

## Elizabeth Bishop, Brazil, and the Question of Home

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GLINDA. Then close your eyes and tap your heels together three times. And think to yourself: "There's no place like home; there's no place like home; there's no place like home." *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)

The first stanza of one of Elizabeth Bishop's most anthologized poems, the villanelle entitled "One Art," declares, "The art of losing isn't hard to master;/ so many things seem filled with the intent/ to be lost that their loss is no disaster" (166)<sup>1</sup>. Bishop (1911-1979) was no stranger to loss: having lost her father when she was eight months old and then having had her mother institutionalized when she was five, the most profound loss she experienced was that of a stable and loving home. A childhood of being shuttled back and forth between the homes of her maternal and her paternal grandparents as well as that of an aunt did not alleviate her sense of alienation, though boarding school and later Vassar College gave Bishop friends with whom she would stay and/or travel, abroad and within the United States. But it was not until she moved to Brazil in 1951 that she found a place she could call home for over a decade and a half.

Her years abroad in Brazil suggest that she was an expatriate writer; yet within the context of American writers who lived abroad, she followed not her immediate

“Lost Generation” predecessors such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose sojourns in Europe were predicated on the assumption that there would always be a return home to the United States, but writers who preceded them and stayed in Europe for most of their lives—Henry James and Gertrude Stein come to mind—as well as her contemporaries whose ties to France (James Baldwin) and Tangiers (Paul Bowles) also rewrote how we understand American writers abroad. Her comfort and commitment to her environs in Brazil set her apart from generations of expatriate writers who chronicled expatriates and expatriate communities; hence she complicated conventional ideas of what expatriation meant and by extension, questioned the nature of home. In this essay, I examine how her move to Brazil enabled Bishop to conceive of home in her poetry and discuss how her “geography of the imagination” (Johnson 98) shifted to accommodate her changing notions of home.

### **Exile versus Expatriate**

One of Bishop’s classmates from Vassar, the writer Mary McCarthy, delineated the differences between exiles and expatriates in an essay she wrote for the *New York Review of Books* in 1972. The main difference is in the relationship that the individual has vis-à-vis home. In the third paragraph of her essay, McCarthy writes:

The exile waits for a change of government or the tyrant’s death, which will allow him to come home. If he stops waiting and adapts to the new circumstances, then he is not an exile any more. This condition of waiting means that the exile’s whole being is concentrated on the land he left behind, in memories and hopes.

This yearning for home, or the absence from home, is the main characteristic of the exile whereas for the expatriate, McCarthy points out half a dozen paragraphs later,

it “is almost the reverse. His main aim is never to go back to his native land, or failing that, to stay away as long as possible.”

I would supplement McCarthy’s definitions by adding that the expatriate can afford to “stay away as long as possible” because he/she can take home for granted: it is always there, whether home refers to a building or a neighborhood or a city or a whole country. As Robert Frost famously has a character declare 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.” The character’s wife chides him gently by responding, “I should have called it / Something you somehow haven’t to deserve” (43). This, I would argue, is the sense of home that expatriates have, that vacillates between the “having to take you in” and the “[s]omething you somehow haven’t to deserve”: home is a given and not necessarily something one has to earn.

If we adhere to McCarthy’s definitions, Bishop was not an exile but an expatriate because she was able to return to the United States at any time during her long stay away. Yet her history of extended periods of travel and not having a stable long-term address throughout most of the years leading up to her time in Brazil imply a deeper problem with settling down and making a place she could call home. Shari Benstock points out that for the Modernists, men and women experienced exile and expatriation differently and calls attention to the etymology of the word expatriation (*ex-patria*= out of the fatherland) and the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s primary definition: “to drive (a person) away from (his) country” (23). And though Celeste M. Schenck notes that “Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop are the only women poets to be embraced unreservedly by the male Modernist establishment in a token stroke of inclusion that isolates them from other women poets” (245), that 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*.

Brazil was not Bishop's first foray out of the Northeast. Though born in Worcester, Massachusetts, she was half Canadian and spent some years living with her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia, Canada, as a child. Because her mother was institutionalized when she was five, her subsequent childhood years were spent with grandparents in Nova Scotia or Worcester and other relatives. That she always felt like a sort of guest at the homes of her relatives (Spires 126) did not help her from feeling Other in both places. Having no home was what made travel especially attractive to Bishop and so in the years following her graduation from Vassar, in intervals of a few years, she traveled with friends to Europe (1935, 1936, and 1937), bought a house in Key West (1938) and visited there periodically for the next few years, visited Mexico (1942) and Haiti (1949), and late in 1951, she started her travels to South America, only to fall ill and fall in love in Rio de Janeiro.

However, just because she could return at any time during her sojourns abroad did not mean that the United States was a particularly attractive place to her as a young woman: though she thrived in the literary circle she help found at Vassar (they published a literary magazine called *Con Spirito*), her sojourns in New York City after graduation and her year in Washington D.C. when she was Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress, though punctuated by interesting encounters and friendships, were bleak. Her drinking, already a habit at Vassar and something she struggled with throughout her life, became a visible problem when she lived in New York City and she spent time in sanitariums and hospitals to dry out in the 1940s.

Perhaps it was no coincidence that after working for a year in the political center *in patria*, Bishop wished to travel south. About her time in the nation's capital (1949-1950), Bishop reminisces: "I hated Washington. There were so many

government buildings that looked like Moscow” (Spires 131). Not only did she feel alienated by this location but it also reminded her of what was then the Other of the United States in world politics: the Soviet Union. Bishop had been appointed the Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress, which meant she answered questions from the public, consulted with librarians about the poetry collection, supervised the recordings of poets reading their poetry for the audio archives, and also wrote poetry. In a letter to Pearl Kazin dated September 16, 1949, she writes, “Washington doesn’t seem quite real. All those piles of granite and marble, like an inflated copy of *another* capital city someplace else . . .” (*One Art* 194).

One of the poems in her second collection of poems, *Cold Spring* (1955), entitled “View of The Capitol from the Library of Congress” hints at her uneasiness with official Washington: in this poem, the light that shines on the dome of the Capitol building moves “from left to left” and is heavy and coarse, a small lunette, an architectural detail, deflects the light easily and is likened to a “big old wall-eyed horse,” and the music the Air Force band is playing on the steps of the Capitol does not reach the narrator in the Library of Congress because the sounds are intercepted by the giant trees between the Capitol and the Library (52-53). Natural phenomena, like light and sound, do not progress in anticipated ways between two monumental institutions in Washington, D.C., bringing to mind the labyrinthine ways of the government and the bureaucracy; this may have engendered a sense of unease and claustrophobia in Bishop and encouraged her to start traveling a year after her consultancy tenure was up.

### **Bishop’s Brazil**

Bishop did not mean to end up living in Brazil for a decade and a half. In an interview with Elizabeth Spires she exclaims, “I never meant to go to Brazil. I never

meant doing any of these things. I'm afraid in my life everything has just *happened*' (128). Indeed three awards happened and made travel possible for Bishop in 1951. In 1950, she received an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters as well as an Amy Lowell Traveling Fellowship and furthermore, in 1951 she was awarded the Lucy Martin Donnelly Fellowship from Bryn Mawr College.

Bishop left for South America in November of that year on the Norwegian freighter *Bowplate*. She disembarked at Santos and went to Rio de Janeiro to visit friends and while there, had a violent reaction after eating a cashew fruit and cancelled the rest of her trip in order to recuperate. Her friend Lota de Macedo Soares, whom she had first met in New York in 1942, nursed her back to health. They fell in love and Lota asked her to stay; Bishop agreed.

For the next fifteen years, Bishop lived mostly in Brazil, and mostly on the estate owned by Lota and her influential family outside of Rio de Janeiro, in the mountains near a town called Petrópolis. When Bishop first arrived, Lota was in the process of having a house built on the estate called Samambaia. She understood Bishop's needs 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 his stunning analysis of the film *The Wizard of Oz*, Salman Rushdie declares that "[T]his is inarguably a film about the joys of going away, of leaving the grayness and entering the color, of making a new life in the 'place where you won't get into any trouble'" (97). As viewers of the film already know, the burst of color that greets Dorothy when she opens the door and sees Oz for the first time is a triumph of Technicolor, and strangely enough, mimics what we might imagine Bishop's move to Brazil to be like as we trace it through her poetry: she leaves the grayness of Washington, D. C. and the East Coast and enters the lush colors of Brazil.

Significantly, in her poetry collections, we see this happening twice: at the end

of *Cold Spring* is the poem “Arriving in Santos” which also appears at the beginning of her next volume of poems, *Questions of Travel* (1965). This duplication had to do with the lack of poems to include in *Cold Spring*, which her publishers ended up publishing together with a reissuing of her first volume of poems, *North & South* (1946), in a volume called *Poems* (1955). Though *Cold Spring* was published after Bishop started to live in Brazil, it is mainly composed of poems on topics that preceded her stay there. But reading the penultimate poem, “Arriving in Santos” opens the door to her Oz, Brazil.

The poem’s first line “Here is a coast; here is a harbor;” echoes the old children’s finger rhyme: “Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people.” But Bishop’s simple opening leads to a more complex view of the landscape:

here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:  
impractically shaped and—who knows?—self-pitying mountains,  
sad and hard 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. . . . (65)

The scenery is personified using words that do not necessarily have positive connotations—self-pitying, sad, hard, frivolous, feeble, uncertain—and give the port of Santos a shopworn look.

The speaker in the poem becomes aware of the inflated expectations of tourists (who are indirectly opposed to “travelers,” a term that does not come up in this

poem) and asks:

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? (65)

Tourists are by definition immodest, and Bishop's humor and sarcasm shine throughout this poem. The demands and particulars of disembarkation at yet another port are articulated through the voice of speaker who tries to be blasé:

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 (66)

Santos, and by extension, Brazil, resists the easy colonization of tourists who say their piece and then leave port quickly and swiftly at the very end of the poem, with an urgency that 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" (66). This interior, we begin to understand, is not only the interior of the country but also Bishop's mind.



It is also where we start to see how her geography changes.

In *Cold Spring*, this serves as the penultimate poem, situated between the Whitmanesque “Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore” with its plaintive refrain “please come flying” (63) as an invitation for Moore to come visit Manhattan from her home in Brooklyn, and the last short poem, “The Shampoo,” which juxtaposes lichens which “grow / by spreading, gray, concentric shocks” that “have arranged / to meet the rings around the moon” and “the shooting stars” in the hair of a “dear friend” which the narrator of the poem wishes to wash “in this big tin basin, / battered and shiny like the moon” (66). The invitation to a shampoo is confirmation of intimacy within this serene and lush environment and shows a shift in Bishop’s poetry from an earlier often detached point of view to a more active and sensual one.

In the poetry collection *Questions of Travel*, which is dedicated to Bishop’s companion during her years in Brazil, Lota de Macedo Soares, “Arrival at Santos” not only opens that door to Bishop’s Oz but is also one of a trio of poems in the first section called “Brazil” that highlights her concerns about traveling and identity and determines the tenor of the whole volume. “Arrival at Santos,” dated January, 1952, 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. The poem immediately takes us from a January in the twentieth century (“Arrival at Santos”) to a one in the sixteenth and directs our eyes to see everything as the colonizers’ must have seen them by declaring, “Januaries, Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs;” (72) and goes on to illustrate how luxurious and colorful everything is:

every square inch filling in with foliage—

big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves,  
blue, blue-green, and olive,  
with occasional lighter views and edges,  
or a satin underleaf turned over; (72)

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” (35). However, unlike Gauguin’s palette which was deliberately opaque and earth-toned, Bishop’s paints in colors that have a clarity and hue that enhance the exuberance of her descriptions.

The second half of the poem indicates who this colorful Nature greets:

Just so the Christians, hard as nails,  
tiny as nails, and glinting,  
in creaking armor, came and found it all,  
not unfamiliar; (73)

By referring back to early contact between Brazil and Europe, Bishop already questions travel: are the tourists on the ship in “Arrival in Santos” who are decidedly 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 walking.

Toward the end of the poem, Bishop signals that the colonizers do not necessarily see Brazil but “an old dream of wealth and luxury / already out of style when they left home” (73). She also indicates a resistance to colonization which

may in the end be futile:

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. (73)

For the Europeans who come to Brazil, the “Indians” are unknowable and alien to them, although they still attempt to “catch” them. Their inability to distinguish between bird calls and women calling to one another as they retreat also reveal a basic lack on their part to understand this new terrain.

The third poem of the introductory trio, “Questions of Travel,” 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. (74)

What they see is too much, an overabundance that provokes annoyance at the landscape, which is not as orderly as the narrator wishes it to be. This is when the doubts start to percolate to 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?  
.....  
What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life  
in our bodies, we are determined to rush  
to see the sun the other way around?  
.....  
Oh must we dream our dreams  
And have them, too? (74)

The doubts are followed by a list of all the things that would have been missed if one decided not to travel. Bishop categorizes them under various “it would have been a pity” topics: “not to have seen,” “not to have had to stop,” “not to have heard,” “not to have pondered,” “never to have studied,” and “never to have listened” (74-75). All of these potentially missed encounters are quaint and exquisite in themselves, making these questions of travel harder to resolve.

The narrator of the poem weighs these and ends by submitting a counterpoint to the tourist in “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?”*

*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?" (75)*

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 and others to not objectify Brazil; instead, the onus is placed on the traveler who must question his/her motives for how and where to travel. This is why Bishop writes, “*Continent, city, country, society; / the choice is never wide and never free*” because there are always consequences to those choices. Though Bishop is inviting us to step into her Oz, she is also asking readers to question their own travels through her poems as well as reimagine what and how home means.

### **Travels Elsewhere**

The second section of *Questions of Travel*, which is filled with reminiscences of Bishop’s childhood in Nova Scotia and poems about those years in the Northeast, is called “Elsewhere.” In his essay on *The Wizard of Oz*, Rushdie also refers to an “Elsewhere” when discussing the song “Over the Rainbow.” He declares: “‘Over the Rainbow’ is, or ought to be, the anthem of all the world’s migrants, all those who go in search of the place where ‘the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.’ It is a celebration of Escape, a grand paean to the Uprooted Self, a hymn—the hymn—to Elsewhere” (97). This seems strangely appropriate for Bishop, because her dream of having a place and people to call home comes true in her life in Petrópolis outside of Rio de Janeiro with Lota. Elsewhere is over the

rainbow in Brazil for her, where her dream of having a stable home comes true. That is why, in the geography of *Questions of Travel*, the center and margins are reversed: Brazil, formerly Elsewhere, is now home and the center, which means everywhere else, including the United States, is Elsewhere.

That the regions in North America that should have been more or less home have become “Elsewhere” for Bishop indicates two sea changes. The first is that by 1965, when *Questions of Travel* was published, Bishop was already at home in Brazil and Brazil was home to her. In a letter to U. T. and Joseph Summers dated September 17, 1952, Bishop remarks, “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 here” (*One Art* 247). And in an *O Globo* interview entitled “Pulitzer Prize Poet Lives in Petrópolis,” 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” (8) and “declares, finally, that after four years of living in Brazil, she has no idea when she will return to the United States” (10).

Her geography has changed: her map has become Brazil-centric and so North America and all that it represents becomes Other. She has arrived as what Rushdie calls Elsewhere and it frees her. Brazil has become home enough that she also “had her library, or what was left of it after having it handed around for ten years shipped” to her, she writes to Kit and Ilse Barker on July 13, 1953 (*One Art* 266). To Marianne Moore, in a letter dated December 8, 1953, Bishop confides, “I am still liking living here very much, more and more in fact, and in spite of occasional cycles of asthma-bronchitis, etc., I am feeling better than I have in twenty years, I think” (*One Art* 280). For Bishop then, the answer to the question in “Questions of Travel” about whether one ought to travel to the southern hemisphere “to see the sun the other

way around” (74) is a resounding “yes.”

The second sea change is how a comfortable home and relationship allow her to artistically and psychologically uproot herself from Brazil temporarily to make the journey to another Elsewhere: 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.

In the long prose piece entitled “In the Village” and in poems such as “Manners” and “First Death in Nova Scotia,” Bishop accesses her past and uses those memories to write intimate and personal accounts that mirror poems in the “Brazil” section that chronicle the lives of the people in and around Petrópolis. But it is in the last two poems of the section that we see the structure of the collection come full circle because they represent Washington, D. C., past and present, in crisis.

The penultimate poem, “From Trollope’s Journal,” subtitled “Winter, 1861,” and the last poem, “Visits to St. Elizabeths,” subtitled “1950,” take us from Washington at the beginning of the Civil War to Bishop’s visits to St. Elizabeths Hospital to see Ezra Pound while she was working at the Library of Congress. Bishop writes to Robert Lowell on November 18, 1965 to tell him that “‘From Trollope’s Journal’ was actually an anti-Eisenhower poem, I think—although it is almost all Trollope, phrase after phrase” (*One Art* 439). The poem is a snapshot of muddy, disorganized Washington, D.C. at the beginning of the Civil War, as it might have been seen by the visiting British writer, Anthony Trollope, who published his travelogue, *North America*, in 1862.

The city is in bad shape, *patria* in crisis, with “The White House in a sad,

unhealthy spot/ just higher than Potomac's swampy brim" (126). The president is rumored to have "ague or fever in each backwoods limb" and all along Pennsylvania Avenue are "herds of cattle, / numberless, wond'ring steers and oxen . . . / beef for the Army, after the next battle" (126). Unlike in "Brazil, January 1, 1502," the landscape is neither pristine nor idyllic. War has already started and the devastation that is to come is foreshadowed by the grubbiness of the streets and the unhealthy cattle. The surgeon called in by Trollope ". . . croak[s] out, 'Sir I do declare / everyone's sick! The soldiers poison the air'" (126). Clearly, Trollope must be asking his own questions of travel, thinking, "*Should we have stayed at home?*" (75).

This view of an ailing nation divided is followed by another poem that is about an ailing poet, Ezra Pound, who was incarcerated at St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D. C., and was, by his mental condition as well as his arraignment for treason charges, in exile while *in patria*. If the beginning of "Arrival at Santos" reminds one of a finger rhyme, "Visits to St. Elizabeths" deliberately parodies another nursery rhyme, "The House that Jack Built," which is a cumulative poem with a base refrain which Bishop changed to "This is the man / that lies in the house of Bedlam" (127). What is accumulated are lines that suggest what the other inmates of this mental hospital are like while the man who lies in the house of Bedlam is in turn tragic, talkative, honored, old, brave, cranky, cruel, busy, tedious, the poet, and wretched (127-29).

Brett Millier, in her biography of Bishop, write about how these visits to Pound were "an unwritten duty of poetry consultants in those years" and comments on how torturous those visits were for Bishop who was losing confidence in her ability to succeed in the public world of poetry (220). It was only after seven years and living in a different hemisphere that Bishop was able to articulate creatively this experience, as one can see in the final stanza of this cumulative poem:



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.  
This is a Jew in a newspaper hat  
that dances carefully down the ward,  
walking the plank of a coffin board  
with the crazy sailor  
that shows his watch  
that tells the time  
of the wretched man  
that lies in the house of Bedlam. (129)

Once she was able to demarcate her home as Brazil and isolate Washington, D. C. as Elsewhere, Bishop makes the creative leap from hospital visits to nursery rhymes to express imaginatively the flattened unchanging despair of the mental patients and the difficult shifting moods of Pound himself. This recuperation of a location with unfortunate memories highlights the problems that Bishop had with both Washington and Pound as synecdochic expressions of *patria* and heightens the contrast between this problematic space and the intellectually and sensually captivating land she encountered and called her own while *ex patria*. This successfully destabilizes further the idea of belonging and serves as a counterpoint to the opening trio of poems that depict Brazil more favorably than Washington, D.C.

## **No Place Like Home**

With the death of Lota de Macedo Soares in 1967, Brazil ceases to be home to Bishop. The previous year, for financial reasons, she started to teach at the University of Washington, Seattle, and later went on to teach at other universities, including Harvard University and New York University. After Lota died, Bishop would occasionally go to a house she owned in the town of Ouro Prêto, but gradually her sojourns in Brazil tapered off. In an interview with Beatriz Schiller in 1977, she makes clear that her Brazil days are 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 Petrópolis. Never again. I also want to sell my house in Ouro Prêto. I started out here, in Boston, and it is natural that I end up here. (80)

By acknowledging her past connection (“Brazil became my home”) as well as her current loss (“Never again”), Bishop’s geography shifts again; stating that her being in Boston is “natural” is a strategy for her to reclaim lost space and rewrite her maps.

In the fourth stanza of her poem “One Art,” Elizabeth Bishop writes: “. . . And look! my last, or/ next-to-last, of three loved houses went” (167), referring to her houses in Brazil, and in the two last stanzas the losses become geographical and personal:

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,

Some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.  
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (*Write* it !) like disaster. (167)

The loss she writes about with such humor indicates a revision of geography, a kind of self-definition that shifts expectations we have about how connections to locations determine who we are in this world. Yet, if this poem is an exile's lament, it seems to lack the anguish and sorrow encapsulated in such works.

By the time this poem was written in 1975, Bishop was established in Boston, and though the tone of the poem is lighthearted, its irony is plain to see. Taking advantage of the repeating lines that villanelles demand, in this poem, even as the losses escalate, the speaker is forced to say that “None of these will bring disaster” (166). Yet everything, from keys to watches to homes to continents to “you,” is integral to home and their loss would certainly be catastrophic. Miller shows how the drafts to this poem constitute a working through of losses to make a “bold, painful catalog of the first draft” a “finely honed and privately meaningful final version” that helps Bishop “see the way in which she might possibly master herself in the face of loss” (513).

Three years later, in 1978, Bishop remarks, “I've never felt particularly homeless, but then, I've never felt particularly at home. I guess that's a pretty good description of a poet's sense of home. He carries it within him” (Johnson 102). This statement, which seems to deny Bishop's years in Brazil, resonates with Rushdie's interpretation

of that key phrase from the end of *The Wizard of Oz*: “There’s no place like home”:

[W]e come to understand that the real secret of the ruby slippers is not that “there’s no place like home” but, rather, that there is no longer any such place *as* home—except, of course, for the homes we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz. Which is anywhere—and everywhere—except the place from which we began. (103)

Bishop’s experiences of home in Brazil are not denied but are tempered by loss and a private mastery of that loss. Bishop is no Dorothy. She knows that there are no places like the homes she had in Brazil or in Nova Scotia or in Key West. They are recovered, if the circumstances permit, through creative energy. That Bishop chooses to not feel at home (but not be homeless) in Boston and to keep her sense of home private (*home, wherever that may be*) speaks to the enormity of that loss of home, the reluctance to experience it again, and her acknowledging a new and different kind of homemaking.

#### Note

1. All poetry quotations are from Bishop’s *Poems, Prose, and Letters* (New York: Library of America, 2008) and will be indicated by page number.

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