A New Topography: Elizabeth Bishop's Late Poems

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Honors Essay
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Geography III, the title of Elizabeth Bishop's last book of poems, prepares her readers for both a passage through familiar territory and an exploration of unmapped terrain. A return to the northern landscape of A Cold Spring and the southern landscape of Brazil is promised at the same time that a third and entirely new landscape is hinted at: we can find the Nova Scotia of "At the Fishouses" and "Cape Breton" in "The Moose" and "The End of March" and we can find the tropics of "Song for A Rainy Season" and "The Armadillo" in "Crusoe in England", but the third landscape is not as easily discovered, since it is not a place, but a new quality of openness and ease that runs throughout these late poems and makes them both more personal and more accessible than much of Bishop's earlier work.

One of the ways that Bishop creates this quality of openness and ease in Geography III is through the use of a new type of poem that sandwiches the speaker's account of a liminal, magical, or in some sense extraordinary experience between a description of an ordinary action: a dream between the start of a bus ride and the sighting of a moose, a recollection of a lost island between two scenes set in England, a moment of vertigo between an arrival at and departure from a dentist's office, a vision of a magical house between a walk up and back down a beach. In these middle sections the boundaries between self and other, past and present, adulthood and childhood, waking and sleeping, tend to break down;
the oppositions and polarities that we use to navigate our way through the contradictions inherent in everyday existence blur and overlap. After passing through these moments where the world is suddenly stranger and/or more wonderful than one expected, the speakers seem more fully human, wiser, yet more painfully aware of doubt and uncertainty. While Bishop's earlier poems often trace the growth of the speaker's understanding of the expansion of their perception, none of them deliniate the unfolding or opening up of the speaker's consciousness to the extent that these "sandwich" style poems do. Part of the interest and excitement of reading Geography III lies in hearing how the speakers' outlooks expand to accommodate the mystery and ambiguity that literally lie at the center of these poems.

The only one of Bishop's previous poems that has a "sandwich" style arrangement similar to the arrangement of the poems in Geography III, is "Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" which exactly reverses the order of the three parts by wedging a "real" description of travel between two imaginary descriptions of travel. It is in Bishop's prose, rather than her poetry, that we can find the possible model for the "sandwich" style arrangement which emerges in Geography III. Like the poems that begin and end with a return to the same location or action, one of her essays and two of her stories begin and end with a return to the same object or action. In "The Primer Class" an essay recounting Bishop's school days in Nova Scotia, the opening description of columns of numbers in account books that resemble the columns of numbers Bishop drew as a child, provides a transition
from the present to the past, and the closing description of the columns of numbers on the primer class blackboard provides a transition from the past back to the present. Likewise, in "Memories of Uncle Neddy" the arrival of Uncle Neddy's childhood portrait in Brazil provides a vehicle for recalling the adult Uncle Neddy and the Nova Scotia village of the speaker's past, and the return to the description of the portrait at the end of the story provides a transition back to the speaker's present life. In "In the Village" the scream and the clang of Nate's hammer at the beginning and end of the story do not work as openings into and exits from the past in the same way that the columns of numbers and the portrait of Uncle Neddy do, but they do produce the same framing effect that encloses the story between two recognizable reference points.

In all three of these prose pieces there is a tension between a need for control and a loss of control, between the symmetrical arrangement of the same object or action at the beginning and end of the story, and the placement of an upsetting experience that cannot be rationally framed or contained at the center of the story. There is a similar, yet not as pronounced, tension in the "sandwich" poems of Geography III. In "The Moose" for example, the linear progression of time, in accordance with the setting sun and the arrival of evening in the opening and closing sections, can be seen as an attempt to control the uncontrolable overlapping of past and present time in the "dreamy divagation."
Because "The Moose" has all of the characteristics that I have attributed to the "sandwich" type poem and can be used as a model for exploring the way this arrangement works in other poems in Geography III, it is worth taking a look at first. Besides being read as a poem about a journey towards an encounter with an animal who embodies the mystery and otherness that lies outside the bounds of the human world, "The Moose" can be read as a poem about the journey towards or search for identity. As the poem progresses towards the numinous appearance of the moose, the speaker becomes less anonymous, more intimate and individual. In most of the opening section of the poem she is nobody or everybody, a disembodied voice; in the middle section of the poem, during the "dreamy divagation," she is herself and her grandparents, and the passengers and their grandparents, all at the same time; and in the last section of the poem she is paradoxically most fully herself, at the very moment that the sight of the mysterious moose releases her from the confines of the self.

Besides the fact that no personal pronoun appears in the poem until the end of the thirteenth stanza, the speaker's initial anonymity stems, in part, from her resemblance to the anonymous speakers of oral children's literature, the unknown narrators of fairy tales, parables, and nursery rhymes. Like them she often personifies the non-human world: the tides take the herrings for long rides, a bus journeys west and waits patiently for the passengers, a collie supervises, evening commences, two rubber boots look solemn. And like them her voice often sounds sing-songish or incantory:
From narrow provinces
of fish and bread and tea
home of the long tides
where the bay leaves the sea
twice a day and takes
the herring long rides

where if the river
enters or retreats
in a wall of brown foam
depends on if it meets
the bay coming in,
the bay not at home;

The speaker's anonymity is also suggested by the way that
the change in the tone of her voice matches the change in the
tone of the light, as the poem progresses from late afternoon
into night. This correspondance often gives the reader the
illusion that the words of the poem are emanating from the land-
scape itself, rather than the consciousness of any one individual.

In stanza five when the light of the setting sun glints off the
bus window, the participle phrases of the stanza dart gracefully
back and forth in much the same manner:

through late afternoon
a bus journeys west,
the windshield flashing pink,
pink glancing off of metal,
brushings the dented flank
of blue, beat-up enamel;

When the light grows richer at dusk in stanza 7, the verse of
stanza 8 grows rich in assonance, alliteration, and rhyme that
imitates the movement of the fog and the verse of stanza 9 grows
rich in compound words that cling and creep inside of each other
like the plants and animals they describe:

Its (the fog's) cold, round crystals
form and slide and settle
in the white hens' feathers
in grey glazed cabbages,
on the cabbage roses
and lupins like apostles;
the sweet peas cling
to their wet white string
on the whitewashed fences
bumblebees creep
inside the foxgloves
and evening commences.

And when evening finally arrives the verse grows slower and
more mysterious through a reduction of the number of verbs and
the use of phrases rather than complete sentences:

A pale flickering. Gone.
The Tantramar marshes
and the smell of salt hay.
An iron bridge trembles
and a loose plank rattles
but doesn't give way.

The magical quality of the speaker's description further
reinforces our tendency to see her as anonymous. We usually
associate the ability to do or describe magic with mythical,
archetypal, or legendary figures, rather than real flesh and
blood individuals. At first glance, the fog of stanza 8 seems
fairly natural, but upon closer scrutiny we discover it is rather
fantastic, and wonderful in its own quirky way. Unlike
ordinary fog that hides the world, this fog illuminates the
hidden colours and textures that we usually overlook or don't
have the opportunity to see. During a first reading "The
Tantramar marshes / and the smell of salt hay" in stanza 11
seems like a fairly common description of the landscape enriched
by an echo of lovely a sounds; during a second reading, however,
we are likely to catch the echo of tantra in Tantramar and
wonder what on earth salt hay really smells like.

After stanza 13, where the speaker quietly places both
herself and the reader on the bus with the offhand comment,
"She regards us amicably," in reference to a passenger, we can no longer see her as disembodied and anonymous. However, it is not until after the passage through the "dreamy divagation" and the tensions between self and other, waking and sleeping, past and present which it contains that the speaker emerges as a specific individual with her own voice and way of looking at the world. At the point where the opening section of the poem and the "dreamy divagation" intersect the language and the syntax of the verse becomes more ambiguous:

The passengers lie back.
Snores. Some long sighs.
A dreamy divagation
begins in the night,
a gentle, auditory,
slow hallucination.

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

uninterrupted

talking, in eternity:

Is this the speaker's or the passengers' dreamy divagation? Are the voices who have the conversation which follows the voices of two old people sitting in the back of the bus, or the voices of imagined grandparents from the speaker's and passengers' past?

As the dreamy divagation unwinds these questions about exactly who is speaking, who is being spoken to, and who is being spoken of becomes progressively more unanswerable. At times the speaker seems to be the speaker of the poem or a passenger on the bus recounting the grandparents' conversation,
and at times the speaker seems to be one of the grandparents themselves. Between stanzas 17 and 19, the speaker begins to sound like one of the grandparents themselves, but as soon as we reach stanza 19 this assumption is undercut by explanatory language and the repetition in quotation marks of what was previously stated straight out:

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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.

Yes... that peculiar
affirmative. "Yes...."
A sharp, indrawn breath,
half groan, half acceptance,
that means "Life's like that.
We know it (also death)."
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The next stanza continues to sound like the speaker recounting the grandparents' conversation, "Talking the way they talked / in the old feather bed", but the lines that follow where the "dreamy divagation" and the third section of the poem intersect make it particularly difficult to tell who the speaker of the poem is:

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Now, its 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.
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Is this the grandparents talking to themselves in the comfort of the old feather bed, deciding it is alright to fall asleep? Or is it the speaker on the bus telling herself that it is alright to fall asleep, just like on all those nights in the past when she lived at home and the grandparents were tucked snugly in their old feather bed? Or is it the speaker on the bus telling us that the passengers feel comfortable falling asleep at this point, just as they felt comfortable falling asleep in the past when they were home with their families. And why the note of urgency, the extra "now" and "even" which imply that sometime it may not have been and perhaps is not alright to fall asleep. It is out of the collision between self and other, past and present, imagination and reality, in this beguiling sentence that the speaker's own individual self finally emerges.

Unlike the anonymous speaker at the beginning of the poem and the combination of speakers in the middle of the poem, the speaker at the end of the poem has many of the characteristics that readers have come to associate with Bishop herself. To begin with, there are the slight shifts in perspective and qualifications that she is famous for:

A moose has come out of the impenetrable wood and stands there, looms, rather, in the middle of the road.

... Towering, antlerless high as a church, homely as a house (or, safe as houses).

Why, why do we feel (we all feel) this sweet sensation of joy?
In these lines, unlike the more conclusively stated lines of the opening section, we can hear a fallible and all too believably human speaker checking herself and assessing her judgement at moments when the intensity of her feelings threaten to undercut the precise clarity of her vision.

Like these slight shifts in perspective and qualifications, the understated, almost prosaic-sounding, verse at the close of the poem is one of Bishop's characteristic ways of distancing the reader from highly lyrical or subjective sections of the poem that could become sentimental or melodramatic if handled less skillfully:

by craning backward
the moose can be seen
on the moonlit macadam;
then there's a dim
smell of moose, an acrid
smell of gasoline.

At first glance these lines seem to be less "poetic" than the more obviously rhymed and alliterated lines of the opening section, such as those describing the movement of the fog and the commencement of evening, however on closer scrutiny we realize that they use sound just as carefully only less obviously; the a, oo, i, e, s, and m sounds of these lines linger faintly after we have done saying or reading them, in much the same way that the the smell of moose and gasoline stays briefly behind after the bus moves on.

The characteristics implied by the understated verse and qualifications of the closing section, humility and a capacity for wonder that borders on awe, are the same characteristics that
many readers have come to associate with the self-effacing "I" of Bishop's poems over the years. In this case, however, rather than acting as a dramatic or presence or point of view through which we can filter the events of the poem from beginning to end, the self-effacing "I" or more properly the "we" of the poem evolves gradually as the poem progresses, and the emergence of the speaker's identity becomes as much a part of the movement of the poem as the unfolding of the story that she tells us.

In "Crusoe in England", Crusoe follows the same progression from a more impersonal and objective outlook to a more personal and subjective outlook that the speaker of "The Moose" follows, but unlike "The Moose" that is built around a single "sandwich", the opening and closing description of the bus ride surrounding the "dreamy divagation", Crusoe is built around two related "sandwiches": the opening and closing description of England surrounding the recollection of the island, a linear change in tone in the opening and closing stanzas surrounding a non-linear change in tone in the middle stanzas. The first sandwich works in much the same way as the portrait in "Memories of Uncle Neddy" and the columns of numbers in "The Primer Class" - as a springboard for memory, a transition from the present to the past and back again from the past to the present. The second sandwich, however, works in much the same way as the sandwich in "The Moose". Like the "dreamy divagation" that breaks through the speaker's anonymity, allowing her own self to emerge in the closing stanzas, the non-linear change in tone in the middle stanzas of "Crusoe"
breaks through the linear change in tone in the opening stanzas, allowing a more flexible and ambiguous, yet still linear change in tone to emerge in the closing stanzas.

A closer look at some of the stanzas themselves will show how this development occurs and what it means in terms of the growth and expansion of Crusoe's outlook during the course of the poem. In the second through sixth stanzas there is usually a linear change in tone, in which a rise in tone, often sparked by a recollection of the island's beauty, is followed by a closing sentence that in some way qualifies, deflates, or undercuts this upward movement. As this pattern recurs in the opening stanzas it becomes progressively more pronounced, each stanza having a more extreme rise in tone and a more pronounced drop in tone than the preceding stanza, with the exception of stanza four where our recognition of a change in the speaker's attitude depends more on our growing awareness of the stoic manner in which he describes his self-pity, than on any change in the tone of his voice.

In the second stanza we begin to hear a slight note of enthusiasm or at least interest in Crusoe's voice as he switches from complaining about his shrunken volcanoes, to talking about the gleaming waves in almost incantory language, but this rise in tone is soon checked by his recollection of the cloudy sky that hung above the sea:

- a glittering hexagon of rollers closing and closing in, but never quite, glittering and glittering, though the sky was mostly overcast.
In the third stanza, unlike the second stanza where a slight rise in tone is hindered by a sudden afterthought, a significant rise in tone is deflated by emphatic qualification:

My island seemed to be a sort of cloud-dump. All the hemisphere's left-over clouds arrived and hung above the craters - their parched throats were hot to touch. Was that why it rained so much? And why sometimes the whole place hissed? The turtles lumbered by, high-domed, hissing like tea kettles. (And I'd given years or taken a few for any sort of kettle, of course). The folds of lava, running out to sea, would hiss. I'd turn. And then they'd prove to be more turtles. The beaches were all lava, variegated, black, red and white, and grey; the marbled colors made a fine display. And I had waterspouts. Oh half a dozen at a time, far out, they'd come and go, advancing and retreating, their heads in cloud, their feet in moving patches of scuffed-up white. Glass chimneys, flexible, attenuated, sacerdotal beings of glass...I watched the water spiral up in them like smoke. Beautiful, yes, but no much company.

After the fifth stanza where this upward movement followed by a deflating final sentence reaches its highest peak with Crusoe's elated memory of getting drunk on home-made brew followed by a recollection of his smallest island industry - a miserable philosophy, the tone within each of the middle stanzas (6-9) develops in a more unpredictable manner or remains more or less the same. There is little change in the tone of stanza 7:

The island smelled of goat and guano. The goats were white, so were the gulls, and both to tame, or else they thought I was a goat, too, or a gull.
Baa, baa, baa and shriek, shriek, shriek, baa... shriek... baaa... and I still can't shake them from my ears; they're hurting now. The questioning shrieks, the equivocal replies over a ground of hissing rain and hissing ambulating turtles got on my nerves.

In stanza nine the first four opening lines might lead us to expect a fall from a more lyrical to a more despairing tone, but such a purely linear pattern cannot be simply imposed on it:

When the gulls flew up at once, they sounded like a big tree in a strong wind, its leaves. I'd shut my eyes and think about a tree, an oak, say, with real shade, somewhere. I'd heard of cattle getting island-sick. I thought the goats were. One billy-goat would stand on a volcano. I'd christened Mont d'Espoir or Mount Despair (I'd time enough to play with names), and bleat and bleat, and sniff the air. I'd grab his beard and look at him. His pupils, horizontal, narrowed up and expressed nothing, or a little malice. I got so tired of the very colors one day I dyed a baby goat bright red with my red berries, just to see something a little different. And then his mother wouldn't recognize him.

As the poem draws to a close there is return to the pattern of a rise in tone followed by a qualifying final sentence that was established in the opening stanzas, but it is a return with a difference - the final sentences that follow the rise in tone are more ambiguous, less definitely qualifications of the upward movements that precedes them:

Just when I though I couldn't stand it another minute longer Friday came. (Accounts of that have everything all wrong). 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. He'd pet the baby goats sometimes, and race with them, or carry one around. -Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body. And then one day they came and took us off.

After hearing Crusoe recall both the beauty and pain of his exile, we know that leaving the island is both a form of salvation and a form of bereavement. Unlike stanzas four and six where we can see the final sentences as undercutting the mounting excitement that precedes them, we cannot say whether the last sentence of this stanza marks a more pessimistic drop in tone or a more optimistic rise in tone, and must acknowledge that it suggests both simultaneously. Similar questions of interpretation arise at the end of the next stanza:

Now I live here, another island, the doesn't seem like one, but who decides? My blood was full of them; my brain bred islands. But that archipelago has petered out. I'm old. I'm bored, too, drinking my real tea, surrounded by uninteresting lumber. The knife there on the shelf—it reeked of meaning like a crucifix. It lived. How many years did I beg it, implore it, not to break? I knew each knick 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. My eyes rest on it and pass on.

We can hear the growing enthusiasm and nostalgia in Crusoe's voice as he lovingly describes the lost usefulness of his old knife. But when we reach the last three lines we can't be certain whether Crusoe is using dramatic rhetoric to poke fun at his own sentimentalism or whether he is seriously expressing an almost
spiritual sense of loss; these concluding lines become both an undercutting of the lament that precedes them, and a further development of that lament.

By the time we reach the final stanza Crusoe's voice has become so painfully human, so capable of speaking in a variety of tones at once, that we don't know whether to pity him, laugh at him, envy him, or admire him, and can only listen attentively to him, disregarding all of our previous assumptions about his character, including the ones we may have brought with us from our knowledge of the "real" Crusoe. With its blend of specific realistic details and fantasy, Crusoe's list of what the museum wants him to leave them is very funny: the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes, the shedding goatskin trousers (with moths in them), and the parasol that now looks like a plucked and skinny fowl. But when we reach his question -"How can anyone want such things?", we suddenly don't know whether to be struck by the absurdity of a museum requesting such odd objects, or moved by Crusoe's loss of such wonderful possessions, and the more vital imaginary life that they are tokens of.

Like the process of memory in "Crusoe in England" that gradually opens up the range of Crusoe's voice until it combines a multiplicity of tones, the process of memory in "In The Waiting Room", is in the broadest sense of the word renewing. Much of the tension and interest of "In The Waiting Room" stems from the fact that the speaker has two voices: the voice of an adult recollecting and ordering the memory of her childhood self that speaks in the past tense, uses big words, and often adds parenthe-
tical asides, the voice of a child speaking directly to us, that uses simple diction, and looks at the waiting room from the perspective of someone who is shorter and smaller than most of the people and furniture around her.

During the course of the poem these voices become a single voice, that contains both an adult's and a child's point of view. The first stanza of the poem, prior to the "Oh of pain" sounds mostly like a child's voice, with the obvious exception of the past tense, occasional big words, and parenthetical asides that puncture this illusion:

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.
It was winter. It got dark early. The waiting room was full of grown-up people, arctics and overcoats, lamps and magazines.

In the middle section where the adult's voice recalls and the child's voice tells what it was and is like to pass through a liminal or threshold state, the tension between the two voices reaches its height, and the verse wavers back and forth between first one point of view then another:

But I felt: you are an I,
you are an Elizabeth,
you are one of them.
Why should you be one, too?
I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.
I gave a sidelong glance
-I couldn't look any higher-
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.
I knew that nothing stranger had ever happened, that nothing stranger could ever happen. Why should I be my aunt, or me, or anyone?

"How... unlikely!" and then suddenly puncture the illusion of the child speaking with a parenthetical statement of the confession that as a child she had no way to articulate what she is now capable of telling us as an adult. The tension between the child's and adult's voice reaches its height in the last sentence, where the speaker talks first in the past tense and then in the present tense. In the opening of the sentence the question, "How had I come" written in the past perfect tense implies that the speaker's coming to the waiting room had been completed in the past before some other action or event, but the phrase "to be here" that follows it suggests that the speaker is talking about the present, since we usually use "there" when we are referring to
a place where we were in the past.

In the last stanza, where all of the language works on both a literal and figurative level, it is impossible to separate the adult's voice from the child's voice: each word contains both the matter of fact meaning a child might attach to it and the more metaphorical meaning that an adult recalling her past might attach to it:

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.

Moreover, it's hard not to hear both a greater tenderness and resiliency in this thoroughly combined closing voice, that was perhaps present, but not as apparent, in the more fragmented opening voices.

In Preferences, an anthology where contemporary poets were invited to choose a work from the past to be published alongside one of their own works, Bishop chose to place "In The Waiting Room" next to Herbert's "Love Unknown". Her comments on "Love Unknown" in a talk sponsored by The Academy of American Poets in 1977 may help to clarify what she saw as the similarities between the two poems: "If you imagine seeing it ("Love Unknown"), or painting a picture of it, it would be fantastic, sort of like a Goya painting.....and yet the narrator speaks as if it were something that happened yesterday - this is one thing I like. I like the purity of language, which manages to express a very deep emotion without ever straining. He doesn't even capitalize
when obviously referring to Christ - at least in my edition. He just goes right on." Understatement, the presentation of an extraordinary event in an ordinary manner, the qualities that Bishop singles out for praise in "Love Unknown" are, not surprisingly, the same qualities that make "In The Waiting Room" such a successful poem.

Like "In The Waiting Room", "The End of March" describes an extraordinary experience in an utterly ordinary manner. Only this time the experience is a sort of momentary vision or daydream, rather than a disorienting passage through a moment when the external and internal world overlap. In the opening of "The End of March" we find the speaker walking along the beach on a bleak and cold day. The adjectives used to describe the beach give the reader the sense that he is simultaneously hearing about an external and internal landscape:

Everything was withdrawn as far as possible, indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken, seabirds in ones or twos.
The rackety, icy, offshore wind numbed our faces on one side; disrupted the formation on a lone flight of Canada geese; and blew back the low, inaudible rollers in upright, steely mist.

Withdrawn and indrawn usually describe a psychological state, rather than a physical setting. Rackety usually refers to a group of people or a wooden structure, rather than a natural phenomenon. Inaudible, instead of quiet or silent rollers, implies that rollers are meant to be or want to be heard, almost as if they had a will of their own. And finally "upright steely" carries the added connotation of moral rectitude.
In the following stanza the cold and bleak landscape of the opening stanza is made even more troublesome and beguiling by a track of dog prints that don't seem to lead anywhere and yards of wet white string that end in a snarl. As the speaker looks at this curious view she imagines what it would be like to suddenly reach her "crypto-dream house".

The speaker's stay in this funny house, "a crooked box of a house", "a sort of artichoke of a house, only greener", resembles in different ways all of the magical, liminal or extraordinary experiences at the center of the poems we have been looking at. It has the cozy domestic qualities of the village and the home recalled in "the dreamy divagation": "There must be a stove; there is a chimney/ askew, but braced with wires, and electricity possibly - at least, at the back another wire/ limply leashes the whole affair/ to something off behind the dunes". It is isolated from both the companionship and responsibility of society like Crusoe's island was and offers similar opportunities for the pursuit of "home-made" entertainment: "I'd like to retire there and do nothing, or do 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."

And finally, like the child's liminal experience in "In The Waiting Room", the adult's imagined residence in her dream house sharpens her senses, making the mystery of the ordinary world luminously apparent: "At night a grog à la américaine. I'd blaze
it with a kitchen match/ and lovely diaphanous blue flame/ would
waver, doubled in the window."

After passing through this wonderful shelter, the speaker is
able to renew her vision of the cold and bleak landscape, without
ever losing sight of its true character. In the third stanza
each of the things seen on the beach in the first and second
stanzas are tentatively and imaginatively transformed. The multi-
coloured stones that throw out long shadows then pull them in
again are a furthermore affirmative development of the "withdrawn"
and "indrawn" ocean that releases nothing. The paw prints of the
lion sun are a more exuberant version of the dogprints that
looked a bit like lion prints. And the kite that the lion sun
bats out of the sky to play with is a fanciful solution to the
yards and yards of kite string. Yet, despite, or rather because
of, these fanciful conversion, the speaker doesn't fail to note
that the wind chills her face on the other side, that the
harshness of reality is both what the imagination seeks to over-
come and what gives it meaning and value in the first place.

In "The End of March" we are likely to notice a
contrast between the stillness of the middle section,
describing the artichoke house, and the motion of the
opening and closing sections, describing the walk down the
beach, that is present, only less apparent, in the other
poems that we have looked at as well. We are not made aware
of this contrast through a difference in the pace at which
we are asked to read the poems; since the middle sections
do not slow down the speed of our comprehension with an array of details or difficult syntax, but through a difference in the manner in which we are asked to look at the world of the poems, since the middle sections often contain fewer images of movement through space and time than the opening and closing sections.

In "The Moose" and "In The Waiting Room," for example, the opening sections present us with a catalogue of images that add up to a panoramic view, and convey the sense of the speaker, as well as ourselves perhaps, traveling, physically or in the imagination, over a significant distance. In "The Moose" stanzas eight through fourteen are self enclosed scenes, mini-postcards or mini-poems, that could easily stand alone outside the broader context of the whole poem, yet taken together as a series convey exactly the sense of movement that one gets riding on a bus—brief glimpses of houses, marshes, gardens, bridges. In contrast, the middle stanzas, describing the "dreamy divagation," are not built around visual images, but the narrative of conversation, and often depend on each other for their sense, rather than remaining self enclosed. If we could watch a color movie gradually turn into a somewhat blurry and perhaps yellowing black and white photo, we might get the same sense of stillness evolving out of motion, that the switch from the crisp images of the opening section of "The Moose" to the dialogue of the middle section conveys.
In "In the Waiting Room" the opening list of pictures in the *National Geographic* evokes motion through a series of images, in much the same way as the self enclosed scenes at the beginning of "The Moose." The exoticness, random disparity, and quick succession of the magazine pictures produces an overwhelmingly rapid movement through space and time, making the speaker feel as if she is falling off "the round, turning world:

- the inside of a volcano, black, and full of ashes;
- then it was spilling over in rivulets of fire.
- Osa and Martin Johnson dressed in riding breeches, laced boots, and pith helmets.
- A dead man slung on a pole —"Long Pig," the caption said.
- 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.

In contrast to this quick succession of pictures, the middle section of the poem, like the middle section of "The Moose," is built around a sort of dialogue, only this time the dialogue is a monologue in which the speaker explores her past experience through a series of rhetorical questions and tentative replies. As in "The Moose," the switch from the imagistic language of the opening section to the more dramatic and interpretive language of the middle section, constitutes a change from an external physical world in motion to an internal psychological world temporarily suspended outside of motion.
In "Crusoe in England," this contrast between motion of the opening section and the temporarily suspended quality of the middle section, has more to do with a change from the present to the past tense than a switch from condensed imagistic language to less imagistic language. Yet, like "The Moose" and "In The Waiting Room" where catalogues of images create a sense of movement that lead the speaker and the reader into the still centers of the poems, the image of an island literally being born in the first stanza of "Crusoe in England" foreshadows the figurative rebirth of Crusoe's lost island in the middle section of the poem.

A movement from motion to stillness and back again to motion is elemental, natural as a pause to catch one's breath in the middle of a run or the daily ritual of going to sleep and waking up again the next morning. In this sense, the poems in Geography III that sandwich the speaker's description of a magical, mythical or liminal experience between an opening and closing description of an action, can be called mimetic, rooted in the order and rhythm of everyday life in a way that makes their progression genuinely renewing.
Bibliography:


Bishop, Elizabeth, The Complete Prose, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux


Reading list:


Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

Herbert, "Love Unknown," "The Collar," "Virtue," "Love(3)," "Redemption," "Affliction I, (particularly the last stanza, in comparison to the last stanza of "Crusoe in England")."