideration of one motif is hidden beneath its clipped (not elliptical) stanzas and relentless rhyming triplets which give it an aggressive and imperative movement. The anger it expresses is uncommonly direct, as the poem muses upon the violent history and "terrorizing" manner of 'those cock-a-doodles'. (C.P.38) Though other poems in North & South may have been spawned partly through anger, such as "Chemin de Fer", "Cootchie" and "A Miracle for Breakfast", none of them have the harsh, almost impatient rhetoric of "Roosters":

> the roosters brace their cruel feet and glare
>
> with stupid eyes
> while from their beaks there rise
> the uncontrolled, traditional cries.

Deep from protruding chests
in green-gold medals dressed,
planned to command and terrorize the rest,

the many wives
who lead hens' lives
of being courted and despised (C.P.35)

"Roosters" has the invective many of Bishop's readers have so wished for elsewhere.[30] It provoked the rift between Bishop and her mentor Marianne Moore which Bishop may have been searching for.

"The Fish" exemplifies the power of the observing eye. The caught fish, gazed upon by its narrating captor, fills the poem, to the exclusion of anything else. Robert Lowell wrote to Bishop about one of her later poems: I'm a fisherman myself, but all my fish become symbols, alas![31] In "The Fish" the protagonist describes her 'tremendous' catch in sharply focussed details, gazing at him, though the fish would not 'return my stare'. (C.P.43) Finally, she recalls, 'I stared and stared / and victory filled up / the little rented boat' and 'I let the fish go '. Her exhaustive visual appropriation of this catch leaves her nothing else to do. Unlike Lowell, she cannot remove her fish from the boat because her fish stays as a fish and never becomes a symbol. We could describe "The Fish" as an analogy for Bishop's writing at this time, her eyes focussed on the one catch in each poem.

"Jerónimo's House", last of all, is paradigmatic of Bishop's poetry both in this book and in her later work, made up of left-overs, spun together by the imagination, like a 'wasps' nest / of chewed-up paper / glued with spit '. (C.P.34) The poem is a love song to the intimacy we can

find in the details of even the most precarious of houses. It stands in a transitional space between the alien structures of the Monument and the Man-Moth's city buildings and the more humanized architecture which Bishop began to build in her next book, A Cold Spring, published nine years later. In the years between Bishop became increasingly intrigued with what she would later call 'the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life'.[32] "Jerónimo's House" marks the beginning of her interest in this notion, which would last the rest of her life.

The surrealism of everyday life lies in the tug between Jerónimo's pleasure in the provisional, garnered objects that compose his house - the 'left-over Christmas / decorations', the 'two palm-leaf fans / and a calendar', and the 'four pink tissue- / paper roses' - and the unencumbered absolute force - the hurricane - which looms threateningly behind it. Each aspect makes the other necessary, as a double. Because there are hurricanes, there are houses made of bits and pieces. Fragmentation is an acknowledgement of intensity, as well as a consequence of it. "Jerónimo's House reminds us of Edwin Boomer's 'idea of a house' and of Bishop's lifelong preoccupation with the shape that home might take. (C.Pr.170) The house is as precarious as nests always are, beginning:

My house, my fairy
   palace, is
of perishable
   clapboards with
three rooms in all,
   my gray wasps' nest
of chewed-up paper
   glued with spit.

It is a Bachelard-like nest, unstable, but offering confident pleasures.[33] Jerónimo never takes us beyond his house, except in threatened flight from the hurricane at the end of the poem. Though it has the curious particularity of some surrealist poetry, the poem remains thoroughly responsible to the domain of the literal and possible.

CHAPTER FOUR

A COLD SPRING: 'WHATEVER THE LANDSCAPE HAD OF MEANING'.

PLATE 18: Postcard owned by Bishop of "The Narrows",
Entrance to St. John's, Newfoundland

i

'SPRING AND ALL'[1]

Your destination and your destiny's
A brook that was the water of the house,
Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,
Too lofty and original to rage.[2]

Bishop is unhelpful about motives. She is therefore characteristically unhelpful about the motives behind the title of her second book of poems, the only collection without a geographical title. She remarks about the title poem:

> My idea was that it would make a good title poem for a book to be published in the spring.[3]

Though the poem does indeed make a good title poem, this offers us no clues as to why the book she published two years later was called A Cold Spring.

Bishop's choice of title must have been partly influenced by the fierce dispute conducted thirty years previously between two of the most important American poets of the twentieth century. T.S. Eliot's publication of "The Waste Land" in 1922 provoked a brilliant response a year later from an outraged William Carlos Williams. Eliot's poem opens:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

> Memory and desire, stirring
> Dull roots with spring rain.[4]

Spring is made into a cruel, abruptly potent drama. It is the initiator of a vision of apocalyptic decline in which rebirth and renewal are thwarted. Williams was devastated by the implications he saw in the publication of a poem written in this "European" and élitist manner:

> It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it and our brave sallies into the unknown were turned to dust...Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself — rooted in the locality which should give it fruit...Eliot had turned his back on the possiblity of reviving my world.[5]

Williams countered what he regarded as Eliot's desertion of American poetry and defection to Europe with his own poetic sequence "Spring and All" (1923) the following year. Spring's entrance is rewritten by Williams, appearing this time as a slow and coaxing inevitability. Though it is 'Lifeless in appearance, sluggish / dazed', it is a definer of objects and the instigator of 'profound change' in nature.[6] Leaves, bushes, weeds and trees become 'rooted...grip down' and with the close of the poem, 'begin to awaken'.[7] Williams's poem is a rebuff to the deserter of the American poetic tradition, which like spring is sluggish but beginning to awaken.

Although we can only guess what Bishop's thoughts on American poetry were in the 1950's, she would have chosen the title for her second book with as much care as she chose the words of her poems. She could not have

been innocent of its implications. If we consider it in the light of the dispute between Eliot and Williams, it offers us a comment on her own place in American poetry. Like the cold spring in Frost's poem, "Directive", she is too lofty and original to rage as Williams does. She may possibly regard herself as something of a cold fish beside him, but she writes as an American one nevertheless. Perhaps the chill in her spring alludes partly to the ambivalence she felt towards Williams's rejection of the Old World in his effort to give voice to the New. Though she often used "vers libre", Bishop also made use of traditions of the Old World, with poetic forms like the sonnet, sestina and villanelle, all of which Williams had rejected in his attempt to achieve an indigenous American poetics. Unlike Williams's catch-all Spring and all, Bishop in this book opts for a more constraining and subdued cold spring.

After the critical success of North & South, the response to A Cold Spring was subdued, even a little dismayed. Despite Bishop's efforts to have A Cold Spring published separately, the two collections were printed together as Poems: North & South - A Cold Spring. Her publishers felt that the new volume was too slight to print by itself, though she disagreed.[8] Their argument seems to have centred on the length and number of the poems, but it confirms the critical reception that the collection received. John Ashbery remembers waiting an impatient nine years for this second book and feeling 'slightly disappointed' with it.[9] Several of the poems seemed to him to be content with just picture-making and in several others 'the poet's life threatened to intrude on the poetry in a way that didn't suit it '.[10] He was dismayed that the poet whose first book he had 'read, reread, studied and absorbed' might not achieve the fullness of her talents.[11] The

later reader is spared this anxiety because we can read Bishop's work, the poems she published so sparingly and years apart, with hindsight, in its collected form.

Only four of the nineteen poems in A Cold Spring have the conviction of Bishop's best work. In three of these, "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance", "At the Fishhouses" and "Cape Breton", she has extended the ideas developed in North & South, finding a new engagement with the physical, observable world in order to do so. In these poems Bishop continues her search for a further dimension, an 'interior' as she calls it in "Cape Breton". In a collection which otherwise seems like a miscellany these three poems stand out. They express preoccupations familiar from North & South, but with a new-found voice, rooted in things actually seen in the world. The fourth poem is Bishop's masterful, celebratory pastiche in honour of her friend and early mentor, Marianne Moore. Without these four the book would be a collection of somewhat derivative, often slight, poems. Some of the poems look like hangovers from the earlier North & South idiom while others seem to be uncertain experiments in a series of different modes: attempts at writing new pictorial poems like "A Cold Spring" and "The Bight", at making a grand American public poem in "View of the Capital from the Library of Congress" (where she fails as emphatically as Lowell succeeds, in her attempt to engage with an important public place) and in writing love poetry, in "Insomnia", "Four Poems", "Argument" and "The Shampoo", where, as Ashbery noticed, Bishop uses a rhetoric of personal feeling which is embarassingly personal because embarassingly unsuccessful.

Almost all the poems in this new volume have left behind the fantastical edifices, dreams and deliberately distorted characterizations of North & South, embracing instead what Bishop later called the surrealism of everyday life.Only the 'two giants... idiot [and] dwarf' of "A Summer's Dream" and the 'wretched uneasy' factories of "Varick Street" give a hint of Bishop's earlier fascination with surreal figures and estranging cityscapes. (C.P.62,75) They are like flat versions of the dream mode which is so important in North & South. Some of the other poems occupy an uneasy, transitional space between the earlier, North & South period and the later poems of Questions of Travel.

"Faustina, or Rock Roses" carries echoes of "Jerónimo's House" and of the later poems "Manuelzinho" and "Filling Station", with its details of a precarious, barely-sustained domestic order, made out of what others might regard as the detritus of life. The poem is torn between two kinds of form, the first like a popular ballad, with a touch of blues rhetoric ('yes in a crazy house'), reminiscent of the earlier "Songs for a Colored Singer", and the second, which does not mix well, comprising lines which are powerfully individuated from one another by their vocabulary and a rhythm imposed by long words. (C.P.72) This prevents the easy movement from line to line needed for a good song. "A Cold Spring" and "The Bight" fall flat because, like the earlier poems "Little Exercise" and "Florida", they seem to be no more than exercises in observation. "The Bight" is 'littered' with the forced effects and excessive similes of a poet trying too hard for too many miscellaneous effects and with no particular end in mind. (C.P.60) The title poem proves a flat way to begin a book of poems, the arrival of

spring in Maryland seeming a dull affair. "A Cold Spring" does inland what "The Bight" does on the shoreline. The poem aspires to a kind of sharply mimetic authenticity but is able to offer no more than its protagonist finds in the landscape: 'particular glowing tributes'. (C.P.56) "The Prodigal" seems just as flat as "A Cold Spring", plastered to the page like the 'glass-smooth dung' which covers its sty. (C.P.71) It is like a New World appropriation of the myths which had preoccupied the Old for so long, the Prodigal Son done American-style. If the poem is a morality tale, as its Biblical allusion suggests, then it is an ironic one coming from the pen of one with nowhere to return to, left "prodigal" by her home territory.

A Cold Spring contains almost Bishop's only published "love" poems. They are awkward, using unwieldy sentence inversions, and they lack conviction in the internal landscape which love poetry so often focusses on. Nor do they have those individuating touches which so often give life to compelling love poetry, nor do they have the specificity of physical detail which characterizes Bishop's best writing. The extended use of inversion in "Insomnia" offers a rare, if oblique, allusion to Bishop's lesbian identity, talking of a world 'where left is always right, / where the shadows are really the body, / where we stay awake all night,/ where the heavens are shallow as the sea / is now deep, and you love me'. (C.P.70) But otherwise the momentary redemption of a good line (such as 'a name / and all its connotation are the same' in "Conversation") disappears in the welter of embarassed cliché that surrounds it (such as stilted 'Uninnocent, these conversations start' in the same poem, or 'Wasted, wasted minutes that couldn't be worse, / minutes of a barbaric

condescension' in "While Someone Telephones"). (C.P.76,78) Perhaps because these poems are so short on names - and possibly, given the personal nature of the poems, this is due to Bishop's exacerbated sense of discretion - they also seem oddly empty of 'connotation'.

Unique amongst Bishop's poetry, "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore" is an inspired pastiche "gloria" to her close friend and early mentor. It is a paean of praise, a marvellous tribute to the pedantic, mannered, original modernist Bishop had, by this time, broken free from. Moore is turned into a legendary, Chagall-like figure flying 'like a daytime comet...over the Brooklyn Bridge'. (C.P.83) But she is crisper and more sharply-outlined than Chagall's airborne fiddlers and lovers. Bishop calls upon Moore to:

> Come with the pointed toe of each black shoe
> trailing a sapphire highlight,
> with a black capeful of butterfly wings and bon-mots,
> ...
> on the broad black brim of your hat,
>   please come flying.

She is like a good fairy presiding over New York, for whom even 'the grim museums will behave / like courteous male bower-birds' and 'for whom the agreeable lions lie in wait / on the steps of Public Library', as though both birds and lions were some species straight out of one of her poems. Moore, like these creatures, becomes part of New York city, as vital to it as the 'skyscrapers [which] glint in the tide'.

Bishop's funny and mannered "Invitation" is an American and feminine reply to the European tradition of the male lyrical ode to a friend. It is explicitly modelled on a South American, not European, model, as Bishop

herself made plain.[12] She borrowed the conceit from Pablo Neruda (whom she liked and admired) and his poem "Alberto Rojas Jimenez Viene Volando".[13] It has a poet as its heroine who, with Williams, characterized a Modernist American Grain which refused to acknowledge a debt to Europe, a poet who became as much a part of the American popular heritage as the Ford Motor Company, for whom she named a car, or baseball, which she followed with great passion. "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore" is a poem written from one woman to another, with its talk of shopping, shoes and ribbons. Bishop delights in addressing her decorous and very American friend who has old-fashioned manners but who can also make grammar suddenly turn and shine 'like flocks of sandpipers flying'. She seems freer here than in any other poem deliberately to enjoy her friend's femininity and the almost exhibitionistic feminine codes to which Moore adheres, and her candid address is in strong contrast to the invisible and unintroduced lovers of her love poems. Perhaps Bishop is not tongue-tied in the "Invitation" as she is the love poems by the implications of her addressee's sex, but is, instead, free to celebrate a woman she loves.

Moore's own crisp, pedantic diction inspires Bishop's flights of fancy. She enjoys her friend's exacting moral tenacity, her 'slight censorious frown, and blue ribbons', with sharp clarity of phrase and generous humour. And she praises the extraordinary simultaneity of Moore's ear, which can hear both the New York taxicabs' 'horns resounding' and 'a soft uninvented music, fit for the musk deer'. Bishop gives her reader as 'priceless [a] set of vocabularies' as Moore and surrounds her friend with a luminous naturalism which is unlike anything else she wrote.

ii

"OVER 2,000 ILLUSTRATIONS"

The "Invitation" is a unique poem. However the three great poems which carry the real imaginative drive of A Cold Spring touch on a territory explored by Bishop throughout her life. She begins these poems with ordinary events: someone casting their eye over a familiar coastline, an old fisherman repairing his nets, a child looking at the tired, familiar illustrations in an encyclopaedia. At their outset there does not seem to be anything particularly strange or special going on, as there was in North & South. The poems take place in a world of deceptive ordinariness but at the centre of each we are drawn, with the protagonist, to gaze if we can beyond the lineaments of what is seen. We are invited to gaze towards what "Cape Breton" imagines held 'back, in the interior, / where we cannot see': a place that can only be imaginatively envisaged, not actually seen, of 'deep lakes', 'disused trails', 'mountains of rock / and miles of burnt forests'. (C.P.67-68) In "At the Fishhouses" the sea becomes that mysterious 'interior'. It is 'like what we imagine knowledge to be', an 'element bearable to no mortal' which would 'burn your tongue' to taste. (C.P.66) For the speaker of "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" a visit to an ordinary site, 'A holy grave, not looking particularly holy', precipitates her into a terrifying experience which is left unexplained. (C.P.58) Although she visualizes the grave carefully, the horror it holds remains beyond the reach of her descriptive language, as out of reach as the freezing depths of the sea in "At the Fishhouses" or the held-back interior in "Cape Breton", as chilling as a cold spring. Each

protagonist grapples with an unexplained and fearful metamorphosis of what they have witnessed with their own eyes; and each poem slips from a known, described landscape into an extraordinary and unknown dimension. There is a vital difference between these three poems and the poems I have mentioned already. In "A Cold Spring" and "The Bight" Bishop only describes. She observes the 'old correspondences' in both landscapes, but makes nothing of these observations. By contrast, meaning is ascribed to actions which are not convincingly described in the love poems and they fall back on overworked formulations which are too laboured and awkwardly expressed to work. Even the adroit "Letter to N.Y." fails to address the problems it raises with its suggestive metaphors, in this case how to interpret a foreign land like the city of New York. None of these poems problematize the relationship between description and understanding which is at the centre of the three great poems.

At the heart of these poems, then, there is a crisis we encounter throughout Bishop's writing, about "seeing", a realization of the limits of vision. They describe the terror and exhilaration felt by someone who has relied on her sight to tell her about the world, but finds suddenly that it cannot tell her what she needs to know. When the poems launch into this unknown (perhaps unknowable?) dimension, they reflect an imagination which does not believe in the transcendent. Eliot in the almost contemporary poems of Four Quartets talks of 'the intersection of the timeless moment' and 'the prayer of the one Annunciation' to underwrite the 'moments' of vision out of which he builds his sequence.[14] At the centre of each of the three poems from A Cold Spring, Bishop displaces such traditional religious imagery and replaces it with a language of rocky, chill, secular reson-

ances, like 'the admirable scriptures made on stones by stones' of "Cape Breton". The world she discovers is immanent, not transcendent. But it is also, paradoxically, withheld and out of sight. It is like the liquid if mythical cold spring of Frost's "Directive", a 'destination and... destiny...Too lofty and original to rage'. What Bishop describes is part of the ordinary landscape but also beyond it. Profoundly sceptical about any language of the sublime, she explains this unknowable dimension using the terms she trusts - those verified by sight - like the vision at the end of "Over 2,000 Illustrations" which is imagined as part of a child's study of the illustrations in a Bible. But she stretches the scope of such terms as far as possible, and further, in her effort to give utterance to what lies beyond her mind's eye, her vision of what is unavailable to her "vision". What gives these poems their power is their grappling with the difficulty of vision. This has been done by a poet who till now has kept her bounds within the visual, or employed a strategy like surrealism to avoid, rather than extend, the confines of literal sight.

In the face of Bishop's need to stretch the limits of sight, to generate insights from her observations, a title such as "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" seems like a kind of joke.[15] It represents a piece of "PR" hype by the publishers of the book to which it alludes and suggests an attempt to cover all possible angles, of sight and of knowledge, offering an excess of illustrations and a comprehensive index. The book is represented as an encyclopaedic, secular fantasy, which gives a total account of the world in the absence of God.[16] But the poem repeatedly returns to the moment when this representation of the world breaks down, and the traveller embarks on different kinds of travels.

"Over 2,000 Illustrations" describes three different journeys in three separate stanzas, each one coming to an end when the protagonist's eye is drawn beyond the illustrations and she grapples with some kind of crisis produced by insight, or another kind of vision. In the first the traveller peruses an illustrated encyclopaedia. She travels vicariously through the 'tired / and a touch familiar' Wonders of the World, gazing at foreign scenes 'arranged in cattycornered rectangles' or in a 'grim lunette'. (C.P.57) In this poem and in "At the Fishhouses" Bishop appears to allude to a point in her early Nova Scotian childhood, referring to what seems to be a childhood association. She connects the Wonders of the World (in "Over 2,000 Illustrations") and the hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (in "At the Fishhouses") with a story of rural Nova Scotia, in "The Baptism". This was a world she knew intimately when she was a small child living with her maternal Baptist grandparents. Bishop's reference to both the book and the hymn seem to reach back to a moment of sight that she associates particularly with her own infancy.

In the second journey the traveller recalls scenes from her own travels, exchanging the public currency of accredited Wonders, like the Tomb, Pit and Sepulcher, for her own personal Wonders. The status of this second order relies entirely on her remembered perception, an internal, not external esteem. Ultimately she returns to her childhood, travelling back in her mind to infancy. She remembers the 'heavy book', an old Bible perhaps, and her imaginative journey inspired by its 'old Nativity'. This early memory is like a palimpsest, which colours all the protagonist's later journeys and pictures.

Bishop's first, vicarious, traveller makes her response to the poem's title into a point of departure:

> Thus should have been our travels:
> serious, engravable.
> The Seven Wonders of the World are tired
> and a touch familiar, but the other scenes,
> innumerable, though equally sad and still,
> are foreign. Often the squatting Arab,
> or group of Arabs, plotting, probably,
> against our Christian Empire,
> while one apart, with outstretched arm and hand
> points to the Tomb, the Pit, the Sepulcher.

In North & South Bishop imagined the foreignness of the familiar. Now Bishop jokes of how we can feel at home with the most unusual and far-flung marvels of the world, finding even the Seven Wonders 'a touch familiar'. The pun on 'touch' is a reminder that this familiarity is bred through "fingertip", rather than actual, travel and though it has been described as 'serious' and engravable', Bishop's ironic tone makes the profound limitations of such "encyclopaedia" travel very clear. Constrained by the conventions which organize such an encyclopaedic account of the world, how can we see anything truly, or construct "the world" at all? The scenes of Tomb, Pit, Sepulcher and so on seem implausible, rigged even, as though there were some vast puppeteer engineering each engraved scene, pulling the 'smoke rising solemnly' by threads or suspending 'the specks of birds... above the Site'. These scenes remain impossibly foreign to their fingering traveller. Their sites are impossible to decode, their characters unavailable for comment, 'far gone' as they seem 'in history or theology'.

The pictures become entangled with their frames, just as the contours in "The Map" were overrun by the printer's excited gestures. And as so often in Bishop's writing, representation becomes an act of fragmentation. Even as the different scenes and texts are drawn together on a page, they are broken up and separated by tatty framing devices. But despite these depressing frames, arranged in 'cattycornered rectangles / or circles set on stippled gray', in 'a grim lunette' or in 'the toils of an initial letter', the foreign scenes resolve themselves, when they are dwelt upon. Without allowing a moment's wonder at what is meant by this reward of "resolution" for the attentive reader, the poem changes its focus. A monosyllabic triplet comes hard on the heels of the compounded clauses and delayed subject of the last sentence:

> Granted a page alone or a page made up
> of several scenes arranged in cattycornered rectangles
> or cir cles set on stippled gray,
> granted a grim lunette,
> caught in the toils of an initial letter,
> when dwelt upon, they all resolve themselves.
> The eye drops, weighted, through the lines
> the burin made, the lines that move apart
> like ripples above sand

The poem turns from the Illustrations to their viewer. Suddenly "sight", and not the "sites", offers a resolution to this foreign world. Having ironised and unsettled the idea of a canon of "Wonders" the poem refocusses on the viewer, not the view. The eye drops like a plumb-line, 'weighted, through the lines / the burin made', cast into a moment of bewildering insight as the ancient lines of the old illustrations 'move apart / like ripples above sand'. Gazing has brought stars before the encyclopaedia

reader's eyes, as she searches for the right simile for what she suddenly sees immanent in the dusty, familiar Illustrations:

> the lines that move apart
> like ripples above sand,
> dispersing storms, God's spreading fingerprint,
> and painfully, finally, that ignite
> in watery prismatic white-and-blue.

The syntax becomes blurred, with subject and object difficult to distinguish. The verbs are diffused - moving apart, dispersing, spreading - until the final clause, which resolves the vision in a paradox. Bishop abandons her attempt to explain what has happened with cold fire. Taking the heat out of the flames leaves her free of the religious associations and spiritual fervor associated with fire and flames, but it also leaves the strangeness of these familiar scenes intact.

This strange metamorphosis is left behind in the next stanza, as Bishop abruptly changes the subject and tenor of the poem. The old illustrations are replaced by a new order of image. 'God's spreading fingerprint' and the cold flame are apparently forgotten. Now her speaker remembers her own journey, describing strange scenes in strange places, but translating what is foreign into colloquial discourse. She can control the nature of what she observes by making her narrative anecdotal and refusing to give her observations the engraved status of Tomb, Pit or Sepulcher. Although her itinerary takes her into foreign places, she seems almost at home in her narrative. The metaphoric translations bring this foreign world closer to home, with the plants growing up the cliffs at St. John's being described as 'butter-and-eggs', the Collegians at St. Peter's looking 'like

ants' and the dead volcanoes in Mexico 'like Easter lilies'. The remoteness of the bookish images in the first stanza is exchanged for the noisy intimacy of the scenes in this new set of travels. The silence of each famous Site and the formal gestures of background figures are exchanged for the noise of a jukebox in Mexico, prostitutes who fling themselves 'naked and giggling against our knees' in Marrakesh and a 'fat old guide' making eyes in Volubilis. Distant specks of birds hovering above the Site and the date palms with branches like files are matched by 'beautiful poppies / splitting the mosaics' and 'fog-soaked weeds'. All the traveller's senses are engaged by these sights.

Bishop's narrative is so engrossing and apparently relaxed that there is no preparation for the crisis it closes with. The welter of detail is interrupted by a musing interjection which changes its pace and emphasis:

It was somewhere near there
I saw what frightened me most of all:
A holy grave, not looking particularly holy,
one of a group under a keyhole-arched stone baldaquin
open to every wind from the pink desert.
An open, gritty, marble trough, carved solid
with exhortation, yellowed
as scattered cattle-teeth;
half-filled with dust, not even the dust
of the poor prophet paynim who once lay there.

The travelogue has proceeded rapidly till now, with no time for narrative pauses or uncertainty. Suddenly the litany of different places - from St. Johns to St. Peter's to Mexico to Volubilis to Dingle to Marrakesh - ends, as though it is no longer important where the next event happened, enough that it 'was somewhere near there'. The companionable pronouns - we and us

- are reduced to a solitary 'I': this experience belongs only to this particular traveller. How or why the grave is frightening she does not say. The somewhat technical terms with which she begins to describe it, 'under a keyhole-arched stone baldaquin' - are soon abandoned and she completes her account with a different kind of precision, exposing the function of such official language, to contain anxiety. Although it is a rough-hewn thing, no more fanciful than a trough, exposed to the elements, filled with desert dust and discoloured, the grave, 'carved solid / with exhortation', frightens the traveller. Perhaps her fear comes from the realization that the human effort to make religious sites holy only comes to dust, and 'not even the dust / of the poor prophet paynim who once lay there.' The last line of the stanza seems deliberately anticlimactic - 'In a smart burnoose Khadour looked on amused.' It is as though having described the surroundings of her terror, Bishop has nothing further to say. Although the world is more than simply a dusty inventory, its status is fixed by each individual, not by some understood consensus. She is content, instead, to ridicule herself through the eyes of a contemptuous local figure. The memory serves to connect her ranging travels with a final, apparently more homely, exploration. The end of the poem draws on the memories which fill the rest of the poem, but it also describes an experience which prefigures them.

The last stanza opens with an observation on all these travels that suggests something like dismay:

> Everything only connected by "and" and "and."

The remark addresses the question of what would give a continuous or connected sense to what Bishop sees. But it also questions the nature of her poetry. The risk is that her poetry, like the "Wonders", will become just an inventory, its items connected merely by '"and" and "and"'. The word "and" explains nothing and plots nothing; it merely accumulates. This sudden and rare self-reflexivity throws not only the travelled world but also the poem's accumulated images into strange relief before it continues, letting the question begged hang before us. It may be a lament for lost connections or an acknowledgement that things have only ever been connected by a small, grammatical conjunction.

The word "and" certainly linked the earlier travels described in the poem:

> Entering the Narrows at St. Johns...
> ...And at St. Peter's...
> ...And at Volubilis...
> ...And in the brothels of Marrakesh

And the problem of how things are connected runs through all Bishop's writing, not just this poem. In "The Sea & Its Shore" Edwin Boomer tries to find the connections between his existence and a world beyond his small hut by deciphering the shreds of newspaper he picks off the beach. By reconstruing their contexts and meanings he imagines himself connected to a body of meaning which nevertheless lies beyond access. Boomer never manages to formulate a system beyond his own system of rubbish collection, or an order outside the unruly, constantly shifting order of the beach. His dilemma is quite different from the interpretative dilemma faced in "The Map". The character of already mapped conjunctions gives Bishop's map its con-

tours, causing her to wonder whether 'the land lean[s] down to lift the sea from under' or whether it is the other way around and the sea caresses the 'sea-weeded ledges' of land. (C.P.3) Although the map's countries have been organized and represented according to an accepted model of the world, their borders seem as hard to interpret as those in Boomer's landscape. Later in "Filling Station" the question to which the poem rises is who or what has brought together and sustains the unlikely collection of greasy, shabby household objects which make the filling station more than merely that.

In "Over 2,000 Illustrations" Bishop's speaker apparently turns away from the question, having raised it, and ends the poem with an extraordinary Nativity. Again she endeavours to explain a visionary experience without resorting to a transcendent or mystical rhetoric while revisiting the Site of a traditional Christian icon. She uses religious sites and a Biblical scene to communicate a secular fervour for what she can grasp and sustain by sight, not by faith. She becomes a fingertip traveller for a second time, finding that the 'gilt' of this book 'rubs off the edges / of the pages and pollinates the fingertips', a fertile metaphor by contrast with the dry stillness of the earlier book of "Wonders". 'Open the book... Open the heavy book' comes the imperative, though it is not clear whether this command is issued or received. The last lines of the poem seem to rise out of the imperative, mixing memory and imagination, the Nativity and infancy, secular and religious wonderment, pictures from books and an impossible fantasy of the family:

> Why couldn't we have seen
> this old Nativity while we were at it?

—the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,
an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,
colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,
and, lulled within, a family with pets,
and looked and looked our infant sight away.

The tense is ambiguous: is the speaker looking back to an earlier, childhood moment, with its infant sight? Or is she wishing she could have seen 'this old Nativity' during her travels round Mexico, Dingle and Marrakesh? Her regret is powerful, drawn, it seems, not from one moment but from a broader sense of historical loss. Perhaps the sentimentalized illustration of the Nativity, with its improbable fire-like glow which surrounds all the figures, seems irresistibly alluring to the orphan poet. Although this illustration is as dusty as all the others she has described, it represents something Bishop longed for as a child, and continued to long for, though less directly, as a rather strenuously unattention-seeking adult. Since her father's death when she was eight months old she had never been the adored child at the centre of a nuclear family, and to be the centre of attention, something very unfamiliar to her, became a source of terror for Bishop as well as a desire. This 'old Nativity' is responsible for the power of such a model and for the burden of desire it places on the speaker.

The last, endlessly ambiguous, line of the poem speaks of looking 'infant sight' away and leaves the reader to guess what might be meant by this. Does it mean that the infant could somehow have freed herself from her infant vision, perhaps by seeing and seeing through the dusty, unconvincing Nativity illustration? Such disenchantment would have left her adult self free to discover that familial intimacy (between parent and child) elsewhere and not continually to mourn its absence in her own,

orphaned life. But if adult sight is the substitute for 'infant sight', it seems an unlikely alternative desire for Bishop, who was suspicious of the equation which linked adulthood with authority and rectitude.

Having ranged around the world in search of more than illustration, Bishop's traveller finds the impression of her most powerful desire in that most hackneyed of images, the Holy Family. Despite her secular adult life, Bishop spent her early childhood in the devoutly Baptist home of her maternal grandparents. This early steeping clearly influenced her adult self. Even in such a religious form, the family group clustered around the small baby must have impressed upon Bishop her own bereft state, left parentless from her early years. She imagines different familial possibilities again and again in her writing, from those in "Songs for a Colored Singer" and "Jerónimo's House" to the invisible one in "Filling Station" to the one Crusoe wishes for in "Crusoe in England". But none is ever as fully idealized as the Christian family group she longs after at the end of "Over 2,000 Illustrations".

The final line of the poem is illuminating and impenetrable at the same time. It confirms that the source for Bishop's adult travelling eye is to be found far back in childhood, far back in 'infant sight'. But the words also reach at an impossible conclusion. They suggest that by gazing long or hard enough, the infant might reach beyond or outside sight, as though sight was the way to see further and yet also an impenetrable impediment to another kind of knowledge. John Ashbery is convinced that this last line 'somehow contains the clue to Elizabeth Bishop's poetry', though he is

unable to exhaust its ambiguities, and will not hazard a meaning.[17] Ashbery is right, and the clue lies in Bishop's wish to make her sight give her all she needs to know, while acknowledging that it impossibly limits her capacity to express what is out of reach of her mind's eye.

iii

"AT THE FISHHOUSES"

Bishop's hope is that the art of observation will hold all the answers as well as posing all the questions. Seamus Heaney characterises it impeccably in his essay on "At the Fishhouses":

> Elizabeth Bishop not only practised good manners in her poetry, she also submitted herself to the discipline of observation. Observation was her habit, as much in the monastic, Hopkinsian sense as in its commoner meaning of a customarily repeated action. Indeed, observation is itself a manifestation of obedience, an activity which is averse to overwhelming phenomena by the exercise of subjectivity, content to remain an assisting presence, rather than an overbearing pressure[18]

But Bishop is far less 'content' with the powers of sight than Heaney might have us believe. Her protagonist in "At the Fishhouses" begins by picking out the scene in its physical particularity. But once she moves to the 'water's edge' and the sea itself, her imagination is absorbed by the singularity and mystery of that 'element bearable to no mortal'. (C.P.65) The delicacy of shape and texture which marks out the shoreline is replaced by a terrain whose potency is signalled through its mysteriousness and meta-

phoric availability. The sea excites the protagonist. She is seduced by this watery element even as she describes its brutality and inaccessibility. The poem ends a long way from where it began. The sea provides an impenetrable focus for her gaze and suggests hidden depths about which she can only speculate, very different from the controlled "still life" with which she began.

After the journeyings of "Over 2,000 Illustrations", "At the Fishhouses" seems very still. It is focussed on one place, from where Bishop's attention slips towards the unknown territory beyond her sight. The poem opens with a quiet and mundane scene where something is happening in spite of the weather:

> Although it is a cold evening,
> down by one of the fishhouses
> an old man sits netting

The low-key tone of the opening sets the pace of the whole poem, as though nothing in this scene will ever change and there is all the time in the world to describe it.[19] To begin a poem with a qualifying, provisional conjunction portends a mind which is apparently unconcerned with the effect of its words on an observer. The reader of the poem might be listening in to the protagonist's internal conversation, though the elaborate clarity and precise exuberance of the evocation, clearly a virtuoso performance, soon invites the reader in.

The description of the fishhouses has the specificity of something we might read in an introduction to Nova Scotian fishing for laymen:

> The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs
> and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up
> to storerooms in the gables
> for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.
> All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,
> swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,
> is opaque, but the silver of the benches,
> the lobster pots, and masts, scattered
> among the wild jagged rocks,
> is of an apparent translucence
> like the small old buildings with an emerald moss
> growing on their shoreward walls.

The reader must concentrate hard to follow the syntactical shift of the main subject in the first sentence from the fishhouses to the gangplanks. The movement of the protagonist's eye and her associative imagination command and determine the contours of this landscape. She clothes the landscape with silver - 'All is silver' - and then decides to qualify this by differentiating between the colour's different textures. The momentum of her full sea, carried on in the repeated 's's', gains considerable impetus through drawn out reflection: 'as if considering spilling over'. But any 'spilling over' is arrested with the turn of the line as the sentence returns to its object, the sea's opacity. From there the protagonist's eye moves back to the definable objects on the shore. She acknowledges the potential intrusion of the sea, but makes it clear that she controls and defines the swelling and spilling over of this landscape.

The protagonist's glance ranges over the clutter of the scene, picking out objects with sustained, not whimsical, attention. She is fastidious, and notices the ways in which the buildings, wheelbarrows, fish tubs or capstan are 'lined' and 'plastered' with 'emerald moss', or 'herring scales' like 'iridescent coats of mail, / with small iridescent flies

crawling on them', or with 'sparse bright...grass'. There is a prosaic quality to some of the lines. Phrases like 'apparent translucence' and 'similarly plastered' suggest approximations which are more often allowed in prose than in poetry. Here they impress the land with a strange ambivalence, making it provisional and approximate even as it is described in close detail. The rhythm of the lines is arranged more around the fluency of the individual sentences than around an established metre or a pattern of stressed syllables or syllabics. There is no rhyme scheme in the poem, but continuity and cohesion between different fragments which catch the protagonist's eye are forged in the assonance between unlikely elements, like 'lobster pots,...rocks [and] moss', and in arresting repetitions. Where another poet might resort to metaphor, Bishop repeats, using words like 'silver' and 'iridescent' twice to make the reader hear the adjective or see the object again. As her eye travels across the shoreline, Bishop's protagonist takes in a landscape made out of a multiplicity of different parts. The old man, 'a friend of my grandfather', is one element. For a moment it looks as if he will take a part similar to Wordsworth's aged and rural figures, like the leech gatherer or old Michael. But Bishop's old man offers no insights nor any home truths; he merely accepts a Lucky Strike cigarette. Her protagonist will have to cast her eye elsewhere for insight.

The protagonist's attention moves away from the shore down into the water's depths, a shift Bishop manages in one sentence:

> Down at the water's edge, at the place
> where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
> descending into the water, thin silver
> tree trunks are laid horizontally

> across the gray stones, down and down
> at intervals of four or five feet.

After looking around and about, apparently describing whatever catches her eye, the protagonist's glance now becomes more narrowly focussed. For a moment it is held by the boat ramp, which is neither fully on the shore nor fully in the sea. Then the ramp draws her gaze 'down and down', away from the land and into the sea. The prosaic flatness at the end of the second stanza, with its detail of tree trunks at intervals of 'four or five feet', only momentarily disguises the shift which has taken place in the poem. As soon as the final stanza begins it is clear that the protagonist has found what Frost might have referred to as her 'destination'.

Returning to a subject close to her heart, Bishop uses a familiar trope. The shoreline has figured significantly in her writing from early on, in "The Sea & Its Shore" and "The Map", and will continue to do so in her later work, in "Sandpiper" and "The End of March". Here its uneasy proximity between land and sea provides her with a final focus. The succession of unpunctuated adjectives with which she begins the last part of the poem offer an emphatic, vertiginous opening:

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

But Bishop quickly modifies this solemn note. She adopts a tone of comic flippancy, possibly as a defence against being taken too seriously, a

defence of her privacy. It also enables her to approach her impenetrable destination more circumspectly:

> 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."[20]

The jester seal, with his own disappearing act and comic shrug, is at home in the watery depths which so alarm Bishop's protagonist. She uses his literal plunging as a metaphor for her own attempts at plunging beneath the water's surface. In folklore seals are thought to be the souls of dead fishermen. Perhaps the protagonist's ironic comparison of herself to the seal - both believers in total immersion - makes him into her own ego ideal, a soul which can plunge to the depths of the impenetrable sea. The protagonist singing the seal the Baptist hymns her grandfather would have known shows how far apart they both are; religion makes a ridiculous common ground for this animal literalist of the imagination and this secular, questioning protagonist. The protagonist's brief imaginative dalliance with the seal ends with the implacable return of the sea. The repetition of the adjectives which began the stanza, 'Cold dark deep and absolutely clear', echo its cyclical motion.

The poem rises to an extraordinary climax, beaten out in dense repetitions. Words are used again and again as though the protagonist were alive only to the harsh textures of the sea. Its 'swinging' motion mesmerizes the eye:

The water seems suspended
above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.
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.

The sight glazes the protagonist's imagination. She is caught in a reverie by this indifferent, autonomous realm, her language mirroring the rhythmic wave movement of the water. When she imagines intruding beyond the surface of this sea, its brutal salt cold repulses her. But, like the paynim's grave in "Over 2,000 Illustrations", it also enables her to imagine a different order of things, for a moment breaking out beyond what she can see.

Feeling and tasting the water remain conditional acts. The protagonist performs them only in her imagination. 'If you should dip your hand in' and 'If you tasted it', then you would find your bones ache, your hand and tongue burn. However this imaginary confrontation with the elemental forces of the world (earth, water and fire; only air is left out) momentarily transforms the impenetrable sea into a simile. It offers the protagonist a way to describe the immanent force she imagines at the centre of things but for which she finds no viable secular or transcendental language:

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.

The sea provides a simile which is both tangible and entirely fluid. Knowledge becomes that cold, briny substance which burns the hand and tongue, whose movement is one of continuous flux, moving ahead and behind the protagonist at the same time. Bishop is tempted by the notion of ahistoric, transcendent knowledge which is like the unbearable seawater: 'dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free'. But she is compromised historically, by that 'infant sight' which holds her in "Over 2,000 Illustrations", by her return to the 'rocky breasts' of the world here. Knowledge is unavoidably historical, not autonomously free-flowing; it has a source from which it is drawn and to which it must return. Bishop has her own stern, secular source for knowledge in place of the 'mighty fortress' of Christianity: 'the cold hard mouth / of the world, derived from the rocky breasts'. This image, which Lowell was unsure of, refigures maternity into a paradoxical form.[21] More than water from a stone, knowledge becomes the world's breast milk, 'derived from the rocky breasts / forever, flowing and drawn'. The metaphor is arresting and unusual in Bishop's writing; she prefers the human body clothed and is usually fastidious in her references to sexual characteristics. It is as though her thoughts have taken wing at the end of the poem and escaped their usual mould. Far from the fishhouses, old man and fish scales which first attracted her eye, the protagonist ends in contemplation of what, perhaps, knits her to an impenetrable world: her own knowledge, even if this is only ever what she "imagines" it to be.

iv

"CAPE BRETON"

"At the Fishhouses" moves from a landscape described in precise visual detail to a region which is impenetrable: too cold for the human hand and, despite its apparent "clarity", hidden to the human eye. Impenetrability marks the landscape in "Cape Breton" from the start. Beginning in a tone of amused disparagement, the protagonist quickly loses her hilarity as her imagination is drawn back into the mysterious 'interior', behind the coast's brink, 'where we cannot see'. (C.P.67) The 'silly-looking puffins [who] stand with their backs to the mainland' and the parenthetical sheep who '(Sometimes, 'frightened by aeroplanes...stampede / and fall over into the sea or onto the rocks)' cease to be just a tragi-comic animal dumbshow. They become emblems of the place, whose actions cannot be explained by simple observation. They are banal examples of the traveller's limited insight. The shag with its 'dripping serpent-neck' appears to lift and penetrate the water as it surfaces from its dive, as though it were breaking into the misty air for a moment before returning to the sea, rather than the other way around. It is as though the protagonist wants her reader to see how much sight can distort, even invert, things, before she lets her eye follow the mist from the sea inland to the 'valleys and gorges'.

The mainland is constructed around absence. In the rest of the poem Bishop's protagonist describes a landscape whose 'meaning appears to have been abandoned', though abandoned by whom, and how, she does not say. Whatever she turns her attention to becomes as elusive, as hard to fix in

the mind's eye, as the sea's weaving 'silken water'. After gazing into the far distance she twice steadies herself by returning to the road which 'clambers' along the foreground. But whether looking nearer to or further off, she finds that the action has taken or is taking place elsewhere.

The vast 'interior', with its 'ghosts of glaciers', 'folds and folds of fir', 'deep lakes' 'disused trails and mountains of rock / and miles of burnt forests standing in gray scratches' may carry the landscape's meaning, but it cannot be seen. It is as impenetrable as the sea in "At the Fishhouses". Though its regions resemble 'the admirable scriptures made on stones by stones', Bishop's scepticism towards the transcendental message of Christianity makes this a dubious comparison. These regions 'now have little to say for themselves', as though they have lost a power they once had. Even the risers of fir-covered hills are only as 'certain as a stereoscopic view'. They appear to have a definite form, like the vista afforded in a stereoscope. But the form is made up of two different outlines superimposed upon another which the protagonist's eye cannot unravel, even though she knows that the final image is false. The only account this 'interior', invisible to her eyes, can give is in the 'thousands of light song-sparrow songs floating upward / freely, dispassionately, through the mist'. These songs seem transitory and delicately frail beside the ancient, carved 'interior' they sing out of. Their syncopated, alliterative sounds dance away from the abandoned shapes of invisible glaciers, rocks and forests. For a moment Bishop's protagonist captures something, not with her eye but with her ear, even if these songs seem so far from the solemn, religious grandeur she has imagined.

The road is littered with the dereliction of Sunday abandonment. Set beside the great expanses of the hidden interior, it seems cluttered and full of local specificity. The 'small yellow bulldozers [are] without their drivers' and the 'small bus' is 'packed with people', but instead of its weekday 'groceries, spare automobile parts, and pump parts', it has 'only two preachers extra, one carrying his frock coat on a hanger'. Roadside stand and schoolhouse are closed and even the 'little white churches', whose day this is, look like 'lost quartz arrowheads', carrying an emblem of the Indian culture they destroyed in the shape of their roofs. The road offers a kind of comic relief. A sharp humour compares preachers to 'spare ...parts' and drops the churches into matted hills. Here as in "Over 2,000 Illustrations" and "At the Fishhouses", religion is central not to Bishop's vision of things but to the way she figures the world. In each poem Christianity is drawn into focus, only to be put aside, even when it offers that most powerful of models, the 'family with pets'. (C.P.59) The syncopated 'up-and-down rushes' with which the bus 'comes along' are reflected in the crowded lines which follow it. They are as packed with images as the bus is with people. After the intangibility of the last landscape, Bishop's protagonist is going to describe this road in all its mundane and blessed detail.

A 'man carrying a baby' lures the protagonist's eye away from the road once again, and once again she can only guess at the shape his destination will take:

> [The bus] stops, and a man carrying a baby gets off,
> climbs over a stile, and goes down through a small steep meadow,

which establishes its poverty in a snowfall of daisies,
to his invisible house beside the water.

The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts.
The thin mist follows
the white mutations of its dream;
an ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks.

She throws a lyrical mantle across man and baby, swaddling them briefly in a reassuring pastoral of birds, infant nature, even the brooks, but she can no more see their destination than she can see that always-impenetrable 'interior'. Like the 'family with pets' in "Over 2,000 Illustrations", this family is beyond the reach of the observer standing by the roadside, looking on.

The symbolic rippling of dark brooks and the misty mutations of a dream which end the poem seem like a final effort to draw together the different parts of the poem. "Drawing together" is something that Bishop has a rather terrified relation to and this lapse into portentous gesture is surprising; it is at odds with her effort to look her sight away. Her protagonist has grappled with the limits of sight, and what she can make of the world she envisages beyond her eye's glance. The 'ancient chill' which ripples 'the dark brooks' in the last line of the poem reminds the reader of the "Cold Spring" which heads all the poems in the volume. It gives an edge to the lyricism, recalling the 'clear gray icy water' of "At the Fishhouses". Like the sea it suggests a fluid history which is ancient and also impenetrable. But its grandly impersonal tone is at odds with the protagonist's self-conscious, even sceptical, awareness of the way a landscape can be made to serve her particular meaning.

V

'NO PLAYHOUSE BUT A HOUSE IN EARNEST'[22]

Elsewhere always holds the key for Bishop, and for the children she imagines, because her parents were always elsewhere during her own childhood. The effort to describe what lies beyond the reach of sight and the crisis this brings in these three poems marks an important stage in Bishop's developing vision of the world. A version of this crisis also occurs in a story called "Gwendolyn", published in the period during which Bishop was working on the poems in A Cold Spring. It is about a child's discovery of the terrifying immanence in the world around her, which bears vividly upon the cold vertigo at the heart of the three poems.

"Gwendolyn", like "In the Village", is set in the Nova Scotia of "At the Fishhouses" and "Cape Breton". It draws explicitly on Bishop's memories of early childhood. Written in an adult-like first person, it recalls the adventures which befall a seven year-old girl. They are shaped closely on Bishop's own recollections. These adventures organize themselves mainly around a childhood friend, Gwendolyn, but what connects them to the poems I have been discussing is the frightening reverie into which the child is thrown at different, sharply individuated, moments in the tale, rather than the plot. Like the infancy conjured up at the end of "Over 2,000 Illustrations", this child looks and looks her infant sight away, finding a dimension to her childish life that goes beyond the simple, though traumatic, events on which the story focusses.

Gwendolyn Appletree is the child's friend and ego-ideal. She is delicate and diabetic 'as if she would prove to be solid candy if you bit her' 'and blond, and pink and white, exactly like a blossoming apple tree'. (C.Pr.216) She is like the girl doll, so admired by the child, come to life, complete with her pretty clothes and weakened joints. Most enviable of all, Gwendolyn has adoring parents who spoil her and almost eat her up with kisses and tenderness after even the briefest separation. Though the protagonist's lack of parents is never mentioned, her situation, like Bishop's, is clearly one of orphanhood and, like Bishop, she is being raised by grandparents in a Nova Scotian village. Gwendolyn not only stands in for all the child does not have; her situation also exemplifies the veneer thrown over things which, the child discovers, often hides a different reality. Bishop has captured a prototype of her adult, poetic self in this story. The intense, capturing eye of the poet appears in the bereaved but capable and gregarious child, as she finds herself compelled at different times to concentrate powerfully on an object. Then she suddenly finds the world laid bare, betrayed by her gaze in its real guise.

The story recalls different events with a tone of easy retrospection. It remembers the child tending graves with her grandfather and observing the 'dry, bright-gold lichen' on the childrens' graves; it remembers her attending village picnics and paddling in the river; and it recalls her playing with Gwendolyn. (C.Pr.223) When her friend comes to visit they trap bumblebees, play with coloured blocks, conduct a dolls' teaparty and lock themselves in the barn privy. The child conducts all these games from within her awed vision of Gwendolyn as the child who had everything and was everything that she was not. However when Gwendolyn spends the night and

gets into bed without saying her prayers, her explanation for this behaviour shocks the child into a moment of bewildering insight:

> [Gwendolyn said] her mother let her say them in bed, "because I'm going to die."
> At least, that was what I thought she said...My heart pounding, I brushed my teeth with the icy well water, and spat in the china pot... the pounding went on and on...I went around and picked up Gwendolyn's clothes...Her drawers had lace around the legs, but they were very dirty. This fact shocked me so deeply that I recovered my voice and started asking her more questions. (C.Pr.220)

Somehow the lace gives the game away, even if neither child nor reader know quite what the game is. Suddenly Gwendolyn assumes a terrible corporeality, made up of her confidence of death and the dirt on her drawers. This revelation seems as powerful for the child as the traveller's shocking exposure in front of the dust-filled prophet's tomb in "Over 2,000 Illustrations".

Gwendolyn's complacency about death and dirt and her vulnerability to them is the focus for the child's next moment of insight, as she looks voyeuristically through the window at Gwendolyn's funeral. The circumstances of Gwendolyn's death are not given and the reader assumes she has died of diabetes. Her funeral is conducted in Presbyterian church opposite the child's house. Though the Baptist grandfather attends, grandmother and child stay at home, each watching the church opposite through different windows of the house.

The child's delight with the children's graves, counting and caressing the white marble lambs, is transformed by what she sees through the lace-covered window. She is free to watch the funeral opposite unregarded. Like

the figure in Bishop's early poem, "To a Tree", the child is protected in her voyeurism by the frame that the window and its lace provides. This freedom enables her to see differently, though she can tolerate her insight for only a moment. When two men lean Gwendolyn's coffin against the church wall, the child finds herself, invisible behind her lace-covered window, facing her dead friend, as though in terrible and parodic reflection:

> But now, suddenly, as I watched through the window, something happened at the church across the way. Something that could not possibly have happened, so that I must, in reality, have seen something like it and imagined the rest; or my concentration on the one thing was so intense that I could see nothing else.
> ...For a minute, I stared straight through my lace curtain at Gwendolyn's coffin, with Gwendolyn shut invisibly inside it forever, there, completely alone on the grass by the church door.
> Then I ran howling to the back door, out among the startled white hens, with my grandmother, still weeping, after me. (C.Pr.223-224)

This encounter is reminiscent of the moments of crisis in "In the Village", which was written during the same period. The child cannot bear her vision and flees from it almost as it forms before her eyes.

Such an appalling vision is immediately compared with another, earlier one by the protagonist. She recalls unearthing some marbles she had been given months previously:

> I stared into the basket and took out a few of the marbles. But what could have happened? They were covered with dirt and dust...The big pink marble was there, but I hardly recognized it, all covered with dirt...The broad lamp flame started to blur; my aunt's fair hair started to blur; I put my head down on top of the marbles and cried aloud. (C.Pr.225)

Bishop's adult narrative voice reflects upon both experiences, the vision of Gwendolyn and the discovery of the soiled marbles, describing both as something fearful and unavoidable:

> If I care to, I can bring back the exact sensation of that moment today, but then, it is also one of those that from time to time are terrifyingly thrust upon us. (C.Pr.224)

Her terror is drawn out of the discovery that something she thought she understood, and knew the colour and shape of, can suddenly appear in a radically different form. In a moment what had been well-defined becomes dangerously mercurial. Like the child in "In the Village", this child discovers that her capacity to control the shape and form of the world around her is severely limited. Things change before her eyes and, like the grave in "Over 2,000 Illustrations", they can terrify her even when she can explain and rationalize their appearance to herself.

The story ends with a second funeral. This time the child invents it with her cousin Billy:

> There was a clump of Johnny-jump-ups that I thought belonged to me; we picked them and made a wreath for the nameless doll. We laid her out in the garden path and outlined her body with Johnny-jump-ups and babies'-breath and put a pink cosmos in one limp hand. She looked perfectly beautiful. The game was more exciting than "operation." I don't know which one of us said it first, but one of us did, with wild joy — that it was Gwendolyn's funeral, and that the doll's real name, all this time, was Gwendolyn. (C.Pr.226)

Until the doll is named the children are merely pursuing their 'idea of adorning her with flowers' (C.Pr.226). By naming her and so deciding the

doll's fate (because as Gwendolyn she must be dead) the child can reenact the terrifying experience she had earlier, watching Gwendolyn's funeral through the window. Only this time Gwendolyn is in her control. The aghast howls with which she fled before are transformed to a 'wild joy' as she first conjures up and then plays with Gwendolyn's body.

The child's home landscape is as hard for her to read and understand as the landscape at the fishhouses, or on Cape Breton, or any of those described in the traveller's journeys in "Over 2,000 Illustrations". Her brief charade with the doll offers a glimpse of her powerful wish for imaginative control. In the best poems of the "Cold Spring" period Bishop confronts the dangerous mutability of things, like Edwin Boomer grasping at the whirling scraps of writing that might make sense of things and recognizing that within such terrifying moments as those experienced by the child lies a disruptive power that is close to the spring of her poetry.

Robert Frost describes the return to a sacral, childhood place in his poem "Directive", and some such imaginative return seems to lie concealed within the charged, cryptic figures of the major poems of A Cold Spring. Frost's poem, a kind of romantic quest narrative set in an inhospitable landscape, is given over to an imaginative return to a 'house that is no more a house / Upon a farm that is no more a farm', a place associated with 'playthings in the playhouse of the children' but also with the sources of imaginative identity:

> This was no playhouse but a house in earnest.
> Your destination and your destiny's
> A brook that was the water of the house,

Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,
Too lofty and original to rage[23]

The explicit material for Frost's poem is a memory of something close to the 'source' of his originality, an origin that is simultaneously a Wordsworthian 'destination'. For Bishop too, as these poems imply, the memory of 'infant sight' and the associations of early childhood lie as a bedrock beneath all her poetry. (C.P.59) This bedrock may not be as explicit as it is in Frost's poem, and it only occasionally breaks through the more obviously fertile surface of the poems. But in "Gwendolyn", published in June 1953, and "In the Village", published in December 1953, Bishop makes two powerfully affecting imaginative returns to that earliest stratum of her life.

The crisis of "seeing" in these stories and in the poems I have discussed becomes translated in Bishop's next volume, Questions of Travel, into another kind of dilemma. In the poems of "Brazil" it is that of the tourist in a strange land, and in the poems of "Elsewhere" it has to do with 'home, / wherever that may be'. (C.P.94) But she abandons her cold spring, and its implication about the dispute between Eliot and Williams, for a much warmer climate. She exchanges one New World, the United States of America, for another one, Brazil, and the first poem in Questions of Travel, "Arrival at Santos", describes the comedy and excitement of arrival in this new continent. The mantle of chilly impersonality in the "Cold Spring" poems (with the exception of "Invitation" and "Letter to N.Y.") is thrown off and Bishop delights in the set of a new theatre where she is not the only player.

At the end of his Introduction to the Wonders of the World (the book mentioned in the story "The Baptism" and to which Bishop seems to be alluding at the beginning of "Over 2,000 Illustrations") Sir Harry Johnston, G.C.M.G., addresses his readership in these benevolent terms:

> Many of us, not only in the United Kingdom and the British Colonies, but throughout the world, have not the privilege of travel; are retained within the narrow limits of a town or village by force of circumstances, by indifferent health, or lack of sufficient means. To all such, a book dealing with the Wonders of the World as seen with accuracy by the photographic lens, and described often by eye-witnesses, should come as a delightful compensation for home-staying.[24]

Bishop never regarded herself as having a home to stay in and she uses her actual, not vicarious, travels as compensation for homelessness in Questions of Travel. She lets her eye roam further and moves away from the explicit and claustrophobic self-regard of A Cold Spring, finding other characters to concentrate upon. But whoever she looks at, wherever she turns and, however far she travels, she continues to ask what the landscape has of meaning, finding in this question the focus she needs for her endlessly quizzing eye.

CHAPTER FIVE

Questions of Travel: 'WATCHING STRANGERS IN A PLAY'.

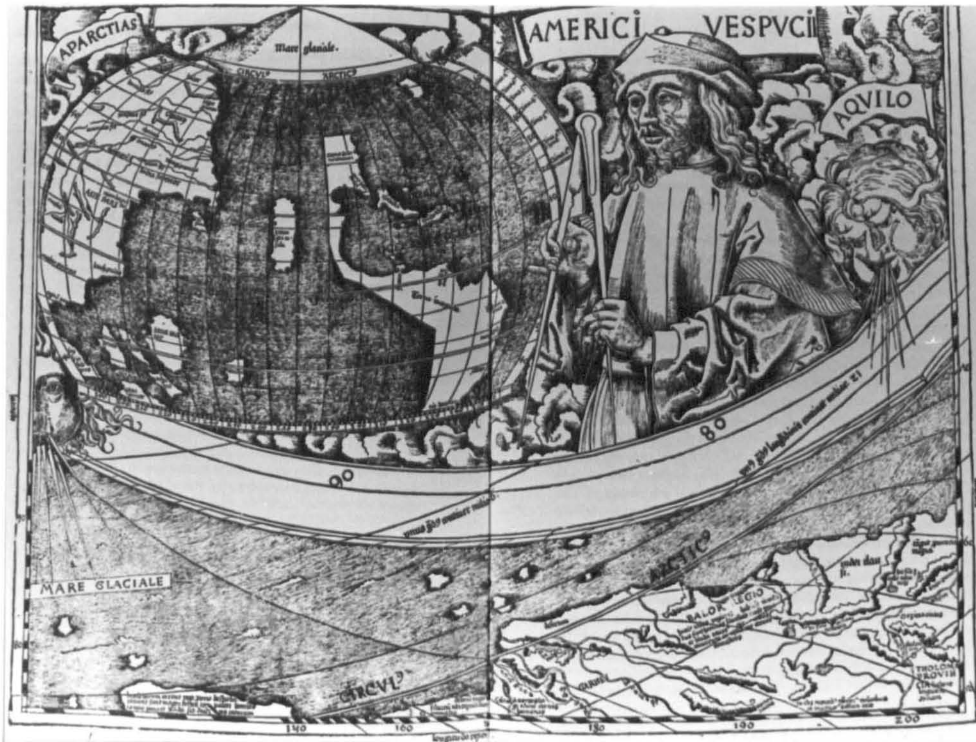

PLATE 19:
Amerigo Vespucci and Mundus Novus on Waldseemüller's 1507 map

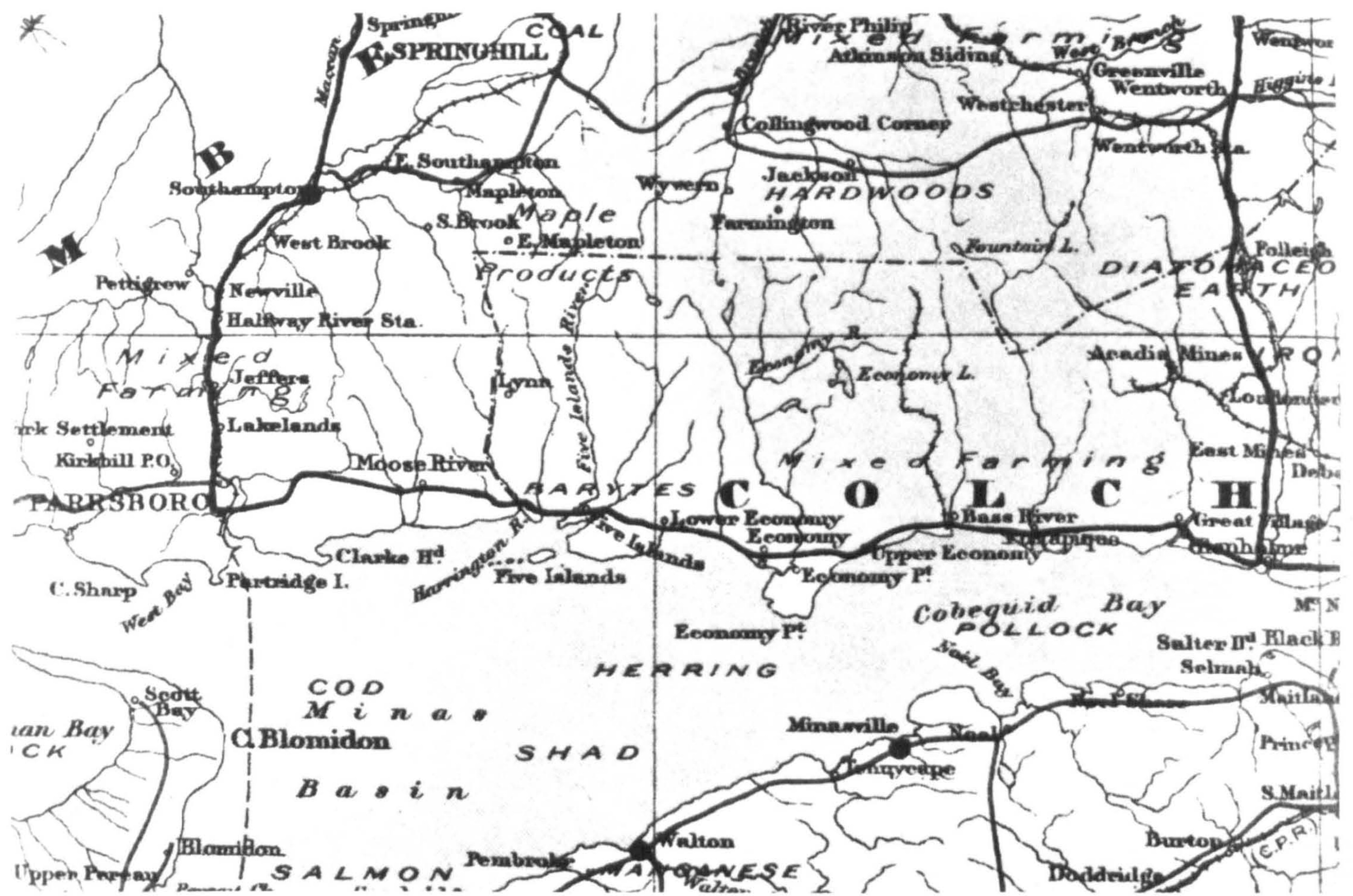

PLATE 20: From a map of Nova Scotia,
showing Bishop's early childhood territory

i

A NEW-FOUND LAND

After the empty, antisocial air of A Cold Spring, Questions of Travel is sociable and well-peopled. Bishop constructs a series of Lyrical Ballads, with her own versions of Wordsworth's "Mad Mother", "Idiot Boy", "Female Vagrant" and "Old Man Travelling". After the apparent miscellaneousness of A Cold Spring, in which the poems seem to be laid out in no particular order, Questions of Travel is conspicuously designed, with its two carefully contrasted parts, "Brazil" and "Elsewhere".

Bishop opens the book with a dedication to her Brazilian lover Lota, with whom she had lived since 1951. One of the unspoken things that holds "Brazil" and "Elsewhere" together is this relationship, formed in what is for Bishop a new-found land. As an epigraph she quotes from a love sonnet by Luis de Camões, the Portuguese sixteenth century poet:

> ...O dar-vos quanto tenho e quanto posso,
> Que quanto mais vos pago, mais vos devo.[1]

Camões's most famous work is an epic poem, Os Lusiades, which celebrates the adventures and discoveries of the Portuguese navigator, Vasco da Gama. Though Bishop nowhere directly alludes to her lover in the book, she uses the quotation as a discreet allusion to the intimacy in her own life bet-

ween her love and her travels. It may be that this intimacy lies behind the new freedom and confidence of the poetry.

Bishop asks particular questions of travel in "Brazil". She questions the curious quality of the tourist's curiosity in "Arrival at Santos" and explores the traveller's capacity to enter, not violate, a foreign land in "Brazil, January 1, 1502". And she ponders whether travel really affords the traveller a better view than the imagination in "Questions of Travel". After posing such questions in the first three poems, Bishop allows the perspective to change and the rest of the poems in "Brazil" are written from within the 'interior' ("Brazil, January 1, 1502"), about indigenous figures playing different parts. Although these characters are at home in Brazil, Bishop marks out their ambivalent attitude towards their surroundings, whether caused by homelessness ("Squatter's Children") or ambition ("The Riverman"), or lawlessness ("The Burglar of Babylon"). In all the "Brazil" poems there is a new ease, which is in tune with their gregarious air. And Bishop appears to be newly at ease: with what? Being away from home? or with finding that home, however compromised, is '*wherever that may be?*'. (C.P.95)

"Elsewhere" describes a very different country from the world of "Brazil". It acts as a kind of dialectic, balancing the discursive, colloquial manner of the first part with a different framework. The poems in "Elsewhere" obey tight, formal constraints, as in "Sestina" and "Visits to St. Elizabeth's", and describe a claustrophobic, self-regarding landscape, peopled not with strangers, but with familial figures. Even in

"Visits to St. Elizabeth's" 'the man / that lies in house of Bedlam' is surrounded by characters who, though not his family, represent the homeland he denounced, and from whom he cannot escape. (C.P.135)

When Questions of Travel was first published in the United States, "Elsewhere" began with the story "In the Village". It acted as a bridge between the new, imaginative continent of Brazil and the old, distant continent of childhood. The story was excluded from all subsequent editions, an exclusion which drastically alters the book's balance. With the story, "Elsewhere" is emphatically rooted in childhood memories. Without it "Elsewhere" seems like a strangely shadowy realm compared to "Brazil". It is somewhere not quite located in time or space but made up of specific, individual foci. Its protagonists are in search of home truths, but home has become part of elsewhere.

It seems as though Bishop's residence in a foreign land (Brazil), where she is undeniably a "stranger at play" and a displaced person, has shown her the extent to which her past, her childhood, has become, paradoxically, the truly foreign country, a place that is mysterious and out of reach.[2]

The questions about "seeing" expressed in the poems of A Cold Spring become something else in Questions of Travel. For describing the new land of "Brazil" and the remembered places of "Elsewhere", sight has become an enabling and revealing act. Many of the "Brazil" poems describe characters in the act of observation - "Arrival at Santos", "Brazil, January 1, 1502", "Questions of Travel", "Squatter's Children", "Manuelzinho", "The

Armadillo", "The Riverman" and "The Burglar of Babylon" all describe situations in which characters give an account of what they have seen, as it were to their reader. They do not rise towards a climactic vision, like "Over 2,000 Illustrations" or "At the Fishhouses". Their characters capture the attention while they perform the natural functions of their lives. They are arrested by the poem in mid-performance, which brings some of the ordinary events of this foreign culture within the traveller's own, peculiar perspective.

The account of what remains unseen, rather than what is seen, directs the poems of "Elsewhere". The dilemma for their characters is that the source for understanding things is always elsewhere. It is either out of sight, or locked into the past, or contingent on an understanding that is beyond their reach. However hard the child in "First Death in Nova Scotia" gazes at the body of her cousin, the explanation of his death does not match up to what she sees, and she invents another explanation to accomodate this discrepancy. The common ground for the Jew, the soldier, the poet and the sailor in "Visits to St. Elizabeth's" lies in their insanity and detachment from the world, not the attachments defined by their roles. And in "Sestina", child and grandmother find different ways of expressing their unspoken, unspeakable, grief. Bishop does not try to answer the questions that are raised by the travelling eye in <u>Questions of Travel</u>, whether it is travelling over a new continent (in "Brazil") or an old one (with memories of an earlier life in "Elsewhere"). But she shifts her attention from 'whatever the landscape had of meaning' in <u>A Cold Spring</u> to take in what the title poem refers to as 'watching strangers in a play' in <u>Questions of Travel</u>. (C.P.93)In this way she offers a different resolution

to the old question of how to identify and define her own, strange place in things.

ii

"ARRIVAL AT SANTOS"

Questions of Travel begins with a humorous anti-epic of arrival in a new-found land:

> Here is a coast; here is a harbor;
> here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:
> impractically shaped and — who knows? — self-pitying mountains,
> sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery
>
> with a little church on top of one. And warehouses,
> some of them painted a feeble pink, or blue,
> and some tall, uncertain palms. Oh, tourist,
> is this how this country is going to answer you
>
> and your immodest demands for a different world,
> and a better life, and complete comprehension
> of both at last, and immediately,
> after eighteen days of suspension? (C.P.89)

"Arrival at Santos" marks the start of Bishop's voyage of discovery in Brazil. She first included the poem in A Cold Spring, only to find a better place for it at the beginning of Questions of Travel, its final destination. This repositioning gives a hint of how carefully this third book of poems was put together, after the apparently random arrangement of the second one. The comic, self-mocking tone of "Arrival at Santos"

characterizes a very different arrival from those made by da Gama (which Bishop's Camões epigraph reminds us of) which are grandiose, self-important and weighted with lofty symbolism.

Bishop's tourist begins to describe the land emerging before her with crude itemizations 'Here is a coast: here is a harbor; / here...is some scenery'. Detail later emerges out of detail as more is seen, and the bare but precise syntax of location with which the poem starts rapidly gives way to a descriptive language which is fraught with uncertainty. Description-by -naming is unravelled as the tourist begins to speculate, and to characterize what she names. The mountains are, perhaps, 'self-pitying' with deceptively 'frivolous greenery' on top. The warehouses are painted in weak colours and the palms are 'uncertain'. The apostrophic 'Oh tourist' begins a succession of subordinate clauses which list, increasingly breathlessly, a series of impossible demands. These demands, for 'a different world...a better life...complete comprehension' are arrested finally by the limbo of 'suspension', with its undercurrent suggestion of 'suspense'. The word forms a bridge between the fantasies of the tourist who is in sight of the new land, but who has not arrived, and the tourist for whom the land has already become a series of practical propositions and dilemmas.

Following the imperative to 'Finish your breakfast' because 'The tender is coming', the suspense of the first three stanzas is soon dissipated in the comedy of arrival:

> So that's the flag. I never saw it before.
> I somehow never thought of there being a flag,

> but of course there was, all along. And coins, I presume,
> and paper money; they remain to be seen.

The traveller's momentary surprise at finding that this new country has a flag and coinage is part of a familiar disparity in Bishop's writing, between what is imagined and what is then seen.[3] The printer's excited imagination in "The Map" meant that 'the names of cities [crossed] the neighboring mountains', so forfeiting in a single stroke all exactitude of scale. (C.P.3) In "Over 2,000 Illustrations" the protagonist's travels illustrate a different world from that described in the Wonders of the World. The two sets of illustrations represent different perspectives on the world. In "Arrival at Santos" the traveller finds that the country she arrives in 'after eighteen days of suspension' asserts itself in ways that her imagination had not bargained for.

The traveller's excitement, expressed in her rapid physical and mental glances towards this new country, is suddenly restrained by the mechanics of arrival:

> And gingerly now we climb down the ladder backward,
> myself and a fellow passenger named Miss Breen,
>
> descending into the midst of twenty-six freighters
> waiting to be loaded with green coffee beans.
> Please, boy, do be more careful with that boat hook!
> Watch out! Oh! It has caught Miss Breen's
>
> skirt! There! Miss Breen is about seventy,
> a retired police lieutenant, six feet tall,
> with beautiful bright blue eyes and a kind expression.
> Her home, when she is at home, is in Glens Fall
>
> s, New York. There. We are settled.
> The customs officials will speak English, we hope

Cautiousness and the drawn-out, emphatically punctuated, syntax of disembarkation replace the impetuous demands formulated during the journey. Descent from the boat becomes a precisely articulated farce, the syntax brilliantly capturing the traveller's uneasy relationship to the new country and subtly emphasizing the fragility of her identity, arriving in a country where the old currency has no meaning. The exclamations over the boat hook seem uncharacteristically and deliberately clumsy. Bishop rarely uses five exclamation marks in as many poems, and never, as here, within three lines. But this is not 'mere mannered fussy prattling', as some have said.[4] The jumpy punctuation accentuates the anxiety of the new arrival. Miss Breen's vital statistics are a diversion into known and nameable facts. Age, profession, height, appearance and, of course, address seem to be set against the awkwardness and unknown embarassments of arriving in Santos. Miss Breen's skirt is the first victim of this tension, caught in a boat hook and suspended between stanzas. And the peculiar enjambement which carries the last 's' of 'Glens Falls' into a new stanza makes her vital statistics seem brittle and incongruous; they fit awkwardly in this new place. The travellers are not at home here.

The unnerving thrill of arrival is succeeded by immediate departure. Bishop's arrivals always mark the start of a departure, because like the child in "In the Village", her characters are always looking beyond what they can see before them, eager, like this traveller, to drive 'to the interior'. Suddenly Santos becomes just another port, a necessity with its own characteristic signature, 'like postage stamps, or soap'. Once identified and coded, the traveller is free to leave it and it no longer has that threatening air of the unknown. 'We are settled' she declares once

she arrives in the port. The pun on 'settled', with its other meaning of colonization, fastens her into an historical context, which began with the European colonization of Brazil in the sixteenth century. The twentieth century traveller is implicated in this history, however different the assumptions she brings with her. With one remark Bishop links the arrival of the conquistadores four hundred and fifty years previously, and their hope of finding 'wealth and luxury', to this modern, comic arrival, with its 'bourbon and cigarettes' and its 'immodest demands for a different world, / and a better life' as the traveller drives off to the unknown interior. (C.P.92)

iii

"BRAZIL, JANUARY 1, 1502"

Bishop makes a second entrance with her second poem. Its title, "Brazil, January 1, 1502", marks the European discovery of Brazil.[5] Bishop dated the end of "Arrival at Santos" 'January, 1952', so that the two dates, exactly four hundred and fifty years apart, mirror one another across the spine of the book. Where the traveller was trammelled by cultural ignorance in the first poem, she is trammelled by historical precedent in the second:

> Januaries, Nature greets our eyes
> exactly as she must have greeted theirs

The etymology of the poem's strangely plural first word 'Januaries' goes back to the Roman Janus, two-faced god of thresholds, passages and bridges. So while the poem appears to start like each new year with the blessing of this god of fresh beginnings, it also acknowledges the binding which constricts every modern new arrival to a continent. The traveller may be seeing this landscape for the first time, but her awareness of those earlier, sixteenth century gazes, to which she adds her own, makes her unavoidably part of a descriptive, appropriative culture. This imaginative new threshold has already been trodden by ancestors who cannot be ignored.[6]

The Portuguese explorers of the sixteenth century erected landmarks, called "padrões", with which they laid claim to the new lands they found for Portugal. Bishop also lays claim to the territory she discovers by enscribing it in her poetry. Her poetic discovery of Brazil is no freer from antecedents than she found her actual arrival to be, and "Brazil, January 1, 1502" offers a response to at least two literary predecessors, the navigator Amerigo Vespucci, who was part of the expedition that discovered Rio de Janeiro in January 1502, and Charles Darwin, who travelled to Brazil during his voyages with the Beagle. Bishop is indebted to both these writers, but she also contests their accounts in order to raise her own "padrão" in this new-found land.

Beginning with Whitmanesque gusto, Bishop describes a pre-lapsarian jungle filled with leaves of every size and colour and flowers which are 'fresh as if just finished / and taken off the frame.' The description is

compact, tumbling one leaf upon another. It has the audacity of a poet who is not afraid of surfaces:

> big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves,
> blue, blue-green, and olive,
> with occasional lighter veins and edges,
> or a satin underleaf turned over;

She allows herself to go on enumerating and detailing where other poets might feel they were wandering from the point. Like Darwin, she makes her way to the interior, to the harder point, by way of an exhilarated mapping of the exterior contours. It is easy to see why she admired his exact, nervous, imaginatively elegant and precise prose so strongly.

Darwin's generous exactitude, with its 'beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless, heroic observations', was also to Bishop the origin of that 'sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown' which she celebrated in the prose of his <u>Journal of a Voyage Around the World</u>.[7] A quotation from his "Forest Scenes" around Rio will explain what she meant:

> If the eye was turned from the world of foliage above to the ground beneath, it was attracted by the extreme elegance of the leaves of the ferns and mimosæ. The latter, in some parts, covered the surface with a brushwood only a few inches high. In walking across these thick beds of mimosæ, a broad track was marked by the change of shade, produced by the drooping of their sensitive petioles. It is easy to specify the individual objects of admiration in these grand scenes, but it is not possible to give an adequate idea of the higher feelings of wonder, astonishment, and devotion which fill and elevate the mind.[8]

But Darwin also slid easily into yet another kind of account, one drawn from the position of cultural hegemony that he assumed. Although he loathed slavery, still legal in Brazil when he travelled there, Darwin could witness an act of appalling human cruelty committed by a white man against negroes but still pledge 'that in humanity and good feeling he was superior to the common run of men'.[9] He felt free to vouch that the slaves on a particular fazenda, or farm, passed 'happy and contented lives'.[10] There is a nineteenth-century liberal naivety in these sentiments which is not to be found in Bishop's writing. His status as a Christian and a European ensured this for him, as it had assured it for his predecessor, Vespucci.

Vespucci's "Letters from the Americas" are interesting to historians because of his detailed description of the scenery and the human beings he encountered during his travels.[11] However a particular sense of moral, religious and cultural superiority colours his account (as we would expect), his sixteenth-century perspective making for a different kind of understanding to that of the twentieth-century traveller. This superiority allows Vespucci to make one rule of savagery for the Brazilian tribes, and a different rule for the Europeans. His letters reflect not `simple prejudice, but an incapacity to imagine another way of being, at the same time as documenting in great detail the forms of decoration, procreation, warfare, nourishment and so on that these other peoples engage in. Bishop in the twentieth century knows she is no freer from cultural hegemony than these predecessors, but she uses her poem to explore the difficult ambivalence this leaves her with. She shares more than the responsibility of descriptive appropriation with her intrepid predecessors.

Nature turns her other face when Bishop takes a second look at the 'tapestried landscape'. Where before Bishop concentrated on the different threads of the composition, noticing 'every square inch' of its leafy texture, now she changes her focus to take in the landscape as a tapestry, a larger design with 'backing' and a 'foreground'. At once things change. There is no longer a pre-lapsarian freshness to it all. It becomes as carefully 'worked' as a tapestry. With the start of the second stanza Bishop continues to "work" her poem, describing the landscape in staccato, apparently incidental details, moving quickly from the sky to fern-like 'feathery detail' to 'palms', just as in the first stanza it leapt from leaf to leaf and flower to flower. But with the arrival of the 'big symbolic birds' a new kind of narrative begins:

> Still in the foreground there is Sin:
> five sooty dragons near some massy rocks.
> The rocks are worked with lichens, gray moonbursts
> splattered and overlapping,
> threatened from underneath by moss
> in lovely hell-green flames,
> attacked above
> by scaling-ladder vines, oblique and neat,
> "one leaf yes and one leaf no" (in Portuguese).

The birds 'keep quiet' and do not fully bare their breasts, as though there were some history here that is not being divulged. With the entrance of 'Sin' the easy profusions of the first stanza end and the vocabulary becomes 'splattered' with verbs of encroachment and metaphors more closely linked to Christian colonization than to the Brazilian jungle. The Portuguese counting-rhyme made out of 'scaling-ladder vines' mixes metaphors still further. The invasive connotation of scaling-ladders becomes confused with the amorous implication of such a Portuguese plucking-rhyme. The

history alluded to in the poem's title (the European discovery and appropriation of Brazil) is brought back into the foreground.

The aggressive courtship of some lizards provides the final flourish to this jungle scene:

> The lizards scarcely breathe: all eyes
> are on the smaller, female one, back-to,
> her wicked tail straight up and over,
> red as a red-hot wire.

Their suspended animation and narrow concentration refocusses the blither courtship suggested in the Portuguese rhyme. Attention is drawn first to the lizards; then 'all eyes' are on the 'female one' and finally the focus narrows to the spike of her tail, 'red as a red-hot wire', its violent shade intensified by quick colour repetition.

Bishop seems to make a connection between the predations of the lizards and the natural world, and those of the early explorers at the start of the final stanza:

> Just so the Christians, hard as nails,
> tiny as nails, and glinting,
> in creaking armor,

The lizards' concupiscence is taken as an emblem for the behaviour of the invading Christians. For a moment the syntax appears to make the kind of moral comparison that Bishop avoids. But as the clause continues, the comparison is turned, and turned again:

Just so the Christians...
in creaking armor, came and found it all,

Now it is not that the Christians are like the lizards, but that what the modern traveller sees, they also found. However with the succeeding line, and its casual double negative, the poem turns again:

Just so the Christians...
...came and found it all,
not unfamiliar

The predatory, sexually aggressive new-found landscape of Brazil is compared to the old, European world as the invading 'Christians' are wrapped in the conceit of territorial and sexual conquest by the successive turns of the lines.[12]

Like the traveller in "Arrival at Santos", Bishop has the Christians compare this new, strange country with their homeland:

no lovers' walks, no bowers,
no cherries to be picked, no lute music,
but corresponding, nevertheless,
to an old dream of wealth and luxury
already out of style when they left home[13]

Just as the traveller arriving at Santos is relieved to find a national flag flying, a currency and the familiar, reassuring blandness of a port, so the sixteenth-century Christians are able to make their own correspondences between the old view and the new prospect. Courtly love is not part

of the agenda in this new country, but as the close of the poem makes clear, the lack of a decorum is no constraint against male despoliation.

In discussing the crucial poems of A Cold Spring I suggested that whatever the landscape had of meaning seemed to be held back, 'in the interior, / where we cannot see'. (C.P.67) In "Brazil, January 1, 1502", the landscape's constraint is broached:

> Directly after Mass, humming perhaps
> L'Homme armé or some such tune,
> they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
> each out to catch an Indian for himself
> those maddening little women who kept calling,
> calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
> and retreating, always retreating, behind it.

This pursuit involves colonial rape with its consequent cultural, geographical and sexual appropriation, by contrast with the visionary effort to give utterance to what lies beyond the mind's eye in A Cold Spring. The new country offers 'a brand-new pleasure', untrammelled by the codes of the old country or even by the dictates of the Church. The religious tune the 'Christians' hum seems to endorse their aggressive posture as, armed with assumptions of superiority, they strike through the 'tapestried landscape' in pursuit of Indian women. The noise of their aggressive, religious marching tune sounds out against the bird-like cries of the women - their repeated 'calling, / calling' cries to one another match their movements, 'retreating, always retreating'. Bishop utters no indictment against the 'Christians' in their 'creaking armor'. She allows their transplanted gestures to speak for themselves. She has already identified some of the problems and the fantasies of travel in "Arrival at

Santos" and is too convinced of her own implication in the colonizing gaze to be interested in straightforward criticism of one set of travellers by another. "Brazil, January 1, 1502" ends, like "Arrival at Santos", in pursuit of the interior and in pursuit of the same dream, the 'immodest demands for a different world, / and a better life'.

"Brazil, January 1, 1502" does not explicitly address questions of colonization, yet its 'embroidered nature' forces the reader to confront the violence inherent in the European discovery of the new world. In "Questions of Travel" Bishop considers her own, perhaps questionable, fascination with the unfamiliar landscape she discovers in her journey into 'the interior' of contemporary Brazil.

iv

"QUESTIONS OF TRAVEL"

Does travel really afford a better view than the imagination? This is the question Bishop returns to in her third poem. She first addressed it in her earlier travelogue, "Over 2,000 Illustrations" as she journeyed through the pages of an old encyclopaedia and through her own, idiosyncratic memories. Now she ponders whether it is better to '<u>come / to imagined places</u>' or to stay '<u>at home, / wherever that may be</u>'. (C.P.94)[14]

"Questions of Travel" echoes the words of one of her predecessors, Henry James. Like Bishop, James was an inveterate traveller, though he chose the old world of Europe rather than the new one of the Americas for his journeys. In Italian Hours, a book of essays on travel in Italy, he interrupts his account of Genoa, with its 'close crepuscular alleys' and 'dusky, crowded shops' to muse on the moral philosophy of travel:

> A traveller is often moved to ask himself whether it has been worth while to leave his home - whatever his home may have been - only to encounter new forms of human suffering, only to be reminded that toil and privation, hunger and sorrow and sordid effort, are the portion of the mass of mankind. To travel is, as it were, to go to the play, to attend a spectacle; and there is something heartless in stepping forth into foreign streets to feast on "character" when character consists simply of the slightly different costume in which labour and want present themselves.[15]

These words bear an uncanny and hitherto unnoticed resemblance to Bishop's in "Questions of Travel". Though she nowhere mentions James, her borrowing is unmistakable. The two writers share an attentively fastidious eye for detail. But where James maintains his distance from the foreign objects of pity he encounters, and is happy to admit that 'Our observation in any foreign land is extremely superficial', Bishop has a different attitude.[16] She cultivates her fascination in the peculiar inventiveness of the materially impoverished lives she sees. To 'go to the play' or, as she has it, to watch 'strangers in a play / in this strangest of theatres', is something she has done all her life, whether at home or abroad. As a tourist, the ineluctable distance she always discovers between herself and other characters can be explained by her position as a stranger in a foreign land. In "Questions of Travel" she allows herself to discourse on

the nature of this "distance" and on the very different kinds of travel and 'spectacle' that offer themselves to the traveller.

"Questions of Travel" begins, like "Brazil, January 1, 1502", with a profusion which threatens to swamp the eye:

> There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams
> hurry too rapidly down to the sea,
> and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops
> makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
> turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.

Vexation is soon turned to seduction in the face of such excess. Clouds become streams, spilling over the mountains, and then waterfalls, even as we look. The landscape is full of liquid motion, in which mountains become 'capsized ships', as though they were making their own voyages of discovery, and the 'streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling'. This fluid beginning, in which things change shape before the traveller's very eyes, poses her a different problem from the precise, overlapping shapes which filled in the background in the previous poem. This landscape will not be easily mapped, nor necessarily succumb to an exact, elegant description. It demands an imaginative venture from the traveller, who must be prepared to invent her own view, even at the risk of being "blurred and inconclusive".

Two different kinds of travel are broached in the next two stanzas. In the first, which is acquisitive, the traveller captures sights like a camera's lens, whether it is the 'tiniest green hummingbird in the world', or 'some inexplicable old stonework', or 'one more folded sunset, still

quite warm'. 'Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?', she wonders. Such sightseeing provides impressions like those captured in the 'cattycornered rectangles' of the encyclopaedia perused at the beginning of "Over 2,000 Illustrations" - nothing that could not be caught in a stilled, silenced image and carried home. It offers views which are 'instantly seen and always, always delightful', as though this Brazilian interior was made up of no more than a few, full colour photographic slides. This kind of visual appropriation is as plunderingly blunderous as the conquistadores's ripping 'away into the hanging fabric' in "Brazil, 1502". The traveller in "Questions of Travel" is intent on catching 'one more folded sunset' in much the same way as the Christians were 'out to catch an Indian' for themselves. Her world can be 'folded' up like a map, but not like the printer's map which heads Bishop's published poetry. That map has more in common with the second kind of travel, where boundaries extend into one another and the lines of division between two elements, even between land and water, are endlessly questioned by the encroachment of one upon the other.

The interior described in the third stanza is not 'instantly seen'. The traveller gathers it in, accruing detail upon detail. Her gaze does not capture each item and put it away, like the earlier folded sunsets, but seems to move across the landscape. First she sees 'the trees along this road,' then the filling-station on stopping for gas, with its attendant clogs and songbird in a wooden cage. And finally she watches the rain. An imagined world is constructed out of what is caught by the eye in one long, sweeping movement. Bishop has found in Brazil what William Carlos Williams found in their native North America: a poetic territory in which she can celebrate the art of passing through. Having discovered the randomness of

the world, and what one happens to notice in it, the only way to be in it is to be random, and to see how it performs before you.[17] The quest for the interior which formed the leitmotif of A Cold Spring has found a new cadence in the "Brazil" poems. The desperate bass note of "Over 2,000 Illustrations", "Cape Breton" and "At the Fishhouses" disappears as Bishop's sense of herself as an outsider becomes naturalized in this foreign land. Though she can never be "at home" in her own country, she can in another. As a tourist or traveller she has a native part and can speak the language of the outsider fluently. Ironically, she finally finds herself "at home" only now when she is abroad, her status as an outsider making her as much part of the indigenous culture as the characters she observes.

The poem changes tense between the second and the third stanzas, moving from the present to a past tense, which is repeated seven times in this negative construction:

> But surely it would have been a pity
> not to have seen the trees along this road

The events of the past are thrown into a more permanent relief than those held in the present because they depend on memory to record them. The negative construction becomes part of the grammatical construction of sight, making it a delicate line between seeing and not seeing, as though this second kind of sight cannot be just accumulated, 'instantly seen and always, always delightful'. Perhaps they can as easily be missed as seen.

After acquiring views in the second stanza, the traveller takes the reader into the view in the third. The rushed clauses, packing image upon image, are relinquished for sentences which range across the lines, finding their rhythm in the adage with which each one loosely begins (a pity not to have...). Drawing her subjects from the stop for gas at a 'filling-station', the traveller does her sight-seeing in this unlikely, 'grease-stained' spot, very different from the 'inexplicable old stonework' earlier on. She becomes more anthropologist than tourist, allowing the filling-station to fill in the music, architecture, history, even politics, of the country for her. The reader is arrested and seduced by an audacious change in scale. Tourism in the grand style of the first two stanzas, with a sublime landsape and the unique attractions which every country is forced to muster for its visitors, gives way to the specific thrill of what might be seen if you stop for gas. The tiniest hummingbird, old stonework and mile-long waterfalls give way to the humorous absurdity of a 'fat brown bird' in a wooden cage like 'a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque' and to rain sounding like 'two hours of unrelenting oratory'. The traveller's imagination is exercised by the delicate specificity and historical reverberations of the mundane and fascinating detail to be seen in everyday life.

The italicized diary entry with which the poem closes articulates the traveller's dilemma:

> "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?"

Pascal's thought that 'all the misery of men derives from one single thing, which is not knowing how to stay quietly in a room [at home]', is underlined in Bishop's edition of his Pensées.[18] Like Baudelaire in "Le Voyage", Pascal raises up the imagination as the great vessel for the inventive mind. The moderate tone of Bishop's doubt at Pascal's words, that he might be 'not entirely right', only serves to accentuate her disagreement with him. It is not enough for her to stay at home, and with good reason. The words of a fellow-American, rather than those of old world, European writers, most nearly articulate Bishop's dilemma. In her copy of Alfred Kazin's 1958 anthology of Emerson, the following reflection is underlined in what appears to be her own, edgy hand:

> [the experience of poetic creativeness] is not found in staying at home nor yet in travelling, but in transitions from one to the other[19]

As someone for whom home was always elsewhere, Emerson's words seem powerfully appropriate. Bishop was forever in transition, neither at home nor fully away, and her writing came out of the interim places she occupied between the two. The deceptive, throwaway euphemism with which "Questions of Travel" finishes, voices the ambivalent nature of her travels. She is not travelling from one place to another, nor from home to elsewhere, but rather travelling because she is not free to 'just stay at home'. Yet the sights her traveller celebrates are not those on the tourist's checklist, but those which offer a momentary insight into the lives for whom this foreign land is home.

V

'TO THE INTERIOR'

Bishop has travelled a long way since her early writing and poems like "To a Tree" and "For C.W.B." or the story of "The Sea & Its Shore". In these pieces she was already broaching the notion of belonging and of kinship, and already finding it to be a difficult and risky affair. Her characters found themselves standing in particular isolation, occupying a place explicitly on the edge of a landscape. The uncertainty of these early pieces derived from Bishop's own uncertainty as to what posture she could safely strike in a world that might refuse to confirm it. Their landscapes were drawn so intimately from the minds of her protagonists that the line between the actual and the imagined, between the exterior and their interior world, was hard to ascertain. Characters like Edwin Boomer and the protagonist of "To a Tree" seemed to inhabit places that were as much figments of their own minds as autonomous regions. Nearly forty years later Bishop's characters inhabit more specific, less nebulous, landscapes, though they are still reflecting on the connections between the landscape of the mind, or memory, and those they see ranged before them in mountain ranges, forests and filling-stations. Her early uncertainty has gone, but the assurance which has replaced it is that of someone who finds themselves "at home" with their own provisional status.

It would have been no surprise if Bishop had never reached the 'interior' she talks of in the first three "Brazil" poems, but had

continued to write poems about being on the brink, asking questions of travel and brooding on arrivals and departures. However, in the remaining eight "Brazil" poems she writes from within this new-found-land, though its inhabitants all have an ambivalent relation to their setting. I want to discuss the precarious attitudes Bishop discovers in these indigenous characters and, as a result, the implicit intimacy she establishes with them. As an outsider, a foreigner, she is always watching 'strangers in a play', and arresting them in mid-performance of their ordinary lives. But the postures these figures strike (perched on the edge of a hillside, living on a beach or moving between the ordinary world of an Amazon village and the magical domain of the river) do not suggest that they are guests in their own homes, as Bishop always felt herself to be. Rather that the notion of 'home' and belonging is as complex and circumscribed in the wider world as it is in Bishop's own difficult history.

The explicit self-reflectiveness which characterizes the first three poems, brooding on the rights and wrongs of travel, is not part of the other "Brazil" poems. These take place within the 'interior'; Brazil is home to their protagonists. These Brazilian homes have the wafer-like fragility of "Jerónimo's House" and the uncertain future of Faustina's 'crazy house'. (C.P.72) They can be as awkwardly related to the rest of the world as the surrealistic rooms of "Sleeping on the Ceiling" or "Paris, 7 A.M.". Yet they are drawn with a new expansiveness, perhaps drawn from Bishop's own new experience of the pleasure of domesticity, however fraught.

In the first two of these "Brazil" poems, "Squatter's Children" and "Manuelzinho", an inheritance seems both the most fragile of belongings and

the most resilient. Neither the children in the first poem nor Manuelzinho in the second have anything they can lay claim to except this immaterial but definite quality of belonging. In both poems this quality finds expression as an imaginative dimension. The children's play and Manuelzinho's performance as the strangest kind of 'fairy prince' give them an aura of romantic inheritance. (C.P.97) This is celebrated by the onlooker even while she is saddened by the children's impoverished vulnerability and exasperated by Manuelzinho.

In her story, "The Country Mouse" Bishop articulates the childish confusion she felt at her grandmother's insistence on using language 'as if we were playing house'. 'She would speak of "grandma" and "little girls" and "fathers" and "being good" - things I had never before considered in the abstract, or rarely in the third person.' (C.Pr.16) Bishop affirms a different kind of 'playing house' in "Squatter's Children". Playing beside their 'specklike house', these children make 'mansions' with their games. (C.P.95) Though they are squatters, they have at their disposal whatever their imaginations provide.

The children are dwarfed by their landscape, but intrinsic to it. Though they seem 'specklike' on the hillside, their play 'at digging holes' with 'their father's tools', as though scrutinizing the adult world, gives them an unmistakeable part in the grander scheme as their 'laughter spreads / effulgence in the thunderheads'. The poem creates a more secure and permanent architecture around the children than their precarious, squatting

tableau at first suggests, reinforcing their confident play with a more habitable rhyme scheme and a tidier rhythm than might at first appear.

The 'soluble, / unwarrantable ark' that the children construct with their play appears to defend them against the intrusions of the world outside. Neither the rain, which sounds as meaningless to them as 'echolalia', nor their 'Mother's voice, ugly as sin', can usurp the authority of their own, imaginative landscape. Ultimately the narrating observer plays the children at their own game. She makes the obliterating downpour under which, 'wet and beguiled', they play their games of make-believe into a metaphor for the interior of their imaginary 'mansions'. So with the close of the poem the children's smallness and vulnerability, strongly emphasized at the start, has disappeared. Instead they inhabit mansions of the mind, a secular equivalent, perhaps, of God's many.

Imaginary houses are always fascinating to Bishop, from Jerónimo's precarious 'shelter from the hurricane' and the surreal interior of "Paris, 7 A.M.", to the 'invisible house beside the water' in "Cape Breton" which 'establishes its poverty in a snowfall of daisies' and now to the beguiling mansions built in the children's play in "Squatter's Children". (C.P.34,68) Although the children appear very much as 'strangers in a play', watched from a distance, by the end of the poem Bishop has constructed for them what she always desired for herself - an inheritance, even if one constructed only in the mind.

Inheritance is at the centre of "Manuelzinho", a poem in which Bishop makes the strained relationship between landowner and tenant into a

performance art.[20] It takes the form of a long, anecdotal, humorously self-deprecating and sceptical declamation by a "friend of the writer" to her gardener/tenant Manuelzinho. Threaded together in blank verse, which is interrupted by Bishop's occasional self-rhymes and half-rhymes, the poem follows the embellished musings of the landowner's mind as she relates her exasperated and amused reflections:

> Half squatter, half tenant (no rent) —
> a sort of inheritance; white,
> in your thirties now, and supposed
> to supply me with vegetables,
> but you don't; or you won't; or you can't
> get the idea through your brain —
> the world's worst gardener since Cain. (c.f. 96)

Although Manuelzinho is addressed in terms of self-conscious proprietorial outrage, he has a closer title to the land than his so-called employer. The grounds for his confidence have nothing to do with tenancy agreements nor with how he farms the land, and everything to do with the easy audacity of his performance. It is precisely this unwittingness, so like that of the squatter's children, which infuriates his landlady.

Bishop does not identify her speaker, except to say that she is a 'friend of the writer'. But she remarks in a letter to Marianne Moore that she is speaking of her lover Lota.[21] Lota is as Brazilian as Manuelzinho, but she has bought the land that his family has lived on for generations. He, as much as she, is responsible for its shape and character, as she acknowledges:

> I watch you through the rain,
> trotting, light, on bare feet,

up the steep paths you have made —
or your father and grandfather made —
all over my property

This, together with the accepted balance of power which places her in the ascendant, provides the basis of their relationship.[22] Like his gardens, Manuelzinho's life is at an angle to his employer's, rather than at odds with hers. The magical absurdity with which he performs it seduces, even as it bemuses her:

Tilted above me, your gardens
ravish my eyes. You edge
the beds of silver cabbages
with red carnations, and lettuces
mix with alyssum. And then
umbrella ants arrive,
or it rains for a solid week
and the whole thing's ruined again
and I buy you more pounds of seeds,
imported, guaranteed,
and eventually you bring me
a mystic three-legged carrot,
or a pumpkin "bigger than the baby."

Bishop's poem is continually pulled between ravishment and rage, between an almost delighted astonishment and anger. The tone of condescension, which runs the length of the poem, is tempered by Manuelzinho's obliviousness to it; his actions are not stratagems devised to confound his employer, but part of a different life, lived in the same place but lived differently.

Evaluating the account which exists between landowner and tenant is impossible:

...you come to settle
what we call our "accounts,"
with two old copybooks,
one with flowers on the cover,
the other with a camel.
Immediate confusion.
You've left out the decimal points.
Your columns stagger,
honeycombed with zeros.
You whisper conspiratorially;
the numbers mount to millions.
Account books? They are Dream Books.
In the kitchen we dream together
how the meek shall inherit the earth —
or several acres of mine.

The notion that Manuelzinho might have designs on his employer's land is made to seem absurd in the face of his comical innumeracy. Described in deadpan, short sentences, the gravity of his fantasy is at odds with the banal homeliness of 'old copybooks...with flowers on the cover [or] a camel'. The meek inheriting the earth, like the squatter's children choosing from among many mansions, is of course just a dream. Bishop does not use these Biblical references to make a political point about the need for economic equality. But Manuelzinho's 'Dream Books', like the children's 'soggy documents', represent an imagination which has taken immaterial, not material, possession of this inheritance.

Manuelzinho is like some latterday Adam in a parodic Garden of Eden. His performance as the fairy gardener, producing 'a mystic three-legged carrot, / or a pumpkin "bigger than the baby"', or jumping out of his clogs and 'leaving three objects arranged / in a triangle' at his landlady's feet, is only interrupted when she introduces characters from outside the garden's environs:

...Unkindly,
I called you Klorophyll Kid.
My visitors thought it was funny.
I apologize here and now.

Like the intrusion of Satan into Adam and Eve's idyll, these 'visitors' end his landlady's reflections, and she concludes with a metaphorical flourish:

You helpless, foolish man,
I love you all I can,
I think. Or do I?
I take off my hat, unpainted
and figurative, to you.
Again I promise to try.

As though to remind us of their parallel but separate paths, Manuelzinho's made over generations, the landlady provides herself with a figurative hat to match his painted 'straw hat'. The colour of his, she imagines, has been fashioned by past imperatives. She fashions hers out of recognition of their different inheritances.

Bishop makes a brief excursion into the territory of her own new Brazilian home, with its vulnerability to the incursions of the natural world, in the three poems, "Electrical Storm", "Song for the Rainy Season" and "The Armadillo". These change the onlooker's perspective. Now she has moved in, out of the squatter's storm and off Manuelzinho's hillside. The houses are her own, threatened from without by storm, rain and mildew and the fire balloons let off for a particular saint's day. Home is a place which exists in spite of its exposure to the elements which threaten its survival. Indeed you only know it is home because it has survived them.

After this detour into her own territory, Bishop returns to watching other strangers in the last three poems of "Brazil", "The Riverman", "Twelfth Morning; or What You Will" and "The Burglar of Babylon". She catches them in mid-performance of their ordinary lives. The discovery of Brazil has liberated Bishop by providing her with a second discovery. This is that the construction of home is always done at the expense of other possibilities. And the form this home takes is as contingent for others as it is for Bishop on how they perform their lives.

Although each character, Balthazár, the Riverman and the Burglar, is at home, each holds an ambivalent attitude towards his surroundings. In each case they live on the edge of two terrains, making their home between the two. The Amazonian villager in "The Riverman" must extract himself from his village life if he is to achieve his ambition of <u>sacaca</u>, or witch doctor, and become absorbed in the river world. Meanwhile, he is fully part of neither territory. In "Twelfth Morning; or What You Will" Bishop depicts a landscape reminiscent of that in "The Monument", though it has an aspect of magical naivety new in her writing. As in "The Monument", the status of sea and land is negotiable and the function of things like 'cement and rafters' is no longer clear. (C.P.110) The 'black boy Balthazár' is just another intrinsic element of this strange beachscape, as apparently incongruous as the 'big white horse' or the 'foundered house'. The parentless Micuçu, the criminal of the final "Brazil" poem, "The Burglar of Babylon", has been raised in one of the <u>favelas</u> on 'the hill of Babylon', one of its 'million sparrows' who have built 'nests, or houses, / Out of nothing at all, or air'. (C.P.112) The vertices of his home seem as vulnerable as any, but the poem's ballad narrative describes how he travels

beyond the reaches even of 'Babylon slum' and his auntie's 'little drink shop'. His solitary death occurs in spite of, not because of, his home as he gazes down upon other people's lives, on the beaches and at the markets. Micucu's gaze captures other people going about their ordinary lives. But his own life has taken him even beyond the bounds of home.

Like Manuelzinho, Balthazár inhabits an apparently magical landscape in "Twelfth Morning". The poem is nonsensical, as though its landscape is being made up as it goes along. Its seashore perspective is as curious as 'the view's perspective' in "The Monument". (C.P.23) Like the strange 'stage-set' which surrounds the earlier monument, with its awkward, two-dimensional perspective, the mist-covered landscape of "Twelfth Morning" has a surreal disproportion. Bishop's borrowing of a title from Shakespeare and his Twelfth Night, or What You Will perhaps signals that, as in his play, things need not necessarily be certain and may not be what they seem. The 'big white horse' is 'bigger than the house' and the fence which looks like 'three dotted lines' is uncertain of its own direction: it 'comes forward hopefully / across the lots; thinks better of it; turns / a sort of corner...'. Perspective, perhaps, is 'dozing' here, rather than lacking a dimension.

This landscape is composed of different autonomous elements, like one of Gregorio Valdes's naive paintings. The sea is 'off somewhere, doing nothing' and the other elements of the scene perform parts apparently unrelated to one another, each situated on their own, odd stage. In this fragmented landscape things appear 'only [to be] connected by "and" and "and"' as they loom through the whitewashed light:

Like a first coat of whitewash when it's wet,
the thin gray mist lets everything show through:
the black boy Balthazár, a fence, a horse,
  a foundered house,

— cement and rafters sticking from a dune.
(The Company passes off these white but shopworn
dunes as lawns.) "Shipwreck," we say; perhaps
  this is a housewreck.

The house in "Twelfth Morning" is 'foundered' rather than "founded". Bishop is more interested in things built on sand than well-founded ones, possibly because she has no reason to trust foundations.

The mysterious Conradian 'Company' tries to pretend that this house on the beach has 'lawns' where there are only dunes, as though it were a well-trimmed, respectable habitation. But this 'housewreck' joins the list of marginal houses invented and celebrated by Bishop with ease. From Boomer's 'idea of a house' and the prison abode fantasized by the protagonist of "In Prison" to Jerónimo's fragile home and the hermit's cabin in "Chemin de Fer", to the 'invisible house beside the water' in "Cape Breton" and, most recently, the 'specklike house' in "Squatter's Children", Bishop repeatedly reconsiders what it means to name somewhere as home. (C.Pr.171; C.P.68,95) She returns to the question again in her last book, in the poem "The End of March", where she allows herself for a brief moment to inhabit in her imagination a 'crooked box / set up on pilings' at the end of a long, bleakly windswept beach. (C.P.179) She never fixes on a place she can name as home, but seems to stick by her definition of the poet's sense of it: he 'carries it within him'.[23] Even so, she never tires of contemplating the elements that might compose it.

There appears to be no consequence to any of the different elements of the landscape. The sea, 'the sandpipers' / [with their] heart-broken cries', the minimal 'three-strand' fence' with its uncertain movements and the doubtful horse seem unconnected to one another. But they all lead, discreetly, to 'the black boy Balthazár'. The ranging lines of the previous stanzas are arrested by the compact nature of the last two, with their vigorous internal rhymes:

> ...But the four-gallon can
> approaching on the head of Balthazár
> keeps flashing that the world's a pearl, <u>and I,</u>
> <u>I am</u>
>
> <u>its highlight!</u> You can hear the water now,
> <u>inside,</u> slap-slapping. Balthazár is singing.
> "Today's my Anniversary," he sings,
> "the Day of Kings."

Balthazár is simply carrying a can of water and singing. However his performance contrasts sharply with the flattened uncertainties of the listless, surrounding landscape. The nonsensical quality of the poem makes it pointless to try to establish his place and function. But he cuts a sharply specific outline after the strangely dispersed quality of the landscape so far. The curious formality of his lyric seems an appropriate ending to a poem of odd forms. Balthazár seems at ease in but distinct from this beachscape where other things may or may not be what they seem. It is a scene made foreign by its disjunctions, rather than by any novel connections.

"The Riverman", by contrast, wears its foreignness on its sleeve. Bishop gives her reader a rare headnote, explaining that her source

material for the poem comes from the book Amazon Town by the American anthropologist Charles Wagley. Like the encyclopaedia reader at the start of "Over 2,000 Illustrations", the poet is already at one remove from what she envisages. It is ironic that while she takes this poem further into the Brazilian interior than any other, describing a culture that lies far behind the 'hanging fabric', its roots lie in somebody else's research, not in her own observation. (C.P.92)

Bishop has her Riverman speak in the sometimes clumsy idiom of an ordinary man. She is characteristically wary of romanticizing the foreign, giving him a syntax as much like small-town America as like the Amazon jungle. The poem's rhythm, by contrast, is incantatory. The difference between syntax and rhythm dramatizes the conflict in the Riverman's position, an ordinary man with a calling to the extraordinary life of the sacaca, or witchdoctor:

> Why shouldn't I be ambitious?
> I sincerely desire to be
> a serious sacaca
> like Fortunato Pombo,
> or Lúcio, or even
> the great Joaquim Sacaca. (C.P.107-108)

He lives between two domains, each infiltrating the other, taking into the river with him the everyday language of his village life, finding his analogies for the magical world he sees there in the cinema, or a gasoline lamp, or a primus stove. His language is prosaic, with long, rambling sentences and imprecise grammatical constructions. To live, as he does, on the border between the magical and the mundane, is the obvious thing to do.

If Bishop represents herself as endlessly living on the edge of different places, the indigenous characters inhabiting her "Brazil" poems do the same.

The last poem in "Brazil", an Audenesque ballad "The Burglar of Babylon", tells the story of a man who finishes his life beyond even the 'fearful stain' of the slums of Rio, the most vulnerable of Brazil's "interiors". (C.P.112) It lacks the questioning eye behind the best of Bishop's poems, but is full of characters, instead, who interrogate the landscape and one another with their gaze. The ballad's part in a popular oral tradition makes it an appropriate form for telling a story Bishop admitted to reading about in a Brazilian newspaper and even to having watched in action in the hills above her apartment. But the poem never has the fluency of her best writing, as though the apparent facility of the form acts against the fluency of the language.

The characters in the poem are linked by their common regard, rather than by a common culture. Watching is a national pastime, transcending social distinctions and the poem opens with a long stare over the hills of Rio. A high price is put on seeing, as though sight and the right to be seen constitute the final possession. Micuçu knows he is a 'doomed man', but his sight is the only forfeit left to him. The ability to see lies at the centre of Bishop's writing and "The Burglar of Babylon" is like a fable of this. Sight, more than anything else, is the key to autonomy for Bishop, whether you stay at home or visit the strangest of theatres. And she ends

her poetic sojourn in Brazil with a narrative poem whose drama turns around it.

Where they 'used to watch for Frenchmen' on the hill of Babylon, now Micuçu watches the world beyond: a buzzard, the ocean, freighters, a lighthouse the sun, the long white beaches and people swimming. The world, in turn, cranes its neck to see Micuçu. The lighthouse stares back at him, the Army with its helicopters comes 'nosing around and in', children peek 'out of windows', rich 'people in apartments [watch] through binoculars' and women 'with market baskets' gaze up as they walk. When Micuçu is finally seen by a soldier, he gets it 'behind the ear' and dies. Bishop chooses to end "Brazil" with a poem which, more than any of the others, might be described as a socially conscious poem, to use Bishop's phrase.[24] But the poem crudely dramatizes a much more important and familiar question, which is what is made of what is seen. How much is anything discovered or controlled through how we see it? The poems in "Elsewhere", which follows "The Burglar of Babylon", describe precisely this predicament.

vi

"ELSEWHERE": THE 'INSCRUTABLE HOUSE' (C.P.124)

Elsewhere is nowhere so much as home for Bishop - and the "Elsewhere" of Questions of Travel is the home territory in which she grew up, the world of her grandparents in Canada, and America. She offers a genealogy in

the first quartet of poems, like a series of oblique, miniature life studies: first grandfather ("Manners"), then grandmother ("Sestina") and then mother, uncle and cousin ("First Death in Nova Scotia"). With "Filling Station" she provides a second family - 'Father...and greasy sons'. (C.P.127) The other four poems are not concerned with the same kind of history. The first two, "Sunday, 4 A.M." and "Sandpiper", might be set anywhere, North or South America, while the last two, "From Trollope's Journal" and "Visits to St. Elizabeth's", describe two very different arrivals in the American capital, Washington.

The first poem of "Elsewhere" returns to a subject Bishop spent some time on in "Brazil": the decorum of travel. But how different the awkward ballad of "Manners" is from the excitement of "Arrival at Santos" or the grand broodings of "Questions of Travel". The poem comes as a strange retort to the elaborately autobiographical story which preceded it in the first edition, "In the Village". The poem's wry celebration of her grandfather's exact notion of propriety in "Manners" follows the story's vertiginously close-up account of a domestic landscape in which everything that the child tries to establish, particularly the boundaries of her mother's affection, crumbles beneath her very eyes. However the grandfather's instructions to the child, 'Always offer everyone a ride; / don't forget that when you get older'; 'See, he answers / nicely when he's spoken to', seem themselves to be so mannered that they remain learned proprieties, at odds with the colloquial and rhythmic structure of the poem's ballad form. (C.P.121) The poem is affectionately mocking; the grandfather's insistence on 'good manners' extends even to the animal kingdom, taking courtesy to ridiculous lengths:

When we came to Hustler Hill,
he said that the mare was tired,
so we all got down and walked,
as our good manners required.

The poem seems nostalgic; the grandfather's awkward grammar is quaint and his insistence on 'good manners' part of a nursery rhyme-like world which is 'far gone in history', but survives in the memory. (C.P.57)

Where "Manners" was concerned with courtesy to strangers outside, "Sestina" is about the reciprocal intimacy between two people locked within the home. What she fails to do with "Manners", Bishop achieves in "Sestina". The poem's form provides it with a strict framework of word repetitions and an exact length. With this structure Bishop creates a dialectical situation. The physical and mental enclosure establish control over the range within which its plot can work, so that the decorum of manners in the first poem has been exchanged for a poetic decorum. But although the six words, child, grandmother, tears, almanac, stove and house, must end each line, both child and grandmother find ways to broach these verbal constraints and express their appalling disquiet. They use these concrete nouns to articulate the crisis in their conceptual world. The poem becomes a kind of almanac to its reader, making its symbolic terrain out of a domestic landscape, just as the almanac in the poem provides the grandmother with a legitimate expression for her anxiety, couching her fears in the reassuringly familiar language of home truths.

Like the story "In the Village", which I have made the corner-stone of my thesis, the material for "Sestina" appears to have been drawn from Bishop's memories of her childhood. In the story, Bishop describes her life as a small child in her grandparents's house, a life made bereft by her mother's madness and absence. The poem leaves the source of pain unnamed, but its claustrophobic intimacy between grandmother and child is too close to Bishop's history for coincidence. She has, it appears, taken the material of her own childhood for use in the poem. The familiar world has always been most filled with pain for her and with lacks that are impossible to fill. Her poems are never free from the residue of memory, but that residue forms the foreground of "Sestina" and not just an echo somewhere at the back.

The poem's two characters seem strangely separate, despite the sestina's compelling repetitions which repeatedly situate them both within the house, near stove and almanac, and despite their gestures towards one another. The grandmother's continual busyness and chatter contrast with the stillness of the child. While the former fusses around the kitchen, 'reading the jokes from the almanac', talking to the child and 'Tidying up', as though to 'hide her tears', the latter draws a different house to accomodate her thoughts:

> It was to be, says the Marvel Stove.
> I know what I know, says the almanac.
> With crayons the child draws a rigid house
> and a winding pathway. Then the child
> puts in a man with buttons like tears
> and shows it proudly to the grandmother. (C.P.123)

The child is a simulacrum of Bishop, who drew the outlines of different houses in her poems all her life as if to find an alternative to the one she had known as a child. The house is her alternative to the oracular, gnomic formulae of stove and almanac. Unlike the squatter's children and the vastness of their imaginary 'mansions', so much larger than their 'specklike house', this 'child' draws a 'rigid' house, as though the outline of her imaginative home has been prescribed in her mind.

While the almanac continues its oracular utterances and the grandmother diverts her own attention, singing 'to the marvellous stove', the poem ends with the child drawing 'another inscrutable house', as though she were creating alternatives to her own repeatedly scrutinized but nevertheless secret house. Houses drawn by small children often have a vivid blankness to them. Their perspective leads them to draw very small doors and windows, or very large ones, or to leave them out altogether. But although the shape of this child's 'house' could be explained as simply a childish characteristic, its rigid inscrutability is tied by the poem to a particular grief, alluded to in the grandmother's tears and the almanac's portents, but unspoken of otherwise except in the child's sad pictures.

Such imaginary houses as the child draws for herself in "Sestina" figure again and again in Bishop's writing. She is endlessly in search of good-enough stories to tell about home, perhaps in the face of her mother's failure to provide her with "good-enough mothering".[25] The next two poems, "First Death in Nova Scotia" and "Filling Station", are again concerned with the need to tell "good-enough stories" as a way of explaining what otherwise appears inexplicable.

The air of "First Death in Nova Scotia" is frigid. Everything is cold, from the parlor to the stuffed loon and his frozen 'marble-topped table' to Arthur's 'frosted cake' coffin to the little dead Arthur, who looks just gently touched by 'Jack Frost'. (C.P.125-126) It is a retrospective first person account of the laying out of a child's young, dead cousin, with non-idiomatic, formal diction and no intimacy between the different family characters. It contrasts starkly with the claustrophobic proximity between child and grandmother in "Sestina":

> 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 the table
> stood a stuffed loon
> shot and stuffed by Uncle
> Arthur, Arthur's father.

The 'little cousin' becomes another family trophy in the eyes of the child, like the chromographs of the royal family and the stuffed bird. Like them he has his own display case - a 'coffin [like] a little frosted cake' - and he is as remote from the child as they are.

Like Wordsworth in the lyrical ballad "We Are Seven", Bishop examines the world of childish grief. She does not try to reproduce the naive accents of a small child, as Wordsworth does with limited success, nor does she have the child accomodate grief by denial of the death. Instead the poem describes the disparity between what the child is told about her cousin and how he appears when she is 'lifted up and given / one lily of

the valley to put in [his] hand'. In the face of what she sees in the coffin, the stories she appears to have been told are inadequate:

> The gracious royal couples
> were warm in red and ermine;
> their feet were well wrapped up
> in the ladies' ermine trains.
> They invited Arthur to be
> the smallest page at court.
> But how could Arthur go,
> clutching his tiny lily,
> with his eyes shut up so tight
> and the roads deep in snow?

The child seems perplexed at this royal invitation to her dead cousin. It has not taken account of Arthur's 'shut up' eyes nor of the 'roads deep in snow' and appears to have come not from her mind, but from someone else's. The story is not good enough. It does not match the child's own scrutiny of her cousin's predicament and the poem ends without a convincing account of this death. Like the grandmother's busy search for reassurance in "Sestina", the telling of an implausible story here offers the child no solace. Instead it ends by emphasizing the cruel contrast between the snugly-clothed 'royal couples' and the dead child, left out in the cold.

"Filling Station" highlights the division between "Brazil" and "Elsewhere". The 'stop for gas' described in "Questions of Travel", and the questions it provokes, is echoed, but very differently, in this comical poem. Its traveller asks a series of questions, as in "Questions of Travel", but they are questions of quite a different kind. Rather than wondering at the foreign delights of the 'two-noted wooden tune / of disparate

wooden clogs', the 'whittled fantasies' of 'songbirds' cages' or the 'unrelenting oratory' of rain, the second traveller is tantalized by what she identifies as the banal exhibits of domesticity: sofa, dog, comic books, doily, taboret, begonia. (C.P.94) This filling station is also an inscrutable house.[26]

The poem is shaped around the traveller's developing gaze. First she takes in the 'oil-permeated' dirt of 'this little filling station' and the 'family' which runs it - the father with his 'several...sons'. This begins as a staid but comic diatribe against dirt, the adjectival disgust piling up: 'oil-soaked, oil-permeated...[an] overall / black translucency...dirty, / oil-soaked...greasy...all quite thoroughly dirty.' But a certain thrill creeps in with phrases like 'a disturbing, over-all / black translucency' and 'several quick and saucy...sons', as though the traveller herself begins to revel in the rich, audacious texture of this oil-soaked landscape.[27]

As soon as she ponders the familial nature of this enterprise with the enquiry, 'Do they live in the station?', her eye moves on again. Such a simple question, as Bishop's reader knows by now, can never receive as simple an answer. In the same way that the traveller arriving at Santos begins to itemize the foreign landscape coming into view, with its coast, harbor, mountains, greenery, church, warehouses and palms, so the traveller at the filling station runs through a list of what characterizes it as a home:

It has a cement porch
behind the pumps, and on it

a set of crushed and grease-
impregnated wickerwork;
on the wicker sofa
a dirty dog, quite comfy.

Some comic books provide
the only note of color —
of certain color. They lie
upon a big dim doily
draping a taboret
(part of the set), beside
a big hirsute begonia.

Objects are rarely left in a half-light in Bishop's writing. And here, though they are of uncertain colour (apart from the comic books), as though discoloured by use, they appear under the full glare of something like strip lighting. The description is somehow comic with its use of extravagant words, such as taboret, hirsute, extraneous, even begonia, to account for such minimal and tatty comforts. They highlight the absurdity of decorative aspirations in the face of such oil-soaked opposition, making the bigness of the doily and the begonia seem hilarious and ungainly. Homeliness has been wrested out of oil and cement and represents an enterprise as imaginative as the squatter's childrens', making their mansions of the mind out on the muddy hills.

With terse brevity the traveller questions not simply the arrangement of objects before her, but their very existence in this 'filling station':

Why the extraneous plant?
Why the taboret.
Why, oh why, the doily?

These things represent another 'inscrutable house'. The attempt to gauge the motive power of the 'interior' they shape ends only in a series of questions. These have a "catalytic" effect and finally produce the only available answer: 'Somebody': 'Somebody embroidered the doily. / Somebody waters the plant...Somebody / arranges the rows of cans'. 'Somebody' is as close as the poem comes to answering its own questions. Any other answer lies beyond the reach of the traveller's roaming eye. It is as good and as full a story as she can tell about this place.[28]

The poem ends with an uncharacteristic cliche. After the caringly placed, softly assonantal oil cans, arranged 'so that they softly say: / ESSO SO SO SO / to high-strung automobiles', all that can be concluded is: 'Somebody loves us all'. It seems a bland enough ending after the poem's tart wit, as though this answered the poem's questions. But like the squatter's children at play in the eye of the storm, 'somebody' in this filling station has invented a vivid imaginary house, even if it seems just comically shabby to the outsider. The banality of the last line epitomizes the response that someone passing by the filling station might give when they look again, and notice the taboret, doily, sofa and oil cans. Bishop comes close to affirming these kinds of easy platitudes, but each time they occur in her writing, she makes it clear that they are not, in the end, enough.

"Visits to St. Elizabeths" presents another genealogy. But it is very different to the one mapped out in the first four poems of "Elsewhere". Instead of familial connections, the characters in this poem are related to one another as exiles from the world of sense. Bishop designs her final

'inscrutable house' as a 'house of Bedlam'. (C.P.133) The poem is modelled on the nursery rhyme, "The house that Jack built" and uses the same stanza building device as the rhyme. Bishop wrote the poem after visiting Ezra Pound in St Elizabeths in 1950 (the date she gives to the poem), four years after his return to the United States at the end of the Second World War. The United States government spared themselves the difficult embarassment of executing one of their greatest literary moguls for treason by incarcerating Pound in the asylum for sixteen years. Bishop also incarcerates him - in a nursery rhyme. This structure with its banal repetitions, allusions only to its own history (in accumulating line repetitions) and a popular, oral form, is a long way from Pound's own poetry with its structural complexities, extensive range of allusion and particular but panoramic view of history. Unlike nursery rhymes, Pound's poetry is designed not to appeal to the ordinary man and certainly not to a child. By making Pound the chief subject of the poem, Bishop, like the United States government, cuts out her own straitjacket for the renegade poet. The structure of strict repetitions, stanza upon stanza, constrains the range of her narrative and enables her to model a marvellously un-Poundian poem:

This is a boy that pats the floor
to see if the world is there, is flat,
for the widowed Jew in the newspaper hat
that dances weeping down the ward
waltzing the length of a weaving board
by the silent sailor
that hears his watch
that ticks the time
of the tedious man
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

Except for 'the poet, the man', all the characters are preoccupied, locked into their own obsessive habits. They dance, pat the floor, weep and stare, the bedlam of gestures shifting and altering at the turn of every stanza. Only 'the man / that lies in the house of Bedlam' provides a still figure in this whirling world.

Although no direct mention is made of the War, Bishop's Bedlam is peopled with figures who could all be described as its victims: 'the crazy sailor', 'the widowed Jew', 'the soldier home from the war' and even 'the poet, the man'. Like the poem before it, "From Trollope's Journal", "Visits to St. Elizabeths" envisages the capital of the United States, Washington (where the asylum was situated) through a visitor's eyes, as a melting pot for the unfortunate detritus of war. In 1861 Trollope feels distaste for 'sad, unhealthy' Washington and pity for the 'starving, dumb' 'herds of cattle' standing in the city's 'half-ice, half-mud' marsh waiting to be slaughtered for the Army's beef. (C.P.132) The tone of "Visits to St. Elizabeths" in 1950 is harder to place. Unlike the 'whitewashed, stubby' statues of Indians which fill Trollope's Washington, this poem builds an effigy of a different kind of "foster-son". Its range of adjectives suggests a mixed attitude towards 'the poet, the man'. He is 'tragic', 'talkative', 'honored', 'old, brave', 'cranky' 'cruel', 'busy', 'tedious' and 'wretched'. Although Bishop seems to have hated Pound's anti-semitism and his fascistic attitudes, she recognises his importance as a poet and sympathises with his equivocal position, returning to his homeland as a traitorous foster-son.[29] She saw him, like the other crazy inmates, as another stranger performing in his own play in the most curious of theatres, an American lunatic asylum. By making him into a Bedlamite poet, Bishop has

freed herself from the need to explain. She can let the full scope of her ambivalence play around Pound in the series of adjectives accumulated stanza by stanza through the poem. Yet she can also leave him simply as 'the poet, the man' locked into an 'inscrutable house' of madness.

Questions of Travel is peopled with characters engrossed in their own lives. After the vertiginous toss of the great poems in A Cold Spring, the figures in these poems seem reassuringly "situated". Their preoccupations are local: the child in "Sestina" drawing pictures in the kitchen; the unseen woman in "Filling Station" embroidering a doily with marguerites; the children in "Squatter's Children" playing on a hillside; the tourist arriving at Santos worrying about her whisky and cigarettes; Balthazár singing to himself as he carries water in "Twelfth Morning"; even the Christians in "Brazil, January 1, 1502" eager to get their piece of Indian woman. Despite the sense of cultural difference, of 'watching strangers in a play', in "Brazil", and although the sources of understanding lie out of reach in "Elsewhere", nevertheless each place is portrayed as imaginatively sturdy, even firmly located as a version of somebody's home. It is also like an image seen through verglas, a structure as fragile as Jerónimo's house built in the face of the hurricane.

In the end the notion of belonging proves as hard to define in Questions of Travel as it was before. Bishop pursues it into the foreign 'interior' of "Brazil" but finds that despite different stage sets and new characters, the predicament is familiar. When in "Elsewhere" she turns back into the recesses of the memory or the mind, her characters are confronted with the same situation. Whether, like the Christians of "Brazil, 1502",

she tries to rip through the 'hanging fabric' of scenery obscuring the 'interior' of a new continent or concealing the history of an old one, Bishop discovers that the fabric itself holds the shape of what lies beyond or behind.

In her poem "Sandpiper" Bishop makes a seashore bird into her philosopher, whose life is the enactment of this great truth:

> The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
> and that every so often the world is bound to shake.
> He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
> in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.
>
> The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet
> of interrupting water comes and goes
> and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.
> He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.
>
> —Watching, rather, the spaces of sand
> where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
> rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,
> he stares at the dragging grains.
>
> 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. (C.P.131)

The sandpiper does not see beyond his own beak. The broader fabric of his beach landscape does not escape him, so long as it comes into his narrow focus, the beach beneath his 'toes'. The poem is written in quatrains with regular rhymes, but the lines' sudden metrical alterations and their interruptive punctuation blur the rhymes, making them less audible, as the

reader follows the jerky movements of the bird, his running staggered by commas. The rhythmic motion of the water, breaking over the beach, draws the reader's eye across the line ends as though they were continuous, like the movement of waves. But though the sandpiper's environment interferes with and arrests his motion, it never breaks his attention. He 'takes for granted...that every so often the world is bound to shake'; he knows that first the 'world is a mist' and then it 'is minute and vast and clear'; and he knows that the 'tide is higher or lower'. But these larger movements are extraneous, superfluous to his real search, only impinging when they interrupt his actions.

Like Edwin Boomer in "The Sea & Its Shore", the sandpiper is 'focussed', 'preoccupied' by what might appear to be simply the texture of the landscape. Boomer is engrossed by the shape, size, soddenness, colour, even flight, of the pieces of paper he collects on the beach. His landscape becomes defined around these scraps and eventually defined by them. 'The sand itself, if he picked some of it up and held it close to one eye, looked a little like printed paper, ground up or chewed.' (C.Pr.179) The sandpiper of the poem is oblivious to the grander movements of the water, noticing the Atlantic only when it drains through 'the spaces of sand between' his toes. But the poem ends with a marvellous list of sand colours, 'black, white, tan, and gray, / mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst', as though for him, the fabric of the sand itself is what matters. Like the sandpiper, Bishop is more 'preoccupied' by sandgazing than by stargazing.[30] And like the 'Poor bird', she is 'obsessed', aware of the limitations of her project. Neither Bishop nor her sandpiper counterpart is free to gaze at the sand and not the stars. They are both

obliged to do so. Bishop's genius as a poet lies in discovering that, despite the limitations of her poetic eye, the stars, the grander questions, are most interestingly figured in the sand. In _Questions of Travel_ the sand is made up of the varied textures of ordinary lives, whether in the foreign landscapes of "Brazil" or the often terrifying and familiar ones of "Elsewhere".

CHAPTER SIX

GEOGRAPHY III: 'THE ART OF LOSING'.

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PLATE 21:
Frontispiece to Monteith's First Lessons in Geography, 1884

i

'WHAT IS GEOGRAPHY?' (C.P.157)

Bishop's last book contains her greatest poems, the consummation of a lifetime. It is a short book, even by Bishop's standards, with only nine poems. But it carries the full load of a life's work. The poems have their tap roots deep in Bishop's history   the history of her life and of her writing.

Nine years before the publication of Geography III (1976), Bishop had lost the lover and partner of her years in Brazil. After Lota's death Bishop ultimately felt compelled to leave her adopted country, so losing not just a friend but a continent. She made a reticent return to the United States and, most unwillingly, turned to teaching as a necessary source of income in this new, changed life. Separated from one intimate relationship by death, Bishop found herself distanced from another by marriage. Lowell's move from the United States to England to live with Caroline Blackwood placed more than just geographical distance between the two friends. They were used to communicating from different continents, but their old intimacy suffered in the face of Lowell's new transatlantic migration of the heart.

Bishop wrote her last published poems over a characteristically long period of time ("The Moose", famously, was about twenty years in the writing.[1] And perhaps more than any of her other books, Geography III seems

to be 'a collection...where the poems stand or fall each on its own', 'like most of mine', as Bishop remarked in 1975.[2] Questions of Travel was constructed within the frame of Bishop's life in Brazil and the perspective this gave to her childhood experiences. This frame crumbled with Lota's death and Bishop's departure from her adopted home. Now her poems are framed by her old, but endlessly rediscovered, sense of loss.

These poems have what might be described as a new aura, connected to the inward-looking, enclosed, intimately familial landscape of "Elsewhere", but offering a different sense of the shape of the past. It is not that they draw more upon Bishop's life than the poems of Questions of Travel, but that they draw upon it differently. In Geography III she gives herself more space, writing longer poems, and she takes fewer pains to cover her tracks, with poems which adopt an elegiac first person stance. In "In the Waiting Room" she even names herself in a poem for the first time.[3] After the glazed, beautifully fixed scenes of "Elsewhere", these poems, like the bus in "The Moose", provide an extraordinary sense of "process", of passing by and passing through.

Far from offering a sense of "process", the title and epigraph of this last book suggest that the world is not only already mapped, but mappable. The epigraph (copied verbatim from the primer cited in the headnote) begins: 'What is Geography? / A description of the earth's surface'. Geography is a science, prescribing for each aspect, each contour of 'the earth's surface'. The second part of the epigraph, Lesson X, asks, 'What is a Map?', a familiar question for Bishop's readers. It recalls the first poem of her first book, "The Map". The question and answer series supplied

by the children's primer is marvellously straightforward, compared to the slipping and sliding contours of Bishop's mappings. "The Map" has an "agitated" topography, in which 'the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains' and 'the land lean[s] down to lift the sea from under'. (C.P.3) It is part of a very different landscape from the "painting by numbers" impression of the 'Earth's surface' offered by the questions which finish the epigraph. These are like a calcification of those that absorb the traveller in "Questions of Travel"; they proliferate rather than disperse boundaries:

> In what direction is the Volcano? The
> Cape? The Bay? The Lake? The Strait?
> The Mountains? The Isthmus?
> What is in the East? In the West? In the
> South? In the North? In the Northwest?

Who is asking these questions? And where are they being asked from? They leave the questioner lost in geography, as though this science of location has at its heart a drastic, undefinable vacuum. Like all such ABC's of the world, the effect of the quotation from Monteith's First Lessons in Geography is naively grand. As an epigraph to Bishop's collection of poems, it is also deliciously ironic.

Bishop recalls her own "First Lessons" in geography in a nostalgic story, "Primer Class":

> Only the third and fourth grades studied geography. On their side of the room, over the blackboard, were two rolled-up maps, one of Canada and one of the whole world...They were on cloth, very limp, with a shiny surface, and in pale colors - tan, pink, yellow, and green - surrounded by the blue that was the ocean. The light coming in from [the] windows, falling on the glazed, crackly surface, made it hard

> for me to see them properly from where I sat. On the world map, all of Canada was pink; on the Canadian, the provinces were different colors. I was so taken with the pull-down maps that I wanted to snap them up, and pull them down again, and touch all the countries and provinces with my own hands. Only dimly did I hear the pupils' recitations of capital cities and islands and bays. But I got the general impression that Canada was the same size as the world, which somehow or other fitted into it, or the other way around, and that in the world and Canada the sun was always shining and everything was dry and glittering. At the same time, I knew perfectly well that this was not true. (C.Pr.10-11)

Even as a small child the questions of geography that interested Bishop were only 'dimly' connected to the 'recitations of capital cities and islands and bays'. Just like her Crusoe, she was always keener to 'stroke these lovely bays' than to catalogue them.

Although the poems in Geography III appear to have little directly in common with textbook primers, they offer intimate and varied mappings of different kinds of geography. Their geographies are studiously local and subjective. Both "Night City" and "12 O'Clock News" explore how one landscape can be seen in the guise of another. In the first the city is seen from the air as a complex of volcanic eructations, with 'fires', 'flaring acids' and 'molten...green and luminous silicate rivers'. (C.P.167) In the second a writing desk becomes the arena of war, with a pile of manuscripts as an 'airstrip' or 'cemetery', the typewriter as an 'escarpment... of peculiarly shaped terraces' and the ashtray as 'a sort of dugout, possibly a shell crater, a "nest" of soldiers'. (C.P.174-175) "In the Waiting Room" and "Crusoe in England" momentarily come close to focussing on the geography of Monteith's Geographical Series. But in these, as in the other poems, it rapidly becomes clear that a very different notion of geography

is at work. "In the Waiting Room" turns on the terrifying geography of the human body and Bishop's Crusoe mourns his lost landscape of solitude.

In Geography III the protagonists capture worlds which appear to be beyond their grasp. They celebrate what can only be glimpsed through the window of a bus (in "The Moose"), or fabricated as an imaginary idyll, a parenthesis on a cold and abandoned beach (in "The End of March") and they lament their loss (in "Crusoe in England" and "One Art"). Bishop has always been interested in the underside of geography - the one hidden by official geographies - and, closely allied to this, the topography of loss.

ii

THE 'WAITING ROOM' (C.P.159)

Like the epigraph, the first poem in Geography III, "In the Waiting Room", is a kind of "primer", a lesson in classification and definitive description. The waiting room is like a metaphor for childhood itself. But, as the poem discovers, adulthood cannot simply be awaited. Instead, in this poem it becomes a brutal revelation forced upon the seated, waiting child.

The poem is set in the context of personal, childhood memories on the one hand and the categorical, public geography of The National Geographic and human grammar on the other.[4] Seated in that curiously indeterminate, transitional space of a waiting room, the child protagonist discovers a

terrifying proximity between herself and the figures she observes around her. She finds that this undesired intimacy throws doubt upon her self-determination and threatens to rob her of her autonomy. The poem is written as a retrospective first person narrative, but it has not been obviously framed by memory nor is it overtly privileged with the analytical authority of retrospection. Its syntax and phrasing mimic those we might expect to find in a seven year-old child, even though the experience is something Bishop could only afford to articulate late in life.

"In the Waiting Room" echoes Bishop's earlier story, "In the Village". In both the child occupies an intermediate space, moving between two, dialectically opposed regions but unable to inhabit either fully. In the story she runs between her home and the village, unable to stay in either place. In the poem she is caught between her childish, oblivious autonomy, in which she is 'an I,...an Elizabeth', distinct from all the other people in the waiting room, and the part she must play as 'one of them', a member of a larger body - of women or of humanity. (C.P.160) In both story and poem the child is incapacitated, unable to represent her internal disarray as order. Deprived of her mother's responsiveness, the child in "In the Village" cannot assemble her many parts into any kind of coherent whole; in the poem the child is equally desperate and equally unable to represent herself to herself, or to fix her constantly shifting gaze. If, as Bishop claimed, both story and poem were closely drawn from her childhood memories, then 'watching strangers' was an activity that began way back, in the shadows of childhood. (C.P.94) And "In the Waiting Room" offers the terrifying proposition that the stranger might become one's own self.

Bishop also wrote about the "waiting room" crisis at the end of her story, "The Country Mouse", which she dated 1961, several years before she wrote the poem. This prose account is more fulsomely circumstantial, but far less affecting than the poem:

> After New Year's, Aunt Jenny had to go to the dentist, and asked me to go with her. She left me in the waiting room, and gave me a copy of the National Geographic to look at. It was still getting dark early, and the room had grown very dark. There was a big yellow lamp in one corner, a table with magazines, and an overhead chandelier of sorts. There were others waiting, two men and a plump middle-aged lady, all bundled up. I looked at the magazine cover...A feeling of absolute and utter desolation came over me. I felt...myself. In a few days it would be my seventh birthday. I felt I,I,I, and looked at the three strangers in panic. I was one of them too, inside my scabby body and wheezing lungs. "You're in for it now," something said. (C.Pr.32-33)

The emphasis is different from the poem. The child's crisis in "The Country Mouse" is contingent on the false smile of the 'plump...lady', on the child's 'scabby body and wheezing lungs' and even on her companions of the moment, 'Beppo [the dog]...the chestnut tree...Emma'. It is a response to the predicament of that moment and to the geography of her own, uncomfortable body. She is not compelled to situate herself as a woman as the child in the poem must and does not suffer the other's revulsion in the face of her own sexuality. Between the earlier story and the later poem Bishop discovers that the "waiting room" experience is intimately connected to her lifelong sense of displacement and she seems to have travelled beyond her need to find the endlessly elusive geography of home.

There is something very odd about someone in a waiting room who is only there to wait. The waiting is not simply an interim gesture, but becomes an anomalously important act:

In Worcester, Massachusetts,
I went with Aunt Consuelo
to keep her dentist's appointment
and sat and waited for her
in the dentist's waiting room.

This is as flat, as prosaic, an opening as Bishop ever achieved. It gives no hint about what is to come and puts her other, apparently bland scenic openings into the shade. Even the quiet, mundane scene which opens "At the Fishhouses" ('Although it is a cold evening, / down by one of the fish-houses / an old man sits netting') and the parodically literal beginning of "Arrival at Santos" ('Here is a coast; here is a harbor') seem to characterize the terrain vividly, compared to the enervating dullness of this arrival in a waiting room. (C.P.64,89)

The child responds to her situation by reading. The magazine she chooses, the National Geographic, takes her a long way from the waiting room. It offers what seems to be a very different geography from that in 'Worcester, Massachusetts' with its 'arctics and overcoats, / lamps and magazines' and 'grown-up people' seated around her:

the inside of a volcano,
black, and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire.
...
Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.
I read it right straight through.
I was too shy to stop.

And then I looked at the cover:
the yellow margins, the date.

How different a family group these babies and women present, compared to that earlier 'old Nativity' of "Over 2,000 Illustrations". (C.P.59) Instead of 'a family with pets', this child sees a 'dead man slung on a pole /— "Long Pig," the caption said'. The wish to look and look 'our infant sight away' translates in this waiting room into an imperative, vigorously stressed act of reading ('I read it right straight through'). There are no connectives between one image and the next, except for the child's forceful embarassment. The volcano, the explorers Osa and Martin Johnson, the dead man, the babies and the naked women tumble quickly one on top of the other. This alien geography is 'only connected by [the magazine's] "and" and "and"', until the child returns, finally, to the anti-climactic, relative safety of 'the cover: / the yellow margins, the date' - familiar borders marking out these erupting, distorting images. (C.P.58)

The child maintains her careful stance as reader, '(I could read)', by differentiating between the pictures in the National Geographic and its yellow margined cover. But this composed distinction crumbles when her attention is forced back into the waiting room. 'Suddenly' the proximity between the inside and the outside of the volcano, between the explorer couple dressed alike 'in riding breeches', (as though there were no difference of gender) and between the 'dead man' and a dead animal come home to the child. What was foreign to her becomes part of her own predicament. She discovers that the 'oh! of pain' 'from inside' that was 'Aunt Consuelo's voice', is also her own voice. The deadpan audacity with

which the child sums up her aunt - 'a foolish, timid woman' - lends a comic tenor to the scene, though it is immediately overwhelmed by the vertiginous impact of her discovery:

> Without thinking at all
> I was my foolish aunt,
> I—we—were falling, falling,
> our eyes glued to the cover
> of the National Geographic,
> February, 1918.

The child discovers herself to be the object of her own observation, inexplicably involved. The boundary between herself and her 'foolish aunt' is as compromised as the boundary between the inside and the outside of the volcano as she faces a dilemma of self-representation. How is she to distinguish between what is external to her - the waiting room, the National Geographic - and what is internal? Like the printer in "The Map", she finds that the boundary between watching from the outside and implication is not clearly marked. Up till now she has operated a successful policy of visual containment, making her own, "geographic" science. Everything has been contained: by 'arctics and overcoats,', by photographs and captions and by the magazine cover. And at the end of the second stanza, as at the end of the first, the child's eyes are 'glued to the cover / of the National Geographic'. But now, unable to differentiate herself from her aunt and unable to contain the vertiginous moment, the child finds herself 'falling'.

Turning to herself and her own contours, the child makes a final attempt to fix herself:

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.

Where before she kept her eyes on the National Geographic, now she is compelled to read her own circumstantiality. Her dilemma expresses itself in her self-address, 'I said to myself', and she recognizes herself to be the subject and, paradoxically, the object of her own life. As the poem collapses into a series of reflexive and reflective musings, confused, contradictory and impossible to unscramble, the prescribed geographies of waiting room and magazine become the amorphous immensities of the 'turning world' and 'blue-black space'. The short, three-stressed lines control the child's desperate meditations. Her gestures and observations are abrupt. They are supported by a mental process which appears determinedly to shift and realign with every variation in the metrical foot in an effort to master itself. The literal coordinates of the waiting room, or the magazine, or even of her own life ('three days / and you'll be seven years old') are no longer a defence against fragmentation, nor do they guard the child from being 'one of them'.

The child in the waiting room is desperate to affirm her own difference in the face of a revelation of similitude. Robbed of her autonomy, she has trouble finding a word which will express her ambivalent status:

What similarities —
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even

the National Geographic
and those awful hanging breasts —
held us all together
or made us all just one?
How —I didn't know any
word for it— how "unlikely"...

Although she can find no likeness with the 'world' that she views 'sidelong' in the waiting room, it is nevertheless this world that she suddenly discovers herself to be part of. Like so many other vistas in Bishop's writing, this one is fragmented. Its different elements do not necessarily connect in the child's eyes, but, like the Gentleman of Shalott's body, they remain separate parts of an elusive whole: 'shadowy gray knees, / trousers and skirts and boots / and different pairs of hands', 'the family voice...those awful hanging breasts'.

The child's self-interrogations find no answers and the poem ends in a swooning return, but not to any 'sole self'.[5] Finding the coordinates of her own body marked out on the vast map of humanity, the child flees her waiting room for the safer geography of the world beyond:

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918.

Although Bishop only uses her biography in this way in her later work, its preoccupations are familiar. The child in this waiting room has many precursors, from Boomer and the Man-Moth to the traveller in "Over 2,000 Illustrations", the tourist in "Questions of Travel" and the children in

"Squatter's Children" and "Sestina". All these characters are engaged in the search for a coherent model of their world within which they can live, whether this means their body, home, or the wider reaches of the traveller. But only in this latest of poems do the coordinates of the search return to that childhood identity Bishop touched upon in "In the Village" but otherwise displaced onto other figures all her life.

Its in-between status makes the waiting room appear briefly like a convincing model for retreat. But it proves too vulnerable to the questions of identity that the waiting child sought to avoid, and for a moment it dissolves into a swoon, 'sliding / beneath a big black wave'. Bishop is always fascinated in the way that boundaries fluctuate, often using the shoreline, with the shifting forms of waves and beach, to mark out this interest. In this waiting room, which has its own fluid definition, the child momentarily drowns beneath a crisis of identity, before fleeing it for the safer bearings of a world defined by facts: place, weather, date. More commonly Bishop imagined the opposite: rooms which offered temporary and precarious refuge from the world. "The End of March" contains the latest of such imaginary constructions. This last 'proto-dream-house' fulfils the fantasy first articulated in stories like "The Sea & Its Shore" and "In Prison" and poems like "For C.W.B." and "Jerónimo's House". (C.P.179) It is more elaborately circumscribed than most, set between two halves of a 'cold and windy' walk, but is so similar in other respects to earlier fantasies that it provokes a sense which is rare when reading Bishop's poetry, of having been here before.

The imaginary refuge exists, as it were, between the two halves of a single breath. On the way out towards it, everything appears 'indrawn':

> the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,
> seabirds in ones or twos.
> The rackety, icy, offshore wind
> ...blew back the low, inaudible rollers/in upright, steely mist.

In this diminished landscape even the discovery of 'lengths and lengths ...of wet white string' ends only in 'a sodden ghost':

> 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.

The waves' motion, like the movement of breath, alternately invigorates, then enervates, the 'ghost' of string. When it is named, fixed for a moment, as 'kite string?', the specific lack of the kite appears to liberate the protagonist's eye, and she looks beyond what is under her feet, to what she calls her 'proto-dream-house'.

The 'crooked box / set up on pilings' far down the beach is like a bric-a-brac assemblage, drawing different pieces of its frame from Bishop's lifelong itinerary of flimsy refuges. Like "The Monument" it is built 'somewhat like a box' and it is raised above the sand like Boomer's in "The Sea & Its Shore", though with 'pilings', not 'pegs'. (C.P.23,171) Instead of the 'three-strand, barbed wire' fence of "Twelfth Morning", this 'box' has 'a palisade / of are they railroad ties?' (C.P.110) Its 'two...rooms'

(one more than in "Jerónimo's House") are as 'bare' as Boomer's, offering their putative inhabitant the same kind of solace as Bishop's early protagonist wished for in her story "In Prison". This early solitary was very clear about what his retreat would facilitate:

> I hope I am not being too reactionary when I say that my one desire is to be given one very dull book to read, the duller the better. A book, moreover, on a subject completely foreign to me; perhaps the second volume, if the first would familiarize me too well with the terms and purpose of the work. Then I shall be able to experience with a free conscience the pleasure, perverse, I suppose, of interpreting it not at all according to its intent. (C.Pr.188)

The wish remains the same thirty-seven years later:

> to retire...and do *nothing*,
> or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:
> look through binoculars, read boring books,
> old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
> talk to myself, and, foggy days,
> watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light

However, there is a vital difference between the fantasy in the story and the one in the poem. The story, first published when Bishop was twenty-eight, ends in confident anticipation of achieving the long-desired prison life. But in the poem, first published when Bishop was sixty-five, her protagonist knows such dreams to be just that, dreams.

'Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?', as the legendary beached mariner of "Crusoe in England", the most sustained meditative poem of this volume, puts it. (C.P.164) We can attach Crusoe's refrain to each of Bishop's proto-dream-houses. The house imagined but never reached in "The

End of March" is not so much homey as shored up without (against what?) in makeshift fashion. Inside, it is as much 'an idea of a house' as Edwin Boomer's beach hut. (C.Pr.171) But where Boomer hangs up his lantern 'on a nail he had driven at the right height' as a prelude to his cosy perusal of the papers he had gleaned from the beach, the 'light to read by' finally tumbles Bishop's later protagonist out of revery and back onto the beach:

> A light to read by—perfect! But—impossible.
> And that day the wind was much too cold
> even to get that far,
> and of course the house was boarded up.

Such perfection of her revery reminds the protagonist that it is impossible to realize. Unlike Keats's dreamer in "Ode to a Nightingale", Bishop's, it seems, finds the perfection of her dream too much to sustain. Keats's dreamer is tolled back to his sole self by the word 'Forlorn!', an echo of the mournfulness of waking life.[6] But Bishop's dreamer is tolled back from, not to, her sole self, and is standing once again far from her crypto-dream-house in the cold, March wind. Her mental relinquishment of the 'crooked box' that for a moment represented the ideal place to live, perhaps the next best place to home, leaves her with an imaginative legacy for which the beach becomes a kind of metaphor. Sand-gazing, she finds the beach lit for a moment by the sun, so that, 'set in their bezels of sand, / the drab, damp, scattered stones / were multi-colored'. It seems that the point of imaginative departure and of loss becomes, simultaneously, a celebration of the material world. Like the sandpiper, while 'looking for something, something, something' the protagonist discovers a different texture to the beach.

So many of Bishop's inscrutable houses are spread along the length of an imaginary seaboard: Boomer's shelter, the hermit's 'cabin' in "Chemin de Fer", the heterogenously-shaped monument of "The Monument", the 'invisible house' to which the man and baby descend in "Cape Breton", the 'foundered house' in "Twelfth Morning", the 'dream-house' of "The End of March" and ultimately, Crusoe's island in "Crusoe in England". (C.P.8,68,110,179) The lure of the shoreline, with its capacity to be both water and land and to change its definition with the turn of the tide, drew Bishop all her life. It offered the possibility that what is lost with the movement of one tide might be recovered with the motion of the next, as though nothing could ever be finally fixed, nor ultimately lost. But it also suggests a world in which human definitions are temporary and erasable, confronted by the 'dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free' element Bishop invokes in "At the Fishhouses" and it associates with the sense that 'our knowledge is historical, flowing and flown'. (C.P.66). As she wrote:

> 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. (C.P.65)

That 'same sea' forms the backdrop to so many of the later poems too, and so many of her poetic 'proto-dream' houses. It takes us back to the answer to the fourth question from the "First Lessons in Geography" quoted in her epigraph: '<u>Of what is the Earth's surface composed</u>? Land and water'. Her 'home-made' poems are composed of land and water too.

iii

"CRUSOE IN ENGLAND"

'Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?' cries Crusoe in what could be the refrain to much of her writing.[7] Crusoe is an archetype, Bishop's representative man. Marooned first on his island and then in England, he reviews his solitary, displaced, "housewrecked" life with mournful resignation, his narrative clouded by the sorrow of lost love. Crusoe is not elegiac but rueful about the 'un-rediscovered, un-renamable' island he left behind - and his 'dear Friday' who is dead. Through the quasi-literary figure of Robinson Crusoe, Western literature's archetypal traveller and archetypal solitary, Bishop brings together questions of travel and questions of loss that have perplexed her work almost from the start. Her identification with Defoe's traveller frees her implicitly to appropriate the literary history that surrounds Crusoe - and the political history of colonial travel it brings with it - yet also to make Crusoe a figure of autobiography. Paradoxically "Crusoe in England" manages not only to be the most self-consciously literary of her poems but perhaps the most directly personal.

Crusoe situates his island reminiscences within a frame of regretful, but somehow complacent, dismay. Only he can get his story right yet he starts and ends it by allusion to other strategies of storytelling:

> A new volcano has erupted,
> the papers say, and last week I was reading
> where some ship saw an island being born:
> at first a breath of steam, ten miles away;

and then a black fleck — basalt, probably —
rose in the mate's binoculars
and caught on the horizon like a fly.
They named it. But my poor old island's still
un-rediscovered, un-renamable.
None of the books has ever got it right.

As though addressing an audience, Crusoe begins with a journalistic anecdote to set against his own insular experience. There is a peculiar quality to his language as he recounts somebody else's discovery of some other island. He writes as though his language has grown out of the space between established, informative texts (like the 'papers' or his 'reading') and the intimately personal, interview-like narrative of his own recollections. His account is not in the kind of public parlance that Defoe has his Crusoe use. He seems uneasy with the authoritative rhetoric of journalism or documentary and uses a predatory simile for this other, formally documented discovery, in which the island is 'caught on the horizon like a fly'. Such a simile would clearly be inappropriate for his own discovery. It smacks of the kind of touristic imaginative appropriation represented by the traveller's wish in "Questions of Travel" for 'one more folded sunset, still quite warm'. As I remarked at the beginning of this chapter, Bishop was always keener to stroke her bays than to catch or catalogue them. In Crusoe she finds the ideal embodiment for her ambivalent relationship to travel, with the fantasies of geographical capture, yet also the wish for "home", that it produces.

Crusoe tells his story partly in the musing tone of an interview, with pauses between one phrase and the next, as though he were struggling to marshal his memories and find _l'image juste_. He seems conscious of an

audience, making his phrasing more elaborate than the associative thought patterns associated with the workings of the inward mind. With at least the audience of his own, altered self before him, Bishop's Crusoe tells a tale of retrospective romance, redefining his island experience in the light of his later life, and his later life in terms of that lost island experience.

Had Defoe written his narrative at the same time as Bishop was writing hers, he might have had his Crusoe commissioned by National Geographic, or Time/Life to keep just such a record. His is a public story. Though it is 'a melancholy relation of a scene of silent life', it is the account of a solitary existence in which every facet is named and accounted for, rationalized and theologized.[8] Bishop's Crusoe on the other hand tells the private story of a 'still / un-rediscovered, un-renamable' island whose geography derives as much from the landscape of his psyche as from the island's contours. In his case, a different person would discover a different island, and find for it a different name.

The make-believe of new discoveries is part of many of Bishop's poems. In "Crusoe in England" the find is not only new, but also unique — that is, until the plethora of allusion packed into the poem becomes apparent. The poem is a brilliant acount of the paradox of discovery in Bishop's world. For the tourist heading off for the interior at the end of "Arrival at Santos", the Portuguese got there first, and all her subsequent discoveries are made in that light. For Bishop's Crusoe, not only Defoe's hero, but also Darwin, Melville and Wordsworth got there first. Bishop and her character are in debt to all these, and she does not pretend to be free of

them. But she can and does provide a new and different moral and philosophical allegiance for her castaway.

Though writing explicitly under the shadow of other people's 'books', Bishop in "Crusoe in England" might be said to validate Emerson's claim that 'every new mind is a new classification'.[9] She creates a new island and her own, distinct Crusoe, because, after all, 'none of the books has ever got it right'. Her Crusoe is truly an Emersonian poet, acting on his island as 'the Namer or Language-maker':

> naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another's, thereby rejoicing the intellect, which delights in detachment or boundary.[10]

Like that earlier solitary, Edwin Boomer, this Crusoe appropriates other texts to mark out his own, peculiar context. Melville's story of "The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles", Darwin's Journal of a Voyage Round the World and Defoe's Robinson Crusoe all echo through the poem. These writers, together with the wandering ghost of Wordsworth, create an ancestry for Bishop's well-travelled solitary in his soliloquy.

Quoting another poem in the middle of his own (a unique occasion in Bishop's poetry), Crusoe draws attention to the element which unites him with his forbears. He does this not by underlining or repeating the earlier work, but, far more effectively, by forgetting it:

> The books
> I'd read were full of blanks;
> the poems—well, I tried

reciting to my iris-beds,
"They flash upon that inward eye,
which is the bliss..." The bliss of what?
One of the first things that I did
when I got back was look it up.

The lines are comical. Crusoe recites to his snail shells, in their alias as iris-beds, since there are no daffodils, from a poem that was published eighty-eight years after Defoe's narrative. As one of the most widely memorized poems in the English language, Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a Cloud" is an apt one for Bishop's untutored Crusoe to half-remember; it is a delightful Freudian slip to forget that Wordsworth's bliss was one of 'solitude'. Although Bishop is indebted to Wordsworth for his creation of an art of loss, the quotation seems to rebuke rather than praise him for the complacency with which he regarded both solitude and poetic inspiration, though Wordsworth of course was with his sister Dorothy when he saw the daffodils. Recollecting his wanderings among the daffodils, Wordsworth expresses an airy pleasure in the moment when they 'flash upon that inward eye', finding simple consolation and poetic inspiration in memory.[11] By contrast, Bishop's poem is created around Crusoe's incapacity for easy recollection. He has an air of lamenting and restless solitude. Whereas Wordsworth is left with a flash of unwilted daffodils, Crusoe is left in England with the relics of his earlier island life. He is 'surrounded by uninteresting lumber' like his knife whose 'living soul has dribbled away'. Where Wordsworth's poem is a kind of merry-go-round of "poetical" thrills, Crusoe's narrative is drawn from a crucible of experiences, from his mastery, or perhaps survival, of loss: loss of his island home, his love, and of passion, even if it was often a passion of frustration.

Crusoe embodies the discovery Bishop made throughout her life, that every man is an island unto himself.[12] Paradoxically, the solitude that so oppresses him is the connective that links him with his "islanded" ancestors: Melville's castaways, Defoe's mariner and Darwin on the voyage of the Beagle. Bishop indirectly connects her Crusoe with these earlier travellers and observers not by large, overt comparisons, but through cryptic allusions to small details recorded in their respective "log-books" as though the loneliness common to them all was inscribed upon the minutiae of inventories which they stubbornly compiled. Admiring the 'solid case [he] ... built up out of his endless, heroic observations' Bishop wrote of Darwin:

> 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[13]

Her Crusoe is never self-forgetful, but his descriptions are a defence against the 'unknown', as though they could hold it at bay for him. It is a familiar posture in Bishop's writing, reminiscent of the child in "In the Village" who describes her mother's accoutrements (hat, dresses, parasol, shoes, handkerchiefs) in the effort to depict but also deflect her.

Crusoe's allusions take indirect form. Like Darwin on Chatham Island, he counts the volcanoes, having 'fifty-two / miserable, small volcanoes' to Darwin's sixty.[14] His opening description strongly echoes the beginning of

"The Encantadas", which Melville based on his memories of the Galapagos islands:

> take five-and-twenty heaps of cinders dumped here and there in an outside city lot; imagine some of them magnified into mountains, and the vacant lot, the sea; and you will have a fit idea of the general aspect of the Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles. A group rather of extinct volcanoes than of isles; looking much as the world at large might, after a penal conflagration.[15]

Melville's 'five-and-twenty' become Crusoe's 'fifty-two' and his extinct 'heaps of cinders' become 'volcanoes dead as ash heaps'. Both Melville and Darwin record the 'oppressive, clouded days' and the way 'the clouds generally hang low' in these islands, while Bishop's Crusoe recalls that his sky 'was mostly overcast' and that his 'island seemed to be / a sort of cloud-dump'.[16] Melville recalls 'wide level beaches of multitudinous dead shells' and Bishop's Crusoe 'drifts' of snail shells; Darwin describes 'the extreme tameness of the birds' in the Galapagos, but for Bishop's castaway the gulls were 'too tame'.[17] His creed of singularity drawn out of his island's 'one kind of everything' is like Darwin's important observation that there are very few kinds of insects, birds, plant life, and so on, on the Galapagos. Oddly, at the point that he is most alone, Bishop's Crusoe is most indebted to his solitary, literary forbears. They all got there first. Bishop's Crusoe and Melville's "Encantadas" castaways have similar histories, only the former is implicit and the latter explicit. The story of "The Encantadas" is of abandoned humanity; it is the story of ruins, past enterprises, hermits, ghost ships, convict hideaways and so on. Melville compares his Chola Widow, left on one of these islands, to Defoe's mariner. She reminds him of 'poor Crusoe in the self-same sea'.[18] Bishop's

Crusoe, house-wrecked in England, carries the burden of her life and the ambitions of her writing in his own recollected history.

The hissing tortoises which both Darwin and Melville recall become turtles in Bishop's poem:

> The turtles lumbered by, high-domed,
> hissing like teakettles.
> (And I'd have given years, or taken a few,
> for any sort of kettle, of course.)[18]

Curiously, Defoe's Crusoe had at first 'not so much as a pot to boil any thing, except a great kettle, which [he] saved out of the ship'.[20] And whereas he failed to make his own beer, despite priding himself on never giving 'any thing over without accomplishing it', Bishop's gets drunk on his 'home-brew'.[21] The most important of these reversals centres on the knife. Bishop remarked in an interview that after re-reading Robinson Crusoe she wanted to 're-see it with all that [Christianity] left out'.[22] In the course of the novel Defoe's Crusoe becomes a full-blown, Bible-reading, non-conformist, using his knife to cut the Sabbath day 'upon a large post, in capital letters'.[23] Bishop's man appears to have no books and those he tries to recall 'were full of blanks'. He makes no mention of the Bible or of scoring Sabbath days with his knife. But in England, gazing at his knife 'on the shelf', he recalls how:

> it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.
> It lived. How many years did I
> beg it, implore it, not to break?
> I knew each nick and scratch by heart,
> the bluish blade, the broken tip,
> the lines of wood-grain on the handle...

> Now it won't look at me at all.
> The living soul has dribbled away.

The knife has replaced the Bible. For both Crusoes, meaning resides in the aura around the useful. For Bishop's man, as Bloom has put it:

> This loss [in the knife] of what Walter Benjamin called aura, of a quality in what we see that sees back at us, is Bishop's version of the loss of a personal Sublime. Her mastery of what she calls "the art of losing" is now all-but-identified with her mastery of the art of poetry.[24]

Unlike Defoe and his Bible, Bishop's Crusoe cannot pretend that the knife is still useful to him. Although he still possesses it, he is no longer master of it and it forms part of his sense of loss, together with his island and his love. The "aura" is lost for Crusoe when his things become exhibits, transposed into a museum. It is not, as Benjamin has it, that the object is reproduced (Crusoe after all does the reproducing on his island), but that it is lifted out of its first origin.[25]

While Bishop's Crusoe gives a description of his island which is partly mediated by other people's texts, he also describes his own, peculiar place. He could no more step onto the same island as his predecessors than Heraclitus could step again into the same river.[26] He becomes Emersonian Namer and Language-maker, christening volcanoes and describing animals' cries, a kind of miniature Adam, finding one instead of two of everything on his island:

> The sun set in the sea; the same odd sun
> rose from the sea,
> and there was one of it and one of me.

> The island had one kind of everything:
> one tree snail, a bright violet-blue
> with a thin shell, crept over everything,
> over the one variety of tree,
> a sooty, scrub affair.

For a moment Crusoe seems to be intoning a creed of singularity, as though his own solitary predicament was part of the island's broader state. Speaking at first in monosyllables, he sounds like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, like him cast adrift. But when his attention turns to the peculiar specificity of his island, his language changes. The colloquial expressions, homey gesticulations and ordinary adages he uses to describe his solitary life make him seem suddenly at home on this island. He, after all, is as 'home-made' as his 'home-brew' or his 'home-made flute'. Whereas Defoe's mariner physically defended himself against his vulnerability, barricading himself in against his fear of solitude and his strange displacement, Bishop's Crusoe shores himself up with words.

Unlike the journal of Defoe's mariner, the account given by Bishop's Crusoe of his island solitude is not directed and tempered by Protestant and providential moralizing. Nor is it coloured by any light-hearted poetical solitude, like the mood captured in Wordsworth's poem. It is characterized most acutely by equivocation. He can recall its infuriating monotony, the '<u>Baa, baa, baa</u> and <u>shriek, shriek, shriek</u>' of goats and gulls and the tedium of the goats' 'colors'. But he can also recall the intimacy he had with his now unrediscoverable island, which enabled him to dye a baby goat bright red, or grab a billy goat's beard 'and look at him', or dangle his legs 'familiarly / over a crater's edge', telling himself:

"Pity should begin at home." So the more
pity I felt, the more I felt at home.

In exile, among banal exotica, Bishop's Crusoe makes himself at home.

As an American poet Bishop is one of Emerson's legatees. As I described in Chapter Two, she marked out her own attitude to this debt very early on, celebrating a voyeuristic version of Emerson's intimate correspondence between man and Nature in one of her earliest surviving poems, "To a Tree". Forty-four years later, her Crusoe recalling his shipwreck on the 'un-renamable' island is just as equivocal in his uneasy attitude to Nature. Like Defoe's man, he delights in an Adam-like naming of his domain, as though he could control the perameters of his experience by defining its parts. But unlike Defoe's man, his sleeping mind lurches away into horrifying concatenations, distorting and clarifying his relationship to his island life:

But then I'd dream of things
like slitting a baby's throat, mistaking it
for a baby goat. I'd have
nightmares of other islands
stretching away from mine, infinities
of islands, islands spawning islands,
like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs
of islands, knowing that I had to live
on each and every one, eventually,
for ages, registering their flora,
their fauna, their geography.

After his casual, small-town, or small-island, colonialism - playing with the name of a volcano and, in a state of ennui, dying a baby goat red - Crusoe finds his dreams becoming nightmares of grandiose colonial approp-

riation. His imagination embarks upon an appalling multiplication, with Nature getting out of hand. The ambivalent wistfulness which had characterized the poem's tone till now is replaced by a terror, of all things, of 'geography'.

Crusoe's dream predicament is like a palimpsest of Bishop's lifetime one. She spent her life inventing and charting new geographies, both terrestrial and domestic, because she wanted to and because she had to. Geography was her defence against displacement and homelessness, a way of fixing the physical world around her. Crusoe's dreams depict Bishop's ambivalence about her predicament, her fear that this strategy might itself run away with her.

There are no easy dreams or memories for Bishop's Crusoe. She has fashioned a character in her own image, whose eloquent reminiscences fade in the face of intimacy, leaving him with only banal terms of endearment. He succumbs with ill grace to the temptation to make a retrospective romance of his past, giving a sardonic, jaded account of his island life and recalling it with great and eccentric specificity. Only with the arrival of Friday does his tone change, as he reaches the nub of his memories and exchanges solitude, and his anxious preoccupation with geography, for solicitude. Having had so much to say about the goats and the guano, Crusoe has very little to say about his beloved companion, as though he were tongue-tied, or tongue-tired perhaps, in the face of intimacy. Bishop comes closest to Defoe with the entrance of Friday, her Crusoe suggesting elliptically what Defoe describes in full sentences:

> He was a comely handsome fellow, perfectly well made; with straight strong limbs, not too large; tall and well shaped...[he] seemed to have something very manly in his face, and yet he had all the sweetness and softness of an European in his countenance too, especially when he smiled...I began really to love the creature; and on his side, I believe he loved me more than it was possible for him ever to love any thing before...we lived there together perfectly and compleatly happy, if any such thing as compleat happiness can be formed in a sublunary state.[27]

The pauses and silences from Bishop's man suggest a tenor of feeling quite foreign to his original:

> 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.
> ...
> —Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body.

His language becomes imprecise, as though the relationship it describes is too valuable for words.[28] Friday's arrival, his figure, and the desire that lies between the two men are told of in language whose blandness is vivid beside the preceding, explicit nightmares. Bishop's Crusoe seems to have run out of words, leaving ellipses to express what Defoe's articulates with a naive frankness. Defoe's narrative forgets Friday once Crusoe is intent on leaving the island, recalling him only in comic guise to chase a bear. But for Bishop's Crusoe, the death of 'my dear Friday' forms the terrible finale to his loss and her poem.

Just as Crusoe can represent Bishop and her own losses, with his shipwrecked, displaced, solitary, travelling life, so his mourning of Friday

becomes a wonderful, transposed and tactful elegy for Lota. His constraint about Friday is characteristic of Bishop's discretion about her love, in poetry and correspondence. Like her Crusoe, she preferred to let her friends draw their conclusions from what she left unsaid and from the ordinary, domestic intimacies she enjoyed with Lota ('He'd pet the baby goats sometimes, / and race with them, or carry one around.'). When her friend James Merrill counselled her to put more into her poem about Crusoe's love for Friday, and their life together, he missed the point:

> Something strikes me as not quite right about Friday when he appears; about what you do with him. The poem's last line, it's true, gives the full resonance of feeling earlier withheld or deflected into the landscape + fauna. Yet I wondered: why that faintly dismissive tone--"poor boy" and his "prettiness"? Why that, I mean, without some expression of the relation that makes him "dear" as well. A lot will go without saying, and does. But I found I was yearning for, say, some lines about how they communicated, Crusoe + Friday: did they make a language? of sounds? of signs? Well, I don't want to press it, and blush for having gone this far; but the poem is so magnificent, and so touching, and so strong (for me) except at this one turning where something seems to wobble unintentionally, that I thought I'd trust your knowing how immensely everything you do matters to me, and blurt out my diffident reservation--since the poem isn't yet between boards.[29]

Merrill recognized that the poem was written with the 'full resonance of feeling...withheld or deflected into the landscape + fauna', but nevertheless asked Bishop to expand in a way that was at odds with her natural ambivalence. Bishop appeared to accept Merrill's criticism, replying by return of post:

> I am very glad you wrote what you did about "Crusoe." I don't get much criticism, perhaps because of my gray hairs...and I'm really grateful. Actually, there was quite a lot more in the last 2 or 3 parts of that poem - then I decided that it was growing boring...and that the poem shd. be speeded up toward the end and not give too many details - so I cut it quite a lot. - the rescue to one line, etc. If I can find the

> original mms. here (under the ping-pong table, no doubt) I might be able to put back a few lines about Friday. I still like "poor boy" - because he was a lot younger; and because they couldn't "communicate" (ghastly word) much, Crusoe guesses at Friday's feelings - but I think you are right and I'll try to restore or add a few lines there before the piece gets to a book. In fact, now that I think of it, I can almost remember 2 or 3 lines after "we were friends" - that's where something is needed, probably.[30]

But the truth of a poem is in the making, and for all her self-derogation Bishop never changed a word. Her last word on the matter - 'probably' - hints at her doubt - about Merrill's suggestion, but also about making explicit her affairs of the heart.

As the poem's title suggests, Crusoe is back in England. His reflections are those of an old man 'bored' into an exile of the mind. He puts no gloss or idealization on his ruminations, recalling his island life with irritation, and remembering his racks of self-pity. But he ruminates acutely, his remembered miseries being coloured by his sharp, recollective interest. His lost predicament (the 'un-rediscovered' island) is simultaneously and paradoxically, a lost paradise - not because he recalls it as pleasurable, but because he remembers it as a time when he, too, was more alive. He might have quoted Wordsworth's "Ode": 'Whither is fled the visionary gleam? Where is it now, the glory and the dream?'[31]

Back home in England, Crusoe discovers that his 'living soul' remains on his island and the whole of his narrative is affected by this dilemma: that retrospectively, the island is the place most alive to him and the place where he was most at home. Like the 'dream-house' in "The End of March", his island proved 'perfect! But impossible', both a hellish

predicament and a paradise lost. After allowing that he is 'Home-made, home-made!', he is stuck with just memories and lifeless artefacts of the place:

> I'm bored, too, drinking my real tea,
> surrounded by uninteresting lumber.
> ...
> the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes,
> my shedding goatskin trousers
> (moths have got in the fur),
> the parasol that took me such a time
> remembering the way the ribs should go.
> It still will work, but folded up,
> looks like a plucked and skinny fowl.
> How can anyone want such things?
> —And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles
> seventeen years ago come March.

Crusoe seems more shipwrecked in England, 'surrounded by uninteresting lumber', than ever he was amongst dreams and goats and turtles. The evidence of his other life is to be translated into a public inventory, the local museum asking him 'to / leave everything to them'. His 'un-rediscoverable' island and his dead 'dear Friday' survive only in his memory. Insofar as Bishop appears to be marking out her own life in this poem, she seems to acknowledge that even her poetry, in the end, cannot recover what she has lost. These memories remain relics, or exhibits, however hard they are conjured back to life.

iv

"THE MOOSE"

Bishop's last poems are written as acts of recollection. "Crusoe in England", "In the Waiting Room", "The Moose", "The End of March", "One Art", "Poem", and two of the four poems published after Geography III, "Santarém" and "North Haven", are all reflective, brooding on the power of memory to conjure up past life and lives. "Santarém" begins with the platitude which so often prefaces recollection:

> Of course I may be remembering it all wrong
> after, after—how many years? (C.P.185)

It is not the material details of the memory of this Amazon town that might be remembered 'all wrong'. These are remembered acutely, such as the 'mongrel riverboats', the 'buildings one story high, stucco, blue or yellow', the 'zebus' hooves', the cow 'chewing her cud while being ferried, / tipping, wobbling', the 'blue pharmacy', the 'empty wasps' nest... exquisite, clean matte white' or the 'fellow-passenger, Mr Swan...a very nice old man'. What might be remembered 'all wrong' is the tenor, the mood, of the remembered experience. Since one cannot remember with certainty what the memory felt like at the time, the past becomes opaque and endlessly open to re-evaluation. For Bishop, this offers the possibility of redeeming and surviving, perhaps even reinventing, her own past. She makes poems and stories out of her memories, constructing a history that makes her life interesting and tolerable to her, if not explicable.

Once Bishop published a poem, she rarely changed as much as a semi-colon. The poem she wrote in memory of Lowell, "North Haven", is like a reply to the question he put in one of his poems for her, 'Do you still hang your words in air, ten years / unfinished'?[32] Whereas Bishop took 'ten years' to find the 'unimaginable phrase', Lowell was gripped by the injunction to '<u>repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise</u>':

> You left North Haven, anchored in its rock,
> afloat in mystic blue...And now—you've left
> for good. You can't derange, or re-arrange,
> your poems again. (But the Sparrows can their song.)
> The words won't change again. Sad friend, you cannot change. (C.P.189)

The birds reinvent their songs each year and the flowers return 'to paint the meadows with delight': 'Buttercups, Red Clover, Purple Vetch, / Hawkweed still burning, Daisies pied, eyebright, / the Fragrant Bedstraw's incandescent stars'. But Lowell can never change his words again. Bishop's poem is like a nostalgic conjuring trick, enlisting the help of Nature's cycle to try to conjure up her friend. But, like his memories of North Haven, as the place where he '"discovered <u>girls</u>" / and learned to sail', Lowell too has become a fragment of memory, for Bishop. Unlike the birds and the flowers, his time for revision and inventive repetition is over. As though recognizing the futility of trying to capture memories of her friend in words, Bishop writes a poem '<u>In memoriam</u>' to him which lights on their s<u>ha</u>red pleasures - pleasures which she at least can revisit.

"Crusoe in England", like "North Haven", is <u>about</u> remembering, rather than, like "At the Fishhouses", made <u>out</u> of memory. It is a strange and

spaciously staged poem, a mix of elegiac nostalgia and peeved recollection. The narrative of "The Moose" is framed by a different kind of travel than that evoked in "Over 2,000 Illustrations", "Questions of Travel" or "Arrival at Santos": an ordinary bus journey through familiar, unexotic territory. The bus acts as a kind of waiting room, its inhabitants seated in limbo. Like the child in "In the Waiting Room", they seem paradoxically liberated by this constraint, free for a moment to regard the landscape around them. Bishop was twenty years writing "The Moose", but it seems very much a poem of her last period, not one which straddles different eras or one that could have been written earlier.[33] It has the peculiar resolution of her last work, which brings into focus a lifetime of journeyings. The great journey for Bishop is characterized acutely by loss. Her travels are as much about losing as about finding new territories and have something in common with Wordsworth's journey of life:

> Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
> Shades of the prison-house begin to close
> Upon the growing Boy,
> But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,
> He sees it in his joy;
> The Youth, who daily farther from the East
> Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
> And by the vision splendid
> Is on his way attended;
> At length the Man perceives it die away,
> And fade into the light of common day.[34]

Though Bishop does not recollect infancy as swaddled in heavenly cloth, like Wordsworth she does try to recover something of the lost past, in brief interruptions to her characters' inevitable journeyings. Her 'crypto-dream-house' in "The End of March", Crusoe's revery, the child's revelation in "In the Waiting Room" and the moose's apparition in "The Moose" are

instances of this. They also form part of Bishop's other journey - the endless, psychic voyage in search of home. Ultimately, as these last poems and the end of Bishop's life suggest, home is as elusive as ever, but she finds odd consolation in the continuity of her old fantasy.

After travelling all over the globe Bishop returns to her childhood territory in "The Moose": she confines herself to what can be seen from the window of a bus as it travels through the places she knew from her earliest years in Nova Scotia (all to be found on the map of Nova Scotia reproduced in Plate 20). After Volubilis, Dingle, Marrakesh, Santos and Rio, now she is once again travelling through an itinerary of tiny, local bus "stops": 'Bass River...the Economies / Lower, Middle, Upper; / Five Islands, Five Houses'. (C.P.170) Bishop is nearly back home. Lowell once remarked about Bishop's poems:

When we read her, we enter the classical serenity of a new country.[35]

His words are as true of "The Moose" as of any other poem Bishop wrote, as though she at last found that the landscape she had known earliest and most intimately might as nearly sate her need for new geographies as any strange terrain across the world.

"The Moose" is as much a voyage of discovery as those in "Over 2,000 Illustrations", "Arrival at Santos", "Brazil, January 1, 1502" or "Questions of Travel". Bishop uses first the bus's and then the Grandparents' meandering journeys to shape a narrative of scrupulous banality which suddenly jolts into almost visionary focus when 'in the middle of the

road' the bus meets a moose. Unlike most of Bishop's poems, the 'shock of recognition' which the poem patiently dramatises, is not so much a matter of individual, solitary experience as of group recognition.[36] It is the bus rather than the poet which meets the moose, and the poem is an attempt to tap what the event holds for all the passengers - and what this almost fairy tale encounter might represent about the 'narrow provinces' and 'the impenetrable wood' through which they are travelling.

The poem's fidelity to the experience of discovery hinges upon the poet's usual eye for the bare, weathered landscape. But it also, more unusually, depends on her ear for the ordinary speech around her, the poet's sense of 'the language really spoken by' the men and women in the same bus.[37] What interests her are the gear-changes of perception in the group before and after the event,the way the sudden interruption is registered by the passengers who have no convincing language to deal with such things. The poem as a whole is a miracle of timing, and can only be understood by our following the intricate weave of its 'awful plain' but cumulatively powerful narrative shape.

It starts like a mock-epic narrative. After a long delay, shaping a landscape of cyclical departures and homecomings, finally a bus enters the scene, driving west towards the setting sun:

on red, gravelly roads,
down rows of sugar maples,
past clapboard farmhouses
and neat, clapboard churches,
bleached, ridged as clamshells,
past twin silver birches,

> through late afternoon
> a bus journeys west,
> the windshield flashing pink,
> pink glancing off of metal,
> brushing the dented flank
> of blue, beat-up enamel;

The bus's abrupt, metallic reflections of the sun, 'flashing pink' and 'glancing' the light, replace the generous, accomodating absorption of the 'red sea' and mudflats which reflect the sun in lavender-hued 'burning rivulets'. And after the cycle of tides and sun, finally the real journey begins.

The fluid motion of the early stanzas, drawn together in one, long sentence, is replaced by shorter, more abrupt clauses. There are no signals to indicate where the poem is going. The bus, passing by, determines what is observed. Things along the road are seen for a moment, almost linger and then, abruptly, are gone: 'twin...birches', 'seven relatives', 'a collie', 'a woman [and] a tablecloth', 'a loose plank', 'On the left, a red light', 'two rubber boots' 'one bark', 'two market bags'. The shaking of a tablecloth at the end of one stanza is taken up at the start of the next, but in the space between the two it has become the slightest of gestures, just 'A pale flickering', and then suddenly it, too, is 'Gone'. Only the obscuring gauze of 'the fog', 'shifting, salty, [and] thin,' weaves across everything outside the bus:

> Its cold, round crystals
> form and slide and settle
> in the white hens' feathers,
> in gray glazed cabbages,
> on the cabbage roses
> and lupins like apostles;

the sweet peas cling
to their wet white string
on the whitewashed fences;

The fog binds around the feathers, cabbages and lupins in a soft, alliterative continuity while the repeated 'i's, 'e's and 'w's stick up the first lines of the next stanza as though the fog's texture infiltrates everywhere. The poem's rhyme scheme seems as haphazard as the landscape picked out by the bus traveller. Each stanza is constructed around its own arrangement of end rhymes, half rhymes and occasionally dense assonant and alliterative links and echoes. The rhymes weave the images together beneath the abrupt arrivals and departures of the bus while emphasizing the single details seen by a travelling eye.

As the light fails the landscape changes:

Moonlight as we enter
the New Brunswick woods,
hairy, scratchy, splintery;
moonlight and mist
caught in them like lamb's wool
on bushes in a pasture.

The passengers lie back.
Snores. Some long sighs.
A dreamy divagation
begins in the night,
a gentle, auditory,
slow hallucination...

The 'woods' almost brush against the protagonist, as though the darkening light heralds the arrival of the strange dream-intimacies Bishop is intrigued by in early poems like "Sleeping on the Ceiling", "Sleeping Standing Up" and "Paris, 7 A.M.". She is always fascinated by the point at

which a view slips beyond the onlooker's eye. In "Large Bad Picture", "At the Fishhouses", "Cape Breton", or "Filling Station" this moment marks a revelation. In "The Moose" it marks the transition from the darkening, exterior world to an interior landscape inside the bus. The incidentals of the outside world are replaced by snores and sighs, 'creakings and noises'. Instead of the road, the protagonist now hears a different narrative - a 'gentle, auditory, / slow hallucination'.

Darkness and invisibility loosen tongues. Now in the poem a new, specific landscape of memories is depicted, visible only to the mind's eye, articulated in the murmurings of 'an old conversation'. Memories catch the inward eye just as the apparently arbitrary arrangement of dog, bumblebees, tablecloth and rubber boots caught the eye looking through the bus window.

The new landscape of old memories is composed of a similar mixture of names and features as the Northern landscape outside. But the connective is no longer the bus journeying through; instead time, and its historians the Grandparents, link its different aspects. After the bus's passage through the Tantramar marshes, Bass River, Economies, Five Islands and Five Houses, the Grandparents make their way through different people, each one now located not by its 'smell of salt hay', but by a pension, or death, or remarriage, or sickness, or insanity: 'the year (something) happened'.[38] This catalogue of commonplace disaster reassures the Grandparents' authorial eavesdropper, who discovers consolation in the ordinary familiarity of it all:

> Talking the way they talked
> in the old featherbed,

peacefully, on and on,
...

Now, it's all right now
even to fall asleep
just as on all those nights.

Lured by echoes of the past, the protagonist takes pleasure in the peculiar reassurance this 'hallucination' gives right 'now'. The reveries of the bus journey seem to be subsumed for a moment within the lulling continuity of an historical but cyclical conversation:

talking, in Eternity:
names being mentioned,
things cleared up finally;
...

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.

He took to drink. Yes.
She went to the bad.
When Amos began to pray
even in the store and
finally the family had
to put him away.

Bishop might have drawn this catalogue of disasters from her own family history. She had a great-grandfather lost at sea and an uncle who 'took to drink'. Her father died when she was a baby, a 'son lost' to his parents, and her family had to put her mother 'away'. But in the darkness of this bus, 'the son lost' and madness, which formed such a calamitous opening to Bishop's life, are contained within the peaceful resignation of this

familiar topography of loss. The memory of such disasters no longer startles, but, like a lullaby, seduces to sleep.

This somnolent revery is abruptly interrupted. Revelation happens 'Suddenly', just as in "In the Waiting Room". The fluent continuity of the Grandparents' conversation, momentarily taken on by the protagonist, is thrown off in the brisk, functional phrases in which the bus driver responds to the sudden vision which stands 'in the middle of the road'. Despite the poem's title, the moose surprises the reader as well as the bus passengers. It is neither anticipated nor alluded to and leaves the protagonist in breathless search of the right words to describe it. It 'stands there, looms, rather, / in the middle of the road', 'Towering [and] antlerless'. Then she tries out a series of proverbial gestures as though by representing the moose verbally she can define to herself the effect it has:

> high as a church,
> homely as a house
> (or, safe as houses)

The vast, unexpected figure of the moose offers the same assurance as the Grandparents 'back in the bus'. It is at home in the world and 'homely as a house'.

The moose provokes a community of response from the passengers:

> "Perfectly harmless..."
> ...
> "Sure are big creatures."

"It's awful plain."
"Look! It's a she!"

They exclaim 'childishly, softly', as though if they spoke too loud, the animal might disappear, as in a fairytale. There is a shared act of recognition taking place in their fumbling, idiomatic phrases which find their final spokesman in the 'quiet driver': '"Curious creatures...Look at that, would you."' The writer who never presumed to speak for anyone but herself includes herself with the other passengers in the wondering lines:

Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

Bishop captures and celebrates worlds which appear to be beyond her grasp in these late poems. They become worlds <u>because</u> they are out of reach. The moose represents the travellers' brief vision of another landscape, one which lies within 'the impenetrable wood'. For a moment the revelation that the moose is 'a she' draws her into a shared domain of gender differentiation. The child in "In the Waiting Room" was aghast to discover her shared identity, demanding:

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities —
boots, hands, the family voice
...
and those awful hanging breasts —
held us all together
or made us all just one? (C.P.161)

But unlike the child, the moose's 'otherworldly'ness separates her from her momentary audience at the very moment that they see her. When the bus restarts, the moose becomes framed once again within the linear movement of the journey. Instantly she is behind, left on the stage of 'moonlit macadam', just visible by 'craning backward'. Then, like the woman and her tablecloth, seen for a moment earlier on, only an impression is left:

a dim
smell of moose, an acrid
smell of gasoline.

The strange encounter is over in a moment. The moose is gone. But her brief appearance has done that extraordinary thing, it has given a 'visionary gleam' to a vision of something quite ordinary.[39] The twenty years Bishop spent on this poem suggests how important it seemed to her to give the right voice and the right shape to an encounter which was over in a moment but which gave such a shared 'sweet / sensation of joy', and which made the journey 'all the way to Boston' into a trip with a different end. Leaving the moose behind is not like Crusoe's departure from his island nor like the child's vision in "In the Waiting Room" of her gendered part in humanity. Crusoe and the child in the waiting room lose something they presumed to possess. But the bus passengers never expect the moose to appear and they know the meeting is just a 'sweet sensation', over in a moment. Their encounter with the moose takes nothing from them, but rather allows them to be surprised by a sudden vision of the real which lingers, mixed with the gasoline, when the bus journeys on.

V

"ONE ART"

Bishop's homelessness was in part an attempt to defend herself against the kind of loss suffered by her Crusoe. Her poems are full of brief insights like the sudden vision of the moose, glimpsed by travellers, by people not at home. They are far fuller of these than of the momentous events in people's lives which break or make the heart. Only once does she allow herself to address her own losses directly, and then it is not in narrative form, but within the tight, structural constraints of the villanelle. The poem in question, "One Art", is one of her most artful but also one of her most heartfelt and moving. Bishop grieves over what has gone as passionately as Crusoe, lamenting not her past travels or brief encounters, but the most important axes of her life. Like "The Moose" the poem is written directly out of experience, but this time, as in "Crusoe in England", it is the death of her lover Lota that directs its climax. It provokes a poem whose sardonic perspective is as far from the mundane, ingenuous delight of the travellers in "The Moose" as it is possible to imagine. One of the poem's villanelle refrains runs, 'The art of losing isn't hard to master'. (C.P.178) It was almost the last of Bishop's poems to be published in her lifetime and it is difficult not to see it as an epilogue to her life and work, a poised but painful comment on her effort of the imagination in making an art, in part, out of her life's losses.

"One Art" contains a lexicon of geographical loss, its elements made up of places, names, travel, cities, realms, rivers, and a continent, as

though it were an amalgam of elements from many of Bishop's other poems. Bishop covered a lot of ground in her writing and had been more concerned with making discoveries than with sustaining losses. Names are the arbitrary signs of such travels and trouvailles. Place names range from Paris and the Quai d'Orléans to Volubilis, Dingle and Marrakesh, from Washington to Worcester, Massachusetts, Bass River and the Economies. People's names begin with C.W.B. and Blessed Mary, then there is the Gentleman of Shalott, Le Roy, Varella (North & South), Faustina, Khadour, Marianne Moore (A Cold Spring), Miss Breen, Manuelzinho, Balthazár, Willy, Mary Stearns, Arthur (Questions of Travel), Aunt Consuelo, Crusoe, Amos, Uncle George, Miss Gillespie (Geography III), and so on. There are travels by ship, bus, tank, wagon, aeroplane, taxi and subway, on at least three continents and taking in several rivers and a number of cities. "One Art" assumes all these in its terse, retrospective resume of her personal and poetic repertoire.

Beside the geographical losses recorded in the poem Bishop sets a sequence of more obviously subjective losses, the pitch of which rises from the banality of 'lost door keys' to the poignancy of 'my mother's watch' and ultimately to the overt grief of 'losing you'. The art of losing is mapped out upon the formal structure of a villanelle, which represents both triumph and failure in its repeated rhyme words, 'master' and 'disaster'. This 'next-to-last' of Bishop's poems suggests that no amount of poetry-making, however hard one "writes it", can restore the intimate losses to which the poem delicately alludes. Though the high formality of the villanelle may help to dissimulate the rawness of the poet's grief, and work it through, the poet dreads having 'lied', and every time the poem's

claim to 'master' loss is sounded, the rhyme of 'disaster' follows hard on its heels.

Reviewing Geography III Harold Bloom observed:

> Where the language of personal loss was once barely suggested by Bishop, it now begins to usurp the meditative voice. An oblique power has been displaced by a more direct one, by a controlled pathos all the more deeply moving for having been so long and so nobly postponed.[40]

Bloom's belief in Bishop's noble postponement is based on a convincing supposition, but he would be hard put to provide any textual evidence for it. However his observation that the language of personal loss begins to usurp the meditative voice touches upon the exact balancing act executed in "One Art". This tightrope poise is also mastered, though less explicitly, in "In the Waiting Room", "Crusoe in England" and even "The End of March".

Mastery is not a word one would associate with Bishop's constrained attitude towards the world. But in the delicate rigour of her late villanelle she talks of a kind of mastery vital to her last poems:

> The art of losing isn't hard to master

How peculiar and apt that Bishop's first use of this verb, with its load of sexual and historical innuendoes (of slavery, or sexual domination), should be in connection not with ideas of mastery over others or even the outside world but with control over the barely spoken about and scarcely speakable world of her individual self, a world she only begins to speak directly of

towards the end of her life. For the child in "In the Waiting Room", for Crusoe, for the wistful walker in "The End of March", for Bishop remembering Robert Lowell in the later poem "North Haven", for the sad intoner of this villanelle, a poem is constructed around their sense of loss. The child in Bishop's earlier story "In the Village" repeatedly tries to face out her loss in her everyday life. But her mother's madness and failure of recognition and the child's consequent internal disarray, unable even to find herself acknowledged in her mother's face, leave her able only to perform, not to inhabit, her ordinary life. Everyday actions, such as taking the cow to pasture or visiting the blacksmith's shop, are vulnerable to the child's anxiety that another, furtive history lies within them, ready to disrupt their sure outlines. What a contrast, then, this villanelle is, written towards the end of her life, in which any impetus towards confusion is checked by the poem's formal requirements, and the different losses themselves are marshalled as a strange bulwark against intolerable grief.

> Losing begins as an art made easy through profusion:
>
> so many things seem filled with the intent
> to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

As easy as "an apple a day", as easy as an adage, one can 'Lose something every day'. From being a volitionless act in which things conspire to be lost, the conspiracy broadens, taking in the loser as well as the lost. The pitch of loss mounts through the poem, encouraged by a syntax in which clauses tumble one upon another:

> 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.

Punctuation hardly arrests the movement of the lines. Only the refrains allow a pause. The notion of loss continues to alter its contours, becoming something to be practised (if ironically) and then personalized. In the fifth and penultimate stanza the loss takes on a monumental geographical scale: cities, realms, rivers, a continent. Stanzas two to five suggest a series of consequential losses. Lost door keys are succeeded by lost houses; and lost memory for 'places, and names, and where it was you meant / to travel' are followed by 'lost...cities...realms...rivers, a continent'. Losing access to hidden or concealed material - by keys or memory - is followed by the loss of the realms themselves, but regret at all this finds only minimal expression, its single syllable words making the response even briefer: 'I miss them'. Bishop has used the contained, six stanza form of the villanelle superbly to bring the reader to a strange pitch of expectancy by the last stanza. What further losses could there be to end suitably this contained crescendo? How can the repeatedly qualified, and explained, 'disaster' finally be let loose without constraint?

The bounds of retrospection break up in the last stanza. The past tense is broken off with a present participle - 'losing you' - and the mapping of loss seems momentarily to crumble and break down. The art of losing is for a second obscured behind the terrible nature of this last loss:

—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 parenthetical, somewhat maudlin, reflection on voice and gesture controls the movement of the first line into the second and delays for a moment the declaration of fidelity to the vital art. But even in extremis the creed sung out is the mastery of loss, though now importantly qualified: 'the art of losing's not too hard to master'. Though the poem's title remains ambiguous (is there only one art, or do different arts combine as one?), the near relation between the art of losing and that of poetry is made explicit, for the only time in Bishop's writing. Its final imperative — 'Write it' — enacts this strange relationship. Writing somehow contains loss, both constraining and embodying it.[41] Bishop's rhyming words — 'master' and 'disaster' — form a crucial dialectic, between which poems are not lost, but made. They represent two possible, violent effects, out of whose crucible an art is forged.

"One Art" seems to declare that geography is expendable, sloughing off geographical terms till finally only the intimate contours of a beloved figure, 'the joking voice, a gesture / I love', are left. Like the other poems in the book, this one invents a different set of coordinates from those usually associated with cartography. Map-making is the colonizers' art. The Portuguese, British, French, Americans, all made maps of the countries they wished to plant their flag in, from Ireland to Brazil. Their maps represented their claim to the land. The coordinates of Bishop's poems

mark out losses and relinquishments, not territorial gains, her way, pardadoxically, of having a kind of purchase in the world.

The title Geography III is like a joke by Bishop on herself, an ironic commentary on being seen as a poet of geography, travel, description. Her poems are a far cry from the primer questions and answers which precede them in the epigraph: 'What is Geography?...What is the Earth?...What is the shape of the Earth?...What is a Map?...What are the directions on a Map?' (C.P.157) Her poems suggest answers to these questions that turn Monteith's primer on its head. Although the child in "In the Waiting Room" is reading the National Geographic, an adult version of Monteith's, what she finds out from the magazine is not what might be expected, a comfortable vision of exotic cultures. She discovers that she is as intimately connected to the alien figures illustrated there, such as the women with 'horrifying' breasts, as she is to the other people in the waiting room. (C.P.159) The geographical turns out to be part of her familiar, but also strange and defamiliarised world of 'Worcester, Massachusetts'. Geography, like charity, begins at home. Perhaps in this last book, it ends there too. In her soliloquy for Robinson Crusoe, Bishop paints a portrait of the traveller as ex-explorer, back in his native land. Despite his colonist's nightmare of islands spawning islands, all to be charted, he finds himself back again in England - 'another island' - old, bored, sad, and 'surrounded by uninteresting lumber'. (C.P.166) It is an ironic epitaph on Defoe's hard-boiled expansionist romance. And in "Poem", the work immediately preceding "One Art", Bishop, like her Crusoe, returns home. In fact she goes back to the earliest location in her own imaginative

itinerary, the Nova Scotian village in which she spent her earliest years and which formed the basis for her story, "In the Village".

"Poem" reflects on art and place in an overtly autobiographical framework. It tests artistic representation against memory — and Bishop's earliest knowledge of place in Nova Scotia against that in her great-uncle's painting. It suggests, for all her migrations and questioning travels, that at some level there has been no migration of the heart. The painting described in the poem has a double attraction for her. On the one hand, it is a slightly embarassing family heirloom, 'handed along collaterally, to owners / who looked at it sometimes, or didn't bother to'; a work of art with no pretentions to entering the public domain, but which the poet relishes as she relished the paintings by Gregorio Valdes, for its semi-naive, semi-trained accuracies of depiction as in the 'iris, white and yellow, / fresh-squiggled from the tube'. (C.P.176) On the other hand it is a reminder of her own past and triggers memories of an old, familiar landscape; half-way through the poem, she interrupts her commentary upon the painter's art and exclaims, 'Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!' At this point, it is not only the relation of painting and place, but the overlap between her experience and the painter's which arrests her, the community of response between two people who never knew each other, but knew the same place.

Unlike Lowell, who enraged her by using details from her past that she censored out of her own poetry, Bishop disclosed little of her early experiences in her writing. Her great-uncle's painting, though done 'naturally before my time', offers her an innocent representation of her

own, traumatic childhood geography. It is for her a remembered landscape seen through the eyes (and brush) of another memory. The painting, however naively it may be committed to the ethos of art 'copying from life — perhaps indeed because of it — can represent the convergence of 'two looks', her uncle's and her own. In some measure it becomes a mirror of her own late art, in which 'life and the memory of it [are] so compressed / they've turned into each other'. At the same time, her poem is not only about memory and the recognized place, but also about art and techniques of representation. She is absorbed by the whole process of recognition embodied by the artist in his brushstrokes and his choice of colours ('titanium white, one dab. The hint of steeple, / filaments of brush-hairs') and then experienced by the viewer of his picture. Though these poetic observations remind us that Bishop was herself a keen amateur painter, the title "Poem" insists that this is a poem and not a copy of copy from life. In a poem like "The Moose" Bishop is doing something closely comparable to her great-uncle when she tries to capture a woman flicking out a table-cloth, or a dog barking, or people waving goodbye: detailing a welter of occasional detail that bespeaks the historical, habitual world of other people. Memory and art both keep alive through their immersion in such tiny detail and delicate brush-strokes as the painting preserves and the poem momentarily conjures up. The discoveries recorded in "Questions of Travel" turn out not to be the big, picturesque and touristic views, but the odd, one-off details experienced when the traveller stops for gas or waits for the rain to stop. This traveller may not have 'stayed at home', but in her late poems Bishop brings the discoveries she has made abroad back to her home territory in a Canadian 'backwater'. (C.P.94) Many of them are about a kind of artistic revisiting

of early terrain, like the revisiting provoked by her uncle's painting, or the brief lapse into early memory stimulated by the old people's conversation in "The Moose". These poems with a lifetime's experience of art behind them, like those in "Elsewhere", often hark back to Bishop's earliest lessons in geography, lessons as vital to the shape of her universe as Monteith's were to the shapes in a nineteenth-century schoolroom atlas.

A recently-discovered poem, undated but probably written in the mid-nineteen-sixties, confirms this magnetic pull 'north', making explicit what is implicit in the other poems:

Dear, my compass
still points north
to wooden houses
and blue eyes,

fairy-tales where
flaxen-headed
younger sons
bring home the goose,

love in hay-lofts,
Protestants, and
heavy drinkers...
Springs are backward,

but crab-apples
ripen to rubies,
cranberries
to drops of blood,

and swans can paddle
icy water,
so hot the blood
in those webbed feet.

—Cold as it is, we'd
go to bed, dear,
early, but never
to keep warm.[42]

The poem has a tone of fine wit, lightness that never, with its undercurrent of sadness, becomes levity. Bishop combines her yearning for the landscape of her childhood with the recognition that it can only be a fairytale; her memory of her mother, possibly (who was bitten by a swan through the finger of her glove), with the wish to return with her lover to the scene of that worst separation; and writes the poem in a country she loves for its difference from all that the poem calls up.

Her uncle's project of 'art "copying from life"' that Bishop observes in "Poem" has something of the totalizing impulse of the map defined in the book's epigraph as a 'picture of the whole or part of the earth's surface'. It is the same project as the one that captivates Bishop in the 1930's in the paintings of the Cuban naive painter Gregorio Valdes. When she commissions Valdes 'to paint a large picture of the house [she] was living in', she returns home one evening to find the picture:

> a fair-sized copy of the house, in green and white, leaning against its green-and-white prototype. In the gray twilight they seemed to blur together and I had the feeling that if I came closer I would be able to see another miniature copy of the house leaning on the porch of the painted house, and so on — (C.Pr.53)

This is like her great-uncle's art, designed to get everything in, and reassuring because it exists in the face of the history (Bishop's, or her uncle's, or Valdes's) that it inevitably leaves out.

There seems to be an analogy between the pedagogic questions in Monteith's primer about the relation between objects in a map (volcano, cape, bay, strait) and the account of the viewer's responses to the

painting in "Poem", as she travels from object to object and sign to sign. The "geography" of the epigraph and the "art" of the painting provide analogies for the status of the poem in "Poem". Both geography and art as public categories only come alive, in Bishop's work, through an experience which is profoundly as well as superficially local. As a poet she is more interested in low art than high art. Her great-uncle and Gregorio Valdes capture her attention more readily than grand or famous artists. As a young woman she was impressed by Ernst's "home-made" frottages (a technique he first discovered by making a rubbing of his bedroom floor) and she was drawn all her life to Joseph Cornell and his art constructed out of ordinary and heterogenous materials. As an amateur artist herself she made her own 'shadow boxes', and describes one of these 'little works' in a late interview with its homely bits — a child's sandals, a pacifier, little bowls and skillets, rice and black beans — that she had garnered from her life in Brazil.[43] In these late poems, "In the Waiting Room", "The Moose", "Poem", she is analogously fascinated by the idea of a community of responses which has nothing to do with artistic conoisseurship or the values of high culture. Bishop is interested in an art that is in some sense conspicuously 'home-made', like Crusoe's 'home-made flute' which he loves though 'it had the weirdest scale on earth'. (C.P.164) She is an immensely sophisticated poet, but her art is never far away from Crusoe's salutary home truth: 'Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?' This home-truth is also, of course, why Bishop's greatest art, her greatest gain, is drawn from a profound and enabling sense of loss.

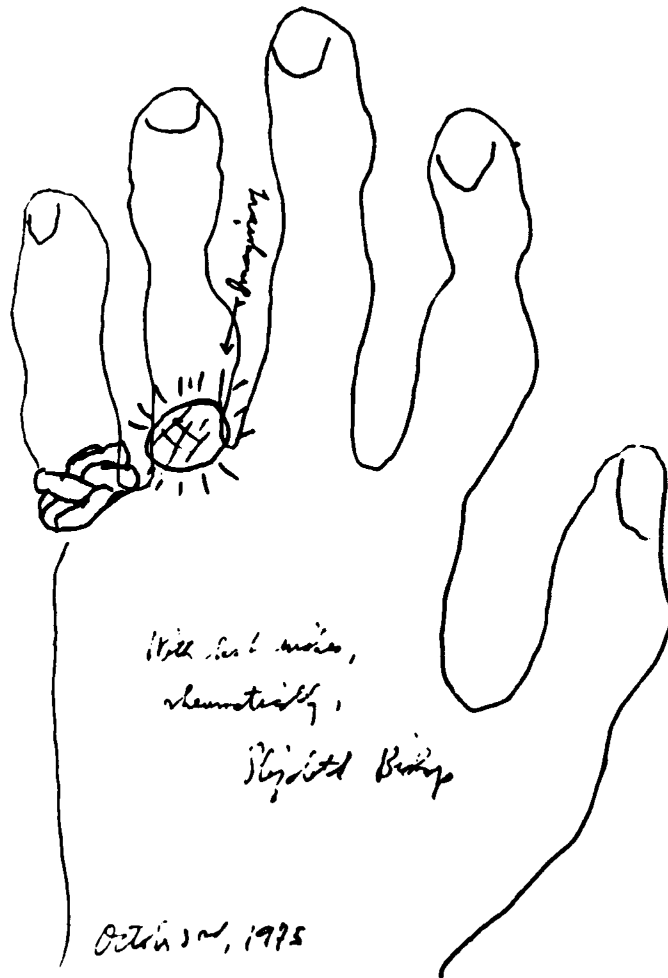

PLATE 22: Bishop, "Self-Portrait"

AFTERWORD

My study of Elizabeth Bishop might appear to my reader to be as self-contained and as obstinately against the grain of contemporary academic decorum as Bishop's own writing. I am aware that to advocates of certain current critical approaches - to some radical feminists and post-structuralists, for example - my approach might seem strangely untheoretical, indeed positively 'home-made', as though I were reproducing Bishop's own distrustful stance towards explicit critical or political alignments. (C.P.164)

When I began this thesis, I was sceptical about using Bishop's biography as a way of understanding her writing, sceptical indeed of biography as a form of literary criticism. Initially I intended to investigate Bishop's work by seeing it as part of an American literary tradition, and to consider to what extent recent feminist criticism could offer a model for understanding it. However, as I pursued my reading of Bishop's work in its various contexts, I was increasingly struck by the uniqueness of her case - or, to appropriate a phrase she originally used of Darwin's 'endless heroic observations', 'the strangeness of (her) undertaking'.[1] Not only is it hard to fit her into any definite literary movement, but she herself works by drawing on multiple models and with an odd kind of formal and thematic miscellaneousness. She appears autonomous, capable of using and responding to the American modernism of William Carlos Williams and her friend Marianne Moore as easily as the more traditional styles of Herbert, Frost or Auden. Her poems and stories seem

self-contained and sui generis, unburdened with allusions to earlier and other writing, curiously free of the anxiety of influence and, despite the sponsorship of Marianne Moore, without apparently needing to establish foremothers or forefathers for herself. This apparent self-sufficiency makes her undomineering, and perhaps this explains why Ashbery could call her a 'writer's writer's writer', and why so many other poets have celebrated her.[2] On the other hand, it also makes her difficult to talk about or "place", whatever your critical approach.

She has in common with many other women poets - some feminist critics would say all other women poets - a preoccupation with the marginal, the precarious, the unrecognised. Her subjects range from socially pauperised and peripheral human figures such as the Riverman (in the poem of that name) or the 'hermit' (in "Chemin de Fer") to birds and animals beyond the fringes of human society such as the moose, armadillo and sandpiper (in the poems named after them). Her landscapes tend to be out of the way and little known, and her characteristic architectures ramshackle and provisional. Yet despite these preoccupations, few of her poems are what Cora Kaplan in an essay on "Language and Gender" calls 'female-centred'.[3] Bishop was wary of being classified as a "woman poet" and gender is not the only or most interesting factor in accounting for her engagement with such figures. It is not that gender is irrelevant to reading her work, but that, as it always must be, it is part of a much more complex cultural situation and psychological history.

The problem of "placing" Bishop has to do with her own problematic sense of belonging - the difficulties she had in placing herself. As a poet

who from her earliest years recalled feeling like 'a sort of a guest', she never fully belonged to any one family.[4] Though she claimed that her 'compass still points north' towards the Nova Scotia of her early childhood, her life perpetually oscillated between North and South America, the U.S. and Canada, making her a kind of American expatriate in her own continent. When she calls herself a 'completely American poet' it is also a mark of the ways in which she is never 'completely' a Canadian, or Brazilian, or United States poet.[5] Even within the traditions of modern American poetry, her loyalties to such opposed figures as Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell suggest divided allegiances. Her own poetic identity combines a fastidious formal detachment, born out of her early engagements with Moore, modernism and surrealism, with an increasingly explicit involvement, however reticently, with the world of personal memory that Lowell explores in his Life Studies. As far as her sexual identity was concerned, she made no apology (in either sense) for her lesbianism; she neither concealed it, nor defended it, nor proclaimed it. Yet it too represents an intimate kind of displacement from accepted traditional notions of "belonging". All these questions of identity, all these problems of identification, concern both Bishop's life and writing, and the problematic relationship between biography and art represents a lifelong preoccupation of hers.

The relation between biography and art changes as her career develops. Her four books of poems show how her priorities shift from the abstract and emblematic constructions of her early work towards a poetry explicitly rooted in memory and autobiography. Her imaginary Man-Moth (in the poem of that name) and the dreamer in "Sleeping Standing Up" are replaced by the

self-reflective Crusoe of "Crusoe in England" and a child with her name, Elizabeth, in "In the Waiting Room". In the absence of a biography, the relationship between Bishop's art and life has in the past been largely conjectural. Yet her late art draws attention to its own autobiographical dimensions and my study is, among other things, an attempt to pursue the implications of these for her work as a whole.

It was the absence of any "Life" of Bishop which led me to research her biography in the first place. Though I initially intended to provide little more than a skeleton outline of her career and background, I quickly discovered how little was publically known about the circumstances of Bishop's biography and how much there was to find in her wonderfully playful, observant and expressive letters. Using these and other unpublished fragments of poems and prose as well as juvenilia, stored in Vassar Library and the Houghton Library, Harvard, I have tried to construct an account of her life which draws attention to the underlying patterns, the Jamesian figures in the carpet of her art. As I wrote earlier, 'in researching the life of the poet, I found myself increasingly confronted not only with the shield that Bishop placed between her biography and her writing, but also the connection between them'.[6] In the face of an art which seems largely to reflect and reflect upon the world outside, her life suggests the ways in which it also mirrors her internal world, and above all her need to construct, if not a "home", then what she calls 'a mirror, on which to dwell'. (C.P.70)

In constructing my thesis as I have done, with a Life Study followed by a study of the writing, I have neither divided biography and art nor

simply read one in terms of the other. The 'mirror' can be construed in many different ways. In Writing It I have dwelt in detail upon her art to show how individual poems and stories tap deep preoccupations. I hope this demonstrates something important about her art as well as her life. Though her poems thrive on descriptions of surfaces and sometimes flaunt their own dazzling surfaces, close reading reveals her to be a rather different kind of poet to the one her critics have often taken her to be. Bishop's poems seem at first like beautifully self-contained 'one-off' catches, but, as I have discovered, from first to last, they form part of a larger configuration and that configuration can be understood only if it has as its background, even occasionally as its foreground, Bishop's extraordinary life. Bishop herself has best described the repercussions of her withheld biography for her art in the scream that echoes through "In the Village", the autobiographical story she placed at the heart of her Questions of Travel. Her life runs as part of an intricate subliminal pattern or bass note throughout her work. I hope my readings of the poems might alert other readers to follow the powerful, buried design of her art, and to hear its specific 'pitch', as the small girl of 'In the Village' hears that of the 'lightning rod' with just a casual 'flick':

> A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies...The scream hangs like that, unheard, in memory - in the past, in the present, and those years between. It was not even loud to begin with, perhaps. It just came there to live, forever - not loud, just alive forever. Its pitch would be the pitch of my village. Flick the lightning rod on top of the church steeple with your fingernail and you will hear it. (C.Pr.251)

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 Elizabeth Bishop remarked in a letter to Robert Lowell on May 20, 1955: 'It seems to me it's the whole purpose of art, to the artist (not to the audience) - that rare feeling of control, illumination - life is all right, for the time being.'
All Bishop's letters to Robert Lowell quoted in this thesis are from the collection in the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

2 Bishop, Complete Poems 1927-1979 (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), p.131. All quotations from Bishop's poetry will be from this edition unless otherwise stated, and page numbers will be given, where necessary, in the text of the thesis.

3 Bishop, "Laureate's Words of Acceptance", World Literature Today 51 (1)-(2) (Winter 1977), p.12.

4 Octavio Paz, "Elizabeth Bishop, or The Power of Reticence", World Literature Today, p.16.

5 Marianne Moore, "Feeling and Precision", The Complete Prose, ed. Patricia C. Willis (New York: Penguin, 1987), p.396.

6 William Blake, Complete Writings, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: OUP, 1969, rpt 1979), p.431.

7 James Merrill, "An Interview with Donald Sheehan", Contemporary Literature (Winter 1968), pp.1-14. Exerpt in Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art, ed. Lloyd Schwartz, Sybil P. Estess (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1983), p.200.

8 Elizabeth Spires, "Interview with Elizabeth Bishop", Paris Review Interviews / Writers at Work, 6th series, ed. George Plimpton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.141.

9 I saw drafts of Bishop's published poems only after completing a full draft of Part Two of this thesis. They did not appreciably alter my sense of the kind of poet she is, so I have not included them in my discussion.

10 Ashley Brown, "An Interview with Elizabeth Bishop", Shenandoah 17(2) (Winter 1966). Rpt in Bishop and Her Art, p.295.

11 Bishop, "It All Depends [In Response to a Questionnaire]", Mid-Century American Poets, ed. John Ciardi (New York: Twayne, 1950). Rpt in Bishop and Her Art, p.281.

12 Quoted by Andrew Motion in his "Chatterton Lecture on Poetry", British Academy, 1985, p.319.

13 W.B. Yeats, "The Balloon of the Mind", Collected Poems (London: Macmillan, 1981), p.175.

14 Bishop to Lowell, April 22, 1960.

15 Ibid.

16 Brown interview, p.290.

17 Geoffrey Moore includes two of Bishop's poems in The Penguin Book of American Verse, ed., (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981): "The Prodigal" and "First Death in Nova Scotia". Helen Vendler, by contrast, includes nine poems, including such long ones as "The Monument" and "Crusoe in England", in her Faber Book of Contemporary American Poetry (London: Faber, 1986).

18 Guy Davenport coined the expression, 'the geography of the imagination' in his collection of essays with that title. In the title essay he wrote: 'The imagination has a history, as yet unwritten, and it has a geography, as yet only dimly seen. History and geography are inextricable disciplines. They have different shelves in the library, and different offices at the university, but they cannot get along for a minute without consulting the other. Geography is the wife of history, as space is the wife of time.' [The Geography of the Imagination (London: Pan, 1984), p.4] Bishop had made the connection well over thirty years before Davenport, in her poem "The Map".

19 Walt Whitman, "Preface to Leaves of Grass, 1855", Complete Poems (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p.741.

20 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet", Selected Essays, ed. Larzer Ziff (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982, rpt 1984), p.281.

21 Whitman, "Song of Myself", Complete Poems, pp.83, 70-71.

22 Whitman, "Preface to Leaves of Grass, 1855", Complete Poems, p.744.

23 William Carlos Williams, I Wanted to Write a Poem (London: Cape, 1967), pp.75-76; Hart Crane, The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose (Oxford: OUP, 1968, rpt 1972), p.249.

24 Williams, Selected Essays (New York: New Directions, 1954), pp.242-243.

25 Emerson, "Self-Reliance", Selected Essays, p.196.

26 Bishop, "The Sea & Its Shore", Collected Prose (London: Hogarth, 1984), p.171. All quotations from Bishop's prose will be from this edition unless otherwise stated, and page numbers will be given, where necessary, in the text of the thesis.

27 Michael Meyer, "Introduction" to Henry David Thoreau, Walden and Civil Disobedience (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983, rpt 1986), p.25.

28 Ibid., p.369. The poem extract is from William Habington, "To My Honoured Friend Sir Ed. P. Knight".

29 Emily Dickinson, Complete Poems, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London Faber, 1975, rpt 1986), p.403. Bishop wrote to Lowell, January 29, 1958: 'Did I really make snide remarks about E. Dickinson? I like, or at least admire, her a great deal more now - probably because of that good new edition, really...[I] think, (along with Randall) that she's about the best we have. However - she does set one's teeth on edge a lot of the time, don't you think?'

30 Brown interview, pp.294, 300; Bishop, "Elizabeth Bishop: Influences", American Poetry Review 14 (January/February 1985), p.14.

31 Jeredith Merrin has a useful chapter on Herbert's influence on Bishop: "Worlds of Strife: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and George Herbert", in her book, An Enabling Humility: Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop and the Uses of Tradition (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers UP, 1990), pp.39-65.

32 Bishop, "Influences", American Poetry Review 14, pp.13, 15.

33 Bishop to Lowell, July 30, 1964.

34 George Starbuck, "The Work!: A Conversation with Elizabeth Bishop", Ploughshares 3 (3 & 4) (1977). Rpt in Bishop and her Art, p.302.

35 Bishop, unpublished prose fragment, "Three American Poets", dated by Bishop as 1968 or '69. I have made use of prose and poetry fragments, as well as unpublished and apparently complete poems, which are held in Vassar College Library's Collection. Unless stated, all letters and unpublished material are from this collection.

36 Emerson, "Nature", Selected Essays, pp.39, 47.

37 Printed in the Penguin Book of American Verse, p.79.

38 Emerson, "Self-Reliance", Selected Essays, pp.197-198.

39 Robert von Hallberg, "Tourists", American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985), p.63.

40 Ibid., pp.63, 65, 66.

41 Ibid., pp.68, 70. Von Hallberg discusses the travel or tourist poems of many of Bishop's contemporaries: Richard Howard, Adrienne Rich, John Hollander, W.S. Merwin, Charles Gullans, John Ashbery, Richard Wilbur and Turner Cassity.

42 Ibid., p.70.

43 Bishop to Lowell, January 29, 1958.
44 Starbuck interview, p.324.

45 Spires interview, p.145.

46 Starbuck interview, p.322.

47 Bishop, unpublished prose fragment, "Notes for Poetry Reviews 1970".

48 Spires interview, p.145.

49 Bishop to Lowell, February 10, 1972.

50 Adrienne Rich, "The Eye of the Outsider", Boston Review (April 1983), p.17.

51 Ibid., p.16.

52 Al Alvarez, "Imagism and Poetesses", Kenyon Review 19(2) (Spring 1957), p.325; Peter Davison, "The Gilt Edge of Reputation", Atlantic Monthly 217 (January 1966), p.85; John Fuller, "The Iceberg and the Ship", The Listener 85 (8 April 1971), p.456.

53 Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (London: Women's Press, 1985), pp.285, 339. I am indebted to this extensive and invaluable study for my undertanding of how lesbianism was regarded and (mis)understood during Bishop's lifetime.

54 Mary McCarthy, The Group (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1963), p.370.

55 Ibid., p.372.

56 Cited in Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men, p.339.

57 Adrienne Rich discusses this in the Foreword to her collection of essays, Blood, Bread and Poetry (London: Virago, 1987), p.viii; Rich, "Hunger", The Dream of a Common Language (New York: Norton, 1978), pp.12-13.

58 Starbuck interview, pp.320, 321.

59 Bishop to Robert Lowell, August 1965.

60 Sylvia Plath, The Journals (New York: Ballantine, 1983, rpt 1987), p.319.

61 Bishop, unpublished prose fragment, "Notes for Poetry Reviews", 1970.

62 Bishop, "On 'Confessional Poetry'", from "Poets", Time (June 2, 1967). Rpt in Bishop and her Art, p.303.

63 Bishop to Lowell, May 19, 1960.

64 Anne Sexton, "Interview with Patricia Marx", Hudson Review 18(4) (Winter 1965/1966). Rpt in No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews and Prose (Anne Arbor: Michigan UP, 1985), p.72.

65 The story "In Prison" includes a brief visit to an Asylum, but the protagonist is always conspicuously detached.

66 Printed in the Faber Book of Contemporary American Poetry, ed. Helen Vendler, pp.264-265.

67 Sexton, No Evil Star, p.72.

68 When I began my thesis there was only one book on Bishop: Anne Stephenson's Elizabeth Bishop (1966) in the Twayne series. Over the last four years, six more have been published. In the twelve years since her death there have been, in addition, two anthologies of criticism (both edited by Harold Bloom) and an increasing number of articles. Whatever she managed to fend off when she was alive, she is unable to suppress now.

69 John Ashbery, "Second Presentation of Elizabeth Bishop", World Literature Today 51, p.8.

70 Howard Moss, "The Canada-Brazil Connection", World Literature Today 51, p.31.

71 Charles Tomlinson, "Looking out for wholeness", TLS (June 3, 1983), p.575.

72 Anne Stev enson, Elizabeth Bishop (New York: Twayne, 1966), p.66.

73 John Ashbery, "The Complete Poems", New York Times Book Review (June 1, 1969). Rpt in Bishop and her Art, p.203.

74 Stev enson, loc. cit.

75 Robert Lowell, "For Elizabeth Bishop 4", History (London: Faber, 1973), p.198.

76 Spires interview, p.130.

77 The title of a story by Willa Cather.

78 From jacket blurb for Robert Lowell's Life Studies (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959). Rpt in Bishop and her Art, p.285.

79 Lowell, loc. cit.

80 Bishop to the Summerses, October 19, 1967.

PART ONE

LIFE STUDY

1 Bishop, unpublished poem fragment, 1935.

2 Early draft for the poem that Robert Lowell later published as "Flying from Bangor to Rio 1957" in Notebook (London: Faber, 1970), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

3 Bishop to Lowell, May 20, 1955.

4 Bishop to the Summerses, October 19, 1967.

5 Remark made to me by Jill Janows, programme producer, June 1989.

6 Bishop to Lowell, December 11, 1957.

7 Spires interview, p.139.

8 Ibid., p.140.

9 Bishop, "On Confessional Poetry", in "Poets," Time (June 2, 1967), pp.35-42. Rpt in Bishop and her Art, p.303.

10 Spires op. cit., p.141.

11 Bishop prided herself on her 'total memory' of her childhood in her interview with Spires, pp.139-140.

12 Discussed in David Kalstone, Becoming A Poet (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), pp.24-25.

13 Bishop, unpublished poem fragment, n.d.

14 Bishop to the Summerses, October 4 or 5, 1954/55.

15 Ashley Brown, "Elizabeth Bishop: In Memoriam", Southern Review 16(2) (April 1980), p.257.

16 Bishop, unpublished prose fragment, "Mrs Sullivan Downstairs", n.d., p.1.

17 Spires interview, pp.140-141; Bishop, "Mrs Sullivan Downstairs, p.5.

18 Bishop, unpublished prose fragment, "Reminiscences of Great Village", n.d., p.1.

19 Bishop, unpublished prose fragment, "When I was seven years old...", n.d.

20 Bishop, "Mrs Sullivan Downstairs", p.5.

21 Brown interview, p.292.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 When Bishop arrived in New York from Brazil without a copy of Herbert's poetry, Robert Lowell gave her his grandfather's copy. She wrote, on her return to Brazil: 'I've been reading a lot in the Herbert - this is the first time I'd ever gone travelling without him so it is nice to have him again - this way, too - even if I feel you really really shouldn't have given it away.' (Bishop to Lowell, Sunday 11, 1957)

25 Bishop, "Women in 'Idylls of the King'", The Owl, (North Shore Country Day School) 1926-1927, p.72.

26 Ibid., p.65.

27 Bishop to the Summerses, July 26, 1964; Bishop to Lowell, August 26, 1963.

28 Brown interview, pp.296, 293.

29 Ibid.

30 Spires interview, pp.142, 144.

31 Bishop, "Editorial", The Blue Pencil XII(3) (June 1929), p.4.

32 Spires, op. cit., p.145.

33 Bishop to Lowell, August 26, 1963; Brown interview, p.293.

34 Spires, op. cit., pp.143-144; Brown, loc. cit.

35 Ibid., pp.293-294.

36 Spires, loc. cit.; Brown, loc. cit.

37 Spires, loc. cit.

38 Bishop's essay "Gregorio Valdes" might seem the exception to my observation. But the essay is not a tribute to a close friend. It is addressed to an unrecognised, naive genius, and is a brief treatise on art; Valdes was not an intimate friend of Bishop's.

39 Bishop to Lowell, November 23, 1955; December 11, 1957.

40 Bishop, unpublished poem fragment, Letter to Two Friends, n.d.

41 Chronology in World Literature Today 51, p.12.

42 Bishop to Lowell, December 14, 1957.

43 Bishop to Lowell, March 30, 1959.

44 Marianne Moore to Bishop, December 20, 1935.

45 Moore to Bishop, June 2, 1936.

46 Spires interview, p.143.

47 Moore to Bishop, August 28, 1936.

48 There are at least two articles and part of a book devoted to the relationship between Bishop and Moore, and their exchange of ideas and work: Bonnie Costello, "Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop: Friendship and Influence", Twentieth Century Literature 30(2/3) (Summer/Fall 1984), pp.130-149; David Kalstone, Becoming a Poet; Lyn Keller, "Words Worth a Thousand Postcards: The Bishop/Moore Correspondence", American Literature 55(3) (October 1983), pp.405-429. I have taken much of my information about Bishop's life during the years 1934 to 1946 from these sources.

49 Moore to Bishop, May 1, 1938.

50 A full account of this is given by David Kalstone in Becoming A Poet, pp.79-85 and Appendix, pp.265-269, in which he provides Moore's version of the poem in full.

51 See Keller, "Words Worth a Thousand Postcards", p.423.

52 Moore to Bishop, May 1, 1938.

53 Brown interview, p.296.

54 Bishop to Joseph Summers, October 19, 1967.

55 Bishop to Lowell, June 15, 1961.

56 Bishop to Lowell, January 22, 1962.

57 Bishop to the Summerses, December 10, 1956.

58 Bishop to Lowell, December 2, 1956.

59 Bishop conducted an extensive correspondence with her New York doctor, Anny Baumann, for much of her adult life. But the correspondence is restricted and I was not able to see it during my brief visit to Vassar College Library. So although I know Baumann treated Bishop's alcoholism, as well as her asthma, I do not know how she did so, or how Bishop responded. For the same reason I do not know the details of ill health which led up to Bishop's surprising death in 1979. I have had, instead, to try to deduce the state of her health from the remarks she drops in letter, such as cancelling an appointment on doctor's orders; a broken bone in the 1970's; asthma attacks throughout her adult life; jokes about drunkenness. It has been suggested to me (by Lorrie Goldensohn) that it might have been Baumann's progressive treatment of Bishop's asthma in the 1960's with large doses of steroids that precipitated her bad health in the 1970's.

60 Bishop to Lowell, December 2, 1956.

61 Lowell to Bishop, April 20, 1958.

62 Bishop to Lowell, March 30, 1959.

63 Bishop to Lowell, April 26, 1962.

64 Starbuck interview, p.328.

65 Bishop, unpublished prose fragment, "Born in Worcester, Massachusetts...", 1961.

66 Spires interview, p.141; Brown interview, p.294.

67 Brown, op.cit., p.299.

68 These three writers made a sharp impression on the young poet. She described Dewey as 'an adorable man' and the only person, apart from Moore 'who would talk to everyone, on all social levels' [Brown interview, p.299]. Olson she remembered as the person who got her to pay his electricity bill for him when she took hers, because he felt that 'a Poet mustn't be asked to do prosaic things like pay bills' [James Merrill, "Elizabeth Bishop, 1911-1979", NYRB (December 6, 1979), p.6]. She remarked in a rare rash of fury, that of the 'three or four people in this world I really hate', Charles Olson is one of them 'the others being 'Richman...and a man named Lord Glenavy'). [EB to Lowell, May 5, 1959] She described herself as the 'female hemingway' once when she was learning pool and going to cockfights [EB to Lowell, January 31, 1949], and on another occasion celebrated her poem "The Fish" as an Hemingwayesque poem.

69 "Chronology", World Literature Today 51, p.13.

70 Keller, "Words Worth a Thousand Postcards", pp.426-427.

71 Bishop to Moore, December 15, 1939. Quoted in Keller, op. cit., p.422.

72 Bishop to Moore, December 24, 1939. Quoted in Keller, loc. cit.

73 Some of Bishop's poems appear in the Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry, ed. Fleur Adcock (London: Faber, 1987). But I do not know how Faber got round Bishop's embargo.

74 Bishop to Moore, July 15, 1943. Quoted in Keller, op. cit., p.425.

75 Bishop confirms this preoccupation in interview with George Starbuck, p.320.

76 Brown interview, p.297. Bishop said about the political writing of the thirties: 'I was always opposed to political thinking as such for writers. What good writing came out of that period, really? Perhaps a few good poems; Kenneth Fearing wrote some. A great deal of it seemed to me very false. Politically I considered myself a socialist, but I disliked "social conscious" writing.' (Ibid., p.293)

77 Kalstone, Becoming a Poet, p.110.

78 Ibid., p.109; Starbuck interview, p.328.

79 Kalstone, loc. cit., p.110.

80 Bishop to Lowell, May 1948.

81 Bishop to Lowell, May 1958.

82 Lowell's two week visit to Bishop here is recounted by Ian Hamilton in Robert Lowell: A Biography (London: Faber, 1983), pp.134-135.

83 Bishop to Lowell, September 8, 1948.

84 Ibid. The lines Bishop is referring to are probably these ones: 'Pain comes from the darkness / And we call it wisdom. It is pain.' Randall Jarrell, Complete Poems (London: Faber, 1971), p.114.

85 Charles Dickens, Hard Times, ed. David Craig (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969, rpt 1982), p.224.

86 Kalstone, Becoming a Poet, p.115.

87 Bishop to Lowell, January 1, 1948.

88 Ibid.; Bishop to Lowell, September 11, 1948; Bishop to Lowell, August 23, 1950.

89 Kalstone, Becoming a Poet, p.111.

90 Bishop to Lowell, March 18, 1948.

91 Robert Lowell, Notebook, p.235. See Kalstone, Becoming a Poet, for a detailed analysis of the development of Lowell's poems about Bishop.

92 Spires interview, p.146. Ian Hamilton describes this fiasco, in which Lowell was the central player, in his Biography, pp.141-149. Also see Sally Fitzgerald, Letters of Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), pp.11-12.

93 Brown interview, p.300.

94 Kalstone, Becoming a Poet, p.202.

95 Bishop to Lowell, March 21, 1952.

96 Bishop to Lowell, July 26, 1953. Lloyd Schwartz says there was a nine year gap before Bishop and Lota became reaquainted in Brazil in his article, "Annals of Poetry: Elizabeth Bishop and Brazil", The New Yorker, (September 30, 1991), p.89.

97 Kalstone, Becoming a Poet, p.150.

98 Bishop, "The Thumb", The Blue Pencil XIII(2) (April 1930), p.7.

99 Ibid., p.9.

100 My guess that Bishop wrote the poem while still living in Key West is based on her use of the 'rock rose' image, which she also uses in her poem, "Faustina; or Rock Roses". She published this poem in 1947, while still living in Key West. A reference to the Navy also connects the poem to Key West, with its large, naval presence.

101 Bishop, unpublished poem fragment, n.d.

102 Bishop to Lowell, November 26, 1951.

103 Schwartz, The New Yorker, p.89.

104 Compare John Donne's "To his Mistress Going to Bed": 'O my America, my new found land, / My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned,/ My mine of precious stones, my empery, / How blessed am I in discovering thee!' Complete English Poems, ed. A.J. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, rpt 1980), p.125.

105 Bishop to Lowell, March 21, 1952.

106 Brown, "In Memoriam", p.259.

107 Bishop to Lowell, loc. cit.

108 Bishop to Lowell, July 28, 1953.

109 Ibid.

110 Brown, "In Memoriam", p.257.

111 Bishop to Lowell, March 21, 1952.

112 Bishop to Lowell, July 28, 1953.

113 Ibid.

114 Bishop to Lowell, December 14, 1957.

115 Bishop to Lowell, July 26, 1960.

116 Bishop to Lowell, March 21, 1952.

117 John Dos Passos, Brazil on the Move (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1964), p.156.

118 Brown, "Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil", Southern Review 13 (October 1977). Rpt in Bishop and her Art, p.226.

119 Brown interview, p.301.

120 Brown, "In Memoriam", p.258.

121 Bishop to Lowell, November 30, 1954.

122 Ibid.

123 Bishop, The Diary of Helena Morley (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957), p.xxvi.

124 Ibid.

125 Lowell to Bishop, May 5, 1955.

126 Randall Jarrell, "Poets", Poetry & the Age (London: Faber, 1973), p.210.

127 Bishop to Lowell, July 8, 1955.

128 Lowell to Bishop, September 5, 1956.

129 Bishop to Lowell, January 28, 1958.

130 Ibid.

131 Ibid.

132 Ibid.

133 Ibid.

134 Stephenson, Elizabeth Bishop, p.66.

135 Bishop to James Merrill, March 1, 1955.

136 Bishop to the Summerses, June 8, 1958.

137 Bishop to Lowell, March 5, 1963.

138 Willa Cather found the landscape she needed in Nebraska and New Mexico; Robert Frost found his in New England; Flannery O'Connor found hers in the Southern States; F. Scott Fitzgerald found his in New Jersey and New York, etc.

139 Bishop to Lowell, June 13, 1964.

140 Bishop to Lowell, August 28, 1958.

141 Ibid.

142 Bishop to the Summerses, May 13, 1960.

143 Bishop to Lowell, August 1965.

144 David Kalstone suggests that "To the Botequim & Back" and "A Trip to Vigia", as well as Bishop's unfinished, unpublished essay about her trip down the Rio Sao Francisco, were intended for publication in this planned book of essays. (Becoming a Poet, pp.228-229)

145 Bishop to Lowell, April 22, 1960.

146 Charles Tomlinson, "Elizabeth Bishop's New Book", Shenandoah 17 (Winter 1966), p.89.

147 Bishop to Lowell, January 22, 1962.

148 Bishop's copy of the Time/Life Brazil is in the collection of her papers etc. at the Houghton Library, Harvard.

149 Bishop to the Summerses, June 17, 1965.

150 Elizabeth Bishop and the editors of Time, Brazil (New York: Time Inc., 1962), p.13.

151 Ibid., p.114.

152 Ibid., p.115.

153 Bishop points out that things are understood differently in Brazil and in the United States in a letter to the Summerses on June 17, 1965. She is writing at a time of great volatility and uncertainty within Brazilian politics:

> I'm in a delicate situation here though – a lot of things you can think & say and write in the U S I couldn't possibly here, because they would be misunderstood — and also play right into the hands of the communist group. — See how complicated it is? It is hard to be patriotic, loyal, anti-communist in Brazil (which I most certainly am) - and yet criticise, draw distinctions, etc. — particularly as Brazilians in general do NOT draw distinctions, won't accept doubt — demand everything in the crudest black and white —and fly off the handle so easily.

154 Bishop to Lowell, August 28, 1958.

155 Bishop to Lowell, October 11, 1963.

156 Bishop to Lowell, October 6, 1960.

157 For my understanding of this period of Brazilian history I have used John Edwin Fagg, Latin America: A General History (New York: Macmillan, 1977).

158 Bishop, Brazil, p.131.

159 Ibid., p.130.

160 Ibid., p.133.

161 Ibid., p.147.

162 Fagg, Latin America, pp.771-772.

163 Bishop to Lowell, March 5, 1963.

164 Bishop to Lowell, April 13, 1964.

165 Bishop to Lowell, May 5, 1959.

166 Bishop to Lowell, January 8, 1963.

167 Bishop, unpublished poem fragment, n.d.

168 Bishop to Lowell, April 4, 1964.

169 Bishop to Lowell, April 13, 1964.

170 Bishop to Lowell, May 3, 1964.

171 Bishop to the Summerses, April 28, 1965.

172 Bishop to the Summerses, June 17, 1965.

173 Wesley Wehr, "Elizabeth Bishop: Conversations and Class Notes", Antioch Review 39(3) (Summer, 1981), p.319.

174 Bishop to Lowell, September 25, 1966.

175 Wehr, "Conversations and Class Notes", p.320.

176 Ibid., p.322.

177 Ibid., p.323.

178 Bishop to Lowell, September 25, 1966

179 Ibid.

180 Bishop to Lowell, March 3, 1967.

181 Ibid.

182 Ibid.

183 Ibid.

184 Bishop to the Summerses, July 14, 1967.

185 Bishop to Lowell, July 19, 1967.

186 Ibid.

187 Ibid.

188 Bishop to Lowell, August 30, 1967.

189 Bishop to the Summerses, September 23, 1967.

190 Ibid.

191 Ibid.

192 Bishop to the Summerses, September 28, 1967.

193 Bishop to the Summerses, October 4, 1967.

194 Bishop, unpublished poem fragment, n.d.

195 Ibid.

196 Ibid.

197 Bishop to Lowell, January 9, 1968.

198 Ibid.

199 Bishop to Lowell, January 23, 1968.

200 Bishop to Lowell, August 28, 1968.

201 Bishop to Merrill, February 27, 1969.

202 Bishop to Mariette Charlton, June 15, 1970.

203 Ibid.

204 Ibid.

205 Bishop to Merrill, August 24, 1970.

206 Ibid.

207 Merrill to Bishop, August 9, 1970.

208 Bishop to Merrill, February 27, 1969; June 10, 1976.

209 Bishop to Lowell, March 31, 1971.

210 Bishop to Merrill, August 24, 1970.

211 Spires interview, p.131.

212 Elizabeth Bishop, Emanuel Brasil, An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Brazilian Poetry (Middletown, CONN: Wesleyan UP, 1972), p.93.

213 Ibid., pp.57, 59.

214 Bishop to Lowell, October 6, 1960.

215 Brown "Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil", p.229.

216 Bishop, "Review of Katherine Mansfield, Letters", The Blue Pencil XII(2) (April 1929), p.39.

217 Bishop to Linda Ledford-Miller, September 1978.

218 Elizabeth Spires describes Bishop's last home in some detail in the introduction to her interview with Bishop.

219 See the third stanza of Bishop's poem, "The Unbeliever" (C.P.22):

> I am founded on marble pillars,"
> said a cloud. "I never move.
> See the pillars there in the sea?"
> Secure in introspection
> he peers at the watery pillars of his reflection.

PART TWO

CHAPTER ONE
"IN THE VILLAGE"

1 Kalstone, Becoming a Poet, p.212.

2 Kalstone sees the two parts of the book as strictly cordoned off from one another, observing that Bishop 'makes no attempt to interweave her two worlds [in "Brazil" and in "Elsewhere"], as she did frequently in her letters [to Lowell]'. Ibid., p.214.

3 Ibid., p.218.

4 Jacques Lacan and D.W. Winnicott formulated different versions of what Lacan termed the "Mirror Stage" in child development. Lacan describes 'the startling spectacle of the infant in front of the mirror':

> Unable as yet to walk, or even to stand up, and held tightly as he is by some support, human or artificial..., he nevertheless overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstructions of his support and, fixing his attitude...brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image... ...This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the infans stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject. [Écrits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977,rpt 1985), p.2]

According to Lacan, the infant at first is in disarray, a chaos of different bits. When he sees his whole form in the mirror for the first time, it makes him 'jubilant', as he appears in control of all his parts. But this is only an illusion, a 'spurious image of completeness', as Adam Phillips describes it, 'that would, in actuality, forever seduce and elude him', because he is still 'sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence'. [Adam Phillips, Winnicott (London: Fontana, 1988), p.129]

For Winnicott, the importance of this stage lies in the infant's relationship to his mother. He suggests that 'the precursor of the mirror is the mother's face' and that her 'role [is] of giving back to the baby the baby's own self'. ["Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development", Playing and Reality (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, rpt 1982), pp.130, 138] She does this by responding to what she sees in the baby's face; 'what she looks like is related to what she sees [in the baby]'. (Ibid., p.131) Her face reflects the baby's changes of mood and the baby's expressions. Phillips describes well the consequences of not good-enough mothering, Bishop's child's experience, at this stage:

> The child with an unresponsive mother - the mother whose face is frozen by a depressed mood - is forced to perceive, to read the mood at the cost of his own feelings being recognized. This perception that pre-empts apperception is an early form of compliance; unable to get "the mirror to notice and approve" the child...is compelled to see only what the mother feels. And he has no way of knowing what, if anything, he has contributed to her mood...Not to be seen by the mother, at least at the moment of the spontaneous gesture, is not to exist...The infant cannot risk looking, if looking draws a blank; he must get something of himself back from what he looks at. (Phillips, Winnicott, pp.129-30)

5 Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p.6.

6 Ibid., pp.5-6.

7 Ibid., p.7.

8 Kalstone reads the child's disappearance differently from me:

> In two sentences separated as paragraphs, and with a quiet shift to the present tense, the "child" vanishes literally from the doorway, and figuratively from the story, to be replaced by a narrative "I" who takes responsibility for putting together the pieces of her life and trying to survive the scream. (Becoming a Poet, p.161)

9 Ibid., p.164.

10 Lowell identifies this same wish in his poem "For Elizabeth Bishop 4", as I pointed out in my Introduction, p.38.

CHAPTER TWO
EARLY WORK: 'UNCERTAIN OF IDENTITY'

1 Bishop, quoted by Anne Stephenson, Elizabeth Bishop, p.66. See my Introduction, p.35.

2 Lowell, "On 'Skunk Hour'", The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, ed. Anthony Ostroff (Boston: LIttle, Brown and Co., pp.107-10). Rpt in Bishop and her Art, p.199.

3 Thoreau, Walden, p.220.

4 Ibid., p.177.

5 Emerson, "Nature", Selected Essays, p.38.

6 Ibid., p.46.

7 Robert Frost, "Tree At My Window", Selected Poems (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, rpt 1984), p.149.

8 A.R. Ammons, "Reflective". Printed in Faber Book of Contemporary American Poetry, ed. Helen Vendler (London: Faber, 1986), p.141.

9 Emerson, "Experience", op. cit., p.294.

10 Thoreau, Walden, p.190.

11 Ibid., p.194.

12 Jerome Mazzaro, "Elizabeth Bishop And The Poetics of Impediment", Salmagundi 17 (1974), p.122.

13 Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, p.32.

14 See Kalstone, Becoming A Poet, pp.56-57.

15 David Lehman, "In Prison: A Paradox Regained", Bishop and Her Art, pp.69, 67.

16 Robert Frost, "The Figure A Poem Makes", Complete Poems (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949, rpt 1964), p.vi.

CHAPTER THREE
NORTH & SOUTH: 'CONSTANT READJUSTMENT'

1 Wallace Stevens, Collected Poems (London: Faber, 1955), p.392.

2 Lowell, "From 'Thomas, Bishop, and Williams'", Sewanee Review 55 (Summer 1947), pp.497-99. Rpt in Bishop and Her Art, pp.186-7.

3 Bishop to Lowell, August 14, 1947.

4 Spires interview, pp.129-130; Alexandra Johnson, "'Geography of the imagination' discussion", Christian Science Monitor, (March 23, 1978), p.20.

5 Edwin Honig, "Poetry Chronicle", Partisan Review, 23 (1956), p.116.

6 Bishop's 'large aquatic animal' is like an echo of Tennyson's Kraken and Stevens's "Hibiscus". Bishop's 'animal' is more wistful than Tennyson's, its 'sighing' losing something of the primal scream of Tennyson's last line, 'In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.' [The Poems of Tennyson, ed. Christopher Ricks (London & Harlow: Longman, 1969), p.247] Her 'animal' has more in common with Stevens's parody of a Kraken in "Hibiscus On The Sleeping Shores":

> Then it was that that monstered moth
> Which had lain folded against the blue
> And the colored purple of the lazy sea,
>
> And which had drowsed along the bony shores,
> Shut to the blather that the water made
> Rose up besprent and sought the flaming red
>
> Dabbled with yellow pollen red as red
> As the flag above the old cafe
> And roamed there all the stupid afternoon.
> [Collected Poems (London: Faber, 1955), pp.22-23]

7 "Large Bad Picture" was published six years after "Musee des Beaux Arts" was collected in Another Time (London: Faber, 1940).

8 W.H. Auden, Selected Poems (London: Faber, 1979, rpt 1982), p.80.

9 Bishop to Lowell, September 8, 1948.

10 W.H. Auden, loc. cit.

11 Thomas Travisano also compares Bishop's "Large Bad Picture" to Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts", but he sees her revising Auden's poem by 'capturing the mind [of the viewer] at an earlier moment, long before it is capable of dogmatic statement'. [Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development (Charlottesville: Virginia UP, 1989), p.91]

12 Bishop recalls reading 'a lot of surrealist poetry and prose' during her year in France in the 1930's (Brown interview, p.297)

13 Richard Mullen, "Elizabeth Bishop's Surrealist Inheritance", American Literature 54(1) (March 1982), p.65. Although I think he makes too much of Bishop's "Surrealist Inheritance", Mullen does make a useful observation about the strange relation between objects and apparitions in Bishop's writing:

Throughout Bishop's poetry, this strangeness of our subjective selves, the queer struggle between conscious and unconscious, is projected outward into a world where the "thingness" of things dominates. (Ibid., p.80)

14 The surrealist artist René Magritte's fusion of the real and the representational must have caught Bishop's attention before she embarked on this poem. His description of his painting "La Condition Humaine I" (1933) addresses the same questions raised in Bishop's poem:

> In front of a window seen from inside a room I placed a picture representing exactly that part of the landscape which was masked by the picture. In this way the tree represented in the picture hid the tree standing behind it, outside the room. For the spectator the tree was at one and the same time in the room - in the picture - and, by inference, outside the room - in the real landscape. This is how we see the world; we see it outside ourselves and yet we have only a representation of it within us. In the same way we sometimes situate in the past a thing which is happening in the present. So time and space are freed from the crude meaning which is the only one allowed to them in everyday experience. [Louis Scutenaire, René Magritte (Brussels: Librairie Sélèction, 1947), pp.82-84]

Magritte's language of subjectivity and Ernst's early precarious monument-like pictures, as in "Catherine ondulée" (1920), "Jeune chimère" (1920) or "Le couple" (1923) and his frottage technique appear to have influenced Bishop at this time, and though she soon moved away from such surrealistic poems, she continued to ask the same questions as Magritte asks above.

15 Mullen, loc. cit., p.66. Ernst's account of his discovery of frottage technique is a good example of the imaginative vision that must have appealed to Bishop as a young poet:

> I was struck by the obsession exerted upon my excited gaze by the floor — its grain accented by a thousand scrubbings. I then decided to explore he symbolism of this obsession, and, to assist my contemplative and hallucinatory faculties, I took a series of drawings from the floorboards by covering them at random with sheets of paper which I rubbed with a soft pencil. When gazing attentively at these drawings, I was surprised at the sudden intensification of my visionary faculties and at the hallucinatory succession of contradictory images being superimposed on each other with the persistence and rapidity of amorous memories. [From Au-dela de la peinture, 1936; first published in Cahiers d'Art, Max Ernst, Special Issue, 1937. Rpt in Patrick Waldberg, Surrealism (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965, rpt 1971), p.97]

16 Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying", Complete Works, ed. V. Holland (London: Collins, 1948, rpt 1970), p.985.

17 Bishop to the Summerses, July 1955.

18 Ibid.

19 There is a popular strain of criticism about Bishop which draws conclusions much like this one by Sybil P. Estess, writing on North & South:

> Elizabeth Bishop seldom violates objects by imposing on them preconceived definitions, a priori interpretations, or sentimental descriptions. She investigates, she records, and she describes with the exactitude and tenacity of a naturalist. ["Elizabeth Bishop: The Delicate Art of Map Making", Southern Review 13(4) (1977), p.705]

20 Quoted in Marcel Raymond, From Baudelaire to Surrealism, (London: Methuen, 1970), p.264.

21 Bishop, From "Time's Andromedas", Vassar Journal of Undergraduate Studies (May 1933), pp.102-120. Rpt in Bishop and Her Art, p.272.

22 Ibid.

23 These galvanic transformations of the wallpaper remind us of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel The Yellow Wallpaper. As her female protagonist is driven further into madness, she sees increasingly a woman trapped behind the wallpaper of her room, 'all the time trying to climb through'. [(London: Virago, 1981, rpt 1983), p.30] The wallpaper begins to change its colours and patterns, to infilutrate the rest of the house and to exert a compelling force on the woman until finally she believes that she has come out of it. Wallpaper is the backcloth to the sleeper's dream in Bishop's poem and to the madness of Gilman's confined woman, making the two states, of dreaming and madness, into close allies and offering each a terrain of imaginative possibility which is limited by the waking or sane mind.

24 Bishop would presumably have read Desnos's poems during her visits to Paris in the 1930's and she would almost certainly have read transition, which printed the surrealists' work from the late 1920's, and which was circulated in the United States. Jolas put his own translations of Desnos's poems in the first edition of transition, including the poem I have referred to.

25 Dougald McMillan, transition: The History of a Literary Era 1927-1938 (London: Calder and Boyars, 1975), p.87.

26 In "The Farmer's Children", published two years after North & South, Bishop again makes use of the Grimm's "Hansel and Gretel" tale. A child called Cato longs 'for the endless full moon of the tale, and the pebbles that would have shone "like silver coins"' to make his trail out of. (C.Pr.196) He has to use 'bits of torn-up newspaper' or crumbs, not being 'able to find the white pebbles anywhere' to drop on his way to sleep in the barn. (Ibid.) As in the poem it is the trail which is recalled, and in both instances the omission of the rest of the story is explained by the work of the unconscious. Though Bishop does not explain Cato's suppression, we are told that his mother is dead and the narrative makes his step-mother's partiality for her natural children clear. In the poem the 'ugly tanks' of the dream-work, though 'contrived to let us do / so many a dangerous thing', also crush the trail and, by their inability to find the cottage, perhaps censor the tale.

27 Tennyson, Poems, p.357.

28 Bishop recalled writing the poem in 1935, when first living in New York City:

> I've forgotten what it was that was supposed to be "mammoth." But the misprint seemed meant for me. An oracle spoke from the page of the New York Times, kindly explaining New York City to me, at least for a moment.
>
> One is offered such oracular statements all the time, but often misses them, gets lazy about writing them out in detail, or the meaning refuses to stay put. This poem seems to me to have stayed put fairly well but as Fats Waller used to say, "One never knows, do one?" [Poet's Choice, ed. Paul Engle and Joseph Langland (New York: The Dial Press, 1962), p.103. Rpt in Bishop and Her Art, p.286]

29 Travisano, Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development, p.31.

30 Bishop emphatically broke out of Marianne Moore's grasp with this poem, cutting herself free from Moore's genteel, episcopalian universe. See Kalstone, Becoming A Poet, pp.79-84;265-269, for details of their disagreement, including the Moores's (mother and daughter) revised version of the poem, which they called "The Cock".

31 Lowell to Bishop, August 21, 1947.

32 Stephenson, Elizabeth Bishop, p.66.

33 Bachelard considers the nest to be the 'origin of confidence in the world':

> we receive [from it] a beginning of confidence, an urge toward cosmic confidence. Would a bird build its nest if it did not have its instinct for confidence in the world? If we heed this call and make an absolute refuge of such a precarious shelter as a nest - paradoxically no doubt, but in the very impetus of the imagination - we return to the sources of the oneiric house. Our house, apprehended in its dream potentiality, becomes a nest in the world, and we shall live there in complete confidence if, in our dreams, we really participate in the sense of security of our first home. (The Poetics of Space, pp.102-103) Bishop's dilemma is that she has no stable, oneiric source for her house to which she can return, however hard she might try. (pp.102-103)

CHAPTER FOUR
A COLD SPRING: 'WHATEVER THE LANDSCAPE HAD OF MEANING'

1 Title of William Carlos Williams's 3rd book of poems (Paris: Contact Publishing Co., 1923).

2 Robert Frost, "Directive", Selected Poems, p.212. 1st published in Steeple Bush, 1947.

3 Bishop to her publisher, 1953. Candace W. MacMahon, Elizabeth Bishop: A Bibliography 1927-1979 (Charlottesville: Virginia UP, 1980), p.14.

4 T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land", Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber 1974, rpt 1983), p.63.

5 William Carlos Williams, Autobiography (New York: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), p.174. The book was first published in full in 1951, four years before A Cold Spring.

6 Williams, Selected Poems, ed. Charles Tomlinson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, rpt 1983), p.45.

7 Ibid.

8 MacMahon, Bibliography, pp.14-15.

9 John Ashbery, "Review of The Complete Poems", New York Times Book Review, (June 1, 1969), pp.8,25. Rpt in Bishop and Her Art, p.203.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Brown interview, 290.

13 Bishop's borrowing is clear if we look at the first stanza of Neruda's poem, though she has made entirely her own poem out of her borrowed conceit:

> Entre plumas que asustan, entre noches,
> entre magnolias, entre telegramas,
> entre el viento del Sur y el Oeste marino,
> vienes volando.
>
> Among frightening feathers, among nights,
> among magnolias, among telegrams,
> among the South wind and the maritime West,
> you come flying.
> [Residence on Earth, trans. Donald D. Walsh (London: Souvenir Press, 1976), p.180-18]

14 Eliot, Collected Poems, pp.215, 208.

15 I will abbreviate the title of this poem to "Over 2,000 Illustrations" from now on, and will do the same with other, long poem titles once discuss them directly.

16 The book Bishop probably has in mind, at least as a prototype for this poem's allusions, is one published in 1910, the year before she was born. Called The Wonders of the World, it was sold in fortnightly parts and advertised as having 'About 1000 Fine Illustrations From Photographs Collected From All Parts Of The World', 'The World's Great Wonders Without Leaving Your Fireside'. (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1910) Bishop also mentions this book in her story "The Baptism":

> They had gone through a lot of old travel books that had belonged to their father. One was called Wonders of the World;...Although they could all sit calmly while Lucy read about the tree that gave milk like a cow, the Eskimos who lived in the dark, the automaton chess player, etc., Lucy grew excited over accounts of the Sea of Galilee, and the engraving of the Garden of Gethsemane as it looks today brought tears to her eyes. She exclaimed "Oh dear!" over pictures of "An Olive Grove," with Arabs squatting about in it; and "heavens!" at the real, rock-vaulted Stable, the engraved rocks like big black thumbprints. (C.Pr.160-161)

The fantasy of comprehensive knowledge together with Christian imperial morality was characteristic of encyclopaedias in the early part of this century, when Bishop was a child, and is very clear in the 1910 Wonders of the World.

17 Ashbery, "Second Presentation of Elizabeth Bishop", World Literature Today 51, p.11.

18 Seamus Heaney, The Government of the Tongue (London: Faber, 1988), p.102.

19 Heaney describes the poem's opening superbly, in a prose as courteously accretive as Bishop's poem, recognising the confidence inherent in the timing of the observing eye:

> Typically, detail by detail, by the layering of one observation upon another, by readings taken at different levels and from different angles, a world is brought into being. There is a feeling of ordered scrutiny, of a securely positioned observer turning a gaze now to the sea, now to the fish barrels, now to the old man. And the voice that tells us about it all is self-possessed but not self-centred, full of discreet and intelligent instruction, of the desire to witness exactly. The voice is neither breathless nor detached; it is thoroughly plenished, like the sea 'swelling slowly as if considering spilling over' (Ibid., p.105)

20 "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" is a translation of one of Luther's most famous hymns, "Ein Feste Burg". The rendering Bishop gives in "At the Fishhouses" would have been familiar to her during her Canadian and American childhood. It was made by the American Unitarian minister and co-founder of the Transcendental Club, Frederick Henry Hedge. Whether or not Bishop knew his history, the hymn provides a peculiar coincidence between the aggressive imagery of a supremacist God and the American transcendental ideology, with its belief that divinity was not impenetrable, but inter-penetrating. This possibility accords much better with the vision of knowledge in Bishop's poem, with its fluid, free movement.

21 Lowell wrote to Bishop on August 21, 1947:

> The description [of "At the Fishhouses"] has great splendor, and the human part, tone etc. is just right. I question a little the word breast in the last four or five lines - a little too much in its context perhaps; but I'm probably wrong.

22 Frost, "Directive", Selected Poems, p.212.

23 Ibid., pp.210, 212.

24 Sir Harry Johnston, The Wonders of the World, p.xvi.

CHAPTER FIVE
QUESTIONS OF TRAVEL: 'WATCHING STRANGERS IN A PLAY'

1 Lloyd Schwartz translates the epigraph as:

> ...Oh to give you as much as I have
> and as much as I can,
> since the more I pay you, the more I
> owe you. ["Annals of Poetry: Elizabeth Bishop and Brazil", New Yorker (September 30, 1991), p.91]

2 Adaptation of L.P. Hartley's remark, 'The past is a foreign country', in the "Prologue" to his novel, The Go-Between. [(Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), p.7.]

3 This surprise is also like a mini-parody of colonialist assumptions, such as that the indigenous culture will somehow be less meaningful than their own.

4 Alvarez, "Imagism and Poetesses", p.324.

5 January 1, 1502 is the date not of Cabral's first discovery but of Coelho and his fleet's discovery of Guanabara Bay, including perhaps the most famous namer of all, Amerigo Vespucci. They named it Rio de Janeiro because it was New Year's Day.

6 Robert von Hallberg writes well on how Bishop is implicated in her forbears' actions, and the degree to which she is aware of this in her poetry, in American Poetry and Culture, pp.80-81.

7 Anne Stevenson, Elizabeth Bishop, p.66.

8 Charles Darwin, Journal of a Voyage Round the World (London: T.Nelson and Sons, 1896), p.41.

9 Ibid., p.40.

10 Ibid., p.39.

11 Here is an example of Vespucci's attentive eye:

> this region is most delightful, and covered with immense forests, which never lose their foliage, and throughout the year yield the sweetest aromatic odours, and produce an infinte variety of fruit, grateful to the taste, and healthful for the body...How shall I enumerate the infinite variety of of sylvan animals, lions, panthers, and catamounts, though not like those of our regions, wolves, stags, and baboons all kinds? We saw more wild animals, such as wild hogs, kids, deer, hares, and rabbits, than could ever have entered the ark of Noah, but we saw no domestic animals whatever...
> [The people] know nothing of the immortality of the soul; they

have no private property, but every thing in common; they have no boundaries of kingdom or province; they obey no king or lord, for it is wholly unnecessary, as they have no laws, and each one is his own master...They sleep in hammocks of cotton, suspended in the air, without any covering; they eat seated upon the ground, and their food consists of the roots of herbs, of fruits and fish. They eat, also, lobsters, crabs, and oysters, and many other kinds of mussels and shell-fish, which are found in the sea. As to their meat, it is principally human flesh. It is true that they devour the flesh of animals and birds; but they do not catch many, because they have no dogs, and the woods are so thick, and so filled with wild beasts, that they do not care to go into them, without going in large company. [El Nuevo Mundo (Buenos Aires: Editorial Nova, 1951), pp.290-291]

12 Vespucci refers to the invading Europeans simply as 'Christians'.

13 J.M. Coetzee discusses the dilemma for European travellers in South Africa, discovering that their European language of pastoral and sublime description is defeated by the South African wilderness. This African landscape leaves the otherwise eloquent narratives of nineteenth-century travellers like William Burchell and Thomas Pringle abruptly circumscribed when they cast their eye to the interior. ["The Picturesque and the South African Landscape", White Writing: on the culture of letters in South Africa (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988)] Bishop's 'Christians' find themselves in a comparable predicament.

14 The end of Bishop's poem is a pungent working of ideas similar to Baudelaire's in "Le Voyage":

> The lookout hails each island, after dark,
> as El Dorado and the Promised Land;
> imagination readies for its feast -
> and sights a sandbar by the morning light.
>
> ...
>
> Awesome travelers! What noble chronicles
> we read in your unfathomable eyes!
> Open the sea-chests of your memories
> and show us jewels made of storms and stars.
> [Charles Baudelaire, Les Fleurs du Mal, trans. Richard Howard (London: Pan, 1987), p.153]

15 Henry James, "Italy Revisited", Italian Hours (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1979), pp.115-116.

16 Ibid., p.116.

17 William Carlos Williams's poems "The Right of Way" and "View of a Lake" and Bishop's prose pieces "To the Botequim & Back" and "A Trip to Vigia" are examples of the celebration of passing through.

18 Blaise Pascal wrote in "Pensee iii, 139:

> tout le malheur des hommes vient d'une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos, dans une chambre. [Pensees (Paris: Garnier Freres, 1964), p.109]

19 Emerson, "Morning, Noon and Night", A Modern Anthology, ed. Alfred Kazin and Daniel Aaron (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1959), p.36.

20 "Manuelzinho" is one of the small number of poems that Bishop made a recorded reading of. Her performance is delivered in a flat, ironic and humorously deadpan voice, rendering the poem both hilarious and sad, for both protagonists.

21 Bishop to Marianne Moore, 27 February 1956. Cited in Travisano, Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development, p.146.

22 Von Hallberg admires Bishop's self-consciously condescending stance in "Manuelzinho":

> One reason Bishop can write so brilliantly about the class relations between a landed foreigner in Brazil, where the poem is set, and a Brazilian tenant-farmer is that she is insistently candid about the most illiberal sentiments. She knows how to make her liberal readers squirm and snicker guiltily. (American Poetry and Culture, p.127)

23 Johnson interview, p.20.

24 Bishop describes her North & South poem "A Miracle for Breakfast" as her '"social conscious" poem, a poem about hunger'. (Brown interview, p.297)

25 See note 4 to Chapter One for explanation of Winnicott's notion of "good-enough mothering'.

26 Derek Mahon is intrigued in a curiously similar way to Bishop by a garage in County Cork:

> Surely you paused at this roadside oasis
> In your nomadic youth, and saw the mound
> Of never-used cement, the curious faces,
> The soft-drink ads and the uneven ground
> Rainbowed with oily puddles, where a snail
> Had scrawled its slimy, phosphorescent trail.
>
> Like a frontier store-front in an old western
> It might have nothing behind it but thin air,
> Building materials, fruit boxes, scrap iron,
> Dust-laden shrubs and coils of rusty wire,
> A cabbage white fluttering in the sodden
> Silence of an untended kitchen garden

...
Here in this quiet corner of Co. Cork
A family ate, slept, and watched the rain
Dance clean and cobalt the exhausted grit
So that the mind shrank from the glare of it.
[Selected Poems (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p.152]

27 Robert Pinsky describes "Filling Station" as:

> a kind of drawn contest between the meticulous vigor of the writer and the sloppy vigor of the family, both poet and grease-monkeys "filling" the potential dull blank of one space and time, filling it with an unexpected, crazy, deceptively off-hand kind of elegance or ornament. [The Situation of Poetry (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1976), p.76]

28 See Starbuck interview, pp.320-321.

29 Bishop's copy of the Opies's Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes (New York: OUP, 1952), signed and dated by her New York, April 1952, has only one margin mark and that is beside a footnote given for the rhyme, "The house that Jack built":

> It has often been presumed that the original of 'The House that Jack built' is a Hebrew chant, 'Had Gadyo', which was first printed in 1590 in a Prague edition of the Haggadah. (p.231)

This putative Hebrew source was noticed by Bishop, writing a poem about a virulently anti-Semitic poet. She hated Pound's anti-Semitism, however much she admired his devotion to literature.

30 See Bishop's remark that all her life she has 'lived and behaved very much like that sandpiper just running along the edges of different countries and continents, "looking for something"' ("Laureate's Words of Acceptance", World Literature Today 51, p.12)

CHAPTER SIX
GEOGRAPHY III: 'THE ART OF LOSING'

1 Starbuck interview, p.316.

2 Bishop to Frank Bidart, June 6, 1975. All Bishop's letters to Bidart are from the collection in the Houghton Library, Harvard.

3 Bishop quips at Frank Bidart's formal address in a letter dated July 27, 1971, shortly after "In the Waiting Room" was published in The New Yorker: 'Please, Frank surely you call me Elizabeth? (As you see by the poem that's what I call myself.)'

4 In her letter to Bidart on July 27, 1971 Bishop remarks: 'Well, it is almost a true story - I've combined a later thought or two, I think'.

5 John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale", The Complete Poems, ed. John Barnard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, rpt 1983), p.348.

6 Ibid.

7 Hugh Kenner gave his book on the invention of American modernism, which came out four years after Bishop's poem was published in the New Yorker, the title A Homemade World (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), an apparent coincidence. Bishop is not, of course, included in Kenner's selection of Language-Makers.

8 Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe, ed. Angus Ross (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965, rpt 1970), p.81.

9 Emerson, "Self Reliance", Selected Essays, p.196.

10 Emerson, "The Poet", Selected Essays, p.271.

11 William Wordsworth, William Wordsworth, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: OUP, 1984), p.304.

12 This is to reverse John Donne's formulation that 'No man is an Island, entire of itself'. ["Meditation XVII", Selected Prose, ed. Helen Gardner & Timothy Healy (London: OUP, 1967), p.101] Bishop would disagree with Donne, but that she is caught within the community of language. Though her Crusoe on his island is, of course, solitary, and he makes up names for mountains, sounds for goats and gulls and recalls his books as full of blanks.

13 Stevenson, Elizabeth Bishop, p.66.

14 Charles Darwin, Voyage of the Beagle, ed. Leonard Engel (New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1962), p.374. This was an edition owned by Bishop.

15 Herman Melville, Great Short Works, ed. Warner Berthoff (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p.99.

16 Ibid., p.100; Darwin, loc. cit., p.373.

17 Melville, op. cit.; Darwin, loc. cit., p.398.

18 Melville, loc. cit., p.130.

19 Darwin, Journal, p.374; Melville, "Encantadas", Great Short Works, p.100.

20 Defoe, Robinson Crusoe, p.121.

21 Ibid., p.175.

22 Starbuck interview, p.319.

23 Defoe, loc. cit., p.81.

24 Harold Bloom, "Geography III by Elizabeth Bishop", New Republic 176 (February 5, 1977), p.29.

25 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), pp.219-253.

26 G.S. Kirk & J.E. Raven, The Presocratic Philosophers (Cambridge: CUP, 1957, rpt 1966), p.197.

27 Defoe, loc. cit., pp.208, 216.

28 Motion, "Chatterton Lecture", p.322.

29 Merrill to Bishop, April 19, 1974.

30 Bishop to Merrill, April 20, 1974.

31 Wordsworth, "Ode ('There was a time')", William Wordsworth, p.298.

32 Lowell, "For Elizabeth Bishop 4", History, p.198.

33 Starbuck interview, p.316.

34 Wordsworth, loc. cit., p.299.

35 Lowell, "Jacket blurb to The Complete Poems (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969). Rpt in Bishop and Her Art, p.206.

36 Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses", The Portable Melville, ed. Jay Leyda (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), p.415.

37 Wordsworth, "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, 1802", Lyrical Ballads, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London and New York: Methuen & Co., 1963, rpt 1984), p.254.

38 Travisano notices that:

> Overhearing,...this "clearing up" becomes more and more a tally of disasters: a list of the different ways human dreams can be shattered, an authoritative catalogue of loss. (Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development, p.201)

39 Wordsworth, "Ode ('There was a time')", William Wordsworth, p.297; Frost's poem "The Most of It" describes the sudden appearance of a 'great buck'. As in Bishop's poem, the apparition is there, and then gone suddenly, giving the end of his poem an abrupt, exhilarated last breath '- and that was all'. (Selected Poems, pp.198-199) Helen

Vendler also compares Frost's poem to "The Moose" and she contrasts the safety, reassurance and satisfaction of Bishop's moose with the 'brute force', 'challenge' and 'disappointment' of Frost's. [Part of Nature, Part of Us (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980), p.109]

40 Bloom, "Geography III by Elizabeth Bishop", New Republic 176, p.29.

41 Bishop's poem is, in part, a reply to Empson's villanelle, "Missing Dates":

> Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills.
> It is not the effort nor the failure tires.
> The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.
>
> It is not your system or clear sight that mills
> Down small to the the consequence a life requires;
> Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills.
>
> ...
>
> It is the poems you have lost, the ills
> From missing dates, at which the heart expires.
> Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills.
> The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.
> [Collected Poems (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), p.60]

Empson's rhyming words - 'fills' and 'kills' - are complementary. Between them they destroy the organism. Bishop's rhyming words counter this destruction, creating a space between them where, as I point out, poems are made.

42 Lloyd Schwartz, New Yorker, p.133. The poem was discovered by Schwartz in 1990, 'illuminated in the roomy margins with small watercolors by Bishop: a square brown house, an apple tree, a goose, a hayloft with a pitchfork, a swan with its head disappearing into the text of the poem, and a fourposter bed.' (Ibid.)

43 Spires interview, p.133.

AFTERWORD

1 Stevenson, Elizabeth Bishop, p.66.

2 Ashbery, "Second Presentation of Elizabeth Bishop", World Literature Today 51, p.8.

3 Cora Kaplan, Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism (London: Verso, 1986), p.70.

4 Spires interview, p.141.

5 See my thesis above, p.12.

6 Ibid., p.45.

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