Reconstructing the Self: The Poetics of Traumatic Memory

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2022

Committee:

Linda Bierds

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Creative Writing

University of Washington

Abstract

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Memory is a fundamental aspect of understanding our relationship with the self and the world. Trauma destabilizes memory, thereby disrupting our connection to the self and others. Poets who address memory and/or trauma in their work, including Elizabeth Bishop, Gregory Orr, Eavan Boland, Natasha Trethewey, and Louise Glück, have used poetry to reassert a sense of narrative cogency to the past, a process which can be restorative and clarifying, particularly in the wake of painful events that often exist in memory as dissociated images and sensations. When writing about traumatic memory, the poet must also navigate the way in which memory, though integral to the self, is unstable and subject to distortion. Memory is inherently mediated by the present, a paradox which complicates the poet's ability to access the past. Nonetheless, poetry, due in part to its fragmented form, is well-suited to accommodate the elliptical and scattered nature of traumatic memory.

Memory is an action: essentially it is the action of telling a story
- *Pierre Janet*

We look at the world once, in childhood.
The rest is memory.
- *Louise Glück, "Nostos"*

The project of building a coherent narrative around the self—where a person moves from childhood to adulthood—is complicated by the way in which traumatic events fragment the landscape of memory. Memory, which is already subject to distortion, is further destabilized in the wake of trauma, thereby eroding the stability of the self over time. Poetry provides a flexible framework for writing about memory, especially traumatic memory, in part due to "the lyric form's plasticity" (Hoff 592). Poets like Elizabeth Bishop and Gregory Orr recognized poetry's power to capture the episodic and fractured nature of traumatic memory. According to Anne K. Hoff, Bishop felt "...that because trauma produces memories that are patchy, disordered, and often more emotional than factual, they find a more 'honest' home in lyric verse than they do in discursive prose" (592). One of the gifts of poetry is that its lyricism and formal qualities accommodate the disjointed nature of memory while still allowing the poet to establish their own sense of narrative agency and voice. Relatedly, many poets who address trauma and memory in their work, including Natasha Trethewey, Louise Glück, and Eavan Boland, use poetry as a way to make sense of the past while also acknowledging the fallibility of their own personal memory. The tension between memory as an integral part of understanding the self and memory as a construction that is necessarily mediated by the present (and therefore inaccessible as a thing-in-itself) is a central interest for many poets who draw from their own life experiences, including myself.

Memory is often configured in terms of place. In poetry, memory becomes a location itself or is tethered to a specific landscape. This conceit of memory as having spatial qualities (in

addition to temporal ones) is a useful entry point for studying its poetic function—both in my own work as well as in the works that have influenced me. The idea of memory as occupying space—as being a part of a physical landscape—exists not only in poetry but also in everyday life. We reach toward material reminders of the past, i.e. mementos, in order to hold onto certain moments. The word "memento" is derived from the Latin imperative form *meminisse*, meaning "to remember" ("Memento"). Our colloquial speech about memory is embedded with spatial metaphors: we "walk down memory lane" and "revisit the past." *Nostalgia*, a term often associated with memory, is a combination of the Greek words homecoming, *nostos,* and grief, *algos* (Pache 1). Johannes Hofer, the Swiss doctor who coined the word in 1688, classified "nostalgia" as an ailment afflicting soldiers who were away from their country. Severe *heimweh* (homesickness) became a diagnosable condition. While present-day nostalgia commonly refers to an emotional state associated with the past, the etymological history of the word is tied to a sense of physical place. When we turn toward the past, we are trying to return to a place—to a homeland which is no longer accessible to us.

In Eavan Boland's work, she participates in this project of constructing memory in connection with place. For Boland, the boundaries between the metaphorical homeland of the past and her literal homeland of Ireland are often blurred. In the poem "The Lost Land," the speaker reflects on losses she has experienced, including the "loss" of her daughters who are now "grown up and far away" (Boland 9). The speaker looks at the landscape around her and encounters her own memories embedded there. The color of the hills reminds the speaker of "a child's eyes" and she begins to see her own children as "distances, horizons" (15, 16). There is a clear connection between the physical landscape and the speaker's memory. In one sense, "The Lost Land" of the title is a reference to Boland's home country: Ireland, a place she lost on a

personal level when she moved away as a child as well as on a political level in terms of its colonial history. However, in another sense, this lost land of Ireland is also a metaphor for the past. Boland writes,

> ...memory itself
> has become an emigrant,
> wandering in a place
> where love dissembles itself as landscape… (10-13)

It is significant that memory here is described as an "emigrant," a person who has lost or left their homeland. Two types of memory are at work in this poem: firstly, the personal experience of remembering, a process which is necessarily mediated by the present, and secondly, the concept of "the past," an entity which exists outside of individual experience. To borrow philosophical terminology from transcendental idealism, there is memory as a thing-in-itself, i.e. the historical past, and memory as a phenomenon, i.e. the subjective process of remembering. In this framework, the past is distinct from personal memory because it is not reliant on the phenomenological experience of remembering. In practice, the retelling of history is, of course, inextricable from personal memory, but in theory the distinction between "memory" and "the past" persists. The concept of the past as a thing-in-itself is essential in highlighting the gap between past events and *remembering* past events. I am not suggesting that we adopt a transcendental framework for understanding memory, only that our experience with memory is inherently mediated. As Eva Schaper points out in her essay on Kantian philosophy, "A philosophical fiction need not be philosophically useless" (233). I use the idea of the past as a thing-in-itself as an organizing structure to conceptualize the problem of memory. The "emigrant," functioning as the speaker's personal memory, wanders the landscape in search of a

past which is unreclaimable, a land which is lost. In fact, much of Boland's work hinges on this tension: the desire to remember that which has been forgotten or which extends beyond the scope of her own personal memory.

The speaker in "The Lost Land" strives to remember a past that she was not alive to witness and therefore cannot actually retrieve through remembering. In order to recall this past, the speaker must construct it through imagining. Boland writes,

> I imagine myself
> at the landward rail of that boat
> searching for the last sight of a hand.
>
> I see myself
> on the underworld side of that water,
> the darkness coming in fast… (28-33)

The speaker merges the personal experience of losing her daughters, who have grown up and moved away, with the historical loss of the thousands who left Ireland—who were often forced to leave due to poverty and famine. She sees herself on two journeys: on a ship leaving the country, and then "on the underworld side of the water," presumably on a journey toward death. In order to "remember" the past, the speaker imagines the historical past as being a part of her own personal past, troubling the boundary between memory and imagination. By collapsing the distinction between the personal and the historical, the speaker betrays the constructed nature of memory. As poet Paula Meehan asks, "'Is there such a thing as the past? Or is there only a relationship with that past?'" (Collins 83). The speaker's experience in this poem demonstrates that the past must be accessed through imagining, and that imagining, in this context, is inextricable from the process of remembering.

Boland further interrogates the nature of memory in her poem "We Are Always Too Late" from *Outside History.* The speaker declares,

> Memory
>
> is in two parts
>
> First, the revisiting [...]
>
> Then, the reenactment (1-3, 12)

The speaker remembers two lovers in a café, one of them weeping. The lovers sit at a table, framed by a window with "a stand of white pines" in the background (8). The speaker is able to vividly recall these images from the past, but she also acknowledges that she is participating in an act of "revisiting," of weaving these images to fit a story in hindsight. The window and the pine trees are now imbued with meaning that they did not possess at the time. During the second stage of memory—the reenactment—the speaker says, "Always, I am going towards [the woman crying]" to point out the pine trees:

> …these
>
> beautiful upstagings of
>
> what we suffer by
>
> what survives (15, 19-22)

The use of the word "always" suggests that the speaker often returns to this crucial moment, repeatedly reenacting the scene. The speaker concludes the poem by saying: "And she never even sees me" (22). This final line reveals the corrupted nature of this memory. The speaker reenacts this moment in order to imagine approaching the woman because in reality this did not occur. The speaker returns to this moment because she wishes that she had comforted the woman and this reenactment is a way to "complete" the memory through imagining. The title of the

poem hints at these feelings of guilt—the speaker wishes she had talked to this woman, but the moment has passed and now it is too late. Embedded in this imagined interaction is also the implication that the speaker actually *is* the woman, the narrative "I," functioning as the speaker's present self while the "she" acts as the past self. This doubling in the poem demonstrates the separateness of the self across time—the speaker can revisit but never actually reach her past. Boland is calling attention to the constructed (and often fraught) nature of memory as well as its influence on our relationship with past selves.

Memory begins to generate meaning in a similar way to myth: the boundary between what is real and what is imagined is muddled in order to create a story. To remember is to weave past experiences into a narrative we tell to our present selves. In Louise Glück's *Meadowlands*, Glück explores memory's connection to both place and myth. *Meadowlands* takes the reader through the dissolution of a contemporary marriage against the backdrop of the *Odyssey.* In Corinne Ondine Pache's essay, "'That's What I'll Remember:' Louise Glück's Odyssey from Nostos to Nostalgia," she points out that the title *Meadowlands* immediately situates memory in a specific place, particularly a mythic place. She writes, "The word "meadow" is in fact etymologically connected to "aftermath" (literally 'after the mowing')..." (Pache 11). The word meadow is defined by both physical and temporal properties, similar to the past itself. Relatedly, the term "meadowlands" evokes a pastoral ideal of luscious grasses unspoiled by human development, a type of place which is increasingly rare and indeed almost mythic in today's over-industrialized world. Pache writes, "The meadows of *Meadowlands* have been spoiled and exist only as a memory" (7). Throughout *Meadowlands*, Glück looks to Greek mythology to make sense of her past experiences, using Odysseus' literal homecoming as a guide for her own attempts toward a metaphorical homecoming through memory.

In the poem "Nostos," Glück interrogates the reliability of memory and the role of memory in meaning-making. Thinking back to forty years prior, the speaker asks,

> How many times, really, did the tree
> flower on my birthday,
> the exact day, not
> before, not after? Substitution
> of the immutable
> for the shifting, the evolving (9-14)

The speaker attempts to recall a detail which is now occluded by the passage of time. The fallibility of her memory betrays the impossibility of this "nostos" or homecoming. The speaker cannot return to this place—she can only substitute "the immutable," i.e. the idea of the past as a thing-in-itself, for the "shifting, the evolving," i.e. personal memory: the story she has created about the past. Similar to Odysseus' quest to return to Ithaka, the speaker in the poem is trying to return to her own homeland—in this case childhood. It is significant that in the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus finally achieves his homecoming, Athena prevents him from recognizing his homeland. When Odysseus wakes on the shores of Ithaka, he is unaware that he has arrived home. He declares, "The [Phaiakians] told me/ they would take me to sunny Ithaka and they did not do it" (Lattimore and Homer 211-12). In truth, Odysseus can never actually return to the same Ithaka he left because he himself has changed. Upon returning, Odysseus sees his homeland through different eyes. Similarly, the speaker in "Nostos" can never truly return to childhood because she has fundamentally changed. Glück ends the poem by declaring, "We look at the world once, in childhood./ The rest is memory" (23-4). This statement encapsulates the multifaceted nature of memory: it is both a method of constructing the past as well as a means of

understanding the present. Childhood, and memory more broadly, is a lens through which we continually look in order to make sense of our present self.

Childhood, as a concept, only comes into existence once we have left it. This paradox is a central tension in my own work. Although I was not initially aware of this theme, much of my poetry has been driven by a nostos—a journey homeward into the past. In my poem, "Seeking Place" I explore the concept of childhood as a "place," but one which the child cannot see while she inhabits it. The "place" in this poem is both literal and metaphorical. The inspiration for this poem came from a memory of a closet. As a child, whenever I had what I now understand to be panic attacks, I would try to find an enclosed space to calm down, on one occasion shutting myself in a small closet that contained brooms and dusters. The child is looking for a place where she can feel safe—the implication being that there are many places where she does not feel safe. The use of the verb "seek" in the title is significant because it recalls the childhood game "hide and seek," but here the playfulness of the game is subverted by the child's desire to remain hidden. The metaphorical place in the poem is constructed by the speaker (the adult self looking back on the childhood self). The speaker concludes, "It was then I began to see childhood as a place without/ walls. I was young, felt everything as teeth to bone. I built what/ I could with what I found. The rest I had to leave exposed." When I look back on my experiences growing up, I have this overwhelming sense of being exposed. This feeling arises primarily from the fact that the child has such little control over her surroundings. I knew I was afraid, but I had no idea how to change my situation. As a child, I was limited in what I could "build" to protect myself, but in this poem, I am trying to address and honor the experience of simply surviving, of doing "what I could with what I found."

Addressing the past is an important process for those who have experienced trauma, and many poets have confronted their trauma through writing. Writing about trauma does not resolve what occurred, but it is a step toward healing. Natasha Trethewey, in her memoir *Memorial Drive,* attempts to reckon with her mother's violent death. For much of her life, she avoided looking at the past, but she realizes that "you can try to forget [...] but memory is a loop" (85). The mind's ability to shut away traumatic memories is a method of survival, but keeping these memories buried does not mean they go away. Trethewey writes, "Of course, we're made up of what we've forgotten too, what we've tried to bury or suppress. Some forgetting is necessary and the mind works to shield us from things that are too painful; even so, some aspect of trauma lives on in the body" (52). While the mind may find a way to forget, the body still carries the weight of what happened. By writing about the past, the body can release some of the tension it holds because even this act of acknowledgment is a step toward reintegrating the experience. In Bessel van der Kolk's book *The Body Keeps the Score,* which details how the body is affected by trauma, he explains, "Traumatic memories are fundamentally different from the stories we tell about our past. They are dissociated: the different sensations that entered the brain at the time of trauma are not properly assembled into a story, a piece of autobiography" (196). Traumatic memories exist as isolated sensations and flashbacks without narrative cogency. In order to process what has happened, it is imperative to reassemble the traumatic past into a story that has a beginning, middle, and an ending—especially an ending.

In Trethewey's poem "Myth," the speaker reflects on her mother's death and her own grieving process. Her struggle to accept this loss demonstrates the way in which both traumatic memory and grief are indeed a loop. Trethewey writes in a mirror form where each line is reflected back. An asterisk in the middle of the poem serves as a hinge or crux, signaling the

poem's reversal. The last three stanzas share all the same lines as the first three stanzas, just in descending order. At the end of the poem, we arrive where we began. The first and last lines are the same: "I was asleep while you were dying" ("Myth" 1, 18). The way this line bookends the poem betrays its inescapability. The speaker struggles to come to terms with the fact that such a seismic tragedy occurred while she was asleep. Yet, while the speaker sleeps, the mother's death is delayed, remaining unrealized and in a way unreal. Waking is connected with making the mother's death real: to wake is to accept again and again that she is gone. The speaker says, "the Erebus I keep you in, still trying/ not to let go. You'll be dead again tomorrow,/ but in dreams you live…" (3-6). Trethewey's reference to Erebus reinforces the poem's loop form as well as the ensnaring nature of grief. In addition to being the personification of darkness from Greek mythology, Erebus also functions as the region of the underworld where the dead pass immediately after dying. While the speaker sleeps, she is able to suspend her mother in this in-between place: not alive but not yet dead. Once she wakes, the reality of her mother's death will be real again. Like Erebus, the poem creates its own in-between place: a loop where the mother is "dying" but not yet dead, not yet irrevocably gone. The repetitive form of the poem recalls Boland's "We Are Always Too Late." Though the stakes in these poems are very different, both poets mimic the looping nature of memory and the way in which the speaker revisits this painful event again and again.

As Trethewey demonstrates, by shaping traumatic events into a narrative, they become easier to confront and manage—even if the form and lyricism of the poem argue otherwise. Once we write down or speak about what has occurred, we can begin to integrate the experience into our lives and assign it an ending. This is in part because the act of creating a narrative reminds us that though we did not have control over what occurred, we can reestablish agency through

storytelling. Van de Kolk points out, "The mind cannot help but make meaning out of what it knows, and the meaning we make of our lives changes how and what we remember" (193). The mind seeks to make meaning and this fact corrupts our ability to remember clearly, but meaning is necessary for survival. Loss and grief often feel senseless, and this is part of why grieving is so difficult to bear: our minds reach toward meaning, toward an explanation which cannot be easily found.Without this search for meaning, however, we would be unable to create an understanding of the self and the world around us. In Gregory Orr's memoir *The Blessing* where he writes about the inexplicable loss of killing his brother in a hunting accident, Orr states,

> Violent trauma sheds the web of meaning. It destroys all the threads of relationship that link the hurt self to the world—to other people and objects, or to nature, or even to the inner world of its own feelings. The real task of a trauma victim—the task that makes life worth living again—is to reconnect the self to the world. To do that, you need to reweave the web, to risk the spinning of new threads until they form a sustaining pattern the self can inhabit (134)

This reweaving involves giving our memories a narrative which inherently changes their structure, yet this artifice allows us to connect again with the self and the world.

In Orr's poem "Gathering the Bones Together," which is segmented into seven numbered parts, Orr collects disparate moments together like bones, all of which seem to orbit around the reality of his brother Peter's death but struggle to touch the memory directly. The poem opens with the haunting image of a deer carcass suspended in a barn, and "a boy" asleep who "dreams about a death that is coming" ("Gathering" 2, 4). The first two sections remain in this omniscient third-person mode where the speaker watches "the boy," aware of the impending death but unable to prevent it or explain its meaning to the boy. It is as if the adult Orr is looking back at

his child self, attempting to make sense of what happened then, attempting to re-weave "a web of meaning" that Peter's accidental death destroyed. In the second section, Orr attempts to recount the shooting, but he can only describe isolated images: "a gun goes off" and "a boy with a rifle stands [...] screaming" (18, 21-23). The memory, due to trauma, is fractured, similar to the form of the poem itself. The images have a semblance of narrative causation, but the heart of the pain—that Orr killed his brother—is still buried, still unsaid. The perpetrator, "the boy," is in the third-person voice, not the "I" voice, suggesting the way in which this trauma has separated Orr from himself. The event remains impossible to integrate into Orr's identity—to reject it completely seems like the only way to cope with the horror. Orr writes, "My father says [Peter] is dead,/ but what does that mean?" (46-47). How can the child version of Orr begin to understand and accept that his brother is gone and that he had a hand in his death? Orr struggles to mend his sense of self and is only able to establish a connection in the poem's final section.

At the end of the poem, Orr returns to the image of an animal carcass, this time a horse "burning in the far pasture" (67). Unlike Peter's death, the horse's death is understandable for the speaker. The horse broke its leg and by shooting it, the father is putting the animal out of its pain, which gives the death a sense of meaning. The deer carcass in the poem's first section also had meaning; it would be dried and re-purposed as food, hide, etc. While the images of these animal bodies instill the poem with a sense of foreboding and demonstrate the pervasiveness of death, the speaker is able to confront these deaths matter-of-factly and without emotion. These deaths "make sense" in a way that Peter's death never will. Orr recalls, "I was twelve when I killed him;/ I felt my own bones wrench from my body (68-9). The image of the speaker's bones being wrenched from his body further demonstrates the way in which trauma "shreds" the self.

However, in this moment the speaker is able to directly acknowledge what has been impossible to accept: that he killed his brother. This leads to a turn in the poem's last lines where Orr writes,

> Now I am twenty-seven and walk
> beside this river, looking for [the bones].
> They have become a bridge
> that arches toward the other shore (70-3).

The bones—the shreds of the self—which Orr lost when Peter died are beginning to form into a coherent whole: "a bridge." Poetry has allowed Orr to form this bridge as an adult and reconnect to himself. The poem's fragmented form and shifting perspective accommodate Orr's internal struggle and dissociation, yet the act of writing has led him to this place where he can acknowledge what happened and look toward the future, toward the other shore.

The ways in which trauma breaks down the stability of the self and the subsequent role of story-telling in mending these rifts are points of interest in both poetry and psychology. In Susan G. Brison's essay, "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self," she writes, "The undoing of the self in trauma involves a radical disruption of memory, a severing of past from present…" (39). When memory is disrupted, a person's sense of self becomes imperiled because the self is essentially "a set of continuous memories" (41). According to Locke, the self is "a kind of ongoing narrative of one's past that is extended with each new experience," which places memory at the core of who we are (41). A trauma survivor's connection to the past is severed in order to cope. The traumatic event does not fit into a coherent narrative of self, so it is rejected—as is Orr's experience in "Gathering the Bones Together." While this reaction may allow the trauma survivor to continue living, it creates a dissociated and disoriented sense of self. In order to feel connected to the self and the world again, the trauma survivor must form their

traumatic memory, which is a type of isolated "somatic memory" that is experienced in the body, into "narrative memory" (42). Brison points out that the act of telling the traumatic event, especially to a receptive audience, is a restorative process. She writes,

> The telling itself may be out of control, compulsively repeated. But one can control certain aspects of the narrative and that control, repeatedly exercised, leads to greater control over the memories themselves, making them less intrusive and giving them the kind of meaning that enables them to be integrated into the rest of life (47)

Similar to poetry on trauma, the method of re-telling the experience may be chaotic or elliptical, but the act of telling, of bearing witness, allows the poet to heal, and this healing is necessary in order to form connections to the self and others.

In Lewis Hyde's book *A Primer for Forgettin*g, which chronicles the historical, mythological, and personal implications of forgetting, he also addresses the importance of narrative memory. Hyde describes an example from psychologist Pierre Janet's writings on dissociative amnesia in which a young woman, Irène, fails to register her mother's death and continues preparing medicines each day as if the mother is still alive. Hyde writes, "the young woman was 'incapable of associating [the death]' with an ongoing life history" and therefore unable to acknowledge the experience (119). Hyde further explains, "In dissociation, narrative collapses. In the short term, that can be a useful, healthy defense against the kind of shock that can threaten a person's very identity," but dissociation is not a long term solution (119). Freud discusses a similar problem in his 1914 essay, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through" where he suspects that patients who suffer "from a compulsion to repeat" are often "remembering by way of their symptoms" (122). The traumatic memory is remembered by the body but not the mind. The patient cannot be free of their symptoms until they remember

their trauma by putting it into words—into "a symbolization which can be held in the mind and therefore worked upon until forgotten" (122). In Irène's case, in order to integrate and "properly [forget]" the experience, Janet helps Irène "reconstruct the verbal memory of her mother's death" (120). By turning the experience of losing her mother into a story, Irène is able to accept her mother's passing and is no longer trapped by her inability to process it.

In her memoir, Trethewey uses photographs as guides to piece together her own narrative and map out time's passage. She continually refers to old photographs from her youth as a portal into a specific memory. This method of remembering struck me because it reveals how important these objects are as touchstones for guiding our memories—yet I struggle to reach toward this method of organizing the past. After my parents divorced, I lost all old photos or mementoes from my childhood besides the few I had digitized on my phone. More artifacts were lost in a flood a few months later. This lack of physical reminders from my past troubles me, in part because trauma has already made my childhood feel separate and fragmented from my present self. I feel like my past happened to someone else—in fact there is little proof that my past actually happened to me. Trethewey encapsulates this feeling when she interrupts her own narration to say, "Look at you. Even now you think you can write yourself away from that girl you were, distance yourself in the second person, as if you weren't the one to whom any of this happened" (104). In my own poetry, I sometimes find it difficult to write in the first person about memories which are particularly painful because it is not only hard to accept that these things happened to me, but it actually feels at times that they did not happen to me. In the pictures I do have of myself as a child before the age of eight or so, I often do not recognize myself. When I look at my younger self, I have this uncanny sensation that this is not me but another girl, and I

feel immense pity for what she experienced. It's clear in these moments that I still have not fully reintegrated my own traumatic past into my present experience.

In Naja Marie Aidt's book translated from Danish, *When Death Takes Something From You Give It Back,* she writes about the sudden death of her son, Carl. A few days before his death, her family lost most of their belongings in a warehouse fire. She writes, "I have nothing to attach my memories to, nothing to help me remember. No photos from Carl's childhood. That's why I am afraid to forget" (40). Aidt's desire to remember and hold onto as much as she can about her son, an impulse which is made more urgent due to the fear that without physical mementoes, she may lose his memory more quickly, resonates with me and highlights an important connection between grief and remembrance. The root of *to mourn* is the Proto-Indo European *(s)mer-,* meaning *to remember* ("Mourn"). As Trethewey, Orr, and Boland have shown in their own poetry, the act of returning repeatedly to a painful memory is a common, if not essential, part of grief. We feel a duty to remember and a protectiveness over what is now gone. Remembrance also allows us to hold closer the person who was lost. In a similar vein, I recognize in myself a desire to remember and record what happened to me in order to ensure that I do not forget or leave behind my childhood self—the girl who often seems totally separate from me. I feel a sense of panic when I think about how much I have already forgotten—the way trauma not only distorts memories but also displaces them—erases them. Yet, as Janet points out in the case of his patient Irène, part of healing is in fact giving ourselves permission "to forget." Paradoxically, when Irène acknowledges, (i.e. "remembers") her mother's death, this allows her to begin the process of forgetting it. Memory entraps us in an Erebus, a loop, but forgetting has the potential to free us. Something I am learning about and trying to reconcile with my (at times

obsessive) desire to remember is the way in which forgetting is actually essential to the function of our memories, and in terms of painful memories, can be a gift.

Another tension when writing about memory is the way in which its constructed nature presents a challenge for poets who draw from real life experiences and want to do so with accuracy. If I plan to document a past experience in a poem, yet I have acknowledged that the past is in a way inaccessible, how do I navigate telling the "truth?" If memory is a story which the present self creates, how do I enter the "autobiographical pact" with the reader (Hoff 578)? While memory is subjective, it should not follow that the poet has no responsibility to accuracy. Additionally, there are such things as false memories, which are not simply unreliable but untrue. However, Elizabeth Bishop, who often wrote about her past, provides one model for dealing with the slipperiness of memory. Through her self-reflexive writing style, Bishop acknowledges that she is not recording the past but recording *what she remembers*, showing the reader that memory, much like poetry, hinges on interpretation. In her poem simply titled "Poem," the speaker realizes that she recognizes the landscape in an artist's sketch of Nova Scotia. Bishop writes,

> ...We both knew this place,
> apparently, this literal small backwater,
> looked at it long enough to memorize it,
> our years apart. How strange. And it's still loved,
> or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).
> Our visions coincided—'visions' is
> too serious a word—our looks, two looks:
> art 'copying from life' and life itself,
> life and the memory of it so compressed

they've turned into each other. Which is which?

Life and the memory of it cramped,

dim, on a piece of Bristol board… (36-45)

Bishop often punctuates her thoughts and recollections with self-reflexive edits and qualifications. This process calls attention to the fundamental way the self shapes our perception of events, a fact which is especially true in relation to memory. Bishop backtracks and corrects herself mid-poem, deciding "'visions' is/ too serious a word." While Bishop's fastidiousness in describing the subjects of her poems seem to demonstrate her loyalty to reproducing events as accurately as possible, her efforts actually prove the impossibility of this project. By including these self-edits in her final draft, Bishop acknowledges that her poems are reliant on her own interpretation and authorial voice. She reveals what Andrew Hudgins calls the "'essential lie ... the lie of interpretation,"' which betrays the artificial nature of poetry and differentiates it from experience (Hoff 578). Bishop writes, "...life and the memory of [the place] so compressed/ they've turned into each other. Which is which?" (43-2). While the question of what is real and what is (mis)remembered is a rhetorical one in the poem, it also functions on a metapoetic level. Bishop invites the reader to take part in the difficult task of reassembling the past. She turns the interpretive work onto the reader and asks: which is which?

Bishop's awareness of the interpretive work required on the part of the reader is central to her poetry's power. While much of Bishop's poetry follows a conversational style, she also purposely limits the reader's access to information. Ann K. Hoff describes this in her essay, "Owning Memory: Elizabeth Bishop's Authorial Restraint." Hoff writes that Bishop

recreate[s] for the reader the experience of being just outside knowledge. By limiting the reader to the exterior of her memories, keeping them at the margins of knowledge,

> Bishop places the reader in the same untenable position she was in as a child. We know that something tragic, crucial, and life-changing has happened, but the adult voices speak in inscrutable whispers, and we cannot quite decipher them. We are helpless as a child, kept in the waiting room of Bishop's memories (579)

The candor Bishop uses when self-reflexively editing her poems is contrasted by the way in which she carefully monitors the information available to the reader. As poet and critic Robert B. Shaw points out, "the illusion is that [Bishop's] poems explain themselves," meaning that Bishop's work comes across as deceptively clear (40). Her poems are intimate in their often unadorned language and specificity of images, but upon closer inspection, their meaning is still occluded. Though adjacent to the confessional movement, Bishop was also critical of confessional poets, saying that they often "overdo the morbidity" (41). In her own poems, she erred toward understatement. Bishop invites her readers to do their own interpretative work rather than laying out all the details before them. She denies the reader full access to her interiority, and in doing so, we, as readers, feel the helplessness that she felt as a child. Hoff points out that Bishop has been criticized in the past for being overly cryptic in her poems, avoiding personal details which readers assume she considered too revealing or transgressive to share. However, in terms of her childhood experience, Bishop is simply guarding access to knowledge which she lacked as a child and which she was only able to understand once she was older. Hoff argues, "In so reversing this power dynamic, Bishop regains ownership and authority over her memories, and by extension, over her traumatic childhood" (579). I often experience this same impulse in my own poetry—the desire to keep the reader at a distance as a way of maintaining control over a narrative which for so long I could not control.

Bishop's poem "Sestina" from *Questions of Travel* has been perhaps the most formative poem in my learning as a poet. A powerful sense of isolation and silence suffuses the poem through Bishop's controlled tone. The amount which is not said in the poem but which Bishop is still able to express is striking. Hoff writes, "Restoring the child's lack of understanding, ["Sestina"] offers no narrative explanations" (587). The reader does not know why the grandmother is trying to hide her tears from the child, but the sense of loss is clear. In fact, the poem is almost entirely made up of simple observations, starting off: "September rain falls on the house" ("Sestina" 1). This statement is straightforward yet its implications unfold continuously throughout the poem. The all-encompassing rain foreshadows the grandmother's tears and sadness. Similarly, the weather is often a deflective form of small talk, a way to avoid addressing more substantive topics. Throughout the poem, we witness this behavior as the grandmother avoids showing her despair to the child, reading jokes from the almanac instead. There is no mention of parents, an absence which feels as inescapable as the repetition of the tears and the other alternating end words. This repetition creates a sense of inescapability similar to Trethewey's mirror form in "Myth." Hoff points out, "Although they are everywhere, the tears become secret for the child just as they are for the grandmother [...] The child has learned from her grandmother's hiding. What the almanac, the grandmother, and the author know, remains inscrutable to the reader" (588). Though Bishop clearly expresses the sadness in the poem, the exact details of what has been lost are not revealed to the reader. Due to her lack of narrative explanation, Bishop is able to convey the bewilderment and isolation of being a child, particularly a child who has experienced a loss too big to fully comprehend.

Bishop presents this memory in the only way she knows how: the way she remembers it. Similar to her self-reflexive edits, Bishop is reminding the reader that this is not *the* truth, but *her* truth. Hoff explains,

> Bishop thwarts investigation, analysis, and scrutiny of this memory. She presents it factually, like an entry in an almanac. She knows what she knows. [...] The 'truth' for Bishop was the experience of not knowing, of being entirely in the dark about her own trauma. To depict accurately the impact of those years, she had to demonstrate for the reader the bleakness of not knowing (589)

This pervasive "not knowing" captures much of childhood's difficulty. The child can sense something is wrong but cannot put it into words. As the child grows and gains knowledge, she experiences the pain of the past with heightened clarity. By realizing the significance of the childhood loss, the adult grieves anew. This delayed grieving process has defined much of my own growth. When the almanac says, "Time to plant tears," I imagine the grief that will grow alongside the child as she ages and begins to understand what she has lost (Bishop 37). Similar to the child's experience in "Sestina," my grandmother's kindness was a protective force in my childhood. Her husband died suddenly when I was young, and I witnessed her grief, but I could not fully comprehend the finality of death. As I grew older and began to grasp this permanence, I mourned again for this grandfather who I never fully knew. I grieved because perhaps if my grandfather had lived, I would have been more protected from the abuse in my home somehow. The "what ifs" which the clarity of adulthood brings can become almost as isolating as the confusion of childhood. "Sestina" captures the other-ing experience of being a child on the outside of knowledge while still communicating the sadness of the adult who now fully understands and must grapple with the knowledge she has acquired.

In Helen Vendler's essay "Domestication, Domesticity, and the Otherworldly," she expands on Bishop's ability to express this sense of isolation and other-ness, especially within one's own family. As a child, Bishop was shuttled between relatives, often feeling like a guest in the homes in which she grew up. Throughout "Sestina," Vendler notes that elements of the domestic: the stove, almanac, house, grandmother etc., are made strange and otherworldly due to the presence of the tears, which appear everywhere. The idea of "home" for both the child in the poem and for Bishop are complicated by loss, by displacement. The house the child draws is "rigid" and contains a man "with buttons like tears," descriptions which present home as a discomforting place ("Sestina" 27-9). Vendler continues, "The absence of the child's parents is the unspoken cause of those tears, so unconcealable yet so concealed" (23). Bishop wrote more overtly about the loss of her parents in the short story, "In the Village." In this story, the mother's scream, a precursor to her disappearance in a sanatorium, hangs over the story. Bishop writes, "A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever [...] unheard, in memory—in the past, in the present, and those years between ("Village" 1). No one hears the scream, yet by acknowledging its existence, the child narrator admits to experiencing it. The child heard it, did not understand its meaning, and now carries it with her like a shameful secret. Vendler adds, "The fact that one's own house is *always* inscrutable, that nothing is more enigmatic than the heart of the domestic scene, offers Bishop one of her recurrent subjects" (23). The mother's scream, like the tears, turns the domestic sphere into a haunting place, which reveals how much is actually unknown within it. The strangeness and subsequent dread of being a child in a world dictated by the unfathomable actions of adults is a thread that I weave into my poetry as well.

Despite Bishop's adeptness at writing about memory in a way which both values accuracy yet leaves room for ambiguity, factual discrepancies can still call into question the authenticity of the "autobiographical" poem. The difference between creative license, the fallibility of memory, and being untruthful is not always clear. Bishop and Robert Lowell often argued over this. Lowell, known for injecting his lyricism with dramatic flares, "filled in gaps in [his] memory with metaphor, myth, and imagining" without hesitation (Hoff 583-4). Bishop cautioned him against this and preferred to "capture the stark realities of her memory, including its failings, gaps, and impenetrability" (583). Yet, this characterization of Bishop is not entirely true. As I have pointed out, even the act of recording memory is a form of imagining, a form of interpreting experience. Even Bishop's carefulness cannot capture memory as a thing-in-itself. At times, Bishop, too, chooses to "fill in" the gaps in her memory like Lowell. In Bishop's poem "In the Waiting Room," she includes details which seem inaccurate. She writes about seeing topics in a particular issue of *National Geographic* which actually did not exist and an Aunt Consuelo who did not exist (590). However, Bishop must have considered these details harmless enough that they would not violate her autobiographical pact with the reader, and even "autobiographical" or "confessional" poems should not be confused with explicit memoir. It is also entirely possible that Bishop's decision to give her aunt the name "Consuelo" is a metrical one. In Dan Chiasson's essay "Elizabeth Bishop and 'Elizabeth Bishop'" from the *Harvard Review*, he argues that "Consuelo" functions in the poem as "a lesson gently delivered" on how to pronounce Worcester: "In Worcester, Massachusetts/ I went with Aunt Consuelo" (34). Ultimately, poetry, even autobiographical poetry, does not follow the same rules as memoir and the speaker, though tethered to the poet, is not required to answer for the poet's life.

Similarly, Bishop's choice to alter minor details could be a purposeful decision unrelated to concerns of "accuracy"—a choice to prevent people from mapping the exact coordinates of her life onto a poem. As a lesbian navigating a predominately straight male literary circle and publishing industry, there were certain details about her life she did not wish to disclose to the public. In terms of writing about her childhood and family, Bishop reveals some of her feelings in a letter to Lowell after his publication of *Life Studies*. She admits that she is "green with envy" due to his "assurance" in writing about the details of his family life in a way which feels "significant, illustrative, American, etc." (Chiasson 33). She continues, "...it is hell to realize that one has wasted half one's talent through timidity that probably could have been overcome if anyone in one's family had a few grains of sense or education" (33). Implicit in Bishop's self-deprecating indictment is the reality that Lowell, unlike her, is able to openly wrangle with his family origins in a way which feels noble, even symbolic of some larger "American" struggle, because his family is so established. Bishop, it seems, feels shame, perhaps even scorn, around her family origins—their lack of education and "sense." While Bishop loved many of her relatives, particularly her maternal grandparents who cared for her in rural Nova Scotia, they perhaps appear less at home in a poem than someone like Lowell's Uncle Devereux Winslow. Bishop admits, "I feel I could write in as much detail about my Uncle Artie, say—but what would be the significance?" (33). Bishop draws a boundary in her poems, even poems which seem to draw directly from her experience, where she avoids going into certain details, such as family naming. As Chiasson points out, there may be "a few 'Elizabeths'" in her work, but there are "no Bishops" (34). This type of omission is distinct from the lack of narrative explanation in a poem like "Sestina," but the motivation stems from a similar place of complicated familial pain.

Hoff cites Stephen Dunn's concept of the "parafactual" when writing about events in our past, particularly large or emotional events. Even when we set out to be accurate, we alter memory, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. As many poets have discovered, the "parafactual" quality of memory translates effectively into the lyricism of poetry. Mark Doty touches on the parafactual nature of memory in his essay "Return to Sender: Memory, Betrayal, and Memoir." In this essay, Doty reflects on his experience of writing about the past, explaining, "What interested me was memory itself, the architectures memory constructs, the interpretive act of remembering" (Doty). Both in his poetry and in his memoir writing, Doty is not necessarily interested in reproducing the past but in exploring his relationship to this past. He describes a situation during the drafting of his memoir which encapsulates this distinction: while writing, he wonders why his sister may have worn a beige wedding dress, and when a copyeditor inquires as to why Doty does not simply ask the sister himself, Doty realizes that he is not actually interested in this kind of historical cataloging. Doty explains, "[M]y inquiry was into memory, not history: how it was to be that child, as that child re-arises in the mind, imaginatively reconstructed, reinhabited. Which is how the past goes on and on in us, changing, developing, its look and meanings built and rebuilt over time" (Doty). In a similar tradition as Bishop, Doty does not want to capture the past; he wants to capture what he remembers, and this type of exploration is personal, parafactual, and evolving. Doty points out, "The past is not static, or ever truly complete…" (Doty). The past is not done; it is not behind us. The past exists alongside us.

We take the past with us, which is why we can never return to it. The past is not *there* anymore. We have only our memories, stories which shift continuously under our feet. The past as a thing-in-itself is ultimately unrealizable—our nostos, into the homeland of the past, is an

impossible journey, but this process of reaching back and assembling a sense of self across time is nonetheless essential. Without our memories, artificial as they are, we would be unmoored. Weaving a cohesive narrative in which we can trace our growth, our movement from child to adult, is a fundamental step in achieving an identity and connection to the world around us. Trauma threatens to disrupt these self-narratives, isolating us from others and from who we once were, but poetry works against this dissociation. As Ira Sadoff writes in his essay "Poetic Memory, Poetic Design" from *New England Review*, "Memory is required for poetry, but memory of a very specific kind. [...] Poetry is associative, not dissociative: it proceeds neither by fact, nor chronological sequence, nor strictly reasoned argument. It follows the inexorable logic of the way we think and feel and what we notice…" (109). Poetry, in particular poetry which addresses trauma, does not seek to simply "[reproduce] what once happened to [us]" as accurately as possible, but to restore agency and narrative cogency to the poet, and in doing so, make these experiences more bearable (109). Poetry, both in its form and "logic," bends to accommodate even our most jagged and difficult memories. I am interested and inspired by poems which function as living maps, constructing a cartography of memory that is unstable yet still useful in its ability to guide the self, to point us in the direction of who we are.

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