

Still Explosions of True Desire:
Exploring Artifice and the Shadow in Elizabeth Bishop and Jean Valentine

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Abstract

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This thesis posits an inherent connection between paradoxes of scale, negative capability, and queerness as expressed through poetic form, taking Elizabeth Bishop's attention to physical objects and geographical landscapes as a primary example. My research takes up what I see to be the other end of the spectrum, which is also a point of connection: the relative slipperiness of Jean Valentine's dreamlike poems of address, particularly her elegy for Bishop: "Snow Landscape in a Glass Globe." I look to both poets for structures that allow emotional directness through syntactically and imagistically indirect means, though the differences in each poet's formal concerns create a central tension in my poetics. I am interested in queerness as the liberating result of negative capability, and the constraints of paradox as a formal embodiment of transformation, which is necessary once one has recognized their place outside of heteronormativity and taken steps to transcend it. Insofar as poetic form is an embodied expression, paradoxes and other strangenesses that emerge are in service of saving the speaker of these poems, and their beloveds, from being flattened into an assumed gender or relational role. Form allows the poem itself to keep some of its secrets, and keeps the art alive.

“I used to tell myself,” she once said to me, “to write, as an exercise, as a prompt, to write as if you’re writing to someone who will understand everything.” She described this kind of writing by saying it’s “like looking into Rembrandt’s eyes in that self-portrait in the Metropolitan. You feel like he would understand anything you could say to him and he has seen everything and he knows everything—and that to me is paradise because I’ve always wanted to be understood but didn’t know how.”

— Catherine Barnett on Jean Valentine, “Little Light on the Road” from *This-World Company*

You’re cutting off your own exuberance. The voice of my undergraduate thesis advisor, le thi diem thùy, cleaves the vague ringing in my ears as I sit in one of our meetings before my final revisions are due. I’m writing a hybrid long poem in an attempt to reckon with my biologically impossible beginnings, and she’s urging me to let the strangeness be, without trying to explain it away. I was born with a kind of innate negative capability, Keats’ phrase which means to be “in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”¹ My mother positioned herself as mother/father both, and raised me to internalize fatherlessness as an unproblematic condition. I had plenty of parents, all women, and I never understood when other children were puzzled. It was simple: “my mother never married,” I used to say, which did elegantly cut off further speculation. Later I learned about the concept of sperm donors, but it wasn’t a real disillusionment. My mother’s world was so imbued with magic that I couldn’t help but take on her perspective. She emphasized the hidden humanity of inanimate beings, and insisted on invisible forces, major and minor deities, that I could always trust. For example, I believed when she told me that wrought-iron bunnies which sat on my bed posts came alive in the night and ensured my safety. There were many unconventional angels surrounding our

¹ [On Negative Capability: Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21, ? 27 December 1817] According to Poetry Foundation

precarious existence, my good luck and her uncanny intuition would carry us through whatever was to come, even the first crash of the housing market, and the next five homes over the next five years.

Poetry's inherent strangeness was another one of the gods I learned to trust at an early age. Maybe due to one of my baby books having been a collection of Emily Dickinson's poetry. I continue to find comfort in mystery, and feel right at home in paradoxes and impossible situations. I maintain a stubborn trust in the unknown, and rather than being threatened by what I cannot explain, I feel confirmed by it. However, up until recently my poetry has been mired in explanatory modes, trying to add up all the details of my life to explain why I hold the worldview I have, rather than allowing the poetry to grow organically from it. I turn to Bishop and Valentine, both of whom have been recommended to me by treasured mentors, to move away from narrative and into an embodied poetics with more trust in language.

I feel that I am reaching after the pure-shadow, dreamscape of Jean Valentine's stark and revealing poetics (more on the word *revealing* in a second, as some would argue the opposite is true), however, the poems I write surface often as narrative, an allegory or an extended metaphor, in which I am trying to *tell the story* of what I think the poem is *about*. When this happens, my professor suggests I look at Elizabeth Bishop, whose highly visual poems employ surfaces, structures, and to some degree, in her own words, *pretense* as the site of emotional but unsentimental meaning-making. Of these two poets, I am more drawn to Valentine's subjects and silences, but at the same time, I cannot help but emulate Bishop. I am descended from her, given that I look to objects in my life as fellow meaning-makers, and my poetic identity has always felt rooted in observation and description, two modes frequently attributed to her. I am also curious about where lesbian love and identity spills through her well-wrought structures. Additionally,

my tendency is to write via implication, which is kindred to her late-modernism style, despite the fact that queerness as a subject is a well-traveled terrain for myself and my contemporaries. Her poetics remind me how impactful I find emotional directness that arrives through indirect means.

In an early review essay entitled “Mechanics of Pretence: Remarks on W. H. Auden” (1937), Elizabeth Bishop writes, “One of the causes of poetry must be, we suppose, the feeling that the contemporary language is not equivalent to the contemporary fact; there is something out of proportion between them, and what is being said in words is not at all what is being said in ‘things.’ To correct this disproportion a pretense is at first necessary.” (Bishop, 183) When thinking about Bishop’s sexuality I initially connect pretense to hiding, but the more I read her poems the more convinced I am that, though her biographers assert her shyness, she crafted a complex container for her inner-self which allowed her to be more vulnerable in her poems than would a more confessional mode, which she adamantly opposed. I find myself also following a version of this maxim, from Pimone Triplett, which is useful for any poet writing from personal experiences (so, any poet): “Sometimes in order to tell the truth in a poem, you have to *lie*.”

The lie inevitably serves the reader’s ability to comprehend the poem’s meaning. When Pimone gave this advice, it was alongside a suggestion that personal details might be altered to shift the poem’s allegiance from an accuracy that pertains to reality, to an accuracy of the poem’s themes, in service of the material and its inherent concerns. I also read Bishop’s use of pretense as aligned with her sexuality, in that she disguises her early love poems, leaving out pronouns as in *The Shampoo*, to which I dedicate a portion of this essay later, or employs the masculine, as in *Love Lies Sleeping*. The attentive reader, however, can feel that Bishop is not wholly committed to the pretense, she only wants to offer enough artifice to satisfy those who would rather not see

the truth, while her second subject is handled more delicately, and readily available for those who are paying attention.

On the other hand, Valentine's ideal reader is the image of Rembrandt at the Met. His is an open face, well-worn with experience and almost absent of ego, an endlessly capacious consciousness who is not afraid of not-knowing. Valentine was not a gay woman, nor was she, to use a term that I identify with, a queer person. Neither is my mother, however, when I share the story of my multi-mothered upbringing, it is inevitably received as "queer-coded." Insofar as queerness still aligns with nonnormativity, I see ways to express and engage with my own queerness through my mother's choices. Likewise with Valentine's poetics. She is interested in grief, desire, and spirituality, and decidedly committed to ensuring that these dwellers of dreamscapes retain their slipperiness even when translated into language. Her subjects are absences, departures, ghosts and god-like entities, all of which I am compelled by, especially in my project of connecting queer desire to spirituality. Her work is highly psychoanalytic and semiotic, but also moving in its simplicity. I call it *revealing*, despite the fact that I am sometimes locked out of her poem's *meaning*, because her intention is to be straightforward, and I can see how her poetry is just that.

Jean Valentine is doubtlessly my favorite poets' favorite poet. She was known as a kind friend and community member, but not one to publish the secrets behind her enigmatic poetics. She never wrote any craft essays of her own, so I owe my scholarship on Valentine in this essay to the collection, *This-World Company*, edited by Kazim Ali (et al). Phillip Booth spends his chapter thinking about what the poems expect of the reader, and what the poet intends. "She acknowledged that since she found her own poems 'utterly lucid,' she was doubly disturbed to get the public reaction, 'over and over again, that they're incomprehensible.'" Booth is a

compassionate reader of Valentine's, as am I, and he celebrates her capacity for negative capability. Booth points out, "Readers remain mystified because, in part, they are too sophisticated to embrace the very mystery of the poems: that the poems themselves immediately embrace the mystery of human existence." (Booth 63)

If Valentine is hard to comprehend, it is because she is principally engaged in Rilke's unsayable, and she is not willing to build up a structure to house it. She wants real silence or pure sound, she wants Marina Tsvetaeva's "nnh nnh nnh."² Valentine wants the poem to be a portal to the genuinely unknown; whereas for Bishop a poem is more like a stable structure, where secrets may be hidden. Bishop is using narrative and intellectual conceits to build meaning gradually which both conceal the poem's true nature and creates a container from which some force is threatening to burst. She often achieves this effect by playing with opposites of scale, which I relate somewhat paradoxically to her innate negative capability, even if it doesn't appear in her poems in the usual sense. Valentine is using fragments, stream-of-consciousness and the material of dreams and the subconscious, indeed is referencing and mediating her poetry through Freud, Jung, and psychoanalysis, so that what comes through is only the shadow, the moan, the silence.

The shadow is, contrarily, what must be puzzled out from Bishop's poems. For Valentine her writing is as straight-forward as she can get, but it's written in a highly individual semiotic language so we are forced to apply our own interpretation. Compared to Valentine, Bishop's poetics almost seem to say: *don't worry, I've interpreted it for you*, so that she may retain the image she desires in public life, while also housing her most essential feelings under a grid of intelligibility.

² Full Quote: "My difficulty (in writing poems—and perhaps other people's difficulty in understanding them) is in the impossibility of my goal, for example, to use words to express a moan: *nnh-nnh-nnh*. To express a sound using words, using meanings. So that the only thing left in the ears would be *nnh-nnh-nnh*." translated by Ilya Kaminsky and Jean Valentine

Both of these poets had careers spanning several decades, which took them through a multitude of varying considerations as the world and their lives overlapped with their poetics. I have identified a curious link at the site of negative capability as it relates to either poet's suspected audience: the portrait of Rembrandt, versus the untrustworthy public. I find it productive to study these two as opposite ends of the spectrum, in order to play with the malleability of artifice, direct-address, scale, and archetype in my poems going forward.

In her essay in *This-World Company*, "Little Light on the Road," Catherine Barnett, a close friend and colleague of Jean's, highlights an aspect of Valentine's skill for turning away from explanation, and toward a shared feeling with the reader. She partitions her essay into sections, one of which is titled "Interlocutor," and calls attention to Valentine's poems as being less *about* and more *for*. When I wrote my undergraduate thesis, I wrote it as an address to my girlfriend at the time, as a way to introduce her to each of the three women who raised me. In some poems I was bringing Isabel to meet the mothers, in a variety of kitchens, and other times I was sharing memories with her in our college kitchen.

Addressing the writing to her made it possible to reintroduce myself, through the layers of my sexuality and the gender-identity which I was at that time discovering, to the women who raised me. By extension, I hoped to reach the audience who I knew would attend the two-part reading, and, I felt as an ambitious young writer, my future readers. Above all, it was an exercise in acceptance of my identity from not only my friends and family, but also myself.

My first encounter with Valentine was during this drafting process, through the poem "Eleventh Brother" recommended by my advisor, thùy, as she nudged me out of explanatory modes, and deeper into internal mystery. The validity of this path was also confirmed, in an

instance of ordinary magic, by the action of an unconventional angel. I ordered a second-hand copy of *Little Boat* (the collection that includes “Eleventh Brother”) to my mother’s house in Chicago (mine and Valentine’s shared place of birth), when I was home for the holidays. When it arrived, I found that it was signed. Goosebumps rose on my arms and legs when I saw the double-name on the title page. Even if briefly, Jean had held this same object, and embedded it with her handwriting, her touch.

Another reason I feel so connected to Valentine is that her poems hold the reader very close, in many cases it is *for* them, which, just as the direct address freed me to be vulnerable in my undergraduate thesis, frees the language from having to defend itself into existence. The poem is a product of the shared feeling between the speaker and the addressed; the ‘you’ who might be you, the reader, or might be anyone living or dead, including the consciousness of Poetry itself.³ In any case, language is inherently shared, maybe it’s been built idiomatically, or maybe from inside-jokes or commonalities, like the language Isabel and I co-created in the process of falling in love, a language that we can still access all these years later.

When thinking about Valentine’s use of direct-address Barnett also calls on psychoanalysis and a term by psycholinguist, Lev Vygotsky, “inner speech.” This mode is enacted when the company or reader has a shared understanding, grammar falls away because there is no need for explanation. My friends and I observed this exact phenomenon on a trip last fall. We have all known each other for nearly a decade. The group was made up of Isabel, who is no longer my girlfriend, but is one of my closest friends, her boyfriend, and a best friend that we share, who we both met in college, who became my roommate. The multi-directional intimacy created a palpable regression in communication that led to hilarious slippages and shorthands.

³ “If you’re familiar with Jean’s poems, you know she can and does speak to just about anything and anyone. She speaks to ghosts, guests, ghost elephants, Gerry Stern, God, fathers, rivers, brothers, mothers, forgivenesses, X, Emily Dickinson, language itself (“Poetry”), the living, the dead.” (Barnett 13)

We fell back into old patterns, and also created new ones together, accumulating meaning in a freewheeling association game which rarely required clarification. We marveled at our ability to understand one another, even when we were making no sense at all.

I am reminded of this kind of magic when I read Valentine, and particularly as I analyze alongside her critics —by which I mean close-readers, a more appropriate word would likely be ‘friends.’ What I see time and again in the scholarship around Valentine is the word ‘trust’, and allusions to it. Valentine trusts not only the reader, but her dreams, which often supply the material of the poem. She also trusts that the words, as they arrive to her, innately carry something from her individual experience to that of the reader, regardless of references to which they may not have conscious access. For Valentine, a poem is something that can only come from one source, the individual, and reach out to another source, the other who seeks to be encountered. She says, in her interview, “Hallowing of the Everyday” with Richard Jackson, “I am trying to move into an other, into others.” She aims to move not only relationally from speaker to reader, but beyond the individually contained self and into a mystical transpersonal potential.

It takes a trust both from the poet and from the reader to embark on this journey through (and an attempt beyond) the self. It might seem like a highly intellectual project, but Valentine’s strength is also in how deeply embodied her language remains, how energetic and impactful her monosyllable words and plain language can be. As I was studying her poems of address, I came across one called *Julianna*, which struck me with its quality of being plucked right from life, or from dreams.

Our lives went differently,
we lost touch...

The table is solid,
its long cloth shines.
Husband and wife lived in one house, forever,
and this was nothing wonderful, a simple fact.
Grown children gather, they bring
white tulips, forsythia

All guests make toasts. Sex taps at our sleeping ears
like water in another room...

The couples lean back, rich canvases. My hunger plays
in front of them, empty,—dozes off, day-dreaming
of true desire.
I try waking, try saying,

Well, we're all human
—One outlying face smiles
and leans forward, gray and mild...

Later Juliana
I meet you, a minute, on the stairs,
and you stop, and hold my arms,
and tears run down your face...

Just waking up
she didn't remember what time of year it was,
and couldn't remember if she had a friend
in the world, Oh thank God, summer, and she remembered last night
her husband's friend, the professor,
that he said, Waiting is what we do in this life, we wait.

What I love about this poem is the affection it holds for Julianna in a moment of crisis. I also like its humility, and that it is situated in the daily. This snippet of life is domestic, not grand, but by nature of its existence, and by having been made into a poem, it's a vital contribution to our shared understanding of one another, through whatever rings true. Its

assertions are at once taken for granted and unassuming, while at the same time being weighted, without weighing the poem down.

It starts by bridging the gap that time has created through a simple exchange with Juliana: *our lives went differently, we lost touch...* This first occurrence of ellipses enacts the awkward distance between speaker and the addressed. The statement is compassionate but detached, the ellipses frame it with a possible regret. It also prepares us for a change of scene, because the next statement is very pedestrian, almost something spoken to fill the silence in the room: *The table is solid, its long cloth shines.* But no, it's not filler, it's placing us, physically and emotionally. It's a kind of misdirection, much like marriage which is *nothing wonderful, a simple fact.*

These bluntly stated observations do so much work. We understand these structures and patterns of supposed normalcy, to the point where the very naming of them signals the instability they're designed to conceal. The older generation is committed to the game of appearances and deception, but the grown children might be able to escape it. The flowers they bring symbolize purity, forgiveness, hope and renewal. Meanwhile *the guests make toasts*, another formality which is peeled away from the wallpaper, made visible, while invisibly the animal body, not convinced by this performance, lies dormant: *sex taps at our sleeping ears / like water in the next room.*

Once the underlying pulse of sex has entered the space, it's harder to ignore. The couples are canvasses, the emptiness which comes later also applies to them. They vacate themselves, and in the absence of substance we project: the happy family, the heteronormativity, the abstinence of polite society. Meanwhile, the speaker cannot ignore her animal instincts which don't fit into these constraints: *My hunger plays in front of them, empty,* — The syntax changes

here, a dash rather than an ellipses adds more drama to the silence, it could point to a “disjunction of the self” as Paul Crumbly analyzes in Emily Dickinson’s dashes, or it could represent, in Dierdre Fagan’s words, “emotion both expressed and unexpressed.” It is the hunger that dozes off, it has been snuffed by the dash. The next line break isolates desire, and signifies a difference between pretense and the real thing: *of true desire*. Our attention is directed to the nature of desire, which, for many psychoanalysts after Jaques Lacan, is considered the distance between wanting and having: the lack.

The dichotomy of waking and dreaming also has a function in this poem, blurred as to what is happening when, since the speaker, after their hunger has dozed, *tries* waking, and enacts a barely lucid consciousness illustrating the impotence of language: *Well, we’re all human*. It’s such a common, toothless phrase, that it does sound like it spouted from one who was half-asleep. Another forceful interruption of the unexpressed, via an em-dash, follows before the phrase elicits a smile, and engagement from one who is *gray and mild*. An ellipses follows this rhyming description, this forward-leaning gesture, while the blank space which precedes it allows the poem the silence necessary for the room to hear what’s been said, though it remains uninterpreted, even by this figure coded with wisdom.

In the penultimate stanza the speaker addresses *Juliana* by name. She is the rupture necessary in this painted-on surface. She is in obvious distress, and reaches out to the speaker who is the only one who can see that everything is not okay. This container is a suffocating force, and also, touch is necessary. The meter of this stanza, nearly iambic, and paced very evenly, strikes me as true-to-life. The interruption of *a minute* feels spoken, almost cinematic. We don’t know why Juliana is crying. As her tears run down we get another ellipsis and a final turn.

The final stanza shifts dramatically from a direct address to Julianna and begins a third person narration. Valentine uses point of view as a simple but effective tool for moving from “an other into others” The story now reaches beyond the particularity of Julianna crying on the steps, the *she* in question could be any alienated woman in crisis, including the speaker herself, who has in some ways slept through a predictable life, and might wake wondering what’s become of it. The antidote to the sleeping potion which rules this quietly fraught household, might be to break the mold of heteronormativity altogether. I read Julianna as having a crisis of identity, related to loss of memory, which here feels connected to the body. We don’t know why she’s upset, and in that negative space left by Valentine, the reader is invited to fill in their own experience.

She couldn't remember if she had a friend in the world. Friendship is a major vehicle of the poem, it is a source of instability, one of the desires expressed through lack. The poem begins from a place of estranged friendship between two people whose lives have gone in different directions. One of its concerns is how people drift apart even in marriage which, though it is set up as a sacred institution of the great unruly experience of love, is unremarkable in the end. Then the professor, who comes in as the learned figure, has the final word, not about love, but about change. This scene is static, and the waiting is static, so it continues without resolve, but perhaps, with just an inkling of possibility.

When John Hoppenthaler asks Jean Valentine in an interview how she, “achieves a receptive state to write poems [she] has said are very much dream-like,” her answer is charmingly straight-forward, “Well, I actually go to sleep and dream.” (Anderson 134) The images that come to her in dreams carry their subconscious significance into her poems, which means that often you have to read more of her work to understand what they mean to her, rather

than analyzing them as references to literature or culture. In his analysis of “Snow Landscape in a Glass Globe,” Valentine’s Elegy for Elizabeth Bishop, Michael Waters notes the images/symbols most frequently found in her poems: “God, light, angels, hands, sleep, friends, summer, dreams, and even white, the cancellation of colors.” (Waters 71) I found more meaning from the elegy through connecting it to another of Valentine’s poems for/about Bishop, “Barrie’s Dream, the Wild Geese.” The poem links a dream the poet/speaker has about Bishop to a *thick china cup / and a thick china sugar bowl, square*.

While the subjects Valentine frequents are mediated through thought, and largely sourced from “ineffable realms” as Kazim Ali illuminates in their introduction to *This-World Company*, Bishop’s subjects, on the other hand, are decidedly material. Sometimes they contain an animal consciousness that we can imagine if not completely understand: the sandpiper, the moose, the roosters, the fish, the lovely seal who pops up at the fishhouses. Often they are also nonsentient beings before she infuses them with life and lessons for the speaker and the reader: the woven fisher’s net, the map, compasses, and all of the subjects featured in “12 O’Clock News” including gooseneck lamp, ink-bottle, and ashtray. Bishop expands the terrain of these handheld objects to expose the imprint that humanity has left on them, and the profundity they conceal. It’s only natural that when Valentine thinks of Bishop she thinks of a handheld object that plays with perspective, out of which some hidden truth may be coaxed.

A thumb’s-length landscape: Snow, on a hill
in China. I turn the glass ball over in my hand,
and watch the snow
blow around the Chinese woman,
calm at her work,
carrying her heavy yoke
uphill, towards the distant house.

Looking out through the thick glass ball
she would see the lines of my hand,
unearthly winter trees, unmoving behind the snow...

No more elders.
The Boston snow grays and softens
the streets where you were...
Trees older than you, alive.

The snow is over and the sky is light.
Pale, pale blue distance...
Is there an east? A west? A river?
There, can we live right?

I look back through the glass. You,
in China, I can talk to you.
The snow has settled; but it's cold
there, where you are.

What are you carrying?
For the sake of what? through such hard wind
and light

—And you look out to me,
and you say “Only the same as everyone, your breath,
your words, move with mine,
under and over this glass; we who were born
and lived on the living earth.”

A thumbs-length landscape offers the first paradox of scale, as Waters notes, The glass ball encompassing its landscape allows the poet both her precise measurement (“thumb’s-length”) and telescopic view (“Snow, on a hill / in China”). (72) The speaker is looking in at the woman/figure, who is eternally at work, uphill work which will never be completed, while at the same time, the woman looks out at her. Valentine uses Bishop’s strategy to abstract the speaker’s body so that the lines on her hands as they cup the glass globe, appear to the figure as bare trees situated beyond her world.

When researching Bishop's poetics, I came across a book by Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Gigantic, the Miniature, the Souvenir, the Collection*, which is summarized by Duke Press to be, "A fascinating analysis of the ways in which everyday objects are narrated to animate or realize certain versions of the world." In a chapter entitled "Objects of Desire" Stewart sets up what will be her model for relating the body to scale in literature:

"When the body is the primary mode of perceiving scale, exaggeration must take place in relation to the balance of measurement offered as the body extends into the space of immediate experience. But paradoxically, the body itself is necessarily exaggerated as soon as we have an image of the body, an image which is a projection or objectification of the body into the world. Thus the problems in imagining the body are symptomatic of the problems in imagining the self as place, object, and agent at once." (132)

The final sentence of this excerpt is what really brought me to Bishop's poetics where the *self is place, object, and agent all at once*. She is the thread that runs through geographically remote locations, including her private life and her public one, which only emphasizes the distances that fall between. Valentine, as a devoted reader of Bishop's, is emulating her unique use of the body to bring energy and dynamism to this elegy. The simplicity/kitschiness of a snowglobe I find this image speaks compassionately to Bishop's poems and her life's theme of place and placelessness, through positioning the representing body in a liminal space, but also through holding that space, cradling it in her hands. Waters also draws a connection between the lines of the palm and the lines on the page which the poet writes, as she will continue to write in the wake of this loss.

No more elders. So simply put, so heartbreaking. Valentine has seen a generation of poets she looked up to pass on, and now she is the elder. The absence of Bishop is palpable *where you once were*. In her stead, there are trees, where she lived in Boston. It snows here too, and the scale is again troubled imagistically, productively to create an accumulation of feeling. Layers of

snow are like layers of grief. But there is, after three repetitions of pale, which are like the woman's trudge uphill with her cart, a hint of blue beyond the white sky. Questions in the third stanza, as Waters points out, echo the titles of Bishop's books, *North & South*, *Questions of Travel*, *Geography III*, and the rivers she loses in "One Art."

Still, the woman is at her work, which is the work of the poet, and also the resilience it takes to simply continue *through such hard wind and light*. For Waters China means distance, it means the other side of the world, or the other side of life itself. *It's cold there / where you are*. But *there* is not only death, it also "assumes resonance, becoming the solitude in which the creative process flourishes, the territory Bishop inhabited and now continues to inhabit, not only through her death but through the 'living' body of her work." (73) Though solitude doesn't feel exactly right to me. I find that art-as-elegy becomes a way to house our lost ones, and the tactile snowglobe is where Bishop still lives for Valentine, where the two can still talk, even if only through the glass. Though this stanza also betrays the speaker's awareness of ultimate loss, of the chill that remains even after snow settles over grief.

In the final two stanzas we find some resolve. The isolation of *and light*, is a reminder of hope, maybe even of God. Then, "*and you say / Only the same as everyone; your breath*" which is the breath of the poet, the breath of the Bishop, living on in her careful music, and even the breath of the reader. The poem ends in a profoundly transpersonal place, once again moving from "*an* other to others." It reaches from the afterlife back to our world, for all who are still breathing.

It is clear that for Valentine, from the relational attentiveness of her poetics, to the accounts from her poet-friends, to her guest-editing of Ploughshares— in which she solicited only poets whom she did not know, and whom had one or no books published— poetry is

something that lives in the world. It is open-access and has no pre-requisites aside from curiosity and receptivity. Anyone can access the font of inspiration for any amount of time, and in fact, people must, they must allow poetry to move through their individual lives.

I admit, at first I was not moved by Bishop. I looked in vain for connections between the frontedness of her narrative constructions and the wondrous mystery I found in Valentine's poetry. However, by the third time my professor brought out a poem of hers to show me how I might approach an existing metaphor, I realized that I am poetically descended from her astute observations. From the time when I wrote my first prose poem in undergrad about the keys of my childhood's many houses, I had stepped onto a path that would always lead to her. She continues to teach me to start with what I can grasp, which gets me closer to what is continually slipping away, the eternal engine of inspiration, the timeless dialogue with desire, knowledge, loneliness/relationality and futility. I found delight and intellectual satisfaction in her early poems, which I've already mentioned, but I didn't fall in love until I read her simple but profound love poem, "The Shampoo"

The still explosions on the rocks,
the lichens, grow
by spreading, gray, concentric shocks.
They have arranged
to meet the rings around the moon, although
within our memories they have not changed.

And since the heavens will attend
as long on us,
you've been, dear friend,
precipitate and pragmatical;
and look what happens. For Time is
nothing if not amenable.

The shooting stars in your black hair
in bright formation
are flocking where,
so straight, so soon?
—Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin,
battered and shiny like the moon.

The groundedness of the lichen meeting the suspension of the cosmos automatically creates an intensity of feeling, supported by the last stanza and the reveal of the beloved, who has become, in a way, the entire firmament. This lover is likely to be Lota De Macedo Soares, and the distances depicted between the moon and the lichen could be read as allegorical to the distance between the U.S. (or Canada) and Brazil, even in terms of cultural separation while Bishop resided in Brazil, as this is also a major subject for her. This is a useful reading, and important to note, but I also want to make space for Bishop's intentions as a poet, beyond her biography.

Bishop's queerness is inseparable from her poetics, not in regards to which love interest she might've been referring to in each poem, but rather how queerness creates expansiveness and forces her to break through the social and sexual limits of the midcentury. I see an inherent link between queer poetics, negative capability, and paradoxes of scale, a combination which I both analyze here, and explore in my own poetics.

Right away Bishop presents us with a paradox of not only image but also syntax. *The still explosions on the rocks*. She is showing us what the lichen looks like, but upon first glance it is an "image" in the Pound sense: a vortex of meaning which sets up a much larger landscape than can fit on the rock. The paradox in the image is what infuses it with vibrancy, which is also achieved through the double-meaning of *still*. The *explosions* are *still*: frozen,

photographic, but they are *still explosions*: ongoing, persisting. Already something pulsing with potential energy is trapped, in a literal sense, it's the lichen, but so much is happening beyond the literal in this poem.

The next line is a short number of syllables with even stresses to bring us momentarily back to regularity. However, the lichen grow, though at an extremely incremental rate of only a couple of millimeters a year, and here's how, Bishop says; *by spreading, gray, concentric shocks*. Here we have our first end-rhyme, using similarity of sound to highlight a contrast, which keeps motion and dynamism inherent in this relatively static reality of lichen on rocks. To take it one step further, the containment of the explosions, the fact that they must be still even while they are occurring, feels apt for describing the eruption of affection and love for another woman, which must not actually rise to the surface, must be kept still.

In the next lines we start to understand how these lichen have come to take a starring role in the poem. They are in love with the moon, or the rings around the moon, and there's a plan for them to meet and be lovers, for the earth to touch the cosmos: *They have arranged / to meet the rings around the moon, although*. Breaking the line on the conditional allows reality another moment to slip in, there is some difficulty here, a barrier.

The difficulty is this: *within our memories they have not changed*. At this point in the poem we are faced with three different layers of scale. There is the scale of the lichen, the time it takes to grow but also the frozen-in-time growth it represents, the ongoingness of its expansion, though it may be imperceptible. There's also the scale of distance to the rings around the moon, the distance that will be crossed in the arranged meeting, which is planned, but not promised. Lastly, and to give it all context, we have the scale of human life. The human memory is wholly unable to comprehend, except in the most abstract manner, either of the two scales, time and

distance, which have been introduced. Notably, human memory and its insufficiency is where we land with this stanza. The rhyme and the stress goes to that pivotal word: *changed*.

As a 21st century reader, lesbian literature enthusiast, and lesbian-leaning queer person myself, I automatically read into those lines a furtive hope that this poem, if not Bishop herself, has for the future of same-sex relations. For Bishop the change is yet to come, and memory also can't supply a social world which supports the love between her and another woman. The word *arranged* speaks to the social, it's a public word that reaches for order. I find it significant because the moon and the lichen's love, which becomes the metaphor for queerness, with its layers of enormous scale, absolutely exceed any order or system, especially human-made. We see this especially in the final stanza, in which even the speaker can't quite reach beyond the scope of her own memory. I emphasize *memory*, so as to say, not imagination, which desire makes possible in the next stanza.

Humans, and the realm of the social, are failing the lovers with their short memories, but the heavens, the breadth of the cosmos, will forever attend on them. Bishop doesn't say forever, but I read the length and scale of the love to match or meet with that of the distance between the lichen and moon, or the time it will take for their rings to touch. It's unfathomable. Now, the same details which signalled an impossibility in the first stanza, are creating the basis for the love shared by the speaker and her 'friend' in the second.

Bishop disguises the femininity of her love interest in this poem all-but-completely. She uses no pronouns, and it's only in the placement of *dear* before *friend* that we feel a twinge of something deeper. In her essay, "Elizabeth Bishop and Geographic Feeling" Elizabeth Hollister quotes Bishop's interpretation of the word 'friendship' as it relates to what was most likely her unrequited love with Margaret Miller: "Name it friendship if you want to—like names of cities

printed on maps, the word is much too big, it spreads all over the place, and tells nothing of the actual *place* it means to name” (Hollister 409)

The word ‘friend’ as a beard for lesbian relationships is a trope, easily recognizable to us now, used for centuries to flatten the complexities of lesbian relationships. As Hollister points out, the typical reading might be that the word ‘friend’ is not *big* enough to communicate the layers of erotic desire which Bishop experiences in these relationships, however, her reversal of scale points to her issue with the remoteness of language. For Bishop the word ‘friend,’ and language itself, is geographically remote. It’s a map on which her specific experience is located only in miniature; a dot that says ‘you are here’ but with no way of knowing where ‘here’ is. Bishop prefers landmarks, residences, the endlessly productive inner life of material objects from which to source specific sensory details, to give physicality to language and bring it closer to the felt world.

Continuing one of the rhetorical devices that gives this poem its energy, Bishop introduces us to the beloved, setting up another paradox of inseparability: *precipitate and pragmatical*. The *dear friend*, the beloved, is at once spontaneous and measured. These opposites are given equal syllable-count and measure, showing that they are given equal importance, while having opposite meaning. The rhythm is at first exciting, and then tempered by the next line, which is the most resistant to easy interpretation: *look what happens*. There’s not much elsewhere in the poem that *happens*— the moon and the lichen have plans but nothing is certain; the heavens will attend, hopefully. The rest of this stanza is mysterious as well. I connect capital T *Time* to the heavens which will attend on their love. I take it to be the memory which exceeds human memory, pitched forward (another reversal) which does now, as I’m writing this, recognize their love for what it was.

I initially read irony in the ending line of this stanza, *nothing if not amenable*— amenable and pragmatical are two words which create a slant rhyme with matching formality. *Time*, especially made into a proper noun, feels antithetical to the meek association I have with *amenable*, and unlikely to bend its will to another. However, read without irony, the assertion seems to be that *Time* eventually will yield to a larger force, perhaps the same force that pulls the lichen to the moon, something outside of order, like love. However, the passive construction of *nothing if not*, also points to a potential irony. Maybe it's a dash of realism to counter the thread of hope as the speaker looks to the future, and future possibilities of desire.

In the final stanza, it all comes together. Bishop collapses the cosmos with the human body: *the shooting stars in your black hair*. Another beautiful aspect of this love poem is its rare expression of love after youth. The shooting stars are greys and silvers in the lovers hair, but not only that. The next two lines, *in bright formation / are flocking where?* When I see formation and flocking together I can't help but think of birds. Bishop layers another animus onto the lover: the silvers and greys in her hair are like the stars which are like birds. This continuation of image enacts, much like the earlier paradoxes, the energy and boundlessness of this love, which actually cannot exist without breaking through the social container. The lover is the sky now, the love and lover both are as tremendous as the time and distance between the moon and the lichen, and that, is what the speaker holds in her hands as she washes her lovers hair in the basin, which must be itself planetary, to contain all that she is and represents: *this big tin basin / battered and shiny like the moon*.

As I look back on the relationship I've cultivated between myself and these two poets, I see how clearly their influence shines through in my most recent iteration of an author's bio.

After the obligatory name and occupation, I attempt to capture some essence of what I'm after: "Their poetry seeks to enter into domestic spaces and stretch them with strangeness, with queerness. They come to poetry to interrogate how the inner self is formed by its surroundings, and to find the site of blurring: between kitchens and mountains, between lovers, between humans and divinity. Their poems are searching too, for the boundaries, for where meaning breaks language on its way out, and where silence must intervene."

The domestic spaces are both Bishop and Valentine, plus where I see myself between them. What I want is a kitchen that can fit a mountain, so that no one feels excluded from the family or the home, and so that wildness and outsideness can be embraced in domesticity. I see the wildness in Bishop, in her maps which can't contain experience as much as they may try. Valentine, while sitting at the kitchen table, dreams a door in the mountain. Bishop wants the kitchen to be a site of relation, of miracles. I want a mother to expand three times her size, and only Valentine will know what that means.

Due to my being a product of my time, which is a different time from each of these poets, I have access to another layer of craft choices which fall under the category of "queer content." I am perfectly allowed to use both poetry and plain language to speak to my experiences of desire, loss, and spirituality, in ways that generations before me didn't have as much access to. I don't have to elide any pronouns, or build an elaborate artifice in which to house a real feeling. I exist in a poetic moment that operates with negative capability as the rule, rather than the exception. These are not exactly novel poetics, but they represent my internal journey through self-expression. Where I differ from each of these poets will be in the material of my own experience, but the attention I give that material will be informed by Bishop's keen eye for detail, and abstracted by Valentine's dream-world language. I need both the elaborate structure of

externality, and the standalone shadow of internal feeling. What I continue to seek in poetry is not only the grains of sand, upon which we walk unthinkingly, but the pressure of ages which transforms them into quartz, rose, and amethyst.

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