CHAPTER II

AMERICAN PHASE

“My house, my fairy
Palace, is
of perishable
clapboards with
three rooms in all,
my grey wasps’ nest
of chewed-up paper
glued with spit.

My home, my love-nest”[CP 34]

The lovely nest - the home - was always a most precious and desirable place for Elizabeth Bishop. Throughout her life, Bishop was in search of such a castle for self called ‘home.’ Her search for ‘home’ indeed leads to a physical displacement in her life from one place to another. ‘American Phase’ throws light on Bishop’s displacement and its effects on the literary output of the period, of Bishop’s life starting from the year 1911 to 1950. This was the time of great turmoil in her life. Shunted about unhappily as a child, with an obnoxious start of Bishop’s life due to her father’s early death and her mother’s mental collapse, her life was in chaos; hence she suffered from loneliness and depression in her lifetime. Bishop found herself shuffled between homes, resulting in a sense of homelessness. Bishop lived with various relatives, but having no stable environment to call ‘home’, she was forced into premature adulthood. In adulthood, Bishop experienced a succession of displacements in temporary houses in the United States of America. As Bishop grew as a poet, the subjects of her poems grew more personal and thus she found a way to approach her past through her poetry. Bishop became better able to understand her complex feelings as drifting into maturity and embrace her ‘poetic persona’ to express it. Bishop chose her theme as displacement, and as her aesthetic self-abnegation – as sometimes arid neutrality, the opposite of attention seeking.¹
Bishop's short story, "In the Village" is an example of how she tries to return to her lost childhood. In her short stories and in many of her poems, a strong sense of nostalgia for past is reflected, to an extent that they express a strong sense of connection to the past infused with an immutable sense of longing and isolation.

Bishop’s literary output in this phase was a book of poems “North & South”, Bishop's only volume of poetry published when she was in America reflecting her existential displacement and her search for home. “North & South” introduces the themes central to Bishop's poetry: geography and landscape, human connection with the natural world, questions of knowledge and perception, and the ability or inability of form to control chaos. In “North & South,” Bishop balanced her ‘northern’ inwardness with factual observations that occurred during her travels, especially through the South. This volume has been characterized by its ‘avoidance of [Bishop's] own persona’ as a result of ‘her private unhappiness.’ Though unknowingly, Bishop drifts into her own creations and be one with the poems she compiled or at times she is seen hiding behind the readers or be amongst them and share the plight of the art. Bishop’s first book of poetry is full of waking up and the sea, and also there are ‘war poems’ in this volume. The poems in “North & South” present an array of characters that are human, animals and still others are surreal. The poems in this volume are dream based, surreal and full of imagery of islands, sea and war. Poems like “The Man-Moth,” “Roosters,” and “The Fish” stand powerfully on their own, displaying the mastery that elevated Bishop to the status of a major American poet of the twentieth century. “North & South” as a whole expresses the young Bishop’s effort to attune her craft to the world she was encountering. During the decade that Bishop worked on the poems that constitute “North & South” Bishop was moving unhappily among hotels in Paris (France), New York City and travelled in Europe and North Africa. In the winter of 1937, with her classmate Louise Crane she went on a fishing trip to Florida, and soon discovered Key West, where she settled into the first of the “three loved houses,” mentioned in her poem “One Art.” Like Nova Scotia, Key West gave Bishop a setting for her imagination and the environs of a number of notable poems. The poems in “North & South” can be grouped into three. One group of poems can be linked together because of their remarkable clarity and straightforwardness: “The Map,” “The Gentleman of Shallot,” “Large Bad Picture,” “The Man-Moth,”
“Cirque d’Hiver,” “Florida,” “Seascape,” and “The Fish.” Another group can be identified by their lack of apparent reference to outside, physical realities; their lack of climax or resolution; and their relative obscurity like “The Imaginary Iceberg,” “From the Country to the City,” “The Weed,” “The Unbeliever,” “The Monument,” “Paris, 7 A.M.,” “Love Lies Sleeping,” “Sleeping Standing Up,” and “Anaphora.” And third group comprises of poems reflecting war imagery and social concerns like, “The Roosters,” “Casabianca,” “A Miracle for Breakfast,” “Paris, 7 A.M.” and “The Song of the Coloured Singer.”

“The Map” is Bishop’s first mature poem which is an opening poem of both her volumes of poetry, “North & South” and “The Complete poems”. It also suggested that “The Map” may lead to a way of understanding her work, especially her sense of how an “objective” work of art may embody an artist’s subjective experience. Every day, ordinary objects present an inner, imaginative world recalling Bishop’s isolated childhood in Nova Scotia and Massachusetts where she would “view the tropics romantically through the mediation of maps, nineteenth-century wood engravings, and books of discovery.” The simplicity of the title promises a straightforward description of an object - a real map - which the poet delivers with fine-tuned and surprising nuances. The descriptions are both objective and emblematic i.e. a real map is very carefully and faithfully described, but the map is also a symbol capable of suggesting meanings or connections beyond itself. The central and significant perception of map is that, while it imitates the whole world it depicts, it has a finer and more precise life of its own. Reading of the poem “The Map” makes us suspect that behind the poem lurks a different world created by a poet with map-maker’s vision; after all a poetic experience is reduced to a map which implies that the person en route is always amongst the lost and searches home in creative expressions. “The Map” seems to represent a threshold of new spatial dimension to the poetic collection, “as if from the beginning Bishop has known that her interest in space and in geography is integral to her positioning herself in poetry and in the world.” Elizabeth Bishop had wanderlust throughout her life. She seemed fascinated by the geographical extremities of land and water. Spaces like straits, peninsulas, icebergs, radio antennas, wharfs and caps and promontories are the structures of her world which share all the quality of isolation, like Bishop they all were pulled to their origin, could be land or water. Bishop’s first poem reflects this
pull towards origin and her own dilemma in the layered struggle between land and sea. Bishop is attracted to the space where the land and the sea meet:

“Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.

Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges

showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges

where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.

Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,

drawing it unperturbed around itself?

Along the fine tan sandy shelf

Is the land tugging at the sea from under?”[CP 3]

Bishop reveals the gap between the real world and its representation, in the form of a map. Bishop allows the environment within the poem to displace between the actual world and the mapmaker’s plane. Words like “Land lies,” “shadowed,” and “edges” confuse the reader and suggest that in poetry, as cartography, “every depiction of the world is a negotiation between description and interpretive invention.” Bishop strove to provide perfect representations of the physical world but her emotions are seen exceeding too far when she tries to enclose the sea from all sides by the land. Bishop was in love with sea and islands for they were the special places from her childhood; they were closely associated with her home from Nova Scotia. Throughout her life, Bishop was in search of one such place where she could make her abode. In this poem, her powerful emotions overpower her, as if trying to make a home of the sea, by building an enclosure of the land around the sea. Implicitly, there is the confinement of the mapmakers’ framed plain. It keeps the frame of reference expanding to the actual realities that are at once homely and surreal. Here we see a poet, who lives in the painter’s world, “blue from green”, using colours with enormous significance to enhance the meaning of experience by connecting it with appearance. Bishop displaces herself in the geographical world of “sea-weeded ledges,” “sandy shelf” etc in this poem. “The Map” focuses on the lines and borders of the map, of the land “drawing” the water around itself, of the various enclosures presented in the scene, and the further imprisonment of being “under a glass.”

“...We can stroke these lovely bays,
under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,

or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.”[CP 3]

Bishop is beguiled by the vast expanses of the sea, the “lovely bays”. Sea was a next door neighbour for her since her early childhood. Loss of Nova Scotia was in a way, loss of sea and the rustic beauty for Bishop which she tries to measure and overcome through her various travels. There is a geographical displacement shown in the poem from land to sea to Labrador to bays and ultimately to the Nova Scotia landscape. Bishop once told the interviewer Alexandra Johnson:

“my mother’s family wandered a lot and loved this strange world of travel. My first poem in my book was inspired when I was sitting on the floor, one New Year’s Eve in Greenwich Village, after I graduated from college. I was staring at a map. The poem wrote itself.”

A use of metaphor based in cultural experiences associating poetic ideas is wittily used in poems by Bishop. Neither land nor water lends shape, but rather the artificial profile of the calibration of latitude and longitude are used at liberty by the printer:

“The names of seashore towns run out to sea,

the names of cities cross the neighbouring mountains

–the printer here experiencing the same excitement

as the emotions too far exceeds its cause.

These peninsulas take the water between thumb and figure

like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods. ”[CP 3]

Words, whether on maps or in poems, always exceed the intersections to which they point. A poem as well as a map symbolizes the difference between objective reality and reproductions of it. Bishop suggests that because works of art are slanted by the creator's subjective perceptions, they are as much guides to that individual's imagination as to the objects or ideas being imitated. Bishop compares the names of shores running out of the map to the emotions exceeding too far. The “peninsulas” are personified like “women feeling for smoothness,” reflecting the delicacy of geography, and also the possibility of geography being humanised. Bishop personifies the “countries” and “waters” in the last stanza:
“Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?

–What suits the character of the native waters best.

Topography displays no favourites; North’s as near as West,

More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors.”[CP 3]

Through “The Map,” Bishop poses the question of freedom, the existence of choices. Bishop's style of writing in the “American Phase” suggests that she was not comfortable with her experiences because they were uncalled experiences to be discussed poetically. For Bishop, questions are assertions, they structure experience and self-awareness. Like compasses, they point to something absolute we can neither see, nor get to it; yet in their pointing they show where we are. These questions, posed to an impersonal world, turn inward when it refuses to reply. Questions about the world become questions about self. Bishop didn’t have the freedom to choice her Nova Scotian home over her paternal grandparents’ Worcester house. Similarly, countries are not free to choose their own colours. Topography is projected helpless, similar to what Bishop was in her childhood, helpless and dependent. The map which is supposed to guide us to our destination is a neural graph by which we lose rather than gain our way towards home. Like Bishop, we pathetically roll in the flux of life and search for identity and place in the grand design and in doing so we do not remain travellers in life but become wanderers. The last line of the poem can be cited as a key to Bishop’s writings. The map is poised between the spatial and historical, but Bishop’s preference seems to be for the map-makers’ colours over the historians’ facts. This underlies a feminine approach to history and her choice towards geography over history. There underlies a feminine approach to history in Bishop’s poetry and she was a “delicate, ladylike abstractionist who preferred geography to history.”

History is not always appealing, as in the case of Bishop’s history full of losses, but geography, for Bishop, is always inviting. Edwin Honig called it a “deliberate anticlimax” because:

“the line states the poet’s aim; a scrupulous representation of the world reduced in scale and line to something like a cartographer’s depiction of geographical area. It is a plan for suppressing rather than compressing contours, dimensions, tonality, emotion.”

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The map becomes an emblem of imaginative promise to search a route towards home.

Elizabeth Bishop - in person and in her poetry - was wry, discreet and a little peculiar. A Vassar girl’s tendency to draw upon her Nova Scotian heritage and her childhood experiences is explicitly seen in her poem, “Large Bad Picture.” For Bishop, this poem is an effort to explore and understand the past in order to overcome the feelings of displacement, asserting a familial and artistic identity. Bishop’s poetry is often a concern, a quest to belong somewhere, to find a home. Bishop seems fascinated to describe a painting from her past by her great-uncle. The entire poem is a description of a painted scene of a landscape in north where Bishop grew.

“Remembering the Strait of Belle Isle or
some northerly harbor of Labrador,
before he became a schoolteacher
a great-uncle painted a big picture.”[CP 11]

Bishop asserted this artistic identity as she dabbled in the visual arts. The Bulmer-Bowers Family Archives hold a number of paintings and sketches by George Wylie Hutchinson, Bishop’s Great-Uncle. George Hutchinson was a painter, illustrator and a photographer; who was still alive during her childhood years in Great Village, in Nova Scotia. Bishop grew up looking at Hutchinson paintings, his portraits and seascapes hung on the walls in the Bulmer family home. Like the family Bible, the art of George Hutchinson inspired Bishop to write poems and search those loved ones through art, it is to say that, Bishop is trying to find her home through her art. Bishop, through these paintings is trying to establish a connection with members of her family. Not surprisingly or accidentally, Elizabeth Bishop, who was fascinated by visual art, has two important poems based on George Hutchinson paintings. Interestingly, these poems span her entire career: the first, “Large Bad Picture,” was published in her first book North & South in year 1946; the second, “Poem,” was published in her last book Geography III in year 1976. In “Large Bad Picture,” a painter-poet is at work, painting the canvas of poetry along with remembering the phenomenon most perfectly.

“Receding for miles on either side
into a flushed, still sky
are overhanging pale blue cliffs
hundreds of feet high,
their bases fretted by little arches,
the entrances to caves
running along the level of the bay
masked by perfect waves.”[CP 11]

The imperfections of the world compel her to displace herself into the perfections of art. There is the characteristic interiorization, followed by the quest for a sterile perfection: the “perfect waves.” Bishop displaces herself to this poetic perfection through the verbal bridges. These bridges are established in her art to connect her present to the past. Bishop cared about the north in her poetry because it reminded her of one of the few places she ever felt at home in – her grandparents’ house in Great Village. Everything in the poem, like the painting, is strung together with some technique, or word; like the landscape is hung between “Remembering” and “Receding”. Again, like the world of her travels, everything in Bishop’s poetic universe is nearly severed and must be strung together with ferries or bridges or their verbal equivalent. Bishop’s involvement in the painting becomes apparent when she goes on to say:

“And high above them, over the tall cliffs’
semi-translucent ranks,
are scribbled hundreds of fine black birds
hanging in n’s in banks.
One can hear their crying, crying,
the only sound there is
except for occasional sighing”[CP 11]

The painting may appear to be scribbles but it is of uttermost importance for Bishop. She is caught up enough in the painting to hear the “crying” and “sighing”. There is a romantic merging, in which distant and separate people are brought spiritually
close to one another. Bishop’s unstated suffering is reflected in the poem – her longing to be a part of that past from which she has been cut off, not only by time and distance but also by her gifts. She is nostalgic for the past she has gone beyond. Adrienne Rich once noted that, “More and more, her poems embodied a need to place herself in the actual, to come to terms with a personal past, with family and class and race, with her presence as a poet in cities and landscapes where human suffering is not a metaphor.”

The strength of the poem is that it allows us to share this longing and pain without belabouring or sentimentalising it.

“In the pink light
the small red sun goes rolling, rolling,
round and round and round at the same height
in the perpetual sunset, comprehensive, consoling,”[CP 11]

French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard regarded shapes--often geometric, such as circles or spheres as epiphanic. Bishop's recurrent epiphanic shapes—circular, spherical, or rounded—convey a psychological threat, that of constrictedness and boundedness. Bishop’s use of these forms evokes the pathos of the isolated self. They often suggest death or a deadly form of life in their links to poison, crying, blackness, deception. Rounded forms are allied to terrifying constriction, contraction, or condensation; to fragmentation, deadening dispersal or depression. Bishop was isolated from her family due to death and separation. She lost every kind of bonding with loved ones, but never the less she resolves to move ahead in life using art as a medium to bridge it. In this poem “Large Bad Picture,” nature is represented in the form of Sun in order to console Bishop to move ahead. Sun is a tireless worker who knows only giving; similarly Bishop should keep producing her art in order to free herself from all the ties of sorrow. The repetition of the words “rolling,” and “round” are epiphany for they reveal the truth of life as a full circle, the circle of life and death. A literary epiphany is a moment that affects us as exceptionally intense in feeling; it is expansive in meaning, appearing to signify more than such a brief experience would have any right to mean; and it is mysterious in effect because its intensity and expansiveness are unaccountable by any rational explanation in the writer's text. Bishop uses one such moment of revelation in “Large Bad Picture.”
Bishop finally separates herself from the ancestor’s art and asks a real witty question ahead:

“It would be hard to say what brought them there, commerce or contemplation.”[CP 12]

The conflict in the painting is between commerce and contemplation. Commerce for its cheap oil painting and contemplation because it is an authentic product of the old man’s work. Like her great-uncle, Bishop is always constructing when she appears as describing, and the result is a poetry which has the quality of an engineering exercise. Commemorating her great-uncle’s painting through her poem, Bishop revisits her lost childhood days and pays a poetic tribute to them. Bishop, in this poem, is seen reminiscent of her happy home at Great Village and is searching the same home through art. Through this poem Bishop’s love for painting over poetry is clearly reflected. Had Elizabeth Bishop got her way, she may never have become one of North America's finest modern poets. “How I wish I'd been a painter,” she once wrote, “that must really be the best profession—none of this fiddling with words.” “Objects and Apparitions”, an exhibition of Bishop's artwork at the Tibor de Nagy gallery in New York, lends a glimpse of her private life as a painter. The show gathers together a selection of the relatively unknown pieces she produced in her lifetime—for friends, lovers or as gifts, never intended for public display—along with some of the objects she adorned her homes with in Brazil and America. Ultimately, Bishop's pictures remain creations that were found in books or among her papers after her death. As she herself described, they were pleasant diversions for herself from her work: “I'm always completely happy when I do get around to painting a small picture—whereas writing is hell, most of the time.”

Bishop felt always divided into two worlds of her existence the one where she resided and the other which she left behind and searched for it throughout her life, the world of her childhood. The poem “The Gentleman of Shalott” is a humorous poem exhibiting the split or the divide which is an essential reality of Bishop’s world. Its inspiration is visual:

“Which eye’s his eye?
Which limb lies
next the mirror?
For neither is clearer
nor a different color
than the other,
... To his mind
it’s the indication
of a mirrored reflection
somewhere along the line
of what we call the spine.”[CP 9]

The poem opens with a question which does not seek answer but rather a confirmation of identity. The symmetrical world of this gentleman becomes unbalanced and physical coupling cannot happen for “this arrangement / of leg and leg and / arm and so on” cannot be achieved by the lovers. A play on bilateral symmetry of human anatomy, the poem is at the same time a spoof of Tennyson’s Romanticism and a satire on modern man’s preoccupation with split personality. Like Alfred Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” whose mirror shattered, betokening her death when she exchanged the unreal vision of Sir Launcelot for a real view of him through her window; Bishop’s “The Gentleman of Shalott” is equally dependent on the mirror for existence, but in his case the mirror runs down his spine splitting his body into two halves. The poem is the more comical because the Gentleman is a modest man who only supposes that his person is half looking glass:

“He felt modesty
his person was
half looking-glass,
for why should he
be doubled?”[CP 9]

The Gentleman can’t imagine why he should be doubled. Bishop’s poem deals with division of personality. The question for Shalott is not of reality and unreality but that of the very modern concept of self-identity. Acts of self-creation go on throughout Bishop’s poems, and through they are always incomplete, they are
nevertheless affirmed steps toward self-consciousness, towards the questioning process. The dilemma seems to be imaginary but still it is worrisome. Bishop further in the poem exaggerates the danger of her gentleman’s doubled life:

“But he is in doubt
as to which side’s in or out
of the mirror.

There is little margin of error, . . .

If the glass slips
he’s in a fix–

only one leg, etc. . . .”[CP 9-10]

The doubt expressed in the poem is fearful indicating an evil play. Bishop seem to be hinting at the error made by the Supreme, the Almighty in making certain species incomplete or half. “The Gentleman of Shalott” is a serious declaration of lesbian identity. Bishop took to extensive physical displacement in her life with her girl friends from her Vassar days and later in life developed serious relationships with various women but she never dared to directly address her love life or relationships in her poems. Bishop was reticent about the uncertainties and anxieties of her personal life, though it was indirectly hinted through her work. Williamson rightly called her “‘underground’ emotional personality” for nothing is apparent in her writing. The self-splitting habit of “The Gentleman of Shalott” produces an “exhilarating” sense of “uncertainty” which exhibit his uneasiness:

“. . . The uncertainty
he says he

finds exhilarating. He loves

that sense of constant re-adjustment.

He wishes to be quoted as saying at present:

“Half is enough.””[CP 10]

Bishop loves this sense of constant re-adjustment, as the structure of human experience. The irony in the poem seems to be light as compared to Eliot’s bitter
ironies. The poem doesn’t seem to set moral lessons or even, criticise anything. Tennyson’s Lady is a foil of Bishop’s Gentleman; where Tennyson turns to melodrama to express her fate, Bishop moves in the opposite direction towards farce. Bishop’s poem is a takeoff on Tennyson’s poem. But the last line “Half is enough” is a serious declaration of the same-sex attraction, again tucked under so many other signs. There is an effect of disinterestedness in the poem which is wholly original of Bishop. “The Gentleman of Shalott” is Bishop’s love poem, where she takes up a search for her sexual identity and is suffice with whatever she has. The poem in a way is Bishop’s search for home because love is home for her.

The theme of enclosure is prevalent in majority of Bishop’s poetry especially of “American Phase.” By encompassing the use of small spaces and limits in her writings, Bishop creates literary walls in her poems which suffice her search for home in poetry. She creates her boundaries and walls in her poems and builds a home for herself assuming the role of poet-architect without making her presence felt. Bishop creates different kinds of enclosures like that of scene, tone, language, setting etc in her poems. In the poem “The Imaginary Iceberg”, Bishop is seen creating an enclosure in the image of an iceberg:

“We’d rather have the iceberg than the ship,
although it meant the end of travel.
Although it stood stock-still like cloudy rock
and all the sea were moving marble.

We’d rather have the iceberg than the ship;” [CP 4]

Bishop’s preference of iceberg over the ship is reinforced through her repetition of the line in the poem. Bishop surrenders movement for the sake of stability and finds an abode in the form of an iceberg. She seems to be tired of her homelessness and of search for a home hence momentarily surrenders her travel in this poem. The repetition of the first line in the first stanza indicates that the imaginary iceberg is erected and worshiped by Bishop in the poem. The iceberg is constructed on the contradictions rather both concepts establish coexistence through the figure of speech, the oxymoron. While the adjectives “cloudy” and “moving” imply motion, the nouns “rock” and “marble” suggest stillness. Bishop combines the connotations of movement and stillness “the iceberg” and its meaning of immobility seems to be
no longer negative. The solemnity and exaltation of the first stanza resembles the poetic form the ode because the poetic voice venerates the magnanimity of the sea and iceberg by means of the coexistence of movement and stillness. “The Imaginary Iceberg” is an introspective work of art painfully partaking of a real iceberg’s aspects, its frozen isolation, its invisible threat to the ship of soul. Though, an artist at heart, Bishop appreciates the artless, undeceptive form of an iceberg.

“we’d rather own this breathing plain of snow

though the ship’s sails were laid upon the sea

as the snow lies undissolved upon the water.

O solemn, floating field,

are you aware an iceberg takes repose

with you, and when it wakes may pasture on you snows?”[CP 4]

Bishop is completely absorbed in the world of her icon, its frozen eminence replacing nature. The “plain of the snow” is breathing because the water pulses under it. The “solemn, floating field” of imagination in this sense awakens to the external symbols which “pasture” there. Bishop waits for the fuller revelation of the iceberg “when it wakes”. Bishop uses terms of ownership as, “we’d rather have the iceberg,” and “we’d rather own this breathing plain of snow.” The ownership and animation, through personification permits a possessive imagination to the writer. Like the Romantic apostrophe, this iceberg-being is bound to elude the poet. Bishop tries to evoke the powers of the iceberg, for it has the capacity to transform the barren heart with green pastures. There is a shift from the conditional mood of the ship to the declarative mood of the iceberg:

“This is a scene a sailor’d give his eyes for.

The ship’s ignored. The iceberg rises

and sinks again; its glassy pinnacles

correct the elliptics in the sky.”[CP 4]

In the second stanza the spatial metaphor changes its perspective. This is to say, from now on the ship seems to be immobile, and the iceberg is moving. This is a meditative phase for the sailors, glimpsing the “iceberg rise and sink again”. Its
“glassy pinnacles” stands for transparency and purity hence they are endowed with utmost power, the power which can also “correct elliptics in the sky.” Here we see that the iceberg no longer move in the sea, but in the immensity of the sky. Once again, Bishop emphasizes the importance of duality contrasting in a mirror-like fashion the references to the sea portrayed in the first stanza and to the sky in the second. Bishop tropes the iceberg into being; yet she emphasises the illusionary and rhetoric nature of this iceberg through the metaphor of theatre. She places the image of the iceberg between the sea and the sky as a scene on a stage:

“This is a scene where he who treads the boards

is artlessly rhetorical. The curtain

is light enough to rise on finest ropes

that airy twists of snow provide.”[CP 4]

By setting this poem up as a “scene,” Bishop is able to limit its physical scope and creates an enclosure in the poetry similar to that of a home. The use of metaphor “the curtain,” “finest ropes” in these lines supports her limitations, as she condenses the vast openness of the poem into the limited space of “a shifting stage”. “He who treads the board” is an actor on a stage thus the sailor has not actualised his desire to behold the iceberg; on the contrary he is involved in the dramatics of the scene. The hypothetical “he” is “artlessly rhetorical.” The curtain goes up on the “airy twists” of the imagination. But the emphasis on the theatrical device belies the illusion. When Bishop chooses to express feelings through images, she chooses to write metaphorically. Bishop used metaphors based in cultural human experiences (presumably the American culture that Bishop has grown up in) which allowed her to connect to the audience through metaphor and imagery. In this poem, Bishop assigns many culturally human characteristics to the iceberg. Bishop symbolically presents iceberg as a state of mind which give rise to invention and creation. It represents creative imagination to some extent. The highs and lows of the sky, in the second stanza, suggest a more sublime, almost spiritual, connotation to the iceberg, which is between the sea and the sky.

“The wits of these white peaks

spar with the sun. Its weight the iceberg dares
The poem celebrates the sublime supremacy of mind over the senses, over the material world. These witty “white peaks” after achieving their pre-eminence merely stand and star without violation or consciousness. Bishop adorns the iceberg with visionary movements and gives it self-perpetuating and mysterious autonomy. Bishop, like Wordsworth, expresses in her poems nothing less than the central effort of an individual’s artistic consciousness to impose order on the world. Robert Pinsky rightly sees the use of Bishop’s language as the “geographical situations of the soul.”

The inwardness of the iceberg is both its fascination and danger. Bishop uses a sensuous but sadistic metaphor in the following lines:

“This iceberg cuts its facet from within.

Like jewelry from a grave

it saves itself perpetually and adorns

only itself, . . . ” [CP 4]

The iceberg has self-contained perfection of its own but it is more detached. The non-contingent iceberg which “cuts its facets from within” is “like jewelery” beautiful but useless like an adornment, like an adamant idle thought. In the last stanza the poetic voice says good-bye as a way of conclusion of the poem and reminds the reader, at the same time, its initial idea of ending travels when one discovers the iceberg. The image of the iceberg may imply the innermost self after struggling in air, on earth, and in oceanic immensities to find the lost element of one’s life. In this fashion, the poetic voice combines harmoniously the sea and the sky upon the stillness of the iceberg.

“Good-bye, we say, good-bye, the ship steers off

where waves give in to one another’s waves

and clouds run in a warmer sky.

Icebergs behave the soul”[CP 4]

The ship “steers off” wilfully away from the iceberg to the warmth of mutual surrender of the waves and clouds bringing about a change. The ship is opposite of the iceberg - isolated, hierarchical, permanent. Yet, the iceberg has the magnanimity
to “behoove the soul” because it is like the soul not dependent on the outer realities but engaged in inner realities. In the end of the poem, the poetic voice focuses on the inner nature of the iceberg and its representation of the soul. The iceberg is the symbol of the eternal within the temporal. Bishop in this poem expresses the self-reflective destination because an object in nature begins to correspond to the soul. This poem recognises how a search for the most impersonal ideal is finally a search for personal. Nothing could be less human than an iceberg, and yet it causes the soul to coalesce. Bishop talks about the soul but at the same time, endows it with human vulnerability of, “fleshed, fair, erected indivisible.” These words create ambiguity because they belong to human body rather than soul. Bishop’s displacement to ever expanding New York and its cultural void had an impact on her writings. In this phase of her life, sexuality becomes the most elusive feature of Bishop’s temperament and is reflected in her writings. It is seen that Bishop stands apart from life at the very moment she engages with it. In this respect, her attitude is “Classical” as opposed to “Romantic.” Yet all of Bishop’s poems have a great deal to do with life. What they express is a way of looking at life. Her poems present us with interpretations which are simplifications but they have life and meaning as perhaps the true world never has.

“Casabianca” is Bishop’s love poem but with difference! “Casabianca” is a parody of a poem with the same title written by the Victorian poet Felicia Hemans. Hemans poem is a kind of indictment of the pathos and bombast of Hemans’s ideal of sacrifice. Hemans sourced her tale in a historical event. The poem commemorates an actual incident that occurred in 1798 during the Battle of the Nile aboard the French ship Orient. The young son Giocante Casabianca of commander Louis de Casabianca remained at his post and perished when the flames caused the magazine to explode. Hemans did not, then, write a jingoistic set of verses about British heroism during the Napoleonic wars, but chose to describe a French tragedy, in a poem running counter to nationalist stereotype, and appealing to universal human emotions. In this poem, Bishop directly expresses her emotions:

“Love’s the boy stood on the burning deck

trying to recite “The boy stood on

the burning deck.” Love’s the son
stood stammering elocution

while the poor ship in flame went down.”[CP 5]

In a brilliant double-twist to the original, Bishop's "Casabianca" turns melodrama into allegory. Somehow the figure in Bishop's poem, "stammering elocution" while the burning ship goes down, has more human pathos than the real child in the Hemans poem. Both poems deal with shipwrecks and have the image of a boy standing on the deck of a burning, sinking ship. The boy is enviable for he has the guts and the courage to stay on deck and burn. It's an unparalleled story of sacrifice and moral uprightness. It's at the same time about being powerless, not being able to say ("trying to recite") what you are and where you are. If you actually imagine someone burning, it's downright horrifying. But Bishop seems to salute the obedient efforts of a son towards his father who is not in a position to guide his son. Bishop unfortunately never in her life got the opportunity to experience the filial love, which in fact created a void in her life. Bishop mentions many objects in the poem which can be loved; the lens widens from the poor boy to everything else and then, finally, back to the boy:

“Love’s the obstinate boy, the ship,

even the swimming sailor, . . .

. . . . And love’s the burning boy.”[CP 5]

The image of love is repeated in the poem several times to emphasise the burning passions. The emotions are so overwhelming that self-destruction also seems to be desirable. Thomas Travisano has rightly pointed out; “Here love is synonymous with pain and seems to exist in a realm of high rhetoric, where it exacts pointless, self-destructive gestures of devotion.” There is something peculiar about Bishop’s choice of the setting and subject in this poem. She chose to talk about ‘love’ in a predicament very close to her heart, and that is sea and ship. Many of her travel experiences were associated with sea and ship. Nothing is more homely than sea for Bishop. Throughout her life, she was attracted to sea, island, and country life all her displacements were directed towards them and also were her favourite subjects of poetry. Margaret Dickie compares “The Imaginary Iceberg” with “Casabianca” and concluded Bishop’s preference for iceberg over ships. If the iceberg stands on “elements least visible,” the boy stands on the visible burning deck, and, if the
iceberg stands for hidden passion, the boy stands for openly declared devotion. In the end the boy is burning, the iceberg remains “erected indivisible.” But in “Casabianaca”, love is so many things that finally it is nothing. The poem suggests that open declaration of love is banal and pointless by contrast to secret passion. “Casabianca” is a very cynical love poem by Bishop reflecting that unsatisfying lesbian love is one of the reasons for her continuous displacement.

America in the twentieth century was a time of many losses, categorized by the Great Depression, two World Wars, as well as a rapidly changing society. No poet displays this sense of loss quite so empathetically or eloquently as Bishop did in her poem “A Miracle for Breakfast.” She puts forth her view of existence in this poem. Bishop in her 1966 interview with Ashley Brown stated that: “Oh, that’s my Depression poem. It was written shortly after the time of souplines and men selling apples, around 1936 or so. It was my “social conscious” poem, a poem about hunger.”18 The poem is also influenced by Bishop’s intense reading of French Surrealism in Douarnenez and Paris in the year 1935. The poem can also be taken as a parable, as a modern version of Christ feeding of the ten thousand; or of the variation of the ceremony of the Eucharist. The Christian implications to the poem itself imply the moral lesson in the poem:

“At six o’clock we were waiting for coffee,
waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb
that was going to be served from a certain balcony,
–like kings of old, or like a miracle.”[CP 18]

The simple opening of this poem with homely images displays Bishop’s eye for simplicity and her love for home. Bishop talks about small happiness and charities which may look small but ultimately gives the utmost satisfaction in life. With all losses in her life, Bishop keeps her philosophy simple but very appealing. Bishop’s poems are not laden with spiritual theologies; on the contrary they may be moral affirmations. Although, she is less interested in philosophy than Stevens, she tends to be a better philosopher.19 Poets rarely make philosophies, but they record more accurately, perhaps, the effect of philosophical ideas upon the human emotions. In the midst of the contemporary social and political chaos, the simple ideology reflected through Bishop’s poems, invested in the power of resonance to different
metaphorical images is commendable. Wittgenstein, in his “Philosophical Investigation” published in the year 1953, discussed the problem of knowing. The book deals with various questions like- How do we know? How do we communicate feelings? How can we describe what we know? This book is in the form of a fragmentary document, for it was published in the form of random paragraphs suggesting that knowing about the “problems of knowing” is a long journey in the world of ideas, similar to Bishop’s physical voyages in the physical world with simple intension of knowing the surroundings and searching a home for self. Like Wittgenstein’s unfinished and unfinishable book, Bishop’s journey and search seems to be never ending. Bishop’s conversation with George Starbuck, published as “The Work!” quoted her friend saying “But you have no philosophy whatever”, further explaining Bishop said, “people who are really city people are sometimes bothered by all the “nature” in my poems.” She may not neatly be categorised under a specific school of philosophy but it will be literal poverty on the part of reader to fail to appreciate the simple but instinctive awareness in Bishop’s poems. Her love for nature, home and search for “a beautiful villa” which is apparent in this poem:

“A beautiful villa stood in the sun
and from its doors came the smell of hot coffee.

In front, a baroque white plaster balcony
added by birds, who nest along the river,

–I saw it with one eye close to the crumb–
and galleries and marble chambers.”[CP 18]

Bishop had different versions of an ideal home in her poems like “a fairy palace” of Jeronimo. Bishop associates the “crumbs,” the basic necessity of life with “mansion” which is a necessity for Bishop. Home had a special place in her poetry and she calls it a miracle. Home is a basic need of her life but in case of Bishop, it remains unfulfilled from her childhood due to early disintegration of her family. Hence her poems are seen haunted by such basic needs of one’s life and to achieve them is a form of miracle for her. There are miracles in our everyday simple life:

“. . . My crumb

my mansion, made for me by a miracle,
through ages, by insects, birds and the river
working the stone...

The natural not the supernatural miracle is what we must expect. We must appreciate
and enjoy the small wonders of our everyday life. Happiness consists of knowing
and living with what one has. The sentiment expressed in the poem “A Miracle for
Breakfast” is banal but the poem is not. It is delightful, amusing and intriguing
poem:

“We licked up the crumb and swallowed the coffee.

A window across the river caught the sun

as if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony.”

The coffee and the crumb are the homely images making a parody of the “high
thinking” behind the moral. The social scenario in twentieth century was
overshadowed by the repercussion of war where simplicity of thought was the only
consolation for the soul, which is very much exhibited in poem like this. In her
poems written in American phase, imagination is trapped in a box. However, in this
poem, Bishop demonstrates faith in miracles of everyday life.

In Bishop’s era, cultural human experiences were addressed through the lens of
dreams or imaginary subjects. Bishop’s poems on the surface are observations
surpassingly accurate, witty and well-arranged but also are macabre showing
influence of writers like Rimbaud and Poe. Sometimes she writes of a place where
she has lived on the Atlantic Coast; at other times of dreams, a picture, or some
fantastic object. When Bishop writes about places, there is a motion in her writing
whereas the second factor is terminus: rest, sleep, dream, fulfilment or death, writing
on these subjects, which are otherworldly, there is a humorous desire of letting-go or
annihilation. Bishop chose to write on abstract or metaphysical subjects because it is
also a way of reconciling the two worlds of reality into a sustained and mystical but
never unbelievable whole. Here lies the uniqueness of Bishop’s vision, she extends
her subjects into the regions of dream and fantasy without even leaving the
touchstones of senses.

The poem “Rooster” begins with the action taking place in the pre-dawn, a time
between awaking and sleeping, which Bishop often uses, a time when consciousness
and unconsciousness merge. She is reconciling these two stages of awareness. In the poem “Roosters”, Bishop juxtaposes two rooster fables—first of the barnyard rooster, the strident, aggressive, warlike one; and second, of Peter’s rooster whose portentous third crow recalled his denial of Jesus, and whose image adorns many a church steeple. In the first rooster fable, Bishop suddenly undeclared transports her readers to a chaotic world, from the deep serene sleep situation. There is an untimely awaking in the poem due to the commotion of the cocks; Bishop feels it is a cruel reality. Home, which has its own sanctity, can turn into a chaotic place similar to Bishop’s childhood home where she suffered due to her mother’s mental illness. Roosters in this case turn the house into chaos due to their commotion:

“At four o’clock

in the gun-metal blue dark

we here the first crow of the first cock

just below

the gun-metal blue window

and immediately there is an echo”[CP 35]

The window is symbolic of home in this poem. Bishop presents a horrifying image of home by painting it with a destructive gun metal colour. There is an aggression in the opening of the poem turning the scene into a military camp. At once the human abode is presented in a hellish image. The narrator expresses her feelings of disgust by stating, "with horrible insistence". Bishop finds the ideal and the real, permanence and decay, affirmation and denial in both man and nature. Bishop integrated this duality consciously in her art. There is a displacement from the natural world to the mystic world in her art. Home is complete when there are residents in it; Bishop lost her home early in life for there was no one to stay in it. Members can destroy the house as well as they can also make it. In this poem, Bishop shows her pain of domestications. She wrote poetry to locate herself—most obviously when she is challenged by the exotic landscapes of North and South, and, also sometimes to show her pain and joy of domestication through her poems. She adds a new element of noise and confusion by introducing new family members who intend to destroy the serenity of home a little further:
“where in the blue blur

their rustling wives admire,

the roosters brace their cruel feet and glare

with stupid eyes

while from their beaks there rise

the uncontrolled, traditional cries.”[CP 35]

They are hens surely but they are wives. The comparison of hens and women creeps in rather insidiously in the poem damaging the image of home-makers. “Roosters” is a war poem where unexpectedly Bishop hints at love’s cruelty. Bishop establishes the imaginative relationship of the real roosters with the bronze statue of cock on a column outside the Papal building in Rome. Bishop goes on to show confusion due to their cries gradually increasing in number and intensity as they begin answering each other from “off in the distance.” The annoyance carries on, as the roosters’ chests “planned to command and terrorize the rest.” The metallic image of the cock suggests that neither human nor natural qualities are in control rather than the unfeeling, mechanical ones have taken over. In a very striking passage of “Roosters”, Bishop addresses the shiny, gloating, and definitively male creatures, cocks, whose cries disturb her and the whole town:

“each one an active

displacement in perspective;

each screaming, “This is where I live!”

Each screaming

“Get up! Stop dreaming!”

Roosters, what are you projecting?”[CP 36]

‘Displacement in perspective’ implies that the traditional perspective is wrapped up and seen through ‘stupid, cruel eyes.’ Bishop’s own poems are active displacements of perspectives. Eventually, the sleepers overcome the assaults and continue to inhabit. Bishop takes in enough of the roosters’ admonitions to concede that “Many things about this place are dubious.” They too project a warning about where she lives and they have the authority of dreams rather than awakenings. These feeble
minded creatures have to be placed with admirable statistics. Bishop directly addresses the roosters:

“You, whom the Greeks elected
to shoot at on a post, who struggled
when sacrificed, you whom they labelled
“Very combative. . .” ” [CP 36]

The anger of the narrator is further expressed, "what right have you to give/commands and tell us how to live," questioning the true nature of a rooster's existence. The hatred towards the rooster escalates to the point of killing it out of spite and shows how the struggling cock is offered as a sacrifice to appease warlike gods; later the sacrificial image suggests redemption and a metaphorical image becomes a pivotal symbol of hope. There is a surreal sense in referring to the ancient Greece. The poem challenges the commotion of the roosters by ending the first section with the images of the Battle of Britain in 1940-41 when the fight in the sky between airplanes are referred to in the poem as cockfights:

“Now in mid-air
by twos they fight each other.
Down comes a first flame-feather,
and one is flying,
with raging heroism defying
even the sensation of dying.”[CP 37]

Bishop uses war imagery but also suggest a response, although not an easy one.20

Moore once wrote to Bishop:

“I feel responsibility against anything that might threaten you; yet fear to admit such anxiety, lest I influence you away from an essential necessity or particular strength. The golden eggs can’t be dealt with theoretically, by presumptuous mass salvation formulae. But I do feel that tentativeness and interiorizing are your danger as well as your strength.”21
Bishop recognised the “tentativeness” Moore pointed and blamed it on an unwillingness and inability to present a political position in the poems though her poems refer to the chaotic political situation of the day. Various displacements in Bishop’s life gave her the direct experience of the issues related with warfare. Bishop takes the poem further with continuous battles - cockfights, combats, and heroism which is futile and blind, signifying death. In the stillness of the dead cock, a sense of waste is established. Bishop takes us to an unearthly and eerie world which she seems to apprehend by crossing the boundary between awake and sleep situation. In the second part of the poem, Bishop compares Magdalen’s sin of flesh and Peter’s sin of spirit and transcends the feeling of pain and despair. The reference to the Greek culture is reflected at this juncture in the poem asserting an element of hope in the poem:

“St. Peter’s sin
was worse than that of Magdalen
whose sin was of the flesh alone;
of spirit, Peter’s,
falling, beneath the flares,
among the “servants and officers.” ”[CP 37]

Bishop transforms the arena of the poem by referring to the Bible story of Peter’s denial that he was a disciple of Jesus Christ. Jesus told Peter that by the time the rooster crows, Peter would deny any knowledge of Jesus three times. As the evening passed, three times Peter was questioned about Jesus and three times he denied Jesus’ existence. Yet even after denial, Christ forgave. The words in quotation marks indicate a quotation from John’s Gospel, just after Peter’s first denial:

Then saith the damsel that kept the door unto Peter, Art not thou also one of this man’s disciples? He saith, I am not. And the servants and officers stood there, who had made a fire of coals; for it was cold: and they warned themselves: and Peter stood with them, and warmed himself. (John 18:17-18)

The sense of “falling, beneath the flares” links Peter’s falls with that of the fighting cocks and warplanes. With this new notion set in the narrator's mind, Bishop
reluctantly begins to forgive the roosters for crowing: Bishop ends this section with affirmation and a subdued denial.

“There is inescapable hope, the pivot;
yes, and there Peter’s tears
. . . . Poor Peter, heart-sick,
still cannot guess
those cock-a-doodles yet might bless,
his dreadful rooster come to mean forgiveness,”[CP 38]

Peter’s tears are symbolic of his repentance. And paradoxically, Bishop presents the same bird as the symbol of both war as well as of forgiveness. Even after forgiveness, the narrator cannot undo the senseless killing that had cost the rooster its life. Emotion has settled to sadness, "how could the night have come to grief?"

Even though the day was overwhelming, the narrator has made it to the end of the day in a somewhat peaceful setting. These cocks are recognised as two sides of humanity and are reconciled through art. In the final lines of this poem she brings us back to awareness with the natural progression of the time. Bishop in the last stanza of the “Roosters” projects the tranquil sunrise:

“The sun climbs in,
following “to see the end,”
faithful as enemy or friend.”[CP 39]

The symbol of Sun suggests ambiguity which is central to the idea of a poem. In Christian iconography, the standard role for Sun is that of Christ. But Bishop’s Sun is no Christ but a Peter – the follower, the friend and disciple, the betrayer and enemy, the bitterly repentant, the forgiven. The concluding symbol of the poem “the sun” witnesses the day and beyond that, the end of all of us, some day. The Sun is a follower, it light up the path to the end, the end that we choose. It is neither the state nor the accused, neither killing nor forgiving. Similarly, nature which stands for sun neither forgives nor executes and this also is true in case of rooster in both the fables. The beautiful vision of Sun has been a part of the reality and though one wishes to hold on it, the last stanza is a reminder that human emotions are subject to


change as natural phenomena are. But there is also the reminder of permanency within the shifting patterns itself. Bishop’s essential honesty makes her recognise that, as the pre-dawn bleakness has not lasted; neither will the shining affirmation of the dawn. As the cock can both deny and affirm, the Sun impartially brings pain and pleasure and Bishop is ready to accept the full reality of the day.

Bishop admired George Herbert’s “the absolute naturalness of tone.”

Naturalness and spontaneity are Bishop’s accessories of writing poetry. Bishop, in her 1966 ‘Shenandoah interview’, defined these qualities as the sense of mind actively encountering realities, giving off the impression of involved, and immediate discovery is one of Bishop’s links to Romantics. Bishop’s poetry tends towards Romantic subject matters- problem of isolation, of loss, and of quest for union beyond the self- and these subjects are expressed with force in her work. But these subjects are understated, modest and expressed in flat ways in her poems. Bishop’s writings exhibited the “honesty and stunning clarity of detail,” but at the same time displayed the “tolerance and understatement” of Chekhov. Bishop tries to cut off her poetry from the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” which was central to romantic imagination hence her poetry with the quality of restraint of feelings is more modernist than romantic. Bishop in her interview further expressed that her poem “The Weed” was influenced by her reading of George Herbert’s poems. Bishop’s poem stylistically resembles Herbert’s. “The Weed,” was an early effort, appears almost as a pastiche of Herbert’s “Love Unknown.” Bishop in this poem returns to spontaneity as a poetic quality which she valued the most. In this dream poem, Bishop begins to discuss her ideas with a mystifying element to it. The theme of enclosure of scene is employed in the first few lines of “The Weed”:

“I dreamed that dead, and meditating,
I lay upon a grave, or bed,
(at least, some cold and close-built bower).”[CP 20]

Bishop’s use of the words like “dead,” “grave,” and cold creates an uninviting atmosphere. The option of “grave” and “bed” given in the first stanza reflects the uncertainty of Bishop’s mind. Bed symbolises the comforts and rejuvenation of one’s mind, which seems to be missing in her life. Bishop was taken to alcoholism and depression in the “American Phase” which remain as an ailment throughout her
life; hence for her bed couldn’t give her the peace it suppose to give, it was just like a grave for Bishop. Bishop creates the image of home in “close-built bower” but it’s not the loved house of Nova Scotia, on the contrary it is a prison resembling her Worchester paternal grandparents house, where she lived lonesome days as “cold and closed built bower.” Bishop personifies “thought” and gives it motion and life of a weed:

“In the cold heart, its final thought
stood frozen, drawn immense and clear,
stiff and idle as I was there;
and we remained unchanged together
for a year, a minute, an hour.”[CP 20]

The thought is “cold,” for it is related to the matters of emotions; “frozen,” for her lesbian reality doesn’t allow it to be realised; “stiff” for it doesn’t leave her; and “idle” for it obsess her mind. The thought and the heart where it germinates are torn appear both seem to be stubborn “remained unchanged.” The poem deals with the romantic subject - the problem of isolation - but Bishop seems to be reluctant to clearly accept it in her poem. From the frozen state, the poem moves towards motion not a delicate one but similar to an explosion:

“Suddenly there was a motion,
as startling, there, to every sense
as an explosion. Then it dropped
to insistent, cautious creeping
in the region of the heart,
prodding me from desperate sleep.”[CP 20]

From a comfortless stricture of a “grave” or a “bed” she is mentally unmoored by an "explosion." This threatening upward thrust subsides to a slower growth, just as ominous as a weed (definable as an unwanted plant), sprouting up from the dreamer's heart, and pushes out leaves like a "twisting waving flag" or a "semaphore". Then the heart, splitting produces "a flood of water," forming "two rivers," cascading down her ribs. The idea brooding in the region of heart, related
with matters dear to heart, could be acceptance, love and security, that is to say, Bishop’s search for home where love and relations dwell. The thought is so dominant that Bishop is conscious of it in her sleep. The plant grows out of her heart, the symbol for love, almost as if to show that through love, life is born. According to Freud “dream is a picture-puzzle” which is comprised of two parts the “dream-thought” and the “dream-content.” The dream-content are expressed or transcribed into the language of the dream-thought which are comprehensible representations. In a way dream poetry is a comprehensible expression of dream-content. The dream poetry being the artistic expression of the dream-thought have many interpretations revealing the many more thoughts concealed behind it. The dream-content may not directly express the different emotions - desire, ailment, worry or happiness - of the person but it is a “displacement” of such emotions. The reality of dream and its interpretations can be different from what is apparently seen or understood. According to Sigmund Freud, “A dream can reject elements which are thus highly stressed in themselves and reinforced from many directions, and can select for its content other elements which possess only the second of attributes.”

In relation to Bishop’s dream poems the outcome in the form of poetry may have different suppressed instincts or desire which need to be analysed and may have multiple interpretations. Bishop’s suppressed desire for home, love and security, and her fear of displacement occasionally surfaces in her poetry. With the use of dream technique, Bishop also uses the interrogative assertions to develop her themes. Bishop implies a question to the reader:

“... . . . A slight young weed
had pushed up through the heart and its
green head was nodding on the breast.
(All this was in the dark.)”[CP 20]

The use of darkness in this passage reminds the reader that any descriptive claims shouldn’t be questioned. This technique allows the reader to impose their own authority, thereby removing the necessity for Bishop to discuss her personal experiences (her authority) openly in the poem. Bishop successful evades from the reader’s eye and displaces herself into the reader’s world to take on questions on behalf of the readers evading the responsibility of answering them. This setup allows
the reader to apply their own experiences to the poem to create a better understanding and it helps Bishop to have a better perspective of her problem. This technique allows Bishop to displace into the world of unknown, the dreamy, mystic and the world of macabre. Bishop’s presence in her art is felt frequently:

“... The nervous roots
reached to each side; the graceful head
changed its position mysteriously.”[CP 20]

Everything about the weed is promising like its “green head,” its growth, its “stem grew thick” except for its “nervous roots” like Bishop’s nervous roots, for she was virtually orphan from her early childhood. The “nervous roots” will lead to nervous growth and vulnerability to decay. Bishop’s “nervous” childhood at Worchester gave her numerous ailments for life time. With all the odds, Bishop’s poems are not the stories of pain and grief, “the graceful head” in the poem stands for hope. Bishop further attaches the element of mysteriousness to the image of weed:

“The rooted heart began to change
(not beat) and then it split apart
and from it broke a flood of water.”[CP 20]

The firm heart is also seen splitting apart causing “flood of water” may be tears of pain and trauma due to separation. Bishop’s physical displacement away from Nova Scotia was a kind of split or separation which inflicted much pain upon her and was a reason for her on-going hunt for her childhood home. Similarly the weed is displaced from its place. These “half-clear streams,” “smooth as glass, / went off through the fine black grains of earth.” Since lateral-descending surges can sweep away the self, similar is the case with the weed:

“The weed was almost swept away;
it struggled with its leaves,
lifting them fringed with heavy drops.
A few fell upon my face
and in my eyes, so I could see
(or, in that black place, thought I saw)

That each drop contained a light,

a small, illuminated scene;”[CP 21]

The weed is shown struggling against the flow of water for survival and trying to resist the circumstantial pressure. Bishop in this poem endowed the trivial with extraordinary capabilities. Bishop is seen directly participate in the drama with her use of personal pronoun “I.” This fight put up by the weed made Bishop’s eyes water. Eyes are important images in Bishop’s poems written in “American Phase,” where they serve to express how the lesbian lover must often disguise emotion even as she signals a private recognition. The images of eyes are not only adept at reading hidden signs, but can also be filled up with tears as emotions erupt into a calm surface. In “The Weed” there is a separation of tears from their emotional source indicating the necessity of reticence in Bishop’s writing. Bishop suppresses the details though achieves a purgation of emotion through “a few drops”; restricting her sorrows and identifying her eyes with “that black place” hinting at the secrets.

David Kalstone attaches the image of the eyes from “The Weed” to a notebook entry in which Bishop, looking at the raindrops on the window, realised she could look into the drops as into so many crystal balls, and the strangest of all drops was a “lonely, magnificent human eye, wrapped in its own tear.” Such eyes, concludes Kalstone, are hardly monitoring a world outside themselves. Their tears’ internal source is hidden as the tears erupt without cause, spill without effect. The weed is to be honoured for its brevity:

“The weed stood in the severed heart.

“what are you doing there?” I asked.

It lifted its head all dripping wet

(with my own thoughts?)

and answered then: “I grow,” it said,

“but to divide your heart again.” ”[CP 21]

Despite of all the contradicting situations for growth, the weed still is strongly willed to grow. Bishop in this poem uses the world “heart” six times “cold heart,” “rooted heart,” and “the severed heart” connotes the cold, firm and harshness of heart
whereas the final usage of the word in the last line “to divide your heart again” exhibits Bishop’s dilemma of growth beyond Nova Scotia and love for roots though “nervous roots” from Nova Scotia. Self-knowledge remains tentative and incomplete, like the flow created in the divided heart, in the poem.

Bishop is successfully seen displacing the physical realities into a surreal world. But Bishop is not a complete surreal writer because her poems are themselves bridge between the physical world and the other world. Bishop’s displacement from the realities to a surreal world is not an escape but rather a decisive way to face it and express it productively. Bishop, in the poem “The Man-Moth” makes the city life fearful. The fantasy creature “The Man-Moth” lives in New York, which is a highly selected and symbolized city of indistinct facades and a generic subway with its third rail, “the unbroken draught of poison.” Bishop’s fascination for her Nova Scotian country life is clearly seen in her employment of theme like this. Bishop expresses this consternation through her surreal character - half human, half insect - that ironically surpasses his human counterpart. In the first line, the speaker signifies a specific position:

"Here, above,

cracks in the building are filled with battered moonlight.

The whole shadow of Man is only as big as his hat.

It lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,

and he makes an inverted pin, the point magnetized to the moon."[CP 14]

“Man” stands passive in the moonlight like an “inverted pin” and seems unable or unwilling to comprehend. The poem can be read as a meditation on the interplay between light and dark. This excerpt from the poem reflects Bishop’s obsession for a descriptive narrative that locates and frames the scene precisely as possible. Bishop writes poems with the crystal-clear clarity of dreams, as paradoxical as this sound. Writing with imaginary or dream-based scenes and characters allow Bishop to address and discuss her ideas poetically without the necessity to include her own experiences. Evidence of her implementation of the technique can be seen in both the word choice and the plot of her poems. In “The Man-Moth” her diction supports the imaginary setting and characters in the poem. She uses words like “inverted,”
“queer,” “impossible,” “flutters,” etc to create a tone of uncertainty and intangibility to the reader.

“He does not see the moon; he observes only her vast properties,

feeling the queer light on his hands, neither warm nor cold,

of a temperature impossible to record in thermometers.”[CP 14]

In this excerpt, the moon is described abstractly while simultaneously being associated with cultural experiences. The man in the poem “does not see the moon,” but at the same time observes its properties. He “feels” the light of the moon on his hands but cannot tell whether it is warm or cold. Bishop seems to associate the moon with her mother whose warmth is unknown to her but she is not direct in her reference. The Man-Moth, on the other hand, is fearful:

“But when the Man-moth

pays his rare, although occasional, visits to the surface,

the moon looks rather different to him. . . .

and nervously begins to scale the faces of the buildings.

He thinks the moon is a small hole at the top of the sky,

proving the sky quite useless for protection.”[CP 14]

The poem contrasts characters (the first time Bishop does so in “North and South”), but there is no hero to admire. Instead, after the first stanza introduces ‘Man’, the next four stanzas emphasize the Man-Moth’s uneasiness. Mistaking the moon for a “small hole at the top of the sky,” the Man-Moth tries to sore high in order to "investigate" the moon. The urban lifestyle is like that of the moon, which is inviting but not reachable and in the process of reaching it one becomes lifeless. Another interpretation, based on the significance of the Man-Moth's attempts to reach the moon, suggests that the poet is attempting to express her spirituality. “The moon” which the man-moth considers as “a small hole” frightens him, as if he believes he will fall into and out of the sky by way of it.

“. . . he will manage

to push his small head through that round clean opening . . .

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But what the Man-Moth fears most he must do, although he fails, of course, and falls back scared but quite unhurt."[CP 14]

The man-moth's hope of escaping through a small hole in the top of the sky attests to the sky's solidity, especially since he fails to escape later in the poem. On the contrary, the sky becomes a protective and solid entity under which all of humanity is enclosed. The scene of "The Man-Moth" under the dome of the sky allows Bishop to explore imaginary ideas of considering the whole world as her home. The explanation "what the Man-Moth fears most he must do" characterizes the plight of a number of Bishop’s characters. Bishop shares the same plight as her characters for she was much reluctant to be a part of urban ruggedness but had to accept the ordinal of life. Bishop in the poem portrays "the sky" as "quite useless for protection." The theme of enclosure of tone can be seen throughout the poem with words such as "idle," "unchanged," "dark," and "black," all reminders of some small dark space. Bishop carries an enclosing tone through the use of words. After failing to investigate the moon, the man-moth scales the buildings "fearfully," "his shadow dragging like a photographer’s cloth behind him." Then lifeless he returns to his home:

“Then he returns
to the pale subways of cement he calls his home. . . .”[CP 14]

Home is the place which is supposed to give solace to the man-moth but it fails to do so, for it is just a cement structure with no love or warmth in it. When he returns underground and boards a subway train, he sits "facing the wrong way" and "travels backward." The ride seems endless. It has also been suggested that the poet's destructive bouts with alcoholism might have influenced the poem, as the image of the Man-Moth going backward on a too fast train is an experience that the poem associates with poison. In fact, the life of the man-moth is a nightmare; death rides constantly beside him, and he must resist the temptation of suicide. The oppressiveness of the city, nevertheless, allows for hope. In the final stanza, the reader has the chance to break the Man-Moth’s isolation and shares his sorrow.

“If you catch him,
hold up a flashlight to his eye. It’s all dark pupil,
an entire night itself, whose haired horizon tightens
as he stares back, and closes up the eye. Then from the lids
one tear, his only possession, like the bee’s sting, slips.
Slyly he palms it, and if you’re not paying attention
he’ll swallow it. However, if you watch, he’ll hand it over,
cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink.”[CP 15]

This allegorical figure, neither man nor moth, partakes the human fear of the urban environment and a moth like compulsion to leave his cocoon to investigate the light of the moon. The man-moth is representative of the poet and stands for the terrible fear of living in the city involving for the extra sensitive beings, which must seek out and experience what Bishop fears. Although the tear that slips from Man-Moth’s eye is associated with the nectar of spirituality to its purity. It can also be associated with Bishop’s pain due to displacement. Bishop presents man-moth not entirely horrible in the poem but a pathetic creature. His loneliness is exuberant; he responds to attention. He even will give away his life for love. When the man-moth shows his emotions, he must like a bee after losing his sting, die. Bishop’s life to some extent is like the man-moth because they both are lonely, love is missing in their life and leaving their home is painful for them.

Bishop faced the ruthless divine order in her life, with a lot of realistic heroism but there is always a conflict of subconscious and conscious seen in her art. In a letter to Anne Stevenson, Bishop writes:

“There is no ‘split’. Dreams, works of art (are some) glimpses of the always- more-successful surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy, catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important. What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.”

Though, Bishop says that there is “no split” but still she tries to reconcile these two experiences. In her poem “Love Lies Sleeping”, Bishop presents a surreal view of New York through the eyes of a speaker waking to a summer morning. “Love Lies

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"Sleeping" described the plight of having a home in the urban city and the experience associated with it. The first eleven stanzas of the poem depict the city in great detail:

"Earliest morning, switching all the tracks
that cross the sky from cinder star to star,
coupling the ends of streets
to trains of light,
now draw up into daylight in our beds;

... an immense city, carefully revealed,
made delicate by over-workmanship,
detail upon detail,
cornice upon facade,"

As the speaker emerges from sleep, she describes the New York night blending into day. Dreamlike trains in the night sky fade out along with the neon signs and the “hangover moons.” In the morning light, the speaker intends on describing in detail the emerging city. The “immense city, carefully revealed” becomes personified as it seems to yawn and stretches itself towards the skies. Underneath these observations of the material world, there also lay a spirituality or otherworldliness. Bishop wrote in her notebook: “But [the spiritual] proceeds from the material, the material eaten out with acid, pulled down from underneath, made to perform and always kept in order, in its place. Sometimes it cannot be made to indicate its spiritual goal clearly...but even then the spiritual must be felt.”

Landscapes for Bishop meant the real inner spaces, the spiritual self; it also is reflexive of home in larger sense. The urban landscape, which is confined into the “fused beads of iron and copper crystals”, is reconstituting the world, as if it is in danger of being continually lost. The city becomes beautiful momentarily rising in “the skies of water-glass,” but it is still confined in a “chemical “garden” in a jar”. In this poem as well as “The Man-Moth,” we see another side of New York, at times beautiful, at times surreal, and at times terrifying. In the subsequent stanzas, Bishop begins to reveal something threatening in the city through the loud “Boom!” that disrupts the sparrows’ play. Even the sleeping city workers feel a jolt of fear in their slumber. The spiritual morning time and the peaceful nature are suddenly disrupted with the “Boom!” of
urban morning. The noise it seems is from the smoke emitting, ever-growing industries, at the cost of its employees:

“(And all the employees who in plants
where such a sound say “Danger,” or once said “Death,”
turn in their sleep and feel
the short hairs bristling
on back of necks.)...”[CP 17]

The activity in the city, which is mandatory for its development, fills our house and life with “the cloud of smoke,” and makes man lifeless, a machine or a puppet. Helen Vendler sees in Bishop’s poems not only the poignancy, but also strangeness and mystery, the “threat of death,” within her adumbration of familiar, domestic scene.26 The sounds in the poem remain very disruptive and disorienting, while Bishop describes the city house which is a representative of it:

“I hear the day-springs of the morning strike
from stony walls and halls and iron beds,
scattered or grouped cascades,
alarms for the expected:”[CP 17]

The city dwellers awake in their “iron beds” in their houses made up of not love and warmth but of “stony walls.” The description of the urban residential place is nothing more than a cage or a prison. The waking up time is also scheduled by the industries and alarms not by the chirping of birds or rising of the sun which is a great plight of the modern urban living. Next in the poem, Bishop evokes a picture of a very sinister lover who would like an animal hunt for his pray throughout the day and would feed on it the evening:

“queer cupids of all persons getting up,
whose evening meal they will prepare all day,
... dragging in the streets their unique loves.”[CP 17]

There is a tone of sympathy and pity for there “queer cupids” who are set about their business feeding on lovers and even dragging their love or “scourge them with roses
only.” The city lovers are not platonic lover but they are hunters feeding on passion. Pure feelings and relationships are missing in the urban life, everything seems to be artificial and hollow, “be light as helium.” Bishop was always restless living in New York, for she always was in search of home and true love which she missed all her life. The “queer cupids” seem to be at home in this surreal city, doing their daily work from sunrise to sunset. Although the final stanza of the poem is a description of a victim of love whose head is hanging over the side of a bed, the speaker seems to empathize with this figure. This figure, ravaged by love in the city, is helpless as he views New York:

“inverted and distorted. No. I mean

    distorted and revealed,

    if he sees it at all.”[CP 17]

In this poem, there is revelation of the truer vision of an unconscious (or dead) man. Bishop is ambiguous in her last line, for it is dead or an unconscious man she doesn’t clearly reveal. Probable, she wanted her poetry to show the mind thinking, pondering over the inverted view of the city or it can be a man who died due to the pressure of modern urban lifestyle. The city once again becomes highly surreal as it grows downward, but it is through this suffering man’s vision that the city becomes fully revealed in its utter distortion. Like the Man-Moth who seems to be at odds with the city yet rooted in it, so too is the man at the end of “Love Lies Sleeping” to whom the underside of New York life is revealed. Both the lover in “Love Lies Sleeping” and the heroically striving Man-Moth (a poet figure perhaps) are sufferers in the city, and by the end of both poems, Bishop pushes us toward sympathetic identification with them. While the Man-Moth reaches out his hand to offer us his pure, nourishing teardrop, the lover in “Love Lies Sleeping” is detached from us, absorbed in his own vision. The final line of the poem is especially disturbing as Bishop shows the speaker continuing to think: Does the scourged lover see the city fully, or does he “[see] it at all”? In a parenthetical aside, Bishop wrote a letter to Anne Stevenson in year 1964 disclosing, “I think the man at the end of the poem is dead.” In the end, the poem does not fully reveal whether this lover is an enlightened seer in the city or a dead man, and perhaps Bishop was unsure herself whether the city could be perceived in its fullness.
Bishop’s poetry is the finest example of the poetry that is interested in, and increasingly takes place within, spaces where we live. Her poems are parables of the fact that our placement in the world, our condition, is not guaranteed by knowing and is not marked by certainty or surety. “Jeronimo’s House” is Bishop’s own reality and fascination of a place called “Home.” This poem acknowledges her drive to make home and in the course discover that how frail is our attempt to realise such a dream. The poem is written in the form of dramatic monologue where Bishop assumes a role. Hence this poem is poetry of experience. The opening lines of the poem are Bishop’s own expressions of a “fairy palace”. Bishop in her interview to Ashley Brown said, “I was crazy about fairy tales.” Since her childhood days, Bishop’s life was overshadowed with losses and isolation therefore she preferred living in a world of fairy tales. The poem is Bishop’s notion of home described in abundance of details.

“
My home, my lovely nest,
is endowed
with a veranda
of wooden lace,
adorned with ferns
planted in sponges,
and the front room
with red and green”[CP 34]

Bishop paints her house with all the beautiful and vibrant colours: “the front room with red and green,” “centre table...painted blue,” “four pink tissue-paper roses” and “old French-horn repainted with aluminium paint”. There reds, greens, blues, pinks and silver that she uses are colours of life, energy, nature and beauty all summoned to elevate and make the house enticing. With such beautiful descriptions and decorations to her house, Bishop is aware that for Jeronimo, this beautiful and precious little house is invulnerable refuge from chaos whose nature is fears and whose power she refuses to think about. Bishop apparently becomes one with Jeronimo in a penultimate paragraph when she suddenly makes the reader realise that it is a writer who stays in this house.
“At night you’d think
my house abandoned.

Come closer. You
can see and hear
the writing-papers
lines of light
and the voice of
my radio”[CP 34]

The “writing papers” are evident that this poem becomes Bishop’s own expression of home and her dreams associated with it. It is Bishop’s childhood dreams of a “fairy-palace” filled with the warmth and security of her dear ones. This dream of home arises due to all the psychological pressures arising due to the unpredictability of her fate and from the pain of losing it. Realising the reality, Bishop at once stands apart from Jeronimo and her love-nest and presents the reality of the home. Home is presented as a fragile, made up of paper in the poem. The poem expresses an attitude rather than an opinion, a suggestion rather than a statement.

“... my gray wasps’ nest
of chewed-up paper
glued with spit.”[CP 34]

Jeronimo’s House is an absurd, impermanent, precarious, bastion against the inhuman forces of nature and these forces reduce all human shelters against them to a level of absurdity. Bishop contrasts the first line of the poem with the last line:

“ My house, my fairy
Palace, ...

... my shelter from
the hurricane.”[CP34]

Are we, with our skyscrapers any more secure than Jeronimo, is the question implied in the poem. And, the answer being negative makes the “Jeronimo’s House” truly terrifying. The need, the necessity, and Bishop’s love of her life, her “home,” is
presented with a very debilitating character. Bishop through this poem presents the relationship between man’s fragile, artificial world and nature’s authority over us.

Bishop is an unbeliever in traditional Christianity, she grew up steeped in the verities of small-town Baptist religion. In the poem “The Unbeliever,” Bishop raises the questions of belief. It is a penetrating fable on the psychological dangers of both faith and doubt. The Unbeliever aspires for no transcendental principle instead aspires for sleep. The poem begins with an epigraph:

“He sleeps on the top of a mast. –Bunyan”[CP 22]

What is it to sleep on the top of the mast? What gives the image such power? Common interpretations refer Bunyan’s “The Pilgrim’s Progress” where the Pilgrim Christian comes upon three men fast asleep, with fetters on their heels. They are Simple, Sloth and Presumption. Christian saw them lying and went to them to awake them. And cried, “You are like them that sleep on the top of a mast, for the Dead Sea is under you, a gulf that hath no bottom; awake therefore, and come away; be willing also, and I will help you off with your irons.” He also told them, “If he that goeth about like a roaring lion come by, you will certainly become prey to his teeth.” Like the Bunyan’s pilgrims, Bishop’s Unbeliever is a man in danger. But the form of unbelief has been secularised. This Unbeliever disbelieves the reality itself:

" He sleeps on the top of a mast
   with his eyes fast closed.
   The sails fall away below him
   like the sheets of his bed,
   leaving out in the air of the night the sleeper’s head.”[CP 22]

Another interpretation of “sleeping on the top of a mast” draws a parallel to the personal domain of Bishop’s life and her battle with alcoholism. The reference to sleeping on the mast of the ship has its origin in the Book of Proverbs: “When shall I awake? I shall seek it again”. The “it” here refers to wine, and the passage is a warning against drink. This vivid evocation of habitual drunkenness gives us a sense of the biblical meaning of “sleeping at the top of the mast”; it is one of the two parallel impossibilities – the drunkard is like one who sleeps in the middle of the sea, or who sleeps above the sea. (The Geneva Bible explains the first part of verse 34 as
implying “In such great danger shalt thou be”). The sleeper is unaware about the dangers of sleeping on the mast with his head out in the air. Bishop tries to show the risk of losing one’s senses or worst consequences of losing one’s life due to alcoholism. The unbeliever is unaware about his whereabouts:

“Asleep he was transported there,

asleep he curled

in a gilded ball on the mast's top,”[CP 22]

Sleeping at the top of the mast would be both precarious and giddy-making; nevertheless the drunkard prefers sleep to waking, and so, if he does wake up, he will drink himself back into a stupor. As the Geneva note puts it, “Though drunkenness make them more insensible than beasts yet they cannot refraine.” Bishop’s Unbeliever is at once enclosed and exposed, static and moving, an emblem of displacement. At first we may think the dream will turn him into a variant of Bishop's dead and blinded birds, or encage him in one of Bishop's so often deadly spheres of isolation. This sleeper is opposed to two believers, gull and cloud. The cloud peering at his own reflection exclaims:

“ “I am founded on marble pillars,”

said a cloud. “I never move.

See the pillars there in the sea?” ” [CP22]

The cloud boosts of his stability and immobility; and this is the irony in the poem reflecting the weariness of movement and need to freeze. The cloud is sadly mistaken to thinks that it securely rests on the "marble pillars.” The pillar that the cloud explicitly boosts of is his own reflection in the water. The illusion of security played upon in the poem alludes to the illusion of security created by our well built homes which gets exposed in the times of calamity. Similarly, a gull has a downward glance and creates a false illusion about herself:

“A gull had wings ...

...“like marbles.” He said: “Up here

I tower through the sky

for the marble wings on my tower-top fly.” ”[CP 22]
The gull’s faulty assumptions of his strength are also like the cloud illusion of his security by supposing the air to be "like marble." The cloud and gull’s imaginary security and strength is as mistaken as the sleeper’s insecurity. At the level of allegory, the sleeper on top of the mast is sustained in the air and propelled through the water by the substantial mast and sails. For a moment, we are tempted to equate the sleeper's illusion of security and strength to that of the deceived belief of a cloud and the gull. Though, in the time of disaster their illusions of security and strength would be exposed and shattered. “The Unbeliever” can be read as a dialogue between the one who dreams (the doubting, distrustful sleeper or poet) and the product of his or her dreams (the confident and believing gull and cloud).

“But he sleeps on the top of his mast
with his eyes closed tight.
The gull inquired into his dream,
which was, "I must not fall.
The spangled sea below wants me to fall.
It is hard as diamonds; it wants to destroy us all."[CP 22]

There is nothing secure about being perched above a sea. It could easily destroy the Unbeliever, but his response, “eyes closed tight” is like the illusion of security and strength of cloud and the gull. To such a looming danger the Unbeliever’s response is inadequate and suicidal. An unbeliever, in the lure of pitiless brightness, can achieve – for this perilous moment – belief in himself as an adequate resistor. The gull discovers when he “inquired into his (the sleeper’s) dream.” The cloud and the gull – who are both the products of the sleeper’s dream and examples of divergent “believers,” – see themselves held up by marble pillars and marble wings. There is an allegorical or narrative appropriateness in the cloud and the gull. The gull and the cloud, in their element and their confident beliefs flow from this appropriateness. On the other hand, the man sleeping on top of the mast is out of his element in an inappropriate place, and his edgy anxiety flows correspondingly from his curious misplacement. Nevertheless, the sleeper, who is the unbeliever of the poem, doubts and fears the environment. The traumatically unreliable love object the “sea” is hard and heartless for Bishop. To approach “the spangled sea” is to die for “it wants to destroy us all.” The dreamer's identity is nonetheless now so secure, so credible that
he can resist plunging into non-entity. The barely suspended terror is convincing as hallucinatory dream; the seemingly blind seer is the truest epiphany. The sea can be contemplated as a trance of diamonds, a spangled sheet of light, in the timeless moment of aesthetic semi-distancing. “The Unbeliever” essentially means that belief is the product of unbelief, that allegorical confidence is the product of literal doubt, and that the dreaming poet / sleeper pays for her or his power by virtue of knowledge of the fragility of vision. Harold Bloom claims this as one of his favourite poems. “I walk around, certain days, chanting ‘The Unbeliever’ to myself, it being one of those rare poems you never evade again, once you know it (and it knows you)” The five stanzas of “The Unbeliever”, says Bloom, are essentially variations on the Bunyan epigraph. “Bunyan’s trope concerns the condition of unbelief; Bishop’s does not.” Quite how he could be so sure he does not say, but he continues: “Think of the personae of Bishop’s poem as exemplifying three rhetorical stances, and so as being three kinds of poet, or even three poets: cloud, gull, and unbeliever. The cloud is Wordsworth or Stevens. The gull is Shelley or Hart Crane. The unbeliever is Dickinson or Bishop.”

In contrast to the waking consciousness- dream experience poem, “The Monument” is one such poem in which, the whole experience is seen as a continuation by Bishop. There is suggestion of the unknown and inexplicable- ‘the always-more-successful surrealism’- which is present in both worlds, the world of consciousness and dream, but visible only at ‘unexpected moments of empathy’- visible but perhaps understandable only as symbols. The monument, in the poem resembles the wood rubbing of Max Ernst, which in fact inspired the creation of this poem. “The Monument” is about the nature and existence of a work of art. It is a symbolic but an abstract image, described with great attention to a particular. On that theme, Bishop has surprising things to say. For example, the material of the monument is wood rather than the expected granite or marble. This suggests that art is made of everyday material and experience rather than great matter that are wrought into a fixed position. The monument also has an unexpected and irregular shape.

“Now can you see the monument? It is of wood

built somewhat like a box. No. Built
like several boxes in descending sizes
one above the other.”[CP 23]

For Bishop, one definition of a work of art might be that which defeats expectations and grows out of ordinary material into a shape that is very much its own, Bishop’s gift is a mysterious ability to empower the most commonplace into something extraordinary, repeatedly transforming images and bringing them into another dimension and realm. “I am very object-struck…. I simply try to see things afresh,” Bishop said about herself in an interview. “I have a great interest and respect…for what people call ordinary things. I am very visually minded and mooses and filling stations aren’t necessarily commonplace to me.”[EAP] Monument in the form of box is an enclosure; it can also be associated with a house, her Worchester home where her parents’ resided is no better than a monument without them. Like monuments, houses also vanish as Bishop’s home disintegrated into the winds of ruthless destiny. Like the monument, human memory and imagination seem to be made of perishable stuff, and are mysterious, indecipherable, and somehow evolving. They are made up of wood which has the quality of both living and non-living. Bishop tries to assert that if past is undesirable it can be eradicated from one’s memory. The monument has the characteristic of stiffness of the religious institutions, angle of the fishing-pole, precious edges like that of an ornament, and the angular perfections of the geometry. For Bishop, conditions for existence can’t be forged, be it monument or human, by superficial applications; they have to be nurtured by the nature and feel more homelier than ever. Her search for home takes her to the more natural destinations near to the sea like the Nova Scotia of her childhood.

“The monument is one-third set against
a sea; two third against a sky.

. . . A sea of narrow, horizontal boards
lies out behind our lonely monument,”[CP 23]

The monument is at once elevated to the unreachable levels of the sky and at the same time it is grounded in the realities of the land. A work of art is also very different from nature. The speaker complains of the artifice of the monument and wants it to be more like nature, to mirror the form of natural elements rather than
becoming a thing in itself. One source for Bishop’s view is Wallace Stevens’s poem “Anecdote of a Jar.” Stevens’s jar and Bishop’s monument are unmoving. They do not ape nature but dominate it, although they are connected to it by analogy. Though it is an abstract image, with Bishop’s touch of realistic details, it gives rise to multiple meanings. Bishop finds herself displaced from the achievement of art “far away”.

“The view is geared . . .

so low there is no “far away,”

and we are far away within the view. . . .

“Why does that strange sea make no sound?

Is it because we’re far away? . . .” [CP 23]

It is common in her work to have a speaker who raises questions about description. According to Thomas Travisano, “Bishop's example encouraged Lowell and others to let the image speak for itself in what might be called a semi-open structure, involving the presentation of a succession of images without direct authorial comment.” Bishop imposes the question but offers no solutions. She raises the questions and leaves them hanging. Bishop suggests that this monument of “piled up boxes” is the remains of the human history which needs to be commemorated, as an evanescent triumph in a ruthless world.

“An ancient promontory,

and ancient principality whose artist-prince

might have wanted to build a monument

to mark a tomb or boundary, or make

a melancholy or romantic scene of it . . .” [CP 24]

The resonance of the poem is entirely due to the multiple applicability of the image of monument. The power of such an image or symbol, as Arnold Hauser observed in his study of “Psychology and Sociology of Art,” “lies in a multiplicity, a seeming inexhaustibility of meaning.” So the monument can stand for many things. The monument represents multiplicity of meanings, that is, it can stand in the memory of someone or to commemorate love or loss. This exhaustive understanding of the
artefact is an outcome of Bishop’s extensive displacement which gave her a deeper understanding of the facets of life. For Bishop, this displacement to the world of poetry is a means of deriving happiness. It is a precious connection she generates with her past:

“But that queer sea looks made of wood,

half-shining, like a driftwood sea.

And the sky looks wooden, grained with cloud.

It’s like stage-set; it is all so flat!

Those clouds are full of glistening splinters!”[CP 24]

For Bishop, nothing is much homelier than sea; it is associated with Bishop’s memories of her mother, the only treasure of her life.

“I remember my mother taking me for a ride on the swan boats here in Boston. I think I was three then. It was before we went back to Canada. Mother was dressed all in black - widows were in those days. She had a box of mixed peanuts and raisins. There were real swans floating around. I don't think they have them anymore. A swan came up and she fed it and it bit her finger. Maybe she just told me this, but I believed it because she showed me her black kid glove and said, "See."

The finger was split. Well, I was thrilled to death!”29

Bishop transfers the pain and the trauma to the sea in this poem by calling it “a driftwood sea.” The sky which is symbolic of limitless freedom and roof to the universal home is also given a wooden quality by Bishop in this poem. Bishop is probably trying to give an artistic order to the sea and the sky and elevating the stature of art in “The Monument.” Wood has a more permanence than sea, sky or sand hence according to Bishop it is best suited to hold the monument than anything else. The more the art “looks old” the more precious it becomes, the more representative it is. Bishop personifies the monument and gives it a voice in the poetry to express its plight:

“I am tired of breathing this eroded air, . . .

The monument’s an object, yet those decorations, . . .

give it away as having life , and wishing;
Bishop, in this poem, talks about the experience of form, the artistic order which is distinct from life yet expressive of it. The monument represents human achievement, the dry, eroded, crude yet precious remains of human history around which the sun goes ‘like a prowling animal’ and upon which the indifferent rain beats and the wind blows. The image is precise but also ambiguous. “The Monument” also insists that a work of art does not prove anything or make a statement. Any meaning it may seem to have is accidental or grown out of its nature. What is inside is not intended to be seen. “The Monument” seems to embody the famous dictum of Archibald MacLeish’s “Ars Poetica”: “A poem should not mean but be.” “The Monument” also suggests that a work of art cannot be limited to one reading or interpretation. The words “might” and “may” recur several times in the poem, denoting the probable interpretations a work of art may have. To fix the work is exactly what the naïve speaker is trying and failing to do. The work of art, in this poem becomes a justification of itself and begins to have life of its own:

“But roughly but adequately it can shelter
What is within(which after all
cannot have been intended to be seen).
It is the beginning of the painting,
a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,
and all of wood. Watch it closely.”[CP 24]

The poem presents a unique case with regards to enclosure, in that the subject matter of the poem is in itself a limited entity, a monument. The monument has the capacity to shelter what lies within it and accommodate everything into itself like a home. Monument becomes the representative of all work of art, so it is an art which is self perpetuating and crude but at the same time commemorates what it represents and here the poem sails off into the unknown the mystic. Significantly, it is only the beginning of that work. It cannot come into existence unless a reader becomes aware of its nature and brings it into being. Readers must understand any work of art on its terms rather than on their own. That is why the reader is urged at the end of the poem to “Watch it closely.” By devoting oneself to the work of art, the reader can
watch it come into being. This technique allows Bishop to displace herself into the world of unknown, the dreamy, mystic and the world of macabre.

Bishop refuses to accept the ‘split’ between the roles of conscious and unconscious forces in our perception of the world, which made her different from the other surrealist writer. On the other hand, Bishop seems to follow the orthodox surrealism in her four poems - namely “Paris, 7 A.M.”, “Quai d’ Orleans”, “Sleeping on the Ceiling,” and “Sleeping Standing Up”. These quartets of lyric she wrote in France between year 1937 and 1938 can be categorised as her “Paris Poems.” In these poems, logical control has been subverted, or nearly so, but the perspective reflects disorientation rather than psychic freedom. These poems reflect a central problem in Bishop’s work in “American Phase” - the looking outside reveals the inside; it is only the other form of introspection or retrospection.

The scene of “Paris, 7 A.M.” is a dreamlike state of consciousness based on visual features. The poem though does not make any mention of dream sequences, yet it clearly recreates logic of its own but it cannot be understood without innumerable references to external reality. This poem is a fine example of indirection of poetry, as described by James Merrill: “You hardly ever need to state your feelings. The point is to feel and keep your eyes open. Then what you feel is expressed, is mimic back at you by the scene. A room, a landscape.” Bishop’s experience of living in Paris is reflected in this poem:

“I make a trip to each clock in the apartment:

some hands point historically one way

and some point others, from the ignorant faces.

Time is an Etoile; the hours diverge

so much that days are journeys round the suburbs,

circles surrounding stars, overlapping circles.”[CP 26]

The clock is an indicator of time past and time present. The time past is historical which has a contradiction or dilemma in itself. The cycle of the time creates a time which is in an overlapping circle (meaning history gets repeated giving rise to the same dilemma or contradiction). And the ones who have witnessed the history of bloodsheds and wars still put an ignorant face, and this is the irony of situation
Bishop refers to in the poem. David Kalstone, Bishop’s best critic, saw how “the clock faces of the opening lines merges into the map of the Paris, the Etoile with dispersing circles.” The place de l’Etoile is round, like a clock-face, with avenues radiating out from it, diverging, so that it does appear starlike, especially on a map. The poem draws us towards a map of Paris, which tells us there are twelve avenues diverging out from the place de l’Etoile, and thus one for each hour of the day if we make a clock of l’Etoile. These avenues extend out into the suburbs so that for the imaginary clock hand going round l’Etoile, days are “journey round the suburb.” The hour hand would sweep through two huge circles each day, and the minute hand through twenty-four circles, hence, “circles surrounding stars, overlapping circles.” There is a sense of capture in time. The transformation of “time” is visually accurate. Costello has pointed that the French used the world “Etoile,” meaning “a star or pattern in the shape of star, to refer to the “to the starlike convergences of streets in Paris and so the consequences of this polysemic play lead us to interpret Bishop’s “days and journeys round the suburbs,” not in terms of repetition but also of the city of Paris in the clock circumference. It is in this sense that two journeys around the suburb indeed make one day—that is when the short hand complete two full circles around the clock. Bishop draws the visual metaphor from a polysemic term and explores the consequences of applying it to both meanings. The sense of stasis is bolstered by the notion of deadness in the absence of death:

“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.”[CP 26]

The Paris winter skies are bluish gray resembling the feathers on a pigeon’s wings. The irregular line-break segregating “feathers” emphasise a sense of dead weight. For Bishop, it could be dead weight of past, a weight which she could not get rid off and probably doesn’t want to. Her past is symbolically presented in the poem in the form of reference to “house.” Bishop goes anxiously from clock to clock within “the apartment”, and then goes to the window and looks down at the courtyard and up at the sky, but there is no leaving the apartment or other action within it. In the second stanza of the poem, Bishop extensively refers to the metaphor of “house”:
“Look down into the courtyard. All the houses
are built that way, with ornamental urns
set on the mansard roof-tops where the pigeons
take their walks . . . ”[CP 26]

After looking down into the lifeless courtyard where pigeons take walk, Bishop reflects upon a childhood memory. The memory of house is a captive memory for Bishop. She is caught in the time past, her childhood time. The captivity of time is the captivity of Bishop in the memories of “home,” a square with four walls where everything freezes and relived. Bishop builds the poem on a serious of implications drawn from this visualisation of time as a star. The star is drawn by the superimposition of the clock hands in movement, and as such it is inscribed in a circle (the clock face), within a rectangle (the body of the clock):

“ . . . It is like introspection
to stare inside, or retrospection,
a star inside a rectangle, a recollection:
this hollow square could easily have been there.”[CP 26]

The square becomes a memory place, with triple end rhymes, “introspection,” “retrospection,” “recollection.” This image of square in the poem reflects the image of home from Bishop’s memory. Her search for home in Paris makes her nostalgic and there is recollection of the childhood memories. Usually, retrospection and introspection are expected to be separate, even mutually exclusive, territories. But here there merger seeks to collapse these territories into one. Further there are more recollections from the childhood:

“–The childish snow-forts, built in flashier winters,
could have reached these proportions and been houses;
the mighty snow-forts, four, five, stories high,
withstanding spring as sand-forts do the tide,
their walls, their shape, could not dissolve and die,
only be overlapping in a strong chain, turned to stone,
The “snow-forts,” stands for the chilled weather by the end of long Nova Scotia winters and become “grayed and yellowed” “withstanding spring.” Bishop’s love for sea is reflected when she compares the “snow-forts” with “the sand-forts” build at the beach with the assumption of permanency due to childhood innocence. The “snow-forts” hardened due to ice, shrink in the spring, their walls become “overlapping” and, like the “sand-forts” which resists the tide, they resist until they “dissolve and die” due to warmth. There is an irony suggesting the destructiveness of permanent structures and strength of delicate or frail thing in life. Probably, the forts or castles from the childhood world may be fragile but they make permanent impressions on ones memory so much so that even strong structures fail to do so. With no one else to turn to, Bishop wants to know if the clocks can resolve her quarries and tell her what she wants to know:

“Where is the ammunition, the piled-up balls
with the star-splintered hearts of ice?”[CP 26]

The distinction which was about to blur by becoming one with the past is suddenly regained. We are bought back to the present time, that is, to Paris and the Etoile, and to year 1936. Bishop here refers to the triumphal arch, a memorable place at the heart of Paris at Place de l’Etoile. This arch celebrates the military victories from Napolean’s time onward. It radiates from centre like a star, one for each hour of the day. Bishop in this poem remembers the look of the map of Paris with its own central battle memorial:

“This sky is no carrier-warrior-pigeon
escaping endless intersecting circles.

It is a dead one, or the sky from which a dead one fell.”[CP 26]

The “pigeon” is a reference to the world wars where they were used as warriors. “Carrier-warrior-pigeon” is a descriptive language used in war. The “dead one fell” from the sky refers to the nightmare images of actual war, where fighters plains and warrior birds fell from the sky. Witnessing the wars and the after effects of it, Bishop is seen occupied with these images in her poem. Bishop had a war nightmare “late in the thirties”: “Tanks, lost in crowds of refugees, bombardments, etc. Last
night I dreamed I heard cannon and that I was explaining to someone ... that it sounded exactly like the cooing of doves amplified 2 thousand times and ‘stretched out’ ... and that there was some connection with that and the Peace Dove.” Bishop had a special affinity towards pigeons, she had two white doves (pigeons belong to the dove family) while living in Paris. But this symbol of peace is dead in the poem, for the war inflicts immeasurable traumas and torment on the living, whether human or bird, every possibility of life is cruelly curbed in the war time.

“When did the star dissolve, or was it captured
by the sequence of squares and squares and circles, circles?
Can the clock say; is it there below,
about to tumble in snow?”[CP 25]

The captivity and destruction of war-stars or soldiers is indicated in these lines of the poem. This poem is a kind of puzzle with an air of surrealism to it. “Surrealism”, Hynes argue, “provided parabolic method for the social nightmares of the time.” “Paris, 7 A.M.” is a poem grown out of the menace of the 1930’s. Hitler was in power for almost thirty years. Samuel Hynes, in his excellent book on literature and politics noted that if the decade is plotted as a tragedy, the peripatetic would be 1936: “In that year, Hitler reoccupied the Rhineland and the treaty of Versailles was finished, Abyssinia surrendered and the League of Nations had failed, the Rome-Berlin Axis was formed and the German-Japanese pact was signed. And, most emotional and implicating of all the year’s events, the Civil War in Spain began.”

Bishop loved most one quality in Herbert and it is, “the always-most-successful surrealism of everyday life.” Hers would be a casual, consciously controlled revision of surrealism based on freshly seeing the unlikely features of ordinary things. Rather than concentrating exclusively on the strange, she preferred telling associations discoverable by turning inward, and her experience through her travel. Bishop knew a good deal of surrealism before there was any wide spread response to the movement in America. She is one of the very fine writers who could be called post-surrealist. Bishop had a life of various physical displacements; she lived in places like Poughkeepsie and Paris, Seattle and Key West, Nova Scotia and Brazil. These physical displacements had a specific effect on Bishop’s psychic conditions in the “American Phase”. Bishop tries to reconcile these psychic and
physical experiences in her poem “Sleeping Standing Up”. There is a displacement from the physical to the dream world in this poem. Bishop, through this poem, explores the promise and the frustration inherited in dream journeys. She treats these two worlds as if they were inversions or even corrective of each other. One such inversion appears in the following lines:

“As we lie down to sleep the world turns half away
through ninety dark degrees;
the bureau lies on the wall
and thoughts that were recumbent in the day
rise as the others fall,
stand up and make a forest of thick-set trees.”[CP 30]

Bishop presents a topsy-turvy world in the first stanza of the poem. Like Hansel and Gretel, Bishop wanders in the forest of memories so as to search her lost home. Bishop is seen choosing the world, between dreams and reality according to her comfort. The whole sleeping-waking paradox is presented as a fairy tale narration. In the day time, the routine chores don’t allow “thoughts” to surface. Bishop personifies “thoughts” and tries to disciple them with a drill; unfortunately, she fails to do so for they crowed her dreams as she lies down. Unlike the clever children’s search, Bishop’s search is frustrating for hers is imprisoned in “the armoured cars of dream.” She finds herself feeble in front of “the armoured cars of dream” “all camouflaged” making her do all the “dangerous things” she would normally not dare to do:

“... we saw the crumbs or pebbles that lay
below the riveted flanks
on the green forest floor,
like those the clever children placed by day
and followed to their door
one night, at least; and in the ugly tanks”[CP 30]
Bishop’s obsession with home is clearly felt in this poem. The children are seen paving a “crumbs or pebbles” pathway towards their house. Bishop tries to excavate her past, a dangerous thing to do but within the enclosure of dream. In her dream, Bishop finds it difficult to trace out the path leading towards home:

“we tracked them all the night. Sometimes they disappeared,
dissolved in the moss,
sometimes we went too fast”[CP 30]

Unable to find the way home, Bishop is utterly dejected. Past remains dead, the former home seems to be unreachable. It reflects her own plight to discover her home out of the flux of history and geography of Nova Scotia. The poem expresses doubt about the central surrealistic doctrine that the unconscious, once trapped, will lead one toward the essential - towards home. Bishop’s past come to life in poetry written after long immersion in foreign experience. There is an ambiguity of experience derived not from the non-existence of reality but from the utter impossibility of knowing it. A dream world becomes the reason for Bishop’s frustration in this poem;

“. . . How stupidly we steered
until the night was past
and never found out where the cottage was.”[CP 30]

The feeling of loss, annoyance of having missed something is not defined as in philosophy or psychology but it is suggested in poetry by the recurring images or frustrating search of “the cottage.” “The armour cars of dream” not only blindly fail in their mission to rescue the children but annihilate any traces that might have pointed to their cottage. The pattern of search and frustration is typical of Bishop’s early dream poems. They are enigmatic because they present a writer grappling with the enigma of self. Their irony is often self-directed, because she longs to get out of her search for her childhood memories and Nova Scotian home but can’t escape. Bishop’s angst doesn’t spring from the lack of moral certainty as in the case of Existentialist writers but from a profound sense of human ignorance. Morally, Bishop is as incorruptible and unquestioning as Marianne Moore; Bishop is stoic in
her acceptance of her life but very humane and sympathetic in her concern for others as seen in her endings of her poems like “The Fish” and “Roosters.”

Bishop uses elaborate descriptions in her poems. Her descriptive technique is so powerful as to blur the boundary between reading and seeing. Reading Bishop’s poems often feels like reading a photographic review. Her poetry is often analyzed in terms of observation, positioning, framing; her poetics of description can also be referred to as optical poetics. With the sharpness of a camera, her images are carefully composed and are intricate wordscapes of the most vivid quality. “Cirque d’Hiver” is a clever, perceptive and a humorous poem with realistic details in it. It is the best example of the influence of displacement in Bishop’s life. Due to her various displacements, Bishop became aware about the various social issues one of which reflecting women’s position in the society is explored in this poem. Cirque d’Hiver is a theatre ("Winter Circus"), located at Paris, and has been a prominent venue for circuses, exhibitions of dressage, musical concerts, and other events, including exhibitions of Turkish wrestling and even fashion shows. Bishop presents the circus with seriousness of tone provided by the formal, rhyming verses. The solemnity of the poem is amusingly at odds with an apparently trivial incident. The poem seems at first to be about what is being observed:

“Across the floor flits the mechanical toy,

fit for a king of several centuries back.

A little circus horse with real white hair.

His eyes are glossy black.”[CP 31]

The toy, in the form of horse carrying a dancer on his back is personified and is attuned with the perfection of art. The presentation of art, in the poem is perfect and classical, similar to a mechanical toy so it deserves to be presented in front of ancient Kings who appreciated perfection of art similar to what Bishop loves to do in her poetry. The dancer, in the poem, represents the traditional reserved women, before the progress of the feminist movement. The "turns and turns," of the dance kinetically suggests the mimicking of the restrictive roles of mother and wife, and the absence of opportunity to develop and accomplish goals outside the home. The "artificial roses" and "pink toes" of the dancer represent the way women are often reduced to pretty surfaces with no human complexity. It is an empty show of beauty
and happiness. Compared to conventional women, the horse has real hair and glossy eyes, reflecting truth of character and spiritual depth, and is more intelligent. Still the little horse and the dancer share the same cultural burden which makes “a formal, melancholy soul.” These characters are no better off than we are; each of us partakes of the unknown. If we wonder whether the poet wishes to leave us with cosmic or comic view of ourselves, the answer is surely with both. The cosmic and the comic are identical just as the body and the soul of the dancer are identical:

“He feels her pink toes dangle towards his back
along the little pole
that pierces both her body and her soul”[CP 31]

Bishop endows these toy characters with “soul” taking the anthropomorphism (treating gods and animals as human in form and personality) one step further. “The little pole / that pierced both her body and her soul” binds both the characters. The dancer is oppressed by the "little pole" (cultural mores), which is the traditional expectations from women. The "tin key" that operates the dancer and the horse is the cultural mechanism, composed of many social components, that still makes the poet obediently behave contrary to her nature, even though she has attained some degree of liberation. It is not until the end we realise that the poet has been implicitly seeing herself in these creatures. She poignantly reveals how similar her life has been to that of the mechanical toy:

“Facing each other rather desperately–
his eyes is like a star–
we stare and say, “Well, we have come this far.” ”[CP 31]

The way the poet stares at the horse at the end of the poem and says, "Well, we have come this far," identifies her with the horse. At the end, there is an irony, both whimsy and serious, usually combined for the purpose of parable or satire as in the fables of Aesop. There is a moral in the poem, but it is not what we expect. Instead of telling what we ought or ought not to do or believe it rather leaves us with a stark condolence. Everything, human and mechanical is in a sense equal. There is sarcasm in this poem intended towards life becoming mechanical.
Elizabeth Bishop travelled extensively and made her first home, among the “three loved house” of “One Art,” in Key West, Florida, an American state. The place Florida was claimed in year 1513 by Ponce DeLeon as he searched for the fountain of eternal youth – he named it Florida for its floweriness. It took three wars and a few hundred years to finally exterminate the Seminole Indians from this land so that, in the 20th century, it could become a haven of real-estate fraud and delinquency, boasting of the greatest percentage of foreclosures in the US in year 2008. Florida is also, according to Elizabeth Bishop, the state with the prettiest name. While prettiness is associated with weakness, it is also a weapon. Debt, death and extermination flourish in this flowery state. Bishop’s poems, at times, are the outcome of heroic observation; eye fixed on facts and minute details. “Florida” is one such poem of Darwinian concentration reflecting her minute observation associated with her physical displacement. The poem is an outcome her own visits to Florida hence it has the exactness of her first hand experience. The poem opens with the metaphors and personifications, almost clinical in exactness:

“The state with the prettiest name,
the state that floats in the brackish water,
held together by mangrove roots
that bear while living oysters in clusters,”[CP 32]

The poem opens gracefully and whimsically with detached, wry descriptions. In Florida, Bishop describes a barnacled world refined to residues. The uncanny, subterranean shape of the mangrove with its massive root system ‘holds together” an unholy rotting landscape which exposes its corpses and its violence Oysters dot the mangrove roots; dead mangrove “strew white swamp with skeletons”; “Enormous turtles, helpless and mild, die” leaving their skull and shell on the beach and become host to other growth. For Bishop, the prettiness of Florida is completely toxic, undead, ex-terminus, grown through with mangrove roots like corpse fingernails, flown over by condors and other flesh eaters. In this poem, the flowers are rooted in death and bring the death, the extermination and buried into visibility when they bloom. Indeed, it changes the whole state of Florida to one of terminus, riddled with death, florid, feverish. Bishop is generally seen praising, protecting and adoring
nature and sea but in this poem she presents them barren, destructed and lifeless, a horrifying expression for the pot like Bishop:

“. . . . The tropical rain comes down
to freshen the tide-looped strings of fading shells:
Job’s Tear, the Chinese Alphabet, the scarce Junonia,
parti-colored pectins and Ladies’ Ears,
arranged as on a gray rag of rotted calico,
the buried Indian Princess’s skirt;”[CP 32]

In this poem, nature asserts itself more forcefully. Here the skirt of the exterminated “Indian Princess” is presented through the pretty names of the flowers from Bishop’s litanies: Job’s tears, the Chinese Alphabet, and the Junonia, Ladies’ Ears. These flower’s names communicate their absent as well as decomposing colours “as on a gray rag of rotted calico” the buried Indian Princess’s cerement. This coastline is partially decomposed and ornamented in flowery death. As in Wallace Stevens’ “O Florida, Venereal Soil,” the state is personified, depicted as a woman; but Bishop’s Indian princess is less sensual, less personal, a woman who possesses the attributes of death, not of life. At length, Bishop describes the geographical change occurred on the landscape the decay and deterioration in a free-floating eternal present tense without the use of main verbs. Bishop in this poem shows Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “timing” his sense of “the mind in action.” She liked to say that her poems are “just descriptions. Though her poems are much more then only descriptions, they are her concerns, her lament upon the depleting condition of the landscape. Bishop’s presence in the poem is excluded for she doesn’t dare to be a part of such a terrifying landscape because the coastline and swamps are evil and so is the poem depicting it becomes terrifying. After two-third of the poem Bishop dares to evoke the prettiest state in the poem;

“Thirty or more buzzards are drifting down, down, down,
over something they have spotted in the swamp,
in the circles like stirred-up flakes of sediment
sinking through the water.
Smoke from woods-fires filters fine blue solvents.”[CP 32]

The landscape is not just one of decay its prettiness still persists in the form of decay and death’s delivery system. Bishop creates a self-enclosed world in the poem. Creature of the air mirror the earth’s discards; and fire, as if completing the cycle, exhales fine smoke into blue. This enclosure within nature is obnoxious and is dwarfed by the rising of the moon, fading the world all together for some time. “Moon” develops a true exposure of the state’s political and racial environment, including the deliberate and exhaustive disenfranchisement of Florida’s Black population:

“Cold white, not bright, the moonlight is coarse-meshed,
and the careless, corrupt state is all black specks
too far apart, and ugly whites; the poorest
post-card of itself.”[CP 33]

Bishop addresses the racial issue in this poem. Since Reconstruction and its continued disenfranchisement under Rick Scott’s regime till today racial discrimination is the burning issue in Florida. Florida’s Republican governor Rick Scott was elected in year 2010 despite the fact that the company of which he was CEO was convicted of 14 felony counts of Medicaid fraud and made to pay the government $600 million dollars in fines. By some estimates, Rick Scott has attempted to purge nearly 200,000 suspected “non-citizens” from his state’s voter rolls; 80 percent of those forced to prove their eligibility are Black or Hispanic. When the moon raises, the wonderful colours and sounds from the landscape- the flashy tanagers, the pelicans gold-winged at the sunset, the musical screeching - turn skeleton. The world, in its process towards nadir, provides answer to the artist’s world which indeed is a reflection of it:

“The alligator, who has five distinct calls:
friendliness, love, mating, war, and a warning—
whimpers and speaks in the throat
of the Indian Princess.”[CP 33]
The alligator’s five primitive calls are restored to darkness and its mysterious identified as “the Indian Princess.” Here the Indian Princess is the trace of Seminole culture. Rather than singing from the alligator’s throat, she unmans the alligator. He ‘whimpers and speaks’ from her throat. She appropriates him for her calls and hence is undead. Against the dead matter of this poem- the debris, suspension, sense of floating like a dead fish in brackish water, the Indian Princess’s revenant voice—cannot be contained in this poem but roars from without it, containing it. She gets the last word, which is no word. Only the mighty necropastoral forces of absence, of erasure, of the disappeared, of death, of ex-terminating are crossing back over the boundary into life. The feeling of barrenness and terror are hidden in the ornamental facade of “Florida.” Bishop doesn’t treat man and nature differently on the contrary man is dissolved in nature in her poems. In the end, man and nature are same in front of death and destruction. Bishop’s poetry implies that man and nature share an inscrutable equality and that they are subjected to some ruthless, mysterious force.

Bishop is usually thought to be an intensely visual poet but her poems are also credited with a strong musical quality. Bishop was taken away from her music studies from Vassar due to the terror of performance but for a couple of years after graduation she believed that her first big writing projects would be a verse play or masque modelled after Ben Jonson and an opera libretto for which Frani Blough would compose music. She also tried to acquaint herself with a clavichord. She saw her studies in music as closely allied to her thinking about poetry. To Frani, Bishop justified her purchase of the clavichord by quoting Ezra Pound to the effect that “the further the poetry departs from music the more decadent it gets.” Bishop loved blues and jazz as well as classical music and drafted song lyrics in her notebooks for years. Her love for music is reflected in the four songs of her poem “Songs for a Colored Singer” published in the year 1944. In fact, when asked about the musical quality of the poem Bishop replied,

“I was hoping somebody would compose tunes for them. I think I had Billie Holiday in mind. I put in a couple of big words just because she sang big words well—‘conspiring root,’” for instance.” Bishop loved blues and jazz as well as classical music and drafted song lyrics in her notebooks for years. Her love for music is reflected in the four songs of her poem “Songs for a Colored Singer” published in the year 1944. In fact, when asked about the musical quality of the poem Bishop replied,

“This dramatic song, written for Billie Holiday attempted to empathize, through Bishop’s own experience of loss, with other figures lamenting over thwarted love. Blues music, a genre Bishop must have felt akin to, frequently revels in the physical
and often unromantic details of love. This poem, ultimately, was set to music by Ned Rorem and Elliot Carter, in later years. The poem certainly could be set to music; they also reveal Bishop’s sensitivity to particular intonations, forms and themes of black music, and taken together the four poems make a fine statement of black experience. “The Song for a Colored Singer” is one of Bishop’s Key West poems in which her love for black is reflected. Victoria Harrison notes that Bishop’s songs “suggest a mixture of voices, each slightly different and together voicing the alienation fostered by gendered and racial oppression.” The “Song I” of this poem reflects how basic these problems are:

“A washing hang upon the line,

but it’s not mine.

None of the things that I can see

belong to me.”[CP 47]

Bishop once said, that writing poetry "is a way of life, not a matter of testifying but of experiencing. It is not the way in which one goes about interpreting the world, but the very process of sensing it." Among the many qualities that have contributed to her greatness is her simultaneously ocular and phonic precision when describing a scene busy with otherwise insignificant details. Bishop does not attempt to reproduce any black dialect through the narrator of these poems; instead she merely suggests the idiom in such a way that it reinforces the rhythm and the personal tone, as in the following lines;

“The neighbors got a radio with an aerial;

we got a little portable.

They got a lot of closet space;

we got a suitcase.”[CP 47]

The heavy assonance and consonance add a humorous effect to the strong beat. And the frequent use of “got” throughout the stanza ironically points up the transient quality of the singer’s life each time it is used. The speaker in this song complains about her poverty as compared to the riches of her neighbour. The first song treats a woman’s problems with a man who cannot settle down though she craves for a more
permanent stable home; still she continues to see his virtues along with his faults. The second stanza moves into an imaginary conversation often repeated and futile:

“I say, “Le Roy, just how much are we owing?

Sometime I can’t comprehend,

The more we got the more we spend. . . .”

He only answers, “Let’s get going.”

Le Roy, you’re earning too much money now.”[CP 47]

The speaker in the first two songs, Harrison writes, “is strident and playful by turns, her unabashed rhymes reflecting how basic these problems are: life is unjust for the black women in the 1940s, shunted by both white and male supremacy”34 In the first song, the singer is trapped by Le Roy’s wanderlust, “He’s seen a lot; he bound to see the rest” and will move on to “the next town” for a better job which is his own desire. In fact Le Roy is supposed to be responsible for their poverty he spends freely: “Darling, when I earn I spends,” without showing any concern for their betterment. But the outcome of Le Roy’s ambition for the narrator is an addiction “A pile of bottles by the fence.” Her man and his desire and alcoholism is the only reason for their poverty, hence, the black woman’s life has personalised problems to add up to her pathetic condition. Despite of all disparity, this woman remains faithful neglecting the irresponsibility of Le Ray.

In the second song, Bishop presents a problematic personal relationship at the centre of the black woman’s unhappy life and also there is this trauma of entanglement in the poem. The Black woman is unsatisfied with her heterosexual relationship but she is strong enough to recognise her right, only after years of her husband’s drinking:

“Through rain and dark I see his face

across the street at Flossie’s place.

He’s drinking in the warm pink glow

to th’ accompaniment of the piccolo(jukebox).”[CP 47]

The man is stuck into the evils of life; he is a drinker and a womanizer. She has tried hard to make him realise his faults but all in vain hence she protests a change in her life. She is strong and independent enough to proclaim her way:
“I’m sick of all fussing anyway.

Now I’m pursuing my own way.

I’m leaving on the bus tonight.

. . . I’ll ride and ride and not come back.

. . . The time has come to call a halt.”[CP 48]

She represents all the oppressive women who are resolved for a change in life and are feed-up with the age old inhuman ways of living, which leads life nowhere. She commits herself to escape on a bus that “will take me anywhere.” The daring of looking at reality squarely in the face has been a major theme throughout Bishop’s work. We sense empathy between the poet and her “singer” in the way that each recognises loss as a natural part of life. The stoical acceptance of life incorporates a quality of self-directed humour, the saving grace, which counteracts both despair and naive optimism. Though the singer’s story is essentially an unhappy one, she is perfectly aware of the comical ironies of her predicament; and no matter how she laments her troubles and betrayals; she somehow avoids succumbing to self-pity. Bishop represents the black woman as assertive, independent, and capable of seeking her own happiness. Both songs I & song II, have a light hearted tone that refuses to take itself too seriously, just as they are making the issues of inequity bluntly evident. The first two poems are in the style of blues expression, in which rhythm and lyrics maintain a strongly personalised tone while they reflect to certain qualities of people. Robert Mazzocco has “spoken of stubborn practicality” and “lilt and grace” as characteristics of Bishop’s poetry, and these seem to be the very qualities which she herself attributed to the narrator in the first two poems. The attitude in “Song I” and “Song II” is similar to her another poem “One Art.” The woman masters herself by “singing” out her loss, and the rhyme and the words act as an emotional and creative release.

“Song III” is a lullaby in traditional comforting tones but with lyrics revealing a sorrowful recognition of the future realities for child who will be an adult soon. The third song is a lullaby but deals with a more serious issue capable for this form:

“Lullaby.

Adult and child
Sink to their rest.
At sea the big ship sinks and dies,
lead in its breast.”[CP 49]

This lullaby parallels, as it opposes the quiet sleep of adult and child, to the sinking of bombed ships. Acknowledging the terms of war that cannot be changed - the ship has indeed sunk – Bishop’s singer reassesses the war impact. The downed ship is like wounded breast, on which the child cannot rest. The domestic situation of mother and child appears imprisoning in the poem, a characteristic, reminding Bishop’s difficulty in identifying with mother figure. Harmonizing the singer’s voice with history, war appears to be a major metaphor in the third song:

“Let nation rage,
let nations fall.
. . . Sleep on and on,
war’s over soon.
Drop that silly, harmless toy,
pick up the moon.”[CP 49]

Bishop in this poem deals with a very serious subject through a very light form, a lullaby. She reflects upon the repercussions of war and the ultimate animosity, hatred, disaster which are the natural outcomes of war but they lead to a society which has lost its zest and zeal for happy and playful living. There is an irony in Bishop’s use of war’s weapon as a “silly, harmless toy,” which is a warning against the playful approach to war by the countries drunk on power. Bishop diffuses the war terror by domesticating it, dismissing its toys, and showing up the impracticality of those weapons by absurdly offering the moon instead, “pick up the moon.” The choice of moon over war encourages the child to ignore the ones who encourage war and embracing moon with the alternative of nurturing love. Down-to-earth and subversive at the same time, the lullaby diffuses as it re-evaluates the reality of war from its tough and well-ballasted position, for the child is on the way to sleep. There is a moral in the poem, it advocates love over war and hatred. Vital to blues is the blurring of singer and song, such that utterance, tone, and beat are elements of both voice and music. Voice and music harmonize each other, repeating, contradicting,
pushing and pulling each other towards realisation. Though this lullaby is clearly not blues most important composition, but still it reproduces many of the element of blues: the prolonged notes of spiritual, the twelve-stress stanzas suggestive of the twelve-bar blues construction, the interruption of narrative with (instrumental) tangents that echo and respond to the original call, the return of the first stanza in the last, which is one of many variation of blues closure.

While the minor key of the third song is calming, the minor key of the fourth buzzes out of control as the racial strife, in this poem, shows Bishop’s range from spirituality of blues to the power of anger of Black’s as articulation in her song of the black woman’s story. The poem is a riddle-song:

“What’s that shining in the leaves,
the shadowy leaves,
like tears when somebody grieves,
shining, shining in the leaves?
Is it dew or is it tears,
hanging there for years and years
like a heavy dew of tears?”[CP 50]

“Song IV” has the powerful, passionate, and melancholy beat of a song which expresses the feeling of a group of oppressed people coming to a realization of their identity. For years together the black community was being oppressed and their plight Bishop identifies in this stanza. Their “tears” are valuable for a sensitive heart like that of Bishop’s. The repetition of the word “shining” make them valuable like a jewel which might be unnoticed by many but Bishop places it high and brings it to others notice:

“See it lying there like a seed,
like black seeds.
See it taking root like weeds,
faster faster than the weeds,
all the shining seeds take root,
conspiring root,

and what curious flower or fruit

will grow from the conspiring root?’” [CP 50]

Bishop dramatises sorrow in this stanza by personifying tears. “Tears” representing sorrow establish their roots in the fabric of the black community giving rise to hatred and conspiracies against the dictators or captivators. Bishop uses verbs like “hanging,” “roll down and fall,” “falling” and repetition of verbs like “beating, beating,” “faster, faster” sets a motion in the poem. Motion in Bishop's epiphanies is sudden, violent and terrifying; the psyche of the Bishop epiphaniast-persona is subject to upheavals, eruptions, and surges from within and without, all of them threatening psychological dissolution. The song is all confusion; the singer poses insistent questions, obsessively beating back doubt to root out answers. She does so by mixing an absurdly simple rhyme scheme (AAAA, with many identical rhymes) and repetitions with an exotic narrative of raising a black army among “the leaves.” The song echoes the explosive question of William Blake from his rather a bitter poem “A Poison Tree”:

“And I watered it [his wrath] in fears
Night and morning with my tears,
And I sunned it with smiles
And with soft deceitful wiles.”

Bishop’s recognition of power of righteous and her revolutionary anger matches to that of Blake’s in the above poem. Fear conflates with pride in Blake’s lines as in Bishop’s; her “black seeds” are neither “dew” nor the “tears” of grieving but are the “beating,” “conspiring” source of rising black people. The ambivalence in the “The Weed” about whether to admire or fear the new growth resonates here; placing her fourth song at the intersection of these two emotions so as to give her singer the force of both. Bishop tests the gap between cultures in this remarkable poem. The song is necessarily confused because it does not have white confidence in the unshakable strength of its “conspiring root.” The “black seeds” do not even have the stability of “The Weed” since the growing weed took root in a nourishing organ, a heart. The seeds, which take “root like weeds” must do so to retaliate their
oppressors. The ground for growth is not sure hence the seeds must grow conspiratorially. The poem is puzzling and ambivalent because the identities take such varied forms - like “tears,” “dew,” “roots,” “weeds,” “fruits,” and “flowers” - all in the end are nightmarish and alarming. Tears, dew, seeds, fruits, flowers, and then an “army of faces,” getting “darker and darker” as the song concludes, mark the stages in the saddening transformation:

“Fruit or flower? It is a face.

Yes, a face.

In that dark and dreary place

each seed grows into a face.

Like a army in a dream

the faces seem,

darker, darker, like a dream.

They’re too real to be a dream.”[CP 50]

Bishop uses round shape, as in “dew or tears” to evoke the pathos of the isolated self. Bishop's recurrent epiphanic shapes – circular, spherical, or rounded – convey another kind of psychological threat, that of constriction and bondage rather than chaos. They often suggest death or a deadly form of life in their links to poison, crying, blackness, deception. With a backward glance before closing, Bishop briefly allows the possibility that this is all only a dream, but she dismisses worry or consolation even before leaving stanza and rhyme. This poem is a wonderful outcome of her physical displacement to different places, which lead to a better and deeper understanding of humans, especially the black community. Jean Pedrick, editor at Houghton Mifflin, wrote to Bishop after seeing “Songs for a Colored Singer” in Partisan Review to invite her to submit a book-length manuscript for the Houghton Mifflin Award for a first book of poetry:

“There is a fresh quality in the songs, and I think a superb bringing together of the tragic and the humorous in the way life so often brings them together, and poets so seldom do.”[36]
In year 1939 and 1940, Bishop has repeatedly submitted manuscripts for a book of poetry and had received publisher’s rejections or terms she could not abide in each case. Pedrick’s request was a surprise; Houghton Mifflin’s award was a financial boon, and it gave her poetry the publicity she needed. “Song for a Colored Singer,” the catalyst to her success, was a daring poem in the 1940s in its insistence that white and black concerns find their common ground, that racial and gendered struggles cannot be isolated from each other, and that as a poet she cannot accept opacity as an excuse for neglecting further inquiry. In her letter of response to Pedrick’s request for poems, Bishop wrote that “I am trying to add several more to the group of ‘songs’ and I hope you will like them, too.” She did not write another song, and it is hard to imagine what she would have written to follow this fourth, which leaves everything so importantly in doubt.

Bishop, in the wake of searching a home for self, reaches to the original existential resting place the mother’s womb which is the safest place ever in the journey of life. ‘The Fish’, ‘Filling Station’ and ‘The Moose’ – are poems where, Bishop creates versions of wombscapes not just as imagined retreats, or resting places from the difficulties of her life as woman and poet, but as actual spaces that becomes spaces of transformation and revelation. They are spaces that like the crack in the rock also bear a physical resemblance to a womb. They are spaces that are also characterised by rhythmical patterns that echo the ‘steady pulsing’ of the heart-beat, or the introduction of non-verbal sounds, or the kind of ‘slippages’ of language and meaning that erupt within and disrupt symbolic language. They are spaces where Bishop reclaims not just the female space from which she was ejected at birth, but the psychic female space lost to her in early childhood through her mother’s severe mental illness and subsequent incarceration in an asylum. Paradoxically, they all are spaces created not, as one would expect, in the female interiors of the home but in the traditionally male domains of a boat, a garage, and a bus.37

Bishop was a lesbian in the days when it was still a taboo and it’s hard not to think that her desire to stay in the closet impelled a broader secretiveness about her personal life. She referred her lovers Louise Crane, Lota de Macedos Soares and Alice Methfessel as her “friends.” Bishop never liked herself to be called a lesbian writer. But in her poem “The Fish” both the sides and the sensibilities of her character are reflected. The location of the poem “The Fish” is a boat on the open
sea - nothing can, apparently, be less homely or feminine than this setting. Bishop takes on a man’s subject – the capture of a huge fish – which already legendary writer of the genre like Robert Frost and Ernest Hemingway had dominated the big game. The poem’s opening boast, with its emphasis on size, seems to deliberately mimic the beginning of a fishing yarn:

“I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.

He didn’t fight. . . .

He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. . . .”[CP 42]

This poem in a way is about capture and captivity. The poet caught a huge fish and is looking at him as he hangs helplessly outside her boat. Bishop tries to hold the fish within the framework of her poetic psyche, to contain his alien being within imagery borrowed from house and home that, as Helen Vendler has shown, is her way of domesticating the strange. She begins almost sentimentally by describing him as ‘battered and venerable and homely’. But the pursuit of noting precise visual detail reveals his body as a palimpsest where she cannot avoid reading ruin:

“his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,

. . . shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.

. . . and infested

with tiny white sea-lice,”[CP 42]

Nature attacks on the weak, the infested and the vulnerable. There is a witty surrealism in the fish skin that resembles a pattern of full-blown roses on wallpaper, or fish flesh packed in like feathers in pillows, but the effect is far more to
emphasise the otherness of the fish than to render its familiarity. Bishop’s command of metaphor is sophisticated but accurate. She doesn’t use cliches but prefers to see for herself. Yet, on the other hand she rarely forces her comparisons beyond the limits of credibility. Presenting the fish homelier, Bishop does not omit the reminders of its potential dangers:

“While his gills were breathing in

the terrible oxygen

—the frightening gills,

fresh and crisp with blood,

that can cut so badly—”[CP 42]

The fish is in fact not ‘homely’ at all. Stressing the fish’s familiarity and the otherness, Bishop transforms the fish into veteran fighter. Bishop puts forth two images of the fish, first the imaginative sadistic picture of its beauty, and the other a new image of the fish with a brave fighters face. Bishop’s image of fish undergoes many revisions in the course of the poem to create the final symbolic weight of it. Though physically Bishop’s fish doesn’t put up a fight, his spirit remains intact:

“I looked into his eyes

which were far larger than mine

but shallower, and yellowed, . . .

They shifted a little, but not

to return my stare.”[CP 42]

The poem depicts an internal conflict, that of Bishop’s mind and external conflict, that what fish puts in which is perfectly natural in its motive and accomplishment. Fish in this poem represents nature. Fish’s refusal to return the poet’s gaze in a way symbolises nature’s denial. Bishop finds in nature the images of her own mind but nature doesn’t seem to return her compliment. Nature’s eyes like the eye of the fish are more tipping:

“—It was more like the tipping

of an object towards light.”[CP 43]
The fish refuses to be contained in a domestic feminine world, so Bishop shifts the metaphorical frame and displaces the setting to a masculine world of war. Bishop is considered a master of descriptive verse. Her descriptions are mesmerising and involving in nature. The fish is presented as a worrier ready with its arms and ammunition to reveal its masculine power:

“I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
– if you could call it a lip –
grim, wet, and weaponlike,”[CP 43]

The body of the fish now becomes the site where she can read his history as soldier. In recording the evidence of his survival instinct and courage - the ‘weaponlike…five big hooks’ and their trailing ‘pieces of fish-line’ and ‘a wire leader’ and ‘the swivel’ that has ‘grown firmly in his mouth’ – she combines the metaphoric skills of the poet with forensic eye of the pathologist. Ironically, the fish is finally ‘captured’. The hooks and broken lines are ‘like medals with their ribbons frayed and wavering, a five-haired beard of wisdom’. The fish’s victory is also the poet’s victory. What Bishop admired reading Darwin, she wrote to Anne Stevenson;

“was the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless, heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic – and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one feels that strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eye fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown.”38

It couldn’t be a better description of what happens at the end of the “The Fish” when Bishop’s eye suddenly slides away from the recording details of the fish to the interior of the boat. Looking hard at her opponent, Bishop moves beyond the military conquest to a “victory” in which both the contestant have a part:

“I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
. . .–until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.”[CP 44]
The line, “I stared and stared” reminds us of the mesmerising vision of William Wordsworth poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” where he says, “I gazed and gazed” linking it to the rich culture of Wordsworthian natural lyric. There is no doubt that the passage draws on a conscious, allusive and sophisticated, verbal wit. The rainbow, appearing as a sign of God’s covenant with Noah when the waters of the Flood receded, is a symbol of peace and reconciliation, of a bridge between this world and heaven. It is also visually witty: an oily film literally creates all over like the rainbow sheen. But in the sudden linguistic slippage by which ‘victory’ becomes identified with the oil there is also a sense of it operating on a level that is half unconscious, of Bishop ‘sliding giddily off into the unknown’. Bishop gets displaced to a mystic world. The hollow interior of the boat - one of Freud’s dream symbols of the uterus, literally a ‘vessel’ - becomes a fluid ‘wombscape’ where the oil from the bilge, normally in the context of boats, a substance with negative associations, is sanctified by its association with rainbow. It becomes holy oil, spreading its rainbow on each object that is damage with age and use, like a kind of blessing. The final repetition of ‘rainbow, rainbow, rainbow’ breaks into the poem as a radiance of both colour and ‘pure sound’. Bishop’s account in 'The Fish' of enjoying the thrill of the hunt and feeling pride when she pulls in an old fish that has escaped from many fishing lines in the past. Two things distinguish this narrative from other celebrated male narratives: In the first place, Bishop is enthralled by the beauty of the fish as it lies at the bottom of the boat; also by its uniqueness, its difference, its strangeness. And secondly, she lets the fish go. She does not wish to kill it. It is a profoundly different living creature from herself, and she wants that emblem of difference to be
preserved. The final line of the poem, ‘And I let the fish go’, deliberately reverses the expectations of first line. Bishop transforms a narrative about possession and domination and death into one about sympathy and survival and the triumph of love. Bishop’s boat is transformed into a womb/shrine where the only possibility is to “let the fish go.” The end of the poem is a revelation or a moment of truth. Fish is a symbol of human qualities she admired: courage, beauty, strength, perseverance. It is apparent that there is a philosophy in Bishop’s poem but it is difficult to attribute a specific philosophy of nature in her poems. She is not a true sceptic, for life has an immense meaning and value for her. Nor is she a mystic in spite of her sense of the ultimate unity of things. Her secularism and her common sense prevent her revelations from being more than temporary insights. Her poems offer moral affirmations and the epiphanic moments which are sufficient for a sensitive mind to ponder over it and opt for a transformation in self. Her simple ideology is more appealing than theories on philosophies. Her calm, understated tone and the ease with which she gradually shifted from observations of ordinary objects to philosophical insights are also highly regarded. In his poem “For Elizabeth Bishop,” Robert Lowell referred to Bishop as an “unerring Muse who makes the casual perfect.” Although her poetry is often deeply personal and expressive of her lifelong struggles with illness and alcoholism, critics note that Bishop avoided self-pity and egoism and extended her themes from the specific to the universal. Bishop’s works have reinforced the widespread critical opinion that Bishop's opus is an important contribution to twentieth-century literature.

In the American Phase, Bishop’s work is accumulation of realistic details shaped into imaginative forms. She never felt obliged to define her metaphysical ideas or to defend them. With this self-evasive vision, she is reluctant and painstakingly shy to directly offer much in the way of autobiographical details. Bishop was able to find a colloquial speech for her themes so as to hold the heart and mind together in an intricate process of poetic meditation. The poems in “North & South” exhibit the intricate conditions which could be inhabited. The poems in the first half of the book show objects and situations in the world which acknowledge the struggle put up to abode them. For example – “The Map” reflects the tension between the agitated land and the quite sea. Another set of poems from this volume describe mental experiences of entering into such an acknowledgement of limits. But
this journey, Bishop offers to undertake through dreams and allegories. For example- “The Weed” shows the reflective disturbance of emotions through the medium of dreams. “The Fish” and “The Roosters” are two most powerful enactments of descriptive tensions. Her physical displacement is seen in her shifts between the “north” of the “Cirque d’Hiver” and the “south” of the “Florida” and there is also a shift from a hermetic inwardness to a manifest concern with people and places outside self. The dialect of her poems were formed from the foibles of everyday character whose reasoning, interpretation and questions seemed silly but for which she had enough compassion to praise them and make them part of her creativity. Robert Pinsky saw Bishop’s language as the real cartography the “geographical situations of the soul” and showed how Bishop like William Wordsworth expressed in her poems nothing less than the central effort of the individual artistic consciousness to impose order in the world. The world that Bishop loves, the beautiful executed evocations of places and the inseparable feelings are reflected in her beach poem “Casabianca.” “The Monument” and “The Imaginary Iceberg” are outstanding examples of Bishop’s use of enclosure, creating walled spaces in poetry. Poem like “Large Bad Picture” help Bishop to connect herself to her concept of Nova Scotian home and “Jeronimo’s House” establishes the fragility of the concept of home as the “fairy palace.” In “North & South” we see Bishop constantly shifting scales between trying to domesticate what is resistant, trying and failing to bring the city under control. For example – “Love Lies Sleeping” the potential distorting pressure of the ever growing and ever demanding city can be seen in the shifting scale of the poem, from “an immense city,” “a chemical garden in a jar” to a “cool watermelon” and “unique loves.” Bishop’s uneasiness about the city life is also reflected in another poem of hers, “The Man-Moth” citing her experience of New York life.

Bishop was appointed consultant in poetry at congress library, while in America where she felt captivated in the hustle and bustle of the city life. Being at library meant that she answered questions from public, consulted with librarians about the poetry collection, supervised the recordings of poets reading their poetry for the audio archives, and also wrote poetry. About her time in the capital of United States (1949-1950), Bishop reminisces: “I hated Washington. There were so many government buildings that looked like Moscow.” All of a sudden, Bishop felt
alienated. In a letter to Pearl Kazin dated September 16, 1949, she writes, “Washington doesn’t seem quite real. All those piles of granite and marble, like a copy of another capital city someplace else...” An ardent lover of the natural phenomena and the vastness of the landscape, Bishop’s mind couldn’t handle the labyrinthine ways of the government and the bureaucracy; this engendered a sense of unease and claustrophobia in Bishop and encouraged her to start travelling south a year after her consultancy tenure was up. Displacement from the professional world which was all the time scrutinised was necessary for an introvert like Bishop. She felt alien to a continuously demanding dictating society. There was an urgent need to migrate and search a home which was more like her Nova Scotia home filled with her grandmother’s warmth and the serenity of landscape which fills void of her life. Bishop takes up travel to South in search of love and home.
CHAPTER II

REFERENCES


34. Ibid pp. 99.


38. Stevenson, Anne. Elizabeth Bishop (Twayne's United States authors series, 105), 1966, pp.66.