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ANGUS CLEGHORN AND JONATHAN ELLIS

Introduction: North *and* South

Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979) published relatively few poems in her lifetime, at least compared to more prolific peers such as John Berryman and Anne Sexton, or her close friend, Robert Lowell. The four main collections published in her lifetime – *North & South* (1946), *A Cold Spring* (1955), *Questions of Travel* (1965), and *Geography III* (1976) – contain just seventy-eight poems (seventy-five if you count "Four Poems" as a single poem), none of them particularly long. Admired for her descriptive powers and the apparent modesty of her poetic persona, Bishop was not quite a Modernist or a confessional poet. At times she appeared an early Postmodernist, but in a completely different register from Language poetry. Indeed, it was not until James Longenbach's *Modern Poetry after Modernism* (1997) that Bishop's centrality within the main shifts and tensions of twentieth-century poetry began to be understood. In historical terms, she is one of the few poets to link the Modern and the Postmodern, Primitive art and Surrealism. A resident in both North and South America, where she owned but lost at least "three loved houses" (*P* 198), she was also an Anglophile who lived in and wrote about her travels in Europe. She explored free verse and traditional verse forms with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell, Spanish poetry with Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz, and translated Portuguese literature while living in Brazil, passing on these lessons directly to younger poets such as May Swenson and James Merrill. Her poems speak of life and death in what she calls in one poem an "indrawn breath, / half groan, half acceptance" (*P* 172). At the same time, no detail is ever "too small" for her various peripheral speakers (*P* 131), many of them animals and children. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, her poetry seems, if anything, even more contemporary than during her lifetime, a process facilitated in part by the numerous posthumous publications of her work, but mainly by the sheer originality and variety of her writing.

Bishop was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1911. She lost her father to Bright's disease when she was only eight months old and her mother

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to mental illness soon afterward. Between April 1915 and October 1917, Bishop lived with her maternal grandparents in Great Village, Nova Scotia, where her mother also lived between breakdowns. The autobiographical story, "In the Village" (1953), recreates two of her most haunting memories from this time: that of her mother's scream and of the "beautiful pure sound" of the blacksmith's anvil that clangs "like a bell-buoy out at sea" (*Pr* 77, 78). Poems such as "Manners," "Sestina," and "First Death in Nova Scotia" also revisit these childhood experiences. Bishop's imaginative preoccupation with the idea of home was arguably one of her main inheritances from childhood. Her poems, as Adrienne Rich once recognized, are full of outsiders for whom the idea of home is precisely that – only an idea. These include the old hermit in "Chemin de Fer," left to fend for himself by the side of his "little pond" (*P* 10); the "specklike" children in "Squatter's Children," waiting for the rain to wash away their "specklike house" (*P* 93); and the gardener in "Manuelzinho," forced to sniff and shiver, "hat in hand" (*P* 95), for a shot of penicillin.

Although Bishop's poems avoid direct political statement, she continually keeps account of the practical consequences of historical events for individual people. She saw "A Miracle for Breakfast" as a "Depression poem" (*Conversations* 25), "Songs for a Colored Singer" as "a prophesy, or prayer, that justice will eventually triumph for the Negro in the USA" (qtd. in Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop* 168), and "From Trollope's Journal" as "an anti-Eisenhower poem" (*WIA* 594). In "In the Waiting Room," she recalls the experience of being a child during World War I. In "Roosters," she reports from Key West during the buildup to World War II; "12 O'Clock News" is one of the great twentieth-century poems about the reporting of war.

A few months before graduating from Vassar, Bishop met Marianne Moore for the first time on a bench outside the reading room of the New York Public Library (see Bishop's memoir, "Efforts of Affection"). The two poets enjoyed a generous friendship, encouraging each other's writing in spite of the occasional disagreement, most famously over the subject matter of Bishop's "Roosters," a poem Moore and her mother wanted to rename, "The Cock." *North & South*, Bishop's first book of poems, was published in 1946. It took its perfectionist author more than a decade to complete, a pattern repeated with each of her subsequent collections. Bishop was in Nova Scotia on the day *North & South* was published, returning south by bus to Boston, the journey that would later become the setting for one of her greatest poems, "The Moose." The following year, Randall Jarrell introduced Bishop to Robert Lowell, who became a lifelong friend. "I loved him at first sight," she later admitted, "my shyness vanished and we started talking at once" (*WIA* 809). In 1951, Bishop visited South America, where an allergy

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More Information

to the fruit of a cashew tree caused her to fall ill. Bedridden at the home of her hostess, Lota de Macedo Soares, a Brazilian architect and landscape designer whom she had first met in New York ten years earlier, Bishop was overwhelmed by the care she received and, at Macedo Soares's invitation, decided to stay. The two women fell in love. Bishop's asthma and drinking seemed to come under control and she began to write fluently again, after several years of stuttering activity. Her prose masterpiece, "In the Village," was completed in 1953 and her second collection of poems, *A Cold Spring* (1955), soon followed, earning her the Pulitzer Prize. Bishop kept in touch by letter with Moore and Lowell, while at the same time corresponding with new friends such as Ilse Barker and Flannery O'Connor. She translated *The Diary of "Helena Morley"* by Alice Brant in 1957 and was the co-editor and a co-translator of *An Anthology of Brazilian Poetry* with Emanuel Brasil in 1972. *Questions of Travel*, her third collection of poems, appeared in 1965. Bishop's relationship with Macedo Soares grew distant, and in September 1967, Macedo Soares died of an overdose during a trip to see Bishop in New York. In Bishop's papers, she left drafts for an elegiac poem, although she never finished it.

After Macedo Soares's death, Bishop drifted between San Francisco, Ouro Preto (Brazil), and New England. In 1970, she began teaching at Harvard. Bishop's fear of losing her partner at the time, Alice Methfessel, prompted the magnificent villanelle, "One Art." In 1974, Bishop moved into a condominium overlooking Lewis Wharf in Boston. She kept a ship's log beside the window, documenting the vessels that came to port and thinking it "curious" that ships from Nova Scotia must have docked there, perhaps even her great-grandfather's. Her last book of poems, *Geography III* (1976), also revisits Nova Scotia, particularly "Poem" and "The Moose." In the last decade of her life, Bishop became friends with Frank Bidart, Octavio Paz, Lloyd Schwartz, and Helen Vendler, poets and scholars who kept her reputation buoyant in the immediate aftermath of her death in 1979.

"All Those Rich Unfinished Fragments …"

Bishop authorized the first *Complete Poems* in 1969, adding two new sections, "Translations from the Portuguese" and "New and Uncollected Work," to the three main collections then in print. In an ecstatic review for *The New York Review of Books*, John Ashbery hoped that the title was "an error and that there will be more poems and at least another *Complete Poems*" ("*The Complete Poems*" 201). Four years after her death, Robert Giroux and others supplemented her first selection with the publication of *The Complete Poems, 1927–1979* (1983). The second *Complete Poems* contains Bishop's

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last collection, *Geography III*, four late poems uncollected at the time of her death ("Santarém," "North Haven," "Pink Dog," and "Sonnet"), and three further sections, "Uncollected Poems," "Poems Written in Youth," and "Translations." The book begins with a "Publisher's Note," the first paragraph of which is worth citing in full:

> This book contains all of the poems of Elizabeth Bishop, from "Behind Stowe" and "To a Tree," written at sixteen, which appeared in the Walnut Hill School magazine in 1927, to "Sonnet," published in *The New Yorker* after her death in 1979. She would not have reprinted the seventeen poems written in her youth; she was too severe a critic of her own work. Yet the variety and range of these early poems are part of her poetic development. Her attitude toward her work was at times unpredictable: she never reprinted "Exchanging Hats," a poem that belongs among her best. First published in *New World Writing* in 1956, it appears here with "Uncollected Poems (1979)." The background of "Pleasure Seas," which appears here for the first time, is odd. Written in 1939, it was accepted by *Harper's Bazaar* but never printed; the sole surviving copy was found among her papers. In the group of occasional poems, there are four which she enclosed in letters to Marianne Moore in the mid-thirties. It was Miss Moore who arranged for her first publication in book form in an anthology, *Trial Balances* (1935). (*The Complete Poems, 1927–1979* xi)

This contradictory narrative suggests that while Bishop had a famously scrupulous eye for revising poetry and "the daily necessity of getting it right," as Wallace Stevens puts it, she could also be haphazard about her material, and was vulnerable to rejection. The brief reference to "her papers" hints at more poems to be found, as did the discovery of four "occasional poems" in letters to Marianne Moore. In addition to bibliographical information about the background to "Pleasure Seas" and the first publication of "Exchanging Hats," the publisher's note also contains implicit criticism of Bishop for being "too severe a critic of her own work." In his essay for this volume (Chapter 9), Lloyd Schwartz notes that she often had second thoughts about her love poems, particularly when *The New Yorker* rejected them. The list of poems rejected or not sent to *The New Yorker* – "Faustina, or Rock Roses" (rejected), "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance" (rejected), "O Breath" (rejected), "The Shampoo" (rejected), "Exchanging Hats" (rejected), "It is marvellous to wake up together," "Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box," "Apartment in Leme," "A Drunkard," "Vague Poem (*Vaguely love poem*)," "For Grandfather," and "Breakfast Song" (all not sent) – might itself form an astonishing collection of poetry. Indeed, the best of Alice Quinn's 2006 edition of Bishop's uncollected poems, drafts, and fragments consists largely of this material.

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As "The Publisher's Note" coyly implies – for all its talk of containing "*all* of the poems of Elizabeth Bishop" (our emphasis) – *The Complete Poems* was very much a provisional volume. Bishop had not just published more poems than the note acknowledged; "her papers" contained more than 3,500 pages of unpublished material, much of it poetry. Robert Lowell, who had only an inkling of what Bishop kept back, once commented enviously on "all those rich unfinished fragments, such a fortune in the bank" (*WIA* 489). Bishop's final "fortune" was left not just in boxes and notebooks deposited at Vassar College, but also in folders and shoe boxes entrusted to close friends such as Linda Nemer in Brazil, not to mention the hundreds of letters she sent to famous and non-famous correspondents and the brittle paintings and shadow boxes she regularly gifted to friends. One poem even turned up in the dedication to a cookbook (*P* 321). Another recently showed up in the end papers of her Modern Library edition of *Jude the Obscure*, found by chance in a flea market in Adamstown, Pennsylvania (Beards "Introducing Elizabeth Bishop"). Might further discoveries be waiting in other friends' attics? Recent additions to the Elizabeth Bishop Collection at Vassar College and a forthcoming edition of Bishop's Notebooks show the flow has not abated. Bishop liked the idea not just of sharing work with others, but also of sharing the responsibility of what to do with that work afterward. When asked by Anne Stevenson about publishing, she replied: "I'm rather against professionalism … and really often think I would have preferred the days when poems just got handed around among friends" (*NYr* vii–viii). In a similar spirit, her will instructed her literary executors, Alice Methfessel and Frank Bidart, to "determine whether any of my unpublished manuscripts and papers shall be published and, if so, to see them through the press, and with power generally to administer my literary property" (*Elizabeth Bishop in the Twenty-First Century* 2). As Lloyd Schwartz recently observed in answer to Helen Vendler's complaint about the recent appearance of unpublished poems: "Bishop never really 'repudiated' most of her drafts. If anything, she was quite prepared for their posthumous publication" ("Elizabeth Bishop's 'Finished' Unpublished Poems" 54).

In addition to poetry, Bishop also left behind several prose works, including memoirs, short stories, art criticism, book reviews, and blurbs, many of which were published in *The Collected Prose* (1984), edited, like the majority of *The Complete Poems*, by Robert Giroux. The publication of both books certainly kept Bishop's writing in the public eye, leading to important reassessments of her work by Adrienne Rich, Eavan Boland, Thom Gunn, Seamus Heaney, and James Fenton, among others. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil Estess's edited collection, *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* (1983), also played its part. It included a typically strident foreword by Harold Bloom in which

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More Information

he claimed Bishop as a rival to Wallace Stevens, if only "the shorter works" ("Foreword" ix). Brett Millier's 1993 biography, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*, and Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau's collection of oral material brought Bishop's life into focus, as did important book-length studies by Thomas Travisano (1988), David Kalstone (1989), Lorrie Goldensohn (1992), Victoria Harrison (1993), Susan McCabe (1994), and Marilyn May Lombardi (1995). The first edition of her correspondence, *One Art: Letters* (1994), undoubtedly attracted a larger readership, as to a lesser extent did the publication of William Benton's *Exchanging Hats: Elizabeth Bishop Paintings* in 1996.

In the past few years, two further editions of Bishop's letters have appeared, *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* in 2008 and *Elizabeth Bishop and The New Yorker* in 2011. Few twentieth-century poets have as many letters in print. No other twentieth-century poet has received as much praise for his or her correspondence. In one of the most detailed responses to *One Art*, Tom Paulin described its publication as "a historic event, a bit like discovering a new planet or watching a bustling continent emerge, glossy and triumphant from the blank ocean. Here is an immense cultural treasure being suddenly unveiled – and this hefty selection is only the beginning. Before the millennium is out, Bishop will be seen as one of this century's epistolary geniuses" ("Writing to the Moment" 215). Although the majority of critics still privilege Bishop's poetry over her prose because poetry in general is privileged over letter writing, it is important to recognize her unusually original gifts as a correspondent. Bishop saw letter writing both "as an art form" (*OA* 544) and as a way of staying in touch with friends. Its informal formality suited Bishop perfectly, particularly the emphasis on making everyday chatter not just funny, but also significant – what Lowell memorably characterized as her ability for making "the casual perfect" (*WIA* vii). Great poets, it is worth reminding ourselves, are not automatically great letter writers. Indeed, great poet-correspondents such as Keats or Hopkins are very much the exception that proves the rule. Siobhan Phillips devotes an entire chapter to Bishop's epistolary voice in this book, including a fascinating insight into what she terms "correspondent politics," although every contributor has cause to cite from the letters at some point.

Alice Quinn's 2006 edition of Bishop's writing, *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments*, is without doubt the most controversial posthumous publication to date. Its contents include

> wistful and comic poems Bishop wrote in high school; poems begun soon after college, reflecting her passion for Elizabethan verse and surrealist technique; love poems and dream fragments from the 1930s and '40s; poems about her

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More Information

> Canadian childhood; poems she was working on into the late 1970s, begun decades before; and many other works that have hitherto been quoted almost exclusively in biographical and critical studies." (*EAP*)

While much of this material has been absorbed into the Library of America edition of Bishop's *Poems, Prose, and Letters* (2008) and the centenary editions of Bishop's *Poems* (2011) and *Prose* (2011), critics continue to debate the merits not just of individual drafts and poems, but even of publishing them in the first place. Some of these debates have been aired already, in Helen Vendler's *New Republic* review of *Edgar Allan Poe*, in newspaper reviews of *Poems* and *Prose*, and, more recently, in *Elizabeth Bishop in the Twenty-First Century: Reading the New Editions* (2012). Contributors to this volume help further the debate, most notably in an essay by Lorrie Goldensohn (Chapter 12), which makes the case for keeping any conclusions about the posthumous material tentative: "As the decades begin their slow, volcanic accumulation over this body of poetry, so must our critical reception of it heave and realign." For Charles Simic: "What these uncollected works lay bare for me is how much emotion there was in Bishop's poems to start with, which her endless tinkering tended to obscure in the end. It has made me read her published work differently, discovering intimate elegies and love poems where I previously heard only an anonymous voice" (19).

"Waiting to Be Found"

Bishop was not considered a major poet during her lifetime, even though her poems were read fairly widely and even taught in several universities. She was, in John Ashbery's famous phrase, not even a poet's poet, but "a writer's writer's writer" (Schwartz and Estess xviii). Fellow writers of various schools and traditions have always loved Bishop's writing, probably because she never belonged to any school or tradition herself. Too young to be considered a Modernist, Bishop nevertheless corresponded with Marianne Moore, interviewed T. S. Eliot, and was a regular visitor to Ezra Pound during his confinement at St. Elizabeths Hospital. Too reticent to have anything to do with the confessional movement, she nevertheless influenced the composition of Lowell's seminal collection, *Life Studies* (1959), and was admired by many confessional poets, particularly Plath and Sexton. The latter sent her a fan letter, as did John Ashbery. Other New York School poets, chiefly James Schuyler, similarly loved her work. Thom Gunn and Robert Duncan both enjoyed her company in the late 1960s, as did Seamus Heaney, James Merrill, and Octavio Paz in the 1970s. Anne Stevenson, who wrote the first book-length study of Bishop's poetry in 1966, may not have become a poet without her. May Swenson, Frank Bidart, Jane Shore, and others all benefited

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More Information

from her personal encouragement and practical advice. If poets agreed on anything during Bishop's lifetime, which they seldom did, they agreed on rating Bishop's poetry highly. And so, although Bishop traveled a great deal during her lifetime and lived outside of North America for at least twenty years, the literary establishment never forgot her. She was appointed poetry consultant in Washington in 1949 when just thirty-eight years old. She did not miss out on any fellowships or prizes, either. Her many awards included a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. And yet at the time of her death, of a cerebral aneurysm in October 1979, Bishop's poetry was very much in the shadow of Lowell and Plath and most of her poetic peers. James Merrill called her "our greatest national treasure" (Schwartz and Estess 243), but he did not speak for everyone, and certainly not for most contemporary poetry readers.

"I envy the mind hiding in her words," wrote Mary McCarthy four years after Bishop's death in 1983, "like an 'I' counting up to a hundred waiting to be found" ("Symposium" 267). For McCarthy, as for many readers, Bishop's mind, equivalent to but not identical to an autobiographical voice, is somehow there and not there in her poems, the act of reading them akin to a game of hide-and-seek. Objects, people, even places, often get lost, or are on the way to being lost, in Bishop's work. One of her most famous poems, "One Art," is about the art of losing. Is this Bishop's one art? The thing she does best? Perhaps it is *the* rhetorical gesture, *the* poem, for which she is best known. And yet, as contributors in this book point out, Bishop is also an astonishing poet of touch and sensation, interested in the detailed, intimate connections between people and in the ways in which people struggle to connect as well. Her love poems, often written in the aftermath of an argument or separation, always cling to the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. "Love should be put into action," screams an old hermit in a very early poem, even if it rarely is (*P* 10). "Insomnia," one of a series of poems from *A Cold Spring* on the false dream of a happy relationship, similarly ends on the hope that "you love me" (*P* 68). This desperate poem, rejected by *The New Yorker* for being "small" and "personal" (*NYr* 112), reflects in a cryptic form Bishop's lifelong struggle to express lesbian desire poetically. Whereas the poems published in Bishop's lifetime cage such desire, many of the posthumous writings set it free. Bishop's queer politics are a key concern of at least a third of the essays in this volume. According to Susan Rosenbaum (Chapter 4), Bishop naturalizes female and lesbian desire in a manner comparable to other women artists interested in surrealism, such as Leonor Fini and Lee Miller. Bonnie Costello, in a wide-ranging assessment of Bishop's engagement with the poetic tradition (Chapter 5), links many of

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More Information

the love poems to her close reading of first Herbert and Hopkins, and later Baudelaire. Bethany Hicok (Chapter 7) credits a change in Bishop's lyric voice to her specific experience of living in Key West in the 1930s–1940s, while Barbara Page (Chapter 8) moves the story on to Brazil in the 1950s–1960s, in particular Bishop's love for Lota de Macedo Soares, arguably her most significant romantic relationship.

Bishop's cautious engagement with politics can be connected to her love lyrics, as essays in this volume by Steven Axelrod (Chapter 2), Bethany Hicok (Chapter 7), and Kirstin Hotelling Zona (Chapter 3), among others, point out. From a personal position of privilege, she consistently attempted to negotiate between rich and poor, master and servant, colonizer and colonized, while aware that the very position of being a negotiator was itself compromising. This unease is foregrounded in Bishop's Key West poems, including "Jerónimo's House," "Cootchie," "Songs for a Colored Singer," and particularly "Faustina, or Rock Roses." To what extent are the awkward encounters depicted in these poems deliberate? Did Bishop, as Renée Curry suggests in her book *White Women Writing White* (2000), always fail to see past her own origins as a white middle-class woman? Did she ever poetically cross the color divide? Axelrod thinks not, or at least not until the late poem, "In the Waiting Room": "Perhaps this one moment represents the culmination of Bishop's racial politics – the achievement of the desired empathy that had so long eluded her" (quotation from Chapter 2). Kirstin Hotelling Zona is equally cautious about crediting Bishop with too much insight into the experiences of being an outsider in modern society. Like Axelrod, she sees "In the Waiting Room" as the summation of Bishop's repeated attempts to face up to the "part she plays in constructing the other's ideality or 'strangeness.'" Comparing the constantly shifting perspective of the poem to a film, she praises Bishop's honesty in reminding us of "the particular, and limited perspective – 'Elizabeth's' – through which we are viewing her world" (quotation from Chapter 3).

Bishop is on safer ground when approaching a subject from the position of being an outsider herself. This was clearly the case during her long residence in Brazil. Her poems about the meaning and purpose of travel, in particular the sequence of poems that opens *Questions of Travel* ("Arrival at Santos," "Brazil, January 1, 1502," and "Questions of Travel"), are justly-celebrated for their investigation of the relationship between home and elsewhere. In "Manuelzinho," adopting the voice of "a friend of the writer" (almost certainly Macedo Soares) allows her to translate class tension from Brazilian into English. For Steven Axelrod, the poem ends up siding with "its satirized title character," the gardener of Macedo Soares and Bishop's house at Samambaia. Barbara Page agrees: "Manuelzinho *deserves* to inherit, if not

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More Information

the earth, certainly a good piece of it." "The Riverman" is another Brazilian poem that modifies Bishop's perspective through a different voice; in this case, Charles Wagley's book, *Amazon Town*. In "Going to the Bakery" and "Under the Window: Ouro Prêto," she listens in on the conversations nearby. Barbara Page's essay on Bishop's Brazilian writing demonstrates how "from the buffering distance of South America, Bishop's long mediation on home and homelessness branched into new considerations of what it means to be a lifelong traveler."

As Bishop moved literally from north to south, crossing the equator, she arguably became less cautious about taking a political stance in her poetry. In the Key West poem, "Roosters," for example, "unwanted love, conceit and war" are as much a feature of the human world as the avian one, but the poem lets the reader join the dots. If "Roosters" is a poem that emphasizes "the essential baseness of militarism" (*OA* 96), as she asserts in a famous 1940 letter to Marianne Moore, it does so obliquely. The poems from Bishop's second collection, *A Cold Spring*, are just as elusive. According to Bethany Hicok, in poems such as "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," we find Bishop "playing, Nabokov-like, with the reader's desire to find meaning." In "The Armadillo," a Brazilian poem from *Questions of Travel*, however, the speaker makes her feelings about human carelessness, in this case toward the natural world, much clearer. The illegal fire balloons cause devastation to the animals that live downwind – from the owls that flee their burnt-out nests to a glistening armadillo that leaves the scene "head down, tail down" (*P* 102). The poem's final image is a "baby rabbit" jumping out at the poet: "So soft! – a handful of intangible ash / with fixed, ignited eyes" (*P* 102). Perhaps Bishop reserves her most empathetic moments for animals? Do they do the work of mediating between man and nature better than the poet? In addition to Bishop's much-anthologized poem, "The Fish," we might add "At the Fishhouses," "In the Village," "Sandpiper," "The Hanging of the Mouse," "Crusoe in England," "The Moose," and "Pink Dog" to a list of memorable animal writings, not to mention her fondness for hybrid creatures such as "The Man-Moth" and "The Riverman." Animal studies and eco-critical approaches to Bishop's poetry may, as Susan Rosenbaum observes, "reorient our understanding of modernist experiments by women poets and artists in particular." Like the moose's sudden appearance at the end of the eponymous poem, there is something both "homely" and "otherworldly" about all of Bishop's animal poems (*P* 193). Tempted to see likeness in the activity of a sandpiper on the shoreline or the appearance of a dog in the street, Bishop also reminds us that seeing likeness may, like many acts of comparison, also be illusory.

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