CHAPTER III

BRAZILIAN PHASE

“... close your eyes and tap your heels together three times. And think to yourself: “There is no place like home; there is no place like home; there is no place like home.””

Bishop was an inveterate traveller throughout her life and travel becomes the major metaphor in her poems. Her travels were directed towards discovering home in the flux of geography. It is this geographical displacement which escorted her to Brazil where her search for home was sufficed for eighteen years. The period from the year 1951 to 1969 comprises of the “Brazilian Phase”. Brazil becomes the country of her middle age and her full maturity as a poet, and it continues to provide a background for her years in Boston. Bishop’s two loved houses out of three, mentioned in her poem “One Art,” were in Brazil - one was ‘Samambaia’, a really handsome modern house, located on the mountains above Petropolis and the other was in Ouro Preto. Bishop’s stay in Brazil was the happiest period in her life as it reconnected her to the memorable days of Nova Scotia. She left the greyness of Washington, D. C. and the East Coast and entered the lush green colours of Brazil. Bishop’s literary outcome in this period was three volumes of poetry namely - “A Cold Spring” (1955), “Questions of Travel” (1965), and “Uncollected Work” (1969). Bishop’s poems, in this and subsequent phase were characterised by active descriptions, subject matter based on personal experiences and with the theme of displacement and search for home. Bishop, in this phase, created meaning in her poetry by using her personal experiences. Being a self-critical, analytical, intellect and eclectic mind, Bishop became an intermediary between Brazilian and American culture. She formulated a way of looking and writing which is trans-temporal and trans-cultural.
Bishop’s second volume of poems “A Cold Spring” was published after Bishop started to live in Brazil; it is mainly composed of poems on topics that preceded her stay in Brazil. “A Cold Spring” is dedicated to Dr. Anny Baumann who acted as physician, therapist and a life-time friend for Bishop. This book is best understood as an extension of Bishop’s middle phase, tending towards a consolidation and expansion of artistic ground gained after the achievement of the poems from “North & South” which had direct access to nature like in “Florida” (1938) and “The Fish” (1940). The nature of reality is a prominent theme in the Pulitzer Prize-winning volume poems “North & South-A Cold Spring” published in the year 1955 under a serviceable title, “Poem.”

The volume “A Cold Spring” shows descriptions and meanings, text and ornament, subject and object, the visible world and poet’s consciousness fused together to form a substance that is indescribable and a continuing joy, to which one returns again and again, ravished. The tropes of epistolary in “The Cold Spring” have often been read with the context of Bishop’s expatriate residence in Brazil, during which time she came to understand letter writing as an extension of her poetic labours. There are poems in this volume which express Bishop’s passionately personal feelings; though her sexuality and her feminism caused her uneasiness and led to more concealing and reticent poems. Poems in her “A Cold Spring”, reflect upon feminine desire and identity, and in the process look towards alternative love poetry like “A Cold Spring,” “Insomnia,” The Shampoo,” “The Argument” and “Sonnet.” Bishop mostly started composing poems of this volume before arriving to Brazil and published the volume after four years of her Brazilian stay; hence the poems are from a shy writer for whom emotions are essentially feelings of despair, loneliness and apprehension which get transcribed in her poetry. There is a curious disproportion to many of her love poems in the volume “A Cold Spring” where she restricts herself from engaging in a dialogue, and expressing her feelings directly. The opposition between north and south nonetheless remains alive: many poems return to the north, recreating seascapes of Nova Scotia seen through the eyes of a revisiting adult. Due to her excessive movement throughout her life and lack of stable relation, Bishop develops a yearning for her past. There is an intensive search and a desire to
relocate her Nova Scotia home through her art. Poems in this volume continue to explore the South, through the exotic paradoxes of Key West.

The title poem “A Cold Spring,” in her second volume of poetry with the same name, is basically a happy poem reflecting Bishop’s happiness due to her physical displacement to Brazil. Bishop’s desire of man being a part of nature and both coexisting cordially with each other is reflected in this poem. This title poem is dedicated to a friend, “For Jane Dewey, Maryland.” Bishop begins the poem by quoting Hopkins:

“Nothing is so beautiful as spring.”[CP 55]

Bishop, like Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost, is a poet much concerned with the truth of nature. Bishop seems to approach nature as a lover, trying to close the gap between what is perceived and what one desires. Bishop’s sense of truth appears as a kind of irony which is used against or with the metaphor of description. There are conventional images in the poem in the form of metaphor or personification. We are reminded all the time that there is pretence and hesitation in the poem which is part of Bishop’s scheme of the poem. Bishop shows her uneasiness about the projection of one season onto the entire natural order:

“A cold spring:

the violet was flawed on the lawn.

For two weeks or more the trees hesitate;

the little leaves waited,

carefully indicating their characteristics.

Finally a grave green dust

settled over your big and aimless hills.”[CP 55]

The poem opens with a description of cold spring which is a transition from extreme chilly weather. The poem has an element of Imagism in it. The images in the poem often relate to unstated subject or tenors, but they do not always have resonance in themselves. There are various images of “the hesitant tree,” “the little leaves waiting,” “Greenish-white dogwood infiltrated the wood,”
“each petal burned, apparently, by a cigarette-but,” etc which are not characteristic of a natural world. These images suggest that nature is similar to man in its characteristics. A new born calf seems “inclined to feel gay,” but its mother, eating the “wretched” after-birth does not feel happy. Man and nature is seen imitating each other; they are seen exchanging properties. There is a sensuous intermingling taking place at the outset of the poem indicating the underling passion and sexual energy of the “A Cold Spring.” The cow mother shows the same anguish and post parturition stress as the woman becoming mother would show. The tone of the poem makes us believe in the personifications for they are very apt and accurate descriptions:

“Four deer practised leaping over your fences.

The infant oak-leaves swung through the sober oak.

Song-sparrows were wound up for the summer,”[CP 55]

Bishop, in the second stanza, describes a much warmer and pleasant day which is full of various natural activities. The warmth of the day seems to make the rosebud stand “motionless,” though underneath there is an overwhelming “movement.” The apparent stillness of nature is more potent with activity beneath it; similar to human stillness in love or relationship, which is exploding with emotional activities beneath the calmer mask. The personification of four deer and in describing them, Bishop is in a way commenting on human behaviour of practising and retaining a learnt skill. “The infant oak-leave” is a pure metaphor inviting a comparison of appearances between the child and a leave. The “song-sparrow” is depersonified to be an inanimate, as if a mechanical instrument which can be tuned according to the requirement. Also the image of landscape “stretching miles of green limbs from the south” is a wonderful personification attempted to establish an association between man and nature. Beautification of nature is suggestive of nature being loaded with feminine features and aesthetic beauty:

“In his cap the lilacs whitened,

then one day they fell like snow.

Now, in the evening,
a new moon comes.

The hills grow softer. Tufts of long grass show”[CP 55]

Bishop’s use of “his” refers to a masculine identity for which the preparation are on. The felling of being in love demands for more adornments; hence nature tries to beautify itself and its lover by adorning its lover with “liliacs” which are more whitened than ever. Bishop wrote to Robert Lowell that “I’m really a minor, female Wordsworth – at least, I don’t know anyone else who seems to be such a Nature Lover”. Like Wordsworth, Bishop often exerts her descriptive powers on landscapes, in meditations that express the poet’s inner life as much as they evoke the physical landscape. The coming of “a new moon” is indicative of a new time which is filled with warmth and love. Similar, to the newness Bishop experienced in her Brazilian home. Though the moon is the same age old moon but in the eyes of the lover it appears totally transformed, with a loveable newness. With the warmth of love the “hills grow softer,” by giving these contrasting characteristics, Bishop is trying to emphasise the power of love over everything. Individually taken these images have limited resonance as an ordinary figure of speech may have, but taken together in the context of the poem there precision suggest that they have different kind of resonance altogether. These images in “A Cold Spring” collectively suggest that a very special relationship exist between human, natural and artificial phenomenon. The poem made up of tropes is a way of looking towards this or that piece of scenery:

“Now, from the thick grass, the fireflies
begin to rise:
up, then down, then up again:
lit on the ascending flight,
drifting simultaneously to the same height,
-exactly like the bubbles in the champagne.
-Later on they rise much higher.
And your shadowy pastures will be able to offer
these particular glowing tributes
every evening now throughout the summer.”[CP 55]

The fireflies in the poem turn into a “glowing tribute” to the landscape. Bishop in the closing stanza of the poem drops the whimsical comparisons and presents the landscape in the glowing light of nature. The mixture of artificial and natural, of wit and of profound emotion is peculiar and succeeds well in the poem at the end. In the end, nature and urbanity are weirdly shown together in the form of “bubbles in champagne.” Bishop deliberately brings together human, civilisation and urban elements in the poem and identifies them with nature. The images in the poem do not stress the importance of the nature for man. In fact Bishop shows man in continuum with nature, where everything is placed in equality. The poet’s joy in spring is the joy of belonging to it not of elevating her sprite through it.

In the volume “A Cold Spring”, Bishop’s poems show a definite shift from an earlier often detached point of view to a more active and sensual one. But the poem “Invitation to Marianne Moore” acts as a relief from the intimacy of Bishop and Moore’s relationship, the desire of this poem is to connect with someone else at a less private level, which is an occasion for Bishop to experiment with a new form, that is, an invitation or a letter. Bishop and Moore’s friend was much admired at the literary circles; Moore served as a mentor for the young Bishop. They met when Bishop was in her early 20s and Moore in her late 40s and Bishop often mention the generational differences in their lives. They maintained their friendship for more than 35 years, often corresponding in letters. Moore was a good reader, a wise adviser and an honest critic and reviewed Bishop's poetry. Bishop wrote “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” for a special issue of “Quarterly Review of Literature” in honour of Moore’s sixtieth birthday:

“From Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning,  
please come flying.  
In a cloud of fiery pale chemicals, 
please come flying,
to the rapid rolling of thousands of small blue drums
descending out of the mackerel sky
over the glittering grandstand of harbor-water,

please come flying."[CP 82]

In the opening stanza of the poem, Bishop extends a much aggressive invite to Moore which Moore might not relinquish. The language used in the poem is far removed from Moore’s style but closer to Bishop’s own interest in Pablo Neruda. “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” is a poem modelled after “Alberto Rojas Giménez viene volando,” (“Alberto Rojas Giménez, Come Flying”) an elegy by the Chilean Nobel laureate, Pablo Neruda.³ Bishop’s “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” uses Neruda as part of a “harsh, obsessed, violent” poetics which bucks against the editing advice Moore (and her mother, Mary Moore) proffered Bishop. In her letters to Moore, Bishop used “violence” as a point of distinction between the style she wished to write in and the style the Moores were attempting to impose. Bishop’s use of “violent” aesthetic in her interpretation is derived from the Primitivist artists, the German as well as Swiss painter Paul Klee. Bishop engages Primitivism to imply her preference for a Surrealist aesthetic and to lend weight to her future use of the style. Chronologically, Bishop encountered Klee before she did Neruda. Her engagement with Klee’s work occurs in 1940. Bishop first discussed Neruda’s writing in 1942. The letter of invitation makes reference to ritualistic travel across the Brooklyn Bridge, the mesmerism of the travel which became a major point of Bishop’s poem. Bishop wrote to refuse Moore’s editing advice for the poem “Roosters”:

“I know that aesthetically [sic] you are quite right, but I can’t bring myself to sacrifice what (I think) is a very important “violence” of tone - which I feel to be helped by what you must feel to be just a bad case. . . It makes me feel like a wonderful Klee picture I saw at his show the other day, The Man of Confusion. I wonder if you could be mesmerized across the Brooklyn bridge to see it again with me?”[OA 96]

The Klee painting of the ‘Man of Confusion’ is one authority among artworks which represents influence of power to divide the artist. The picture shows a
male figure separated into component parts and scattered across the picture plane. In the book “Deep Skin: Elizabeth Bishop and Visual Art,” Peggy Samuels connects this separation to a poetics of lines broken up and separated by the three-step-stanza. The “violence” is symptomatic of Bishop’s desire for an individuated poetics. Instead of following a normative form, say iambics, or an intricate construction, say Moore’s syllabics in “A Carriage from Sweden,” Bishop presents a poetic practice that is an outright dismissal of Moore’s advice. “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” is a palpable rejection of Moore’s mentoring; and Klee enters as the one Surrealist Bishop has made available to Moore, and Neruda enters her poetics unannounced. The poem “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” seems to describe Moore in such detail that it indicates an intended apposition and opposition between Moore and Klee. Bishop uses Neruda’s translation idiosyncratically as a means of breaking away from a mentor. The Primitivism is used to displace Moore from a position as poetic source. Bishop’s encounter with the Primitive aesthetic is not intended to bring something into that English, but to advance idiosyncratic English with a series of indefinable limits. In such a regard, translation is not between the limits of languages, but also between the limits of experience and expression. Nevertheless, Bishop locates Moore among traditions of English-language sensibility and expressivity. There is a role-reversal wherein Bishop assumes the mentor role over the “mesmerized” Moore. Bishop invites Moore to Surrealism to lead her away from properness, and to express her personal dissatisfaction with the sensibility. Bishop arouses impassionate atmosphere in the poem as there is “a cloud of fiery pale chemicals” or the glittering grandstand, this invitation encourages a more female-centred world where “museums will behave / like courteous male bower bird.” Further Bishop highlights the peculiarities of Moore’s dress like “the pointed toe of each black shoe,” and “broad brim of your hat.” The descriptions Bishop gave of Moore’s writing are to the order of mimicry. The poem, which is a double insofar as a translation, doubles on the level of “invitation” and “rejection.” In “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore,” Moore’s affectations resolve to agency and opportunity denied:

“We can sit down and weep; we can go shopping.
or play at a game of constantly being wrong
with a priceless set of vocabularies,
or we can bravely deplore, but please
please come flying.”[CP 83]

Moore mentored Bishop, and, had critical objections about the use of certain words in Bishop’s poem “Roosters” to which Bishop expressed her indifference to her advice. Bonnie Costello, the Moore scholar, asks “Is this Bishop’s reminder about the limits of art?” The oft-repeated point that, Moore objected to Bishop’s inclusion of the word “water-closet” in “Roosters” is repeated to indicate a puritanical bent in the Moore’s editing. In the passage of “Efforts of Affection,” Bishop notes “I was scolded for having used ‘water closet’ in a poem, but by then I had turned obstinate”. “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” is a melting pot of Bishop’s influences. The poem reflects ambivalence towards Moore which runs as an undercurrent through Bishop’s writing. Klee is associated with a tonal “violence,” and, by then Bishop, associated with Neruda’s violent stylistic:

“With dynasties of negative constructions
darkening and dying around you,
with grammar that suddenly turns and shines
like flocks of sandpipers flying,
please come flying.”[CP 83]

One stratum of “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” is a response to the division she noted in the Klee. The “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” goes slightly further by separating the parts of Moore’s poetics into distinct divisions, each marked off from the other by the end line “please come flying.” Samuels identifies one of these divisions–“grammar that suddenly turns and shines”–as the crux of the poem. The line from “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” is superficially in reference to Moore’s use of multiple negatives and the way a negative clause may be twisted, repeatedly, to the affirmative. Each of the line-based divisions which Bishop employs in resistance to Moore’s editing principles is a turn to the pluralised voices present in the text: Neruda
and Klee. The many images of Moore—“flying,” “writing,” “lion-leading” and “weeping”—are separated. The end of the poem is the repetition of the first line of the poem:

“Come like a light in the white mackerel sky,

come like a daytime comet

with a long unnebulous train of words,

from Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning,

please come flying.”[CP 83]

Gilbert and Gubar noted the eroticism of this invitation - “come flying,” “come like a light,” “come like a daytime comet,” “Mount the sky with natural heroism.” The poem is separated into different pieces just like the Klee’s “Man of Confusion.” The degree to which the components of the poem are separate is less important than their plurality. The intention of such a poetics is the plural coding of a single text. “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” presents a list of Moore’s qualities liked by Bishop but it is more of a displacement from Moore’s sole influence. The poem appears a reconciliatory reaction to Moore’s criticism of “Roosters” and the subsequent Man of Confusion’s aesthetics which Bishop attempted to bring to Moore’s notice. The poem, “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” serves with its plaintive refrain “please come flying” as an invitation for Moore to come and visit Manhattan from her home in Brooklyn.

Bishop’s last poem of this volume “The Shampoo” is another kind of invitation to accept one’s self by accepting love. This poem is an outcome of her displacement to Brazil which gave her the courage to express her most personal feeling of intimacy that is rare for a reticent writer like Bishop to articulate in her art. If a sense of loss often permeates Bishop’s work, the desire for connection and intimacy becomes increasingly prominent. Bishop’s ability to suffer loss also measures her ability to feel love. “The Shampoo” has Brazilian setting which is felt in the opening of the poem:

“the lichens, grow

by spreading, gray, concentric shocks.

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They have arranged

to meet the rings around the moon, although

within our memories they have not changed.”[CP 84]

The poem begins with the description of “lichens” that “grow on the rocks.” According to Bill Bryson’s account lichens are “the hardiest visible organisms on Earth,” they show slow growth, sometimes taking “more than half a century to attain the dimension of a shirt button,” and “thrive in environments where no other organs would go- on blowy mountaintops and arctic wastes, where there is little but rock and rain and cold and almost no competition.” Bishop is trying to establish the similarity between the lichens and human relationship. Relations are hardest things to achieve, they take time to bond strong, they develop in people which may be different altogether, and are offered to you at an unexpected time in life. For Bishop, finding her soul mate in Brazil and having an unusual lesbian relation was a “still explosion” in her life. The word “concentric” evokes the memories of the Brazilian weekly fair where the nested tin basins – smallest to largest - were placed for sale. The still and the unchanged nature of rocks, moon and stars are belied by the adjective describing them: explosions, shocks, shooting. Bishop, in the second stanza of the poem, indicates upon the role of memory in relationships and the sanctity of the supreme “the heavens will attend as long on us.” Bishop shows that relations would always remain intact if one respects and remembers the bases of it, and also seeks blessings from the almighty. A middle-aged love poem can slip easily into self-parody; hence there is a seriousness of tone in the poem with an advice not to be too “precipitate and pragmatically.” For time is / nothing if not amenable,” indicates not just potential for nothing or indifference of it in human affairs. In relationships if past remains as an unchanged memory, “look what happens,” it can bind the lovers together. The poem upholds the importance of time, it is only time which can heal and bless or “amen.” Bishop implies time by referring to the “black hair:”

“The shooting stars in your black hair

in bright formation

are flocking where, so straight, so soon?”[CP 84]
The gentleness felt in the poem is a note in Bishop’s poetry. The greying hair can be recast in the lover’s eyes into “shooting stars” “in bright formation” and suggest the possibility of the romantic transformation, that passion can work at any age. Bishop can think “the shooting stars” in the hair of a “dear friend” which the narrator of the poem wishes to wash:

“- Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin, battered and shiny like the moon.”[CP 84]

There is an expression of acceptance and responsiveness in the last two lines of the poem. This acceptance can bind the relation stronger. “The Shampoo” was penned when Lota de Macedo Soares and Bishop’s intimacy was firmly established. In the last lines of the poem Bishop describes herself washing Lota’s hair in the pool near her the study of their Samambaia house. Ashley Brown expresses, “Elizabeth and Lota got along well together, had this great ease with one another. I remember well the way Elizabeth used to wash Lota’s hair. . . Lota loved it. It was a ritual Elizabeth made [into] a poem.”[OB 142]

The poem is indicative of the provisional reciprocity which is necessary to sustain relations. Loss of significant relations in life, and importance of them has probably guided Bishop in writing this poem. Bishop’s poems do not have stark confessions, but rather passions covert and implied. These poems celebrate Bishop’s happiness and fulfilment in Brazil. There is a festive displacement in Bishop’s life from loneliness to companionship. It is in Brazil that Bishop’s search for home was sufficed to an extent of eighteen years. The invitation to a Shampoo and an invitation to Moore are confirmations of intimacy within this serene and lush environment of Brazil.

Bishop’s companionship with Lota de Macedo Soares, in this period gave her some amount of fulfilment but it also connected her, through poems, to her earlier days of Nova Scotia. Bishop got frequently displaced, through her poems, from the present time to the past history. In Bishop’s art, there is a constant struggle with the present metaphorically represented as a dialectic involving natural landscape and the claims of history. History, for Bishop is not chronological time but symbol for every failed connection. In the poem “Argument,” there is a displacement of emotions from the past time to the
present. As Elizabeth Bishop does with other poems, she is able to make topics that might seem cliché or ordinary and make them unique and beautiful. For this particular poem, she creates the image of typical arguments. In general, arguments are ways in which people try to come to an agreement. The poem is a lament for some lost love, yet the rift is related in terms of a battle between distance and desire on one hand, and days and voices on the other:

“Days that cannot bring you near
or will not,

Distance tries to appear
something more than obstinate,
argue argue argue with me
endlessly

neither proving you less wanted nor less dear.”[CP 81]

“Days,” in the poem, connotes history, which is full of all the past relations; whereas, distance is a spatial measure representing the migration away from home, which is away from most loved Nova Scotia in Bishop’s case. People argue, there won't always be an agreement and that arguments will not necessarily bring two people closer. But rather than the accumulation of experience in increments of intensity, the arguments of past days are merely a record of cancelled hopes and fears. History is the absence rather than the presence of connection in the poem. For Bishop, history becomes merely another map, a spatialization of relationships that always appears as distance. Repetition of the word "argue" creates an illusion of continuous argument and a force to prove the argument right. And when there is no willingness to stop arguing, it "neither proving you less wanted nor less dear." In the poem “Argument”, there is no distinction between the language of history and language of space. Bishop very meticulously displaces history into space through language-

“Distance: Remember all that land
Beneath the plane;
that coastline

of dim beaches deep in sand

stretching indistinguishably

all the way,

all the way to where my reasons end?”[CP 81]

Distance is all the “land,” “coastline,” “beaches,” and “sand” of the Nova Scotian landscape which was the most loved place from her past. Nova Scotia had the tender memories of her most loved home and its landscape which repeatedly appear in her various poems. The landscape is such an obsession from Bishop’s past that it stretches till her present memory. Her nostalgia for the geography of Nova Scotia is so profound and deep that it knows no reasons and logic of a cognitive mind. Distance is a trauma of being away from home:

“Days: And think

of all those cluttered instruments,

one to a fact,

canceling each other’s experience;

how they were

like some hideous calendar

“Compliments of Never & Forever, Inc.”[CP 81]

Every day experience was disentangled and got accumulated in the memory only to become past; and past, for Bishop, is a history. Days or history, for Bishop, is full of people from the past leading to an argument of loved once and undesired people. The conflicts arising among her people leading “to cancelling each other’s experience” was the most painful argument from past days. Bishop creates history of her childhood days in her poem and displaces herself into it. Her memory is a calendar of past days, full of “Compliments of Never & Forever” incorporating all the elements from the past. Past is like an ocean, always there unmoved, into which the present sinks:

“The intimidating sound
of these voices
we must separately find
can and shall be vanquished:
Days and Distance disarrayed again
and gone…”[CP 81]

The voices from the past cannot be separated as if they are in continuous argument, and the moment they are separated they would cease to exist. For Bishop, staying in Brazil bought her close to her past, her nostalgia would be on and off with her. The two components of “Days and Distance” are in pseudo-dialogue, in the poem, and come to participate in the present life. Days are related to the cancellation of experience, and distance is inextricably bound to the process of memory “stretching indistinguishably” to appoint where “reasons end.”

One of Bishop's earlier attempts to reconnect with the past is also seen in her poem "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance." The inspiration for the poem is the Bulmer Family Bible, which is housed at the archive in Wolfville. Bishop lived in Nova Scotia roughly from the age of five to six, a key period in a child's development, especially with regard to language acquisition. The thought that troubles Bishop is that the book of fiction and history may not be a canonical one, whether Bible or secular text, there is something more than the concordance (a system of reference to all important words) comes from the occasional glimpses into the illustrations. In the poem, “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” a traveller is tantalised by the promise of vision beyond the random encounter:

“Thus should have been our travels:
serious engravable.

The Seven Wonders of the World are tired
and a touch familiar, but the other scenes,
innumerable, though equally sad and still,
are foreign.”[CP 57]
The poem recalls exotic images from this Bible and considering the fact that Bishop lived in the same household as that Bible; the poet likely associated it with memories of her childhood in Nova Scotia, her family, and the wonder of language itself. After insisting that our travels should have been engravable, Bishop begins to see the emotional deadness of the steel engraving of her Bible, and thus the limitations of vicarious (imaginary) travel. There may be the merit of variety in foreignness, but these so-called wonders lack surprise, they are “tired / and a touch familiar.”

“... Often the squatting Arab,

or group of Arabs, plotting, probably, against our Christian Empire,

while one apart, with outstretched arm and hand

points to the Tomb, the Pit, the Sepulcher.”[CP 57]

The poem itself is full of a number of images from the family Bible and lent those with capital letters like, the "squatting Arab," “the Tomb,” “the Pit,” and “the Sepulcher” reflecting Bishop's learning process in Nova Scotia suggesting their historic or religious significance for Bishop; their emphasis also rests uneasily on death, on what is sad and still. This poem is one of many attempts Bishop made to reconnect with her Nova Scotian identity and her home in Nova Scotia. The poem is a story of “God’s spreading fingerprint.” Only Christians in the illustrations make a connection from place to place; and in the margin are the sinister “Arabs, plotting” or looking amused. Together these figures give unity to the poem. Bishop in this poem also catalogues one of her various displacements with Louise Crane. While on their way to Gibraltar their first destination was Morocco, chiefly because they “cannot resist the temptation,” to go to “the most improper country in the world.” Later arriving at Tangier, Bishop was down with asthma and Bronchitis necessitating travel by rented car and a constant care to protect her health. Beginning their tour from Rabat, they moved on to Casablanca, Marrakech, Taroudant, and Agadir, then to the Mountains of Meknes where they hired a guide to show the city. The guide, a large boy sent them through the muddy road where they got stuck. They sat down for two hours surrounded by the Arabs, before a few of them got
together to lift the car out. The poem “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” recalls the other part of Morocco vividly:

“And in the brothels of Marrakesh
the little pockmark prostitutes
balanced their tea-trays on their heads
and did belly-dances; flung themselves
naked and giggling against our knees,
and asking for cigarettes.”[CP 58]

Bishop and Louise overstayied in Morocco only because they loved the country and it was very different from the places Bishop had visited earlier. She found the night life beautiful and the landscape “perfectly unearthly” but she wrote nothing in her diary, which she otherwise did, suggests that she was moved deeply. Bishop in the poem renders every worldly fact with an exchangeable quality, and the loss is that of history and the pathos of things one may come to know through experience and travel. Distancing from Nova Scotia, Bishop felt was a loss of history for her. Bishop’s repressed anxiety surfaces:

“I saw what frightened me most of all:
A holy grave, not looking particularly holy”[CP 58]

Bishop is reminded of “little cousin” “Arthur’s coffin” from her childhood days of Nova Scotia and being unable to understand its stillness she was aghast by it. This poem can be divided into three movements: the first examines the engravings in a family Bible; the second recalls disjointed glimpses of the poet’s travels; the third return to the Bible, finding the “old Nativity,” a fiction whose warm, concentrating power stands against the disconnection, flatness, and fearfulness of travel. The three movements show three different ways of knowing, through artefacts, travel, and fictions. Transitions between these perspectives constitute the action of the poem. Bishop’s search for graven truth in this poem is a failure, and the monuments and wonders observed in one’s travels are corrupt, bewildering, or in decay; but one still has the imaginative strength to summon a vision that will answer, though temporarily, one’s most pressing spiritual needs. The poem ends with envisions beyond everything.
“Open the heavy book. Why couldn’t we have seen
this old Nativity while we were at it?
- the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,
an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,
colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,
and, lulled within, a family with pets,

-and looked and looked our infant sight away.” [CP58]

In this stanza Bishop recounts her earlier travels through a world in which
“Everything only connected by “and” and “and.” Bishop seems to have
painfully lost her infant sight her “old nativity.” This phrase carries a mysterious
yearning to stop observing. Bishop glimpses the terrifying folk truth behind the
apparent satisfaction of a sight, “we’d give our eyes for” only to witness “the old
Nativity” in “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” with
engraving memories of a childhood book. Bishop in the poem poses a question,
“Why couldn’t have we seen ... while we were at it?” which implies a child’s
pleading, “Why couldn’t we stay there?” Bishop talks about a home or a
childhood place where she is not allowed to grow at the hands of a ruthless
destiny. The book, the sacred Bible, is not easy to open because it is difficult to
admit the strength of the child’s plea. Any place where we live in, savage or
homely, dream-house or rough shelter, we ourselves and the circumstances have
a role in the making of it and yet once made, it is to be inherited forever. The
last line of the poem yields an ambiguous truth about nostalgia: to look our sight
away is to gaze our fill, but also to look until we do not see it at all.

Bishop’s physical displacement and a continuous search for home in many
ways fulfils the modern American poet’s search for what William Carlos
Williams called “a sense of place”. Like him, Bishop’s poems often describe the
significance of her experience of a place, while defining some particular aspect
of existence in the process. This search for communion with a place obviously
has its roots in Bishop’s own life. Her childhood was defined by instability as
she was shunted from one relative to another after her Mother’s committal to
mental asylum. The titles of her poems, many a times, tell us where the speaker
is and descriptions of the surroundings tell us whether she has come in terms with the place. These places are Geographical mirrors in her poems. “The Bight” is one such poem by Bishop describing the chaotic nature of existence. The poem is subtitled “on my birthday” a suggestion to the resonance beyond the poem. The poem is a detailed study of a coastal bay. The opening lines provide a description of the speaker’s surroundings through a series of metaphors which are disturbing in their association with death. The landscape is corrupt and rotting:

“At low tide like this how sheer the water is.

White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare

and the boats are dry, the pilings dry as matches.”[CP 60]

Many of Bishop’s Brazilian poems recreate sea-spaces of Nova Scotia seen through the eyes of an adult Elizabeth. But this bay is unglamorous tropical bay. The dryness of the boats and the “crumbling ribs” is indicative of the inactivity and perversion of the place. The repetition of “r” and the broad vowels have a cacophonous effect, startling the reader. The water is a source of corruption, as it facilitates the process of corrosion. The “water in the bight doesn’t wet anything,” “one can smell it turning to gas,” it shows the extent to which the pollution and corruption has taken place:

“Absorbing, rather than being absorbed,

the water in the bright doesn’t wet anything,

the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible.

One can smell it turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire

one can probably hear it turning to marimba music.”[CP 60]

The poem takes an ironic look at Baudelaire’s temptation to find inflated analogies between nature and the human soul. Richard Howard Nemerov called Bishop “one of the most profound Baudelaireans,” he had in mind this modest poem. He first noted the poem’s essential feature, its intention to discover analogies between human and natural activities. Though there is an irony intended in the poem, when Bishop makes the nature does which it is not meant for and doesn’t do what it is suppose to do. Nature does all the unnatural things
in the poem. Birds seem strangely human in the poem, “going off with humorous elbowing.” There is a sense of mechanised beach for “little ocher dredge at work,” leading to the destruction and erosion of the natural beauty of the beach. It is this sound of the muddy dredge that evoked the dark romantic marimba music but probably Baudelaire would have forgotten this. Bishop tries to deflate Baudelaire’s irony in this poem. The habitat at the beach is seriously affected as the “pelicans crushed,” “man-of-war birds ... open their tails like scissors on the curves.” The human interference is devastating the serenity of the place “a fence of chicken wire along the dock,” the blue-gray shark tails are hung up to dry,” and boats are beached while some are wrecked. The description of the birds is replete with mechanical similes. Bishop’s homely images of communication through “the frowsy sponge boats keep coming in / with the obliging air of retrievers” reveal an intention to deflate Baudelaire’s haughty analogies for “the inner and secret relations of things.” Bishop suggests that facing the same scene Baudelaire would have been alert primarily to the chance for synthetic transformation: alert, not to the scene itself, but to its exotic possibilities. This is the scene where Bishop sarcastically intends to celebrate her birthday. The repulsive description of the bay is domesticated by its comparison with the mechanical associations, our everyday survival instruments. Bishop uses simile to enhance her comparison:

“Some of the little white boats are still piled up
against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in’
and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last bad storm,
like torn-open, unanswered letters.
The bight is littered with old correspondences.”[CP 60]

There is nothing romantic in the description of the beach in the poem. The objects which are described are as disorganised as the bay itself. The boats are compared to “torn open, unanswered letters.” There is an outrageous pun on words like “unanswered letters” and “old correspondences;” bringing back in the poem the reference to the French symbolist poet, Baudelaire. Baudelaire is subjected to the good humoured irony in this poem. Baudelaire’s faith in “correspondences” rested in the long tradition with parallels to the devotionals
poetry of Hopkins. As Octavia Paz points out in an imaginative study of the concepts underlying modern poetry:

“The belief in correspondences between beings and worlds predates Christianity, crosses the middle age, and through Neo-Platonism, illumination, and occultism, reached the nineteenth century.”

Baudelaire and Hopkins agreed on the need to search material things for their analogies to the human soul. While Bishop recognises that such analogies can be found, she does not treat correspondences as articles of faith. This is clear from her ironic treatment of Baudelaire in “The Bight.” The correspondences Bishop discovers are often funny, sometimes accidental. Octavia Paz observed, “Modern poetry is awareness of [the] “dissonance,” which permit her to explore transience through irony, with what she called “knowledge of necessity”.” She has a kind of tough, cheerful resignation to metaphysical uncertainty that allows her to see through all kinds of pretensions. “The Bight” wryly imitates this philosophy. Bishop’s “correspondences” are old and plain, not “secret” or “almost divine.” As an imagist, Bishop expands imagism, making it a medium for complex philosophical investigation. As a symbolist, she draws her symbols back towards rigorously observed natural fact. She does protest against the nature as Baudelaire did. For Baudelaire, “correspondences” occurred when the external world of nature corresponded with the internal thoughts and feelings of an observer, allowing for an understanding of the inner self. He represented this process through the use of his “marimba music” and, hence, Bishop makes the dredging machine beat out:

“Click. Click. Goes the dredge,
and bring up a dripping jawful of marl.
All the untidy activity continues,
aawful but cheerful.”[CP 60]

Bishop makes a sharp and pointed observation of the surroundings. All the “correspondences” that Bishop establishes in the poem point towards the epigraph “On my Birthday,” pointing towards the answer that this predicament has a peculiar place in her life probably a kind of similarity is established between the place and Bishop’s home. The rhythm of the click, click allows the
speaker to find some harmony in these “untidy” surroundings. Is the bay being compared to the poet’s untidy desktop? If so then we can read the whole poem as an extended metaphor for the poet’s life where “All the untidy activity continues,” making the poet awfully “cheerful”. This is where Bishop allows her birthday to be celebrated, in a storm ridden inlet where small-craft victories are celebrated.

Bishop wrote poems on various places; her settings may shift between bustling Manhattan streets and craggy New England coasts but thematic attention tends to be dedicated to places where labour is being performed. Whether farms, fishing villages, or factories, the ebb and flow of industry comes to form a symbolic extension of the human drive to coordinate, discern, and finally regulate the world, which she had experienced right from her childhood in the provincial village of Nova Scotia. Where there is the grime of work there is also the trace of energy and therefore hope, whether at the “Filling Station,” “At the Fishhouses,” or “The Bight” where work goes on, the world is constructed in the midst of them. These are the places where Bishop seems to be more homely and comfortable than the urban luxurious houses. These are the places where "the crumbing ribs of marl protrude and glare / and the boats are dry, the pilings dry as matches," where the "untidy activity continues, /awful but cheerful." (By her request, "Awful but Cheerful" is carved on her gravestone in Worcester.)

Bishop’s poems in “Brazilian Phase” are reminiscent of her Nova Scotian life and its sea. Bishop’s love for sea, its inhabitants, and life dependent on it frequently are referred to in her poems. Sea is a symbol of home for Bishop and its expanse indicate her ongoing search for home. The seeds for the poem “At the Fishhouses” were sowed in Bishop’s 1946 trip taken to Nova Scotia, her first return in fifteen years to her home village, occurring just after the publication of her first book of poetry. Brett Millier in his biography of Bishop rightly states; “From the many notebook entries of this summer, and the poems that grew from those notes, it seems clear that the trip was both deeply disturbing and deeply significant to Elizabeth in ways that it would take her years to articulate.”

At Lockport Beach on the Atlantic Ocean, she made a note to herself:
"Description of the dark, icy clear water – clear dark glass – slightly bitter (hard to define). My idea of knowledge. This cold stream, half drawn, half flowing from a great rocky breast." Earlier, in the evening sunlight at Ragged Islands...”

Bishop’s poem “At the Fishhouses” begins, as a poem by Marianna Moore might, with a description of a scene that seems eternally suspended. Bishop slowly exposes the scene with a willingness to let it speak for itself in a declarative present tense;

“Although it is a cold evening,
down by one of the fishhouses
an old man sits netting,
his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,
a dark purple-brown,
and his shuttle worn and polished.”[CP 64]

In the opening lines, Bishop’s tone is impersonal and voice calm. The perfectly regular iambic pentameter lines separate the poem into half, describing the activities of an old fisherman at the shoreline of Nova Scotia. The poem is not only history but history transformed. The lone fisherman, in his Wordsworthian solitary, is involved into his routine activity. The deliberate slow opening of the poem close to fifty lines portray the sight, sound and senses so as to involve us in the poem:

“The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs
and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up
to storerooms in the gables
for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.”[CP 64]

The force of the poem is doubled with the doubling of the adjectives like “steeply peaked” and “narrow, cleated”, and clotting of the consonants as “f, f, s, p, r” etc so as to force a vision on the readers and make them a part of this creativity. Bishop is seen creating relation between the speaker and the reader, between words and between Nova Scotia and also in her poem everything is
linked with each other:

“The big fish tubs are completely lined

with layers of beautiful herring scales

and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered

with creamy iridescent coats of mail,

with small iridescent flies crawling on them.”[CP 64]

The scales and the wheelbarrows are linked through similar plaster and everything in the scene turns iridescent. Bishop also creates syntactic links with the repetition of the word "iridescent." The connectedness blooms etymologically, for "iridescent" links with the iris plant, the iris of the eye, and the rainbow. There is crudeness as well as delicacy in the description of the landscape’s age-old subjection to the sea - to the caking, the plastering, the lining, and the silvering - over which everything turns to iridescence or sequins; at the same time the sea rusts them and wears them away. The solitude of the poet, mapmaker, and traveller necessitates not only active looking but also the lucid regarding of the copiousness of others. The visual description in "At the Fishhouses," and throughout Bishop's poetry, insists the observer enter into the perceptual field and come into relation with others, and thus, however provisionally, stave off isolation, silence, and death. For Bishop, her childhood memories were like soul of her existence, after every reality and its observation she had to return to those connections. Who she is and where she and her people have been and grown, she implies in this poem. Their place of existence is about to disappear, which will transform their sense of origin into a memory forever. For the first time in the poem, Bishop’s presence is clearly felt with her use of pronoun “my”, she becomes a participant instead of observer:

““The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.

He was a friend of my grandfather.

We talk of the decline in population

and of codfish and herring

while he waits for a herring boat to come in.”[CP 64]
Everything here appears on the edge of the end. Bishop becomes an active participant, offering the old man a “Lucky Strike” and engaging with him in conversation. The fisherman acquiesces to the poet's distant manner of closeness, her friendly purchase of rapport. Reminders of historical process now become more overt, "he was a friend of my grandfather" implies her grandfather's death, and "the decline of the population" tells us of broader changes. She gives him almost a parody of his profession—a Lucky Strike, as if to imply that is the only way he'll get any luck. Her little gift belongs to the fishing-sport from the world of "The Fish," where she can toss back her prize and feel heroic for it. It has nothing to do with this fisherman's fishing. In his commercial, unheroic, blue-collar salt's world, he must wait for his fish, for his "boat to come in"; and in some sense the boat he now waits for, is the soon-to-come ferry of death. He is almost worn away, like his knife, like the population that declines, as if in the fishing mores as well as in numbers, so unlike the unnumbered fish, which are always the same. The human enterprise depend upon and is dwarfed by the sea, just as the fishhouse ramps lead out of, but back into the water:

"Down at the water's edge, at the place
where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
descending into the water,"[CP 65]

Bishop wins some authority on these encircling powers of water. Moreover, Bishop's enchantment with this place emerges as a fascination not so much with the visible world people inhabit but with the unknowable sea it borders. Bishop is attracted to this silvered village and its inhabitants because it bears so much evidence of the sea's touch. But her love for sea knows no limits, for she also engages herself in communication with a seal:

"... One seal particularly

I have seen here evening after evening.

He was curious about me. He was interested in music;

like me a believer in total immersion,

so I use to sing him Baptist hymns."[CP 65]
While her real desire is for "total immersion," though she admits that would be "bearable to no mortal." Bishop uses present tense in this poem and hence it is more immediate and "existentialist" poem. The use of present tense helped Bishop to convey mind in action rather than in repose. Bishop presents the sea as a symbolic of much more than it seems, she is reluctant to differentiate between sea and knowledge:

"It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:

dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,

drawn from the cold hard mouth

of the world, derived from the rocky breasts

forever, flowing and drawn, and since

our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown." [CP 66]

For Bishop, knowledge it seems is a concrete entity with its pieces “dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free.” In this last stanza of the poem, sea appears as the primordial grounding of form, formlessness, and life. In the phenomenal resides mystery: the constant and erosive flux. Likewise, our knowledge is "flowing, and flown"; subject to change and decay, knowledge is temporal and governed by linguistic constructions. The relation between things, such as knowledge and sea, rather than distinctions, is expressed in the final repetitive and connective music of "flowing and drawn ... flowing, and flown." The use of the word "Historical" in the final line assumes a double meaning. Our knowledge is necessarily historical as it occurs in time and is therefore subject to the transience of all temporal things, "flowing and flown"; but it is also knowledge of history, of the lives and events which give meaning to everything. Thus the history of Nova Scotia fishing village proves to be closely bound up with Bishop's own painful childhood and its formation of her present self. The old man, like the "ancient wooden capstan" with its "melancholy stains, like dried blood," his presence speaks of a past beyond recovery. In a poem where Bishop considers her origins – on her first visit to her mother's home since her death in year 1934 – the cold water reflects the absence of maternal warmth in her life, and perhaps the drug with which she medicated that sense of loss. Like past, history is unrecoverable and it will face the same fate, that of “total immersion.”
The shifting sea of knowledge is both general and highly personal, as the startling image of “rocky breasts” makes her speculations suddenly physical again. It is with those "rocky breasts," the original source of knowledge is been associated, both feminized and resistant. These lines offer a charged metaphor for the origins of knowledge, the rocky breasts, an image Bishop often associates with the Nova Scotia landscape where she lost her mother. Loss of mother is loss of home for Bishop and ultimately the loss of a secured place on the face of earth which she tries to search through her poems. The Nova Scotia landscape is identified with the female body but reminds us at the same time that the equation is historically contingent. By the end of "At the Fishhouses," Bishop’s own place as protagonist is apparent; her sense of being an outsider is powerfully banished at the cost of identifying herself with universal, natural laws.

Bishop is reticent about expressing her feelings directly in her poems but the displacement to Brazil and newly found love of her life, Lota made her more expressive and direct in her poems. Bishop, in her poem “Insomnia,” articulates the disturbance or anxiety that leads to sleepless night. The anxiety in case of the speaker or Bishop herself is an unrequited love.

“The moon in the bureau mirror
looks out a million miles
(and perhaps with pride, at herself,
but she never, never smiles)”[CP 70]

The speaker is watching the moon as reflected in the mirror, and, personifies the moon as a female who is admiring herself in the mirror. This newly found woman, in the poem, doesn’t smile because she is unhappy. The moon, by being up at night with the speaker connects the poem with the title “Insomnia” and reflects that both are the sufferers of love. The fact that only the speaker is up with the moon gives a sense of alliance among them and also a sense of isolation on part of Bishop. The moon possesses an invulnerable detachment. Like the moon the speaker suffers from insomnia and thus lives an inverted life, staying awake all night and “perhaps she is a day time sleeper.” The very simple diction of the poem retains an air of childlike wonder and uncertainty:
“By the Universe deserted,

she’d tell it to go to hell,

and she’d find a body of water,

or a mirror, on which to dwell.”[CP 70]

The feeling of abundance is what Bishop suffers but personifies the moon to articulate them. Bishop tries to evade her feelings from the reader’s eye but fails to do so; to be an isolate wanderer is the fate of the moon and its destiny but Bishop suffers the fate of isolation due to someone’s neglect towards her. These feelings of neglect could be the initial confusing feelings she had for a socially active and careerist Lota. Due to Lota’s preoccupations with her work, probably Bishop felt neglected and expressed her trauma in the poem. Bishop portrays moon as a scorned woman, strong enough to tell the universe “to go to hell”. There is a story of Bishop’s own life behind this direct expression of her most abject moments of guilt and self-recrimination. Bob Seaver, the boyfriend of her college years, committed suicide in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in November 1936 because Bishop denied marriage with him. He left a postcard for Bishop which said, “Go to hell, Elizabeth.” This guilt haunted her till her own death that she had “ruined” Bob’s life. Marring him was impossible for her, but his death and his unanswerable condemnation of her were devastating blows for Bishop. The use of italics for the pronoun “she” asserts Bishop’s otherness, showing that she can’t be strong and straightforward like the moon. The moon has feminine characteristics; it can live on self contemplation alone. The moon can “wrap up care in a cobweb / and drop it down the well.” The water’s mirrored surface is a place, where relationships, physical and personal, are inside out:

“into that world inverted

where left is always right,

where the shadows are really the body,

where we stay awake all night,

where the heavens are shallow as the sea

is now deep, and you love me.”[CP 70]
A surprise is reserved for the last line, where Bishop mentions her own desertion indirectly “you love me.” By confessing her pain, she surprises one with the reasons of her own sleeplessness and her longing to emulate moon’s aloofness. The urge to look into the mirror is set off by the emptiness of an extraordinary visualised place where “the shadows are really the body.” The moon in the poem corresponds exactly to the unattainable loved ones. The poems inverted method has its own source – one in Bishop’s shyness and the other in her own sexual orientation. Bishop in her lifetime never married though she had serious relationship with women. Alan Williamson finds in Bishop’s poem “a kind of ground-conviction that reciprocal love is, almost metaphysical, impossible.”

The poem is a result of the combined effect of the early loss of parents and a sexual orientation that appears to contribute to an innate disposition towards shyness, anxiety, and loneliness. As Thomas Travisano in his book “Elizabeth Bishop: Her Artistic Development” observed that “the period between 1946 and 1951 was a very trying one” for Bishop. Bishop’s poems in this period were explorations of loneliness and separation such as “Argument” (1947), “Varick Street” (1947), and each of the poem from “Four Poems”: “Conversation,” “Rain Towards Morning,” “While Someone Telephones,” and “O Breath” (1949-1951) making clear that failing love troubled Bishop deeply. These poems, with their strange, almost surrealistic, patterns, breathe pain and – in their tense, fragile beauty- acknowledge love’s dangerous but compelling force.

In the poem “Varick Street” Bishop combines love with mechanical growth of the city. Bishop wrote this poem when she had travelled more extensively but had also been wounded by love and life experiences. The setting of the poem is Bishop’s apartment tiny flat on King Street (that intersects Varick Street). The New York of “Varick Street” is even more sinister, suffocating, and surreal than the New York depicted in “The Man-Moth” and “Love Lies Sleeping.” A sleeping couple is surrounded by a threatening Manhattan, pulsing with nocturnal activity, whispering of inevitable betrayal. The machine city is gruesomely personified:

“At night the factories
struggle awake,
wretched uneasy buildings

veined with pipes

attempt their work.

Trying to breathe,

the elongated nostrils

haired with spikes

give off such stenches, too.

And I shall sell you sell you

sell you of course, my dear, and you’ll sell me.”[CP 75]

“Varick Street” is a night poem. Bishop draws a metaphorical comparison between the human body and the operation of a factory. The grotesque factories come alive at night, threatening with their (possibly phallic) stacks, “veined with pipes.” The factories morph into nightmarish “elongated nostrils / haired with spikes” which absorb the odours and give off their own horrendous stench simultaneously. The city is personified and depicted metaphorically in two poems like “Love Lies Sleeping” and “Varick Street,” but the dreamy strangeness of “Love Lies Sleeping” is tame compared to the terrifying visions in “Varick Street.” In the second stanza, Bishop presents the night city in “Varick Street” more mechanical, and thwarts any natural processes. Even the faint light becomes “pale dirty light” and are compared to “some captured iceberg / being prevented from melting.” There is no natural moonlight, but instead “mechanical moons,” controlled by man which is a reference to the electrification of the cities and city men’s extreme dependence upon them.

“Lights music of love

work on. The presses

print calendars

I suppose; the moons

make medicine

or confectionery. Our bed
shrinks from the soot
and hapless odors
hold us close.

And I shall sell you sell you
sell you of course, my dear, and you’ll sell me.”[CP 75]

The final stanza of the poem completes the utter industrialization of the city. Like the gross odours that smother their embrace, the lovers are themselves both hapless and dangerous. In an echo of Shakespeare’s quote from “Twelfth Night” [Act I scene I] “If music be the food of love, play on,” Bishop echoes: “Lights music of love / work on.” Bishop implies that even the lights and music that should joyously encourage love fail to do so. The mechanical world of New York City traps the lovers. While the moth, in the poem “The Man-Moth,” and the lover, in “Love Lies Sleeping,” appears alienated and alone, the speaker of “Varick Street” lies next to her beloved. However, the relationship in the “Varick Street” is doomed repeatedly in the inauspicious refrain: “And I shall sell you sell you / sell you of course, my dear, and you’ll sell me.” In the New York setting, the speaker and her “dear” are trapped in a relationship of consumerism in which they will inevitably sell each other off. Amid the grotesque, nightmarish setting of industrial New York, they cannot remain uncorrupted and loyal. Their bed may “[shrink] from the soot,” but they cannot escape the “hapless odors” that seduce and embrace them, ultimately tearing the lovers apart. In this dismal poem, Bishop reveals that even if one finds love, it cannot shelter us against the threats of the city’s corruption and consumerism. This poem doesn’t show great ease and conviction in treating personal, painful, emotions. The two books after “A Cold Spring” show much ease in expressing personal emotions, for which her friend Lota deserves some credit for helping her towards a more secular idea of self and the possibilities of human relationships.

Bishop’s early life was traumatic, without parental love and home of her own, which lead to depression and alcoholism for lifetime. Her own alcoholism and repeated attempts to escape from it are discussed extensively by her biographer Brett C. Millier. Bishop’s poem “The Prodigal(1950)” Millier notes,
“speaks painfully and eloquently about her own experience with alcoholism.” Bishop had been working on an initial draft of the poem as early as in year 1948, in a letter to Robert Lowell written on September 9th, she tells him I want to see what you'll think of my Prodigal Son and in a letter written on July 31, 1949 to Loren MacIver she again refers to working on the poem, this time in conjunction with her alcoholism:

“One of the men guests got terribly drunk two nights ago and was put in jail. Mrs. Ames went and bailed him out. This is all a very good example for me and let's hope I profit by it. I worked on The Prodigal Son all morning... I've had enough of it & drinking and all forms of trouble and I think it is most due to you that I have pulled myself together again... I want to get in such good shape that I can go see Dr. Anny without a tremor. Well, I've just been out blowing bubbles on my balcony, my chief diversion. Now I'll give you a rest, Loren dear ....” [OA 192-193]

Parallel in form to her earlier work, “The Prodigal” is a parable concerning parental and filial love, but Bishop doesn’t seem to make love easy. The prodigal is aware that even offers of generosity and forgiveness can be frightening, because in accepting them one confesses one’s need and lays oneself open. The poem alludes to Herbert in its use of his favourite form, the double sonnet. This parable reflects the crippling period of doubt before the prodigal son returns home. Bishop portrays in detail the Prodigal’s peculiar life in an apparently modern barn, the home he has chosen for himself.

“The brown enormous odor he lives by

was too close, with its breathing and thick hair,

for him to judge. The floor was rotten; the sty

was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung.”[CP 71]

The prodigal son has chosen isolation and the stringent dwelling over the familiar heaven filled with the parental love. To stand by his choice, he never admits it that the sty is awfully inhuman. He is reduced to the condition of animal; he lives so close to the animals that he is unable to distance himself and view them objectively. He lives “by” the enormous odour, a smell of the animals which is overwhelming but he has lost the sense of it, staying in such pathetic
condition. In simple rhetorical terms, odour is transformed from a kind of metonymy (substituting the odour for the pigs and their dung) into a synecdoche (a hirsute pig's skin used for the pig as a whole). And, breathing is personified to take on a life of its own. The particular use of breathing in the sense to emit an “odor” which Bishop might be said to virtually parody in “The Prodigal” is from Herbert's poem “The Odour;”

“My servant, as thee not displeasing,

That call is but the breathing of the sweet.

This breathing would with gains by sweetning me

(As sweet things traffick when they meet)

Return to thee.”

Herbert's poem provides the necessary biblical and theological context to breathing, sweetness, and savouring in order to amplify the essential theme. Man ought to be a sweet odor for God, who Himself, however, breathes this sweet odour into him. In Matthew (4:4):

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. It is the breath of God which, biblically speaking, animates the living soul and it is the word of God, also proceeding from his mouth, by which the soul lives.”

For the Prodigal, both forms of divine inspiration have been usurped by the brown enormous odour. That the odour “he lived by was too close” for him to judge suggests additional wordplay on “close,” both as proximity and as confinement, similar to what air is in a tightly sealed room becomes close. The Prodigal can no longer judge how close, in both senses, the odour is. A surreal compound of smells emanates not only from the pigs and their dung but also from the Prodigal who himself constitutes the brown enormous odour which envelops and assimilates the Prodigal and his brethren. He lives near it and horrible lives on it. As for the pigsty, its being plastered half-way up with glass-smooth dung and it injects a tactile element both delicate and repulsive. The “glass-smooth dung” also infiltrates an association with another kind of glass which the Prodigal, in the process of becoming plastered, wants to touch; here
“plastered” emit its colloquial meaning, that is of, drunkenness. The alcoholic references and allusions, some of which are covert, fill the entire text of the poem, laden with the breath of the alcoholic. He has lost the ability to stand and look back at his own life and see how dreadful it is. He is desperate to find beauty and companionship in the barn. He confronts the images of humanity in this place:

“the pig’s eyes followed him, a cheerful stare-

even to the sow that always ate her young-
till, sickening, he learned to scratch her head.”[CP 71]

These images suggest the danger of arbitrary parental power and hints at the young man’s unspoken terror. Bishop’s use of detailed sensuous imagery to bring the scene to life is commendable. The pig is filthy and repulsive but they are nevertheless some sort of company for the poet. The alliterative description of the pigs’ eyes “light-lashed” and their “cheerful stare” show that the Prodigal has sunk so low that he can regard even these animals as appropriate companions. There is a relation between them for they look at him cheerfully and he scratches a sow on her head. Although the casualness with which Bishop links the pig’s “cheerful stare” and his “sickening” and “scratching her head” is not made explicit, this heartfelt episode conveys something of the nausea, isolation, and attenuated emotional life of the prodigal. He pets his favourite sow, which always ate her young, reveals a disguised death wish. The pigs remain insouciantly self-righteous while bestowing on him a cheerful stare suggests that eating one’s young may not be, in their eyes, such a heinous activity. The sty remains a satisfactory home for him:

“But sometimes mornings after drinking bouts

(he hid the pints behind a two-by-four),

the sunrise glazed the barnyard mud with red;

the burning puddles seemed to reassure.

And then he thought he almost might endure

his exile yet another year or more.”[CP 71]
Bishop strangely reassures the beauty and human values in this scene. The Prodigal hides his alcohol behind a plank of wood, perhaps in an effort to assume him humanity. Bishop’s experience is similar to that of the prodigal; for even after leaving Nova Scotia she frequently made visits to this place. “The Prodigal” is one such poem citing her experience of her visit to Nova Scotia in year 1946. Years later, writing to U. T. and Joseph Summers on October 19, 1967, Bishop remarked that:

“‘The Prodigal’ was suggested to me when one of my Aunt's Stepsons offered me a drink of rum, in the pigsties, at about nine in the morning, when I was visiting her in Nova Scotia.”[OA 478-79]

This experience, combined with her psychoanalysis, led to Bishop’s writing this poem in the year 1950 which is her least personal poem about love, but is one of her best poem. Bishop also expresses the beauty of Nova Scotia in this poem when she goes on to exhibit the beauty of the sunrise which makes the mud in the barn glow red. Still, it is sad that the only warm and beauty in his life comes from temporarily shining muddy puddles; and the only affection from the pigs. It is a mark of the strength of the human spirit that the Prodigal can admire anything and everything in his surroundings, but this leads him to feel that perhaps he can endure his imprisonment for some more time. He is not ready to give up his alcoholism and inspect the realities of his situation:

“But evenings the first star came to warn.

The farmer whom he worked for came at dark
to shut the cows and horses in the barn
beneath their overhanging clouds of hay,

with pitchforks, faint forked lightening, catching lights,
safe and companionable as in the Ark.”[CP 71]

The farmer shuts him in the barn at night along with the animals while he goes back to his family. The only family the Prodigal has is of those animals in the barn. While the animals feel safe and sleep happily in the barn, the Prodigal is uneasy in the darkness of the barn amongst these creatures. The word “But” at the opening of this stanza indicates a change of mood, a note of real hope,
ascertaining that the Prodigal may see the error of his way. The Prodigal retains some sense of humanity and awareness that this is no way to live. The imagery in this stanza becomes more light-filled reflecting more positive and optimistic viewpoint. A “star” is personified as it “came to warn” the prodigal son of his wrong path. There are allusions to the Bible in the poem. A star reminds us of Bethlehem which lead the wise man to the infant Jesus. The farmer’s lantern leaves a circle of light on the mud that is like a saint’s halo or “aureole.” The animals in the barn are as safe and comfortable as on the Noah’s “Ark.” The reference to the Bible elevates the poem to another level reflecting Bishop’s need for such a connection to save her. The Prodigal’s return is inevitable and his delay a matter of endurance, because enclosure in this self chosen prison cannot last longer. Subhuman intimacy cannot completely replace human love and affection. His bed fellows are pigs, in whom there is a parody of human sleep, “stuck out their little feet and snored.” He is frightened by not the grossness of the place but by the aloneness.

“Carrying a bucket along a slimy board
he felt the bats’ uncertain staggering flight,
his shuddering insights, beyond his control,
touching him. But it took him a long time
finally to make his mind up to go home.”[CP 71]

The Prodigal’s situation is awful for he is doing all the odd and trivial jobs in this place which is not even his home. The bats’ flight is “uncertain” and “staggering” the poet’s drunkenness and his stumbling through life without direction. There is growing realisation in prodigal’s mind that he does not belong to this place. Although he becomes more self-aware, the Prodigal’s decision to go home does not come quickly. This is only the beginning of the path to recovery. The very last word of the poem, “home” implies recovery and healing. “Home” is the only destination towards which all the search of the Prodigal as well as of Bishop is directed. A drinker trying to find his way home is one way of describing the poem, written by an alcoholic for whom home and homelessness were central preoccupations. The Prodigal has made up his mind to go home. Home represents love and security, for Bishop, are the only search
her nostalgia pervades in her life. As it seems difficult for the Prodigal to reach his home without hindrances so is it for Bishop, difficult to reach the place called "home." Hence, the search for home, in Bishop's poems, is an ongoing process.

Bishop had multiplicity of experiences due to her anomalous exposure from her various displacements and her handling of life single-handedly. Bishop’s multifarious understanding of life brings, in her poems, resonance suggesting that, within or beyond the images, there are possibly many interpretations of an image or an object leading to ambiguity. Such a resonance is particularly evident in a poem like “Faustina, or Rock Roses” in which the problem of interpretation is raised. This poem celebrates the relation between the master and the servant and also dramatizes “service,” turning hierarchy into a bizarre democracy:

“Tended by Faustina
yes in the crazy house
upon a crazy bed,
frail, of chipped enamel,
blooming above her head
into four vaguely roselike
flower-formations,
the white woman whispers to
herself.”[CP 72]

The opening stanza depicts the uncertainty of human relationships. The description doesn’t make clear who is master - the white woman, shrivelled and dying or Faustina, the black servant. This poem, according to Brett Millier, is based on Bishop’s selection “among many facts and anecdotes about a black Cuban woman, a familiar figure in Key West in the 1940’s, and focuses on a single visit she made to Faustina at work, caring for an elderly white woman in her home.” In this poem, Bishop dramatises the tension and the intimacy between these women. Socially there are gulf seen in this relation but in the
poem they share the same domestic space. Bishop’s displacement to Brazil in particular and her various travels down South gave her profound understanding of class, race and gender. Bishop very well portrays the plight of the underdeveloped countries and their people in her poems. Margaret Dickie, for instance observes that Bishop’s interest in the conflicts of “other classes and races” is related to her own “conflict identity” as a lesbian, and that Bishop is “knowledgeable about the marginal, the exiled, and the dispossessed in society because she was one herself.”

On the contrary, Timothy Morris perceives “patronizing curiosity” in Bishop’s Brazilian poems, arguing that they “make South America quaintly inferior and helplessly deficient in comparison to North America. Nevertheless, it is reductive to read Bishop’s poems as simply expressive of its whiteness and its ideology. There is a displacement of the difference of race and class to the difference of lesbian sexuality. Bishop showed interest in the lives of African Americans and tried to represent them in her earlier poems life “Songs of Colored Singer,” “Cootchie,” “Florida,” and now in “Faustina, or Rock Roses.” Faustina has immense freedom but her current status is ambivalent. Bishop’s obsession for home is seen in many of her poems but in this poem Bishop creates not Jeronimo’s “fairy palace” but Faustina’s “crazy house.” Faustina is an image which has resonance to freedom, to slavery and to the black woman representing the oppressed class. “Faustina” is both like a picture and like looking at a picture:

“The visitor sits and watches
the dew glint on the screen
and in it two glow-worms
burning a drowned green.
Meanwhile the eighty-watt bulb
betray us all,”[CP 72]

The picture that Bishop reveals through this poem is from her own understanding of these two classes - the master and the servant class - from her experience of provincial life in Nova Scotia and Ouro Preto. It is ambiguous that Faustina is the caretaker of sculpted flowers and the white woman, equally “frail” and “chipped.” The poem is a still life, a study in desiccated whiteness
“the white woman whispers to herself,” “the fine white hair,” and “her white disordered sheets,” with human analogue. Curry detects racial coding in Bishop’s use of the colour white in her poems. Bishop’s poems render visibility to her white characters’ privilege as structured invisibility. Bishop uses visual motifs of “white” and “roses” in contrast to the “cruel black” of Faustina in this poem:

“Her sinister kind face

present a cruel black

coincident conundrum.”[CP 73]

Faustina’s “sinister kind face” poses an unanswerable riddle of her own feelings about her mistress approaching death and her own survival. This is a typical question Bishop herself contemplated upon throughout her life. Her mother was admitted to mental asylum for a period of seventeen years where she died in year 1934 without having her daughter by her side. Bishop always had a motherly void in her life and also in her poems, which was never ever filled. The understanding of birth and death is equal for all; by birth everyone whether white or black learns his lessons for survival and the concept of death at the end equates us all. It reflects the sheer cruelty on part of humans for one another due to various motives:

“Oh, is it

freedom at last, a lifelong

dream of time and silence,

dream of protection and rest?”[CP 73]

We see in the poem two people locked in relationship of affection and struggle from which there is no release in life. Death acts as the ultimate freedom from decease and decay as well as a freedom for the ones who seemed to be stuck by responsibility as in this case Faustina is stuck with her mistress. Bishop in her last stanza formulates an abstract idea:

“There is no way of telling.

The eyes say only either.
At last the visitor rises,
awkwardly proffers her bunch
of rust-perforated roses
and wonders oh, whence come
all the petals.”[CP 74]

The poem poses the question of appearances and its resonance can only be inferred upon. The “eyes” in this case are not the index life; even if the mistress is surviving her eyes reflects death, or is she in the transition of two worlds is the question implied at the end of the poem. What is seen or reflected is only a version of the truth whereas the complete truth is unfathomable. The image of “bunch of rust-perforated roses” is a timeworn indicating a long wait for the release of the soul which would lead to a newer beginning when all the “petals” would come. Bishop in this poem rises from the trivial social issues towards the ultimate knowledge of freedom of the soul.

Bishop was not very vocal about her views and feelings but could communicate herself well through letters. “Letter to N.Y.” is Bishop’s letter poem, with the sub-heading, “For Louise Crane” who is the recipient of it. After graduating from Vassar, Louise Crane and Bishop had together taken up travelling exploring different places and its literature. “Letter to N.Y.” was composed when Bishop was in the process of breaking up with Crane. While Bishop was still at Key West, Crane relocated herself in New York. The poem has somewhat a pleading tone and it refers to Louise’s mother Mrs. Crane who was a founder and patron of New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Mrs. Crane was less supportive of Louise’s affair with Bishop. Bishop appears to be using this poem “Letter to N.Y.” to impersonate Mrs. Crane’s paranoia, poking fun at her excessive concern. The dedication, in this light, can be seen as a rather cruel joke, a cryptic clue to the New York intelligentsia who would have recognised the letter’s target:

“In your next letter I wish you'd say
where you are going and what you are doing;
how are the plays, and after the plays
Bishop, in the poem, implies all the time they spend together travelling and living at various apartments and sharing various pleasurable moments. Bishop hints at Mrs. Crane, in the poem, with a tone of mother’s moral lecturing her child. According to Joanne Feit Diehl’s much of Bishop’s oeuvre seems informed by a desire to “make reparation to the abandoning mother.” Not only Mrs. Crane but also Marianne Moore is the target of Bishop’s scorn in this poem. The cab ride, in the second stanza, seem reminiscent of Bishop’s and Moore’s frequent trips to the circus and zoo “where the road goes round and round the park;” while “the meter glares like a moral owl,” sounding like a pun on Moore’s elaborate “syllable-counting meter.”[CP80] There is an element of mystery in the poem as in the third stanza:

“and the trees look so queer and green
standing alone in big black caves
and suddenly you're in a different place
where everything seems to happen in waves,”[CP 80]

Bishop seems to be saddened by Crane’s indifference and distancing her life from Bishop. The letter-poems are a kind of psychoanalytic dialogue of the poet narrating biographic stories with others. Bishop turned to the epistolary mode in late 1940s following a second stint of psychoanalysis with Dr. Ruth Foster, a New York clinician. Bishop’s work with Dr, Foster was a great solace to her during the uncertain and often turbulent phases of her life. Brett Millier reported that Bishop and Dr. Foster “spent two years... [investigating] the origins of her depression and alchoholism,” and that Dr. Foster assured Bishop that she was “lucky to survived” the grievous losses of her childhood. After losing all the valuable relation early in life, Crane was her first mature relationship of her youthful days. They shared various apartments and later shared her first out of “three loved houses” of Bishop’s life:

“and coming out of the brownstone house
to the gray sidewalk, the watered street,

... nevertheless I'd like to know
what you are doing and where you are going.”[CP 80]

Langdon Hammer, conjectures that the letter-poem enables Bishop to develop a “trope of thirdness”: a (Winnicottian) dimension in which the anonymous reader is the privileged participant in the reciprocal play of correspondents. Bishop is much concerned about Crane and greatly values her friendship in her life. It was with Crane that Bishop made her first house among “three loved houses” mentioned in the poem “One Art.” Though, they could not nest their much loved home in Key West for a longer time. Distancing from Crane created a void in Bishop’s life, not knowing where to go and where to make a house for self Bishop took to travelling which ultimately brought her to Brazil.

Upon arriving in Brazil, Bishop began writing more stories and poems based in her childhood in Nova Scotia. The geographical displacement to Brazil brought Bishop close to her memories of Nova Scotia. The two places, Cape Breton in Nova Scotia and Ouro Preto in Brazil share similar industries such as mining and fishing; however, they also share similar physical features. For instance, the landscapes of these two regions in which Bishop lived for extended periods of time are both covered with deep green foliage, steep, rolling hills, winding roads, and frequent fogs during the rainy season. Bishop's similar treatment of the two landscapes reflects not only the physical connections between the two regions but also the psychological and emotional connections, she made to her Nova Scotian heritage while in Brazil. This is evident in her similar treatment of these two places in her landscape poems "Cape Breton" and "Brazil, January 1, 1502." Bishop got psychologically and emotionally displaced between Nova Scotia and Brazil. She directed her searches for her Nova Scotian home which was a history towards a Brazilian abode which she was trying to create, physically and also through poetry. Bishop's poem "Cape Breton" was one of her earliest examinations of the landscape of Nova Scotia and reflects her personal feelings towards the place at the time she wrote it. Her later work entitled "Brazil, January 1, 1502” echoes Bishop’s search for home in many aspects, including its free verse form and similar stanza lengths, suggesting that the connection between the two places is not only historical or psychological, but also textual within Bishop's poetry.

In Elizabeth Bishop's second letter to Robert Lowell, written in Briton Cove from
Cape Breton Island, Bishop briefly describes her surroundings to her fellow poet:

“This is a very nice place - just a few houses and fish houses scattered about in the fields, beautiful mountainous scenery and the ocean. I like the people... Off shore are two "bird islands" with high red cliffs. We are going out with a fisherman to see them tomorrow - they are sanctuaries where the auks and the only puffins left on the continent, or so they tell us. There are real ravens on the beach, too, something I never saw before - enormous, with sort of rough black beards under their beaks.”[WA xx]

Traces of this letter’s description appear throughout Bishop’s poem ‘Cape Breton’ published two years later of her visit to Cape Breton-

“Out on the high "bird islands," Coboux and Hertford,  
the razorbill auks and the silly-looking puffins all stand  
with their backs to the mainland  
in solemn, uneven lines along the cliff's brown grass-frayed edge,  
while the few sheep pastured there go "Baaa, baaa." [CP 67]

The images of birds and land found in the poem subtly echo the letter and show how the inspiration for Bishop's poetry can lie in landscape. These opening lines also illuminate Bishop's cinematic approach to the landscape which is largely dominated by the fauna of the bird islands, as well as there are a number of images tied to the water surrounding the island:

“The silken water is weaving and weaving,  
disappearing under the mist equalling under all directions,  
lifted and penetrated now and then  
by one shag’s dripping serpent-neck,  
and somewhere the mist incorporates the pulse,  
rapid but unurgent, of a motorboat.[CP 67]

Bishop uses the language of fabric, indicating an attempt to weave the beauty of two similar places together and a mist represent the peace found in nature as
indicated by the smoothness and coolness of these images. Bishop, like Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost and Ted Hug is a poet much concerned with the truth of nature. When, Bishop personifies natural or artificial objects, she tends to reduce them to human proportions. Bishop mixes nature with urbanity and profound emotions with wit. The water is disturbed by two things, however: first by the shag raising its head out of the water and then by the rapid but less urgent pulse of a motorboat. Civilization, as represented by the motorboat, affects nature and encroaches upon it, yet the two manage to coexist. Man and civilization represent a threat, in these landscape poems, to the calmness and stability of nature. In “Cape Breton,” the theme of the disruption and destruction of nature due to the encroachment of urbanization is strongly evident. Bishop’s displacement from the simple country life of Great Village to the fast life of New York was a painful displacement for her. The progressive groups are isolated from nature and become dispassionate towards the world around them, just as its dispassion towards these people is implied in the second stanza of the poem. The looming threat to stability, due to development serves as a means to understand a stable sense of place, its beauty and serenity so as to fathom the loss thereafter. The relationship between man and nature is also a key to understand Bishop’s “Cape Breton” in which civilization imposes itself upon the natural world literally and figuratively:

“The wild road clambers along the brink of the coast.

on it stand occasional small yellow bulldozers,”[CP 67]

The landscape’s original beauty is overridden by the whims of humanity much like Bishop’s cultural identity was taken from her as a child upon being removed from Nova Scotia. Upon the road in the poem is a set of “small yellow bulldozers,” whose sole purpose is to destroy natural or existing things in order to replace them with civilization. Especially significant are the lines:

“The road appears to have been abandoned.

Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been

abandoned,”[CP 67]

Both these lines end with the word “abandoned” suggesting a sense of misuse in regards to the land and allude to the sentiments, the poet felt in her own
struggle to assert her identity. The land has been unnaturally abandoned, and hence it has neither a natural nor a man-made purpose. The land has been robbed off several things like, its purpose and identity by these bulldozers. First, the abandoned land has lost its meaning. It becomes a blank canvas left to be inscribed upon. Second, the natural beauty of the land has been robbed of its meaning. And finally, without meaning or beauty, the landscape serves no purpose. It remains inactive and unused and is characterized by what it is not suppose to be. In addition,

“and these regions now have little to say for themselves
except in thousands of light song-sparrow songs floating upward
freely, dispassionately, through the mist, and meshing
in brown-wet, fine, torn fish-nets.”[CP 68]
The road is described as “disused” and associated with “song-sparrows” which sing “dispassionately” reflecting the inaction and abandonment of the road and its imposition upon nature. This impersonal characterization of the landscape maintains a distance between civilization and nature throughout the poem. Although the two affect each other, they are distant and disconnected despite their coexistence. Bishop’s deconstruction of the landscape’s meaning and its relationship with humanity suggests a personal disconnection from the landscape. By evoking these emotions, Bishop expresses her deep disconnect with urban displacement in search of a home and amplifies it to make it a universal concern. Bishop continues focusing on these themes in the final stanzas of her poem, specifically examining the relationship of civilization and religion as well as with nature. The stanza describes a bus, “packed with people, even to its step,” transporting a group of people from one town to another. This group is isolated from nature and dispassionate towards the world around them. In parallel with the landscapes lack of action and meaning, civilization lacks action and meaning because it is Sunday:

“A small bus comes along, in up-and-down rushes,
packed with people, even to its step.
(On weekdays with groceries, spare automobile parts, and pump
parts,
but today only two preachers extra, one carrying his frock coat
on a hanger.)
It passes the closed roadside stand, the closed schoolhouse,
where today no flag is flying”[CP 68]

Just as the inactive bulldozers displaced and destroyed the meaning and beauty
of the landscape, similarly Sunday temporarily creates inaction and displaces
the meaning associated with the social and religious institutions, and
government offices. The bus, the roadside stand, and the schoolhouse lack the
meaning and purpose that they possess on the other days of the week. Holiday
also has its effect on humans; the man walking through the meadows does not
interact with the landscape reflecting his poverty of soul. He simply goes
through it in order to arrive at his house which has been inscribed into the
landscape just as the “little white churches,” of the third stanza, were “dropped
into the matted hills”. The man’s continuous disconnection and dispassion is a
pattern seen throughout the poem. Place and nature are cold and impersonal
towards civilization which is represented by the man, because they lack
connection, meaning and purpose in the poem. Bishop opens the poem with a
great deal of distance describing. She goes on narrating the islands, the birds,
and the sheep which are all visible. The speaker of the poem approximates
herself to the landscape more and more in each stanza, throughout the poem.
She concludes the poem with an intimate yet distanced focus on human tragedy.
Bishop slowly drifts and gets displaced into the poetic world as the tragedy is
the common thread to bond them, the poem and the poet:
“...a man carrying a baby gets off.
climbs over a stile, and goes down through a small steep meadow,
which establishes its poverty in a snowfall of daisies,
to his invisible house beside the water.”[CP 68]
The fact that the man is carrying a baby in the poem suggests the conspicuous
absence of a mother figure – a common element of Bishop’s poetry. The
absence of this figure draws Bishop into the poem as she associates the evasive
ideal of a home, as indicated by her use of the adjective “invisible house” with this landscape. The “invisible house” is also indicative of the homemaker’s absence, that is, absence of mother in the poem. The man stepping off the bus with a baby only in the penultimate stanza of the poem symbolises the losses of identity, family connections, and place which is much similar to that what Bishop faced in her life:

“The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts.

The thin mist follows

the white mutations of its dream;

an ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks.”[CP 68]

The final stanza reinforces this idea that man and nature intersect but do not connect, as the different entities in the poem do not connect or interact. The images in the poem refuse to intersect and interact. They suggest an amplified sense of displacement and a search for home. The distance between civilization and nature as well as the buildings within the poem imply a deep disconnection. In the poem, humanity is simply displaced, without a home or purpose. “The birds keep on singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts” all this do not affect one another. As the bus leaves the scene of the poem, the “thin mist” and “ancient chill” are ominous indicators of the effect civilization has upon nature; civilization is taking from nature an identity and imposing purpose upon it. This stanza examines how even after having an identity imposed upon it by civilization, the landscape can lack identity and purpose, reflecting Bishop’s state of homelessness and her attempts to remedy it through her memories of Nova Scotia. Using imagery, voice, and figurative language, Bishop skilfully weaves a tapestry of words and symbols to define the relationships between man, nature, and religion in her poem. Bishop’s definition of these relationships is a result of a struggle she makes to understand her own identity and to understand her own trauma.

The descriptive poems in her second volume of poetry, “A Cold Spring” continue the investigation and search for home, of her earlier books. These poems used descriptive act like her earlier poems in order to takes us far within the implications of her art. There is an insistent attempt to map a world
that is foreign but to where she is trying to accommodate herself and make it her home.

It seems that Bishop did not believe in settling down, for no place gave her the warmth of home. She never found herself in any stable location, but rather in transit. Travel was Bishop’s nature, a dominating metaphor for the human condition. Even dreams, which we associate with wish-fulfilment, are in Bishop’s poetry revelations of homeless natures. Bishop makes such a revelation in her volume of poetry “Questions of Travel.” In an interview with Alexandra Johnson, Bishop remarked “I’ve never felt particularly homeless, but then, I’ve never felt particularly at home. I guess that’s pretty good description of a poet’s sense of home.”

It seems Bishop is consciously denying the search of home which is apparently seen in her poems. Bishop’s sense of home is not only limited to a four walled place, it is much more than that. Home for her could be any place - even in the midst of the sea on a boat, or an enclosure like monument or iceberg giving the sense of security of emotion or ideology, or a landscape, or an island, or a provincial place resembling Nova Scotia, or it could be a journey full of love as with Lota in Brazil where she made her home for eighteen years. Thomas Travisano noted that, “Bishop travelled to experience freshly, and in the process, she twice accidentally found a home, first in Key West, then in Brazil.”

To add to Travisano’s view, we can say that Bishop travelled in order to experience the new homes she would make while undertaking her journey towards new destinations. Bishop while travelling had a deep insight into the culture and climate she travelled to. “Questions of Travel” is dedicated to her Brazilian love Lota de Macedo Soares. It is evident of the fact that Bishop in a way acknowledges the presence of love in her life. Goldensohn had noted that, Bishop’s new life of affection and security in Brazil caused her to make “a decisive break from . . . that annoying ‘constant insistence on the strength of her affections,’ that clinging to the female topic, love.” Nonetheless, Bishop’s new companion becomes the beloved subject of variety of her poems. “Question of Travel” is divided into two sections: Brazil, and Elsewhere. The first section, “Brazil” highlights her concerns about travelling and identity and determines the tenor of the whole volume. “Brazil” deals with her physical
presence in the country. Whereas, poems in the “Elsewhere” section are more reflexive of Bishop’s return to her New England past, her childhood and to the sense of loneliness. The poems in this section are, therefore, more personal and take an inward turn.21

The poem “Arriving in Santos,” dated January, 1952 not only opens the door to Bishop’s Brazil but is also one of a trio of poems in the “Brazil” section of “Questions of Travel.” The first line of the poem, “Here is a coast; here is a harbour;”[CP89] indicates Bishop’s simple opening of the poem leading to a more complex view of the landscape – geographical and emotional one:

“here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:

impractically shaped and - “who knows?” - self-pitying mountains,

sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery,

with a little church on top of one. And warehouses,

some of them painted a feeble pink, or blue,

and some tall uncertain palms. . . .”[CP 89]

The scenery is personified using words that do not necessarily have positive connotations – self-pitying, sad, harsh, frivolous, feeble, uncertain – and gives the port of Santos a shop-worn look. Bishop uses adjectives not only to describe, but to anthropomorphize what she's looking at, so that what we see and what is seen are inextricably fused. Her subject, as John Ashbery once memorably put it, is the way we are "part-thing and part-thought." Seeing becomes a form of feeling. The tone of the first stanza of the poem is restless, as if in search of something and there is a continuous movement presented by shifting of places like, “coast”, “harbour”, “mountains”, “church” and “warehouse”. This signifies that her search for home, although leading to creativity, at times make her anxious and is ongoing. In the poem, Bishop introduces two women, one of them is Miss Breen who is a retired, seventy-years-old policewoman who is seen in search of home; for “Home” no longer accommodates these women. Bishop’s travel poems reinforce the point that the search for origins and ideals is our way of structuring thoughts, organising
experiences and there by locating ourselves. Finding a home for self is the ultimate destination of travel; in the process it also reveals our origins and there by impart meaning to the journey of our life. The tourist, on arriving at Santos realises that they do not find the sublime nature that they had imagined before taking up the travel, but the new place drearily is in between the comforts of home and an exotic wilderness. The speaker in the poem becomes aware of the innate expectations of tourists who come with the desire to witness the beauty of the landscape. Tourists are indirectly opposed to the “travellers,” a term that does not come up in this poem:

“...Oh, tourist,

is this how this country is going to answer you

and your immodest demands for a different world,

and a better life, and complete comprehension

of both at last, and immediately,

after eighteen days of suspension?”[CP 89]

Tourists are by definition immodest, and this humour and sarcasm of Bishop shine throughout this poem. Miss Breen’s home is in New York but her “quest” is “answered” with the same kind of confusion, she thought she had left behind. She has to take another voyage to the interiors in order to find a more serene home, which she is in search of. "Arrival of Santos" has both the landscape of Brazil and the poet's own subjectivity as its subject. This element of self-awareness within the poem is manifested in a variety of forms. One interesting example is the way she contrasts her own aesthetic sensibilities with the sensibility of the world of the docks. Whereas she is drawn to colours and beautiful structures the world of the docks cares little for appearances, it is about work and profits. Her awareness of the way subjectivity structures the manner in which we view the world is coupled with intense curiosity about the outer world, a combination that is found in many great poets since Wordsworth. She describes the boat that will carry her and her travelling companion from their freighter to the mainland:

“...The tender is coming,
a strange and ancient craft, flying a strange and brilliant rag.

So that’s the flag. I never saw it before.

I somehow never thought of there being a flag.”[CP 89]

Bishop points out at the Brazilian flag and comment on its appearance before moving on to describe the rest of the freighter with its “customs officials” who would speak English and the “bourbon and “cigarettes.” Bishop for a moment transforms the dock into a stage set for the rest of the movement. All of this shifting makes us think about the wonderful uneasiness of being a tourist—the mind is constantly engaged in adjustment. So when the well-documented Miss Breen gets caught amidst "twenty-six freighters / waiting to be loaded with green coffee beans" readers cathartically guffaw until "We are settled." The demands and particulars of disembarkation, at yet another port are articulated through the voice of speaker who is blasé about the new place. Arrivals, for Bishop, are always starting points. Either the place does not excite us as we had hoped, or it dissolve or retreats on approach. The arrival immediately becomes a departure as the “tender,” the “strange and ancient craft,” is inviting them and the tourist prepare for “driving to the interiors,” literally and figuratively. The poem expresses a fundamental ambivalence about this quest, since the two women in the poem want the “different world,” still they climb down the ladder and want the officials to speak their tongue and behave their way:

“Her home, when she is at home, is in Glens Fall
s, New York. There. We are settled.

The customs officials will speak English, we hope,

and leave us our bourbon and cigarettes.

Ports are necessities, like postage stamps, or soap,

but they seldom seem to care what impression they make”[CP 90]

Bishop has found Nova Scotia’s equivalent in Brazil as it gave her home, the phrase “we are settled” used in the poem reflect the same. Bishop wholeheartedly gets acclimatized to Brazil and displaces her love for Nova Scotia to Brazil. Bishop’s dream of having a place and people to call home
comes true in her life in Petropolis outside of Rio de Janeiro with Lota. Bishop accepts the ephemeral of all domesticities and further goes on to say that all homes are ports or waiting rooms, for they leave us in suspensions, where experience is not grasped but used up like “soap, or postage stamp.” Bishop might have developed this view from her childhood experience when she had changed homes like ports or waiting rooms without the essential parental love. Though, Bishop found a home in Brazil but still she could not give away her love for Nova Scotia. Bishop had to go further in the interiors to find her lost home and this quest takes her to the interiors of Brazil at Ouro Preto. Hence driving to the interiors becomes an idle impulse since completely comprehending a “different world” becomes a fiction. Bishop isn’t aware whether such world or home exists but as an enthusiast she carries her journey forward. Bishop was also quite aware of the fact that Santos, and by extension, Brazil, resists the easy colonization of the tourists, so her tourists say their piece and then leave port quickly and swiftly at the very end of the poem. This urgency echoes the role of this poem to serve as a way into Bishop’s Brazil:

“We leave Santos at once;
we are driving to the interior”[CP 90]

This interior, we begin to understand, is not only the interior of the country but also Bishop’s mind. More than the urban life, Bishop gets magnetised to the country life “the interior”, it is at this place that the Nova Scotian happiness is laid for Bishop. Bishop often ends her poems with poetic ‘epiphanies' that are unusual for their modesty of expression and scale. Here the revelation that she is headed for the Amazonian interior is given in an almost offhand way, almost as an afterthought. The poem intends to reproduce the mental adjustments and settlements that proliferates Bishop's poems as epistemological quests. It also reflects the theme of geographical displacement “to the interiors” i.e. to the country life. Unlike Robert Lowell and Nathaniel Hawthorne for whom provincialism was breeding ground of guilt and suspicion, for Bishop it was the bastion of innocence.

“Arrival at Santos” is followed by “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” a poem which imagines a Brazil of the past, characterized by an abundance of exotic
tropical flora and fauna when the Europeans first came. Bishop was enamoured with the nation and its landscape, but she also questioned her place – as an expatriate or outsider – in the country. Bishop’s displacement throughout her life has raised questions of land identity for her. “Brazil, January 1, 1502” explores that idea from an historical perspective. The poem’s title refers to the day that the Portuguese anchored at Guanabara Bay, Brazil, and claimed the country as part of their empire. (In 1494, Spain and Portugal had signed the Treaty of Tordesillas, dividing the non-Christian world between them.) Bishop begins her poem with an epigraph from Sir Kenneth Clark’s “Landscape into Art” and goes on to examine the European perception of nature in this poem about colonial conquest:

“...embroidered nature...tapestried landscape.

-Landscape into Art, by Sir Kenneth Clark”[CP 91]

Clark’s title offers a metamorphosis of art but Bishop offers a two way metamorphosis. Bishop’s epigraph shows us the doubled vision: a landscape in a work of art, and a landscape that looks like a work of art. The first stanza is filled with colour and weaving details. Nature and landscape both look sewn or woven; and embroidery and tapestry both are art form depicting nature and landscape. The opening of the poem immediately takes us from a January in the twentieth century to a one in the sixteenth century and directs our eyes to see everything as the Portuguese colonizers’ must have sighted at Rio de Janeiro (River of January); it was the first time European eyes saw this place:

“Januaries, Nature greets our eyes

exactly as she must have greeted theirs.”[CP 91]

The use of the word “Januaries” not January indicates something unusual and memorable about that month, of which the date is specified in the title. It was the time when Europeans discovered what was named Rio de Janeiro, A new place and a new year. Bishop personifies “Nature” which greets us as if we were explorers, seeing its beauty for the first time and is unchanged every time we see it. The flora and fauna of Brazil traps her and she goes on to illustrate how luxurious and colourful everything is in Brazil. The plant imagery, in the
first stanza of the poem is established as a foundational ideal. The foliage is associated with the purity of Eden, free from corruption:

“every square inch filling in with foliage -
big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves,
blue, blue-green, and olive,
with occasional lighter veins and edges,
or a satin underleaf turned over;”[CP 91]

Tom Robbins likens these descriptions to the paintings of Paul Gauguin:

“Like Gauguin, Miss Bishop has a keen, loving eye for the exotic: a born voyager’s fondness for the unfamiliar detail which escapes the jaded notice of ordinary tourist and permanent resident alike.”

However, unlike Gauguin’s palette which was deliberately opaque and earth-toned, Bishop’s paints in colours which have a clarity and hue that enhance the exuberance of her descriptions. Different layer of colour and embroidery is used in the poem to establish the link between the stability of the poem’s imagery and the extended metaphor of the tapestry. Tapestry is a kind of enclosure, a four walled home in which humanity is reflected. Bishop ties together the language of fabric and the language of nature simply by juxtaposing the two:

“monster ferns
in silver-gray relief,
and flowers, too, like giant water lilies
up in the air—up, rather, in the leaves—
purple, yellow, two yellows, pink,
rust red and greenish white;”[CP 91]

Bishop’s descriptions bring to our notice the most remarkable things a person might not otherwise notice about Rio’s nature. Its peculiarity is its size (“giant leaves,” “monster ferns,” and “flowers like giant water lilies”), its density (indicated by “every square inch filling in with foliage”), and its variety (the
palette of colours, gradations of sizes, contrasts, and, even, textures—as in “satin underleaf”). These two levels of description unify the tactile and linguistic aspects of fabric and nature. Nature and its exotic beauty are so fresh for a visitor as if God has just finished making it:

“solid but airy; fresh as if just finished
and taken off the frame.”[CP 91]

Bishop does not use the word “tapestry” but instead refers to the “frame” from which the tapestry is removed. These lines were true for Bishop, when she arrived in Brazil and witnessed its beauty for the first time, she was mesmerised. Here lies the paradox of Bishop’s life – the regions in North America that should have been home for her have become elsewhere, and Bishop felt already at home in Brazil. In a letter to U.T. and Joseph Summers dated September 17, 1952, Bishop expresses;

“Against all the correct theories of escapism, exile, and the horrid facts about the condition of Brazil, I like living here more and more. Maybe it is just age, but it is so much easier to live exactly as one wants to be here. . . It is funny to come to Brazil to experience total recall about Nova Scotia – geography must be more mysterious than we realise, even.”[OA 247]

And in an ‘O Globo’ interview entitled “Pulitzer Prize Poet Lives in Petropolis,” Bishop answers a question about “why she made Brazil her second homeland?” by replying; “Because nature here is sweet and beautiful, and the people are sweet and good.”

Bishop was in love with Brazil for she had found a home there. Her geography has changed: her map has become Brazil-centric. This change of perception has occurred because Brazil was very much like Nova Scotia, it was her paradise regained! The first stanza ends with the image of God as Embroiderer or weaver who has just finished his art. Bishop establishes a peaceful backdrop in order to contrast directly with the conflict which the poet is about to ensue and the corruption that will destroy the atmosphere associated with this landscape. Following the biblical account of the creation, the poem displaces from the plant world to the animal world. Bishop continues to use the tapestry metaphor in the scene and layers it with a back drop of colours. There is a
displacement into the painter’s world in this poem; Bishop takes on the role of a poet-painter and paints;

“A blue-white sky, a simple web”

backing for feathery detail:

brief arcs, a pale-green broken wheel,

a few palms, swarth, squat, but delicate;”[CP 91]

Bishop is a poet who lives in the painter’s world in which the meaning of experience is inextricably connected with the appearance of it. She goes on to describe the upper portion of the landscape tapestry: sky, foliage (“simple web”), and the birds (“feathery detail”). And “a pale-green broken wheel” indicates the arching palm branches looking like a spoke wheel without hub or lower half. In the palms are birds, most likely macaws (a kind of parrot); these birds are not only identified with South America, but with a rich symbolic heritage—most generally as a solar symbol, as a form of heavenly fire—among the tribes of Brazil:

“and perching there in profile, beaks agape,

the big symbolic birds keep quiet,

each showing only half his puffed and padded,

pure-coloured or spotted breasts.”[CP 91]

The big bird is quite probably because they are embroidered or probably there is no need of warning or fight for they mutually have choices, “pure-coloured or spotted breasts.” These birds, Bishop seems to notice, are usually depicted in profile, perhaps to show off their magnificent beaks. They are quiet because asleep and, like a still life or tapestry, a general stillness pervades these lines. From symbolically weighted landscape Bishop takes us to the awareness of Sin. Bishop establishes the centrality of religious thought in the poem and ties it to the poem’s extended metaphor by stating:

“Still in the foreground there is sin:

five sooty dragons near some massy rocks.

The rocks are worked with lichens, gray moonbursts
splattered and overlapping,
threatened from underneath by moss
in lovely hell-green flames,
attacked above
by scaling-ladder vines, oblique and neat,

“one leaf yes and one leaf no” (in Portuguese).”[CP 91]

Bishop’s view is displaced from the beauty of the landscape to the religious reality. Sin is placed in the forefront of the tapestry and tied up to the subsequent lines which describe the lizards as they perform their mating ritual. Dragons, often linked to serpents, are paradigmatic symbols of original sin. “Sooty” might be linking dragons to the fires of hell (described later as “hell-green” to link nature with fallen nature, nature as sinful). Transgression is tied up in the language of religion and to the language of conquest by the presentation of the mating lizards in stanzas two and three. The lizards are associated with sin and with hell as they lie on the rocks, symbolize earth, covered with “lovely, hell-green flames” in the form of moss and the lone female lizard’s tail is characterized as “wicked”. The rocks appear to attack from below by hellish forces and from above by heavenly forces—earth is depicted as a battleground in the war between God and Satan. The man-made concept of conquest is also imposed upon the lizards as Bishop employs the image of a “scaling-ladder vines” and aggression-related verbs such as “threaten” and “attack” to describe the scene of the lizards. For example, the spreading “moonbursts” of lichens overtaking the rocks link the scene to a pagan and feminine, not a Christian, scene: the moon—a body that changes earth’s tides, glows with indirect light, and proceeds through phases—is linked with earth, woman, and sin. Bishop assured that the aforementioned lines have been a Portuguese, not a Brazilian Indian, conception of landscape, since the vine, attacking from above, is described in Portuguese. Bishop in her poem displaces nature into hell. The beautiful landscape bears the sin of the animals. She complicates our views of nature by associating it with sin and conquest and weaves these thematic threads together in the tapestry metaphor. The extended tapestry metaphor of the poem would be incomplete without
Bishop’s focus on colours because they are the most basic elements of a tapestry that – woven together – produce images and meaning. Bishop very artistically displaces herself from the unbearable reality into the world of colours. Bishop uses these colours to establish the Edenic imagery of the first stanza with a distinctly cool palette of colours, “blue, blue-green, [and] olive” leaves and flowers in “purple, yellow, two yellows, pink, rust red, and greenish white”\(^{10}\). Together, these colours contribute to the cool, stable and earthy atmosphere established in the first stanza. This coolness is gradually replaced by warmer colours associated with fire and flames. The second stanza opens with “A blue-white sky,” and further “a pale-green broken wheel,” Bishop associates sin with these colours. She describes the scene with “hell-green flames” and finally the female lizard’s tail “red as a red-hot wire” as if she describes the lizards’ original sin. It is at this point in the poem that nature is most closely tied to the religious concept of sin. The vibrant colours associated with this mating scene successfully links sexuality to nature while tying it to sin, an idea usually based exclusively in the realm of humanity. Using colours in addition to language, Bishop enforces her perspectives on the relationship between religion and nature by characterizing nature as having the capacity to commit sin. Bishop equates nature’s sin with humans and the association of humanity with the first fall of Adam and Eve from an Edenic stature allude to Bishop’s lifelong struggle with displacement. “Brazil, January 1, 1502” reflects Bishop’s state of homelessness, for Bishop, comfort doesn’t lie in humanity or religion but in nature. Nature which was so dear to her has taken over the human sin in the poem. Bishop brings us out from the embroidery and tapestry when she says, “The lizards scarcely breathe.” We are all of a sudden transported into the mimesis of the actual world, scarcely breathing. The second half of the poem indicates who this colourful Nature greets:

> “Just so the Christians, hard as nails,
tiny as nails, and glinting,
in creaking armor, came and found it all,
not unfamiliar;”[CP 92]
The phrase “Just so” at the beginning of the third stanza suggests the analogy of those Christians and the lizards that immediately precede them. The Christians are depicted as nails, because they are dressed in armour and are violent, but there is also phallic symbolism attached to the description. Both are protective male (meaning both “armor” and “the scale of some animals”) hard as nails. Bishop in this stanza gathers all earlier experiences of seeing: hard, tiny, glinting, and, adds to the stillness of the poem the sounds, “in creaking armor.” The dialectic of hell and heaven is relegated to the Mass, and an old dream of “wealth and luxury” is brought in the poem. By referring back to early contact between Brazil and Europe, Bishop questions travel: Are the tourists on the ship in “Arrival in Santos” from the northern hemisphere, if not the United States, tracing the same journey as those early Europeans and do they come with similar attitudes? She invites readers to do some inferential reading. Toward the end of the poem, Bishop signals that the colonizers do not necessarily see Brazil but come to exploit it:

“to an old dream of wealth and luxury
already out of style when they left home-
wealth, plus a brand new pleasure.”[CP 92]
Bishop shows native resistance to colonization because the native wealth, the landscape and its women are exploited at the hands of intruders. Home should be well guarded from the intruders or else it will be seized. But at times, resistance may prove to be futile in the end:

“they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
each out to catch an Indian for himself-
whose maddening little women who kept calling,
calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
and retreating, always retreating, behind it.”[CP 92]

The cinematic treatment of the landscape is echoed in Bishop's "Brazil January1, 1502." While examines the island, she first focuses on the greenery of the landscape, and then, gradually shifts to human tragedy in the form of the native women being raped. The imagery at the forefront of this tapestry lies in its
final stanza and is rooted almost entirely in civilization - in nails and “creaking armour,” in the bowers, lute music, and “wealth and luxury” the conquistadors lust, and finally in images of religion such as Mass and “ L’ Homme arme”. As Bishop describes the human presence in this natural tapestry, there is an irony of the un-Christian acts of the Christian conquerors against the Native women. Despite the beauty of the tapestry and the Christians’ attendance at Mass, they still destroy everything around them out of desire, a characteristic generally attributed to nature. They remove from nature and from the women, they rape, a sense of identity and purpose in order to ascribe their own senses of purpose and identity onto the landscape and the female sex. In the final stanza, Bishop moves her focus from the animal world to mankind and civilization in order to show humanity’s lack of purpose and home. Home, here represent the basic family values and culture which these vagabonds lack. Bishop’s conceit of nature and history as a tapestry in the poem captures a moment of horror in Brazil’s history which contrasts to the natural beauty of the place. As the Christian conquerors encounter the native women, the encounter between man and nature, as represented by the native women, ends in terror and the retreat of the women into nature, behind the “hanging fabric” of the uniting tapestry image. The sexual ritual of the lizards in the second and third stanzas parallels the sexual aggression of the Christians in the final stanza. There is a crude displacement of humanity to the savageness of the animals. These contrasts and parallels illuminate the reader’s understanding of nature as Bishop portrays it. Nature is not easily pinned down as good or evil or anything in between. It has multiple layers as represented by Bishop’s use of the extended layered tapestry metaphor. Its identity, like that of Bishop, is elusive and fluid. Again, the deconstruction of nature with humanity, as well as that of men with women, in the poem demonstrates Bishop’s strong sense of homelessness. Bishop expresses her disconnection and yearning to regain that connection by examining the relationship between nature and humanity while emphasizing the emotional distance between the two. The threads and images of the poems just as literal tapestries, are interwoven and layered creating nuanced yet two-dimensional snapshots of trauma and history.

This Bishop's treatment of Brazil in "Brazil, January 1, 1502" parallels that
of Cape Breton in three distinct senses. First, the distinction between man and nature is apparent and thematically tied to tragedy and pain. Also, Bishop explores the relationship between man, nature, and religion. Second, Bishop uses language associated with fabric to describe the landscape. On the most literal level, the poet describes the Brazilian landscape as a tapestry; however, this tapestry serves as an extended metaphor for the interactions between man, nature and religion in the poem. The different actors in the poem build upon one another and weave together much like a literal tapestry would. And finally, as mentioned above, the poet constructs the poem cinematically: the focus of both poems shifts from the broadest sense of landscape down to a scene depicting society and its trauma on the most basic level. "Brazil, January 1, 1502" as well as "Cape Breton" reflects Bishop's state of homelessness.

The third poem of the introductory trio, “Questions of Travel,” sees the conversion of the tourists’ heart. She becomes a passionate observer, and in a sense loses innocence. Bishop positions the tourist/traveller in Brazil, probably after “driving to the interior” and gazing upon the wonders of nature like the early European colonists did, but with the bewilderment and anxiety that comes with questioning why one travels:

“There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams
hurry too rapidly down to the sea,
and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops
makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.”[CP 93]

Bishop is seen repeatedly relying for her expressions on the sea and nature. The travellers, in the interiors of Brazil, see too much, an overabundance that provokes annoyance at the landscape, which is not as orderly as the narrator wishes it to be. Bishop has unsophisticated people in her poems whose lives contrast with nature but never violates it. This is when the doubts start to percolate in the narrator’s consciousness:

“Think of the long trip home.
Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?
Where should we be today?

Is it right to be watching strangers in a play

in this strangest of theatres?"[CP 93]

The narrator of the poem weighs the concerns of her tourist who questions their travel. “Question of Travel” is a record of Bishop’s experience as a traveller and the difficulty involved in the process of conveying otherness. In this poem Bishop considers how we might appreciate another culture. Bishop, in a way, projects her concerns in the poem by checking the authenticity of her travel. Should the traveller be in the comforts of his home or like a child be determined “to see the sun the other way around.” In the questions posed, by Bishop to the traveller, there are answers hidden in them. It is “always, always delightful” to be a spectator to “some inexplicable old stonework,” or hear the “tiniest green hummingbird.” Bishop herself was a traveller, so she implies that, “we dream our dream / and have them, too.” Bishop demands an escape from narcissism. And this escape Bishop finds in the midst of nature provided we have a traveller’s mind which is full of temptations to be “determined to rush to see the sun the other way around and “The tiniest green hummingbird in the world”:

“But surely it would have been a pity

not to have seen the trees along this road,

really exaggerated in their beauty,

not to have seen them gesturing

like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.”[CP 93]

Bishop in the third stanza declares that it is pitiable not to take travelling and witness the celebration of nature. According to David Kalstone, Bishop’s deepening assimilation to Brazil not only recalled her Nova Scotia childhood but helped her to recapitulate and retain it. Though Bishop is inviting us to step into her Brazil, she is also asking readers to meditate on their concept of home, what a home mean to them. For Bishop, home is not the four wall structure but it is the sea the landscape, the art, the waterfalls, the natural vegetation and its inhabitants. Bishop being the traveller on the journey of life is equipped to
make homes on the way; home for her is the place where she finds love and security as in her Samambaia home in Brazil. Bishop pities all those who have not heard "the other less primitive music of the fat brown bird;" "pondered" "on what connection can exist" "between the crudest wooden footwear" and "the whittled fantasies of wooden cages;" "to have studied history in / the weak calligraphy of songbirds’ cages;" and "to have listen to rain." Bishop gives a counterpoint to the tourist from "Arrival at Santos": here it is a traveller with a notebook who writes:

"Is it lack of imagination that makes us come

to imagined places, not just stay at home?

Or could Pascal have been not entirely right

about just sitting quietly in one’s room?"[CP 94]

The phrase "stay at home" appears three times in this poem, not as a deliberate refrain, but as the utterance of a perplexed traveller who wishes to do the right thing, whatever that is. Bishop is careful in this poem not to objectify Brazil; instead, the onus is placed on the traveller who must question his/her motives for how and where to travel. Bishop further expresses;

"Continent, city, country, society:

the choice is never wide and never free.

And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home,

wherever that may be?"[CP 94]

There are always consequences to our choices. Bishop, for herself has already answered the question in her poem, that for her, a whole phase of lost experience has been transmuted (displaced) into something permanent. Through the readers, Bishop is trying to assess her stay in Brazil though this becomes the happiest phase in her life in the company of Lota, still there is no productivity in their bond like similar to the Brazilian exotic landscape with lots of beauty but not the childhood Nova Scotian home. For Bishop her wanderings are idiosyncratic, engaged in looking for a home. Bishop shared with Frost the habit of imaginative and actual property speculation. The majority of Bishop’s poems, deal directly with the experience of travel and
none of them posit a secure home from which the character has departed or an ideal destination towards which they have moved. “Home” no longer accommodates any of Bishop’s characters.

Bishop’s characters are not only displaced themselves but they are disarming to others by their conspicuous vagabondage. The confrontations between people in Bishop’s work are sometimes ambivalent and tricky; high and low, master and servant, victor and victim, are likely to change places. In the poem, “Manuelzinho” the relation between the patron and the tenant-farmer is based on the inequality between them but there is also reversal of roles, when “superior” and “inferior” lose all meaning. In contrast to the poems where a traveller was the speaker, this poem has a native voice “Brazil. A friend of the writer is speaking.”[CP 96], offering a narrative that is both Brazilian and privileged. Bishop’s appointing a speaker helps her to dissociate herself though partly from the speaker; here we have a liberal landowner addressing a squatter-tenant. Bishop’s change of speaker provides an added dimension to the theme of representation present in the previous poems. Those who call Brazil their home fail to guarantee an accurate comprehension or description of the place and rely on the subjective point of view of the tourist. The character, in the poem works on imagination:

“Half squatter, half tenant (no rent)—

a sort of inheritance; white,

in your thirties now, and supposed

to supply me with vegetables,

but you don't; or you won't; or you can't

got the idea through your brain—

the world's worst gardener since Cain.”[CP 96]

Bishop’s subject in this poem shifts from sea, ship, ports etc., to places like property, house, and territory, and to the dynamic forces shaping the relationship of employer and employee. Manuelzinho worked for Bishop and Lota at their Samambaia house in Petropolis. Manuelzinho, a blessed fool, magical and hexed can grow nothing. The outright refusal of Manuelzinho to
work, frustrate his employer who is Bishop’s friend and also the speaker of the poem. This friend of Bishop is no one else but Lota de Macedo Soares, who figures as the indulgent, loving mistress, taxed beyond patience by her profligate servant. Bishop once confessed that, “the poem [Manuelzinho] reminded me of how upset Lota would get because people wouldn’t or couldn’t do what she wanted them to. It would just infuriate her.”[OB 134] He refuses to do as he is supposed to do:

“The strangest things happen to you.
Your cow eats a “poison grass”
and drops dead on the spot.

Nobody else’s does.

And then your father dies,
a superior old man . . .

The family gathers, but you,
no, you “don’t think he’s dead!”[CP 97]

His refusal is exaggerated to such an extent in the poem that he refuses to call a dead man dead. He refuses to respond to the conventional order of things-challenges the order of things he works to preserve. The employer proclaims the distance between his childish wonders and her mature sensibility. Gary in her book notes that, “Lota was exasperated and scornful when Manuelzinho misspent money she had given him for his father’s funeral”[OB 140] which incident Bishop incorporates in the poem, “I gave you money for the funeral / and you go and hire a bus.” Though, evading participating in the narration still the death of the father brings her in the poem; it becomes the common pain for both of them to witness the death of their father. Though for Bishop the plight is deeper and unhealed for she was too young to comprehend the death of her father, “don’t think he is death.” Manuelzinho, the tenant is seen as improvident, touching, exasperating, picturesque – qualities traditionally attributed to the colonized; the landowner is essentially benign, ruefully resigned to the balance of power in which Manuelzinho must cajole and beg for handouts. His stature is purposefully diminished:
“With blue sugar bags on their heads,
    carrying your lunch,
your children scuttle by me
like little moles aboveground,
or even crouch behind bushes
    as if I were out to shoot them!
– Impossible to make friends,
    though each will grab at once
for an orange or a piece of candy.”[CP 98]

The world of Manuelzinho is diminished and dehumanised by addressing his children as “little moles aboveground.” His children are described with an inhuman eye. But this description is not directed towards the children, it only shows the ethnography of the observer. The poem seems to be less about the Manuelzinho than it is about the narrator. Bishop’s various displacements acquainted her to the different cultural constituted identities and that can be clearly seen in her descriptions of Manuelzinho, his family and children. There is a bridge Bishop is trying to create with the help of the language between the colonial voice of the narrator and the humane of the provincial poet:

    “Between us float a few 
        big, soft, pale-blue, 
sluggish fireflies, 
the jellyfish of the air …”[CP 99]

Here the descriptions contain the elements of air and water, two of the five elements of nature, which make the floating and flowing between them smooth. The open-end stanza of the poem indicates a space provided for the fireflies to illuminate the bond and make it bigger, softer, and easy going. Bonnie Costello states, “Manuelzinho’s protean quality infects the beholder, who participates through metaphor in the defeat of her old orders and joins his deviant curiosity, making a bridge between his world and hers.”25 This
bridging allows, Bishop, to transgress the barriers of the society and the class. Not limiting herself by bridging the divides, Bishop goes on to appreciate him:

“Or perhaps when you were small,
your mother said, “Manuelzhino,
one thing; be sure you always
paint your straw hat.”

One was gold for a while,
but the gold wore off, like plate.
One was bright green. Unkindly,
I called you Klorophyll kid.”[CP 99]

As a child, he had his mother to guide him but whose absence now becomes a common element between both of them. Whatever was said by mother becomes the eternal truth for him and remains unchanged and unchangeable thought throughout his life. The golden words from mother were “gold for a while / but the gold worn off” for she died long back leading to a weak memory of hers. The history of Manuelzinho, reminds Bishop of her own pain and trauma. Giving way to her own confession, Bishop calls him a “Klorophyll Kid,” this phrase connects Bishop to her childhood and the greens of Nova Scotia. The poem also suggests that Bishop too, is in some way “a squatter” in a world that resists human interest. The distance between the employer and Manuelzinho can be reduced first with affection of adult for a child and than by the dependence on him. Bishop’s displacement to Brazil and to its interiors had taught her the complexities of human relationship and the strength of love:

“You helpless, foolish man,
I love you all I can,
I think. Or do I?
I take off my hat, unpainted
And figurative, to you.
And I promise to try.”[CP 99]

In this poem, Bishop places herself between the narrator and Manuelzinho. There is no way for her to be equidistant from the landowner and the tenant because the poem reads, after all, from the landowner’s point of view, even though it the course of the poem Bishop is seen engaged in it. The poem explores that perspective, leaving the reader free to accept or reject it. The poem ends with the patron’s humility and warmth for Manuelzinho, making the readers believe that Bishop’s displacement made her more humane. Leaving the trauma of losses aside, she has invested herself to more positive creativity than ever due to the festivity her physical displacement bought in her life.

Bishop’s stay abroad, in Brazil, suggests that she was an expatriate writer. In Brazil, she found a place she could call home for over a decade and a half. Bishop’s move to Brazil enabled her to conceive home in her poetry and discuss how her ‘geography of the imagination’ accommodate her changing notions of home. Bishop’s Brazilian love Lota understood Bishop’s need for a house and built her what Virginia Woolf would call “a room of one’s own”: a studio set apart from the main house where Bishop could write. In this way Bishop’s quest for home was satisfied in Samambaia. Many of Bishop’s poems have “Samambaia” as their setting like: “Electrical Storm” which immortalises Tobias the cat, “The Armadillo”; “Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics,” and “Song for the Rainy Season.”

In the “Song for the Rainy Season”, we get the glimpses of Bishop’s love for her Samambaia house and the enthralling nature which surrounds it. Bishop was dreamily contented during her first months in Brazil. Gary in her book describes Bishop’s “Samambaia house as following: “The Petropolis house was so high in the on the black granite mountains that clouds would drift in and out of the windows. The house was near the base of the cliff and its waterfall. A window of the house overlooked a small artificial pond fed by the waterfall. Here Bishop gathered her books and papers for the first since she lived in keywest.”[OB 138] Bishop in this poem is seen engrossed in the beautification of her home which is surrounded by enchanting landscape that the casual visitor might overlook:
“Hidden, oh hidden
in the high fog
the house we live in,
beneath the majestic rock,

rain-, rainbow- ridden,”[CP 101]

Bishop is seen using the alliteration to enhance the effect of the scene. The repetition of the consonants ‘h’ and ‘r’ is achieved in the first stanza of the poem to express the intermingling of the nature and the house to such an extent that they have become one. “Elizabeth was very proud of her little studio at Samambaia. She bought her books as a way of saying, ‘I’m staying here.’ ”[OB 139] The country life in Petropolis promoted vivid recollections of Great Village. Bishop uses personification to enliven the scene.

“The brook sings loud
from a rib cage
of giant fern; vapor
climbs up the thick growth
effortlessly, turns back,
holding them both,

house and rock

in a private cloud.”[CP 101]

The brook and vapor are given life so as to magnify the surroundings. This dream house of Bishop is “hidden” “in high fog,” and, except for “fat frogs” that “shrilling for love, / clamber and mount,” all that happens in this place is hidden too behind a protective covering that is described nonetheless in terms of physical closeness where “waterfalls cling” and “vapour” is seen “holding them both,” “house and rock.” Bishop uses implicit metaphor and displaces the animals to the human world endowing them with human qualities like “blind drops crawl” “owl gives us proof \ he can count”. These images imply that Bishop took these animals better inhabitants of her house and the environment:
“House, open house

to the white dew

and the milk-white sunrise

kind to the eyes,

to membership

of silver fish, mouse,

bookworms,

big moths.”[CP 101]

Bishop invites the occupants of the natural world to be a part of her house. She opens the door of an “open-house” to the mist infiltrating the house and causing “mildew’s / ignorant map” on the wall. The progressive architecture of Lota and Bishop’s “Samambaia” house was such that the outer environment could be felt indoors, and also in Bishop’s poems. The repetition of the word white as in “white dew,” “milk-white,” and “silver” enhance the purity and innocence of the natural world. Bishop’s house, in “Song for the Rainy Season,” is “darkened and tarnished/ by the warm touch / of warm breath, / maculate, / cherished.” The nature is displaced into the “house” along with the animal world and Bishop maculates, cherishes and rejoices it because “For a later era will differ:”

“(O difference that kills,

or intimidates, much

of all our small shadowy

life!)”[CP 102]

Bishop fears that when this connection between the house and the nature would extinct everything would cease to be full of life. Nature would be a routine, lifeless and uninteresting activity if the human ties to it were broken. The last stanza reverses and nullifies the exotic picture created in the first stanza of the poem. The poem implies the importance of the coexistence of both the worlds the natural and the human.
Bishop’s Brazilian influence is also reflected from her poem “The Armadillo” which meditates on the Brazilian custom of floating celebratory fire balloons on saints’ days and festival days. Bishop dedicated this poem to Robert Lowell eight years after its publication in the New Yorker on June 22, 1957. In a letter to Lowell on August 2, 1965, Bishop writes:

“I don’t think I told you – but I finally decided to put your name under the Armadillo poem, since you have liked it.”[WA 582]

The seeds of the poem can be traced in the specificity and timing of the Brazilian holiday during the “Festa de São João” (or “Junina”) which falls on June 24 in the honour of St. John. The celebration demands the background of the cultural icon of the fire balloons, which leads to the disruption of both the environment and the domestic life of Lota and Bishop who lived in Samambaia when the festivity was on. It is a poem that is rooted more deeply in Brazil and in Bishop’s domestic circumstances. The time of year when the action unfolds, the cultural phenomenon of the “frail” but “dangerous” fire balloons, and the background of the particular saint “still honored in these parts,” all of which Bishop refers to in the initial six lines of the poem:

“This is the time of year
when almost every night
the frail, illegal fire balloons appear.
Climbing the mountain height,
rising toward a saint
still honored in these parts,
the paper chambers flush and fill with light
that comes and goes, like hearts”[CP 103]

The “mountain height” is part of Samambaia; thus, “The Armadillo” continues the same natural setting as “Squatter’s Children,” “Manuelzinho,” and “The Shampoo,” but now this environment, including the home is under a literal and metaphorical threat. The “we” that observes this threat (the pronoun appears only once in the sixth stanza) is the same pair as the dear friends in “The
Shampoo.” This makes it reasonable to wonder if the displacement of the animals out of their nests and lairs illustrates the speaker’s real or imagined fear about threats to the domestic environment of Samambaia. The balloons “like hearts” indicate a “love that suddenly turns dangerous and abandons or destroys.” As readers we expect to see “fire” associated with the balloons, but not necessarily the “flush and fill” of light that suggests either a heart beating or the heart in stages of waxing or waning passion. From the beginning of the poem, Bishop hints at the physical danger of the fire balloons and also the metaphorical danger of inconsistent love. These fire balloons seem to imitate stars and planets, but which also sometimes fall flaming to earth, disrupting and destroying natural life. It depicts the almost unearthly beauty of these fragile, dangerous objects which rise in the night sky. Bishop compares this event with the stars and the planets and beautifies it but at the same time shows the cruel repercussions of this event, the chaos these fire balloons generate.

“Last night another big one fell.

It splattered like an egg of fire
against the cliff behind the house.

The flame ran down. We saw the pair
of owls who nest there flying up

...The ancient owl’s nest must have burned.

Hastily, all alone,

a glistening armadillo left the scene,”[CP 103]

The falling of the fire balloon in “The Armadillo,” give the animals physically marks, injuring them and forcing them to leaves their abodes and the environment it invades. The animals in the poem, driven from their nests by a fallen balloon, emerge frightened and mystified, all, from the ancient owls to the baby rabbits, vulnerable in the face of this disaster. The owls’ “whirling black-and-white” is “stained bright pink underneath,” the armadillo becomes “rose-flecked” with either sparks of fire or blood, and the baby rabbit jumps out “short-eared,” appearing as “a handful of intangible ash / with fixed, ignited eyes,” either reflecting the fire, filling with metaphorical fire, or
literally catching on fire. All these creatures become transformed in the eyes of the viewers. Even the well protected armadillo is defenceless before the incomprehensible and terrifying shower of fire. In “The Armadillo”, Bishop seems to present her first hand experience of witnessing World War II while in Key West. The poem presents a paradox by presenting the terror of the animals, at the same time presenting the beauty of the fire balloons which are in a way responsible for the destructing of the natural beauty itself. Man as well as animals, build houses to guarantee their safe living but this illusion gets shattered in this poem. Bishop in this poem depicts the susceptibility of our well-made houses as well as the feeble nests of birds in the face of man-made disaster. Bishop has painted an uninhabitable scene in the poem. The last stanza is an outcry in italics. Every emotion is heightened and exclamation marked to sum-up the panic and misery of all the animals:

“Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!
O falling fire and piercing cry
and panic, and a weak mailed fist
clenched ignorant against the sky!”[CP 104]

Here the italics indicate that this quatrain is different than the others. They might in themselves be a tool to create the “dreamlike mimicry,” indicating how the fire balloons mimic a beauty that hides their danger. In these final lines the plight of the animal extends to become our own. Bishop suddenly realises that the art of poetry is “too pretty” an act as compared to the worldly affairs that are painful and fearful. The mystifying and terrible events are capable to shake us to the core. However, mailed we may be with our intelligence and strength we cannot protect ourselves from these destructive elements. Bishop shows a contest in the last lines of the poem between the “weak” and “ignorant” “mailed fist” and the extended all powerful “sky.” The possible defeat is exemplified to make the existence on earth very trivial however advance or progressive it may be. Bishop dedicated this poem to Robert Lowell, who becomes a conscientious objector when the Allied command began firing and bombing German cities in World War II. Bishop’s poem points directly to these fire bombings, which wreak the same kind of
horrifying destruction on a part of our universe that the fire balloons wreak on
the animals. The last quatrain, with its exclamation and enjamed lines,
heightening the intensity and expresses the helplessness in the face of terror.
Bishop seldom protests or specifies her emotions, her work is full of an
implicit compassion, and her friend Robert Lowell justly ascribed her tone “of
large, grave tenderness and sorrowing amusement.” Though Bishop holds
back her emotions, by not showing her authorial control intending not to give
moral resonance to the poem, still the moral dimension is undoubtedly present.
This subject is very much of Bishop’s immediate concern. Many of Bishop’s
poems reflect the urban disturbance in natural living, and this ideology is very
much a part of Bishop’s provincial, Nova Scotian upbringing. Her concern for
natural life and the integrity of home were subjects dear to Bishop. This poem
is an outcome of Bishop’s displacement to a provincial place in Brazil very
much similar to her Nova Scotia.

In the geography of “Questions of Travel”, the centre and the margins are
reversed: “Brazil,” formerly elsewhere is now home, and the centre which
means everywhere else, including the United States, is “Elsewhere.” Poems in
the “Elsewhere” section are filled with reminiscences of Bishop’s childhood in
Nova Scotia. Upon arriving in Brazil, Bishop was able to examine her sense of
unhomeliness and embrace her "poetic persona" as she embraced Brazil’s
culture to search a home for self. It is interesting to note that how a
comfortable home and relationship allowed her, artistically and
psychologically, to uproot herself from Brazil temporarily to make the journey
to another “Elsewhere” i.e. to her past. The second half of “Questions of
Travel”, entitled “Elsewhere,” consists of Bishop’s recollections of her
childhood, both in poetry and prose. What is remarkable about the pieces in
this section is that they make complicated journeys in time and space, from the
present in Brazil to the past in Nova Scotia up to her year in Washington D.C.
This reflects the theme of displacement of time, through, which she extends
her search for home in her work. The poems of “Elsewhere,” for the most part,
are about prodigal, homecoming, insights - those inevitable returns of
repressed feelings. As the title “Elsewhere” suggests, the poems revolve
around the continual displacement Bishop experienced but here we witness the
memory crossing into her understanding of places. Fairy-tale diction and childlike simplicity characterize these poems and delude the reader into illusion of “pure” confession; encoded, however, in them are the strategies always remaking memory. An unnamed pain moves through these ultimately self-reflexive poems. For instance, her poems such as “Sestina,” “Manners,” and “First Death in Nova Scotia,” are Bishop’s accesses to her past. She uses past memories, to write intimate and personal accounts that mirrors her childhood in her poems.

While Bishop focused exclusively on the exterior of the houses and churches in "Cape Breton," she focuses on the more personal interior of a house in her poem "Sestina". Examining Bishop's introspection in “Sestina,” Susan McCabe suggests that a "hidden and repressed" sorrow is at the heart of the poem. Bishop changed the title of the poem form “Early Sorrow” to “Sestina” reflecting her work not only as an aesthetic device but as a method of reliving and covering over painful experiences. The poetic form Bishop chose in the sestina imparts a sense of suspension. Bishop in this poem narrates a painful story of a child and a grandmother living with their losses though making the absence of mother conspicuous. Although there is no specific indication of the geographical setting, the poem's Marvel Stove and almanac suggest a distant, rural atmosphere, likely a part of Bishop's past. The story, set in a kitchen on a rainy day late afternoon in September, features two actions: having tea and drawing. Although the woman tries to remain cheerful and thus protect the child, her tears give way to her sadness:

“September rain falls on the house.
In the failing light, the old grandmother
sits in the kitchen with the child
beside the Little Marvel Stove,
reading the jokes from the almanac,
laughing and talking to hide her tears.”[CP 123]

The use of the third person voice in 'Sestina' blends the poet's adult perspective with the child's. It also permits Bishop to control the emotional distance
between the reader and the character. The choice of the third person may have helped Bishop treat highly charged memories, may have allowed her, in other words, to steady herself emotionally and use the characters – human and non-living – to re-enact a persisting trauma. This past is somewhat dreary; it is full of "tears" and "rain." Bishop’s nostalgia for Nova Scotia is apparent, though she is reluctant to address it directly. Bishop longed for the warmth of relationships which were absents in her life right from her childhood. Her nostalgia is a kind of psychological displacement to her past. The child has magical understanding of sorrow and separation:

“She thinks that her equinoctial tears
and the rains that beats on the roof of the house
were both foretold by the almanac,
but only known to a grandmother.”[CP 123]

The grandmother and the almanac are both bearer of knowledge but grandmother tries to provide a place of protection from loss and tries to bring the child into the present time “It’s time for tea now;” but the child’s acuity reads inscribed in her surroundings, her mother’s madness. “The iron kettle sings on the stove.” The grandmother copes with the apparent loss by hiding her feelings from the child essentially burying them. An effort is seen on part of Bishop and grandmother to place correctly all the displaced relationships. The strange component which finally renders the whole house unnatural is tears. The grandmother tries to "hide her tears" and says only “It’s time for tea now,” the child senses the tears unshed and displaces them elsewhere – into the dancing water-drops from the teakettle, into the rain on the roof, into the tea in the grandmother’s cup. Grandmother still trying to distract the child, "reading jokes from the almanac" and "laughing and talking" while the child:

“With crayons the child draws a rigid house
and a winding pathway. Then the child
puts in a man with buttons like tears”[CP 123]

The child, presumably Bishop herself, yearns for stability and searches a home for herself. She attempts to connect and explore her past through her childish
art and imagination. The child’s understanding of the world is expressed only in the “rigid house” she draws. The child must translate the tears she felt into the “buttons like tears” into her drawing.’ In ‘Sestina’ Bishop does not state the cause of sadness but it can be conjectured upon. The fact that it is a man whom the child draws with “buttons like tears” may suggest that someone—the grandfather or perhaps the child's father—has died or left. Certainly, the grief is serious, for the final three lines indicate that the problem will persist. A study of Bishop's life reveal that her father died when she was eight months old; but the absence that may have troubled her more was that of her mother, whom Bishop never saw after she was institutionalized for serious mental illness. The child's and the grandmother's respective responses to loss presents the readers with a spectrum of mourning which reflects the poet's own feelings in regard to mourning, death and separation. The loss of both parents resulted in the young Bishop spending time with her grandmother in Nova Scotia. Bishop never outgrew the spectre of her absent mother and the terrible feeling of not belonging. Thus, while the characters are very close to one another, there is a contrast—even an opposition—between them. The grandmother tries to make the desolate day pleasant, while the child imagines and draws a world preoccupied with tears:

“But secretly, while the grandmother
busies herself about the stove,
the little moons fall down like tears
from between the pages of the almanac
into the flower bed the child
has carefully placed in the front of the house.”[CP 124]

“The almanac” is symbolic of present foretelling past. Bishop and her grandmother, both are longing for something in their past. As in "Cape Breton" and “Filling Station,” the absence of a mother figure in the poem suggests an autobiographical link. Similarly, in “Sestina” the beauty and stability of the "rigid house" and its surroundings allow the child to cope with her situation. The poem's rigid form as well as search for displaced relations provided Bishop with a method for reliving painful experiences. Still the story of pain
and anguish is conveyed in the poem by Bishop’s use of the word “tears” in different connotations, as “hide her tears,” “her equinoctial tears,” “small hard tears,” “dark brown tears,” “button like tears,” and “moons fall like tears.” The emphasis upon tears, and the artificial way they are portrayed is the precise sense of Bishop’s visual detail. In addition, this poem often sounds like prose: the use of dialogue, and the long, careful sentence comprising the sixth stanza. 'Sestina', in other words, is not personal confession, as the lack of personal names indicates, but representative in the way that a tale is. The envoy makes it clear that the trauma has not been resolved:

“Time to plant tears, say the almanac."

The grandmother sings to the marvellous stove

and the child draws another inscrutable house.”[CP 124]

There is a flow, in the stanzas, which weave them together – rain turns tears, tears turn tea, tea turns buttons, button turns moon, moon turns seed, and seed again turns tears. But these tears of mourning irritate a creative impulse – the child’s recasting of a house – that tentatively helps shelter sorrow and painful memory. The absence of child’s parents is the unspoken cause of those tears, so unconceivable though so concealed. For all the efforts of Grandmother, for all the silence of the child, for all the brave cheer of the Little Marvel Stove, the house remains frozen. In the continuous process of the painful history, “the child draws another inscrutable house” indicating that “house” is the only resting place from this spell of loss and pain. The child in "Sestina" is able to understand her past through art much like Bishop did as she explored the significance of loss and home in her own poetry. The child in the poem not just reacts to the world: she helps create it. She reconstitutes her loss through making a home along with absent father in her drawing. Bishop is displaced in the past memories through the medium of the poem. The theme of emotional displacement is seen in the poem, when Bishop along with the child revisiting her Nova Scotian days. Bishop suffered from depression, but used art as a means of connecting with and overcoming her past. As McCabe suggests,

"Bishop abolishes the past, and perhaps more important, she makes the past so inextricably a part of the present that she reveals the falseness of separating
Bishop is able to manipulate her relationship with the past by recreating it in the present; this lingering sense of the past being in the present is another way of understanding present.

The poem "Manners" by Elizabeth Bishop is a profound and insightful depiction of the system of etiquette followed in the era of history, more specifically the twentieth century American history. The title of the poem refers to what is socially correct, polite and decent behaviour. World War I had ended in the year 1918 denoting a shift in value and manners that are often followed by rapid changes brought about by the war. The subheading “for a child of 1918” shows that the child of year 1918 was different in a sense that the social scenario were inconsistent. While on the surface the poem seems merely a description of manners of the day, it is, in actuality, a satirical depiction of the obsolete and old fashioned codes of civility, traditionally accepted by all people as proper and necessary. Also the poem is about the relatively instantaneous transition from the old to new. Bishop witnessed the transition from the old to new while she undertook various physical displacements in life but heart in heart was deeply attached to the old system of etiquettes, as reflected in her love for her maternal grandparents and the Nova Scotian heritage. Bishop uses the relation between grandfather and granddaughter, in order to bridge the gap between their respective eras and also to put them in contrast:

“My grandfather said to me
as we sat on the wagon seat,
“Be sure to remember to always
speak to everyone you meet.” [CP 121]

The system of etiquette from the grandfather's time is based largely on always being humble and ingratiating oneself for others. Bishop uses the image of “wagon seat,” in the opening stanza of the poem, suggesting a simpler and a middle class past still very conscious of the value system which is all the wealth they possess. In today’s world, values like kindness and respect for
others are vanishing slowly. But grandfather seems to take all the responsibility of restoring the value system back in the society. Hence, grandfather needs to be a strict disciplinarian, which the “grandfather’s whip” is symbolic of, to reinforce his authoritative voice:

“Always offer everyone a ride;
don’t forget that when you get older,”

my grandfather said. . . .”[CP 121]

Recognizing others with simple gestures and extending one’s help is what grandfather reiterate. The word “always” emphasises the value of time, and this transcend time is enforced by grandfather urging: “don’t forget.” Bishop strikingly compares the value system among humans and the animals:

“Man or beast, that’s good manners.
Be sure that you both always do.”[CP 121]

The lessons given by grandfather were for both “the crow” and the child. However, the child was worried about the crow, indicating an uncertain future of the bird. But the line “Be sure that you both always do” indicates that grandfather is very ardently about implementing his order upon the bird and the child, who represents the future generation. The granddaughter's era brings in a newer and much different understanding and outlook of manner:

“When automobiles went by,
the dust hid the people’s faces,
but we shouted “Good day! Good day!
Fine day!” at the top of our voices.”[CP 121]

The “automobile” is symbolic of the modern, changed time indicating a change in the mannerism. The racing of the automobile raises dust that obscures everyone’s vision and obligating them to shout, “Good day! Good day! / Fine day!” implying that the dissonant future will supersede the calm “wagon ride.” Bishop refers to “grandfather” four times in the poem showcasing her love, attachment and bound between with her maternal
grandfather. His values are the only hope which would take her through the audacities of modern times:

“When we came to Hustler Hill
he said that the mare was tired,
so we all got down and walked,
as our good manners required.”[CP 122]

“The mare” and his tiredness are symbolic of the conflict between the nature and the hustle of modern life but, even then, “our good manners” prevail, internalized from the grandfather’s values. Throughout the poem, there is “abcb” rhyme scheme. Bishop used this scheme probably to keep uniformity in the poem, so that the change that was taking place is not noticeable. Bishop’s poems are examination of earlier experiences; her poems are return to childhood as the source of current experience. And while these two experiences are very different and less concern with memory’s imaginative reshaping of experience, hence these poems establish the process of recovering from past with Bishop’s childlike tone and acute perspective.

Bishop in her poem “First Death in Nova Scotia” faces directly the question of death. The question of death has haunted her since her childhood with the death of her father in her early infant years. Bishop, in this poem, places herself as a child in a familiar parlor from her childhood days and faces the question of death directly. The language used in the poem is childlike, as befits a poem written from a child’s perspective; the observant little girl notes the furnishings of the room and recalls them perfectly. The child is transfixed with the perception of death by the presence of a coffin containing “little cousin Arthur.” The presence of the coffin in the setting of the parlour is strange and may well scare the small girl.

“In the cold, cold parlor
my mother laid out Arthur
beneath the chromographs:

. . . on the table
stood a stuffed loon
shot and stuffed by Uncle
Arthur, Arthur’s father.”[CP 125]

All these details are immemorially known to the child. These uncalled for memories are the burden of grief from her earlier life which she releases through this poem. Bishop uses simple childlike language, as befitting the poem written from the child’s perspective. The observant girl notes everything in the poem and finds them cold, lifeless or dead just like “the little cousin Arthur.” The child’s attention is not focused on the dead body, but is caught instead by the objects around her in the room reflecting that the focused is on the domesticity of things. "First Death in Nova Scotia" places a child in a familiar domestic setting, but transfixed by the presence of the coffin containing little cousin Arthur, the child's observations are confused by desire and fear; the need to face death and the need to disguise it, which is reflected by the portrayed of royalty – hanging Edward, Prince of Wales, and King George –in the room. The focus on the coffin, the familiar truth becomes all of a sudden unfamiliar and unreal. Bishop goes on to make many images in the poem that results in seeing more than it is comfortable to see. Mary McCarthy once described Bishop's way of seeing as being like a big pocket “magnifying mirror.”29 Not a magnifying glass, which Bishop can hide behind and, in god-like fashion, probe the externals and reveal the internal workings of nature, but a magnifying mirror which would more problematically capture and reveal her own disquieted image in the representation as well as that of her readers. The child’s attention is not focused on the dead body, but is caught instead by the other objects around her, particularly the “stuffed loon” shot and killed by “Uncle Arthur. The cousin Arthur becomes stranger all of a sudden. The domestic life losses its domestication and becomes unknown and strange - the stuffed loon becomes alive, his taciturnity seems voluntary, his red glass eyes can see:

“Since Uncle Arthur fired
a bullet into him,
he hadn’t said a word.
He kept his own counsel
On his white, frozen lake,
the marble-topped table”[CP 125]

The adult conspires and wears a frightful garb. For the child, the secrets of the adult world are baffling. Bishop’s physical displacement to Brazil made her investigate the childhood queries and free herself from the troublesome memories with a braver persona. Bishop in this stanza looks at the loon more closely. Bishop personifies the loon and calls it “he” instead of it, and links it to her dead cousin. The child’s innocence and her lack of understanding of the concept of death is reflected when she enumerates that “the bird “hadn’t said a word” since it was killed. Although this is hardly surprising, it shows that the child does not understand the implications of death. There is something mysterious and secretive about the loon for he keeps his counsel suggests that he does have something to say, but chooses not to share it. Again the coldness of the room is reinforced by the description of the bird on the ‘marble-topped table’ as being ‘on his white, frozen lake’. The bird is a metaphor for the dead boy, who is similarly inanimate and cold. The child finds the loon attractive; his breast is both ‘cold and caressable’, and his red eyes are ‘much to be desired’. The loon’s eyes are the only mention of any colour other than white in the poem. Their redness may be linked to the redness of the mourners’ eyes when they are weeping over the dead child. Even when focusing on the bird, the dead boy is always in the child’s mind. In the third stanza, the silence and stillness is broken by the child’s mother speaking directly to her. The child is further confused with the stillness instil by death and a fantasy of communication still possible, as the child is told;

““Come,” said my mother,
"Come and say good-bye
to your little cousin Arthur.”
I was lifted up and given
one lily of the valley
to put in Arthur's hand.”[CP 125]
It is significant that Bishop’s mother is only brought to life in a poem about death. It suggests that memories of her mother are linked to absence and loss. Bishop’s physician once remarked on the unusualness of the fact that Bishop had memories of herself at home at two years of age, that is, after her father’s death but before her mother’s breakdown and commitment to mental asulum. Bishop brings back her mother to life in her poetry, based on the image and memory captured in those impressionable age of infancy. The little girl’s mother has to lift her up to see her cousin – a poignant detail which reminds us how young she was when brought face to face with death for the first time. The little girl places a small lily of the valley in her dead cousin’s hand. The lily of the valley is a small flower, and not at all exotic. It is entirely appropriate that the child should leave this as an offering rather than a large, showy bloom. Again, it emphasises the smallness of the poet and of the dead boy. Bishop’s description of the coffin is in childish terms:

“Arthur’s coffin was

a little frosted cake,

and the red-eyed loon eyed it

from his white, frozen lake.”[CP 125]

She imagines that the ‘red-eyed loon’ wants it for himself. The loon seems slightly frightening now as he looks covetously towards the coffin. The image of “the red-eyed loon” is a haunting one and is repeated in the poem. The child is attempting to make some sense of the situation, and by linking the coffin to something she understands – ‘frosted cake’ – and imagining the loon’s feelings on seeing it, she tries to bring some sort of order and normality to a situation that is unfamiliar and disturbing. Further, Bishop describes the little boy in his coffin using childish imagery:

“Arthur was very small.

He was all white, like a doll

that hadn't been painted yet.

Jack Frost had started to paint him

the way he always painted
the Maple Leaf (Forever).” [CP 126]

In her innocence, the young girl believes that it is Jack Frost who paints the leaves red in the autumn, and she imagines that he broke off part way through painting Arthur. Instead, Arthur is like a porcelain doll whose features are not brought to life by the application of red lips, a bloom to the cheek and so forth. In the fourth stanza, Bishop says that the dead boy is like a doll that has not been ‘painted yet’: the word ‘yet’ suggesting that she still does not fully comprehend the finality of death. Arthur will never be brought to life. Later in the stanza, she imagines Jack Frost dropping his brush and leaving Arthur “white forever.” In contrast to the word ‘yet’, ‘forever’ shows us that there is a part of the child’s mind that is now beginning to realise Arthur is gone “forever.” The word ‘forever’ is used twice in this stanza, reinforcing the permanence and finality of death. Arthur is never coming back. As she mentions the maple leaf, the child’s mind drifts away for a moment. She connects the maple leaf to the Canadian national anthem of the time. This stream of consciousness is typical of the way small children make associations and find it difficult to keep their attention on any one thing for a long time. The child joins in the fantasy, first by imagining that Jack Frost, who has painted Arthur’s red hair as he painted the Maple Leaf of Canada, and next by imagining that “the gracious royal couples” in the chromographs have “invited Arthur to be / the smallest page at the court:”

“They invite Arthur to be
the smallest page at court.
But how could Arthur go,
clutching his tiny lily,
with his eyes shut up so tight
and the road deep in snow?” [CP 126]

In the final stanza, the child attempts to make sense of the situation by imagining a fairy-tale ending for Arthur. Perhaps the royal couples will take Arthur to be a knight in waiting, “the smallest page in court.” It is interesting that there is no notion of heaven here. However, the young girl cannot quite
believe in this fairy-tale ending. On some level, she is made aware that Arthur is dead. She questions her own fantasy, wondering how the little boy could go and join the courtiers when his eyes tightly shut “and the roads deep in snow.” This is a particularly poignant image, and the sadness is underscored by the use of the words “smallest” and “tiny.” By ending the poem on a question, the poet suggests that the child still has many unanswered questions about death. What does seem clear, however, is that there is no happy ending. Domesticity is frail, and it is shaken by the final strangeness of death. Until death, it is believed that we are truly, in this world, in our mother’s house safe and secure, that “somebody loves us all.” But this truth of homeliness is ripped off by the tyrant hand of death. Bishop in this poem tries to establish that domestication of the familiar goes on even after death, “clutching his tiny lily” is some kind of assurance of transcendent domesticity. After a loss of life that destroys one form of domesticity, the efforts to reconstitute it in another form begins. The definition of death, in few of Bishop’s poems, is to have given up on the domesticating the world and re-establishing yet once more some form of intimacy. Bishop in this phase of her life is seen exploring the deeper sense of life and death.

Bishop domesticates strange, remote, filthy, and untidy place in her poems. She mocks at one such filthy and messy place with black appearance in her poem “Filling Station.” Surprisingly she finds signs of order within its filth and disorder. Bishop wonders who provides the orderly or domestic touches. ‘The Filling Station’ is a much lighter poem but it also ends with a transcendent sense of maternal nurture and love. Like ‘The Fish’ it is located in a place traditionally occupied by men. The poem is an antithesis of beauty. The filling station is a space that is not just ‘dirty’ but potentially dangerous:

“Oh, but it is dirty!
- this little filling station,
 oil-soaked, oil permeated
to a disturbing, over-all
 black translucency.

‘Be careful of that match!’”[CP 127]
The opening exclamation demonstrates the intended fascination of the filling station and the ambiguity from which the poem is constructed. Filling stations are dirty places, covering everything with a black slick; but there is something peculiar about its oiliness which is so deep that it translucent, almost everything into the essence of oil. Bishop, in this poem, transforms the ordinary filling station into mysterious, revelatory and unique. The final warning about the fire hazard reinforcing the illusion achieved through the use of the present tense, and sounds like a parent who is instructing children. The over-all oiliness in the poem is reminiscent of the boat in ‘The Fish’. In the second stanza the human element is introduced with the same oiliness;

“Father wears a dirty,

oil-soaked monkey suit

that cuts him under his arms,

and several quick and saucy and

greasy sons assist him

(it’s a family filling station),

all quite thoroughly dirty.”[CP 127]

Bishop introduces the staff at filling station consisting of father and his son. Father is funny because he has been wearing a suit for a long time and that it has shrunk on him. To underscore the masculine disarray, Bishop compresses the judgement with description by calling it “a family station”. The absence of mother figure, peculiar of Bishop is apparently felt in this stanza with the description of the whole family, and “thoroughly dirty” implying the need for the tidying presence of a woman. The garage is filled with things that would normally be in a home. Bishop converts the garage into a home with the presence of the whole family and the absence of mother made more conspicuous. These objects have all become impregnated with oil and dirt;

“a set of crushed and grease-
impregnated wickerwork;

on the wicker sofa
a dirty dog, quite comfy.”[CP 127]

The station itself appears to be a resting place for men and dogs. Bishop allows “grease” to teeter at the end of the line, isolating and heightening the vaguely sexual connotations of “impregnated”.30 The blackness and dirtiness seems to contribute to the feelings of homeliness and comfort visualised due to the image of “sofa.” The more the narrator elaborates the details of what she sees the more strange, even bizarre are her discoveries;

“some comic books provide

the only note of color –

. . . . They lie

upon a big dim doily . . .

a big hirsute begonia.”[CP 127]

The image of books, in the fourth stanza, suggest a lot of idle time due to poor trade. The survival and growth of “hirsute begonia” implies that in such a filthy place like filling station life exists in all forms due to companionship and mutual love. The domestic becomes compulsion in every location we reside, be it filling station then, it promises homely tranquillity, meaning, and love in Bishop’s life. It seems that Bishop’s search for home takes her to places like filling station reflecting the pressure and need for nesting. Bishop’s presence, in the poem becomes apparent when the pressure of questions breaks through:

“Why the extraneous plant?

Why the taboret?

Why, oh why, the doily?”[CP 127]

Bishop, in the fifth stanza, questions that why the nicest things are at the “dirty,” “oil soaked” filling station - like the “wicker sofa,” “taboret,” “hirsute begonia” and “doily” with “Embroidered in daisy stitch / with marguerites” and “heavy with gray crochet.” The metaphysical questions, posed in the poem, challenge the woman’s sometime presence reflecting Bishop’s sense of nostalgia in the poem. In this normally unquestionably male space, permeated with grease and filth, there are not just the necessary objects of domesticity but
those objects that are ‘extraneous’ to it, that are part of the inexplicable human
desire not just to create shelter and comfort but to be ‘at home’. Home in this
poem represents Bishop’s mother. This poem, therefore, can be read on two
levels. On a deep level, the poem is about the poet’s spiritual search for her
mother. On a simple level, the poem is about Bishop’s memory of a
dilapidated filling station, a filling station on its last legs. In a wonderfully
witty last stanza, Bishop draws the conclusions from the evidence the poem
has presented that;

“Somebody embroidered the doily.
    Somebody waters the plant,
    or oils it, maybe. Somebody
    arranges the rows of cans
    so that they softly say:
        Esso–so–so–so
    to high-strung automobiles.
    Somebody loves us all.”[CP 128]

The poet’s final observation may be sardonic for only mother can love us all
but “Somebody” might, in a broader sense, imply a divine perspective in
which the filthy and ornamental are reconciled. It sounds unreal that in such an
oily place somebody maybe watering the plant or that the cans of oil are
placed in such a way as to read ‘Esso–so–so–so’ – the phrase, Bishop explains
that ‘people use to calm and soothe horses’. It is a witty continuation of this
line of humour that the automobiles, like thoroughbred horses, are ‘highly
strung’. The last line of the poem balances all the opposing elements and
conveys serious but mysterious idea “Somebody loves us all” it has meanings
on a range from the most banal to the most profound. ‘Somebody’ could be
anyone from ‘a mum’ to a supernatural power; here the poems ambiguity
becomes apparent. There is certainly no mention of a mother. But there is a
sense of maternal nurture. ‘The Filling Station’, although the domain of the
male, is gendered as female space – through the domestic details but also by
less overt features that helps to create a sense of a wombscape. The oiliness of
the poem operates like the oiliness in ‘The Fish,’ touching and sanctifying everything like ‘holy’ oil. The whispers by the cans “Esso–so–so–so”—the sound that soothes horses, a sound already prepared for in the sibilant repetitions of “somebody” is like the comforting lullaby made to small child to put them to sleep. The poem blurs the boundaries of male and female space, of feminine and masculine characteristics, and subverts limited phallocentric divisions of gender. The emphasis on oil and grease conjures the experience of a child before it is introduced to language and challenges culture-bound classifications of ‘nice’ or ‘nasty’ substances. “The Fish” and “Filling Station” are poems of healing: of restoring the rift between infant and mother that occurs at birth, and again in acquiring symbolic language. For Bishop – who never saw her mother after the age of eight when she was committed to an asylum and whose early experience of home was traumatised by her mother’s madness – these are poems in which she is able to reclaim the nurturing space of the lost mother.

Bishop’s lived a life of a nomadic. Her various displacements in life were not due to frustration or an escape but were directed towards discovering self and exploring various possibilities hidden in self, about which otherwise she would not be conscious of. “Sandpiper” is one such poem where Bishop talks about “a bird” who is an explorer like her. William Blake’s student “a bird” is trying to find something and this search of the bird constitutes the poem. Similar to what Bishop was looking for through her various displacements, possibly a Nova Scotian home. Elizabeth Bishop was born in Massachusetts near Atlantic Ocean and spent a lot of her childhood in Nova Scotia. Hence sea and its inhabitants are close to her heart and have special place in her writings. “Sandpiper” is a family of wading shorebirds and is often sighted along the eastern Atlantic seaboard. The members of this family have characteristically long legs and bill, which they use to probe around in beach rocks and sand in search for insects and other invertebrates that comprise their diet:

“The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
and that every so often the world is bound to shake.

He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.”[CP 131]

In the first line of the poem the bird is unaware about his surroundings "he takes for granted" the roaring of the ocean and is desperately searching for something, something to eat. It is common to the point of cliché in literary criticism to state that a poem is about poetry itself, but here this inference can’t be ignored, for we are surely meant to see the poet, William Blake, in the qualities of the sandpiper. The reference to Blake is part of this characterisation, with both the Romantic artist and the bird sharing the oxymoronic quality of ‘controlled panic.’ The connection between the two is continued through the focus on grains of sand, which echoes in Blake’s lines from the poem “Auguries of Innocence”: “To see the world in a grain of sand.” It also captures another oxymoron of Blake’s; that the world is both ‘vast and minute’. It is this strain of thought that suggests the tide may be higher and lower at the same time, or at least the difference no longer matters. The word “controlled” suggests discipline and determination towards his search. While “panic” suggests not finding what he intends for. The phrase “controlled panic,” in fact, suggests the common condition of most living things: they must be controlled if they hope to succeed in their efforts to find their search, but always lurking beneath the control is the fear that they may not find what they intend. It is this fear, in fact, that leads to the need for control. It is easy to see how one might say that human beings also exhibit a kind of “controlled panic” as part of their identities. Indeed, by comically asserting that the bird is a “student” of the poet William Blake, Bishop may be suggesting the relevance of the bird’s existence to human experiences. Birds, obviously, cannot be students of any poet, but humans can be; bird’s behaviour, therefore, seems relevant to human identity. This impression is driven home by the lightly comic references to the fussiness of the bird, running across the sands, ‘finical, awkward’. Bishop’s tone here suggests that she is only too familiar with these personality traits, not merely from her knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of William Blake but from an awareness of her own character. Formally, the verses are beautifully handled. The random accentuation of the first two lines provides a sense of stasis in the poem. The first two lines are contrasted with the pattering pentameter of “He runs, he
runs, to the south, finical, awkward,” and in its rhythm we feel the darting movements of the bird. The image of the ocean's “roaring” also presents a different point of view, maybe the sandpiper has come to accept this fact of modern life, that “often the world is bound to shake.” There are number of hindrances that are restraining the sandpiper to finish his search and to reaching what he is looking for:

“The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet of interrupting water comes and goes and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.

He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.”[CP 131]

In the first line of the second stanza, Bishop uses the simile "the beach hisses like fat." The word “fat” creates an image of something sticky and unattractive in our minds. It is possible that the fat is used to describe the virtual boundaries or limitation by which the bird is stopped from reaching what it seeks. The poet then goes on to note various other obstructions like "a sheet of interrupting water comes and goes". The vigorous movements of water fail to divert bird’s attention from his search for food because he is entirely focused on his task. Bishop uses an oxymoron "comes and goes,” to emphasise that the water is 'interrupting' the sandpiper from its search. The bird is so obsessed in his search that everything around him acts just as a distraction. Bishop then goes on to discuss the bird's “dark and brittle feet” which are important to help him continue his pursue and leads him to the point that "He runs, he runs." In any case, the bird’s existence is shaped by his natural surroundings and environment. Almost every moment of his waking life is affected by his need to sustain himself – against a situation that might seem to apply to human identity as well. In the third stanza, Bishop focuses on the bird’s visual abilities to locate his search. The bird looks constantly at the sand with a hope to find something edible there. But while it is concerned with the specific, the poem makes us very much aware of the larger stuff that is outside of this focus. In the poem, Bishop also highlights ‘particularity’ at another level, that of language. The sandpiper ignores the sea, but the poet names it; this isn’t any sea, it’s the particular sea known as the ‘Atlantic.’ The sea is referenced in
such a way that we, unlike the sandpiper, cannot ignore it due to its vastness and devastating strength for it is “Atlantic” Ocean. Its roaring is the first thing that the poem announces, along with the fact that ‘every so often the world is bound to shake’. The roaring and the shaking are not trivial events. And it is not merely water, or even the sea, but that gigantic ocean, the ‘Atlantic,’ drains between the bird’s toes. By drawing attention to that which is ignored, the poet foregrounds the apparent oddity of a consciousness that can shut out something as vast and imposing as an ocean. It provides a kind of irony throughout the poem that beside something, all-encompassing one can focus on something so minute, like “grain.” The sandpiper is looking for that world in the millions of grains of sand. Everything, in the fourth stanza is reduced to a measurable size except for the grandness of the bird’s search:

“The world is a mist. And then the world is
minute and vast and clear. . . .

His beak is focussed; he is preoccupied,”[CP 131]

Sandpiper does not notice the events occurring around him, as he is preoccupied in his quest. He stares while “the world is a mist,” but then it becomes "minute and vast and clear." He does not notice the ocean tides; they do not matter for him, for he is in search of a grain. In this way, perhaps, his life and identity resembles human beings who are preoccupied in the trivialities of life, so much so, that they are not aware about their surroundings:

“looking for something, something, something.

Poor bird, he is obsessed!

The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray
mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.”[CP 131]

In the last stanza, the bird is seen moving quickly exhibiting a kind of tunnel vision, and is the object of the speaker’s pity (“Poor bird”) because of his obsession of a petty “grain” so as to sustain himself. The repetition of 'something,' emphasizes the point that the sandpiper does not know what he is looking for. The bird is so engrossed in looking for “something” that he pays no attention to the beauty that is literally beneath his feet “the millions of
grains” which are in vibrant colours like, “black, white, tan, and gray mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.” Instead, he merely hurries along, searching, focused, and hoping to find the next tiny scrap of food that will sustain his existence. Finally, it is the ambiguity behind the sandpiper’s actions that strikes us most forcefully; the sense of mystery that we can all relate to is ‘looking for something, something, something.’ The trochaic metre of this line creates a fitting contrast to the iambic that dominates the poem. The poem ends with a contemplation of the finest detail of the scene, as if to suggest that we can find beauty and truth in the smallest particles, in contemplation of ‘quartz grains, rose and amethyst. Similar to what Blake said “It is possible to see a world in a grain of sand.” The sandpiper, coincidentally, a student of Blake, in the end completes his search by finding his world in the grains of sand. Bishop’s Sandpiper is concerned with the particular. Through a controlled tightening of focus, like the turn of the lens on a telescope, Bishop draws our attention ever closer to the minutiae of existence, of which the bird is solely conscious: from the water glazing over its feet, to its toes, to the spaces between its toes, to the grains of sand, and finally to the very nature of each grain, their precise colours and the stones and minerals that constitute them. Sandpiper in many ways is similar to Bishop for both of them are focused in their search so much so that all the temptations are ineffective to divert their attention.

The section “Elsewhere” concludes with a poem “Visit to St. Elizabeth” written and published in 1956. Ezra Pound was an incarcerated at St. Elizabeth’s psychiatric hospital in Washington, D.C., from December 21, 1945, to May 7, 1958. Pound’s stay at mental hospital was an alternative to conviction for treason, for he had made purportedly pro-Fascist radio broadcasts on Italian radio during World War II. The poem “Visits to St. Elizabeth” was a result of Bishop’s visits, while in Washington, D.C., as the poetry consultant to the library of Congress, to see the modernist poet Ezra Pound. Bishop had uneasiness in visiting Pound and the reasons being her personal childhood experience about it. Bishop never saw her mother during her lifelong confinement in a Nova Scotian mental institution, though she must have “visited” her frequently in her imagination, and, possibly, she had never
actually walked in a mental hospital before she entered St. Elizabeth’s. Bishop is seen willing to dwell in most of the dingy places like filling stations, rigid houses, crooked houses etc but she does not dare to engage in a mental asylum for it is associated with her painful memories of her childhood. “Poised between compassion and revulsion, amusement and unease, Bishop’s memories of visiting Pound . . . shaped into her nursery-rhymed poem “Visit to St. Elizabeth,” are perhaps the most complex example of what may almost amount to a midcentury literary subgenre of resolution and guarded independence.” The poem is a combination of many of Bishopian devices – anaphors, metonymy, and hypnosis of simple monosyllabic diction – to touch upon early experience, what is shuddering, closest to home. Modelled on the nursery rhyme, the poem has the compulsive form of “This was the House that Jack built.” All stanzas begin with “This” with a different word ending; they gather force and yet retain previous morphemes. Each stanza of the poem present a different perspective; Pound being “tragic,” “talkative,” “honoured,” “brave,” “cranky,” “cruel,” “busy,” “tedious,” “the poet, the man,” “wretched,” depending upon the position of the describer. Embedded in the “Visits to St. Elizabeth” is also Bishop’s own history. Her name significantly inscribed in the title compels identification, and the poem and the visits necessitate a connection between her own relationship with her mother’s institutionalization, and the absence and possible guilt about of not visiting. The poem has twelve stanzas, all are like the positions on the clock; and “time,” skewed and arbitrary, is central to this piece:

“This is the house of Bedlam.
This is the man
that lies in the house of Bedlam:
“This is the time
of the tragic man
that lies in the house of the bedlam.
This is the wristwatch
telling the time
of the talkative man

that lies in the house of Bedlam.”[CP 133]

The wristwatch falls through the poem is much similar to Bishop’s loss of her mother’s watch in the poem “One Art.” The “time” becomes the connecting element from past to the present which contain painful history. The fact of “madness”- and even if Pound’s “madness” had much “method” in it, there were plenty of St. Elizabeth’s inmates who were mad enough not be avoided – was always a taboo with her, while her mother’s history of mental instability is conspicuously absent from her poetry. Bishop, through this poem, is trying to face the traumas “of the tragic man.” Even though Bishop participates in the story of “Visits to St. Elizabeth”, still she distances herself from Pound and the tradition of modernism he represents. In this Pound poem Bishop avoids identifying Pound by name. She modifies the tense of the nursery rhyme from “This was” to “This is” intending to bring everything to immediacy. Bishop uses this form to reinforce psychological impulse, even act them out through the nursery-rhyme structures reliance on the ritual repetition. Probably, because Bishop found herself in an unpredictable world, therefore, she cherished regularity and repetition. But as the unknown is as compelling as the known, she invites it more vigorously into view as contrasting undertow to compulsive projection of the key word “house,” a figure so resonant for Bishop:

“that shut on a boy that pats the floor
to feel if the world is there and flat.
This is a Jew in the newspaper hat
that dances joyfully down the ward”[CP 134]

This is Bishop’s post-war poem, without the absolute hopelessness and despair of other poems. Bishop indicates a flatness that has taken over imagination, “this is the world of books gone flat.” But the boy, who is anticipated as Bishop in the poem, tests the environment trying to find if it is solid or flat. Discovery is exploration for Bishop. Her poems characteristically give choices of perspective. Bishop was a perfectionist and wrote poems slowly, but “Visit to St. Elizabeth” was one such wonderful composition written in twenty four
hours. In the penultimate stanza, Bishop directly tells us that “the poet,” is the same “man / that lies in the house of Bedlam.” The poem helps to contrast a sense of both Pound’s literary grandeur and stature and of the circumstances to which he had been reduced. Bishop’s meditative involves a realisation of both these extremes, of both the splendours and miseries of Pound.

“This is the soldier home from the war.

These are the years and the walls and the door

that shut on a boy that pats the floor

to see if the world is round or flat.”[CP 134]

The first line of the last stanza indicates the mental struggle of the soldier and an inevitable fragmentation of identity. The soldier’s home is the home which had suffered many losses and destruction hence it is lost for him. The patting on the door by the boy indicates Bishop’s revisiting her past memories which are distant and lost for her. But, if at all, the world is round then there are possibilities of experiencing it again probably through her art. To “tell the time” here indicates the passing time of the Pound and modernity. It is the time to investigate her own historical time, her own time to employ personal memory. History, for Bishop, becomes the reliving and inevitable refiguring of experience in art.

Bishop’s love for nature is reflected in her “Uncollected Work” incorporated in her volume of poetry “The Complete Poems,” published in the year 1969. She muses upon nature and its inhabitants in her prose poem “Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics” and makes us think of the beautiful, “Giant Toad,” “Strayed Crab” and “Giant Snail,” all these creatures who “go travelling the same weathers.” The physical displacement is painful for these creatures and it creates in them the feeling of nostalgia. These creatures are the mouthpieces of Bishop articulating her anxiety behind her displacement. In this prose poem the animals are embodied with human feelings like vanity, aggression, envy, fear, longing for repose and so on. These qualities help the animals to vigilantly tackle the burden of displacement very much like Bishop. The strayed Crab of the “Rainy Season; Sub-Tropic” declares that;

“This is not my home. How did I get so far from water? It must
be over that way somewhere.”[CP 140]

Not knowing how he got where he is, the strayed Crab has a very precise idea of his identity. Bishop’s physical displacement to Brazil was accidental and made her more reminiscent of her childhood days of Nova Scotia. Though, she never accepted herself to be a confessional writer but her poems reflected traces from her personal life. She took herself to be very strong similar to what Crab stubbornly declares in the poem;

“I keep my feelings to myself.

.. My eyes are good, though small; my shell is tough and tight.”[CP 140]

Bishop enters her protective shell, in the form of her art. Still the physical and spatial distance from Nova Scotia inculcated in her the feeling of homelessness and deep nostalgia in her. Similarly, these new surroundings are strange for the Crab, challenging his ability to adopt but he is inflexible;

“I admire compression, lightness, and agility, all rare in this loose world.”[CP 140]

He is unhappy about the world because it lacks his pace and beauty. World for Crab was similar to what New York was for Bishop, they were not meant for these “loose world.” The Crab, in the poem, rightly articulate Bishop’s trauma;

“I wasn’t meant for this . . . This place is too hard.”[CP 140]

Bishop juxtaposes her experience with contrary views to show limits and errors of each. The geographical displacement creates in The Giant Toad a feeling of insecurity. The Giant Toad as well as the Giant Snail both have pride and discomfort about their size. The world around the Giant Toad is not worth giving an eye for;

“I am too big, too big by far. Pity me.

My eyes bulge and hurt. They are my one great beauty, even so. They see too much, above, below, and yet there is not much to see. . . .”[CP 139]

The world around these creatures is nasty and a pain for them. The Toad expresses his plight about this nefarious world;
“Once, some naughty children
picked me up, me and two brothers. They sat us down again
somewhere and in our mouths they put lit cigarettes. . . .
. . . I thought it was the death of me,”[CP 139]

Bishop tries to establish differences between the animal world and the humans. The behaviour of the boys is symbolic of human behaviour in general and the Toad is representative of the animal’s humbleness and understanding;

“the almost unused poison that I bear, my burden and my great responsibility. I am angel in disguise; my wings are evil but not deadly. If I will it, the poison could break through,”[CP 139]

These creatures are vulnerable still beautiful at heart. The toad is filled with humble humanity which the humans lack. Each of these animals has personal beauty and they are well aware about it but they bemoan their enormous hardship and disproportion to the world, feeling that their very nature is a liability in a world that does not accommodate them. Some point of Bishop’s observation, as a traveller, must have revealed the truth of disproportionate ends of the world. From the secure home of the Nova Scotia to the uncalled atmosphere of Warwickshire was a heart rendering displacement for Bishop, similar to these isolated creatures. These animals continually play back a sense of themselves, inquiring, recording and tracing their own features and sensations. The external world brushes by them, but their relationship to it is defensive rather than adaptive or communicative. They withdrew into the personal rather than asking their way home. “I keep my feelings to myself,” snaps the Crabs. “Withdrawal is always best,” mumbles the Snail. Finally they are not only lost, but self-deceived. Bishop’s displacement of place is not only limited to herself but it is seen in her characters. The Giant Snail, for example, gives this account of his situation:

“I am heavy, heavy, heavy. My white muscles are already tired. I give the impression of mysterious ease, but it is only with the greatest effort of my will that I can raise above the
Displacement isn’t easy neither for these creatures nor for Bishop though they have always tried to clandestine their anguish relating it. To counter this trauma the Giant Snail finds;

“Withdrawal is always best.” [CP 141]

Bishop’s displacement was not in the urban city of Brazil but to the interiors, towards the mountains and landscape of Petropolis and Ouro Preto which acted as a kind of withdrawal for Bishop. Carmen L. Oliviera in her “Rare and Commonplace Flowers: The Story of Elizabeth Bishop and Lota de Mamedo Soars” writes that the two woman lived in a house and setting that was a complete, if remote world:

“The place was at the end of the earth. The house that Lota was offering as a dwelling didn’t even have electric light. When it rained, the road became impassable, sealing them off the rest of the world.”

Bishop’s houses in Brazil were not close to nature but where part of nature itself; it was like living amongst the mountains, the clouds, the creatures and greenery surrounding it. Bishop assimilates the unknown world of the creatures as if she is a part of it. For her, life is the conversion of the strange to the familiar, of the unexplored to the knowable, of the alien to the beloved. Bishop’s eye for beauty and its description is seen in the description of Giant Snail;

“my body is like a pallid, decomposed leaf. . . .

. . . . Ah, but I know my shell is beautiful, and high, and glazed, and shining.

. . . . I leave a lovely opulent ribbon: I know this.” [CP 141]

Here, like Wordsworth, Bishop is looking steadily at her subject, but - again, like Wordsworth - not from a merely analytical, matter-of-fact perspective: on the contrary, she is facing a wordless creature with so much of affectionate responsiveness that not only (in Coleridge’s phrase) does “nature [become] thought and thought nature” but there occurs even an interchange of roles, the snail becoming a speaking “I,” as the poet becomes a listening “thou.” And the
result is a well-nigh preternatural commingling of love and awe before the sheer otherness of the things of earth.

Bishop’s sense of home is a problematic one; when describing her childhood to Elizabeth Spires she talks about her frequent displacement among family members, saying movingly that she “was always sort of guest, and I think I’ve always felt like that.” Bishop has outrightly accepted her status as a house guest and her poems also validate her view. Bishop in her poem “House Guest” describes her guest as a misfit who resists the social and cultural norms through which society is disciplined and controlled. The house guest is not antithetical but rather lives within the community. The “House Guest” symbolises the failure of the domestic orders, the inevitable intrusion of uncontrollable elements into our lives, towards which we may react openly and creatively, or defensively:

“The sad seamstress
who stays with us this month
is small and thin and bitter.
No one can cheer her up.
Give her a dress, a drink,
roast chicken, or fried fish-
it's all the same to her.”[CP 148]

The “sad seamstress” challenges the “home life” to which she won’t subscribe. The house guest in the poem is a melancholic soul for “No one can cheer her up.” She is an adamant only watching T.V. “on and on, / without hope without air.” She is not orphan for she has “a father, a mother, / and all that,” indicating that they may not be perfectly normal to share a house with, similar to Bishop’s own circumstances which lead to various displacements and search for home. The “sad seamstress” earns well but seems to be disinterested in everything the host tries to do for. She is into her own seclusion cut off from all the basic social activities probably because she lacks the courage to be expressive at somebody else’s place. The guests identity inscrutable, “her face is closed as nut, / closed as a careful snail / or a thousand-year-old seed.” The
host have tried every possibility to pursue her, “Please! Take our money! Smile! What on earth have we done? They have opened up in her presence, partly because she is so impenetrable. For six stanzas Bishop describes “sad seamstress” seclusion as if expressing her own plight, in a home which is not her own. Miller has rightly pointed out that, “Bishop spend her childhood with uncomprehending relatives – first in Nova Scotia and then in Massachusetts. Though she eventually found family members who tolerated her precociousness, she was never at ease in any home and, except for her fifteen years in Brazil, never really settled down anywhere. Bishop, in the six stanzas, of the poem gives the reason for the sad mistress’ dejection:

“Then one day she confides
that she wanted to be a nun
and her family opposed her.”[CP 149]

At this point in the poem, the “sad seamstress” opens up and confides in the host of the house. She is not been allowed to pursue her dreams by her family. She has no control on her own life. Major as well as minor decisions of her life were taken by others be it the family members or the host of the house. Bishop presents this homeless figure, the house guest, with a detached, third-person narration so as to maintain distance to a womblike mystery. The speaker is speaking from remembrance, and that the house guest’s despair was such a huge part of her personality, that it taught the speaker a life lesson. This is a very important question for all readers, because it asks us to analyze our own situations and make sure we aren't being held back because we are allowing what others have predicted in our fate to stop us from living happy and meaningful lives causing us to ask:

“Can it be that we nourish
one of the Fates in our bosoms?
Clotho, sewing our lives
with a bony little foot
on a borrowed sewing machine,
and our fates will be like hers,
Everyone should be allowed to pursue his or her dreams. The seamstress in the poem seems depressed, missing out on life and it is really bothering her inside. The house guest presences is disturbing, her hosts are much more located in their self-consciousness than they ever were before, within rigid boundaries of their house. I believe that she must have a loved one overseas and is thinking that the worst can happen. She could have done so much more with her life than wait around. Perhaps, it is not too late for her to follow her ‘dream’ of delivering such service with her Fate. She should not have “hems crooked forever.” Bishop's "House Guest" is a brilliant poem summarizing how exhausting life can be if we allow others to predict our fate. Bonnie Costello sees in Bishop’s poems an emblem of her desire for self-location in an impersonal world:

“Home seems to be in question, or rather, in questioning.”

Bishop challenges the concept of “home life” through another poem “House Guest,” where the “sad seamstress,” to whom she won’t subscribe, asks in the last stanza of the poem:

“Can it be that we nourish
one of the Fates in our bosom?...
and our fates will be like hers,
and our hems crooked forever?”

The presence of the guest is disturbing for it makes the host to enclose herself into her sudden self-consciousness, within the rigid boundaries of property and propriety. We see Bishop present her homeless figures as a third-person narrator for see is reluctant to associate herself with these homeless figures. She housed them in the obscurity of storm; “right in the room of falling rain.”

Bishop’s search for her Nova Scotia house continued in her days at Brazil which took her to the interiors of Brazil to Ouro Preto, a town in the mountains of Minas Gerais. She liked the place because everything there was made on the spot, by hand, of stone, iron, copper, wood.” Finally succumbed to its charm in year 1965, Bishop bought an old house, and decided to restore it. The last of
Bishop’s Brazilian poem is entitled “Under the Window: Ouro Preto” which reflects her nostalgia and love for provincial living, the poem is also an affectionate tribute to Nova Scotia. This poem is dedicated to, her host at Ouro Preto, Lilli Correia de Araújo, the Danish widow and an inn keeper. Bishop liked her host and stayed at times at her inn, Chico Rei, but longer at Lilli’s old four square colonial houses on the road to Mariana. Bishop bought a home from Lilli “Casa Mariana” in Ouro Preto, her third loved house of “One Art”. While renovating the old house dating year 1730, Bishop discovered that the thick walls of wattle and mud were tied together with rawhide at some places, and the bit of this architectural oddity was preserved under the glass when the restoration was completed which was a reminiscent of the provincial living in Great Village. The balcony of the house overlooked the whole range of Ouro Preto on its steep hills. Although the truck from the bauxite mine hurtled alarmingly close to the front door, a certain order prevailed inside Bishop’s house. Bishop’s personality was a little reserved, she avoided knowing people. When she plans a trip to Italy, in 1964, Lowell recommends her to visit Ungaretti and Montale. She replies: "you know I never dream of calling on anybody!" And it is the salvation of her as a poet, the source of her greatness. Living in Brazil, she seems to be self-centred, restricting herself to her home in the midst of the provincial beauty and magnanimity of common living reflects her love for home and getting captivated in it. The great difference between her letters and those of Lowell is that his have only two topics – poetry and gossip. They are fatally restricted in subject matter which can be called the official world of literature and letters. Bishop's gossips are unofficial and are wonderfully typified in this poem, “Under the Window: Ouro Preto;”

“The conversations are simple: about food,

or, “When my mother combs my hair it hurts.”

“Women.” “Women!” ”[CP 153]

Bishop records, in this poem, the overheard conversations of the passerby gathered around an old fountain, from her second floor bed room. By keeping the formation of this poem simple, Bishop allows the reader to focus instead on her subtle story of a town changed over the years. The poem is a low-keyed
rendition of Brazilian life, so much of which is spent outdoors. So as to not draw too much attention away from the words, Bishop chose to write this poem in a pretty basic way. Bishop chose to describe the dilapidated condition of the town by showcasing the condition of its monument. In the fourth and fifth stanzas, the reader is introduced to the pipe that the townspeople use for almost everything. It’s described as just a lone pipe coming out of a wall, constantly leaking water. There used to be ornamental faces decorating and celebrating the fountain, however when the town, a touristy one in Brazil, started losing money, the fountain was removed. Bishop describes these ornamental pieces as:

“of the three green soapstone faces. ( One face laughed and one face cried; the middle one just looked.

Patched up with plaster, they’re in the museum.)”[CP 153]

From the above lines, it can be assumed the town fell on harder times, and had to resort to ridding itself of extra expenses. A town trying to watch over its money can’t be spending what precious dollars they have on frivolous items like fixing decorative fountains. This fountain is what tells the reader that the town of Ouro Prêto was once a prosperous town, now fallen upon harder times. What was once regarded as a beautiful decorative piece is now used to wash traveller’s dusty feet, and quench the thirst of babies and old men alike. The monument went from being superficial to being purely useful with the removal of the decorative faces. The fact that the faces are now displayed in a museum, however, do tell the reader the town has a bit of pride in its background and a determination not to forget who they once were. Bishop touches on this pride by focusing on the subtle story behind the lone pipe. Bishop gives the reader an understanding in the background of this town, the people in it, how they live their lives, and the relationships they form with those around them. The inhabitants of the town, its women, “old man,” “black boy,” along with the animal population “donkeys,” “dogs,” etc are referred to in the poem. “Under the Window: Ouro Preto” demonstrates how a poem can be made of the most unlikely of the materials. Not only the inhabitants but also the nerve of the town, its condition of the public transport is presented in the
Two vehicles, an old work truck and a new Mercedes-Benz truck, have bumper stickers on them, written in capital letters; these visual differences draw the reader in, asking to be re-read and noticed time and time again. The new Mercedes declares:

“HERE AM I FOR WHOM YOU HAVE BEEN WAITING”[CP 154]

The bumper sticker on the new truck is based on a story in the Bible where Jesus Christ tells his people that he has come to release them. He is talking about freedom from slavery, and a promising new life. While the old truck “tells the passersby”:

“NOT MUCH MONEY BUT IT IS AMUSING”[CP 154]

In comparison to the old work truck (the only other vehicle in the poem), the new Mercedes-Benz sounds like a new and different life, free from the troubles that an old truck faces, like “a blue cloud of burning oil”. Bishop doesn’t waste time or space telling her reader this biblical story. Instead the reader is left to wonder if they are supposed to just know the story, or if Bishop wants time to be spent elsewhere looking up and researching different aspects of the poem. The new truck has a driver, and an assistant driver, showcasing the amount of money the owner must have. Not everyone can afford two drivers, along with a new, expensive vehicle and the old truck pokes fun at itself for it lacks money. This old truck parallels to the pipe in the story, another object Bishop talks about that has seen better days. In the last stanza, Bishop describes the difference more stunningly:

“Oil has seeped into
the margins of the ditch of standing water
and flashes or looks upward brokenly,
like bits of mirror—no, more blue than that:
like tatters of the Morpho butterfly.”[CP 154]

In these lines, Bishop is comparing “oil” that has soaked into the road’s “ditch” to a “butterfly”, a creature known for its beauty and fluttering grace. In doing so, the reader unknowingly sees the connection between a dirty and unusable substance (oil in a ditch) to something beautiful and enjoyable to
watch (a butterfly). This is subtlety what makes the poem so beautiful. She draws the reader to read deeper and deeper until they have an understanding to this town similar to the understanding they have of their own hometown. Bishop did, in the poem, what takes some authors an entire novel to do. As made obvious by the above evidence, Bishop chose to allow her reader to focus solely on the story of this historic town without the distractions of superfluous wording, and a strong meter and rhyme. Bishop’s displacements from Petropolis to Ouro Preto ignited in her the keen mind of a city observer.

After Lota died, Bishop would occasionally go to a house she owned in the town of Ouro Preto, but gradually her sojourns in Brazil tapered off. In an interview with Beatriz Schiller in year 1977, she made clear that her Brazil days were over:

“I have no theories about Brazil, unlike so many people. Immediately upon arriving I did have theories and they were sharp ones. Little by little those theories evaporated. Brazil became my home... I do not want to see our house in Petropolis. Never again. I also want to sell my house in Ouro Preto. I started out here, in Boston, and it is natural that I end up here.”

By acknowledging her past connection “Brazil became my home” as well as her current loss “Never again”, Bishop’s geography displaces again; stating that her being in Boston is “natural” a strategy for her to reclaim lost space and rewrite her maps again though never ever with Brazilian intensity. As Robert Frost famously has a character declared in his poem, “The Death of the Hired Man,”

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,

They have to take you in.”

Bishop had to go abroad to make a “home” signifies that she too had difficulty in patria. Brazil transforms her poetry and gives her the space to explore her homes, in patria and ex patria.
REFERENCES

CHAPTER III


18. Ibid. Part II


