

The Purple Vest

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These kinds of things happen all the time

“The eagles fell and twirled above us while we sat in the parked Corvette. We all screamed. They missed the seats and slid down the outer windshield, paused at the bottom as we pulled our arms away from our faces, and flew off.”

“If you hold your arms all the way out, parallel to the ground, and turn around a few times, no one will bother you, but this only lasts for a while and after, you have to turn around several more times than before to gather that same air, and even then, you never know.”

After high school, she became a stunt girl.

Going Around

Nothing's going to happen to you, so go, go, go!
We jumped off the tilt-a-whirl
and passed through the field of long-limbed soccer players.
We had so much to look at and taste and be—
At the wire fence a boy said,
“Dad, Dad, lots of people go in
and lots of people go out!”
On the street, a girl shrieked,
“I want a pigtail perm!”
I thought I was going to choke on my gum,
I held my throat the way
you might if choking someone.
Have you ever been choked? I asked my companion,
then realized I didn't actually speak.
“Excuse me,” I said to a woman in superman-blue tights
I was about to walk into,
though I wished I hadn't said excuse me.
If I could go back, I would say “pardon.”
“Pardon,” I whispered to the ground,
and ran on ahead to reach the car first.

Introduction

Hang on a sec, one second.
Hand me that rubber band over
there on the floor.
Wait, this will do.

My mother told the hairstylist
that my hair is so thin
it pulls my face down.

You are the talent, she says.
The rest of the year will happen,
so hang in there.

I kicked to start the four-legged
twirler at the playground.

Night water becomes morning water,
Monday becomes Friday, and so on.

When Monday Becomes Friday

I have some things to say but need to be
at the top of the stairs to say them.

This is the house of one bathroom.
Why were the pillars taken out
from the basement?
Once you've been doing it for a while,
it stops dripping, like anything else.
Let's crawl on our knees to prove it.

Frog and Toad lie kindly next to each other.
The lilac trees are friends with the lilac bushes.

Metempsychosis

If I were a dead one writing to a living one,
would the living one carry me back out?

If I am called upon to unground another,
and I carry him in my arms,
as he is so very small, so I *can* hold him,
will I begin to receive letter after letter,
enlisting me so that, eventually,
there will be no babies Below?

And, what of the girl I love to miss?
Will she wait for me,
holding her blue babe,
hoping I'll take them both?

Have You Been Found

Have you been found,
because I saw you walking down the block
with the sad parade as though you wore
a compass in your stomach,
and the fins of your feet
couldn't stop at the curb.

Look, over there at the lady
in the three-fold lawn chair
who's come to watch,
who's sleeping.
She's like that old friend,
the angel who slid down the slide
in the end of the scene, waving.
She was a tire-climber,
a full flesh in the lame
light of the surgery room.

Once, she found the killer in a pine tree,
and he saw her, too, and disappeared.
She climbed to the top
of the yellow shed and waited
until the time came to jump for real.

If Someone Handed You the Rod, Wouldn't You Take it?

The girl ran all the way to her concert.
The boy brushed crumbs from his hands between bites.
The dad hurled over the ice and into the snow bank.
We all laughed.

Here's a pamphlet,
mind the insert.

I thought I was dreaming until I remembered
the rod in my arm, a log beneath the skin, an unexpected vein.

Yesterday, I found a newspaper photo of blue carpet,
and the furrowing across a young woman's neck
after having been cut down from the rail,
so I pasted it in my notebook.
I've never had a hickey to share,
the knife's never slipped in that direction.
I once stuck my tongue out until it felt sandy and cold.
I would smooth out your dried pea-face
with my fingers if I knew you,
I would melt the rail.
Push—breathe—she's gone.
A flayed doe on the lawn.

Send Me to Jail, Then

He threw the cup at the wall.
I hate the pair of electrical cords
outside the house,
they surprise my forehead
and I think an animal's attacking me.
Remember the fluttering downstairs,
down the chimney pipe?
did you hear the fall?
The first owner's grandkids came then,
peering into the kitchen window,
wanting to look around.
They didn't remember
there'd been a third door
on the side of the house,
so I showed them the key and
made a turning motion in the air.
They passed through the rooms
feeling the windows,
the strengths of the screens.
I stood directly behind,
listening to the fluttering
as they measured themselves
against the frames. I assured them
nothing had changed.
They wanted to see my bedroom,
but I couldn't let them do that;
they explained the situation:
Had I had any nightmares
or felt any ghosts?
They asked if I had a gun
to save myself, but I admitted
I just don't have that right,
and they pulled out
one of their own.

The Company That Ate the Wolf Pack

The packages arrived in specially sealed plastic,
no one could have guessed.
Rumors said not until next fall,
it's too little too late, the boss
has already opened them.

The banquet dinner soon began,
the boss' birthday party.
He walked in, looked both ways,
cracked his knuckles, requested
we all do the same,
and asked for knives for everyone.
The pepper-grey-haired man to my left
sighed and said,
"The dinner and dessert make me tick.
In the morning, it's something new."
"No one ever asked," I whispered back,
"or gave an estimate of the overall proportions."
I raised my voice at the last word,
I'd embarrassed myself. Everyone else
began eating in harmony.
The man and I agreed we needed facts,
not weathermen, the maps were changing.

The boss was laughing thickly now.
I imagined marching up to him
and yelling out that I'd seen the wolves
circling in the trees. They came
when the westerly sun threw a shadow
over the hill.
But he was mumbling a joke, spitting,
and, I swear, his eyes rolled all the way back twice.
I shrieked a laugh, a bit too high,
and feigned coughing to avoid the faces.

Then, a torch was raised and lit.
I folded my hands and ankles and waited.
I couldn't see him
as he said, "Every year,
we ripen to what we can,
what we can accomplish,
and while nothing repeats itself,
our lives are full with the
déjà vu of our hearts."

He poured sand over the flame to kill it,
the ceiling lights turned back on,
and we watched him wipe
sweat off his forehead with his sleeve,
revealing the full length and width of his arm.

Go Ahead

After the gas station, I run
as discreetly as I can home,
where I fall asleep in the bushes
and later wake to my cat
above me, looking from inside.
I hear a girl's voice singing one note
over and over, getting louder.
I bet if I stood up, I'd see her
waddling by, because that's the way
the notes sound, and she'd be holding
the hand of someone tall.

The sun will set soon.
If I went around to the backyard,
I'd see pink between the ash trees.
In the morning, I'll be on the other side
of the door, sleeping,
and the sun will be rising.

I'll Try My Best

I'll get the car, you said,
and you got the car.
What else can you do?
It depends on how much you're willing to help.
If I were fundamentally an ant,
I'd be over my head in capacity to help.
I'd drown for you. I'd dunk my head
in a barrel of water. Maybe it'd help my blood,
to put my head into the water.
As a kid I hung upside down all the time.
Then, I began to worry about the blood in my head,
and lately, I've been cold. I try to wear hats and scarves.
I take showers. I sweat on the sheets.
Someone's always turning the heat down,
someone's always taking the blanket.
I like to cover my head when I sleep
to keep the air close to me.

Mistakes

There has been a mistake, you might whisper.
No one was there to take precautions,
the boat unraveled like it had never been.
For instance, there's the chalk—not the kind
you know with your fingers—the kind
that builds like ash and resists water
to the highest degree.
Are you soluble? they might ask.
Do you wear well. Can you?
I think the real question is,
have been worn before,
have you been around.

“One hundred times one hundred
equals ten thousand.”
There, I said it in words,
why don't you give it a try.

This isn't a metal can
that comes out clean.
This isn't a peel on the floor
to watch out for.
I don't believe you—he points
—and neither do they.

They

I bought the staple-gun myself, see?
Well, I almost pointed it at him when I
realized—and, so I let him install the carpet.
I bought us ice cream. I produced a fan.
We both forgot a broom, so we used our hands,
but it was all dust by then.

I felt like fish bait—
to think of those shops I've been in,
how their fins move,
I can never see what state they're in.

When a teenage girl wishes for the death of her father

I asked for a punch in the face,
or at least suggested it,
and 45 minutes later, he's dead.

What can I say?

I ordered the hit, not the fall.

We all knew he'd meet the floor eventually,
even if we didn't know what kind
or if one day we'll find ourselves against some floor
that we cannot see or move away from.

Springtime

A voluminous force, a push half as hard as you would.
I'm sure the doorknob is my fault.

The list of repeated incidents, the newspaper,
the signs pointing toward the Spring Fair.

After some time of watching,
we couldn't see the hang glider anymore,
so we turned around, checking every now and then.
A pair of white-haired ladies and a couple with a boy
joined us at the picnic table, hot dogs and burgers
in their hands and mouths.

How have you been? Eaten a fair amount?
Taken your temperature? I stopped yesterday,
you knew that, you knew how the rest of the day
went for me so why call if I wouldn't have answered?
I don't blame you.

The goslings? The cords across the path are necessary,
I know, but how could they run?

What Flight

Living room sized rugs hung on the walls
all the way to the elevator and stairs.
I leaned against a bristly green rug, laughing
until I almost puked, and I lay down
under its blue fringes.

The two of us really did discover a baby bird
directly below the nest and back entrance light.
We put her in a postal box with a four leaf clover
I'd found earlier in the summer, and we buried
the robin beneath a fire pit we knew of.

From the elevator, a *ding*, I stood and walked in,
an egg yoke floundered on the floor.

This time, I fled down the ten levels
first thing in the morning. What a flight,
the windows had no screens,
a windy theater-box one visits without sleeves,
thinking the higher one gets, the more heat there'll be.

Excursion

I'm all cashed out, what'll happen next?
The hike lasted thirty percent longer
than I wanted. If only I had counted
the number of steps—I jumped
one or more times on the rocks,
I slid, I backed-up, I sat,
I let my feet go in the river.

Whoever went so far as across the river
by rock-stepping must've known the steps.
Here's where it is: the sixty degree dirt slope
takes you to these rocks and the river here.
And the shiny green leaves, these, are poison.

I can't say anything looked different,
but I've never been here before.

Somewhere close, I know,
there had been a death, and
they still can't find him.
The rock hit his head
and he was sent somewhere else.

Further down, I drank the water.
Then, we saw a hole, or a pit.
"There'd better be nothing at
the bottom of that hole," I warned,
and thought to cry. I knew about
the possibility of slipping in.

I'm Sorry

I'm sorry I missed your funeral. I knew of it
because everyone knew. The newspaper was off by a day,
however else it was phrased, etcetera, etcetera.
I did see your box, the lowering of it.
She had just left with the baby,
leading the procession outward in her parent's car.

She guessed, you guessed the answers to so many questions
that questions were formed in response to the answers.
Have you ever played such a formulaic game?
Is it a board game?
I don't know, you know, I just don't remember.

You're a long shot, and you know you are.
What a star, a handshake thrice because, why not?
I once saw you walk diagonally across the classroom.
Have you done this before?

At some point, I couldn't help it, you know.
I know you know.

THE PURPLE VEST

LOCATION—
MAYHEW LAKE ROAD:

Dear D—,
— North — Street, MN —

Will there be a funeral to attend?
Would you tell me?
What is in your pocket? What
haven't we talked about?
The comb, I suppose,
and black the only color available.
Let's shake hands.

IMAGINED PROP LIST:

Fish house,
Coal-black wood burning barrel stove
Picture frames
Pine

PRELIMINARIES:

Form 2 INVESTIGATION REPORT

NAME OF COMPLAINANT		7729 CASE NO.
Dr. [REDACTED]	Phone [REDACTED]	
ADDRESS [REDACTED]		

OFFENSE Double Homicide	PLACE OF OCCURRENCE [REDACTED]
Appr. [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
TIME COMMITTED 02:03 A.M. DATE 1-16-77	[REDACTED]
REPORTED BY Complainant	HOW ATTACKED Shot to death with shotgun
ADDRESS [REDACTED] PHONE [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
TIME REPORTED 02:06 A.M. DATE 1-16-77	MEANS OF ATTACK Shotgun
REPORTED TO Dispatcher	[REDACTED]
HOW REPORTED Phone <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> In Person <input type="checkbox"/> Radio <input type="checkbox"/> Mail <input type="checkbox"/>	OBJECT OF ATTACK Unknown at this time.
OFFICERS ASSIGNED [REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
PERSONS ATTACKED [REDACTED]	TRADE MARK None
[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
PROPERTY ATTACKED None	VEHICLE USED Unknown at this time.

DETAILS OF OFFENSE: (State Fully All Other Circumstances of This Offense and its Investigation, Action Taken, Witnesses Interviewed, Etc.)

At approximately 0202 A.M., on 1-16-77, I Officer [REDACTED] and C.D. Police Officer [REDACTED] were dispatched to [REDACTED]. The call was that there was a man outside with a gun. [REDACTED] County Deputies [REDACTED] assisted. Upon arriving at the address we checked out the area looking for the person. After checking the outside area. The inside of the residence was checked. Inside in the bedroom that [REDACTED], and [REDACTED] were, They both had been shot in the head with what at that time appeared to be shotgun wounds. At approximately 0211 A.M. assistance was called for. After the rest of the Officers arrived, a search of the basement was made. I Officer [REDACTED] then went to the Dr. [REDACTED] residence, Where the the other four [REDACTED] children were. The names are [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED], and [REDACTED]. The rest of information is on Tape, [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] told me that her brother [REDACTED] was the one that had did it to there parents. ([REDACTED]) [REDACTED] she said that [REDACTED] was wearing a blue ski jacket, with yellow stripes on it, also possible blue jeans, and a red checked shirt. This information was then given out to all departments. I then stayed with the children at Dr. [REDACTED] home until 0638 AM. At that time I went to the [REDACTED] County Hospital with the bodies of Mr. and Mrs. [REDACTED], where an autopsy was done. We got back from the hospital approximately 1100A.M.

This case is declared

UNFOUNDED

CLEARED BY ARREST

EXCEPTIONALLY CLEARED

INACTIVE (not cleared)

Officer's Signature

SUPPLEMENTARY INVESTIGATION REPORT

OFFENSE Double Homicide
COMPLAINANT Dr. [REDACTED]
ADDRESS [REDACTED]

CASE NO.

Additional Details of Offense, Progress of Investigations, Etc.

At approximately 1427 P.M., 1-16-77, A Mrs [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED] called and stated that [REDACTED] the dogs at her place had woken her up, she looked outside and saw a vehicle, she thought that it was blue in color in the drive-way. [REDACTED] it could have been a chevy. Today when she called she said that foot prints came up to the front door. Also when the vehicle backed out of the drive way it did not use the lights, she said that the vehicle drove down the road for some distance before putting on the lights.

At 2:10 A.M. I received the call of the double murder at [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED]. I went and looked in the bedroom located on the southeast side of the house and saw a man and a lady both shot in the head and dead.

I immediately posted [REDACTED] Police Reserve [REDACTED] to protect the back door of the house which was to be used by everyone. The front door of the house was locked by myself.

Officer [REDACTED] and Reserve Officer [REDACTED] went next door, to Doctor [REDACTED] home, to protect the four [REDACTED] children [REDACTED] Officer [REDACTED] started getting what happened on tape, [REDACTED] The rest of the [REDACTED] Police and [REDACTED] Deputy's went out looking for the suspect, [REDACTED]

I set up command headquarters in the kitchen of the [REDACTED] house. [REDACTED] Bureau of Criminal Apprehension were called in [REDACTED] County Deputy [REDACTED] took over at the bedroom, taking all the pictures, processing of the evidence and measuring of the room. [REDACTED]

A statewide broadcast was put out for the arrest of [REDACTED] as a suspect in the double homicide of the [REDACTED] s. At around 4:00 A.M., [REDACTED] County Attorney, [REDACTED] was called and he came to the scene and also Father [REDACTED] a Catholic priest, was called and he came, and gave last rights to the dead couple. [REDACTED]

This Offense Is Declared:

Unfounded []
Cleared by Arrest [] Signed [REDACTED] Investigating Officer Date _____
Exceptionally Cleared []
Inactive (Not Cleared) [] Signed _____ Chief or Commanding Officer Date _____

This Form Is Used by Officer Assigned to a Case to Report Progress After Three and Seven Days and Weekly Thereafter, Also to Report Significant Developments.

SUPPLEMENTARY INVESTIGATION REPORT

OFFENSE Double Homicide
COMPLAINANT Dr. [REDACTED]
ADDRESS [REDACTED]

CASE NO.

Additional Details of Offense, Progress of Investigations, Etc.

[REDACTED]

At 8:06 A.M., [REDACTED] Police received a call that there was a man in a car with a gun, with blood all over, 1 mile north of Mayhew Lake. Officer [REDACTED], [REDACTED], BCA Agent, and myself went 1/4 mile north of Mayhew Lake and found the suspect dead in a car reported stolen from [REDACTED]. The suspect had shot himself in the head.

Deputy [REDACTED] took charge of the car and the body, and I came back to [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] took the 12 gauge shotgun and all the other evidence to the BCA Lab in [REDACTED] on Monday, 1-17-77.

The following 4 guns were taken out of the home by myself and will be kept for the time being:

- (1) a 22 Winchester rifle, [REDACTED]
- (2) a 20 gauge Remington shotgun [REDACTED]
- (3) a 12 gauge single shot, [REDACTED]
- (4) a Remington 30.06, with scope and case, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] BCA, took the following items of the suspect out of his home at [REDACTED] (see attached inventory).

At 4:00 PM, 1-17-77, a [REDACTED] called and said he didn't know the suspect, [REDACTED] but he said he thought he killed his parents and tried to kill the rest of his family because since his other two brothers had killed themselves, that the [REDACTED] family had had blood and they should all die before more [REDACTED] came into this world.

Chief [REDACTED]

This Offense Is Declared:

Unfounded	<input type="checkbox"/>	Signed	Investigating Officer	Date
Cleared by Arrest	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
Exceptionally Cleared	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Signed	<i>Robert D. Allersattel</i>	Date
Inactive (Not Cleared)	<input type="checkbox"/>		Chief or Commanding Officer	1-18-77

This Form Is Used by Officer Assigned to a Case to Report Progress After Three and Seven Days and Weekly Thereafter, Also to Report Significant Developments.

DEAR FRIEND:

I've pulled a bow's arrow to my chest and let go once or twice,
in the backyard, with the help of my dad,
where he liked to shoot arrows at a blue styro-foam square.
And for a moment, I held his hunting gun in the kitchen.
Mom was right, the weight pressed hard against my shoulder.

TRUCK:

I know what's in your pocket.
What a windbreaker, orange and yellow stripes,
they even match the truck's stripe.
How wonderful that I still have a photo with the truck.

My dad could have mended the hole in his jeans,
as he had nailed the bottom of my box for me.
There is the question of shoveling, the question of who
got the table-saw.
Do you mind if I sit to see?

BED:

Had the bed the time it needed to have
to really fulfill the needs of a bed,
their bed and then my parents' bed.

The family lived in a one-story on a hill,
near the Protestant and Catholic cemeteries.
I asked about the pine trees, what happened.

A wooden bed that went far away from its old form of itself,
the bottom had been replaced, which is practically everything,
but the headboard, the frame. The frame! The photo albums
have been in the basement all these years. This notebook with numbers,
notes in pencil and cursive,
an accounting test, 86% written in soft red pen.

SECRETARY:

Eventually, the secretary took out the microphone:
"They will be calling out the numbers.
Attention. Soon, they will be calling out the numbers."

CONDITIONS:

The place was perfect for the shoot.
Now, with the location and the story,
we were doubled up and ready.

SHE:

What is going on here? I asked my friend the driver
in her white brimmed hat, ready for a sandy beach if it comes.
What other kinds of beaches are there?

Dad once explained the kinds of clouds. One doesn't
see oneself in the mirror as well as in
the auditorium of clouds. A jackpot,
how lucky I am.

The idea of a Perimeter Heaven came up;
The crew couldn't stop
circling and multiplying with their fingers
the perimeter of the kitchen table,
which Dad built using tiles and a wooden frame.

Our homework would later require us to
capture texture by shading a piece of paper with a pencil.

BED:

The double bed in the bedroom, it was actually a double bed.

Don't touch the sheets yet, I'm not ready.
This isn't a Queen's bed, it's a double bed,
to end up in your house in your bedroom, the double bed
which is now another couple's bed, which they
would never call a King's bed.

CONDITIONS:

His van, the red one,
no truck here, but the road slimming out
as we go one direction for a very long time.
The tablecloth wouldn't have stayed clean,
not even with your placemats.

I waited for my friend with a plastic Easter egg.

Mom had hoped for me to attend Catholic grade school,
even though we weren't Catholic like the neighbor boy's family.
Sometimes, the boy rode a unicycle up and down the sidewalk.

My friend promised to run away from home, but will he?
The following afternoon, we walked into an abandoned store
down the road. He picked up a glass ashtray and held it in the light,
and he pocketed it.

EASTER:

What you once were,
hiding across town under the archway
even though I was coming to visit.

Let's go to the hill. I have it.
Later, he went south, then east to the army fields
and then Germany.
No, I never believed him that he'd been selected
to sing in the boy's choir.

SHE:

She drove us to a house which is actually a barn,
and which doesn't belong to us, but to the farmers over there,
I believe, and I'm not scared of them, they won't mind.
We camped inside for the night.
We could have climbed higher than the chicken coop,
Ticks never bother me. You?
I found a gun shell, and, to be honest, I don't think we'll find more.
You found one, too?
Some stones, but let's go back towards the river, another possibility
for the final spot.

What did the newspaper say, exactly?
About one mile south, toward Mayhew.
He could have turned toward the lake, rather than stay on the main road.
What could we have found there, but she insisted on driving,
and even though she was not paying attention,
she made the turn to the lake.
She lent me her headscarf. Are you scared?

Some boats, it is summer so that's normal, and some families
picnicking and fishing over there. The bend. I remember this bridge.
Once, we had a boat, and I wore a bright orange life-jacket and caught a sunny.

I took a photo of the sign and dedication note.

TAPE:

I did, I called the police like I said I would, and now the papers,
and I have some names, some numbers of nearby counties to inquire at.
Can you believe a tape may still exist? To hear my dad
as a kid on tape. Would he sound like me, I wonder.

ICE:

I began, around that time,
to part my hair to the side like my dad
had done as a child.
But he is now balding and most of his hair
lies on either side of his head, as I imagine it.

Do you really know what I'm talking about?
The lake-water Dad promised to bring me
for my science project was fine, thanks.
And, I opened a savings account.

Each early morning: the blue robe, the blue arm chair,
the TV show *Roadrunner*, the cigarette, the basement,
the almost-tornadoes, the metal bed, the red headboard,
her hidden diary, my hidden diary, which one was stolen,
and I broke the lock by accident.

I don't want to admit anything
about the ice we slipped on,
some of us doing so on purpose. Don't laugh.
I don't want to admit to the rollerblade fall
over the acorns, the hill. Oh, and
the tall sidewalk slope. There she goes—
and the ladies with the canes and wheelchair
moved fast—she flew,
and I angled slowly toward the grass.

We played *Sorry* as a family, my dad, too,
who chose the red pieces.

I remember the cousins, I remember the Dalmatians,
the baby blanket confusion, the kitchen table conversation
at the family reunion. All the minnows in shallow water,
sunnies nipping my legs. Why, why would they do that?

MAY:

I haven't seen my dad in years, but I'm sure he's not a Catholic, even if he spent some time at a priest's home after his release.

“DAD”:

“If someone is to be the pastor of the family, it is me, simply because I know more about praying, I believe I've done it more. Sorry.”

POCKET:

I have a project, but we need tools. What kind? We'll see. Let's sit. No, let's head to the park. I want to swing and think about it.

TRUCK:

None of us were pleased with the new order confronting our lives. The television set provided the morning—channel five news, breakfast, medication, teeth, bus, people, school, wait.

When the second grader returned to school after a family vacation in Duluth, she told her teacher about the ships, and the teacher clapped in excitement. Our class was full of clubs. I slipped my cover. Let's go back and hide in the clothing racks. Mom's gone looking at antiques.

CONDITIONS:

“I hope they have insurance. A representative will call
and tell me exactly that, but that way of saying so. . .”
Continuing, practicing into the most rashly steeped tea—I hope
it’s pomegranate, which I’ll never drink again.

The photographs still exist on another drive,
having been “backed up,” an expression I hate.
Can things be much better? Entrancing?

POCKET:

Things like this wander away from me,
I can never remember what I wrote in the morning.
Remember that note? The paper-carrier with the yellow bags,
his letter to you about the rough ice and his feet. The commas, I think.
She changed the television channel.

But, did you see it? Do you know? The stairwell was probably
pine, just like the rest of the neighborhood, and a slow hill’s slope, too.

ICE / POCKET:

My favorite kind of wood is pine because it’s soft all the time.

The pink bicycle, I remember the tan couch. That’s great.

The home-alone summers, the dog Sadie,
the boy who mowed lawns across from the park.
The books, the backyard, the ice-water.

POCKET:

A mattress on the floor isn’t enough, it can’t float
the way we float on our backs, water just over the ears
and arms loosely balanced.
Put me in the sauna before I freeze.
Having floated without a boat
like the Lady of Shallot, I heard
nothing but *whoosh* in my dreams, thought about sharks.
I was there, last night, for the concert in the dining room
held before the twin windows, beneath the Christmas lights.
After, I floated back, over the lake.

CONDITIONS:

Somebody had grown close to someone, and I wish I had done the growing. Shh, the sleeping person again, under the coat, the chair behind the government documents, or the map section, except I think that may really be on the other side of the hall. Don't trip on your way out, please, I don't respond well to emergencies.

TWO SHOOTINGS IN JANUARY:

The conditions settled closely to one another. I watched a man walking from yard to yard, checking blue meters and recording numbers. I wore sunglasses, and he couldn't see me.

The boy says his brother shoved him before leaving, and the girls climbed out the window, but the boy wanted to see the parents.

A THIRD SHOOTING IN JANUARY:

Happened within the same day
in a stolen truck
one mile north of Mayhew lake.

CONDITIONS:

At the meeting, we talked about things we needed to know:
the handrail, your shoes, all of your shoes, the times of things.
I brought proof of my condition that causes me to
feel as though I'm walking on a downward slope.
The way I walk now is a relearned walk, like having to
learn and relearn the face's expressions.

COUCH:

When I learned about Dad, I knew I had a story.
Dad slept on the couch in the afternoons, and at night,
sat in the blue chair drinking milk and eating a Nutty Bar.
“I can eat a whole box of Nutty Bars on my own,” I’d say,
“I could eat a whole barrel of strawberries, you know?”

No one cared that we broke down the fish house, who needs two pairs
of pruning shears. Mom painted the garage and
the four-paned window the same blue. She rolled out
the barrel stove and followed that with the chimney pipe.

The swing-set was stuck in the ground with cement
so we wouldn’t tip over. Don’t tell me how to slide down a slide,
I can slide faster than you think, and I am sorry that I
made you eat mud. I was only sitting at the bottom to say *Hello*,
when you got down, why would I want to put mud in my little sister’s face.

How are you today? I woke at 5am, thank you very much.
Where’s my money? I brushed my teeth twice as long as necessary.

He slept on the couch, and then we got rid of the couch,
threw it in the back yard, and invited the neighbor boy over to sit and pick
at the foam inside. How delightful, my friend said.
Of course the boy with the mopy hair had a crush on her.
She had a crush on our best friend, and we were sure of it.
Of course I was jealous. She gave me her bra when she grew out of it.
I became sick, and I slept on the couch,
a new couch this time which was green and wider than the tan and cold foam couch.
I lost five whole pounds in one week and started to feel better,
Mom was happy because I ate a Sloppy Joe, and I stopped moaning
and I stopped sleeping on the couch. Why sleep on the couch
in the first place? Because the other sister plays music all night, that’s why,
and she thinks headphones will make her go deaf, and she thinks
the birds hanging on my wall will eat her, I’m serious, she tore it off my wall,
so I taped up some wolf photographs from the Wildlife magazine
Dad bought me a subscription to, which is a magazine I hardly read,
being eighty percent photographs, better than National Geographic?

TAPE:

When we arrived, I would have called you,
but the phone wouldn't have worked anyway.
Yes, we changed the locks on the doors.
Yes, we're keeping our eyes open for danger.

THE SHOOT:

Yes, and the shoot:
They all went out on the pontoon,
and someone's father turned on the radio.
Like my dad, her father can burn,
but less so.
He talked about diving loons
and we listened for cooing near the beaver dam
before steering back.

TAPE:

When Dad started working for the cabinet company,
we drove out to the small town,
and my older sister and I sat on the see-saw,
and she whined that she couldn't go high, like I could,
but it's because she was born first. She's bigger.

When the company burnt down a few years after they let Dad go,
he laughed at the television screen.

Many of us have started bonfires in pits and barbeque grills,
burned certain papers and photographs. Sometimes,
journals got torn apart and shredded for safety.

Many smoked pipes, too.
Can you believe my friend's husband's best friend's uncle
smoked a pipe with them and the man also smoked with my dad?
We raked his yard when he was away for the month.
Dad helped him file his taxes.

AFTER JANUARY:

Will you please, for God's sake, take the May Day basket and shake my hand? Perimeter-wise, I know it's very wide. Perimeter may not be accurate. It turns out that the bumble bee we found for my class science project was never alive.

Who wants to shake my hand now!

she demanded at the top of her lungs. I'm just kidding, you can stand over there while we set the camera.

The closet, the hair curler for her dance recitals, for a prop, the slanted ceiling overlooking the neighbor's yard.

The window won't work in this shot, pull the shades, will you.

Not the brown dress from your grandma, and I hate that you never let me act as the good guy in our movies. Do I look angry to you?

DADDY LONG LEGS:

How did the daddy long leg spider start shaking? It's not dead;
here, in a winter basement a spider will eat another spider,
and, when every other spider is gone—shake? Waiting until shaken?

DEAR SISTER:

I have been “Exceptionally Cleared,” I think
I heard them call it. Thank God.

CONDITIONS:

Most of us know fewer people than we think.
Let's brainstorm synonyms for "said." Anyone?
I'm telling you, I wanted a more thoughtful reply
to my letter. A prayer of gratitude,
your talk of hot bread, don't cut it.

The operator announced my father's desire
to speak with each of us.
Should anyone have let them?

DEAR D—:

Let's make a deal: You won't
give me away at my wedding,
and I won't, when you die,
come see your body.

MAY:

Our class planted flowers together,
and the monarchs will come later.
I'm at the playground in the shadowed sand,
and I see so are you. Our kite
had gone in a tree, over the railroad tracks,
not worth retrieving, not from that high up.

—end of poem—

Relocation

We left before considering staying.
We'd overstayed our welcome.
One of the kids is following us.
"Hello," I say, looking back, and she takes my hand.
I know the girl is running away,
her younger brother and sister are following, too.
Should we let them stay this way? Continue walking?
"Excuse me, what's your name?"
She looked at me.
I couldn't think of anything else to say.
I wanted to say something about lines,
like, "throw the line down," or "she was lined."

Here's a line: a tree with only very high branches
that can't be seen because the paper,
having already been cut, can't expand anymore.
Sometimes, I have lines on my forehead,
but they soon disappear. For now,
they're voluntary lines, but some days they're constant.
What about rows? In a theater, rows are lines.
What about round tables? Are they rows?
At this point, we're playing crack-the-whip,
turning circles into lines, thread into lead.

In the church basement before the relocation:
a folding table with rounded off corners,
its edges covered over with black plastic.
Can you picture it?
Someone asked if the broken pieces could be glued back on.
The edges felt brittle, so they gave it a try.

The Stripes

What was I going to tell you?
Nothing, nothing, never-mind.
She had something she wanted to think about.
The stripes? She thought about stripes first thing in the morning.
This isn't an *each* situation,
stripes have always existed.
Can you guess? Is there an answer to recall?
If not, then there's no use trying.
The fish aren't in the lake, so why fish?

We followed each other from one block to the next.
What next? The man behind the brick wall?
the long stick propped between two trees? or, further down,
the sign that read: "No one should want to enter the lake,
not past the dock, not past what sleeping in the boat requires."

They stopped. Let me see that.
They replayed the scene in their heads.
Why carpet steps? Who carpeted them?
I like the blue.
A picket fence?
Not on all sides, remember?
And the back?
I'm working on it. I'm looking, I'm hunting.

The Real Thing

I'm full of lines, you might say,
the simplest kind, meaning all the lines.
The boards in the garage, the slivers I'd gotten
pulling them apart.

What is against the wall,
what is fair and regardable.
What can be seen and shifted
to another place,
leaving behind a trail in the dirt,
or a scuff on the door.

This is the real thing,
what you came for,
even if it's crawling all over the dirty floor,
trying to make a noise
so as to seem like the very real thing.

The trick is to display the lines
like a new set of power poles
to be drawn out along the road.

Stay With This

A blue and white plaid material suspended over the ceiling,
another version of the suspended dining room set,
and every one of us rising until we bump our heads.
“That’s not how I wanted it”—no one said that,
we knew we’d ease back down.

This couldn’t happen anywhere.
My mother’s ceiling fan
could never have hung from my ceiling.
Her young maples, one on either side of the walkway,
ready for staying, ready for replanting if her sister wants it.
I wanted to add something—here’s a stone sign
I found off the road up north. It’s a stone made into a sign
when I hurt my thumb and bled. Take it.
I’ve read about this—take it.

Here we are, together, you wish to say.
Close your eyes, hold each other’s hands for a moment.
Think only of what you’re holding.

The Boy and His Snow-friend

They were ready for it. The lines grew closer.

How far away does one have to be
before being unrecognizable?

Have a go! the snowman urged,
and the boy launched into the sky.
Eventually, he began to fall,
and he sank onto the back of his snow-friend
as though suddenly held by a wind-thrust.

A second truth fell in a similar fashion,
but this one lay on a doormat like a sleeping body.

After some time, the likelihood of life lessens,
and a new likelihood of discovery begins.
Not just above the ground, but perhaps in it, perhaps below it.

One can't help but imagine flowers—the yellow-flowered shrub
that grew below the front window in a triangular cedar bed.
One can't help but remember the tree extracted from the ground
and the depression that was left where a circle of long, soft grass grew,
and the little spaniel who loved to sleep there.

Night

What if she had known
whether her father drank
from the cup of water colors
left on the table
when he got home from work.

What about when he got
to the very bottom
where the color resides most?

When Earthworms Resurface in the Spring

How I understand earthworms
has nothing to do with memories
of digging for them or fishing with them.
The shallowest-living are the weakest,
the kind that come out of the ground to die
in a thawing puddle-flood. They look like overcoats
or shed skin, shed bodies with loosened hearts
that had once helped to keep the soil buoyant.

When I stepped out of the tub, I felt like a watery worm, too.
Was I resistant to surfacing? The cold keeps me curled,
but the curl keeps me warm enough.

Elizabeth Bishop
and her
Metaphysical Poetry

Katie Hoffman

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In an essay on metaphysical poets, speaking of John Donne, T.S. Eliot points to medieval influence: “For the twelfth century, the divine vision or enjoyment of God could only be attained by a process in which the analytic intellect took part; it was through and by and beyond discursive thought that man could arrive at beatitude. This was the form of mysticism consummated in Dante’s time” (*Clark Lectures* 99). According to T.S. Eliot, the thirteenth century marks a shift in thought: “I should by no means say that Aquinas accounts for everything in the thirteenth century. But it is surely one of the differences between the new world and the old; and in its various mutations it either accounts for or is related to the causes which account for, a great many of the phenomena even of our own time” (*Clark Lectures* 91). Aquinas participated in what is now called scholasticism and was interested in the capacities of reason to interact with knowledge to gain a higher understanding of the world and God and one’s place in it.

Contemporary scholarship on Thomistic Metaphysics can provide useful definitions for ideas behind contemporary metaphysical poetry. In *One and the Many*, a required text for those studying to join the priesthood, Norris Clarke provides the definition of metaphysics according to the teachings of Aquinas: “Metaphysics is the study of *being qua being*” meaning, “being as such” (6). Clarke explains the “work” of metaphysics in the context of philosophy: “Its work will then be to try to discern the great universal properties, constitutive principles, and governing laws of all that is real, in a word, the laws of intelligibility of *being as such*, including how all real beings interrelate to form an intelligible whole, that is, a universe (the term ‘universe’ comes from the Latin *universum*, which means ‘turned toward unity’)” (6). Aquinas’ concept of unity as related to beauty modernized the way people saw the world: “beauty as a transcendental property of all being” (Clarke 298). What John Donne and his contemporaries and those following the seventeenth century metaphysical poets adopted was a spiritually charged act. As

a spiritually charged act, the engagement of the material with the abstract mind is meant to stir the normal currents of life and rise above them. In Catholicism, the concept of metaphysics is related to the behavior of the person as engaging reason and intellect, and participating to society for the greater good. In metaphysical poetry, the act of engaging the material and abstract is meant to be a process for the writer and reader. The metaphysical poem is surprising and casual, as the poet uses language in a way that allows her to embody and experience its imaginative truth, and engages the reader in an experience in which the reader creates a new unity, or a transcendence of understanding, a discovery.

If communicated successfully to a reader, a metaphysical poem will “elicit feelings of delight, awe, wonder, respect,” and the metaphysical poet does this through the act of embodiment of *being as such*. Eliot’s definition of metaphysical poetry largely derives from Donne’s work, so is closely related to Thomistic metaphysics. According to Eliot, “When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. . . . [T]hese experiences are always forming new wholes” (*Selected Prose* 64). In other words, the poem is an amalgamating experience that eventually results in a new unity. In characterizing the metaphysical poet’s use of language Eliot says, “. . . the language of these poets is as a rule simple and pure. . . . The *structure* of the sentences, on the other hand, is sometimes far from simple, but this is not a vice; it is a fidelity to thought and feeling” (*Selected Prose* 62). This “fidelity to thought and feeling” is key, since Eliot says the early metaphysical poets were concerned with “. . . the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent of states of mind and feeling” (*Selected Prose* 65). Finding language for the abstract is a metaphysical endeavor with and without religion. It is a desire to get to something new that will enlighten the mind.

For Elizabeth Bishop, the “task” of the poet is to watch closely. The object of observation is up to the poet, and the way of observing is always an act or process of the mind,

particular to every individual and their frames of reference, but an act that always requires the poet's full attention. Language brings forth the conversational aspect. Visual and verbal are highly present. Visual allows for interior and exterior, mental and dreamlike, or analytical, it allows for energy to be brought forth in the imagination which will manifest these images in poetry. And the verbal uses the energy of interaction to stir and create new energy, an act that requires an external and an internal source in order to exist in itself. The product, which is the poem, is meant to exist in itself because it is both inner and exterior, abstract and concrete, unknowable and familiar. In Bishop's poetry, the existence of the poem comes out of the interaction of these two forces. Her poems suggest a way of looking at the world by demonstration. To read Bishop as a metaphysical poet provides insight into the discussion of her poetics as well as the discussion of contemporary metaphysical poetry.

Bishop's short stories provide insights into the In her short story, "The Sea and its Shore," Bishop explores the interactions of interior and exterior through the actions of the character Boomer, whose job is to pick up the litter on the beach that accumulates throughout the day. He does this by the light of his lantern at night, during which time he develops a method to collect or discard a piece of writing, and how, out of three categories, to judge it at first. The endeavors of Boomer are somewhat directed and given importance by his desire to gain some kind of knowledge for himself through. That Boomer burns all the papers feels in the story sinister (*Prose* 179), but the question remains as to whether Boomer will or even wants to remember the contents of the discarded papers. He burns the papers because his job requires that he burns them, but the collecting and organizing of papers was a choice made by Boomer.

Bishop describes Boomer as only being able to see birds within the range of his lamp, a metaphor for the human perspective as limited. Boomer carefully watches the birds when he sees them, but his act of choosing which papers to keep and which to discard, suggests a guided

purpose. Windy nights cause a disturbance in the activity of the scraps of paper, and the wind appears to give life to the scraps of paper:

But the flight of papers was an interesting thing to watch. He had made many careful comparisons between them and the birds that occasionally flew within range of the lantern.

A bird, of course, inspired by a brain, by long tradition, by a desire that could often be understood to reach some place or obtain some thing, flew in a line, or a series of curves that were part of a line. One could tell the difference between its methodical flights to obtain something and its flights for show.

But the papers had no discernible goal, no brain, no feeling of race or group. They soared up, fell down, could not decide, hesitated, subsided, flew straight to their doom in the sea, or turned over in mid-air to collapse on the sand without another motion.

If any manner was their favorite, it seemed to be an oblique one, slipping sidewise. (*Collected Prose* 174)

The birds as flying “inspired by a brain” at first suggests thought, but we know birds do not possess conscious thought so cannot use reason to make decisions about flight. Flying as inspired “by a desire that could often be understood to reach some place or obtain some thing” expresses the timelessness of motion and the sense of moving forward, which for humans is linear. The phrase, “that could often be understood” assumes a general understanding of the behaviors of birds, while the vague wording leaves the possibility of not understanding bird desires in the open. When birds fly for show, “their desire to reach some place or some thing” is lost and no longer gives them direction productive to the whole group. Unlike group rebellion, which is at times necessary to come back to harmony, flying for show can be understood as one straying from the natural tendency of forward movement and in pursuit of nothing, thus not

contributing nor growing individually. In a book by Arthur Allen, published in 1930, Allen explains the known facts of migratory patterns of birds: “If there were no such thing as weather . . . the birds would swing back and forth as regularly as a pendulum and cross a given point at exactly the same time every year. For this migrating instinct is closely associated with the enlargement and reduction of the reproductive glands, a physiological cycle which, under normal conditions, is just as regular as the pulsing of the heart and records time as accurately as a clock” (*The Book of Bird Life* 119). Allen’s book was originally a children’s book and, given the early date of publication and breadth of knowledge in simple language, Bishop’s knowledge of birds could not have been much more advanced than what Allen explains.

The metaphysical poem’s tendency toward unity and “the effect of the whole,” is similar to the birds’ “methodical flights to obtain something” because the goal itself is vague and always present, and the pursuit is dependent on each element’s interaction with one another and the elements’ potential to unify into a whole apparatus. If a metaphysical poet writes something that does not contribute to the whole and is there because of the poet’s vanity, then that thing can be said to stray from the singular goal of unity. In “Lyric Cryptography,” an essay, Ashbery discusses the inner and exterior tensions and plays in Bishop’s poems. He references Bishop’s 1930s college essay, “Time’s Andromedas,” which reveals key thoughts behind her poetics. Ashbery quotes Bishop on the phenomenon of bird migration:

There was the individual rate of each bird, its rate in relation to all the other birds, the speed of the various groups, and then that mysterious swath they made through the sky, leaving it somehow emptied and stilled, slowly assuming its usual coloring and faraway look. Yet all this motion with its effect of precision, of passing the time along, as the clock passes it along from minute to minute, was to result in the end in a thing so inevitable, so absolute, as to mean nothing connected with the passage of time at all—a static fact of the world, the birds here

or there, always a fact that may hurry the seasons along for us, but as far as bird migration goes, stands still and infinite. (*E.B. and Her Art* 272)

All the details in this image contribute to explaining the simultaneously existing polarities in the metaphor of bird migration as time and timelessness. The “mysterious swath” is like the effect of the end of a poem. Bishop not only watches the movements of the birds, she watches the spaces in between the birds, as a painter might, knowing that everything visible and invisible is related: “I watched closely the spaces between the birds. It was as if there were an invisible thread joining all the outside birds and within this fragile net-work they possessed the sky. . .” (271). The physical details hint at the birds’ natural behaviors and intentions. Bishop’s observations of the birds in this passage show a metaphorical image from which she made her own poetics.

The pieces of paper that fly about on the beach are imitative of a mind’s thoughts before they are given meaning through use. Bishop characterizes Boomer’s desire to obtain the scraps of paper as predatory: “. . . Boomer, waiting to catch them on a sharpened nail” (174). Boomer already has a specific goal in mind when he captures the aimless thoughts, and he acts as he might envision God might act when he obtains them and passes judgment on whether to keep something or to throw it into the fire pit. Bishop’s earlier suggestion of Boomer as priestly, in “So Mr. Boomer, Edwin Boomer, might almost have been said to have joined the ‘priesthood’” (172), suggests the possibility for human error and gives Boomer a more humble status below God, rather than at the level of God, a level often analogized with author or poet. This may also be a statement on the arts and the kinds of artists who enjoy the control aspect of creation and forget themselves for the sake of vain pursuit. Although Boomer is characterized as having full control of the beach’s papers, he does not have full control, as some papers fall into the water before Boomer can catch them. Far from being aimless, the scraps are indecisive and appear to have no end in sight because their movement is not “discernable” as Bishop writes, suggesting a

secret motive unknown to the naked eye. Attention to their movements is precise: “they soared up,” “flew straight to their doom” and “collapse on the sand without another motion.” The papers are more vulnerable than the birds because of their lack of linearity, but they are also more flexible, like thought before it is processed, an “almost-thought.” Boomer’s act of attempting to make coherence out of the chaos of the flying paper is analogous to Eliot’s definition of metaphysical poetry as an attempt to express order that comes out of an affect of the whole. More than cataloging the scraps of paper, the effect that the experience of discovering or never recovering, and what is and isn’t uncovered, is what effects a new being.

In the seventeenth century the term, “monument” in one sense denoted a “lasting work of literature, science or art,” coming from the classical Latin meaning of “a commemorative statue or building, tomb, reminder, written record, literary work” (OED). The current meaning is that of a structure or edifice that serves the purpose of commemoration or memory (OED). The Italian Renaissance baroque architecture, the monuments and statues to commemorate saints and divine beings points toward the notion of unity. For Boomer, the edifice “was a shelter, but not for living in, for thinking in. It was, to the ordinary house, what the ceremonial thinking cap is to the ordinary hat” (“Sea & Shore” 172). The function of Boomer as priest-like suggests that the edifice can be seen as a churchlike or monumental structure, and Bishop suggests that this building has a specific purpose for Boomer to bring his collected scraps and thoughts to the location to think. There is a sense of the sacred with the analogy to the “thinking cap,” suggesting the importance of Boomer’s work as paper-collector. The importance of the work is the archeological and the analytical process that brings Edwin to decide what to keep and what to burn with the rest of the trash. The body of the structure would not exist without the presence and interaction that Boomer offers, and the function would not have purpose. It becomes a commemorative entity because Boomer makes it as such. “The Sea and its Shore” is a highly

visual and unusual story that provides insight into Bishop's poetics as Boomer's behavior illustrates internal and external worlds and interactions.

In her poem, "Paris, 7AM" Bishop creates a sense of timeless motion through repetition of words and sounds, and geometrical imagery. The poem opens with the speaker making a "trip" to the clocks, though the reason for doing so is not explicit. The speaker is like migrating birds in that she is making a "trip," but on a much smaller scale. Bishop's use of this word in the poem references the image of migrating birds and thus increases the charge of the word in its ordinary context. The fragment that follows the declaration made in line four continues the bird migration image: "Time is an Etoile; the hours diverge." The image may literally refer to the image of the face of the clock as an Etoile, but the active "hours diverge" promises a motion-charged image or feeling coming from the rays of the star. Also, time as an Etoile suggests a fortification structure, as well as a star, imagistically suggesting that an "ignorant face" (2) of a clock is a container of time directed outwards in all directions.

The sounds imitate the circular, yet transitory, sense of time: "point" in lines two and three; "circles" twice in line six, once in line twenty-seven; "pigeon's wing" in lines eight and nine; "snow-forts" in lines seventeen and nineteen; "dead" twice in line twenty-eight; and "squares" and "circles" twice each in line thirty-one. Bishop's use of alliteration, "winter weathers" (7), and the rhythms of words as in "It is like introspection / to stare inside, or retrospection, / a star inside a rectangle, a recollection" (13-15), also lend to this effect, allowing the poem, with its odd turns, to exist as a circular whole, imitative of time itself. This circularity of time "in motion" carries the reader through a journey, without actually leaving the form of the poem. By the seventh line, the passage of time in winter turns into a conceit of time that haunts the poem:

The short, half-tone scale of winter weathers
is a spread pigeon's wing.

Winter lives under a pigeon's wing, a dead wing with damp feathers. (7-9)

This ninth line hangs out of the rest of the poem, even hovers over its following lines, imitating the image of winter living under a “dead wing with damp feathers,” suggesting that the rest of the poem literally lives under this “dead wing.” One particularly interesting aspect of this technique is that the image remains existent in its absence, absence due to the continuation of time as being concerned with the next and the next lines, always moving forward. Like the phenomenon of the “mysterious swath they made through the sky, leaving it somehow emptied and stilled,” line nine in “Paris, 7AM,” seems to suggest the effect of an after-image. At the end of the poem, the ghost of the “dead wing with damp feathers” remains. Also, the precision of the imagery throughout, and the motion pushing the poem forward, allows these details to represent the winter that lives under the shadow.

With the conversational tone established in the first line, Bishop can go anywhere she likes with the poem without losing her reader. The tone of familiarity establishes trust between the speaker and reader. The next line is a way of guiding the reader: “Look down into the courtyard” (10). This guidance is perhaps a misguidance that presents itself as simple; it allows the reader to easily follow the speaker's argument. We are then given a mostly straightforward illustration of the courtyard: “All the houses / are build that way, with ornamental urns / set on the mansard roof-tops where the pigeons take their walks” (10-13). So far, the image is simple, yet beginning to pose problems, since the image of the walking pigeons and a dead pigeon's wing are somewhat contradictory. Also, in placing the pigeons on top of the roof, “walking,” normally an action attributed to humans, the rest of the world below the elevated pigeons literally lives under the pigeon's wing. The speaker, however, is not below the level of the pigeon, as she directs the reader to look down, not up. Then, Bishop writes,

. . . It is like introspection
to stare inside, or retrospection,

a star inside a rectangle, a recollection:

this hollow square could easily have been there. (13-16)

The “introspection” leads one to look inside oneself, “retrospection” leads one to look at the past, and “recollection” leads one to a meditative state of contentedness, having “gathered again,” and back into the present moment. The notion of a star inside a rectangle as a recollection brings back the image of the Etoile as time, since one can imagine the shape of a star inside a rectangular clock. By staring into the face of the clock, the observer participates in a process of self-observation through interaction with the material, a process which becomes a reflection into the past and a movement back to the present moment, a movement that involves the past and the self-reflection. The image of “a star inside a rectangle” sonically repeats and extends from the previous line’s: “to stare inside,” suggesting the emotional connection of the actions of “retrospection” and “recollection” and at the same time a movement forward that brings a new thought to the speaker’s mind about the way things fit in with one another. We did not yet know we were supposed to think of the square of the clock as “hollow” until the speaker makes a realization about the shape of the clock, that it “could easily have been there,” referring back to the mansard rooftop she is observing. The sequence of thoughts presented in lines thirteen through sixteen exemplify the ability of the material to interact with the intellect and allow language to grow out of this interaction for a new understanding of things. In this case, the understanding is the speaker’s observation of the way things fit into one another and the revelation of the square as “hollow” that come out of the layering of thoughts and sequence of sounds.

In proposing that the fort-building work of children is more substantial than the adult construction of houses, Bishop takes us back in time: “—The childish snow-forts, built in flashier winters, / could have reached these proportions and been houses” (17-18). The snow-forts are “childish,” which implies that they may not have been the forts of children, but were

merely forts that were childish. This adjective then brings the past into the present, asking readers to engage in “introspection,” “retrospection,” and “recollection,” by recalling the past. The forts possess more strength and fortitude than the houses, since they “could not dissolve and die, / only be overlapping in a strong chain, turned to stone, and grayed and yellowed now like these” (21-23). Rather than disappear, these fragile structures are reinforced—turned to stone—by time. This image also brings up the image of deteriorating paper, and the metaphor of literature and language as stone-like and everlasting. The very act of play that the children engaged in when they built snow-forts and houses shows what is absent in the Paris houses, the absence being the strength of the product that comes out of the process of play. Because the forts were built in “flashier winters,” the present time is by contrast dull and lacking in potential to build something that can withstand and protect the way a fort protects in wartime.

The final stanza leaves us with ambiguity and a sense of the inescapability of time. The chain in line 22 introduces this idea of time as enclosing, as does the earlier image of “a star inside a rectangle” (15). The first two lines of the final stanza evoke this inescapability: “Where is the ammunition, the piled-up balls / with the star-splintered hearts of ice?” (24-25). Not only does time enclose the world, there is no attempt to escape. This is because the sky itself cannot escape time: “This sky is no carrier-warrior-pigeon / escaping endless intersection circles. / It is a dead one, or the sky from which a dead one fell” (26-28). Even in the confines of time, Bishop does not let us leave the poem in any sort of finality; her use of “or” leaves the question asked in the start of the stanza open, almost uncomfortably so, suggesting an endless state of unknowing. This unknowing, however, is true to experience; Bishop does not relinquish the ambiguity that “or” allows to the philosophical order and reduce the experience to a certainty because certainty is not reality. Even within this ambiguity, the reader is confined to the ever-changing, slippery presence of time.

Near the end of the poem, the reader is confronted with a repeated word that, unlike the earlier-mentioned words, shows up in different places and serves opposite purposes to “dissolve.” First, the word appears when Bishop says that the snow-forts cannot “dissolve and die” (21), showing that the artifacts of time cannot disappear. Then Bishop turns the meaning of time into a slippery question: “When did the star dissolve, or was it captured / by the sequence of squares and squares, circles and circles?” (30-31). This suggests that time is a whole, even though in reality, time is measured in sequences. Perhaps we can say that time was once not treated in such a mathematical sense, but at one time was something physical. Bishop’s metaphor of a star as time is perfectly appropriate because a star is a physical, though nebulous, thing that no one can touch, yet moves through time as it burns. The star, like a structure meant to store ammunition for wartime, also contains the power to unleash fiery energy. Time has a similar feeling to this energy potential because of its constant turning away from the present and becoming the past, creating a continuous energy that is invisible yet necessary for daily order. Time skirts human potential for understanding because of the difficulty in grasping it. When Bishop asks, “Can the clock say; it is there below, / about to tumble in snow?” (32-33), she is asking an unanswerable question because the clock cannot say or predict anything, even if its functions suggest the predictability of the way in which time acts. While the material realities of the snow-fort or the houses cannot dissolve but only represent time, time itself is unattainable but constantly changing into something else, being displaced by time and new events. The lingering effects of the imagery, which is in motion until interrupted with the final image which places time, the *etoile*, in snow, is reminiscent of the image of Icarus falling with its implication of loss.

“Paris, 7AM” explores and analyzes the dimensions of time as it appears outside her window at that time. The casual observation and analysis of one’s immediate surroundings to gain an understanding of time is a metaphysical act. It is a performance of imaginative seeing, and the poet directs the reader in what is to be seen. She does this casually and conversationally,

but also openly so that the reader will know what is to be observed. The conversational tone reinforces the importance of the process of observation and discussion because it acknowledges the third party, the reader, and not only engages in an act of imaginative observation, but also requires that the poet herself is transformed in the process so that the reader can be transformed. Participation is required from all parties. Time becomes the material in the world, specifically the material that layers and never fully dissolves into nonexistence, emphasizing time's characteristic of eternity in spite of change. This understanding of time would not have occurred without the instigator of the poet's mind and the observation of the world. One can only interact with the material things connected to time in order to understand something intangible and fleeting. The reader is meant to be transformed by the experience of reading the poem because of the handling of the abstract and the material, and because of the time it takes to read it.

The "still and infinite" migratory nature of birds is an important theme in Bishop's work. Her poem, "Sandpiper," illustrates her attitudes toward the creation of art and herself as an artist through the observations of a bird. In a letter to Donnie E. Stanford, she quotes M.W. Croll in his essay, "The Baroque Style in Prose," who she says provides "a very good description of what I mean about poetry.":

We may describe it by observing that the first member is likely to be a self-contained and complete statement of the whole idea of the period. It is so because writers in this style like to avoid prearrangements and preparations. . . . The first member therefore exhausts the mere fact of the idea; logically there is nothing more to say. But it does not exhaust its imaginative truth or the energy of its conception. It is followed, therefore, by other members, each with a new tone or emphasis, each expressing a new apprehension of the truth expressed in the first. We may describe the progress. . . as a series of imaginative moments occurring in a logical pause or suspension'" (*One Art* 12).

In “Sandpiper,” the “imaginative truth” is arrived at by the end, when the speaker, who represents objectivity and reason, becomes the sandpiper in order to perceive the world through the bird’s eyes. The “progress” of a succession of “imaginative moments occurring in a logical pause or suspension” can be seen in the succession of images in the speaker’s eyes.

The first stanza of “Sandpiper” sets the bird up as innocent to the dangers of his small world, and at the same time establishes a threatening tone: “The roaring alongside he takes for granted, / and that every so often the world is bound to shake” (1-2). The vagueness in “roaring alongside” is specific enough for the reader to know the speaker is referring to the sea, but it minimalizes the sea’s power, which is both threatening and unreal. The “binding” sense of the word “bound” makes the dangers of the violence of an earthquake inevitable, if not imminently present. The speaker is observing the bird with a filter that personifies him, which suggests something about the speaker more than the bird: “He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward / in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake” (3-4). While the first stanza is a statement about the bird, the second stanza directs the reader into a more tactile setting that shifts the tone by locating the speaker on the beach and expressing a new tone: “The beach hisses like fat” (5). The beach has suddenly become sinister, as “hiss” suggests, and unsettling, reminding one of the apparent danger the bird is ignorant of at the start. During the course of the poem, we see the speaker readjust her perceptions based on her observations, suggesting the succession of imaginative images that Croll speaks of: “He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes. // —Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them” (8-9). The speaker’s desire for accuracy brings her closer to the bird’s perspective. The imaginative images generated from observation bring the speaker and bird metaphorically closer, until the speaker is in the bird’s point of view. It is interesting to look at the progression:

. . . As he runs,
he stares at the dragging grains.

The world is a mist. And then the world is
minute and vast and clear. The tide
is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.
His beak is focussed; he is preoccupied.

looking for something, something, something.

Poor bird, he is obsessed! (11-18)

The speaker calls the bird “obsessed,” however the reader may note the obsessive nature of the speaker’s close observation of the bird. At first, the bird “stares,” which is an odd word-choice for a bird, since it suggests the bird has a mind and has lost himself in his concentration. The shift from “mist” to “minute and vast and clear” to “. . . higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which,” does not clarify the order of the world, but expresses the perceptions and disillusionment of it as a result of intense narrow focus. However, the final two lines come as a surprise: “The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray, / mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst” (19-20). The sudden clarity and the numerous, possibly endless, new details overwhelms the fragmented and undecided observations of the previous stanza. The speaker has become the bird, or at least re-enacted the behavior of the bird, in order to see the small details that preoccupy him. The “seeing” through the bird’s eyes requires that the vision is *through* the bird because the observations are no longer the speaker’s, but both the speaker’s and the bird’s. The conversational mixed with trivial tone that separated the speaker from the bird by disappears upon the emergence of new details coming from observation.

Gregory Orr, in his book, *Richer Entanglements*, discusses the limits of the imagination for a lyrical temperament: “Its external limiting conditions (time, space) are mirrored by internal limiting conditions (obsessions) that it also yearns to transcend. In its anguish, it is at odds with

the inner world as well as the outer world” (69-70). The sandpiper’s obsession with the “dragging grains” not only prevents him from seeing clearly, but distorts his perceptions of reality so that he no longer has control over the way in which he looks at the ground, he must “stare.” The speaker’s observations of the bird are at first limited by the physical distance between them, and the speaker’s inability to literally be able to see through the eyes of the bird. Throughout the course of “Sandpiper,” the interaction between the speaker and her reflections on what she sees stretches the limits of reality. Bishop’s poems are not lyrical in the sense of introspection, but lyrical in a dramatic sense because of the interaction that observation requires. Of the dramatic lyric, Orr says,

[W]e have two truths powerfully present. We have the truth of the lyric: that the self longs for the unconditional, for transcendence of suffering and mortality.

And we have the truth of the world: that we are bound by time and space, that our bodies are mortal. In the full-fledged dramatic lyric these two truths contend in the arena of the unfolding poem” (*Richer Entanglements* 42).

The speaker’s observations of the external enable the transformation of the bird. The bird having been in motion during the time it was being observed, invariably affected the observer’s perceptions.

Bishop’s “The Monument” is another poem involving the interactions of conversation and observation in a “dramatic lyric” style. This poem is interesting because it seems to involve two people, though only the companion is given voice markers with quotation marks, and the two do not actively engage in conversation with one another, but instead focus on the monument. The premise of the poem is that the speaker is taking her companion to look at wooden crates that to her make a “monument.” Throughout the poem, the speaker describes the object by first seeing and then adjusting her observations based on new sightings. Even though the speaker constantly decides upon new ways of seeing the monument, there is never a sense of lack of

control. The speaker's calm and confident demeanor suggests control as well as imaginative freedom. At the same time, the speaker does reach to a clearer understanding of the monument, a result of the process of observation and a somewhat indirect result of the companion's negative reactions prompting further justification for the existence of the object as a monument.

The companion engages in the landscape only when she is able to find something familiar to her: "And the sky looks wooden, grained with cloud. / It's like a stage-set: it is all so flat!" (42-43). The seemingly exciting connections the companion is suddenly making illustrate the connective nature of the imagination and exert a new energy force coming from the companion. The companion is mostly disinterested in the monument and not following the same direction of perceptions that the speaker is voicing, so when the companion sees the similarity of the landscape to a stage-set, she has a purpose, a way of looking at the object. This is short-lived excitement, but the companion is thoroughly invested in the woodenness of the landscape. The speaker and companion have their perceptions in common, and the speaker continues to talk about the wood of the object.

The point, if there is one, is not to convince the companion that the object is a monument, but to direct the companion to look closely at the object because it possesses the desire to be a monument and contains life in itself:

The monument's an object, yet those decorations,
carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all,
give it away as having life, and wishing;
wanting to be a monument, to cherish something (64-67).

The speaker is asserting knowledge of the creator of the monument by characterizing the work as having been "carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all." The mere effort of nailing into the wood and altering the appearance of the object to make it into something else, something new, is what is important about the object; this is its expression of meaning. And, the object is

vulnerable because it is subject to weather and time altering its initial expression of meaning. It is important that the object has been given a life separate from the creator of the monument. That the object was first and foremost the material of a tree is important because this initial and separate existence as a tree is necessary for the existence of the object as a monument. Both the tree and the creator sacrifice something in the transformation of the object: the wood will no longer grow as a tree, and the creator has given the object meaning in itself and was also not fully present in the final product of the object as a monument. All of this is implied. The fact that the monument “wants” to “cherish something” leaves the final step toward meaning to the observer because there is no one else left. The final necessary step toward meaning is the third party’s confirmation of its existence. The speaker sees the object as a monument because of the markers of the “jig-saw work hanging down” and the box shape implying something exists inside it, while the speaker does not care about these details and asks for markers of familiarity (“Are we in Asia Minor?” 34). The companion will not acknowledge the identity of the object as a monument. Near the end, this is not important to the speaker. Rather, the material and function of the object is important. It is important that the material is wood, because it “. . . holds together better / than sea or cloud or sand could by itself, / much better than real sea or sand or cloud” (60-63), and also important because “. . . roughly but adequately it can shelter / what is within (which after all / cannot have been intended to be seen) (75-77). The final conclusion of the poem is to “watch it closely” (80), suggesting that the act of observing is of higher importance than the object itself. If this is so, it is because of the imaginative freedom that comes out of close observation. In the end of “Sandpiper,” the bird and speaker, watching closely, suddenly see many small details clearly. In “The Monument,” the speaker is picking out details, too, and the details allow for endless imaginative interpretation. The final conclusion to “watch it closely” leaves the object open for interpretation.

The language of conversation becomes most ordinary near the end of the poem when the landscape has already begun to visually materialize for the speaker, the companion, and the reader. The speaker's language also becomes more simple with monosyllabic words and repetitions of words and phrases, evoking a sense of memorializing, thus suggesting the speaker is now engaging in the same act as the initial creator of the artifact by imposing a structure that characterizes the object as something whole. "It may be solid, may be hollow. / The bones of the artist-prince may be inside / or far away on even drier soil. / But roughly but adequately it can shelter . . ." (72-75). Regardless of what the object is, it is an adequate shelter, something that has lent itself to the roughness of the weather for the sake of protecting something mysterious. The speaker's recognition of this artifact as a "monument" gives the object new meaning grounded in its original meaning, and provides the beginning for a new creation while giving value to the artist who built the monument.

It is possible that Bishop's use of the word "artifact" in the final stanza, line 59, is meant to modernize the notion of the monument. The notion of the monument in the seventeenth century metaphysical poems is reincarnated in Bishop's poem, but the use of the word "artifact" suggests a less spiritually significant existence. When the speaker says "The monument is an object" (64), she is explaining the fundamental existence of the object: something meant to memorialize and protect what is important to the creator. The mystery is preserved and closed off forever to the observer, but the fact that it does exist to protect something worth remembering is what is important about the artifact. The word "monument" in the seventeenth century had more concrete significance because of the pervasiveness of religion during that time as compared to now. Without an explicitly religious culture in the twenty-first century, the object has a different kind of significance, one less related to memorializing saintly and royal people and more closely related to the human act of memorializing as universal. The mystery inside the artifact is always meant to be a mystery because knowing what is inside would mean an end to

imagination. This is supposed to be “the beginning of a painting. . . .” (78), not the unveiling of a long-gone person’s deepest secrets. The details of the artifact reveal the life of it and hints at its original conceptions. The monument is an “object” (64) built not only in the aftermath of a death, but also because someone living wanted to memorialize the person who died, wanted to eternalize the spirit by constructing a box-like structure out of wood.

George S. Lensing’s essay, “Bishop and Flannery O’Conner: Minding and Mending a Fallen World,” considers Bishop’s poems in light of a spiritual interest and concern. Drawing on the similarities between Bishop and O’Conner’s work, Lensing says, “Neither figure baldly presents a specifically religious homiletic, but both probe beneath and beyond the immediate realism of the physical world in quest of some manifestation of transcendent association” (*E.B. in the 21st Century* 200). Bishop’s interest lies in the aesthetic, as Lensing’s essay argues, and this is consistent with her “passion for accuracy” (Lensing quotes Bishop in a letter to Robert Lowell 197). Bishop has also her entire literary life loved the poetry of George Herbert. Later in life, she wrote in a letter that Herbert is “the only poet I can stand these days” (*One Art* 477).

Some critics have wanted to place Bishop next to feminism or talk about the politics in her poems. In a recent essay, “Elizabeth Bishop and Containment Policy,” Steven Axelrod reads Bishop’s poems in light of the Cold War era and what he calls her “political detachment” which “can be attributed to her somatic and psychic difficulties; to the very real possibility, in an age of high surveillance, of being labeled a Communist; or to simple disinterest” (849). This is an interesting characterization, since Axelrod makes a large jump in connecting Bishop’s psychosomatic state to her ambivalent relationship with politics, an ambivalent relationship because, as Axelrod points out, she does not believe in poets participating in politics yet contradictorily writes political poems (848). Making claims based on what a person writes and does not write, or says and does not say is a tricky business, since one must also take into account Bishop’s dispositions in order to contextualize her words and silences. Merely because

Bishop says she does not believe in poets writing about politics and yet writes poems that are related to politics, that does not mean that she has an ambivalent relationship with the political sphere. Axelrod acknowledges the possibility of his being wrong, but his claims are too far away from the evidence in Bishop's poems and prose. Axelrod further categorizes Bishop as participating in what would later become "queer politics": "Bishop's midcentury poems focus particularly on the power and legitimacy of same-sex desire, not a classical political issue but certainly at the core of what would later emerge as queer politics" (849). His claims are grounded on a perspective different from what the editor of her letters implies with the title, *One Art*. Axelrod says, "I see art displacing life, betraying it, rebuking it—or perhaps resignifying it, constructing it differently. For the poems of midcentury constitute themselves in ways that the letters rarely do. Whereas the letters seem penetrated by signs of political caution, the poems constitute a more fluid field, much more hospitable to social sympathies and anxieties relegated to the margins by Cold War ideology. I would borrow a different figure from Bishop's poems to describe her oeuvre: 'a creature divided'" (849). Axelrod is concerned with Bishop's social and political struggles as it manifests in her poems and letters. However, this problematizes and perhaps deflates Bishop's transformative aesthetic. If Bishop was "a creature divided," she already knew it, and she used these ambivalences in her poems because they are natural to the mind's process of thinking. Axelrod is arguing a classical political theory, but this seems counterproductive because it implies that Bishop's poems are affected more by her political and social ambivalence than her aesthetic and hard work.

A poet invests a sense of understanding of language and ordinary life in language; language is a limitation and at the same time a necessary tool for attaining freedom. Language is an abstract concept, but writing is not, so the poet provides the force that initiates the existence of the poem. Many critics and poets have discussed the poem as an entity in itself. Where a poem begins and ends is the body of the being, simply because this relies on a poet's intuitive

sense of language and its ability to recreate something living, to imitate the idea of a living being in order to reach to a newer order or things, a newer understanding of the world. Bishop's poetics is based on a passion for visual accuracy, and her emotional accuracy is a part of careful observation. The lyrical nature of Bishop's poetry is metaphysical in its qualities of ordinary and surprising language and the freedoms and limits in the physical world and in language.

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