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ELIZABETH BISHOP AND HER WOMEN:
COUNTERING LOSS, LOVE, AND LANGUAGE THROUGH
BISHOP'S HOMOSOCIAL CONTINUUM

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Elizabeth Bishop's seemingly understated and yet nuanced poetry with a specific focus on loss, love, and language through domesticity to create a poetic *home*. In this sense, home offers security for a displaced orphan and lesbian, moving from filial to amorous love, as well as the literary home for a poet who struggled for critical recognition. Further, juxtaposing the familiar with the strange, Bishop situates her speaker in a construction of artificial and natural boundaries that break down across her topography and represent loss through the multiple female figures that permeate her poems to convey the uncertainty one experiences with homelessness. In order to establish home, Bishop sets her female relationships on a continuum as mother, aunt, grandmother, and lovers are equitably represented with similar tropes. In essence, what draws these women together remains their collective and familiar duty as potential caretaker, which is contrasted by their unusual absence in the respective poems that figure them.

Contrary to the opinion most scholars hold, Bishop's reticence was a calculated device that progressed her speaker(s) toward moments of self discovery. In an attempt to uncover her voice, her place in the literary movements, and her very identity, critics narrowly define Bishop's vision by fracturing her identity and positing reductive readings of her work. By choosing multiple dichotomies that begin with a marginalized speaker and the centered women on her continuum, the paradox of Bishop's poetry eludes some readers as they try to queer her or simply reduce her to impersonal and reticent, while a holistic approach is needed to uncover the genesis of Bishop's poetic progression. To be

sure, Bishop's women conflate into the collective image of loss, absence, and abandonment on Bishop's homosocial continuum as a way to achieve catharsis. Bishop's concern with unconditional love, coupled with the continual threat of abandonment she contends with coursing through her work, gives credence to the homosocial continuum that is driven by loss and love with the perpetual need to create a language to house Bishop from the painful memories of rejection. Bishop situates her speaker(s) in the margins, since it is at the center when the pain of loss is brought into light, to allow her fluid selves release from the prison loss creates.

By reading her work through the lenses of orphan, lesbian, and female poet, the progression of her homosocial continuum, as I envision it, is revealed. It is through this continuum that Bishop comes to terms with loss and abandonment, while creating a speaking subject that grows with each poem. Without her continuum of powerful female relationships, Bishop's progression as a poet would be far less revealing. Indeed, defining herself through negation, Bishop's sense of homelessness is uncovered in juxtaposition to her centered female subjects, and I delve into these contestations of space/place as well as her figurations of home/ homelessness to discern Bishop's poetic craft as she channeled the painful details of her past, thus creating her "one art."

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INTRODUCTION

“There are said to be certain Buddhists whose ascetic practices enable them to see a whole landscape in a bean.”
—Roland Barthes, *S/Z*

Overview: Elizabeth Bishop's Place Within the Literary Tradition

Elizabeth Bishop's place within literary cultural history while she was alive was as a minor poet known for her aesthetic form but never achieving critical attention or a fixed identity in any one particular school of poetry despite receiving numerous awards. Described as a "writer's writer's writer" by John Ashbery, Bishop's process was methodical and her elusive form was often overlooked as simply keen observations. However, after her death in 1979, Bishop's reputation "continually ascended" according to Thomas Travisano, who termed the increased attention "The Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon" in 1995 (*Gendered Modernisms* 904). Once deemed a minor poet, Bishop achieved canonical status with a flurry of critical interest and the establishment of the Elizabeth Bishop Society. Now, with the recent publication of her unpublished works in the 2006 *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box*, it is clear that Bishop has achieved permanent status and an elevated reputation among contemporary poets who continue to look to her work for inspiration.

Bishop's seemingly understated and yet nuanced poetry focuses on loss, love, and language through the use of geography and domesticity to create a poetic *home*. In this sense, home offers security for a displaced orphan and lesbian, moving from filial to amorous love, as well as the literary home for a poet who struggled for critical recognition. Further, juxtaposing the familiar with the strange, Bishop situates her speaker in a construction of artificial and natural boundaries that break down across her

topography and represent loss through the multiple female figures that permeate her poems as watermarks backdropped within surrealist settings to convey the uncertainty one experiences with homelessness. In order to establish home, Bishop sets her female relationships on a continuum as mother, aunt, grandmother, and lovers are equitably represented with similar tropes. In essence, what draws these women together remains their collective and familiar duty as potential caretaker, which is contrasted by their unusual absence in the respective poems that figure them. Bishop, simultaneously, aligns each woman with a familial role while creating a defamiliarizing fantasy that juxtaposes the domestic sphere with an uncanny presence or eerie setting—personifying the "Little Marvel Stove" and the grandmother's "equinoctial tears" in "Sestina," the horrifying breasts in her poem "In the Waiting Room," or even the famous rebuke from her mother in "A Drunkard" as Elizabeth picks up the "long black cotton stocking," which leads to an "*abnormal* thirst."¹ Helen Vendler originally termed this trend as combining the "domestic" with the "strange" (97); indeed, rather than choosing one over the other, Bishop creates unity.

Building off of Vendler's observation and taking it a step further, Bishop's dislocated speaker remains in the margins as objects and women take center stage to revisit the traumatic loss of her mother and counter the perceived threat of abandonment that follows with each female relationship that are set on a homosocial continuum. Understanding this structure is imperative to comprehending Bishop's poems since Bishop's women remain equal with respect to each other; to be sure, there is no hierarchy imposed, and the women are bound to her on her journey toward self discovery. Bishop's

¹ Italics added.

nuanced relationships truly break the barriers between simplistically defining relationships as familial or lovers or even as gay or straight. Indeed, the speaker approaches each woman in her respective poems from the periphery² as each woman draws her out into the center; it is at the center that Bishop finds a sense of home, even if it is not a place of security, where she can negotiate a space for the many facets of her identity, while maintaining her fringe status as keen observer. In a similar vein to the margins/center binary, contrasting familiar subjects with strange images parallels Bishop's autobiographic self in flux with the women in her life, both past and present, and yields an unsettling effect on the reader. The focus of her gendered poetry revolves around traumatic moments of loss, loss of mother, identity, security, or even her lovers, from which she can never truly recover, and from which the genesis of her spiritually renewing poetry was born. Bishop not only creates a voice for women, she finds a voice *through* her engagement with her women, the very women that shaped her life.

As Brett Millier has indicated in *Life and Memory of It*, one central theme that runs through Bishop's poems remains her "struggle to locate herself in the world" (78). Through the exotic and commonplace elements at play, a transformation of everyday life occurrences is revealed to encourage a jarring effect on both the speaker and the reader to take seemingly innocuous subjects and "other" the speaker: a mother's love turns into disaffection in "A Drunkard;" a young Elizabeth becomes a displaced orphan in "Sestina" and "In the Waiting Room," and a mature Elizabeth's sexuality is revealed as lesbian in "One Art." The purpose, it seems, is self reflexive rather than self serving. In fact, Adam Kirsch observed in *The Wounded Surgeon*, quoting Mary McCarthy, that the "I" in

² See *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery* edited by Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott (2002).

Bishop's poems seem to be "counting up to a hundred waiting to be found" (65). The reader has the privilege of reading the language infused in her poetry as if through a looking glass and observing Bishop's autobiographic self from various entry points that she leaves open through the multiple subject positions and personifications. Bishop often takes on at least two subject positions in her poems—whether it is mother or grandmother/child, aunt/niece, or lover/beloved—to avoid simply bemoaning loss. In doing so, she relates both points of view simultaneously in order to achieve cathartic revelation, which allows Bishop a place on the page to call home since the "coherence and safety of home" is never achieved in her childhood as she was displaced and bounced from relative to relative (Martin 191). By placing her significant women/others—her lovers, her grandmother, her aunt, her mother, and even herself as "an Elizabeth"—on an existing homosocial continuum,³ Bishop blends the vulnerable position of the child with the reflective voice of the adult poet, thus making the confessional voice accessible in an effort to reveal *not conceal*, despite Kathleen Spivak's argument to the contrary, her many shifting subject positions, such as the child *and* the grandmother at once in "Sestina." Further, Bishop refuses to insert a patriarchal hierarchy to order the structure of the very women who influenced her life.

Bishop's liberating refusal to hierarchize her women, opting instead to paint an intimate scene, not simplistically reticent as critics argue, expresses the narrating "I" as an autobiographic self, rather than explicitly naming it, undercutting the drama of confessional poetry by strictly adhering to its *principle techniques*; namely, the public and personal voice collapse into one as the wounds of childhood are revealed, thus

³ This theory combines Eve Sedgwick's "homosocial" with ⁴ Adrienne Rich's "lesbian continuum."

uncovering the autobiographic I and connecting with the reader. Travisano suggests that Bishop imbues the reader with the agency to "share the process of observation and discovery" by leaving her thesis out of her poems (*Artistic* 13). Indeed, this is the premise of confessional poetry, a communal call and response between reader and poet to heal emotional scars; however, this was a process that took years and several volumes of poetry to achieve the desired result, most explicitly in her late volumes *Questions of Travel* published in 1965 and *Geography III* published in 1976.

Bishop's underscored approach essentially adds psychological depth since it has a level of verisimilitude, a truth presented from multiple positions within the poems, avoiding disingenuous sensibilities that can stem from typical confessional poetry that appears one sided. Bishop's uncertain placement within literary convention and various schools of poetry leaves many unanswered questions that this project will investigate.

Central Questions and Plan of Organization

Central Questions

1. By determining meaning by difference—what one is not—Bishop's poems, "A Drunkard," "Sestina," "In the Waiting Room," and "One Art," situates her speaker in a construction of artificial and natural boundaries that break down across space and time. Within these four respective poems, the image of the speaker floats between realms—the child's memory of a mother positioned against the adult's reflection of the past; the domestic sphere flanked against a child's imagination conjuring the appliances to life; the private mind contextualized with exotic magazine images juxtaposed against the ordinariness of a dentist's office; and the speaker as lover, brooding over loss in the

material world compared to abstract loss. How, then, is the image of the mother/aunt/grandmother/lover conflated into the collective image of loss, absence, and abandonment?

2. Perhaps what proves most interesting is the spaces left open by Bishop—the simultaneous presence/absence—in her poetry, leaving a gap for the reader to slide into. Is it through this identification that Bishop's style lends itself to the confessional genre? In distinguishing herself from the confessionals, is Bishop truly present, and is the poem's verisimilitude reproduced? Does Bishop reside at the periphery or does she squarely reside at the center? Are the multiple subject positions at work in her poetry devised to reflect back on poetic identity (in a similar fashion to Berryman's vested interest in Mr. Bones and Henry in *Dream Songs*)?

3. Recent feminist theory, specifically Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's article "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It," has provided a language in which to explore women writers, such as Bishop, through a discovery of home and its uncertain constructions. Moreover, Adrienne Rich's review, "The Eyes of the Outsider: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, takes issue with Bishop's refusal to name her otherness as a lesbian, opting instead to rely on allusions, complex metaphors, and symbolism. The question then remains: Why limit Bishop to a singular form of otherness? Are critics like Rich suggesting her sole identity is determined by her lesbian self? The question strikingly overlooked remains: Why are critics certain that Bishop was in hiding? Rather than implicating Bishop's technique as a contrivance to mask her sexuality, shouldn't one consider her mastery of form, metaphor, and nuance as the device that sets her apart as a skilled poet rather than a closeted lesbian? Indeed, it is my

intention that Bishop's fixed lesbian identity in her poems is easily recognizable when considering an intertextual connection with Roland Barthes' "image repertoire" and Bishop's placement of female relationships on a homosocial continuum (5).

Plan of Organization

To begin my four chapters of close readings, I will start with one of Bishop's unpublished poems, "A Drunkard," from the newly released collection *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box*. "A Drunkard" offers an opportunity for scholars to reflect back on Bishop's past volumes in search of the child's voice in an effort to reframe the readings of Bishop's poetry that characterized her work as reticent and not part of the confessional genre. In doing so, the two consecutive chapters, "Sestina" from *Questions of Travel* published in 1965 and "In the Waiting Room" part of the *Geography III* collection published in 1976, will complement "A Drunkard" and dispel the theory that Bishop, who disliked the confessional mode, was too impersonal to be deemed confessional.

When put in chronological order according to the child's age or perceived age, judging by the voice, place, and time,⁴ it becomes clear that the child in the poems and the adult writer are on a journey toward catharsis in order to release the painful details of childhood memories that burdened the poet well into her later years. By analyzing her masterpiece "One Art" from *Geography III* in my penultimate chapter, the poet's burden and anguish as an adult still suffering from loss will be unearthed. Although I will be discussing four specific poems and producing close readings based on my theoretical framework, woven within the chapters will be intertextual references to other pertinent

⁴ By reading the three poems chronologically, I am referring to the biographical context within the poems,

selections from Bishop's volumes of poetry. Of course, the conclusion offers final remarks and a chance to reflect on my research and discoveries drawing together my course of study.

Theoretical Framework and Criticism

While Bishop's talent resides in her ability to be the constant observer, she opens a door onto her most private and intimate world through her poetry. Contrary to the opinion most scholars hold, such as Brett Millier, David Kalstone, and Thomas Travisano, Bishop's reticence is a calculated device employed to camouflage these intimate moments not in an effort to conceal the poet, but rather to craft a space for the reader to identify with her emotional world. To be sure, the dedicated reader must delve deeper than the surface and view her world from the broadest possible lens to capture her private *selves* that linger just below the surface as each interacts with the women on the page.

Recent feminist theory has provided a language in which to explore these fractured selves that cling together into a fixed identity. Interestingly, the sharpest criticism against Bishop was triggered by Adrienne Rich's review of *Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems*, which called for an explicit naming of her otherness rather than nuanced allusions to her difference as a lesbian through complex metaphors and symbolism. Still, the question remains: Why limit Bishop to one sense of otherness? In keeping with Luce Irigaray's theory of women as multiple and fluid, the critique of Bishop for failing to render her sexuality explicitly seems like a "brutal separation"

whether direct or implied, that indicates the child's age.

between feminists and poets like Bishop who elect to portray mutable selves beneath the surface of her work (24). Indeed, in a deliberate attempt to call attention to her multiple selves, Bishop employs the trope of geography, while perpetuating vivid binaries to cite the point of departure from rigid, patriarchal constructs, which are, unfortunately, perpetuated by feminist critics like Rich who reinforce the notion that there is only one correct way to represent one's identity by focusing exclusively on one's sexuality on a "lesbian continuum" ("Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" 51).

In another divisive example, Editor Marilyn May Lombardi in the introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Elizabeth Bishop: The Geography of Gender* contends that "[e]ach essay contributes to the mapping of Bishop's sense of difference as an orphan, a woman artist, and a lesbian" (4); however, the central problem that will frame my argument resides with scholars and critics who approach Bishop's work from a constricting and isolating lens, creating the parity of readings. Critics scrutinizing Bishop's work tend to ignore the totality of Bishop's selves in favor of these fragmented identities, which lends to the unilateral consensus as to the meaning derived from her poems. This point is echoed in the recent work by Jonathan Ellis, *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop*, when he interprets the various criticisms specifically around Bishop's "In the Waiting Room": "The desire to limit the poem to one reading seems to be a common critical tactic" (51). Still, this essentializing approach is not limited to simply one of Bishop's poems. By favoring one reading over another—Bishop as *either* an orphan, a female poet, or a lesbian—Bishop's identity is fractured, and the interpretations of her work under the microscope of these narrowly defined positions becomes divisive. To read her poems from the lenses of gender and sexuality in addition

to the poetic mask are indeed instructive, yet crucial to understanding her work is the simultaneity of the readings. Perhaps my theoretical methodology of analyzing Bishop's multiple I's concurrently will counter the essentializing stance through a holistic approach.

To build on my theory of mutable selves, I have selected four poems from her published volumes, *Questions of Travel* and *Geography III*, and her recently released posthumous volume of unpublished work, *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box*, to demonstrate the evolution of the poet's voice over time as she grapples with issues of loss, sexuality, and place within the literary marketplace. David Kalstone's *Becoming a Poet* cites Bishop's confessional style as centering on ways to "counter and channel [her poetic] energies in new and healing directions" (247). This notion of "countering" loss becomes evident in "A Drunkard," "Sestina," "In the Waiting Room" and "One Art" as Bishop's more confessional styled poems revealing personal and intimate details of her childhood and adult experiences by placing women on an existing continuum that blends the vulnerable position of the child with the reflective voice of the adult poet.

Specific theoretical apparatuses that I will draw on to unpack my premise that Bishop puts her female relationships on a continuum (mother, grandmother, aunt, lover) and directly challenge the critics who mistakenly read her poetry as "straight" and/or "reticent" are Roland Barthes' text *A Lover's Discourse* and Biddu Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's article "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It." Essentially, Bishop employs several inherent constructions that set up the geography of her poetry, and I intend to delve into these contestations of space/place as well as her figurations of home. Several binaries are at play in her poetry that deserve critical

attention and decoding: exclusion/ inclusion, periphery/proximity, rememory/memory, and home/homelessness. By making use of Martin and Mohanty as well as Barthes perhaps my distinct theoretical lens will open a new dialogue for Bishop criticism.

Indeed, in "Feminists Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?", Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty raise questions about "conflicts, loss, memories, and desires" in conjunction with the subject of home (191). Martin and Mohanty suggest that "architectural points" are employed as a method to secure the white, privileged, female identity, offering a sense of coherence and safety (196); nevertheless, Bishop's "home" is anything but safe and secure. Instead, home resembles her own insecure and unstable subject position as a lesbian, orphan, and female poet. Bishop's architectural anchors, such as the waiting room, her "three loved houses," and even the burning crib, attempt to balance the "domestic and the strange" (Vendler 97), especially within the domestic sphere, giving voice to one's inner doubts and realization that home is "an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself" (Martin 196). "Sestina," particularly, and "A Drunkard" distill this illusion of home through an orphan's indeterminate subject position and expresses the child's sense of abandonment upon its ambiguous discovery.

Further, indeterminate subject positions give Bishop's lyrics a confessional edge without drowning readers in emotional and psychological turmoil. Martin and Mohanty postulate that identity is based on negations; to be sure, one defines herself based on "what [she] is not" (196-97). For instance, in Bishop's "In the Waiting Room", the speaker is not exotic (African) and yet she is not typical either (heterosexual). Bishop

constructs a safe position of having the speaker in flux: she straddles two worlds both *in* the waiting room with average people and *in* the magazine with exoticized images of naked Africans. As James Longenbach points out, "the child recognizes another person's voice as her own, just as she recognizes her own destiny in the racial and sexual otherness of the African women" (480). She also opens a dialogue to the point that a struggle to be "other" exists even in an "ordinary" child. The contradictions inherent in such a construction set up the interplay of otherness that is at risk of being exposed; however, the point for Bishop lies with the seductive trapping of being "an Elizabeth" ("In the Waiting Room" 61). Essentially, the child in the waiting room is not parented; her lack of a mother is intensified not only upon hearing her aunt's "Oh! of pain," but also the child's anxiety and identification with it (37). The child's disjunctured response fuels the cycle of otherness also witnessed in "A Drunkard" and "Sestina." Although, what is most interesting is the manifestations and implications of this child that seeps through the adult speaker's voice in "One Art" as she reflects upon her life losses and contradictory feelings of abandonment.

Critical attention must be given to not only what is said, but also what is not said hidden behind the dashes and formal language, which raises an eyebrow. The additional theoretical lens that will allow further examination of Bishop's language and structure is Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*. As Barthes describes it, "verbal hallucination[s]"⁵ exist under each figure in the form of a mutilated, cut-off sentence (6). Bishop's style often employs the use of dashes, prominent in "One Art," "In the Waiting Room," and "A Drunkard," which is indicative of something left unfinished or unsaid, requiring added

emphasis. Although Barthes' text, *A Lover's Discourse*, interrogates the amorous figures and "what [she] says" when calling upon her "image repertoire" (5), Bishop's own image repertoire plays into the premise of a continuum of female relationships that speak in an, albeit coded, amorous language even when the poem centers on familial relationships. Barthes' introduction expels the myth of the "love story, subjugated to the great narrative Other . . . the subject . . . reduce[ed] the great imaginary current . . . which is passing through h[er], to a painful, morbid crisis of which [s]he must be cured" (7).

Further, Bishop's relief as well as pain stems from the series of women who pass through her life. Barthes' figure, "The Absent One," strikes a chord with Bishop's work since, according to Barthes, its function "stages the absence of the loved object," transforming into an "ordeal of abandonment" (13), which is seen most noticeably through "A Drunkard;" however, all four poems have this reoccurring issue of abandonment, from a daughter's perspective, an orphan's, and a lover's. Interestingly, just as Bishop's speaker soliloquizes loss, Barthes' figure of absence is performed by the "*one who stays*, never by the one who leaves"⁶ (13). Through abandonment and loss Bishop's self reflexive poetry cuts against the confessional grain offering a fresh way to express mental anguish without the usual overtly dramatic angles. By drawing on several other figures from Barthes' text, such as "Atopos," "Tip of the Nose," and "Ideas of Solution," to chart Bishop's speaker, her women, and the role each plays on her homosocial continuum, one can identify the "signifying economy of the amorous subject" even when the love is not sexual (6). As I work through each close reading, at the forefront of the

⁵ Barthes credits Lacan and Freud for this term.

⁶ Italics added.

discussion will be the fluid selves that merge together into "an Elizabeth," and the role each of her women play as the remaining elements that work to fill her perceived void stemming from loss, creating Bishop's poetic and personal identity.

CHAPTER ONE: "A DRUNKARD"

"We are all just prisoners here of our own device." —The Eagles

By reviewing first her uncollected work, specifically "A Drunkard" from her recently published 2005 *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box*, the stage will be set for reading her published poems that are themed in a similar vein as the impetus of the poet's voice. Beginning with the emerging child's voice vis-à-vis the poet's speaker, momentum will build with each poem until the cycle of loss comes to fruition with the strengthened adult voice that has come to grips with the meaning of loss and how to effectively channel it into her work. By digging back into her subconscious and uncovering the genesis of her suffering, Bishop fingers the source of her displacement as a child readily exposing her pain and unveiling her wounds as she traces key moments with the women in her life—her mother, grandmother, and aunt—only to replace them with her mentor, Marianne Moore, and her lovers, specifically Louise Crane (to whom she dedicated "Letter to N.Y."), Lota de Macedo Soares (dedicatee from *Questions of Travel*), and Alice Methfessel (Bishop dedicated *Geography III* to her).

Lorrie Goldensohn asserts in her book, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry*, that "A Drunkard" "chronicles a moment of betrayal and abandonment burning itself into consciousness with the aid of that fire" (51). Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* offers an interesting angle into Bishop's poem since Barthes' intended discourse is geared toward lovers, while Bishop's "A Drunkard" reflects back on the moment when her mother abandoned her. Barthes suggests through the figure, "The Absent One," that the lover takes on a mask when faced with the "ordeal of abandonment;" further, to "speak this absence is from the start to propose that the

subject's place and the other's place cannot permute; it is to say: 'I am loved less than I love'" (13). The poem opens with the speaker remembering the Salem fire of 1914 as she viewed it from her crib: "When I was three, I watched the Salem fire. / It burned all night (or then I thought it did) / and I stood in my crib & watched it burn" ("A Drunkard" 1-3). At the outset of the poem, the speaker warns the reader of the poem's questionable validity when she says, "It burned all night," then adds the parenthetical aside, "(or then I thought it did)." Interestingly, the opening images of "fire" and "burn[ing]" depict the proximity of the actual fire and intimate the child's fantasy of desire, setting the stage for the moment that evolves later in the poem when she acts on her feelings and is "burned" by her mother's scolding. The reader must first question the authenticity of a memory of an event that took place when the poet was only three years old, yet the "ordeal of abandonment" is crystallized by the absence of the child's mother as she watches the fire burn. "It burned all night" refers to more than the external fire; rather, it intimates the child's burning desire for comfort from her mother.

Martin and Mohanty's feminist theory offers a prism in which "narrative and historical specificity" intertwines resulting in the coherence of Bishop's stable self, as poet reinterpreting and "remembering" personal history, being in conflict and in flux with the act of interpreting public histories through Bishop's fluid self—the speaker of the poem. Barthes posits that the "I" speaker "reconstitutes a memory, a confusion" while waiting for the loved object to return (15). Bishop paints the scene red like a child would use a crayon and scribble over the pages of her work:

The sky was bright red; everything was red:
out on the lawn, my mother's white dress looked

rose-red; my white enameled crib was red
and my hands holding to its rods—
the brass knobs holding specks of fire—
I felt amazement not fear
but amazement may be
*my infancy's chief emotion.*⁷ ("A Drunkard" 4-11)

Millier correctly isolates the two poles evident in Bishop's process: "she is amazed and not afraid. . . . she is alone and in trouble" (*Life* 4-5). The context of "A Drunkard" depicts a distanced relationship between mother and daughter suffused with fire and brimstone imagery as the world before young Elizabeth burns in front of her eyes. The "brass knobs" on her crib hold "specks of fire." She is positioned on the inside—culpable, perhaps, in her child's mind—as her mother feverishly works outside to aid the displaced survivors coming in from the bay, but the fire that is truly outside is brought in by reflecting in the brass knobs of her crib. This should be a frightening experience, and a child's mind would view this catastrophe in personal terms. One can almost hear the child saying, "If my mother loved me, she would come home and protect me." However, she "felt amazement not fear," which speaks to the distance already present in the mother/daughter relationship. Is it that the young child has already learned to rely on herself? In essence, Martin and Mohanty's premise of "being home" and "not being home" is realized when juxtaposed against Bishop's "A Drunkard":

'Being home' refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; 'not being home' is a matter of realizing that home

was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of difference within oneself (196).

Bishop's "home" was an illusion. Safety did not exist and her developing sense of otherness that will reveal itself further into the poem demonstrates her inability to repress her difference.

One way to read "A Drunkard" centers on the child believing that the fire is a game or a play that develops before her eyes in which she is observer, ignored, but actively watching the events unfold:

People were playing hoses on the roofs
of the summer cottages on Marblehead Neck;
the red sky was filled with flying motes,
cinders and coals, and bigger things, scorched burnt black.
The water glowed like fire, too, but flat.
I watched some boats arriving on our beach
full of escaping people (I didn't know that). (12-18)

In reimagining the tale, Bishop's speaker assumes the child's voice, who thought "[p]eople were playing hoses on the roofs" as she "watched some boats arriving on our beach." Why only "some" boats? Martin and Mohanty conclude that privileged histories are built against oppressed histories. Is this a place where the privileged white adult realizes the devastation and loss that occurred when she was a child thinking it all a game? The possessive voice of a child emerges in the same line when she indicates the

⁷ Italics added.

boats were arriving "on our beach." It is a testament to Bishop's technical ability to flow from the adult to the child's voice and past and present reflections so seamlessly; then, she takes it even further with the addition of a parenthetical aside when the child/adult voice merge at the culmination of the line, "I watched some boats arriving on our beach / full of escaping people (I didn't know that)" (17-18). Her tone suggests remorse for thinking it was all a game as she tries to explain her curiosity and possessiveness with the simple fact that she "didn't know" about the "escaping people." The poet's voice rings through the child's as she absolves her memory and, perhaps, selfish behavior while still exploring her feelings of abandonment and its ramifications as an adult. These feelings of abandonment are glossed over as "bigger things" left unsaid; through her exploration of maternal loss and revisiting the wounds of childhood, Bishop only offers cursory insight into the child's perspective, an insight that will burgeon with time.

Critics, such as Marilyn Lombardi, Susan McCabe and Brett Millier, agree that "A Drunkard" centers on early feelings of abandonment and attempts to trace back to an exact moment the author contributes to the "psychogenesis of [her] alcoholism" (Lombardi, *Body* 105). Abandonment is a central theme in Bishop's body of work; however, the argument can be made that Bishop employs an interior/exterior binary to deal with her mutable selves—the very selves critics fracture and isolate when prescribing rigid readings of her work. McCabe posits that "[m]emory and fiction . . . are not easily disentangled. And the creation of the self depends upon the uncertain and seemingly arbitrary selectivity of memory" (*Poetics* 217). Bishop uses the interior/exterior binary that separates the child from the source of her pain—her mother. The mother is outside—a part of the exterior—on the lawn, while the child resides in her

crib inside the house, inside herself.

Bishop's ability to merge the reflective voice of the poet with the child in the poem creates a detachment inherent in a work that centers on loss and coming of age, while exposing the wound by employing the symbolic reference to "Washington Crossing the Delaware":

One dory, silhouetted black (and later I
thought of this having looked like
Washington Crossing the Delaware, all black—
in silhouette—). ("A Drunkard" 19-22)

By referencing the moment of Washington's crossing as the image the adult attributes to the "one dory, silhouetted black" gives credence to the turning point in Bishop's own life since Washington's decision changed the course of history. Further, the craft's black silhouette foreshadows the "black stocking" and the momentous rebuke that is to come as altering the course of her life. The blackness, representing otherness, stands in contrast to her "mother's white dress" (5).

Perhaps the void in the poem that is most interesting resides in language, or rather what is unsaid through the silence of the mother at this particular moment in the poem. The child calls for her mother, readers are told, but neither her mother nor the readers, now complicit in the mother's inaction, can act:

I was terribly thirsty but mama didn't hear
me calling her. Out on the lawn
she and some neighbors were giving coffee
or food or something to the people landing in the boats—

once in a while I caught a glimpse of her

and called and called—no one paid any attention. ("A Drunkard" 23-28)

Indeed, the reticence or emotional detachment that critics usually attribute to Bishop can be traced to the mother in "A Drunkard," who attends to strangers while leaving her daughter, seemingly, unattended and yet situated to watch the terror unfold: "once in a while I caught a glimpse of her / and called and called—no one paid any attention—" (27-28). Barthes describes the figure's desire to "sustain the discourse" even in the other's absence as "a preposterous situation" to resolve; to be sure, the figure is "wedged between two tenses, that of reference and that of allocution; you have gone (which I lament), you are here (since I am addressing you)" (15). The mother in "A Drunkard" is physically gone, and yet she is present as the child "called and called" out to her.

The poet reaches back to reveal her innermost thoughts of her mother and the picture she paints is unflattering: "I was terribly thirsty but mama didn't hear / me calling her" (23-24). Of course, on the surface the thirst reminds readers how the mother abandoned the child, but it also conjures desire. Her "abnormal thirst" for womanly company ignites just like the fires, which unfolds later in the poems. "A Drunkard" could be said to sketch the foggy details when one feels, but cannot name, her otherness. The vagueness implied through Bishop's language, the mother was "giving . . . something" to others not her and seen earlier through "bigger things," is an indictment of the mother's refusal to give unconditional love to her child. In effect, "something" always gets in the way of an exchange between mother and daughter. The poet's struggle between her mother and her sexuality is at the heart of the poem, which validates the claim of fluid selves mingling together as the poet captures the struggle between abandoned orphan and

budding lesbian, essentially.

The moment of recognition when one establishes difference from the outside world is unequivocally established in "A Drunkard." There could not be a more pivotal scene in the poem than the child burning within her crib of confinement, or rather conformity. Anne Colwell addresses in *Inscrutable Houses* the "disappointment" felt by theorists who desire Bishop to be candid about her sexuality: "[F]eminist and lesbian theorists have expressed disappointment at what they see as Bishop's 'timidity,' her refusal in her love poems to acknowledge openly and celebrate her homosexuality" (75). Although "A Drunkard" remained unpublished until recently and may not be considered by mainstream critics as a narrowly perceived "love poem," as part of Bishop's homosocial continuum, it is included here as a love poem. First, one must consider Bishop's early love poems from *A Cold Spring* such as "Insomnia," "Faustina, or Rock Roses," "Varick Street," "Four Poems," "Letter to N.Y.," "Argument," and "The Shampoo" that lament love and loss implicitly, thus tapping into lesbian sensibilities in spite of the essentialist heterosexism many theorist ascribe to when analyzing Bishop's poems and demanding explicit references, in order to fully appreciate "A Drunkard." Interestingly, the lesbian and feminist implications of her "world inverted" in her poem "Insomnia" takes readers deep "down the well" (12-13) where the moon must find balance, a counterpart: "she'd find a body of water, / or a mirror, on which to dwell (9-10). This mirrors the reflection in "A Drunkard" as a poignant lesbian poem in which Bishop brings homosexuality out of the moonlight, the cover of night, and into the "brilliant morning" (29).

In *A Cold Spring* Bishop began the process of revealing her other selves as

vulnerable, but to argue that she refused "to acknowledge openly and celebrate her homosexuality" is indeed a critical error (75) that Adrienne Rich, Lorrie Goldensohn, and Victoria Harrison, to cite a few, propose. Goldensohn's depiction of the "angry, deserted moon" and the negative duration of "inverted" misses the point that Bishop's "Insomnia" makes that the moon reflects the lover's in the moonlight as one lover's left becomes the other's right when facing each other, and there is no distinction since the bodies are mirror images (31). Just as Goldensohn misreads the moon, Harrison also sees the moon full of "anger and frustration" and the lover "split" (66). The moon's avowal to the Universe to "go to hell" signals empowerment not anger anchored in the speaker's lesbian identity ("Insomnia" 8). Without the reading of "A Drunkard" as the genesis of her emerging identity as orphan, lesbian, and female poet, a true understanding of Bishop's voice at that moment in time would be far less revealing.

Martin and Mohanty conclude that the materiality of place and identity considered through "geography, demography, and architecture" allows a woman to anchor herself to the places from where she speaks, which provides the ability to shift the vision of herself into mutable selves due to the saving "indeterminacy" of identity (194-95). Bishop did lose her mother at five years old as Gertrude Bulmer Bishop was institutionalized and years later died in an asylum. Would it not make more sense to contribute Bishop's abandonment and isolation to her need for companionship? It is true that alcoholics drink to "fill a perceived void" as Millier suggests ("The Prodigal" 56); nevertheless, the question that remains is not what void, but rather which void is she trying to fill, an emotional or a physical void or both? Is this a vaginal void that must be satisfied? Lombardi attributes the void as a search for "maternal solace" (*Body* 105).

One could contend that the void is actually a desire to stimulate her curiosity, the "chief emotion"—"amazement," —that the child revels in as the crisis ensues, but which crisis? Perhaps it is both the exterior fire of Salem and the interior fire—the child's burgeoning sexuality—as reimagined by the adult poet reflecting back. Loss makes one want to desperately name the origin of difference since there is not a witness to attest to it. This is not Bishop's only poem that involves love, loss, and language through the tropes of fire and parental abandonment: In "Casabianca," "Love's the boy stood on the burning deck / . . . / while the poor ship in flames went down" (1; 5). Although Bishop's Elizabeth is absent, the retelling of the tale of the burning boy who waits for his father's return is revealing when juxtaposed against "A Drunkard." Elizabeth waits in her "white enameled crib" that radiated the "red" fire off in the distance; her hands held the crib's "rods—the brass knobs holding specks of fire" (6-8). Like the "burning boy of "Casabinaca" Elizabeth, too, waits for her mother's return to save her from the metaphoric flames. The poem evinces Bishop's own lack of control as a child and later as the "half-drunk" poet (46).

The morning after the Salem fire, Elizabeth and her mother are walking along the shore, while the "fire still went on" both physically in the distance and metaphorically in her mind ("A Drunkard" 30). The tone is curious, almost gleeful, as the speaker describes the "brilliant morning across the bay"—an odd adjective—and the "strange objects" that litter the shore like treasure (29, 33; respectively). Again, Bishop portrays the mother as neglectful in her duty as she walks with her three-year-old along the "beach strewn with cinders, dark with ash" while "strange objects [that] seem to have blown across the water" are scattered about (32, 33). What mother would expose her child to

this level of destruction? The child wonders if the objects were "lifted by that terrible heat, through the red sky?" (34). Does she believe she willed it to happen due to her almost morbid curiosity? In the face of destruction, the child emerges unscathed physically and comes out into the world reborn mentally through the fire as she questions her identity and power in the smoldering world around her. For Bishop's speaker, it is the Day of Judgment as her mother's rebuke will change her perception of herself.

The clearest recollection and moment of lucidity occurs with the life-altering scene—the mother's rebuke:

I picked up a woman's long black cotton
stocking. Curiosity. My mother said sharply
Put that down! I remember clearly, clearly—
But since that night, that day, that reprimand
I have suffered from abnormal thirst—
I swear it's true—and by the age
of twenty or twenty-one I had begun
to drink, & drink—I can't get enough. ("A Drunkard" 37-44)

Bishop begins the poem with the speaker cautioning the reader as to the accuracy of her memory with the parenthetical aside "(or then I thought it did)" and segues to "I remember clearly, clearly" (2, 39; respectively). The rebuke gives impetus to her suffering. Lombardi reads the child's reaction to her mother's scolding, the "Put that down!" moment, as "a sign of a more general rejection":

the 'woman's black cotton stocking,' evoking perhaps a world of secret delights and intimacy, must be put down or suppressed; the child's

curiosity about herself in relation to that world is summarily dismissed.

(*Body* 105)

Susan McCabe takes Lombardi's premise further by defining this moment as the site of the child's "submerged sexual curiosity," while Millier hints at the meaning behind Bishop's inclusion of the "intimate clothing" perhaps having to do with "some aspect of her sexuality," but all three critics fail to delve deeper into the poem's sexual crescendo (McCabe, *Poetics* 216; Millier, *Life* 5). Critics resist engaging in a serious dialogue that addresses the implicit sexual undertones that surface in "A Drunkard." Barthes suggests through his figure, "Tip of the Nose," that the "speck of corruption . . . is a tiny one: a gesture, a word, an object, *a garment*,⁸ something unexpected which appears . . ." (25). When the garment appears it signals the crux of Bishop's identity as other on multiple levels: orphan, lesbian, and as the gendered poet retelling her tale. More importantly, it gestures toward her willingness to delve into the genesis of her otherness as she picks up the garment and withstands the rebuke.

Bishop's identities as poet, lesbian and soon-to-be-orphan (she is practically motherless in the poem) intertwine, and yet critics refuse to answer the real question of curiosity and intimacy that underscores the theme of parental abandonment as a mother notices a child's interest in the feminine, situating the child as "other," and thus citing difference as she reprimands her daughter. Why are the critics determined to leave the question of sexuality unanswered? Could it be the taboo subject of a lesbian writer connecting her lesbianism to the mother figure? Is it due to the absence of a mother at a critical age that leads Bishop to infatuate the female figure, which makes readers of her

work uncomfortable? And yet, the Oedipus cycle keeps readers at ease? Perhaps the real issue at play is homophobia and heterosexism that preferences the Freudian analysis of the parent/child relationship in terms of opposite sex—Oedipus or Electra—making the language to discuss the parent/child relationship when the two are of the same sex difficult to read in psychoanalytic terms.

The rebuke, Bishop purports, was the cause of her "*abnormal* thirst" ("A Drunkard" 41). Through language, the very inclusion of "abnormal" is telling since homosexuals were cast into the role as outside normalcy, meaning heterosexism determines what is normal and abnormal behavior. In an effort to reflect back on her childhood and name the emerging otherness that surfaces at a young age, Bishop conceals her lesbianism through her alcoholism, which is a convenient trade off since both subject positions place her as outsider, but one must consider her emerging status as orphan since the poem centers on the theme of abandonment. The poet/speaker uses the pretext of intoxication to gloss over the painful details of one's childhood while ironically allowing for blunt honesty, leaving spaces and gaps left open in the recall—"(*or then I thought it did*)"—to mirror that of a foggy childhood memory, or hangover, where vibrant images stand out "*clearly, clearly*" but specifics are often filled in by the adult reflecting back evidenced by Bishop coyly ending the poem with a disclaimer: ". . .you must have noticed, / *I'm half-drunk now . . .* / And all I'm telling you may be a lie . . ." ⁹ ("A Drunkard" 45-47). The inclusion of "half-drunk" is telling as it may imply half-truths were offered in the poem. Further, employing ellipses invites readers to view her

⁸ Italics added.

⁹ Ellipses and italics original.

other poems as extensions of her personal tale; then, to read Bishop as less than confessional would be an oversight.

"Irreconcilable tensions between the search for a secure place from which to speak, within which to act, and the awareness of the price at which secure places are bought . . . exclusions . . . denials . . . the blindness on which they are all predicated," Martin and Mohanty conclude in their research (206). Paradoxically, the allusion to being "half-drunk" also offers protection from her revealing an anger toward her mother helping less fortunate, the very "blindness" Martin and Mohanty refer when one considers the intertwined personal and public histories. As Bishop retells the story in "A Drunkard" the knowledge of her alcoholism and the profound affect her mother's neglect had on a young Bishop reveals too much. Perhaps the evident loss of control answers why Bishop left "A Drunkard" unpublished. Typically, Bishop's emotions brim just beneath the surface; however, in "A Drunkard" her anger at both her mother's refusal to answer and the rebuke thrust toward her very identity as other is the very denial of Bishop's individuality and sexuality that spurs her poems of self discovery, which will continue with her grandmother in "Sestina."

Martin and Mohanty suggest that it is impossible for a lesbian to be truly at "home" since her sexuality is in contrast to the privileged position as a heterosexual as home is created by repressing difference (202). The "complexity of lesbianism" stems from the separation that could occur between mother and daughter if her sexuality were revealed (202). When referring to their case study, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Martin and Mohanty postulate that Pratt's "lesbianism is precisely what she can deny, and indeed must deny, in order to benefit fully from the privilege of being white and middle-class . . .

. She can deny it, but only at great expense to herself" (203). The isolation between the daughter and mother in "A Drunkard" is symbolized through the woman's stocking; the stocking, then, represents the intimate bond the speaker desires between herself and her mother. This bond is key to understanding Bishop's homosocial continuum. Inevitable in this discovery is Bishop's positioning herself and her emotions with a taboo subject—sexuality and the mother. In doing so, Bishop negates the privileged relationship between the mother and daughter as a hierarchy only to tread towards other pertinent female relationships with equal impact: the grandmother/child relationship that will be seen later in "Sestina;" the aunt/child relationship in her poem "In the Waiting Room;" finally, the progression culminates in "One Art" between lovers. Interestingly, each poem personalizes loss with a poignant and raw emotional quality.

Although "A Drunkard" was in fact unpublished and presumably unfinished, its revealing nature should prompt scholars to revisit her published poems and take another look through the confessional lens in lieu of the openness and specificity Bishop uncovers from her own "memory" through the use of an interior/exterior binary. Seemingly, in Bishop's published work specifically addressing loss, she employs a strategy of obscuring pertinent information from the reader while, simultaneously, divulging her secrets and darkest fears of loss stemming from childhood. Critics have termed this phenomenon by numerous dichotomies: Kathleen Spivak defined Bishop's artistry as "conceal/reveal" (496); David Kalstone deemed it a "curious combination of self-assertion and guardedness"¹⁰ (213); "Absence and presence"¹¹ or "isolation and

¹⁰ David Kalstone was specifically referring to Bishop's *Questions of Travel* collection in which "In the Waiting Room" is a part in his book *Becoming a Poet*.

connection" are the terms Anne Colwell employs to characterize Bishop's approach (154, 199; respectively).¹² One explanation takes us directly to Bishop's famous line published in *Time* magazine referencing her distaste for confessional poetry when she tartly said, "You just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves" ("On 'Confessional Poetry'" 303). In Bishop's case, readers can appreciate the irony that she did not always follow her own advice; otherwise, even guarded published poems like "Sestina" would lose its intimate air.

¹¹ Susan McCabe also employs the dichotomy, but reverses it to "presence/absence" in "Writing Loss" (19).

¹² Anne Colwell applies the "dichotomy between absence and presence" specifically to "Sestina" (154) and addresses "isolation and connection" when discussing "In the Waiting Room" (199).

CHAPTER TWO: "SESTINA"

"Sestina," from Bishop's collection *Questions of Travel* strategically placed in the aptly subtitled section "Elsewhere," sets the stage for interpreting her poetry as more than a simplistic opposition of forces or insoluble selves. Except for the anxiety imbued in Bishop's surrealistic treatment of the subject in "The Man-Moth," "The Weed," and "The Unbeliever" from her earlier collection *North & South*, "Sestina" marks a departure from the male-identified subject fascinated with fantasy and death, replacing it with domesticity and the intrusion of natural elements in an unnatural state through eyes of an ambiguous narrator watching an androgynous child. David Kalstone assesses Bishop's *Questions of Travel* as "what's past is past," which fails to account for why Bishop elects to return to her childhood to gain perspective (221). Interestingly, "Manners" precedes "Sestina" in the same collection and also centers on the silenced child; however, it is in stark contrast to "Sestina" since the grandfather at the center of the poem is dictatorial in his tone by listing the rules of manners as the pair makes their way through town. The town, of course, symbolizes the public sphere in which Bishop was silenced as a child. Again, the child in "Manners" like the child in "Sestina" is voiceless, yet unlike the grandmother in "Sestina" the grandfather's dominance negates the child's presence, which is indicative of the patriarchal constraints that Bishop was moving away from as she progresses through the continuum.

In "Sestina" Bishop focuses on the divide between her conscious (outside) and subconscious (inside), Bishop's poetic mastery blends the two in an attempt to harmonize her mutable identities as she struggles against loss by evincing the language of the public,

external, sphere with the private, internal, sphere in an attempt to balance the familiar with the strange on her homosocial continuum evidenced in the first stanza by the rain and the tears:

September rain falls on the house
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears. ("Sestina" 1-6)

At the outset of the poem, Bishop brings the "September rain" that "falls on the house" into the kitchen, transforming nature into "tears." Addressing the inside/outside binary, critics overlook her goal: to fuse her interior world with her exterior world. Helen Vendler posits that "Sestina" combines the "domestic" with the "strange" (97); indeed, rather than choosing one over the other, Bishop creates unity. Meg Schoerke surmises that the tears in "Sestina" are "simultaneously contained and exposed" (203); however, that exposure takes shape through the inanimate objects Bishop employs as her subconscious voice. Too young to recognize her own blossoming identity or comprehend her grief over the loss of her parents, the child in Bishop's poem empowers the domestic objects that surround her to take up the position as griever or other, especially pertinent since the poem was originally entitled "Early Sorrow."¹³ As stated in the introduction, it is possible to divide the poet into neat categories in an attempt to study her work, but that only provides readers with a partial understanding of her method. Instead, the challenge

is working through the many lenses of the poet's complexities at once, a point echoed by Kalstone when he suggests that "Sestina" represents the process of "self-location" (218). Just as the child in "A Drunkard" takes charge of the fire and holds specks in her hands, the child of "Sestina" channels the inanimate objects with objectivity and restraint, a critical distance lacking in "A Drunkard."

The grieving child, isolated from her mother, begins to face her subject position as orphan/other through negation. Martin and Mohanty contend that identity appears stable when defined by what one is not: the child in "Sestina," like the child in "A Drunkard," is not mothered; therefore, "such negativity is represented by a rigid identity . . . which sustains its appearance of stability" (196). Further, the voice of the child is silenced and represented through the rememory of the speaker. Martin and Mohanty emphasize how "[s]ilence is significant" in a text (203). Although Bishop can deny her lesbianism, issues of abandonment, and the influence of her gender into her art, she refuses to "benefit fully from the privilege of being white and middle-class" since, as Martin and Mohanty contend, for a woman to do this it would only be done at "a great expense to herself" (203).

Critics looking for explicit proclamations of lesbianism overlook Bishop's artistry and mastery of form that offers the poet a controlled way to reveal not simply her sexuality, but also the many facets that make up Bishop. "Sestina" amalgamates the orphan, the poet, and the lesbian seamlessly. Through personification Bishop's "child" has an outlet, which reaches out to her subconscious level vis-à-vis the "sing[ing] almanac" and the wise "Marvel Stove":

¹³ Anne Colwell's *Inscrutable Houses* references Vassar Box 29 as the source of the title (155).

She thinks that her equinoctial tears
and the rain that beats on the roof of the house
were both *foretold* by the almanac,
but only known to a grandmother.

The iron kettle *sings* on the stove.¹⁴ ("Sestina" 7-11)

Bishop's selection of "equinoctial tears" emphasizes the *imaginary* divide between the polarizing forces, which in turn expresses the need to synthesize her various selves that are beginning to emerge. This heightened awareness is in part due to the loss of her parents, whose role typically is one of reinforcing identity. As an orphan, this noticeable void will be exacerbated by her difference physically (gender), sexually (lesbian), and poetically as a writer. Something is hidden within the text that needs to be extracted. All objects, both real and inanimate, hedge toward catharsis—the kettle sings, the almanac tells, the child paints, and the grandmother's tears are all indicative of a concealed truth that is searching for a healing release. By queering the text, the cues unfold and events "only known to a grandmother" are "foretold by the almanac," suggesting that the poet realizes that her grandmother always knew of her difference—her lesbianism—but conflated her sexuality with her gender, which attests to the ambiguity of the child's sex.

Adam Kirsch in *The Wounded Surgeon* posits that "Sestina" exemplifies Bishop's "characteristic method of revealing and concealing at once" (89). Interestingly, the child is both figuratively and literally "elsewhere," as the volume's subtitle implies, in the poem; she is both physically inside the kitchen with her grandmother—reveal—and outside of herself observing the world around her—conceal—watching the almanac

"hover half open above [her], / [and] hover above the old grandmother" ("Sestina" 20-21). Exactly what does the almanac represent and why does it hover over the family? Brett Millier deduces that the almanac serves as an "inevitable symbol of Elizabeth's lifelong anxiety about the passage of time" (*Life* 13). Although the almanac seems to suggest that one's life is already written and documented, hovering over the child, it is also the birthplace of the poet's voice. "Sestina" uncovers the way Bishop managed love, loss, and language from an early perspective that later influenced her seemingly, upon cursory review, reticent style. Aptly titled "Sestina," the style and content conjures the image of the six-line stanzas employed by the Provençal troubadours, who sang about love; although the love that resonates in "Sestina" centers on a child finding a way to love herself by devising a space corporeally and mentally that is her own, the poem also places the grandmother on Bishop's homosocial continuum as she begins to address the question posed in her poem entitled "In the Waiting Room": "Why should I be my aunt, / or me, or anyone?" (75-76). To only consider "love poems" as poems strictly between or concerning lovers limits the narrative, as Barthes proposed, to the "great narrative Other" (7). Instead, Bishop treats love with equality as these "loves" who transformed her perceptions of identity, for better or worse, exist at moments of transformation, with which her autobiographic poetic eye/"I" recovers.

The genesis of the poet's voice is seen here in "Sestina" and will flourish as "One Art" will show. Bishop's gift for detail comes alive through the inanimate objects she breathes life into:

It's time for tea now; but the child

¹⁴ Italics added.

is watching the teakettle's small hard tears
dance like mad on the hot black stove,
the way the rain must dance on the house. ("Sestina" 13-16)

During a time of perpetual grief and loss—first she must deal with the death of her father, then she witnesses the committing of her mother to an asylum—the "teakettle's small hard tears" represents the grandmother's intuitive knowledge that "the child," who has suffered already from untenable loss will never be the same, setting the stage for admittance of otherness as an orphan. Bishop gives life to the domestic objects she has control over as poet since the tangible object—her mother—is a life without animation. A cruel parody of her situation is at once reflected in the dark tone of the poem; further, the poem amalgamates her lost identity as "the child" since the speaker conceals the child's sex. In this sense, the speaker's other is the genderless child, or as Barthes suggests through his figure, "Atopos," "[t]he other is the figure of my truth" (34). Bishop's truth resonates on several levels as the poet reflects back on her "early sorrow" first as orphan. The tears also symbolize Bishop's truth, her coming to terms with her difference as a lesbian and her future as a poet: "*It was to be*, says the Marvel Stove. / *I know what I know*, says the almanac" (25-26). Just as the kettle must sing and the almanac must tell, Bishop's identity was fated—"it was to be." Parallel to the speaker keeping the child's sex indeterminate signaling a conflation of gender and sexuality, Bishop also integrates her grief and her poetic voice into one. Lurking in the shadows of her text lies the striking openness that could be overlooked upon a cursory review. Bishop shades her voice and identity through the child's subversive silence; however, it is through absence and silence that her poetic identity is revealed.

Through silence, Bishop controls perception, forcing readers to view the child's world through the child's eyes. In this regard, Bishop shows readers instead of telling readers: "Bishop's silence regarding sexuality and feminism is strategic. . . . her powers of camouflage and polyphony had become extremely sensitive. Bishop invites a specialized reading, one that scrutinizes absences and spaces—what lies in the shadows of her print" (McCabe, *Poetics* 57). In creating a picture stemming from her unconscious and conscious mind, "the child / puts in a man with buttons like tears / and shows it proudly to the grandmother" ("Sestina" 28-30). By ascribing the man in the picture with "buttons" for tears, Bishop essentially castrates him and forces her wish for a mother figure onto the picture. The button with its typical circular shape and holes for the thread also symbolizes the vagina and Bishop's unconscious desire for the same-sex, which for a child would be a mother but as an adult would be a same-sex relationship. Bishop merges the two, while castrating the button man in the scene to which she shows "proudly to the grandmother" (30). The child announces pictorially her difference, fusing her identities into one complete self: First as an orphan, the man in the picture Elizabeth draws could clearly be her deceased father; second as a lesbian, the same-sex relationship encourages a female castrator interpretation; and third as a poet, who creates an exotic world to replace her bleak reality as a mechanism to protect her inner child from suffering.

Perhaps what is also camouflaged in the text is the grandmother's true intentions as she keeps busy in the kitchen, watching the child innocently play:

But secretly, while the grandmother
busies herself about the stove,
the little moons fall down like tears

from between the pages of the almanac
into the flower bed the child
has carefully placed in the front of the house. (31-36)

The grandmother's "secret" understanding that she cannot protect her grandchild from the future foretold by the almanac and planted by her tears are metaphorically emblemized by the flowers "placed in the front of the house" that will continue to grow outside the security of the home, thus sealing the child's fate. A harvest is planned and planted years in advance; when the almanac says, "Time to plant tears," the realization of the upcoming harvest—the child's maturation into adulthood/womanhood—brings forth the recognition of her gender and her sexuality, hence her otherness (37). Anne Colwell incorrectly assumes that "the child will harvest what the *almanac* has planted"¹⁵ (154). In effect, the almanac is a device used to foretell what the child will reap after the harvest the *child* has planted inside of herself that will "come out" at harvest time through the exteriority of the self. Once the child leaves the "rigid" house and opts for the "winding path" of uncertainty, the poet accepts the vulnerability of her subject position(s) ("Sestina" 27-28). Interestingly, the child drawing the "inscrutable house" is essentially herself an inscrutable house as the search to find a place in the strange world will take readers into the bizarre realm of "In the Waiting Room" ("Sestina" 38-39). Thomas Travisano affirms that the child in "Sestina" confirms a place in the family through a "veil of silence"—a silence that began in Nova Scotia and transcended to Worcester, burgeoning within a genderless body as the gender of the child is unmentioned until the involuntary and eerie scream of "In the Waiting Room" breaks through (*Midcentury Quartet* 222).

Faced with her difference, the child must push her way "out" toward acceptance in order to find her voice without faltering/fainting among the masses, which will be evident in "In the Waiting Room." Embracing her poetic vision, Bishop created a voice for her unconscious evidenced through the "Marvel stove" and the "clever almanac," and then captured her conscious artistic self on paper: "With crayons the child draws a rigid house / and a winding pathway" ("Sestina" 18, 27-28). The true markings of the early poetic self is one searching for identity; indeed, the poet's "crayons" create a canvas that embraces both the rigidity of structure—Bishop as reticent and detailed observer—while interjecting a "winding pathway" that serves as a foreshadowing of her exploration of her private thoughts and intimate moments that construct the "blue-black space" of "In the Waiting Room" (59).

Bishop's dislocation and sense of homelessness left her "uncertain about the security of her home", according to Millier; Bishop wrote, "I really have no right to homesickness at all" (*Life* 87). Martin and Mohanty's premise that "home," and the architecture that signifies home to the individual, functions as "anchoring points" and offers stability (196). For Bishop, much of her poetry is consumed with these anchors and her relation to it. By defining herself through negation—not homeless—Bishop's sense of homelessness is eradicated by the very landscape her poems create, offering a world of security to house her otherness, a world whose contours she unveiled in "Sestina" only to come alive in "In the Waiting Room."

¹⁵ Italics added.

CHAPTER THREE: "IN THE WAITING ROOM"

"In the Waiting Room" opens *Geography III*, Bishop's last collection of published poems completed in 1977. The orphan of "Sestina" embarked on the winding path away from the rigid house only to seek refuge in the public sphere of both the waiting room, corporeally, and the "blue-black space" of the magazine, metaphysically ("In the Waiting Room" 59). The fainting spell of "In the Waiting Room" occurred very soon after seven-year-old Bishop was torn away from her maternal family in Nova Scotia to live with her deceased father's family in Worcester, Massachusetts. Critics agree that the crux of the poem centers on a "young girl's moment of awakening to the separation and the bonds among human beings, to the forces that shape individual identity through interrelated recognitions of community and isolation" (Edelman 182-83); however, the critical question that scholars like Lee Edelman and Anne Stevenson fail to address remains: what exactly is making young Elizabeth feel simultaneously separated and united with humanity? In order to appreciate and address this question the fully realized picture of Elizabeth as orphan, lesbian, and poet comes into play. Lee Edelman's seminal work "The Geography of Gender: Elizabeth Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room'" explores the homoeroticism that underlay Bishop's poem. Bishop uses this poem to uncover the wounds of suffering, becoming vulnerable on print compared to the distanced child of "A Drunkard" and silenced child in "Sestina," rather than veiling her pain in an effort to truly heal; thus, the painful loss of her mother and her search for a place to call home strikes at the heart of the poem, a poem with a fully invested speaking subject articulating her numerous perspectives and entrances into the public sphere.

In trying to carve out a home for herself, one not foretold by the almanac of "Sestina," Bishop finally found a way to channel her energies into "new and healing directions" by creating realms to explore her otherness, collapsing her fluid selves into one sustainable whole (Kalstone 247). In order to define oneself, one must uncover the "exclusions" and "repressions" that support a homogenous white identity, an identity "derived from and dependent on the marginalization of differences within as well as 'without'" (Martin 193). The androgynous child of "Sestina" proudly shows her pictorial difference to her grandmother, who then reacted with concern for her granddaughter's otherness, and the child becomes the gendered, self-conscious, and strangely aware "Elizabeth" of "In the Waiting Room" as her question of place, or displacement rather, resonates in her obtuse discomfort with her surroundings and her desire to create an alternate universe to house her difference, similar to the space created in "Sestina," combining normalcy with the strange or exotic. First, normalcy is presented:

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.

My aunt was inside

what seemed like a long time ("In the Waiting Room" 1-12)

Out of her element and surrounded by "grown-up people," "arctics and overcoats, lamps and magazines," Elizabeth is already feeling the enormity of her otherness weighing down upon her, but instead of this awakening being a negative force it becomes the very fuel that Bishop taps into, juxtaposing reality—the waiting room—with the metaphysical—an out-of-body experience.

Susan McCabe determined that Bishop's "poetics of loss imbricates a writing of a fluid and unfixed self" ("Writing Loss" 2).¹⁶ Certainly Bishop embraced the fluidity of her "selves" when writing the ways to control and manipulate loss and the grieving process as the child attempts to locate her untapped identity as an orphan or perhaps a cipher balanced between two worlds. In analyzing the opening stanza, why did Bishop elect "Aunt Consuelo" instead of her aunt's actual name, Florence? Anne Colwell hypothesizes that the change is indicative of loss (194). If one were to unpack that speculation further, Bishop's stance of distancing herself by excluding a name crystallizes. In essence, employing distance is a defense mechanism against the losses she endured as a child, stemming from her father's death to her mother's confinement to an asylum; further, Bishop's reserve or reticence clinches the essential meaning of the poem as waiting for loss to occur. It is through the stress of waiting for loss that the poet discovers an impetus to channel her pain into new directions as intimated by Kalstone. By harmonizing normalcy—Aunt Florence—with the exotic—Aunt Consuelo—

¹⁶ Susan McCabe's article begins on page 69 and runs 42 pages; however, neither the printed version nor the online version obtained through Gale Group follow this format. I have numbered the pages according

Elizabeth is afforded a sense of control similar to the child's control over the inanimate objects in "Sestina." Normalcy keeps her close to her family, while the exotic, paradoxically, keeps her at a safe distance where she can work through her otherness. On the homosocial continuum, through her mother, grandmother, aunt, and lovers, Bishop encounters loss, which is clearly a search for identity in "A Drunkard" as the famous rebuke denotes; however, the loss of identity is far more sinister in "Sestina" as the child remains androgynous, while Bishop's Elizabeth in "In The Waiting Room" appears to use loss as a mechanism to balance normalcy with strange emotions welling from within. As poet, Bishop controls these forces and propels them onto the page toward catharsis.

Bishop's Elizabeth cannot be harmed in either world the poet created even as she morphs from one to the other in an effort to mask her pain from outsiders. Potentially, the Elizabeth in the poem recognizes how easy it would be to lose yet another member of her already shrinking family and resorts to the realm of the strange as an outlet for her grief as well as her otherness. With that being said, the strange lines emerge, giving credence to the juxtaposition of normalcy and exotic/strange. These are the shaping forces that isolate her at that moment in the waiting room:

and while I waited and read
the *National Geographic*
(I could read) and carefully
studied the photographs:
the inside of a volcano,

black, and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire. ("In the Waiting Room" 13-20)

Interestingly, although the parenthetical aside signals the poet's voice, inserting the autobiographic truth, it also has a definite child's ring in the tone, which differs from its use in "A Drunkard." The aside in "In the Waiting Room" provides validity—she "could read"—instead of questioning the content as the speaker does in "A Drunkard"—"(or then I thought it did)," which adds to the poem's verisimilitude. This shift reinforces the legitimacy of the narrative. She could read, so yes it is not unusual that she was looking at the *National Geographic* and can remember the details vividly even though, cunningly, no such edition can be found. Indeed, for Bishop the craft and result outweighs an exacting truth since what is more important is the essence of memory and the process the poet works through to achieve the desired effect. In an interview with David McCullough she was asked about combining two issues of *National Geographic* for her poem, "In the Waiting Room." Bishop aptly replied, "I didn't change the poem. It was right the way it was" (73). Bishop engages an escape mechanism through the magazine as a device to give Elizabeth a self temporally apart from the pain. As she sits in the waiting room and "read the *National Geographic* / . . . carefully / stud[y]ing] the photographs," Elizabeth induces an almost trance-like state allowing the volcanic eruptions on print to mirror her interior feelings of needing an outlet, while she also desires calmness, at once, until she is "spilling over / in rivulets of fire." The cathartic release signals the fainting spell. The volcano also suggests orgasm and a child's discovery of her body. The exotic nature of the pictures in the magazine excited Elizabeth until she announces "I felt: you are an I"

(60). Again, the reading circles back from an emotional sensation to a physical realization of her emerging identity as other on several levels. It appears that Bishop was getting closer to discovering her identity as multiple other. More importantly, she was adjusting to her childhood discomfort as other not shying away from it as critics like Rich and Edelman argue, which will be fully shown.

Martin and Mohanty's argument, explored in the earlier chapter "A Drunkard," establishes geography as the device to anchor the subject. This theory will support the conclusion that Bishop never hid her identity. It was always intimated on the page. Bishop found a way to counter suffering illustrated through her recognition in "Sestina" that there is a vast world ready for exploration, giving her hope that one day she would move outside of Worcester, Massachusetts and take the "winding path" toward acceptance. The merging of identities was originally explored in the 1946 collection, *North and South*, as the "Mapped waters . . . / lending the land their waves' own conformation" ("The Map" 20-21). Geographical distance becomes a recognizable trope in Bishop's work. Through "In the Waiting Room" distance is achieved through the child's voice, which in some ways is appealing because of its vulnerability; however, since there is a length of time between the actual event and the recollection of it "relationship[s] between the literal and figurative, observation and invention, perception and vision" become blurred (Edelman 180). The child ponders if her difference is as obvious as the exotic scenes in the magazine, which sends shock waves, momentarily, through her system and explains the fainting spell positioned within the poem as she observes others and delves deep into the caves of her mind, which is a safe haven unlike James Longenbach's point of view that suggests the child realizes "there is no 'inside'

world safe from this exterior violence" (480). Bishop's poetry provides distance and a space to recuperate memory.

Many scholars, including McCabe, Edelman, Kalstone, and Stevenson hone in on the artificial inside/outside binary set within the poem. Focusing specifically on the "paradoxical desire to be connected and to be apart," McCabe argues for the psychology of Bishop's artistry, but fails to render an opinion as to why this binary exists if indeed it does (*Poetics* 38). This refusal to probe beyond the simplistic in/out binary also resonates when Edelman advocates that "the inside/outside dichotomy is reversed and discredited at once" (188), but he neglects to admit that a reversal is still a binary among women as exotic or domestic because he is quick to align a simplistic binary between men and women.¹⁷ In "Sestina" the domestic and strange took form through the grandmother and the house juxtaposed with the child and the personified kettle and stove. This point is the actual challenge Bishop addresses in her poem, electing to infuse these powerful women onto a symbolic homosocial continuum rather than simply flip-flopping the binary, and thus keeping the patriarchal constructions and exclusions in tact. At the locus of her thought process resides the breakdown of the binary system, which may infer Elizabeth's perception of difference, but due to her youth she is unable to translate what *her* difference means without employing the exotic pictorial of another geography that underlay the *National Geographic*.

Similar to the black stocking in "A Drunkard" and the "vaginal" buttons in "Sestina" signaling sexuality and gender, there is a noticeable and real difference from

¹⁷ Edelman alludes to Bishop's conflation of Osa and Martin Johnson by representing them as identically dressed, which may be a "subversion of the hierarchical opposition of male and female . . ." (189-90).

the ordinary Americans sitting in the waiting room compared to the sense of otherness imbued through the naked Africans with "awful hanging breasts" (81). However exotic the women or babies are, they are still women and babies:

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. ("In the Waiting Room" 26-31)

Bishop appreciates the fluidity of her gender, discovered through pictorial imagery, which once again connects readers back to "Sestina," that a world does indeed exist beyond her current frame. It is here at the intersection of sexuality and gender that the two collide, while remaining, paradoxically, separate entities: the "black, naked women" construe both gender and sexuality, while "their breasts were horrifying" denotes sexual anatomy for a child disoriented by her physical difference. The Elizabeth of the poem appears on the outside to be just like them, while on the inside her otherness is like the "rivulets of fire" streaming from the volcano that the adult Bishop needs release from ("In the Waiting Room" 20). To be sure, the cathartic release from both the constraints of the patriarchy and the need to reveal one's sexuality reaches its zenith both in the child and adult, but it is the adult poet who can articulate the essential meaning. Buttressing gender with sexuality keeps the two divisions separate, but in close proximity as they do indeed play off each other in a holistic reading. The mention of "babies" and "naked women" once again conflates mothering with distance and sexuality. Even the babies in the

magazine are motherless. There is no mention of a mother, only "naked women."

Although Bishop envisaged herself as a poet, and not as a female poet rendering her thought-process purportedly androgynous, her identification as a lesbian still delineates her poetry as coded and feminized.

Bishop's narrative "I," or observer's "eye," remains concerned with mothering, sexuality, and gender. David Kalstone questions in his book, *Becoming A Poet*, whether "the young girl 'learns' from hearing her aunt scream? Or, more eerily, that she herself screams, in a moment of involuntary identification. The indeterminacy of reference gives the poem its air of menace and complicity" (246). Is Bishop horrified at the prospect of identifying as a girl? Her Elizabeth centered poems provide a space to work out constructions of gender, sexuality, and homelessness along the homosocial continuum, while remaining in control of her pathos:

Suddenly, from inside,
came an *oh!* of pain
—Aunt Consuelo's voice—
not very loud or long.
I wasn't at all surprised;
even then I knew she was
a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't. ("In the Waiting Room" 36-44)

Elizabeth experiences the "*oh!* of pain" from "inside" her gendered body, but contorts her subject position by refusing to be identified with (or as) a "foolish, timid woman," while,

at the same time, she refutes the masculine position, opting instead for ambiguity in an attempt to silence the gender that speaks from within her body. Kathleen Spivak notes in her article "Conceal/Reveal: Passion and Restraint in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop or: Why We Care about Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry" that "the cry both separates and unifies" the child from humanity (503). More specifically, the cry separates Elizabeth from women and unifies her interior/exterior selves into one soluble identity: "I might have been embarrassed, / but wasn't." Taking a closer look at those lines, perhaps Bishop was really saying, "I might have been a foolish woman, but wasn't." In a moment of gender construction, Bishop elects female empowerment.

Further, it is at this moment that Elizabeth is hailed as a subject through the recognition of the "*oh!* of pain." Interpellation of the subject, to be sure, is constructed by Louis Althusser when "the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, [s]he becomes a *subject*" (174). Bishop locates weakness in the cry, and this weakness taps into her subject position as orphan, one who has felt the magnitude of loss. By recognizing the scream as her own, and answering its call, Bishop formulates in the poetic voice an emerging reticence. Althusser suggests that the subject "recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to [her], and that 'it was *really* h[er] who was hailed' (and not someone else)" (174). Within the waiting room, the child recognizes her subjectivity, and thus the overwhelming nature of her otherness transfigures into her nearly "seven years old" self (55). Ideologically, the subject is "always already interpellated individuals as subjects . . ." (175). Bishop is always already othered.

At this juncture in the poem, Barthes' figure "The Tip of the Nose" comes to light: "It is by language that the other is altered; the other speaks a different word . . . a whole scene through the keyhole of language" is revealed (26-27). The aunt on Bishop's homosocial continuum is the other, and her "oh!" reveals the oneness that Elizabeth feels inside of her as well as her difference as a lesbian and orphan, which Bishop as poet reveals. Just as the stocking symbolized the intimate nature of femininity and the child's attraction toward it without being able to name it at that time as her burgeoning sexuality, Elizabeth's aunt's "oh" can also be construed as shock, similar to the rebuke that stung the daughter in "A Drunkard." In this case, the aunt's corporeal distance as the child attends to herself in the waiting room has a striking resemblance to the mother in "A Drunkard" who failed to hear her daughter's cries for help. In effect, the niece in "In the Waiting Room" is left to her own device to figure out her identity as "one of them" (62) intimating both her gender and her sexuality similar to the child in "Sestina" whose fluid selves merged as "it was to be."

The stone that trips most critics' interpretations remains whether the child accepts her place and conforms or resists and rebels. Bishop posed a similar quagmire in "The Map" with the question, "[I]s the land tugging at the sea from under?" (8). Elizabeth allows herself to momentarily let go and "fall off" in the waiting room just as Bishop predicted the map allowed the sea to be "tugged under" in "The Map," setting the stage for an intricate metaphor for "mapping" identity. The multiple selves that are constructed and amalgamating within the child of "Sestina" let go and collide in "In the Waiting Room." Through the fusion of fluid identities, Elizabeth experiences the sensation of falling when she hears her own voice inside her head:

What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me*:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I—we—were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the National Geographic,
February, 1918. (44-53)

Elizabeth has finally found her poetic voice—a language all her own—that will free her from grief, and bring her selves to culmination. This level of consciousness, the "we," that has already begun the process of observing the world from her fixed position at the margins, while placing instrumental women—her mother, grandmother, aunt, and lovers—at the center of each proposed poem. Indeed, each woman plays a vital role in connecting Elizabeth to a sense of home, even if it uncovers the uncertainties of the constructions of home, while she remains at the margins between home and homelessness.

Home is thus created by repressing difference, struggle, and other histories of resistance as Martin and Mohanty contend. Interestingly Spivak, like Edelman, conflates gender and sexuality into one entity, rather than appreciating them on separate, but complementary, planes of vision. As a result of this conflation, difference is repressed and it suggests that one's gender—specifically femininity—is contingent on

one's sexuality—specifically heterosexuality since both critics argue for a "straight" reading, thus emphasizing hidden homosexuality. Do Spivak and Edelman mean to ascribe certain attributes that engender a gay reading? This merging occurs because Edelman and Spivak fail to consider the true "displacement" of the cry and the perspective of the poem resides in the child's loss of her mother as she attempts to be whole:

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities—
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the *National Geographic*
and those awful hanging breasts—
held us all together
or made us all just one? (75-83)

Elizabeth turns toward her aunt, in the absence of her mother, and discovers "what similarities . . . made us all just one [gender]?", which clearly lays blame on the patriarchal constraints that conflate anatomy with gender, defining women anatomically, specifically the breasts in "In the Waiting Room" and through castration by imposing a vagina onto the picture in "Sestina." For a girl about to "be seven years old," it was akin to "falling off / the round, turning world / into cold, blue-black space" (55, 57-59; respectively). Renee Curry points out, "this white female child does recognize herself as connected to women of color" (118). Elizabeth's orphan status as well as her gender,

sexuality, and place as a female poet put her "otherness" on display, yet each part maps her whole identity and must be considered simultaneously. Just as the almanac in "Sestina" predicted "*it was to be*," the scene that unfolds in the waiting room was set in motion when she became an orphan, as the conclusion of "A Drunkard" suggests, an developed an "abnormal thirst" (41). Only now Elizabeth is finally realizing what it is like to spin helplessly out of control as her mind struggles to comprehend a society that devalues difference, or at least that is what Bishop's poems seem to imply.

To combat this essentializing trend of negating difference, Bishop places her critical female, personal relationships on a continuum where each shares equitable status in relation to her. Add back into this equation Barthes' figure, "Tip of the Nose," introduced in the earlier chapter, "A Drunkard," as the "speck of corruption. . . a gesture, *a word*,¹⁸ an object, a garment, something unexpected which appears . . ." (25) to signal disappointment with the object at the center of the poem, Aunt Consuelo, which spurs the hailed subject as Elizabeth discovers her identity. It is this corruption of gender, specifically juxtaposing Aunt Consuelo with the naked Africans, that Bishop fixates on through the "*oh!* of pain" (42), identifying Aunt Consuelo as "foolish, timid" compared to the empowered Africans whose nakedness attests to their strength resonating from their gendered bodies that Elizabeth finds "horrifying" as a child balancing "normal" with "exotic" (31). Bishop's poetic rendering of her aunt in "In the Waiting Room" is a carefully crafted snapshot of the emotional frailty the child feared within herself and transferred onto the aunt as a method of control:

I said to myself: three days

and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space. (54-59)

The "sensation of falling off," her connection to the women in her life, is frightening for the child. Just as the child in "A Drunkard" has difficulty naming her otherness, the speaker's memory of an almost seven years old Elizabeth also cites the source of difference Bishop continues to address in her poems as she goes back to the various moments in her childhood to determine when she recognized her other selves by using the exotic black women depicted in the *National Geographic* and by altering her aunt's name to Consuelo. These mutable selves flourish on the page and interact with each other. As poet, Bishop recreates her version of "an *Elizabeth*" (61), the abandoned orphan, while, simultaneously, intimating the impetus of the lesbian self-merging with the others as one through the poet's lens: "I scarcely dared to look / to see what it was I was" (64).

In essence, Bishop's mutable selves are in flux rising from beneath the surface just to drop below again, while the threads of identity keep her connected to the influential women that adorn the page. These women are more than muses since their collective role influenced the poet and aided her formation of poetic identity; indeed, they are recognized as the stable, fixed notion of home that Bishop's selves must contend with as she deconstructs the illusion and elusiveness of home. Unstable and shifting identity

¹⁸ Italics added.

occurs by living on the edge not outside or inside home; it is Bishop's mutable selves that exist at the periphery, coming into contact with the women at the center of the poem even though each woman only liminally exists. What Bishop reveals through the unsaid and the painted scene truly does reveal more than the explicit renderings of abandonment.

Analyzing the same scene through a specifically queer lens is instructive, but it must be cited at the conception as a limited reading like conflating gender with sexuality. "In the Waiting Room" demonstrates that homoeroticism and institutional heterosexuality are part of the terror Elizabeth faces when seeing those "horrifying breasts" as a child with a burgeoning sexuality (31); Edelman concludes this horror may stem from "the disfigurements and constraints that mark female sexuality in patriarchal cultures" (194), while Elizabeth Dodd contends that "'In the Waiting Room' is full of gender awareness" but quickly assumes that "if it is not merely a carefully concealed proclamation of homosexuality . . . [then] is the act of hiding the point of the poem?" (110). Both Dodd and Edelman narrowly perceive the poem in a homosexual binary that Bishop's "Elizabeth" is either resisting homoeroticism or accepting the homoeroticism in the pages of the magazine, which are both half-truths. The poem also reflects on a child's perception of her internalized difference in addition to gendered difference, and the "hiding" that Dodd speaks of is simply a child trying to name her otherness in terms she understands—external similarity/dissimilarity:

But I felt: you are an *I*,
you are an *Elizabeth*,
you are one of *them*.

Why should you be one, too? ("In the Waiting Room" 60-63)¹⁹

Elizabeth considers her "I" position as conformist, then quickly concludes with her "you" position, questioning the very structure of identity based in the "you" as different from the "I." In a true reversal, Bishop elects the "you" subject position, which conjures an image of the adults in the waiting room pointing at her and shouting or perhaps hailing Elizabeth as "You! You are different." What is refreshing and revealing about the poem lies in the fact that Bishop traces her noticeable internalized difference to her earliest years, "I scarcely dared to look / to see what it was I was," which attests to sexuality being much more than just the physicality of sex (64-65). Bishop begins channeling her child's voice to describe the sensation of simultaneously finding and losing one's identity: "Why should I be my aunt, / or me, or anyone?" ("In the Waiting Room" 75-76).

Adrienne Rich's article "The Eyes of the Outsider: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop" stresses that Bishop writes under the pretext of a "false universal of heterosexuality" rather than exploring her lesbianism (16). Bishop's identification as a lesbian manifests in the poem through the magazine she was "[t]oo shy to stop" looking at/reading. Similarly, Edelman points out that the reading "straight though" could "mark her reading [and presumably Bishop] as 'straight'" (105). One could argue that it was her poetry that at times could be marked as ambiguous rather than in an oppositional binary of straight or gay. Bishop does not "silenc[e] the voice of her own sexuality" as Edelman proposes (195), rather Bishop's tendency to play with language and its meaning comes out clearly as orgasmic release, signified as the "*oh!* of pain" ("In the Waiting Room" 37). As a child she felt that her world was spinning out of control, just like she was

¹⁹ Italics original.

spinning in the waiting room, but as the adult reflecting back Bishop captures the real meaning that she was perched on the verge of psychological and physiological explosion due to the constraints of mental conformity and the physical development of the child's upcoming growth into puberty. Bishop wars against the many roles that the patriarchy imposes: as an orphan, she must withhold those tears; as a girl in a gendered society, she should read quietly in the waiting room; as a lesbian, she should be "straight" and horrified by the breasts; and as a poet, she should conceal her voice; however, two conflicting emotions are at play: the child is trying to keep from falling/fainting and the adult is ready to explode/let-go—this catharsis is what signals a confessional reading, and thus leads readers to the core of Bishop's suffering, tracing back to her realization that she has to build her identity against the bulwark of parental loss in order to gain her "I" voice, which will allow her interior thoughts, once housed in her subconscious, to surface.

Just as her grandmother in "Sestina" knew that "the child" would suffer in light of her difference, Elizabeth now realizes the truth: her otherness embedded in her status as orphan, woman, lesbian, and poet must be channeled from her pain to fuse her selves into one collective voice that honors the boundaries her personal and poetic geography champions, while expressing her multifaceted and autobiographic identity. Bishop's boundaries are inscribed on the page as her poetry resembles the certainty of land, a constant, with her fluid selves mingling and emerging like the water that continuously runs over the land at various stages. Returning to the certainty of the waiting room, or reality rather, the child uses the reality of her aunt as a weight to keep her centered while she mentally escapes into fantasy since reality is expressed by what is both present and

absent from her life:

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. ("In the Waiting Room" 94-99)

As mentioned in the earlier chapter, "A Drunkard," Martin and Mohanty illuminates the coherence of a stable self is a product of interpreting personal history, histories that are also produced from interpreting public histories. Jonathan Ellis cites Bishop's use of facts, such as dates and timelines, as "a way of shoring up the imagination, of grounding it in literal facts and history" (51). Although critics, like Longenbach and Ellis, attest to the "welcome certainty" of reality (Longenbach 481), Bishop says more through what is absent and unsaid. The lines, "it was still the fifth/ of February," suggest a tenor of hopelessness since nothing has changed and the child must go on to face another day of inevitable loss represented by the imagery of "night," "slush" and "cold." Indeed, the end circles back to the fainting spell as she was "falling off . . . into cold, blue-black space" signaling the ultimate fear of loss or even death (57, 59; respectively).

No longer the androgynous child of "Sestina," Elizabeth is transformed by the recognition of the significance those "horrifying breasts" hold on many levels ("In the Waiting Room" 31). Perhaps she is realizing how easy it is to lose one's individuality and place in society if one fails to conform: "*Why* should you be one, too? / I scarcely dared to look/ to see what it was I was" (63-65). The detachment inherent in a poet's work that

centers on loss and coming of age are a "gravely empowered presence" in Bishop's work, according to Lorrie Goldensohn, who further intimates, "how erotic subjects concerning the female never move very far in Bishop's work from issues of parental abandonment and the subsequent development of an uneasy and orphaned selfhood" (65). Weaving these fluidly through her poetic vision, readers envision a landscape without the fissures sought out by most scholars and critics who refuse to look at the whole, focusing instead on the parts, and positing only a partial reading of "In the Waiting Room." In doing so, Bishop's voice is marginalized as her ability to find home through her personal female figures is diminished. Bishop's homosocial continuum also gave her a place to affix her selves in relation to her women while exploring the otherness at the periphery. From her mother to her grandmother and later her aunt, Bishop grows into "an Elizabeth" as the always already other. Testing the limits of their collective acceptance, Elizabeth finally emerges as the fully realized Bishop stationed between spheres in "One Art" as she wrestles with the multiple meanings behind one art, the final poem that truly expresses Bishop's fluid identity and her entrenched position as confessional.

CHAPTER FOUR: "ONE ART"

Having situated herself between the personal and public histories that brought about "In the Waiting Room," Bishop collapses these histories and blurs the borders between them into one seamless vision laid out in appropriately titled "One Art," also from *Geography III*. Bishop's poem reflects the final merger of her multiple, fluid selves into one as the poet, orphan, and lesbian culminate into her "one art," while her homosocial continuum remains intact with the entrance of her lovers inscribed on the page. Millier defines "One Art" as a "careful approach to the confessional" (*Life* 513). "Careful" seems to be a word that describes critics' treatment of Bishop and her place in the literary tradition rather than Bishop's own approach to this particular poem. "One Art" is one of Bishop's more revealing works. It is here that she, once again, lets go of her pathos while playing with the formality of the villanelle similar to her method in "Sestina." The primary distinction lies with the poet's growth from the child's perspective as the reflective poet to the now adult nearing the end of her life.

Bishop maps her language carefully and strategically to evince the raw emotion without overstepping the borders into a singular voice. Instead each aspect of loss is mapped out and overlapped like the boundaries described in "The Map" and "The Imaginary Iceberg" from *North and South*. Bishop's first collection envisions love as impersonal or through an observer's lens rather than directly through a lover's: "We'd rather have the iceberg than the ship, / although it meant the end of travel" ("The Imaginary Iceberg" 1-2). Although the iceberg is a natural element compared to the machinations of the ship, like love the iceberg is free to float within the ocean until its

path crosses another and, perhaps, a corporeal connection is made. Similar to Bishop's poetry representing land, while her fluid selves unite in the water that covers the land, Bishop's personal and poetic geography are intimately connected to the women who sustain her and keep her connected to the appearance of home. Martin and Mohanty contend that recognizing the "architectural anchors" that surround one's "home" is crucial to understanding identity:

Geography, demography, and architecture, as well as the configurations of [one's] relationships to particular people . . . serve to indicate the . . . fundamentally relational nature of identity and the negations on which the assumption of a singular, fixed, and essential self is based. (196)

Bishop stands outside the center in each poem; however, she is tenuously affixed to the poems' objects vis-à-vis her stable influences that take shape through her women, which are expressed as her lovers that represent her one art. In "The Imaginary Iceberg," the speaker prefers the "imaginary" to the real, opting to lose something, travel in this case at the surface but love beneath, for "a scene a sailor'd give his eyes for" (12). Refusing to be adhered to the center, or home, Bishop prefers her decentered status as observer, but this does not imply detachment. Astutely aware of her own subject position, Bishop embraces her otherness by defining herself by what she is not: she is not mothered, not gendered, not straight, and she is not loved in "One Art." Finding a way to represent her "selves" as complete is clearly evidenced through Bishop's villanelle, which serves as the perfect poem to conclude the discussion of Bishop's selves as orphan, lesbian, and poet and her ability to confront and grow from the inherent obstacles that loss creates and language overcomes.

In *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop*, Anne Stevenson describes "One Art" as "directly address[ing] the theme of loss that runs obscurely, like a chill current, through all her work" (125). Bishop's ability to combat loss and otherness stems from her childhood experiences, which has been discussed at length, bringing into view the now grown orphan who is confronted with the loss of a lover, Alice Methfessel, the implied recipient of her elegiac "One Art," and the perceived threat of abandonment. Barthes' figure "Ideas of Solution" offers an interesting prism in which to interpret "One Art." Barthes stresses that "[t]he Idea is always a scene of pathos By imagining an extreme solution . . . I produce a fiction, I become an artist, I set a scene, I paint my exit" (142). Bishop's "scene of pathos" effectively countered loss in "A Drunkard" by creating a fantasy space as she paints the scene with her observer's eye as the child plays a visual game; the child in "Sestina" designs a space for loss pictorially through her drawings; and Elizabeth, trapped in the waiting room, constructs an alternate universe. *Geography III* stands as Bishop's last collection of published poems, and she is just two years from her own death, Bishop indeed "paints her exit" through "One Art" with a revealing discussion of love and loss through the only language she know—poetry.

As poet, Bishop's method transcends the child's imagination and settles into a deliberate form that offers a sense of control, the villanelle, to showcase her craft, while providing an outlet for her pain as she blends the personal with her art using the structured discipline as an artist to provide relief from her private grief on the page; Whether it is through the poetic process or emotional journey, Bishop appears to find solace through her medium and the language she constructs: "The art of losing isn't hard to master; / so many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost that their loss is no

disaster" ("One Art" 1-3). Again, the ambiguity of language is telling. The "many things" that trigger loss leaves a gap for readers to fill in, and it is reminiscent of Bishop's vague language in "A Drunkard" when the mother was "giving . . . something" to others, not her, and the child eluded to "bigger things" as an indictment of the mother's refusal to give unconditional love to her child. This seems to parallel, equally, Bishop's concern with Alice refusing to give her unconditional love coupled with the continual threat of abandonment she contends with coursing through her work, thus giving credence to the homosocial continuum that is driven by loss and love with the perpetual need to create a language to house Bishop from the painful memories of rejection. Bishop's consolation is to turn inward and remain at the margins since it is at the center where the pain of loss is brought into light. Even further, the substance of the first stanza is cloaked as the second line splits into the third: "*intent / to be lost*" in an effort to uncover intentions, perhaps. The almanac did predict, "it was to be" in "Sestina." Separating "intent" from "to be lost" results in a loss of power over the events that unfold and create a "distancing effect,"²⁰ a device previously seen in the poem "In the Waiting Room" when Elizabeth distances herself from the pain by renaming her aunt (Colwell 175).

Essentially, the distancing effect is masked by the form of the stanza; when one reads it, the rhyming "master" and "disaster" of course stands out, which add to the mistake critics make when attributing a smug tone as if she can really "master disaster." Jonathan Sircy describes Bishop's "ruefully cheerful argument" as "tenuous at best" (242). And yet, this juxtaposition of contradictory tones and emotions made an

²⁰ Colwell specifically refers to the insertion of a "third person;" however, I think it applies to my example as well (175-76).

appearance in "A Drunkard" as the child's gleeful tone was circumspect since it conflicted with the backdrop—a smoldering fire. In "One Art" the "cheerful argument" seems clear as the speaker looks for a way to subvert her feelings of loss through the control the form of the villanelle affords by naming the things she has lost that did not break her. Further, "One Art" cycles back to "Sestina" as gender remained neutral and unspecified in order to contain the internalized emotions as Bishop treads toward catharsis.

In an attempt to trivialize loss as a mechanism to manage the pain that arises from it, Bishop says, "Lose something every day. Accept the fluster / of lost door keys, the hour badly spent. / The art of losing isn't hard to master" ("One Art" 3-5). Sircy continues his argument citing the speaker's "desperate effort at starving off the unavoidable reality of loss's tragedy" (242). It would be a mistake to believe, as Sircy and Colwell do, that the speaker's "one art" rests in her ability to "starve off" or in Colwell's terms "evade loss" when, in reality, Bishop realizes that she has to contend with it every moment of her life, as evidenced through the previous chapters, and control her reaction to it (Sircy 242, Colwell 178; respectively). Echoing Millier's review of "One Art" as "a rehearsal of what we tell ourselves to keep going," Sircy's argument falls short since the speaker faces the losses she can handle in an attempt to *manage loss* not ward it off or in Susan McCabe's words "come to terms with loss," which has a defeatist ring to it (Millier, *Life* 506; McCabe, "Writing Loss" 1; respectively).

Loss becomes a permanent fixture, it would seem, in her life: "Then practice losing farther, losing faster: / places, and names, and where it was you meant / to travel. None of these will bring disaster" ("One Art" 7-9). Again, the emphasis on the rhyme

creates "faster disaster" as if to imply that loss is hurled at her and she must act fast and go "farther" into the source of her pain to the memories of "places, and names, and where it was [she] meant / to travel" in order to cope. Another interpretation emphasizes the fact that disasters keep coming "faster" and, inevitably, there is no escaping loss, so one must face it head on, which chronicles her progression. The child in "In the Waiting Room" hide between two worlds, but the adult in "One Art" is determined to confront loss. The speaker's desensitization is actually an acute process of healing. Bishop's elegy for lost relationships, according to Joanne Feit Diehl, "speaks in the tones of survivor" (179).

A proven survivor, Bishop's "one art" is surviving loss with her work standing as proof. The speaker's ability to survive the painful events traces back to "A Drunkard" when what she really discovered was her ability to cope in an unfathomable situation. The poem has a blues ring to it—'laughin' to keep from cryin.' Like the blues singers, Bishop kept moving forward and channeled her pain into her work to survive. Through her incantation of "losing," repeated in all but one stanza throughout "One Art," Bishop attempts to master loss by experiencing, not avoiding, it. The penultimate stanza refrains from "losing" as Bishop underscores "it wasn't disaster" (15). It is in this very stanza that Bishop recalls that she "lost two cities, lovely ones" as a reflection on her past lovers, referencing Louise in Key West and Lota in Petropolis (13). Although the pinnacle of the poem comes in the last stanza when the speaker verisimilitude comes into question ask she addresses her current love, Alice, directly not implicitly through geographical tropes: "—Even losing you" (16). Emphasizing "losing" over and over implies a lessened burden as Bishop's speaker counters loss and the stoicism imbued in the

speaker's unresolved tension with her lover. Ultimately, Bishop seems to say that she can get through it; she has always worked through loss and survived. McCabe cites the "unresolved tension between mastery and a world that refuses to be mastered" as the source of the speaker's anxiety ("Writing Loss" 19). Indeed, the paradox of wanting to master and unable to master becomes the jagged grain that tears the veiled cynicism from the flesh of the poem to show the underlying wound of the poet.

As if describing a breakdown, the speaker recounts the litany of possessions she has lost followed by the poem's mantra cited in the last line: "I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or / next-to-last, of three loved houses went. / The art of losing isn't hard to master" ("One Art" 10-12). The jarring command—"look!"—seems to imply that the missing piece is right in front of the reader. Bishop hails readers through the "look!" to become subjects of her poem; to be sure, by commanding readers to find the loss inscribed in the text, Bishop's interpellation produces a subject, and a subject who identifies with and through Bishop will generate an accurate reading of her work. The symbolism of her "three loved houses" represents the three significant lovers/others—Louise, Lota, and Alice—she lost, but there is a sign of hope: "my last, *or / next-to-last*, of three loved houses went."²¹ Once again, Bishop sandwiches the substance of the lines (in this case the first and second line of this tercet) to lessen to magnitude. The speaker's hope of finding another love is embedded in the line, "my next-to-last," as she leaves a space open for her lover, Alice, to stay or go. Perhaps she will meet another woman and find love once again even though she will always "miss them . . . it wasn't a disaster" (15). Conversely, "next-to-last" also signals death as she is acutely aware her end is

nearing. Millier suggests that the poem is an "elegy for her whole life" (*Life* 513). Echoing Millier, Colwell points to an emotional response stemming from "One Art", which "forecasts the remarkable collapse that is about to happen" (Colwell 177). From two opposing spectrums of loss, tangible and intangible, Bishop propels the speaker toward the climax of loss in "One Art"—herself.

Clearly, Bishop embraces the pain in order to release herself from it. Barthes' "Ideas of Solution" presents the amorous subject with "temporary peace" from the "amorous crisis" (142). In the quatrain that ends the poem, the speaker lets her guard drop and substitutes the personal for the impersonal "things" that she has lost:

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster. ("One Art" 16-19)

Bishop seems to say, it may look like disaster to you, but I lived it, felt it, and ultimately survived. The "Ideas of Solution," according to Barthes, "is *seen*, like the pregnant moment (pregnant = endowed with a strong, chosen meaning)" (142-43). Bishop's *scene* inscribes loss; her speaker has *seen* the effects. One actually hears the quiet and controlled tempo as the stanza begins: "Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture / I love)"; then it builds momentum with charged language: "I *shan't* have lied" as the emotions are raw and growing louder, which is eluded to with the verb choice "shall" that intones seriousness, determination, and force. The aside is protected by the parentheses that form a barrier and represent the circularity of life and death. Bishop verbally plays

²¹ Italics added.

with "lied" as it sounds like "lived" when read in the phrase "I shan't have lived" as her grief mounts. Also, it points to Bishop's deceptive voice seen first through her "half-drunk" speaker in "A Drunkard" who closed the poem with the caveat, "And all I'm telling you *may* be a lie . . ." (47). The formality and ambiguity of language in both poems, "shan't" and "may," forfeit autobiographic accuracy. Bishop essentially recreates her memories, while continuing to enact and react to each episode in an effort to overcome disaster, which seems to be ingrained into her personality and poetics of loss. All of this culminates into her commanding herself to "Write it!" as the parenthetical aside captures the pinnacle of catharsis in order to contain the "disaster[s]" that cast shadows over her life, producing a galvanizing affect.

A dichotomy of "presence and absence" is evident in all four poems, but most explicit through the discussion of "A Drunkard" and "In the Waiting Room." Interestingly, McCabe reverses the typical "presence/absence" binary in favor of "absence/presence," whether knowingly or not since McCabe does not make the exchange a point of discussion ("Writing Loss" 19); however, there is something noteworthy behind the reversal. Preferencing "presence" over "absence" is a propos when discussing "One Art" since so much lies in the actual body of the text and the absences or spaces left empty for the reader to fill in seem obvious. Indeed, Bishop reveals herself as a powerful presence. One only needs to "look!" (or listen) for her within the spaces to find her mutable selves embedded within the speaker's voice. Although the women in "One Art," specifically her lovers, impacted her life, their collective presence along the homosocial continuum with her mother, grandmother, and aunt, speaks more to Bishop's desire to grow from the many losses she endured, whether

an actual loss of her mother or a lover's abandonment or implied rejection of her otherness. Bishop's women stand figuratively at the center of each poem since each woman's physical presence in each respective poem is often marginalized in an effort to draw Elizabeth out of the margins, thereby embracing the very difference that makes Bishop "an Elizabeth" and Elizabeth "a Bishop" as she finds a way through her women figures to recover her fluid selves.

CONCLUSION

The boundaries between the aesthetic and the personal collapse when reading Elizabeth Bishop's poetry as the poet's vision of the world around her was shaped by loss, specifically in regards to death or deterioration of a loved one and the loss of one's identity. While her talent resides in her ability to be the constant observer, Bishop opened a door onto her most private and intimate world through her poetry. Contrary to the opinion most scholars hold, Bishop's reticence was, in actuality, a calculated device that led her progression toward the moments of self discovery that are indeed there. The dedicated reader must delve deeper than the surface and view her world from the broadest possible lens and then, slowly, allow Bishop's words to bring into view her private *selves* that lie just at the surface, too minute to capture upon first glance, but too powerful to be ignored. Bishop's style lent itself to the confessional genre without losing the message through overwrought pathos. Instead, Bishop revealed the uncertainty of memory with the twist that she may, or may not be, lying by reproducing the poem's verisimilitude without reproducing her reaction to it; her reactions in each discussed poem were indeed authentic. Through her wit, even when in pain, Bishop's most intimate moments crystallized.

In an attempt to uncover her voice, her place in the literary movements, and her very identity, critics narrowly defined Bishop's vision by looking at only slivers of her personal and poetic selves in tandem rather than approach her in a holistic manner. Indeed, this is what makes Bishop *Bishop*. By choosing multiple dichotomies between strange and normalcy, isolation and presence, as well as conceal and reveal, the paradox

of Bishop's poetry eludes some readers as they try to queer her or simply reduce her to impersonal and reticent, but in the end discover all of these approaches must be considered simultaneously if there is to be a true understanding of her work. Essentially, the image of the mother/aunt/grandmother/lovers conflates into the collective image of loss, absence, and abandonment on Bishop's homosocial continuum as a way to channel the painful details of her past and create her "one art."

Bishop drew inspiration from each woman that infused her art, and each proved to be the stable, fixed notion of home that Bishop's selves contended with as she deconstructed the illusion and elusiveness of home. Shifting identity occurred by living at the periphery of home. Bishop's speakers come in contact with the women paradoxically at the center of the poem even though each woman only liminally exists on the page. As part over her oeuvre, "A Drunkard," "Sestina," "In the Waiting Room" and "One Art" brilliantly illustrate the progression of the person and the poet. Tracing the psychogenesis of loss to build momentum from her varied status as other— orphan, female, lesbian, and poet—and the way she encountered and handled loss on multiple levels speaks to her nuanced form and strategy as a poet who warred against being cast into the role of simplistically confessional or widely woman-centered poetry, Bishop refused limitation. Thus, part of the allure of her poetry is her ability to place her women on a homosocial continuum in relation to her. Each woman, specifically in the four discussed poems, had an impact on the poet personally and aesthetically. Bishop's concern with unconditional love, coupled with the continual threat of abandonment she contends with coursing through her work, gives credence to the homosocial continuum that is driven by loss and love with the perpetual need to create a language to house

Bishop from the painful memories of rejection. Bishop's consolation is to turn inward and remain at the margins since it is at the center when the pain of loss is brought into light. Lingering behind each poem lies the displaced orphan, the lesbian, the woman and girl, as well as the poet who needed release from the prison loss creates. This catharsis signals a confessional reading, and thus leads readers to the heart of Bishop's suffering, tracing back to her realization that she has to build her identity against the bulwark of parental loss in order to gain her independent "I" voice, which will allow her interior thoughts mapped beneath the water to surface.

As a poet molding her craft, Bishop's poetry is "deliberately closed to all but the most careful scrutiny," thus resisting reductive and essentializing readings of her work (Dickie 209). It is here that readers witness the poetic genesis/genius and begin to pull back the layers to uncover Bishop's tenor of openness, revealing personal insights into her private life and alerting readers to her transformation of mutable selves, who remain in the margins waiting for the reader to uncover. Weaving her poetic vision with her personal relationships produces a topography with fissures overlooked by scholars and critics who refuse to look at the whole, focusing instead on the parts, and positing only a partial reading of her work by preferencing a queer, gendered, or orphan reading. Finding a way to represent her "selves" as complete is clearly evidenced through the discussed poems. Bishop essentially recreated her memories, while enacting and reacting to each episode in an effort to overcome personal tragedy, which is ingrained in her poetics of loss.

Roland Barthes opened *S/Z* with the acknowledgment that "There are said to be certain Buddhists whose ascetic practices enable them to see a whole landscape in a

bean" (3). Just as Buddhists can see a whole landscape in a bean, Elizabeth Bishop rendered her poetic geography through her aesthetic practice of loss. Whether revealing or concealing, Bishop left the spaces open for her readers to interpret, and in Bishop's own prophetic words, "it was right the way it was."

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