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*“Back to Boston”:  
Elizabeth Bishop’s  
Journeys from the Maritimes*

by CAROLE KILER DORESKI

**T**O SITUATE her biographer correctly in her life, Elizabeth Bishop wrote Anne Stevenson a long and detailed account of her lineage and residencies throughout her life of perpetual guesthood:

I am 3/4ths Canadian, and one 4th New Englander—I had ancestors on both sides in the Revolutionary War. (EB to AS, 18 March 1963)

Indeed, though born in Worcester, Massachusetts, poet Bishop deserves at least the honorary status of Canadian writer. From her first to final collections, the Canada of the Maritime Provinces provides the landscape to her poems of childhood and self-discovery. She tells us in “Primer Class” that “[her] father was dead and [her] mother was away in a sanatorium” and so she was raised through toddlerhood by her maternal grandparents in Great Village, Nova Scotia (CPr:6). This “elsewhere” (as she would call it in *Questions of Travel*) world became a place central to her developing imagination; it occasioned the available mysteries of her childhood perceptions.

A life of dislocations (childhood in Canada and Massachusetts, adulthood in Florida, Brazil, and Massachusetts) forced on her an international (at least in the Atlantic sense) citizenship (in “Travels Back,” Margaret Atwood discusses this at length [107–113]<sup>1</sup>). As Robert Lowell commented:

A twelve-foot cedar hedge screens out the human, teenage softball makes the Castine Common a *Youth’s Companion* cover. North & South from Halifax to Rio the same Atlantic—you can never settle on where to be, lashed by your giant memory to the globe. (“Flying from Bangor to Rio 1957,” Notebook 1970, 234)

We discover in her prose memoirs the claim that the Canadian landscape made upon her child’s consciousness. While not her native soil, Nova Scotia becomes the key to her memory. Bishop tells us that

So many things in the village came from Boston, and even I had once come from there. But I remembered only being here, with my grandmother. (“In the Village,” CPr:254)

The child Bishop’s sense of home as the Maritimes is so engrained that by the time the paternal grandparents relocate and resituate her in their Worcester home, she ironically reclaims a sense of belonging, elsewhere:

1. Atwood returns to this caught-between-the-cultures stance in her poetry, fiction, and essays. *Survival* offers multiple perspectives on this issue of Canadian non-citizenship.

I do remember arriving by a driveway lined with huge maple trees. To my slight resentment (after all, hadn't I been singing "O maple leaf, our emblem dear" for years?), they were pointed out and named. . . . ("The Country Mouse," CPR:17)

Nova Scotia formed the core of this life of location, relocation, and dislocation. She would return to Great Village in person and in poems throughout her career. The journey between her worlds—Great Village and Boston—would become the topic for two of her most masterful lyrics: "Cape Breton" and "The Moose." These shuttling-between-home poems traverse a timeless, unchecked setting—what Margaret Avison calls "a territory without a name"<sup>2</sup>—the very peculiarities of the inhabited places merge with the mysteries attendant to this world apart. Here in the Canadian wilderness, Bishop encounters the fantastic in the landscape capable of invoking the Wordsworthian "beyond" into her reality. She answers Northrop Frye's "Where is here?" by claiming that "here" is where she can re-call her identity.

## I

AN EARLY opportunity to read Canada's landscape as text came in "Cape Breton" (CP:67-68). Here Bishop challenges the preconceptions and sensitivities of the reader as she prepares, shapes, and withdraws the otherworldly from the poem. "Cape Breton" serves as the seminal antecedent to that final journey poem, "The Moose." It's as if she needs to impersonally prepare the places of recall before she can populate them with her self.

"Out on the high 'bird islands,' Ciboux and Hertford," we enter a world removed from and yet sinisterly impregnated by the human presence. The relatively comical "razorback auks and the silly-looking puffins" stand as ceremonial guards along the cliff's edge "with their backs to the mainland." Humanity's presence is, however, everywhere: in the "pastured" sheep, in the frightening "aeroplanes" that threaten them, in the "rapid but unurgent [pulse] of a motorboat." More than the human "unnatural" presence threatens the islands, which are surrounded and upheld by the heartless immensity of the Melvillean sea; as the ocean seems its calmest, it turns most hazardous. Effortlessly, Bishop draws our attention from the placid uncertainties of the landscape to the more threatening uncertainties of this sea:

The silken water is weaving and weaving,  
disappearing under the mist equally in all directions,  
lifted and penetrated now and then  
by one shag's dripping serpent-neck . . .

2. Atwood couples Avison's "Not the Sweet Cicely of Gerardes Herball" with Northrop Frye's "Where is here?" to serve as epigraphs for her first chapter, "Whatm Why, and Where is Here?" in *Survival* (10).

The times and tides of Bishop's sea form and enact their own fate (not unlike the Weaver God of Carlyle and Melville). Bishop does not rely solely upon the sea to produce such mysterious effects. The fog blocks the various natural penetrations and rents in the earth's surface — "the valleys and gorges of the mainland" — further suggesting the difficulty of isolation peculiar to the islands. The poet introduces the spiritual, unearthly world to draw us towards but not into the formative, causative world beyond the poem. The essence of this island world lies buried

among those folds and folds of firs: spruce and hackmatack —  
dull, dead, deep peacock-colors,  
each riser distinguished from the next  
by an irregular nervous saw-tooth edge,  
alike, but certain as a stereoscopic view.

The poet points to our origins with the processional solemnity of "dull, dead, deep," but quickly returns us to the constraints of the quotidian.

A radical change of tone marks the opening of the third stanza. Here lurks the first hint of the presence of humankind since the ghostly pulsation of the motorboat in the first stanza. Humanworks check the flow towards interiority. The island idles on this Sunday as its earthmovers stand driverless; the mere presence of those objects tempers the movement toward epiphany. Not only has work ceased but so has the religious activity:

The little white churches have been dropped into the matted hills  
like lost quartz arrowheads.

The churches themselves are relics of another age and spiritual condition. The road is not a thoroughfare but rather the borderline between the experienceable landscape and the interior, "where we cannot see." Within,

where deep lakes are reputed to be,  
and disused trails and mountains of rock  
and miles of burnt forests standing in gray scratches  
like the admirable scriptures made on stones by stones —

we might discover the earth's own record. But, Bishop suggests, by its very uninhabitable nature, the landscape defies translation. She suggests that the real story has passed; we live after the fact:

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.

The net seems to Bishop something beyond the intended scope of her poem. Unlike Lowell, she would never accept a "tarred rope" as a metaphor for her work. The dangling notes of the song sparrows drift into and become one with the world beyond her poetry. We have reached a turning point; we require either transcendence or a forthright acceptance of these natural hieroglyphics; we must turn to a text we can read.

As our eyes and ears attend to the celestial distractions, Bishop demands our attention below, on the road, which follows an erratic but earthly course.

This wilderness road of "Cape Breton" serves as a means of measuring limits and capacities. On it we experience the confines of the bus, "packed with people, even to its step," of our journey, "It passes. . . . It stops," and our knowledge:

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.

The poet curiously regards the guardians of the interior space; just two more passengers, "but today only two preachers extra, one carrying his frock coat on a hanger," no different in capacity from, say, the weekend "groceries, spare automobile parts, and pump parts." Like the tiny churches littering the hillside, these men of faith seem anachronistic. The family life of the baby-carrying gentleman remains in the imagination; his house, literally out of sight, is unrealized.

"Cape Breton" continually shifts its stance at the onset of epiphanic moments as if to preserve the secret residing in the Canadian landscape itself. In the final stanza, apparently on the brink of epiphany, we confront an odd reversal. Because we have been prepared by the final lines of "At the Fishhouses," the first line of the closure of "Cape Breton" does not surprise us:

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.

The assertive continuity suggested in the first line is pure Bishop. Yes, we nod in assent, we know this to be true. But here, excluded from more characteristic Bishop closures, an epiphanic suggestion of the other-worldly enters. The cloaking chill has its roots in prehistory, beyond our "earthly trust." How different the effect of the last stanza would be if Bishop had chosen to retain the final word, to deliberately limit her poem's world:

The thin mist follows  
the white mutations of its dream;  
an ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks.  
The birds keep singing, a calf bawls, the bus starts.

This remains for Bishop a rather open closure; the poem withdraws into the world of birds, bus, calf. The "ancient chill," reminiscent of the "chill white blast of sunshine" in "A Cold Spring," invokes the world of the unknown that engenders the brooks and calves of our phenomenal world. Bishop, like Emerson, walked through her world with an "aroused in-

tellect," but not in search of transcendence; her allegiance was always to this earth and its experience.

## II

BISHOP would again turn her attention to the sorting and recasting of her Canadian memories of a bus journey from Nova Scotia to Boston, making a poem of confrontation and exchange that verges on epiphany, but retreats at the last moment into the phenomenal reality of the creature world. "Back to Boston" (the working title of "The Moose") bears the lineaments of an actual bus trip, but turns into a response to romanticism and its conflict with life (CP:169-73). As she situates us in our common westward travels, she builds toward and then deviates from the expected epiphany, preferring to pause and reflect upon "the little that we get for free . . . the little of our earthly trust."

The measured sestets replicate the moral increments of the human condition. Unlike the repeated sameness of "At the Fishhouses" ("I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same, / slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones") or the monotony of the landscape of "Crusoe in England" ("The sun set in the same sea, the same odd sun rose from the sea"), the habits of the natural world of "The Moose" are vaguely reassuring, predictable, repeatable. The Mobius strip – winding and returning – six-stanza single sentence introduction creates a recognizable, though not necessarily specific, landscape. (Though it is surprising how few critics and anthologists have been willing to concede the reality of the "Economies"; when mentioned at all, several anthologists have assumed they were in New England.) Though we know our route, we cannot locate the scene; yet we not only see it but can predict its characteristics. The world depicted in this journey-poem sustains us with the qualities of the generic "home." Inhabited by consumers of "fish and bread and tea," the landscape offers security in spite of the flux of travel and of the poem itself.

The herrings, the sun, and even the church depend upon the will of the sea, which invests the land with life and uncertainty. The vulnerable, fleshy landscape penetrates the very vehicle of discovery in the poem, the bus:

through late afternoon  
a bus journeys west,  
the windshield flashing pink,  
pink glancing off of metal,  
brushing the dented flank  
of blue, beat-up enamel . . .

The mortal substance of the bus reminds us of those "Under the Window" vehicles that so eloquently raised the issues of health and disease (the Mercedes-Benz trunk with "Throbbing rosebuds" and the old truck with

“a syphilitic nose”). Even as the bus displays a vaguely human anatomy, it reveals a relatively human temperament as it goes

down hollows, up rises,  
and waits, patient, while  
a lone traveller gives  
kisses and embraces  
to seven relatives  
and a collie supervises.

The solitary traveller bids farewell to her own kind; the guardian of domesticity presides over the departure into the unknown. The landscape becomes one of unity and harmony, influencing the products of humanity as well as humanity itself. As Bishop draws the introduction together with a series of echoing “where”s and “past”s, in the present tense, we encounter the predictable, accountable, acceptable aspects of the scene.

As certainly as the traveller relinquishes family and home, we must relinquish our new-found knowledge of the scene, along with the scene itself. The true journey begins; the poet must abandon those large, recognizable structures (elms, farm, dog) that placed her in direct relation to her family, home, and landscape. The mist drifts in to shroud, enfold, and, at the same time, disclose the countenance of the natural, native (to the speaker) Canadian surroundings. As the greater world fades in the mist, Bishop shifts our attention to a world of diminished scale and microscopic form:

The bus starts. The light  
grows richer; the fog,  
shifting, salty, thin,  
comes closing in.

Its cold, round crystals  
form and slide and settle  
in the white hens' feathers,  
in the gray glazed cabbages,  
on the cabbage roses  
and lupines like apostles.

The atmosphere, though hardly threatening, rapidly grows murky. The “sweet peas cling” to their strings and the “bumblebees creep / inside the foxgloves” for certainty and shelter. As the fog obscures, it adheres, transforming phenomena and affecting behavior. Whatever predictability this world possessed in daylight has receded into obscurity. Potentially magical as this landscape has become, it in no way resembles the celestial world of “Seascape” or the iridescent world of “At the Fishhouses.” Bishop is determined to make this journey only as rich as the quotidian.

The gradual descent into evening (announced by “evening commences”) occasions a renewed commitment to routine, which offsets the slide into the romantic otherworld of the fog. We listen for the reassuring stops, signaling arrivals and departures. We witness the routine of a household

as "a woman shakes the tablecloth / after supper." The evening enacts its schedule, one comparable to the tides. And this artificial world now must yield to the unfocussed (because sensory-deprived) world of disconnected sensations, a world unorchestrated by man:

A pale flickering. Gone.  
The Tantramar marshes  
and the smell of salt hay.  
An iron bridge trembles  
and a loose plank rattles  
but doesn't give way.

Destabilized by unexpectedly full sensory appreciation, we drift in a world of peripheral glances, partial appreciations. Even as the domestic figure fades in that flickering instant, we slip into a cloaked land and sea world where the salt marsh sensorially reveals its true and frightening origins. Human structures quake in the uncertainty of this setting; they react in "fear" as they "tremble" and "rattle." Though they stand firmly, if dubiously, those structures (and the traveller) feel collapse may be imminent. Once again we are prepared to meet the otherworldly. The elements and the senses merge as the severed self attempts to recognize and relate to the significance of the scene. Though reduced to particulars — synecdoche of boots and bark — the traveller attempts to relationally frame her increasingly formless environment:

On the left, a red light  
swims through the dark:  
a ship's port lantern.  
Two rubber boots show,  
illuminated, solemn.  
A dog gives one bark.

We have enough to sustain us. The bus becomes the relational still point from which we can distinguish right from left, orienting our sightless selves. Security derives from our ability to see the world in relation to ourselves.

The presence of a particularized, characterized, destined human being heightens our sense of physical well-being. She enters "brisk, freckled, elderly" to encounter her fellow travellers. No longer does the journey lack definition; we now have a destination, indeed a final destination: "All the way to Boston." Having located us in the journey from her Canadian homeland and on the bus as well, the poet returns to the preparatory atmosphere that clarifies even as it clouds.

Priming us with specific sensations, the poem suggests a powerful conjunction between the "moonlight and mist." We feel the landscape — "hairy, scratchy, splintery" — even as we were made to experience the "brisk, freckled, elderly" traveller. We forsake the sensuous introduction to this world and recline to sleep. Bishop recalls that antecedent world of memory, the time of her childhood in Nova Scotia:



Snores. Some long sighs.  
 A dreamy divagation  
 begins in the night,  
 a gentle, auditory,  
 slow hallucination. . . .

Sprung but simultaneously divorced from the surrounding world, the poem slips into the world of ancestry and archetype. Though relying on the unsorted and scattered particulars, Bishop positions us in regard to humanity as a whole by means of an unexpected and extended genealogy. Stripped of painful specifics, the poet's "gentle" recollections isolate the common insults to our beings: "deaths, deaths and sicknesses." The finality of our lives demands isolation even as it requires repeating. No longer do the deaths shudder from the black-bordered obituaries; they are too random and common. Death occupies our attention no more than do births and marriages. The archaic tragedy—"the schooner foundered"—speaks not to the individual but to our mythological aspirations and our common ancestry. Catastrophic events are as meaningful as the outcome: death. The universality of that ending makes it more bearable, less newsworthy. Bishop forewarned us of the impact of old news in her survey of "The Bight":

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:60-61)

Finally the tide of specificity affects only the living; a dreamy retrospect leaves us meditating the facts of life. Dates resonate—"the year (something) happened"—long after the clarity of fact fades. Shuttling pronominal exchanges invite us into this world of common history, prompting our own recall of those who went "to the bad." The tentacular frame of reference provides branches for a common family tree. We offer individuality, the raw facts, to the historical hum of life's repeated insults and events. The drone of recurring experiences secures and assures us even as it forces us to find common cause with humanity through disaster.

Withdrawing from recognition and resignation—"Life's like that. / We know it (also death)."—we cuddle down into a child's secure understanding and relaxed confidence. Life passes tranquilly, grandparents droning

in the old featherbed,  
 peacefully, on and on,  
 dim lamplight in the hall,  
 down in the kitchen, the dog  
 tucked in her shawl.

Now, it's all right now  
 even to fall asleep  
 just as on those nights.

Though at first this dream-world excursion seems to reach beyond the phenomenal of bus and fleeting Canadian landscape, Bishop withdraws, reorders, and projects the dream into the everyday world of the poem. In spite of the childlike acceptance of the predictable and routine, the language of the memories is that of adult recall. An earlier typescript shows that Bishop had originally intended a childlike passage similar to the innocence of "Five Flights Up":

Now, it is safe now  
to go asleep  
Day will take care of things.  
(Typescript; Vassar College Library)

These midnight inquiries of childhood reassure us of our well-being by situating us in the conscious world.

The encounter with the moose coincides with and benignly disrupts a false and earthbound self-assurance. Rather than reaching for the epiphanic sublime, Bishop summons one reasonably modest (though impressive in its own right) particular of the natural world. Led to expect the otherworldly, we meet this creature with relaxation, if with modest wonder. A creature of the "impenetrable wood," the moose is also "part of nature, part of us." As Helen Vendler suggests (110), Bishop provides her own version of a mild sublimity. The moose initiates the exchange and actually experiences the bus:

it approaches; it sniffs at  
the bus's hot hood.

Lacking gender, the creature appears at first both otherworldly and threatening; it seems a force unto itself. The curious animal beckons the dreamy travellers to consciousness. Unlike the retreating farmhouses and churches of the traveller's landscape, this presence stands solid, comfortable, and inspirational:

Towering, antlerless,  
high as a church,  
homely as a house  
(or, safe as houses).

We regain from this visitor a relational security and sense of wholeness. Dwarfed by the unassuming grandeur of the natural world, the passengers resort to childish utterances of the commonplace and obvious:

"Sure are big creatures."  
"It's awful plain."  
"Look! It's a she!"

Unembellished nature on a scale both intimate and impressive startles the passengers. A mute and mild moose affects them with its relative size, silence, curiosity, and sex.

The moose, like the seal of "At the Fishhouses," participates in a direct

encounter and exchange. The moose “sniffs” and “looks the bus over,” as if in recognition of this fellow creature, vehicle and passengers complimented by its interest in their otherness. The casual yet intimate relationship between moose and travellers demonstrates how our “earthly trust” includes all surface dwellers; as the animal senses the people, so the Boston-bound passengers experience the moose:

For a moment longer,  
by craning backward,  
the moose can be seen  
on the moonlit macadam;  
then there's a dim  
smell of moose, an acrid  
smell of gasoline.

The essential fact grows dim and finally is displaced by a smell of gasoline, complement to the moose's own scent. Though seemingly poised for transcendence, the poem retreats in itself and this world, the marvellous transforming environment serving to sensitize and alert the travellers to the precious life we share without violating the poem's essential self-containment.

Even as the inhabited villages of Bishop's childhood in the Maritimes offer an imaginative context, the seemingly deserted stretch between worlds (the Great Village of toddlerhood and Boston of adulthood) offers a natural place of wonder and encounter. The otherness of nature is but half a perception; here nature sees our presence as unnatural and curious. Rather than strive to penetrate the secret of this whole, phenomenal world, Bishop suggests that we define ourselves, as she has, in relation to that otherness. Finally she asks, “What does nature make of us?”—underscoring the unbridgeable difference between ourselves and the exterior world. All human limitations—destinations, schedules, births, deaths—mirror environmental complexities. Like Darwin, Bishop delights in the natural world of her childhood because it too is natural; she sees the moose not as an emissary from the beyond but as a moose, one of the available wonders of this world. She marvels at its “mooseness.” When we make contact with our world without attempting to confound it with ourselves, we reawaken to the daily wonders of this life and land, the proper materials of poetry.

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