

## *Geography III – Poetry Written for the Scene*

*Geography III* by Elizabeth Bishop (1976) was a fascinating and refreshing read. It reminded me of magical realism literature or surrealist art – her words, Salvador Dali strokes translated to the page, an internalized Darren Arronosfky script, a Guillermo del Toro production played on a screen in the mind. Throughout all ten poems in the collection, Bishop’s diction is nigh palpable. Her use of vivid imagery masterfully – seamlessly, effortlessly – paints the scenes of her poems into the reader’s psyche. Furthermore, her ability to forgo traditional temporality while incorporating detached points of view allows her poems unquantifiable space to breathe, building a quite expansive literary landscape peppered with evergreen shrubbery of rhyme and undulating syllabic brooks.

For example, in one of my favorites from the collection, *The Moose*, Bishop uses a bus as a driving force for her imagistic prowess. Through her concrete descriptions of the Nova Scotia scenery outside of the public transit people mover, Bishop becomes the bus herself, writing the lay of the land and hoi polloi of the people. The poem is formulated of sestets, with a pretty consistent rhyme structure at the end of lines – but even with these tight (5-7 syllabic makeup) constraints, her diction gives way to evocative phanopoeia. She writes, “Goodbye to the elms, / to the farm, to the dog. / The bus starts. The light / grows richer; the fog, / shifting, salty, thin, / comes closing in” (Bishop 24). To clarify, in this exploration of Bishop’s work, a “ / ” will indicate a line break. Here, Bishop uses the imagery of the countryside and nature (elms, farms, dogs) to evoke a sense of nostalgia for what the bus leaves behind: this easy living. How she describes the bus light and her characterization of the fog adds an elevated level of realism that brings the reader into the setting, allowing us to see the light slicing through the fog, a misty haze in front of a dead-eyed-doe. This is all but one example of Bishop’s attention to detail and usage of concrete descriptors to deconstruct the setting that's present not just throughout the poem but the collection as a whole.

Secondly, in *In the Waiting Room*, Bishop’s imagistic repertoire and world-building diction are accompanied by a narrative that isn’t bound by the traditional flow of time. In the piece, Bishop allows herself to reflect on her past as an entity outside herself – sometimes becoming someone

else – her Aunt Consuelo. This effectively detaches herself, as the writer, from her own point of view. We start with a fairly normal scene: “In Worcester, Massachusetts, / I went with Aunt Consuelo / to keep her dentist’s appointment...It was winter. It got dark / early” (Bishop 3). This first stanza reads almost as fiction as it opens the poem’s narrative. Then, when the Aunt starts to scream, whimsical elements begin to detach the speaker from the first person POV, leading to the deconstruction of typical functions of temporality: “but wasn’t. What took me / completely by surprise / was that it was me: / my voice, in my mouth. / Without thinking at all / I was my foolish aunt, / I—we—were falling, falling” (Bishop 5). She continues, “why should I be my aunt, / or me, or anyone...How had I come to be here, / like them, and overhear” (Bishop 6-7). Here, through the speaker’s self-introspection, Bishop removes the speaker we were initially introduced to in the first stanza from the first-person perspective.

“The waiting room was bright  
and too hot. It was sliding  
beneath a big black wave,  
another, and another.

Then I was back in it.  
The War was on. Outside,  
in Worcester, Massachusetts,  
were night and slush and cold,  
and it was still the fifth  
of February, 1918.” (Bishop 7-8)

The two stanzas above conclude the piece by reigning in the whimsicalness of the POVs and the flow of time. The speaker is back in the place we started – the waiting room – and they are also back inside their own body. Throughout the poem’s journey, Bishop doesn’t force herself to convey this experience from one perspective or in a linear manner. Rather, the speaker traverses time and space, reflecting on her past 6 (3 days from being 7) years old self through the eyes of a detached entity and the speaker’s own Aunt.

After finishing this collection of Bishop’s poems, I recalled a distinction between a story and a poem that someone passed on to me one day (a someone I can’t remember). They said that whereas fiction tells a story, poetry relates an experience, which Bishop does throughout

Geography III. Her evocative writing style equips writers and poets alike with tools to keep in their back pockets. Personally, I often feel like there's not much worth saying at a particular moment. But, if I could relay an experience rather than trying to deconstruct some philosophy or deeper meaning to life, poetry writing can become less of a burden and more of a vessel.

Finally, I leave you with a work-in-progress poem I crafted with Bishop's style in mind.

## The Gyri Sugar Glider

Ton heavy raindrops drip on the flesh  
holder of memories below me and there  
in between the gyri blooms a lotus cache  
I see her tethered crown chakra lamenting  
cleared meadows in a blur. Her skull's rim  
encasing a gushing matter of neural links  
the length of your childhood puppy's leash

*Just try and think of the swelling waves  
meeting the shore* I say, though unconscious  
she is complacent through the pain, her chest  
barely rising under the polyester gown,  
a distasteful shade of blue you'd only find  
in hospitals – dimly lit by a dismal orb  
A slip, a severed slice, a spurious spyhole

My gaze latched beyond the opening,  
I flail within the space, contort and fall  
backwards, allowing me to be caught  
in the dead eyes of my own embrace  
Apple round bobble head of an appendage  
The delicate depth of the nothingness –  
and everything to have ever exist –

swallows me. I see my arms moving,  
a suture in hand, yet my hispid fingers  
are not stinging from the cool of the steel  
I flip forwards, flying with style, one might  
call me now a sugar glider of the abyss...  
no - the swelling waves meeting the shore  
greet me as the splash that is my body's descent

floods the sand. The galaxy's sun steams off  
sweat right as it trickles down my forehead  
and I can count on one hand all the cloudlets  
overhead are Emerald City green palm tree  
fronds grace me with a half-piped sliver of shade  
I take a leak and Coconut water happens to be my  
pissant pleasure of choice – a scarlet macaw's voice

reins me back in. *Doc- Doctor she's coding*

Abscess. Hematoma. Jugular Veins. Gauze.  
*The waves, the swelling waves kissing farwell  
to the serenading sea...*says the patient  
She shouldn't be awake. I should be asleep  
But *the waves, the swelling waves slinking back  
into the sea...*I won't make it, she sees...