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**Scarecrow**

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in partial fulfillment of the  
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## Abstract

*Scarecrow* is a dissertation in two parts. It begins with a book-length manuscript of original poetry that explores the uncanny process of inventing our many selves and the consequences of performing these selves under real or imagined scrutiny. The poems extend the lyric's introspective nature by suggesting that this continual process of invention and re-invention is never certain and creates only projections—various transparent approximations of whom the speakers think they should be. The speakers' endeavors to find something solid and immutable about themselves create the underlying tension in the manuscript. Because of the shifting nature of the self in this work, the poems rarely rely on the narrative *I* as a focal point and instead turn to unexpected juxtaposed topics and imagery largely taken from a palette of natural and scientific interests. From particle physics and M-theory to the contradictions that are California, the poems of *Scarecrow* operate under the belief that as we strive to discover the nature of the universe around us, we learn the nature of ourselves.

Complementing the manuscript is a scholarly essay titled “Transgression and Transformation: Racial Negotiation in Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Brazil’ Poems.” This essay investigates the poetic techniques Elizabeth Bishop devised in the “Brazil” section of her book *Questions of Travel* to scrutinize how racial identities were constructed and positioned in postcolonial Brazil.



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## Table of Contents

### I

Parallax.....	2
Apology for Seeing Something Beautiful .....	4
Allegory Takes a Nosedive .....	5
Learning to Drown.....	6
Our Story: A Love Poem.....	7
Ghazal .....	9
I Eat My Television.....	11
Director X.....	12
California.....	14
West Coast, Three to Six.....	15
Something Organic .....	17
Apollo, Languishing.....	19
Pox .....	21
Smart Like Ox.....	23
Along the Aisles.....	25
Quotes From the Investigation .....	26
Sycophants & Debutantes .....	28
The Mime’s Eye.....	30
Allegory Ups the Ante .....	31
Doppelgänger.....	33

Anonymous.....	34
The Magician.....	35
The Scarecrow’s Apprentice .....	36

## II

Twilight.....	39
<i>Ex Nihilo</i> .....	40
The Problem with Glass .....	41
I Created a Universe Once.....	43
Ockham’s Razor .....	45
Oracle, Waiting.....	47
Twin, Absorbed .....	49
’79 Flux .....	51
Ether .....	54
Mucking It.....	56
The Night the Blinds Broke.....	57
Narcosis.....	58
One-Night Sestina.....	59
Language .....	61
For the Love of Eye at the Disco .....	63
Mute Desire .....	64
Gold.....	65

What Dictionaries Are Good For.....	66
Rare Metal .....	67
Crossing a Stream in February .....	68
Elemental.....	70
Happy Simulacrum .....	72
Seducing Eris.....	74

### III

Transgression and Transformation: Racial Negotiation in Elizabeth Bishop's "Brazil" Poems .....	76
--	----



**I**

## Parallax

For all that's apparent, we know  
very little. Saturn's rings evanesce

for the casual observer too lulled  
by H—as Houdini's wife

called both him and heroin—to follow  
the sight lines of escape. We angle

our gaze, grasp only the eye's ostensible  
stillness at ninety miles an hour

as our car clutches Earth, and we fall  
lidless around the sun. Light

speed curves us as six or six  
hundred cows hover on a hill,

their teeth grinding chlorophyll  
into satiety. Shade your salt-flat

eyes—so tired of coronas

dissolving into dusk, into lost

rings. We push the white. We seek

lucidity and wing, clamber into fluid

skins to hide what little we know

of ourselves from the leering moon.

## Apology for Seeing Something Beautiful

How cliché to see the moon  
reflect off frost at  
dusk,  
even if her cycle's new and casts

only rabbits and raccoons  
from winter fields. That  
dust  
of light that dances with ice on grass

probably comes from typhoons.  
Seas riled with heat  
must  
craft hackneyed drafts that smash ships to grist

and blow corpses to lagoons  
where rent spirits hate  
most  
their icy radiance that persists.

## **Allegory Takes a Nosedive**

Allegory jumps  
from the rooftop  
and falls  
toward the mirror  
on the ground.  
Words he utters—  
the pleas  
he stutters—  
are bricks  
in mortar,  
too sheer to stop  
his fall; he finds  
no word to be  
a window, until  
he hits the sky.

## Learning to Drown

You're part of the water,  
one-celled, amniotic, industrial  
bleach, and shining. You soak  
the bed, play red on the sheets.  
They beckon the nurse. *Come  
over, come over.* We hold hands, red  
rover. Your nipples chafe against  
light, blind. What would I taste,  
iron or salt if I took them to mouth  
once more? There's a downpour  
in the desert. Like the rain, I seek  
the lowest point. I admit I want  
dark, surrender. You float  
in yourself. An arid room wicks  
you away. Fluorescence sinks  
over your skin. Disappears. Garish  
home, barely bulbed, incandescent  
family treks in, out, hauls off the edges  
and corners, but leaves the dark.

## Our Story: A Love Poem

I bought a tree  
for my living room.  
The leaves never fell.

So tell the story.

Tell the story  
from beginning  
to end.

My calendar's grid is too narrow  
for time to sift my daily routines.

Tell the story as you would stroke a fish.

My sister had a glass fish for pennies.  
She broke it.

Tell that story of man,  
incarnate—sky's  
promises that gravity can't  
allow.

One hydrogen, then two.  
The vacuum of space isn't quite.

Make *me* a story: I was born  
then torn.

So now you breathe air.  
How can you feel anything

but different?

Tell me why a widow forgets  
which side of the bed she slept on  
for fifty-one years.

Bits of sky keep falling on my house,  
so I sleep in the basement.

Tell me when you're ready;  
will you deny reparations?

I can smell nothing but must.

Tell me.

A story?

Me.



## **Ghazal**

Pines are razed so cherries may bloom in Michigan.

Cherries rot in pine sap on the ground in Michigan.

Flies collect in sap like angels on fly paper,

but angel wings are dashed on the stony coasts of Michigan.

Angels can't ascend the moon's reflection.

They drown in the lakes of northern Michigan.

The fine white glow of halos floating offshore

guides former lovers along ancient paths of Lake Michigan.

I follow decaying photons imitating your skin

as you lead me over trails of frozen Michigan.

As water turns to salt, we are lost with only one

sip while the skeletal cold thrashes us in Michigan.

In fading halo light, the moon long set, I turn in black

to find an Erie coast and leave the harshness of Michigan.

Along the Erie shore, I wait, as halos float down the lakes,  
for spring to thaw the orchards and dunes of Michigan.

Eight months and you call: *Hello, is Bob there? No? Nothing  
Important. Tell him I'm in love again in northern Michigan.*

## **I Eat My Television**

There's an electron sandwich  
in my living room  
on which I dine,  
hour by hour,  
until pieces of light pummel  
my head and static razes  
my awareness.

I do not think I am  
a glutton. I remember  
the outside:  
the moss green  
cloud blown violently by  
the cold summer breeze.

Still, I *am*  
hungry.

## Director X

Stars, bedazzle yourselves. Conspire  
in resplendent fabrics. Let *action* belie  
your red-carpet love of children.

Group once a year in velvet  
constellations, capped teeth and hard  
candies in your mouth. Step from limo.

Into a microphone deny: *He forgot  
his underwear, but I would never paw  
at soft fabric where sin begins.*

No, you're no Polanski. Invent and repeat  
by rote: *it's the best script I've seen.*

*I had to take the part.* Applause.

Californians, rest on a fault of your own.

Pretend: *I'm a superstar. Daddy makes  
me feel good. I don't touch.*

*I only covet a premiere invitation,  
fresh young flesh.* Nominee

and winner, silver your mirrors. Throw  
pennies in an Oscar pool. Go  
supernova—take it all with you.

## California

The sun incites the trees and chlorophyll,  
determines minds to dream on forest floors  
beneath a thousand years. I'd breathe the gill  
or lose this *habilis* thumb, bar the doors  
of evolution. Water's scarred the land  
and life's mushroomed: bragging Y's skim and skill  
pheromonal waves, poised on inner ears,  
as swayed double X's abandon sand  
for desire and TV static smears  
a spectral glow on loose cerebral grooves  
like luminous lichen encrusting bark  
stripped for network sets. Actors fake their moves,  
tease the archaic electrons to spark  
endorphins, dreams, regrets along the maze  
of neural paths like ultraviolet rays.

## **West Coast, Three to Six**

Sell their fame in cellophane at twenty  
bucks a blow. Jellied men in suits  
raise waves with a baker's cousin—thirteen  
years old and she knows how to swirl

her tongue stud like all the Arroyo's dirty-faced  
girls living under fingered glass. Men in alleys  
and Jaguars buy their families food. She models  
pretzel twists, rise by four, sell by six, pulls

back foreskins, blows and makes a wish to be  
anywhere but this circle's center or the police  
cruiser cleaning her face and rolling her wrists,  
learning that cuffs aren't always for play.

Sunset's own primetime trial emotes as the buyers  
perform on a confectioner's stage. I've talked to strangers  
hanging from palms: a dozen peers adjourn to breakfast  
buffets, wolf caffeined sweets, discuss pinot

noir and a minor's consent. Caramel kiss, *sweet young ass*,  
*that's what I like*, a whore's justice is twelve sneering jowls  
deciding that probation is enough payment, that candy  
stolen from a baby is worth a half a year at most.



## Something Organic

Don't come  
to the garden and speak  
of imbalance, of soil  
and salt leaching  
liquids from us. So what  
if we are celery  
and blue, dead  
stalks siphoning  
color by habit—  
isn't this what we learned  
from osmosis: things  
come and go?  
No. We go  
where we're forced.  
Don't leave—  
the gloves, basil,  
and slugs will want  
to know why. Look  
at the compost under  
my nails, it proves  
I know how to coax  
life and death

across membrane—

one way or the other.

What is a slug

except a target

for salt, writhing

and shriveling like our skin

on each other? But stay.

I'll remember to soak

the tender root

reap and love

whatever I don't eat.

## **Apollo, Languishing**

Daphne, force  
your tears a little  
left. I still can move  
my arm from elbow  
to wrist, bend  
and twist like October  
that takes your leaves  
and bows your boughs  
to lowly Earth. Force  
your amber over my ear  
and shoulder. Flow down  
my nape; my legs  
need stillness after  
the burn of wanting.

Let our movement be  
our image carried  
by the river, so Gods  
and man will know  
that you kiss the hollow

of my hand, my small  
of the back, the flesh  
on the back of my knee

## Pox

This virus was invented  
and in our house, it mixes  
our blessings, inflicts a fever  
and pitch to disguise  
your forgetting. There's no  
Victorian mnemonic to restore  
what's lost. *Mon Amour*  
sounds foreign to your ears  
like the sounds of Paris  
after the war, as vendors  
haggling the price of bread  
in nasals made you laugh  
as much as the grunts of sin  
becoming sacred in our  
honeymoon bed did.  
Forty years later and I lure  
reflections from your eyes  
that look like the carnal  
knowledge we taught  
each other, but only see

myself looking into yours

and too soon I shift

from your eye's light.

## Smart Like Ox

And you weren't  
very strong on Mars  
either, boy with marbles  
and chalk on the wet  
blacktop. You pulled  
down your pants and humped  
the grass while you tongued  
the dirt. Your frosted glasses  
became everyone's game. You,  
boy, seven, pale and just plain  
dumb—your laugh, a hiss  
and snort. You studied the solar  
system, Japanese monsters  
and thought the swing  
set could take you to Pluto.  
And I know you never made  
it off this planet or anywhere  
close because I see you every day  
eat steel-cut oats, tuck  
your t-shirt into your tighty  
whities, skip shaving for days. Just

build a model out of clay. Make  
it Gamera. Fly this turtle  
to anywhere but here.



## **Along the Aisles**

The woman was aware  
she was wearing leather  
pants in the store, her spaghetti  
hair falling down to hide  
the sheen, the curve, her ass  
squeezed into a wrap  
for the man who followed  
behind her, grabbing the cans  
she wanted  
in her cart. The man was  
  
aware how she looked  
at the boy stocking the shelves,  
how he moved pasta  
left, then right to get a feel  
for what was stacked and how  
much he needed to fill the gap.

## Quotes From the Investigation

*—a found pantoum, after the disappearance of Michelle Vickers*

We'll pass out yellow ribbons, that'll be enough.

She was so young; it's really quite a shame.

It sounded like she and her boyfriend were just being rough.

Things—well, they're not going to be the same.

She was so pretty; it's really quite a shame.

I met her at a party—no wait, it was lunch.

Things just aren't going to be the same

though We hadn't really keep in touch.

No, I met her at a party and then we did lunch.

Neighbors found her cat and thought something was wrong.

We didn't have time to keep in touch.

Her parents have come to remove her things.

Tim retrieved her cat and knew something was wrong.

We never believed it could happen. It did.

We had to go and remove her things.

The police think it was some one she trusted.

We can't believe it happened to us, but it did.

I know her boyfriend. He'd never be rough  
though I'm sure it was someone she trusted.  
They think yellow ribbons will be enough.

## **Sycophants & Debutantes**

leer on a parquet slab. Hand  
in hand and hand on back,  
they twizzle and step, throw  
heads back and bow.

Ligaments and tendons  
writhe in threes as harpsichords  
pound allemandes in cascades.

Three by three: count no  
survivors. Step, quick step  
under vault-hoisted  
crystal, skin slips skin  
as guests slough muscle  
and bowel into puddles.

Boys' flayed faces grimace  
at fathers whose approval  
they seek—hands grope  
respectfully even as they drop  
to the floor. Bone and hair thrash  
under lace and silk as numbers  
continue to grow. Scrubbers  
will wait to hose revelers down  
steel drains—to interrupt

would be rude. On the eve  
of Poland's partition, the young  
danced as monsters must have  
before the Age of Reason.  
I'll withdraw if I've offended—  
this dance was nothing if not polite.



## **Allegory Ups the Ante**

Allegory deals each card from the top  
of the deck, then looks at his heart  
among the spades. Across the table, Man Ray bets  
his brush—without paint. Allegory calls  
with his mirror and rain, then sets his heart aside  
and asks Man, “How many you want?”  
One is the answer—so Allegory  
peels two cards from the deck.

Allegory and Man stare as they look at their cards.

Man Ray starts the bet with two  
glass jars. Allegory meets with his shirt  
then raises a star, causing Man to throw in his pay phone  
and grater. Allegory pauses, then calls with a fable.

When cards hit the table, Man Ray straightens his hair  
and looks at Allegory from the side  
of his eye and says: *A flush to my straight. Damn—*

*I thought I would win at least once in my life.*

*So take it all, my friend; don't act*

*surprised. You're good at the draw—*

*I can't read your eyes.*



## **Doppelgänger**

Mirror, hide me.

There's a man

Looking at me

With my eyes.

A projection

On a darkened

Plane, he stares.

With knowledge,

Unyielding

And penetrating,

His perception is more

Than flesh.

I stand, judged

By cold glass,

Silver-painted

And omniscient.

## Anonymous

One more button undone. Michelangelo's knees soak through on the quarter-booth floor as another trick comes to pay his respect. Adult videos for a quarter have never had such theological value. In the flickering reflection of video on spit, muons and nuons play drama on a sliding skin stage: lucid scenes of Mike's past, kneeling before God where he first learned the Latin *fellatio*—the studio audience howling at his broken Brooklyn-accent slang, *How you doin'?* There is nothing except the Word and the moans of the crowd, then silence. He knows when to pause for a comedic beat. Gesso and carpal tunnel, scaffolding, Mike's been on his back before, been bent over before.

How does he get himself into these positions? His face presses into Plexiglas as he comes face to face with the monitor's glow. Another quarter slides down the chute. Mike keeps his eyes closed and re-invents perspective: his arms, long enough to reach around the light of the TV, grab for something solid—something more permanent than an image. In the sudden orange of the garish withdrawal when there are no more quarters, only time to pull up his pants, Mike's words betray him: *let me follow and I will*. These words are lost in the empty black of the swinging booth door.

## **The Magician**

You cannot see my hand. It moves so quickly.  
Before the light can be transposed against  
your brain or even reach your eye, I'm done—  
the dove is gone. So brief my touch against  
your skin, so slight your heart upon my arm,  
you always knew I'd fly away and leave  
white feathers that tickle and scratch your skin  
like whiskers, fingernails, and teeth. Our bed  
is empty, pillows torn, and impressions  
left in cotton sheets will smooth to white.  
I once again will do my show and show  
my audience I can be trusted, show  
that I am wearing sleeveless shirts, and you  
will take me back because, though bed sheets hold  
no memories, skin recalls bruises; it needs them.

## The Scarecrow's Apprentice

I'm a riddle in eleven syllables.

I'm a triangle with seven sides each thicker  
than the last. I'm a pun and a door, your kid  
self tugging your pant leg—stretching denim, time  
in narrowing circles until each becomes  
the other on a straw-filled plane. I'm gravity.

I play favorites. Papier mâché becomes peaks  
when I hang on Hollywood sets. There, as in  
here, I am only what you want me to be:  
the coarse burlap of space shining with enough  
light to notice these weathered holes need patching.

I could stop right here, but I have more to say.

It doesn't take real eyes to see that I'm not  
suited for such sublime hanging. Of nimbus  
and thorn, I am divine. Crows circle through me—  
my parts that are sky—relishing my beauty  
as fields go barren and drift under washed out  
clouds. Please forgive me for pretending my arms  
don't have previous lives. I will forgive you  
for asking why I hang here, why I struggle

to be less beautiful than I am. It's easy  
to make no sense, to murmur amid parched fall  
winds, to fail your only reason for being.

II

## Twilight

The frogs in my pond creak,  
cackle, or crow; I used to call  
it singing. Their lives are iron  
and water, rust and algae, and I  
called it singing. That song  
through my screen warps  
the difference in diurnal lives:  
the balance of waiting tonight  
for tomorrow, needing to believe  
that after dusk the aberrations  
of breathing forced, joints torn, tumors  
formed were only passing phases—the moon  
against the sky, new to new. My hands  
feel nothing though heat bends light  
around the metal of the iron as I prepare  
clothes for tomorrow's day, work  
and pay. Heat rises to the ceiling.

*Ex Nihilo*

*after Bishop, after Blake*

Virgo deflowered by Taurus—her blood  
clots comets' dust, bears incinerating  
stars. She's knows this fusion; her half-  
breeds pander their freak in canvas tents  
as she sells you any faith you'll buy  
so uncertainty will keep her on heaven's arm.

Below this scene, I'll snuff her sun, walk  
dismally among the shades. I'm tired  
of alchemizing our galactic spin to find  
a quicker silver and searching the cosmic  
din for dimes to pay admission to shows  
where they pound our skin with cattle bones.

Since euphoria's the state with the prettiest  
name, I'll survey a line and live in the middle  
always spying from the attic window, always  
fearing each knock is the cops coming to balance  
offenses. I'll pray: Holy Lachesis, stretch  
my thread into a line so I eventually forget.



## The Problem with Glass

Start the poem here.

Face on glass, eyes on air, look.

It's silicon

and hydrogen—

let them go.

Count Helium. Sing in wheezy falsetto.

Start

breathing,

gasp and laugh, then

ask yourself why in words—

dead end.

Paper clips, rubber

bands, molten

sand—fall

leaves and fireflies, mayonnaise jars, no air.

Swim through liquid sand.

Another chance:

clips bend, bands break, but the sand  
you played in yesterday

hardens, traps  
your blistered feet.

You punch holes  
in lids to breathe  
the sky, because all

you can do is wait.

## **I Created a Universe Once**

Nothing—then: tango  
in darkness, the strong  
force and light. Earth  
coalesced and human

brains grew big  
as small Easter hams  
while chambered hearts  
divided themselves, ready

to steal a rained-out  
noon recess in a second-  
grade corner. The world  
was a puddle—a splash

of blue finger paint  
turning brown with added  
land. When I painted with Kristi  
under thunder and flickering

light, her eyes blinked  
in fluorescence and I knew

I had to paint the stars.

I pulled more paper

from the roll, pushing

away brushes and coffee

cans and covered the white

with black, pulled more

paper, and more—the stars

are so very far away—

and yard by yard, I created

space. Kristi watched

and, perhaps bored

with the void, blew

farting noises on her arm

while I painted heaven.

## Ockham's Razor

Low country, slip

a little lower. I'll watch

the catacombs as they flood, separate

rot and guilt on limestone. In the crypts of New Orleans,

the dead rest only a year

before the air's water and salt

melds their bodies with the slabs.

Slumber turns to molder under a land that wasn't here before.

I'd ask the mountains to shift,

to offer me relief of living on a higher

plain, but this is the delta—as in *mouth*,

as in change, as in go speak the change that gravity compels:

the surging of silt into water. I part

new land. I scrape one corpse

for another, track time by the clothes

of the buried. I forget how to see the day.

There is only always—and always

another *now*. I see lives

pass from each star's light, but too soon lose count

as the gulf chides *tell them* behind my back.

## Oracle, Waiting

She'll never leave  
the room, sees  
it in chicken livers stuck  
to aluminum, burnt  
organs that cajole her eyes  
to see each line  
on her palm, still tracing the same,  
converging a slope  
of callus and oil—skin  
too thick to slough,  
too old to render anything  
new. Cages  
lined with July's weather  
and lottos open  
for the birds' return. Ivory  
chords, winter  
rain diminish the E  
in Bach's Fugue.  
She watches children—pale  
as chicken bones—  
leap puddles into the salt-  
stained yellow

of the Kings local bus.

Her crystal crooks light  
and traps the children  
in tomorrows only she  
knows. Birds  
cross corners, thud  
into the window closed  
tight. She knows nothing  
clearly as her knees'  
cold and rakes her thoughts  
ensconced in her drowsy  
chair, surprised  
at last. Her tower laid  
in reverse, this future could not  
have been predicted. Birds  
broken on the sill,  
bus oil sheens the abandoned  
street. She throws  
her bones on sacred ground—  
the TV static, her fixed  
stars dotting heaven's sphere.



## **Twin, Absorbed**

My appendix swelled;  
the doctor found it contained  
all dimensions and complications  
spiraled: a nick, sliced nerve,  
synapse break, and, in relative  
motion, a tongue like mine.  
Space poured from your mouth  
in my abdomen and you asked  
me to take you to your lover's  
north of Columbus. The other  
side of my other side, the far side  
of the sun is your only eye, socketed  
in a skull I was used to sleeping  
on. That eye looks like our mother's.  
How much of you could she afford  
to be? Your lids and lobes like paper  
cuts, your teeth too crooked  
and gnashed for this decade of capped  
and bleached and if you're newly  
born, everyone's older than I care  
to remember. You are matter  
annihilated, a twist of flesh

coaxing me north, but time  
and distance are working  
against us. And how much of you  
can I afford to be with the brane  
between us sagging? We're strings  
and soup cans; uncertainty  
binds us. Symmetry broken, you  
give me mass as I lie in a wheat  
field on John's farm north of the city.

## '79 Flux

Particles

or waves

like polyester

weaves spill

over candent floors

of rising flame.

Widening flares

and bass lines

hustle threes

into fours as linear

clocks wind

against lunar

tides. Inevitable:

trips of the tongue

into the mouth of matter.

Loss lights

on the chests of dancers

breaking in waist-

deep dunes.

Hourglass sand

slides down

itself like songs

yelped against

the strobe-light surge

battering the door.

Tongues drift

into the valley; language,

too, must always

reinvent itself.

Dust sands

the empty dance

floor and the bar's

silver bar

shifts to the black

of beach glass

found by slivered

moon. Uprooting

dune grass,

breakers gorge on

land, eroding

our need to save

today's wants

for tomorrow. Encroaching

songs of a flock

of seagulls, another

new wave

rolls in at dawn.

## **Ether**

Air became my arms.

Sky wilted away.

I forgot my watch.

Can you hear my voice?

I remembered Kindergarten as a piece of wood (birch)—

or, at least, white trees, leaves

made of dust and cold, dissolving

like conversation.

When I was seven I was shorter.

When I was twelve I was still shorter.

I had a splinter in my finger—in too deep

for me to find. I searched for it, my legs strapped

to my back like the first three minutes of the universe—

that instant followed by the only things I knew:

licorice staining your teeth, stop signs on bedroom walls, cat hair  
stuck in dried pancake syrup.

## **Mucking It**

Today I'll be a learned lover—all table  
of contents and multiplication. Like twos and fours  
becoming eights and apes, our brains continue  
to swell, and I know to drive it slow  
on 62 from Wooster to Columbus, after a week  
on your parents' pull-out couch. Driving  
forty-five, our hands and a plan are all we have.  
Love's always about timing—knowing  
when and how quickly: hydrocarbons mucking  
lightning, a nascent house on a hill in Utica.  
Exposed wood, mud floors, another time trial,  
and two 314's could become a 628 in the UPD's  
revised code. Grasping, invertible thumbs  
and full-frontal eyes have primed us  
for this evolutionary swoon: lift, grunt, pull.  
We know this math; we could do it  
on that rusting bike in the corner. Jerk  
the handle. Bite lip. Ring bell. Here's an old entry  
in the encyclopedia of what to do right now.



## **The Night the Blinds Broke**

The neighbors are watching  
from darkened  
rooms. They watch  
me press close  
to the candle, too close  
to burn. They hold  
their breath as they watch

you appear. They know  
our flesh in black  
sky, flooded with night. They watch  
until moths glide down to share  
our light and obscure their view  
of our delight.

## **Narcosis**

From surface to sand, doubloons  
descend in a shower of treasures  
belying the tragedies above.  
It might be a matter of refraction,  
of light around thigh and shin and one  
hand finding another under white  
Caribbean sand but in these cascades  
of ancient gold, you are my sun.  
These tropical shallows are warmed  
and I am beautiful with your light  
as we walk the rippled surface  
of the sky, disoriented and giggling  
into bubbles showing us the way  
to navigate time. We should follow.  
We should choose to live, but let's  
stay, hands in the sand just to see  
what we'll find in ourselves. A pinch  
of nitrogen in my side. We should go,  
but what fun would surfacing be?

## One-Night Sestina

Again, again, I hear the clock tick, tick,  
tick into another wordless night  
as I lie on words strewn over my bed,  
lose them in shadows a bare bulb  
throws. I am here to write a poem.  
The minutes go and go, and the fog  
  
grows thick like that movie The Fog  
where every one dies. The tick  
quickens and the poem  
still doesn't exist. The night  
is eerily lit from the 60-watt bulb  
that watches from its perch above my bed  
  
and smirks at me as I lie in that bed  
writing and pushing the fog  
from my head. I stare back at the bulb  
but it still only smirks while the clock chimes in: tick,  
tick, tirk. Something is changing tonight.  
I stare at the ceiling, not writing this poem  
  
and the ceiling stares back—it's written its poem,

wants to sleep in the dark above my bed  
that's so common—no, expected—each night  
so the textured ceiling allows the fog  
to fill its ridges, but still hears the clock tirk, tick,  
tick and the being in charge is certainly the bulb

so the ceiling glares at me, past the bulb,  
as I lie on my back cursing this poem  
in the form of a chant, like the clock with its tick  
as I lie down and write in this empty full bed  
and the cold reaches in to solidify the fog  
that throws itself against the black of the night

outside of the window, outside in real night.  
But these are just words and the nasty bulb  
knows it. It laughs at me for comparing fog  
and my thoughts so I forget about the poem  
and roll to my back and press into bed  
enveloped in light and each tick, tick...

## Language

You were rock salt

on my tongue—scrape,

dissolve, then acid burn. We learned our bodies, moist on smooth stone,

at night in a cave. I whispered water

that spilled over your body and time—too cold,

as if it were my voice you wanted to hear.

Morphemes into phonemes,

a cramped popping of a hip, an exclamation point of flesh on flesh—the syntax

of action became more clear. And I thought

you said something Latinate over my Anglo-Saxon

grunts, but it was the river of whispered

water over the rough,

muscular heft of your thigh. Useless parts

of speech were carried away, and eddies etched only verbs

in us. And then we breathed the dampness:

no sounds, no air, no light to let us see

the words worn in our bodies.

## **For the Love of Eye at the Disco**

On the dance floor, I see the perfect eye  
staring back at me, green as any tree  
in summer and alive just the same. “Dive  
  
on the count of five, four, three, two, one. Dive!”  
Without asking why, down goes the loved eye,  
swimming under free arms, tumbling like tree  
  
branches in the sea, bending like no tree  
could—contortions I’ve never seen. I dive  
in to join the dry-land swim, to find Eye  
  
in a pile of eyes and offer to buy  
some drinks. “Climb a tree, Jake—I’m swimmin’ free.”  
So I leave the dive, a little less naïve.

## Mute Desire

I hope Valentino valued  
the silent grays he lived  
in—lascivious shades  
white and hoary, dusting  
floors as he dissolved  
to black, or washed  
himself down the drain  
like Hitchcock's chocolate  
in *Psycho*. I hope you  
were joking when you came  
to me, speaking of desire—  
with words carefully  
formed in ice, falling  
from lips that once  
tasted not of this gray, but blue?



## Gold

Cellophane skin, sinew and bile, under-breath  
desire—all we need is a verb so let's choose  
*thrust*. See-through carbon on carbon, our bodies  
on pavement, molest me in the driveway. I'll do you

in the yard. This is spring. Our skin no longer  
sloughs in winter's dry confines. Allow me  
this pleasure of trying to describe what *fuck*  
doesn't: whiting and size in broad strokes,

a gesso to cover every transparency. Ready  
to gild. And the *i* is not an *e*. We're not  
purveyors of castration. We are the *i* and the *o*,  
one leading to another, and now our radiance

blinds the neighbors. They covet our love—as  
they cover their eyes—making it even more precious.

## **What Dictionaries Are Good For**

Do you think a word won't come  
home again, that it leaves the page  
once spoken or read? Does that bother you?  
Would you follow the letters if they slipped,  
or flew, floated in air? What  
if they charged the sky, toward a cloud  
and through? Could you pursue or be chained  
to the line, smitten by white waiting  
for the echo?

What if sky were solid  
and the word bounced back and crushed you?

## Rare Metal

We eighth-grade boys called Tina gimpy  
but it was middle school and everyone  
was paralyzed by something—braces,  
glasses, too much mousse, each was enough  
to make us see obtusely. Her brace—a living  
thing, a crooked animal, everywhere  
on her leg—climbed around her different  
limb, secured at points with metal  
screws. Her dress would bunch the brace's  
lip, exposing flesh buckled by bone.

We laughed *If you were a horse*  
*We'd get to shoot you, melt you*  
*into glue for backs of stamps. We'd mail*  
*you to Timbuktu.* The brace bit  
into the nearest boy with its jagged  
teeth, ripped corduroy and skin, forged  
scars in the boy on the floor under  
the flailing limb. And the rest of us laughed  
because he'd been beaten up, not  
by living metal, but by a girl.

## **Crossing a Stream in February**

I'm inches underwater and the sky  
is a mirror shattered by trees so bits  
of myself keep falling around me  
like the whole that just slipped off  
the bridge—old rules of gravity  
made new by ten feet of air. Lying still  
on the stones, I watch sun slip  
through broken sky as oxygen tugs  
on hydrogen, replacing solid air  
I never trusted. The pain of cold water  
on teeth—I have never been more  
alive, surrounded by pieces of me.

The time on the streambed is measured  
by questions never asked. My father's in a dream  
in Vietnam. He crouches and listens  
to footsteps in water, knows bodies  
by the sound they make on land  
and the silence they endure in water  
as dead float down the river. Weapon and eyes  
ready for movement, he watches the enemy  
float down the river, body after body.

He stands above the water and reaches in  
to raise me to air and his eyes are time's  
mirror. *I'm fine*, I say. Water chokes  
from my lungs as pieces of me are carried away  
by icy water and questions I'd never think to ask.

## **Elemental**

*—a sequence of triolets*

### **i. Whisper Shy**

Shrieks from the root shake the air  
as Mesmer swings from the branch awake  
enough to hear his son's first cry. It's fair  
that screams from plants stir the air  
enough to see a ghastly pair—  
mother and daughter grinding mandrake  
into the cries of the boy that light the air  
as his father hangs, no longer awake.

### **ii. Migration**

Red leaves fall against overcast skies  
as hummingbirds sink to the Gulf's floor  
piling wings on wings and eyes on eyes.  
Red leaves fall against Houston skies  
while hummingbirds gorge. Each one flies  
toward longer days on Mexico's shore.  
Red leaves succumb to overcast skies  
as hummingbirds rot on the ocean's floor.

### **iii. On the Subject of Consumption**

It's no use pondering the origin of light;  
tectonic shifts chew magma and mire  
that consume young worlds and incite  
clichés used to ponder the origin of light  
or why love tempers from the trite  
lyrical sparks of photonic desire.

It's no use pondering the origin of light  
as our love cools from magma to mire.

### **iv. Flat Cemetery**

*Thirteen steps from road to hidden stone,*  
is how he finds his mother's nameless grave  
where she and twelve neighbors atone  
for thirteen deaths. Past the road, stone  
lambs above their children bleat in drones,  
remind him of flu's familial mortal waves.

*Thirteen steps from road to grassy stone,*  
is how the survivor finds his mother's grave.

## Happy Simulacrum

Exhume

the android.

The witches

are all ashes

swept away.

Their web

page feigns

apologies.

Two hands,

fused plastic,

feedback—loop

the peel, can

the fun. Anonymous

eyes scorch

to dust. I hear

radiation

billions of years



after the bang.

Moths now men

part mussed

curls from their brow.

They shed

first one then

the other wing.

## **Seducing Eris**

Because you want to love that which is not beautiful:  
Forget Bond girl names, the digits of pi, and all things  
without end—especially the sky and/or horizon. Seduce  
everything in discord—make sure they're all indecent  
prepositions. Scry the number of stars (this is finite)  
while looking at the sun. It's easy to think too much, to lose  
your sense of taste so leave your watch in a drawer  
and know inside english and how to break in 9-ball.  
At least consider swerving into traffic while singing  
with the radio, even if you never do. Always keep  
on the edge of your mind that you can't determine  
what is to be remembered about you.

**III**

## Transgression and Transformation: Racial Negotiation in Elizabeth Bishop's

### "Brazil" Poems

In a February 1965 letter to Randall Jarrell, Elizabeth Bishop writes of her poem "Burglar of Babylon," a forty-seven-stanza ballad narrating the final days of an escaped prisoner named Micuçu: "I wonder if you saw the ballad I had in *The New Yorker* . . .—an endless affair that will certainly make a bigger book, at least. I like it fairly well still. (Marianne thinks it my "best"—but I'm afraid that's because she approves of the moral)" (*One Art* 431). In light of Bishop's general cageyness in discussing her work, the final parenthetical comment is particularly intriguing because it indicates that Bishop felt that "Burglar of Babylon" has a moral or lesson.

The recognition of a moral and Bishop's seeming discomfort in allowing the moral of "The Burglar of Babylon" poetic weight in Moore's valuation strikes particular resonance because of its placement among her "Brazil" poems—poems from the first section of her book *Questions of Travel*. These poems explore the construction of the *self* amidst shifting notions of place and home, as does much of Bishop's work; moreover, in the "Brazil" poems, Bishop's keen observations concentrate on issues of race relations in a postcolonial setting. Earlier poems explore race issues (such as "Cootchie" and "Songs for a Colored Singer" from *North & South*), but nowhere else does Bishop concentrate the effort as in the eleven "Brazil" poems. In this context of postcolonial exploration, Bishop's moral problematizes readings of not only the final poem, but those that precede it in light of Leela Ghandi's assertion that "the colonizer. . . is principally, if not exclusively, an educator" (32).

The eleven poems have a thematic and dramatic arc; they build to a climax with "The Burglar of Babylon." The first two poems, "Arrival at Santos" and "Brazil, January 1, 1502,"

establish the gulf between the speaker's culture and the observed culture, and the third poem, "Questions of Travel," distills the issues raised by this gulf into two succinct questions:

Is it right to be watching strangers in a play  
in this strangest of theatres?  
What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life  
in our bodies, we are determined to rush  
to see the sun the other way around? (*Complete Poems* 93)

The first question more concretely shows the gulf between observer and observed and reveals that it is the observer who has the power in the relationship. The speaker also questions the appropriateness of this power. The second question begins to develop the sense of sliding scale that Bishop will frequently use in the section. From sitting in a theatre watching a play, the poem immediately takes the reader rushing to "see the sun the other way around." Such play with scale is a usual trope in Bishop's poetry and is examined in depth in Bonnie Costello's *Questions of Mastery*. In the "Brazil" poems, aspects of scale are often used to establish and shift power relationships between two cultures.

With the shifts of scale, Bishop creates a purely imaginative space or territory that represents real social boundaries. With these imaginary territories she creates, she is able to examine questions of power and social fixity. Bishop often creates boundaries to transgress in this imaginative territory as she does in the fourth poem, "Squatter's Children," whose use of the word *squatter* implies a territorial transgression by those who have less wealth, less power, and no home. Bishop begins the poem by establishing the scale of the territory between observer and observed:

. . .a specklike girl and boy,

alone, but near a specklike house.  
The sun's suspended eye  
blinks casually, and then they wade  
gigantic waves of light and shade. (CP 95)

In this poem, the exaggerated scale suggests the insignificance of these children, provides a nicely vivid yet intellectually resistant image; moreover, this extreme scale creates a significant amount of territory between the observed children and the speaker. As the poem proceeds, Bishop's observations belie the increasing scale:

a storm piles up behind the house.  
The children play at digging holes.  
The ground is hard; they try to use  
one of their father's tools,  
a mattock with a broken haft  
the two of them can scarcely lift.  
It drops and clangs. Their laughter spreads  
effulgence in the thunderheads, (CP 95)

In the increasingly exaggerated scale (the storm piling up behind the house), the speaker begins to give specific minute details (the hard ground, the broken haft) and empowers the "specklike" children to spread "effulgence in the thunderheads." This leaping from the beholder's eye to the distant objects is itself a trek through the territory that separates the two cultures and a transgression across the boundary that territory is home to.

Bishop's use of space and distance bears importantly on issues of race and colonization. I think this distance has too often been interpreted to isolate Bishop's speakers from what they

observe: much critical attention has been paid to Bishop's position as an outsider. For example, Adrienne Rich, in "The Eye of the Outsider: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop," argues that

Poems examining intimate relationships [in Bishop's poetry] are almost wholly absent. . . . What takes their place is a series of poems examining relationships between people who are, for reasons of difference, distanced: rich and poor, landowner and tenant, white women and Black woman, invader and native (16).

While Bishop may feel like an outsider in all social situations, her poetry plays with the indeterminacy of social roles, contracts, and expectations; this indeterminacy, moreover, allows for the characters in her poems to engage intimately with one another across whatever boundary that might separate them socially and creates a fluidity that undercuts the binary that Rich puts forward.

Jeredith Merrin writes about this "fluidity" in regard to sexuality in "Elizabeth Bishop: Gaiety, Gayness, and Change." Merrin identifies two tropes, "inversion" and "thirdness," and describes how Bishop uses them. Particularly interesting is Merrin's notion of "thirdness," which is a "questioning or blurring of gender boundaries" and an attempt to "condense into one word what seems to [Merrin as] Bishop's own in-betweenness—together with her sense that in indefiniteness resides possibility, the chance for almost alchemical change into some other reality, some third thing" (167). In contrast to the insider/outsider dichotomy that dominates the discussion of Bishop's poetry, Merrin allows shifting possibilities and social categories.

As Bishop, in some poems, then, suggests an alternate, "third" angle from which to view gender; in the "Brazil" poems, she suggests alternate angles from which to view and construct racial and post-colonial identities. She is deft at creating imaginary territories for her speakers and characters to coexist—an imagined, uncertain space with shifting scale and ethereal

boundaries for her characters to transgress. It is through this territorial creation and her characters' transgressions that Bishop calls into question those social categories used to separate one group from another.

The questioning of social categories consumes the fifth poem of the section, "Manuelzinho." This poem about a servant additionally blurs its relationships between observer and observed, dominant and subordinate. The poem complicates its relationships from the start, as it begins with an epigraph: "Brazil. A friend of the writer is speaking" (*CP* 96). This distancing strategy—establishing that the speaker is not the writer—in fact makes the poem rather personally revealing: in a letter to May Swenson, Bishop writes that the speaker of the poem is Lota de Macedo Soares, Bishop's long-time companion and native of Brazil (*One Art* 315). This epigraph deflects Bishop's immediacy in the poem, while at the same time personalizing the poem more than it would otherwise be without it. Blurring the connection between herself and the speaker of the poem in such a way allows Bishop to begin to create the territory necessary for her examination while still deflecting complications that her position as a privileged, white American woman in post-colonial Brazil might raise in the poem.

As the poem begins, the speaker doesn't even quite know how to define Manuelzinho:

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 ideas through your brain— (*CP* 96)



Manuelzinho begins his poetic existence in an undefined state—neither squatter nor tenant. He isn't even quite an inheritance, the speaker jokes, since an inheritance usually has some sort of value. Ascribing Manuelzinho a value is the speaker's initial goal in this poem, and this places the power in the relationship with the speaker. She seems to have the power to name, define, and to ascribe worth to her manservant; the joke is a derision at the beginning of the poem and she doesn't seem to feel the need to give him a clear identity, or even to work to understand whether his shirking of his social obligation to her is intentional or a result of his perceived lower intellect. How much power she actually has is called into question with all of her uncertainty.

Bishop develops this uncertainty syntactically; this stanza sets a pattern of using the word “or”—a word that appears in eight of nine stanzas that attempt to describe Manuelzinho. The speaker seems unable to exactly remember the events about which she is testifying—especially concerning the attributes or actions of Manuelzinho. At first this uncertainty reinforces the initial positions of the speaker and Manuelzinho—she has the power to define him. As the poem progresses and the social lines blur, this repetition of “or” begins to redefine their relationship and call into questions the assumptions of how much power the speaker actually has over Manuelzinho.

In the next stanza, Bishop introduces images of a blurring lens through which the speaker begins to see Manuelzinho: the speaker admits, “I watch you through the rain” (*CP* 96). This image of the speaker looking at Manuelzinho through the rain begins a shift in the poem from a clearly defined social contract to one in which the roles are no longer clear. It is also the first line that suggests an intimacy between the speaker and Manuelzinho. While she is still clearly the one with power, the fact that he holds her attention until she feels like she “can't endure it another

minute” (*CP 96*) also accords power to Manuelzinho; furthermore, the poem implies a desire to transgress social boundaries, though what form this transgression could take is still unclear.

In the third stanza, Bishop continues to develop this transgressive tension, first by reiterating the unwillingness to define, “You steal my telephone wires, or someone else does” (*CP 96*), and then by working to obscure the relationship between mistress and servant even further by introducing the fantastic:

as if you’d been a gardener  
in a fairy tale all this time  
and at the word “potatoes”  
had vanished to take up your work  
of fairy prince somewhere.” (*CP 97*)

The speaker of these lines initially reaffirms Manuelzinho’s subservient position, but the change in setting, from Brazil, with its rigid social stratification, to a fairy place, allows the gardener to be a prince. This pronouncement of elevation is the speaker’s first unqualified definition of Manuelzinho; that the definition is nonetheless fantastic, however, provides additional complication. Bishop returns the setting to Brazil; the speaker begins to notice how Manuelzinho’s perception of his own situation is blurred, “The strangest things happen to you” (*CP 97*). Even the death of his father escapes his rationality:

The family gathers, but you,  
no, you “don’t think he’s dead!  
I look at him. He’s cold.  
They’re burying him today.  
But you know, I don’t think he’s *dead*.” (*CP 97*)

Manuelzinho is removed from the world around him. He exists in Brazil, but he doesn't interact with his surroundings in expected ways or perform his expected role. Manuelzinho exists outside of the social realities.

So far in the poem, while much has been blurred, there's nonetheless a clear distinction between the speaker and Manuelzinho. However in the final lines of this stanza, Bishop now begins to meld the two identities and further decay the walls that separate them socially:

They are Dream Books.  
In the kitchen we dream together  
how the meek shall inherit the earth—  
or several acres of mine. (98)

This is a turning point in this poem. The speaker and Manuelzinho join in a dream, and in sleep, the lines that were blurred in the fairy tale completely disappear; their social positions become irrelevant. This is the strongest suggestion so far in the poem that the speaker struggles with the nature of their relationship. Bishop works a tonal shift from disdain to perceived intimacy by allowing them to share this dream, and the tone of the poem has shifted to be more sympathetic to the speaker as she transforms from a woman who follows social conventions to one who knows these conventions are complicated and problematic.

The growing intimacy challenges the speaker's still distant tone; she continues to struggle and shows reluctance in redefining their relationship, of transgressing the boundaries of their established relationship. Finally, in the last two stanzas, the speaker, still hedging, most emphatically expresses her regret about their fixed, real situation:

I called you the Klorophyll Kid.  
My visitors thought it was funny.

I apologize here and now.

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. (*CP* 99)

As the poem ends, their relationship is left in the most uncertain state yet. The wavering once used by the speaker to try to define Manuelzinho and his role in her life has slipped to her attempts to define herself. She is unsure if she loves him; her hat is figurative; and she is only promising to try. The speaker now ascribes the uncertainty originally ascribed to Manuelzinho to herself. By the end of the poem the two transform to one uncertain whole.

The tropes of transformation, transgression, and uncertainty are also present in “Twelfth Morning; or What You Will.” In this poem, which has mostly been ignored by Bishop critics with the notable exception of Bonnie Costello, the speaker is less involved with the observed—a black boy named Balthazár—than the speaker was with Manuelzinho. In “Manuelzinho,” the reader overheard the speaker. In “Twelfth Morning; or What You Will,” the speaker talks directly to the reader so that it’s the poem’s images rather than a speaker’s inner monologue that bear the weight of conveying the transformation, transgression, and uncertainty. This eight-quatrain poem begins with images of transparency:

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 (*CP* 110)

Balthazár has no agency in this stanza. He is merely allowed to “show through”; additionally, he’s made to show only through the white-gray mist, and he is defined in opposition to this paleness: “the black boy.” This image has the characteristics of a fade in shot in a movie; that shot where characters emerge from the black screen into full lighting and the action begins. Bishop imbues movement into a static description.

The color choices in this image are also very important. Balthazár is a black boy emerging through a white-gray mist into the gaze of a dominant white speaker. He is slowly materializing into the speaker’s world, transgressing the boundary represented by the mist and foreshadowing his later transformation.

The speaker’s tone undergoes a transformation as well. Through the first stanza, the speaker’s tone is observational and somewhat distant. In the second stanza, the tone begins to develop the speaker as a character: “The Company passes off these white but shopworn/dunes as lawns.) ‘Shipwreck,’ we say; perhaps/this is a housewreck” (*CP* 110). Two important words help in this development. The word “passes” denotes the speaker’s disdain for the unnamed company that Costello reads as an “exploitative . . . white-owned company” (Costello 40), though it may seem unclear whether this sets this speaker up as someone against the exploitation of the company or simply against its landscaping choices as they infringe on her sight. Since Balthazár is observed without this judgment and, in fact, later is held in higher esteem, it seems as if it is exploitation that the speaker is against. The other word in the second stanza that is important for defining the speaker is the word “we.” The plural places the speaker among a larger group of observers and judges. It serves to tie the speaker in with the dominant culture.

This tie with the dominant culture becomes important in stanza four as the speaker begins describing and questioning literal boundaries that exist in the yard:

The fence, three-strand, barbed-wire, all pure rust,  
three dotted lines, comes forward hopefully  
across the lots; thinks better of it ; turns  
a sort of corner . . . (*CP* 110)

Like the mist in the opening stanza, the fence serves as a permeable boundary. The fence still has its barbs to deter transgression, but it is really a relic of a past time, a boundary that is losing its effectiveness as it rusts away. In addition to losing its effectiveness as a divider between territories, the fence is anthropomorphized by the adverb “hopefully” and the act of thinking. The fence is unsure of itself, where it should be or go; arguably, it is unsure about its reason for existence.

The next stanza introduces the whitest imagery of the poem and the role of whiteness in maintaining social boundaries::

Don't ask the big white horse, *Are you supposed*  
*to be inside the fence or out?* He's still  
asleep. Even awake, he probably  
remains in doubt. (*CP* 110)

Whiteness is represented by the dozing horse that is completely unaware of his place on either side of the boundary. The speaker also puts forward that if he were to be awakened and asked, he could not determine or critique his own positioning; however, by asking the horse, the speaker reveals some level of possible agency for the horse—an agency that was denied to Balthazar at the beginning of the poem thus highlighting a little of the power structure between the two.

The speaker, having shown the horse to be incapable in imagining different boundaries or critiquing the existing ones, turns to questioning the scale of her observations, why the horse is “. . . bigger than the house” and wonders why if it is so big because “The force of/personality, or is perspective dozing?” (CP 110). As she questions scale and perspective, the horse becomes less white and pure: “A pewter-colored horse, an ancient mixture,/tin, lead, and silver,// he gleams a bit” (CP 110). Questioning the size and the physical dominance of the now-darker horse is an attempt on Bishop’s part to make a common space for Balthazár and the horse to coexist, as if the horse is passing into the gray mist from which Balthazár emerged.

Having questioned the scale of the horse and moved it toward a common grayness, the speaker of the poem is able to turn to the black boy Balthazár. Balthazár is named after one of the three magi from the gospel of Matthew who is traditionally depicted to be of African descent, and, in the final two stanzas of the poem, Balthazár transforms into his namesake:

. . . But the four-gallon can  
approaching on the head of Balthazár  
keeps flashing that the world’s a pearl, *and I,*  
*I am*  
*its highlight!* You can hear the water now,  
inside, slap-slapping. Balthazár is singing.  
“Today’s my Anniversary,” he sings,  
“the Day of Kings.” (CP 110-1)

Balthazár’s transformation from a hazy figure in the beginning of the poem to a king who is clearly described by the speaker and distinct from his landscape reinforces his new social position and agency in the poem. The speaker steps aside, and Balthazár pronounces himself a

king in his own words; the speaker's depiction of him shifts from an indistinct object viewed through a "white" lens to a subject with the power to name himself. With Balthazár's transformation the speaker, having relegated the dominant whiteness to the gray mist, fades away herself.

These two poems, "Manuelzinho" and "Twelfth Morning; or What You Will" exemplify how Bishop develops her investigation of the imaginative territorial boundaries between a dominant culture and the colonized culture throughout the "Brazil" poems. After these investigations, Bishop ends the section with "The Burglar of Babylon." Bishop shapes the poem into a literary ballad—a form based on the traditional folk ballad that was originally used to tell a story in a culture with an oral tradition. In such societies, the oral tradition was used to pass along cultural information from generation to generation or, when put in Lyotardian terms, the ballad was a way to grow consensus on what was and was not culturally valuable within a society (19).

The choice of ballad form that begins the complications in the reading of "The Burglar of Babylon." The speaker of the poem tells the reader the story of Micuçu, an accused murderer and burglar, who escapes and is brutally pursued by the Rio police. This chase becomes spectacle and enthralls the wealthy citizens of Rio, who watch every event unfolding in any way they can. Eventually the police catch Micuçu and brutally shoot him down, but the story ends with an acknowledgement that the police are after more "dangerous" elements; in fact the police are pursuing two at the end of the poem. The lesson to be learned from the poem, the moral Bishop was concerned about, depends on who is the poem's speaker and who is the poem's audience.

Let us return to Gandhi's assertion that "the colonizer. . . is principally, if not exclusively, an educator" (32). This assertion suggests reading the existence of a moral in "The Burglar of



Babylon” through a postcolonial lens. Questions of who is teaching whom and what cultural values are being spread through the moral come into play in a very complicated way given the form and the content of the poem and its placement as the final poem in a group primarily focused on a wealthy white outsider’s observations of a post-colonial society.

Since Bishop acknowledges the existence of a moral in “The Burglar of Babylon,” she must have in mind the existence of a lesson and a pupil or pupils. Bishop creates another way to play with the space in between cultures. She creates this space not through imagery or syntactic uncertainty, but through her choice of form for the poem. If the speaker of this poem is a member of the Rio slums, then the traditional intention of the ballad form is maintained. The moral that one should respect one’s family/mother is implied in the following stanzas where the speaker relates what Micuçu’s mother says:

We have always been respected

My shop is honest and clean. . . .

. . .His sister has a job

Both of us gave him money

Why did he have to rob?

“I raised him to be honest

Even here in Babylon slum” (*CP* 117).

Immediately following these lines, the mother’s male customers negatively comment on the burglar’s inability to provide for his family, “he wasn’t much of a burglar.” This comment exemplifies a type of cultural value that is transmitted from one generation to the next. Much of

this poem could be read on this level, a literal reading of a ballad told by one member of the colonized culture to another in order to pass down simple values. This reading very much assumes a homogenous observed culture and replaces whatever values that might be passed from generation to generation with those that Bishop imagines to exist.

If the reader doesn't read beyond this, it seems as if Bishop leaves no room for personal or subcultural variation among the "poor of Rio" while she ascribes her own cultural values to them. To complicate this reading and to tweak the reader's expectation for the ballad form, Bishop creates a narrative framing for the ballad:

On the fair green hills of Rio  
There grows a fearful stain:  
The poor who come to Rio  
And can't home again.

There's the hill of Kerosene,  
And the hill of the Skeleton,  
The hill of Astonishment,  
And the hill of Babylon (*CP* 112)

These stanzas begin and end the poem, and they call into question the audience and speaker and, by extension, the intended recipient of the moral. Because this is the most written about of the "Brazil" poems in regards to race, it might be enlightening to look at what other critics have written about these framing stanzas. Beyond the exposition and description of the names of the hills, much focus has been duly placed on the words "fearful stain."

These words have been the focus of critics who want to show how Bishop exposes her own cultural biases. Renée Curry writes:

Bishop permits the reader insight into the stains upon her own imaginative landscape: stains typically named race and class. For every move Bishop makes to aesthetically refigure the connotations associated with race-related words and images, she also makes it clear that the figuring occurs inconsistently at best (Curry 114).

Curry does bring a useful point to light—Bishop makes explicit attempts to “refigure” her position as an out-of-culture observer when she calls the slums of Rio a stain. Curry suggests Bishop seeks to create empathy with the residents by using the word “fearful”—but this word is complicated by multiple connotations. If the stain does constitute the residents of the slums, are they the fearful ones? Does the stain create fear in the wealthy observers? Is the word a matter of degree, as in a large stain? While Curry names the stain of Rio as a “stain of race and class” on Bishop’s imagination indicating Bishop’s inability to exist as anything other than a privileged white writer, Margaret Dickie reads the stain and the scene where Micuçu is arrested as a condemnation not of the oppressed of Rio, but of the oppressors:

“These scenes are cartoonlike in their exaggerated parody of South American incompetence in its lust for military power. And yet, like the exaggerated concern for the dog with scabies in “Pink Dog,” the sentiments of these poems cover a severe indictment of the repressive regimes that first colonized and then came to rule the country. (*Stein, Bishop, & Rich* 115)

On Dickie’s surface reading, the speaker attempts to draw attention to the blight of colonization and the Brazilian government’s incompetence in protecting its poorer citizens. While Curry’s

reading holds that the speaker was distanced from the observed culture, Dickie's reading goes even further and distances the audience from the subjects of the poem; i.e., if the moral is intended for members of Bishop's social circle or North American readers of poetry and is indeed a condemnation of a corrupt oppressive culture, then they are implicated as mere distant observers as well like Bishop.

What Curry rushes past and Dickie doesn't take into account is that Bishop is engaging in a form of cultural imperialism herself as she creates the space that she often creates when confronted with the issues of race and social class. As an American writing mostly for the consumption of Americans and Europeans, she creates the exotic in the slums of Rio and submits them for valuation under her cultural norms. In each of the "Brazil" poems in which she observes members of the subjugated culture, she somehow creates a space to play with a fourth possibility beyond being a member of the subjugated culture, or the dominant culture, or of a dominating foreign culture: she is a member of a culture that is at once condemning colonialism while evaluating the indigenous neo-colonial culture by the norms of her own society.

Bishop's personal concerns regarding her own positioning within various cultures were at the forefront in an April 22, 1960 letter to Robert Lowell:

But 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. 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 bluenose at the same time. (*One Art* 383-4)

Margaret Dickie claims this passage depicts Bishop's "fear of losing her own identity in her fascination with the foreign and the alien" ("Race and Class" 44), but this does not take into

account Bishop's impulse to "use everything." This impulse forces Bishop to create territory for herself to exist that is seemingly outside of what is possible. No one is capable of doing this for real, but Bishop does create a space for herself in her poetry where her speakers can exist in spaces she couldn't and transgress boundaries more easily than a real person could. This letter suggests that Bishop's commoditization of exotic imagery in her poem is complicated by Bishop's desire to not transgress her own social boundaries and leads the creation of imaginary spaces, established by images or complicated rhetorical stances, to allow the poet to play with the static social classes she admits she doesn't want to change. This play is evident in "The Burglar of Babylon." Bishop blurs perspectives and commits to no certain constituency for the pupil or the teacher. These uncertain roles permeate the imaginary territories of the "Brazil" poems.

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