

## No Detail Too Small

She began with the idea that little is known and that much is puzzling. The effort, then, to make a true statement in poetry—to claim that something *is* something, or *does* something—required a hushed, solitary concentration. A true statement for her carried with it, buried in its rhythm, considerable degrees of irony because it was oddly futile; it was either too simple or too loaded to mean a great deal. It did not do anything much, other than distract or briefly please the reader. Nonetheless, it was essential for Elizabeth Bishop that the words in a statement be precise and exact. “Since we do float on an unknown sea,” she wrote to Robert Lowell, “I think we should examine the other floating things that come our way carefully; who knows what might depend on it?” In her poem “The Sandpiper,” the bird, a version of the poet herself, was “a student of Blake,” who celebrated seeing “a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower.”

A word was a tentative form of control. Grammar was an enactment of how things stood. But nothing was stable, so words and their structures could lift and have resonance, could move out, take in essences as a sponge soaks in water.

Thus language became gesture in spite of itself; it was rooted in simple description, and then it bloomed or withered; it was suggestive, had a funny shape, or some flourishes, or a tone and texture that had odd delights, but it had all sorts of limits and failures. If words were a cry for help, the calm space around them offered a resigned helplessness.

In certain societies, including rural Nova Scotia where Bishop spent much of her childhood, and in the southeast of Ireland where I am from, language was also a way to restrain experience, take it down to a level where it might stay. Language was neither ornament nor exaltation; it was firm and austere in its purpose. Our time on the earth did not give us cause or need to say anything more than was necessary; language was thus a form of calm, modest knowledge or maybe even evasion. The poetry and the novels and stories written in the light of this knowledge or this evasion, or in their shadow, had to be led by clarity, by precise description, by briskness of feeling, by no open displays of anything, least of all easy feeling; the tone implied an acceptance of what was known. The music or the power was in what was often left out. The smallest word, or the holding of breath, could have a fierce, stony power.

Writing, for Bishop, was not self-expression, but there was a self somewhere, and it was insistent in its presence yet tactful and watchful. Bishop's writing bore the marks, many of them deliberate, of much re-writing, of things that had been said, but had now been erased, or moved into the shadows. Things measured and found too simple and obvious, or too loose in their emotional contours, or too philosophical, were removed. Words not true enough were cut away. What remained was then of value, but mildly so; it was as much as could be said, given the constraints. This great modesty was also, in its way, a restrained but serious ambition. Bishop merely seemed to keep her sights low; in her fastidious version of things, she had a sly system for making sure that nothing was beyond her range.

Bishop was never sure. In the last line of her poem "The Unbeliever," she has her protagonist state that the sea "wants to destroy us all," but the last line of "Filling Station" will read: "Somebody loves us all." In the poetics of her uncertainty surrounding the strange business of "us all," there was something hurt and solitary. In the first poem in her first book, a poem called "The Map," it was as though the world itself had to be studied as a recent invention or something

that would soon fade and might need to be remembered as precisely as possible by a single eye.

For her, the most difficult thing to do was to make a statement; around these statements in her poems she created a hard-won aura, a strange sad acceptance that this statement was all that could be said. Or maybe there was something more, but it had escaped her. This space between what there was and what could be made certain or held fast often made her tone playful, in the same way as a feather applied gently to the inner nostril makes you sneeze in a way that is amused as much as pained.

In an early essay on Gerard Manley Hopkins, Bishop wrote about “motion” in poetry: “the releasing, checking, timing, and repeating of the movement of the mind according to ordered systems.” Hopkins, she wrote, “has chosen to stop his poems, set them to paper, at the point in their development where they are still incomplete, still close to the first kernel of truth or apprehension which gave rise to them.” Thus the idea of statement in Hopkins, the bare sense of a fact set down, offers a revelation oddly immediate and sharp, true because the illusion needs to be created that nothing else was true at the time the poem was written. And that making a

statement has the same tonal effect as recovering from a shock, recovering merely for the time necessary to say one thing, including something casual and odd, and to leave much else unsaid.

Thus a line in a poem is all that can be stated; it is surrounded by silence as sculpture is by space. Hopkins could begin a poem: “I wake and feel the fell of dark not day.” Or “No worst, there is none.” Or “Summer ends now.” Only then, once the bare statement had been made—something between a casual diary entry and something chiseled into truth—could the poem begin to be released and then controlled “according to ordered systems.”

Bishop would begin poems with lines such as “I caught a tremendous fish” or “Here is a coast; here is a harbor” or “September rain falls on the house” or “Still dark” or “The sun is blazing and the sky is blue,” and manage even in such inauspicious openings a tone that attended to the truth of things, a tone also of mild, distracted, solitary unease in the face of such truth.

In her poems Bishop often corrected herself, or qualified herself, almost as a duty or a ceremony. In the second line of “The Map” she wrote the word “Shadows,” and then immediately wondered “or are they shallows”; in “The

Weed,” she wrote, in a dream, “I lay upon a grave, or bed” but immediately again she had to qualify that slightly by writing: “(at least, some cold and close-built bower)”; in her poem “The Fish,” when she wrote the words “his lower lip,” she had to wonder “if you could call it a lip.” Before she could allow the mountains in “Arrival at Santos” to be “self-pitying,” she had to impose the words “who knows?”; in “The Armadillo,” when she mentioned “the stars,” she had to correct herself to say “planets, that is”; in “Sandpiper,” she wrote:

He runs, he runs straight through it, watching  
his toes.

—Watching, rather, the spaces of sand  
between them,  
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains  
rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,  
he stares at the dragging grains.

So, too, in her poem “Trouvée” about a white hen run over on West 4th Street, she was forced to make clear that the hen, while once white, was (or is) “red-and-white now, of course.” In “Poem,” when she used the word “visions,” she instantly wanted to change it: “‘visions’ is / too

serious a word”; she found a calmer word: “our looks, two looks.” In “The End of March,” she wanted to retire and “do *nothing*, / or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms.” In one of her last poems, “Santarém,” she mentioned a church twice and had to correct herself each time. The first time it is “the Cathedral, rather,” and the second it is also a “Cathedral,” in parentheses, but with an exclamation mark.

This urge to correct herself also appeared in her letters. In 1973, for example, she wrote to Robert Lowell: “James Merrill and I gave a joint reading—no, a sequential reading—at the YMHA.”

This enacting of a search for further precision and further care with terms in the poems (and maybe in the letters too) was, in one way, a trick, a way of making the reader believe and trust a voice, or a way of quietly asking the reader to follow the poem’s casual and then deliberate efforts to be faithful to what it saw, or what it knew. The trick established limits, exalted precision, made the bringing of things down to themselves into a sort of conspiracy with the reader. But she also worried about anything that might be overlooked (“no detail too small”), or not noticed properly, or exaggerated, or let too loose

into grand feelings, which were not fully to be trusted. In that first poem, “The Map,” Bishop seemed to disapprove of the moment when the map’s printer experienced “the same excitement / as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.” She was careful, or as careful as she could be, not to allow that to happen in her life or, more accurately, in her poems.