The Weirdest Scale on Earth: Elizabeth Bishop and Containment

At the heart of “In the Waiting Room”—the first poem in Elizabeth Bishop’s last book—lies the recollection of a terrifying childhood experience:

the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space. (160)¹

This experience has been characterized by many readers, following Helen Vendler, as “vertigo” (1977, 37), and though Vendler herself construes vertigo as “metaphysical doubt,” I would like to take a harder look at what is at stake in this childhood memory, which inaugurates a volume whose last line concedes the persistence of beginnings: “(A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift)” (181). What other sense can we make of this early “falling off”?

One way to pursue this question is to consider the passage as a stark instance of one of Bishop’s crucial tropes: the destabilizing threat of what, in the poem following “In the Waiting Room,” Bishop’s Crusoe calls “weird scale” (164). Highlighting the way that “throughout her work Bishop loves juggling relative sizes,” James Merrill points out that in “Crusoe in England” “Crusoe’s flute appropriately plays ‘the weirdest scale on earth’” (1989, 256). Merrill’s formulation, however, seems to me a little too cheerful, by contrast with the darker sense informing Vendler’s observation that “Bishop’s poems . . . put into relief the continuing vibration between two frequencies—the domestic and the strange” (1977, 32). But of the important early readings, perhaps David Kalstone’s most clearly evokes the threat posed by such “juggling” and “continuing vibration”: the “odd, habitual changes of scale” (1977, 13) in Bishop’s
Focusing on this trope of instability in “In the Waiting Room” and some related work, I would like to explore the threat that impels Bishop’s weird scale. We can call this the threat of “loss” that many critics have come to recognize as central to Bishop’s writing. In trying to enrich our sense of how her work explores what “loss” means, I shall have recourse to a psychoanalytic perspective, albeit one that cuts against the Lacanian grain of many previous readings of Bishop, drawing instead on the object-relational formulations of D. W. Winnicott and W. R. Bion.

This tradition envisions the role of language very differently from that ascribed to it by Lacan. As Jane Flax maintains in her lucid contrast of Lacan and Winnicott, since for Lacan language “is not self-created, it must be alien and alienating. Language and its laws are seen as imposed on the subject from the ‘outside”—by a culture that is ‘alien’” (1990, 96–97). For Winnicott, in contrast, culture, including language, can occupy a “potential space” between inner and outer worlds that is neither purely subjective nor purely objective; given a “good-enough” presentation of the external world, the individual “can creatively transform what is given in part by bringing something of inner reality to the process” (Flax 1990, 119).

Barbara Schapiro points out that “much of the current clinical research . . . would seem to belie Lacan’s view of the primacy of language in the construction of subjectivity” (1994, 22). She marshals many recent theorists who share Daniel Stern’s view that “the word is given to the infant from the outside, by the mother, but there exists a thought for it to be given to. . . . It occupies a midway position between the infant’s subjectivity and the mother’s objectivity [and thus] is a union experience” (qtd. in Schapiro 1994, 23). Christopher Bollas, as Peter Rudnytsky summarizes him, “subsumes a theory of language, the alpha and omega for Lacanians, within an object relational framework, which recognizes that nonverbal affects precede linguistic representations” (1993, xvi–xvii). For Lacan, all human beings come to language in the same way, as something fixed and non-negotiable; for Winnicott and his colleagues, our encounter with language participates in an
already existing relationship between self and world that is, necessarily, different for each of us.

Crucial to this approach is that the conditions of our earliest relationships shape how we experience language and other cultural formations. Winnicott sees “cultural experience” as being located in the “potential space” between the individual and the environment (originally the object)” (1967, 100), and he claims this “intermediate area” or “transitional” realm is indispensable for “the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet related” (1953, 2). Marion Milner likewise stresses those very early “moments when the original ‘poet’ in each of us created the outside world for us, by finding the familiar in the unfamiliar” (1955, 18). But the possibility of this intermediate area where moments of poetic originality can occur depends (at least in part) on the external environment. Winnicott’s “potential space happens only in relation to a feeling of confidence on the part of the baby . . . related to the dependability of the mother-figure or environmental elements” (1967, 100), and Milner’s focus is on “the internal and external conditions that make it possible to find the familiar in the unfamiliar” (1955, 16).

Bion’s notion of “containment” provides, in my view, an especially illuminating way of posing these “conditions” and exploring how they animate Bishop’s work. Before undertaking any further theoretical elaboration, though, I would like to consider in more detail the ubiquity in Bishop’s writing of the trope of instability. An oft-quoted instance concerns her admiration for Darwin:

reading Darwin one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless, heroic observations, almost unconscious or automatic—and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one feels that strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown.5 (1966, 288)

This is pretty obviously also a self-portrait, but the anxiety implicit in such sinking or sliding into the unknown is veiled here—or isn’t really—by the “giddiness.” Writing to herself,
Bishop is more forthright about the danger of such sliding off, as is suggested by two entries Kalstone cites from her shipboard journal on her first, disorienting, trip to Europe, in 1935: she sees something in the water as “men on rafts, poor wretches, clinging to a board or two” (Kalstone 1989, 20), and twice at dinner is “overtaken by an awful feeling of deathly physical and mental illness—something that seems ‘after’ me. It is as if one were whirled off from all the world and the interests of the world in a sort of cloud—dark, sulphurous gray—of melancholia” (21).^6

Kalstone notes how this 1935 experience of sinking and sliding anticipates the late, very ungiddy, “In the Waiting Room,” but—if we accept that such disorientation is related to Merrill’s “juggling,” Vendler’s “continuous vibration,” and Kalstone’s “odd, habitual changes of scale”—we can begin to see its threat lurking just about everywhere in Bishop’s work. Her first volume presents “The Unbeliever,” who firmly shuts out the external world, sleeping “on top of his mast / with his eyes closed tight,” anxious about a Darwinian sinking or sliding, as he dreams, “I must not fall. / The spangled sea below wants me to fall / . . . it wants to destroy us all” (22). “Sleeping on the Ceiling” begins with a disorienting shift in scale—

It is so peaceful on the ceiling!
It is the place de la Concorde.
The little crystal chandelier
is off, the fountain is in the dark (29)

—as does “The Man-Moth,” whose first line, in the act of offering a setting, dislocates: “Here, above” (14). The title of that poem, too, uneasily commingles the small (moth) with the medium (man) with the large (the title is taken from a “misprint for mammoth”). That such weirdness of scale expresses troubled early relationships seems all but explicit at the start of “Chemin de Fer”:

Alone on the railroad track
I walked with pounding heart.
The ties were too close together
or maybe too far apart. (8)
The connection between vexed early “ties” and subsequent instability concludes “At the Fishhouses,” in the second volume, where knowledge of the external world derives from “rocky breasts” and is thus imagined as undependable, not merely “flowing,” but, more troublingly, “flown,” having left no substantiating trace (66). In “Sandpiper,” in the third book, the bird’s panic reflects this absence; knowing “that every so often the world is bound to shake,” that on his beach “a sheet / of interrupting water comes and goes,” he obsessively observes the grains of sand (“no detail too small”) and, like Darwin, is “preoccupied, / looking for something, something, something” (131). And in the last volume, in addition to “In the Waiting Room,” we find Crusoe’s island of weird scale, also a place of giant waves where “the world [is] bound to shake” so violently, in volcanic eruptions, that the volcanoes’ heads are “blown off,” dependable scale dissolves, and thought itself cannot reconstitute things:

Well, I had fifty-two
miserable, small volcanoes I could climb
with a few slithery strides—
vocanoes dead as ash heaps.
I used to sit on the edge of the highest one
and count the others standing up,
naked and leaden, with their heads blown off.
I’d think that if they were the size
I thought volcanoes should be, then I had
become a giant;
and if I had become a giant
* I couldn’t bear to think what size
   the goats and turtles were,
or the gulls, or the overlapping rollers.
   (162; italics added)

Such weirdness of scale seems to derive not only from “rocky breasts” or from violent explosions or from sinking and sliding away, but also from the kind of cultural representations that structure Bishop’s early experience. In her prose memoir “Primer Class,” she recalls the start of her formal education, an early experience of being presented with the external forms of
a culture. Already haunted by her parentlessness—“I used to ask Grandmother . . . to promise me not to die before I came home” from school (6)—young Elizabeth seems hungry for meaningful symbols but also thwarted by them. She is fascinated by “long columns of numbers, handwritten,” but they remain “a mystery I never solved when I went to Primer Class in Nova Scotia!” (4). She is drawn to “two rolled-up maps, one of Canada and one of the whole world” (10), and wants to meet these symbolic representations half-way—in a potential space where her own agency is accommodated, and she is allowed playfully to “snap them up, and pull them down again, and touch all the countries and provinces with my own hands.”

These first lessons don’t, however, mediate between the internal world and the external one or help the students discover the familiar in the unfamiliar: “we didn’t sit about socially, and build things, or crayon, or play, or quarrel. We sat one behind the other in a line of small, bolted-down desks and chairs” (4). Elizabeth never does get her hands on the maps, and soon these rigid representations of identity and place serve only to confuse, as scale turns weird: “I got the general impression that Canada was the same size as the world, which somehow or other fitted in it, or the other way around” (10).

A dominant strain in the critical response to Bishop’s trope of instability—reflecting some postmodern and feminist valorizations of indeterminacy—celebrates it as her resistance to repressive, inflexible structures of meaning. Barbara Page contends that, “against the finality of closure, Bishop asserted her preference for unofficial and unstable positionings” (1993, 210). Bonnie Costello parses her “antimimetic manipulations of perspective and scale . . . which challenge visual and conceptual frames” (1991, 5). For Susan McCabe, Bishop’s poetry “dismantles the notion of the traditional self as it confesses to a disunified self” (1994, xvi), a position echoed in David Jarraway’s Žižekian claim that Bishop “proposes to turn a blind eye to universalist (i.e. natural, normal) notions of selfhood, constructing in their place hypothetical (i.e. synthetic, artificial) versions, whose endlessly rhetorical prospect makes true selfhood . . . unattainable” (1998, 250). Lee Edelman’s influential essay on “In the Waiting Room” concludes that “the critical desire to locate or to define or to frame
any literal inside for that voice [the ‘oh! of pain’] to emerge from has been discredited as ideological blindness, a hierarchical gesture” (1985, 107).

It is certainly true, as such readings suggest, that Bishop’s work resists authoritarian and universalist structures, and remains alive to the vitality of the particular and unpredictable. There is some giddiness to sliding away, as her last poem, “Sonnet,” insists, slyly sexualizing and celebrating as “Freed” the “rainbow-bird . . . flying wherever / it feels like, gay!” (192). But to do justice to this freedom one must also take into account what threatens it. In her shipboard diary, as we have seen, Bishop equates being “whirled off from the world” with “melancholia” and “homesickness”; and as Kalstone observes, “disorientation and the threat of abandonment are very close in her mind” (1989, 21).

What has forsaken Bishop, then, is what Edelman and many others don’t allow for: an external structure that is not by definition alienating and repressive. Brett Millier sees in her work “the simultaneous realization of selfhood and the awful otherness of the inevitable world” (1993, 23), and even Vendler seems to take for granted “the fact that one’s house always is inscrutable” (1977, 33). But how much of the world is inevitable, and why is otherness self-evidently only awful? Is one’s house necessarily only inscrutable, affording no possibility of, in Milner’s phrase, “finding the familiar in the unfamiliar”? Millier and Vendler are hardly “Lacanian,” but even they accept Lacan’s premise of the fixity of the symbolic order—an assumption strangely at odds with the frequent postmodern celebrations of indeterminacy. Jane Flax interrogates the way Lacan “assumes that if something is not self-created, it must be alien and alienating” (1990, 96), and contrasts his view with the relational one, “more compatible with postmodernism than Freud and Lacan” in that it doesn’t “require a fixed . . . view of ‘human nature’” (110). For Winnicott and his British colleagues, again, much depends upon the particulars of one’s early relations with others, who may respond either in a way that imposes rigid structure and thus alienates or in one that, to a good-enough degree, negotiates with the individual’s emerging disposition and thus shapes a self capable of giddily resisting closure or “flying wherever / it feels like.”
“permanent gap between subject and Other, self and culture,” that Flax rightly imputes to Lacan can, she argues, instead be rethought as a “space” (126–27) where disposition flourishes in some dependable relation to a not too inflexibly positioned other.

To the limited extent that object relational perspectives have been taken up by literary and critical theorists, Winnicott is now a central figure. But as important to many psychoanalysts is the work of W. R. Bion, whose notion of “containment” I find especially helpful in thinking about the fragility of potential space—that is, about the possibilities and anxieties of weird scale—in Bishop’s work.9 For Bion, an infant’s often overwhelmingly intense internal states need to be made tolerable by the mother by being taken in and returned to the infant in a more bearable form. This is the basis for constructing a relationship between inside and outside, and hence also for thinking and experiencing. Bion describes how containment operates in a psychoanalytic session:

When the patient strove to rid himself of fears of death which were felt to be too powerful for his personality to contain he split off his fears and put them into me, the idea apparently being that if they were allowed to repose there long enough they would undergo modification by my psyche and could then be safely reintrojected. . . . An understanding mother is able to experience the feeling of dread that this baby was striving to deal with by projective identification, and yet retain a balanced outlook. (1959, 103–4)

So-called “normal development” thus involves a caretaker with a state of mind that Bion calls “maternal reverie” and who engages in active mirroring:

Normal development follows if the relationship between the infant and breast permits the infant to project a feeling, say, that it is dying into the mother and to reintroject it after its sojourn in the breast has made it tolerable to the infant psyche. If projection is not accepted by the mother the infant feels that its feeling
that it is dying is stripped of such meaning as it has. It therefore reintrojects, not a fear of dying made tolerable, but a nameless dread. (1962b, 116)

As glossed by Hanna Segal, maternal reverie is the origin of the emerging self’s experience of “mental stability”:

When an infant has an intolerable anxiety he deals with it by projecting it into the mother. The mother’s response is to acknowledge the anxiety and do whatever is necessary to relieve the infant’s distress. The infant’s perception is that he has projected something intolerable into his object, but the object was capable of containing it. . . . He can then reintroject not only his original anxiety but an anxiety modified by having been contained. He also introjects an object capable of containing . . . anxiety. The containment of anxiety by an external object capable of understanding is a beginning of mental stability. (1981, 134–35)

Although containment is originally presymbolic, Bion’s view of early relations implies that language itself, far from constituting an inevitable structure of alienation, is one medium through which containment can be achieved, while containment is reciprocally one form by which the meaningful use of language can be achieved. Bion writes of a patient who was “trying to ‘contain’ his emotions within a form of words. . . . The words that should have represented the meaning the man wanted to express were fragmented by the emotional forces to which he wished to give only verbal expression: the verbal formulation could not ‘contain’ his emotions” (1970, 94). The failure of containment thus leads not only to an intense mental state being “stripped of such meaning as it has” with a consequent disruption of “mental stability,” but also to what Bion calls “nameless dread” or to what Winnicott analogously calls “unthinkable anxiety,” an “acute confusional state” also resulting from maternal absence (1967, 97). In turn, the world itself no longer seems to be dependably there, as “the patient feels surrounded not so much by real objects, things-in-
themselves, but by bizarre objects that are . . . stripped of their meaning” (Bion 1962a, 99).

Bishop is not alone among her poetic kin in exploring this terrain. In “Of Modern Poetry,” Wallace Stevens describes the challenge of a modern poem in terms that evoke an infant’s predicament. It has to develop some sense of meaningful space—to “construct a new stage”—and to “learn the speech of the place,” “face the men,” and “meet / The women of the time” (1990, 174–75). But the poem functions at once as the infant and as the infant’s first good object. In mirroring itself, in being able to “repeat / Exactly, that which it wants to hear,” it has “expressed / . . . an emotion as of two people, as of two / Emotions becoming one.” By such responsiveness, the poem “gives / Sounds passing through sudden rightness, wholly / Containing the mind.” Poetry as an art of containment lies at the heart, too, of James Merrill’s The Changing Light at Sandover, where God B reveals to DJ and JM their true subject: “MY SON MICHAEL LIT UP YOUR MINDS MY SON / GABRIEL TURNED THEM TO THE DARK FORCE WE / CONTAIN” (1982, 493).

But though she is not unique in this respect, Bishop is surely among the poets most consistently and originally engaged by such issues. When she says that “There are times . . . when I really start to wonder what holds me together—awful times” (qtd. in Wehr 1981, 325), and in her notebook ascribes to a severed arm the words, “this is what it means to be really ‘alone in the world!’” (Page 1993, 197), we can sense how the “loss” so often taken to be central to her work is experienced as a failure of containment.12 And when readers repeatedly stress that Bishop’s world is “populated by people and things whose ties to one another [are] tenuous at best and at worst nonexistent” (Lombardi 1995, 103), that her “great subject” is “discovering the strangeness, the unreality of our reality” (Ashbery 1977, 8), they are intuiting that such failure of containment produces a world of Bionian “bizarre objects.”

Bishop’s most explicit writing about her difficult early relations with her mother is the autobiographical story “In the Village,” the “vital center,” as Kalstone puts it, “from which many of Bishop’s poem’s radiate” (1977, 16). The story concerns her mother’s return from a sanitarium to the Nova Scotia village where, her father having died when she was an infant,
Elizabeth has been living with her maternal grandparents and aunts. Her mother can’t cope and soon must leave again, for another sanitarium, where she remains for good; at the age of five, Bishop has seen her mother for the last time. The story’s exposition starkly presents the destabilizing family history: “First” the mother “had come home, with her child. Then she had gone away again, alone, and left the child. Then she had come home. Then she had gone away again, with her sister; and now she was home again” (1984, 252).

In the beginning was “a scream,” as the story’s first words tell us, one that seems to have permeated nature itself and the narrator’s perceiving consciousness: “A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies. . . . The scream hangs like that, unheard, in memory—in the past, in the present, and those years between” (251). Woven into the fabric of perception—partly constituting the narrator’s world—the scream is quietly associated in that first paragraph with weirdness of scale: its “pitch would be the pitch of my village. Flick the lightning rod on top of the church steeple with your fingernail and you will hear it.” (You would have to be gigantic, or the church miniaturized, to play upon its string instrument so casually.)

The mother is experienced primarily as the source of this scream. She is being fitted for a new purple dress, having decided, finally, to “come out of [the] black” (251) she has been wearing since her husband’s death five years earlier. (Her tenuous presence for the child reflects her own uncontained grief.) Both drawn to and wary of the mother, the child stands “in the doorway, watching” (252). The negotiation between self and world fails:

The dress was all wrong. She screamed.
The child vanishes. (253)

Bishop’s almost desperate flatness of tone here, as in the introductory family history (“First she had come home . . .”), might suggest the intensity of the child’s feelings, but rather than the mother accepting and returning them in “tolerable” form, the mother herself is overcome. Whereas containment
might have constructed a potential space, an explosion under-
mines its possibility, and the child’s intense feelings are, in
Bion’s phrase, “stripped of . . . meaning.” The world, in turn,
vanishes, doesn’t seem to be really and dependably and use-
fully there, a disorienting condition that persists, as the scream,
“alive forever” (251), becomes the very “pitch of [the] village.”

“In the Village” thus presents a scream-stained world
where, the child having emotionally vanished, external objects
are tenuously present or are stripped of meaning and become
“bizarre.” Just as in “Primer Class,” where maps served not to
locate but to disorient, here once again the symbolic order
mystifies:

“There’s that mourning coat she got the first win-
ter,” says my aunt.

But always I think they are saying “morning.” Why,
in the morning did one put on black? How early in the
morning did one begin? (254)

Mother’s china is “painfully desirable” but “broken,” and the
“innocent and small” grains of rice it bears on its surface seem
present but “aren’t really there,” a hidden absence augmented
by the rigid (and patriarchally inflected) imposition of lan-
guage: “My aunt says that she has heard they write the Lord’s
Prayer” on the grains (256).

Other objects associated with the mother likewise are
“bizarre,” fail to help constitute the sense of a relatively stable,
meaningful presence. The material for her new dress threat-
en to explode: “The purple stuff lies on a table. . . . Oh, look
away before it moves by itself, or makes a sound; before it
echoes, echoes, what it has heard!” (258–59). The mother’s
creative power having been withheld, the child is compelled to
“abscond with a little ivory stick,” her mother’s embroidery
tool, but her anxiety about its reality precludes her making use
of it: “To keep it forever I bury it under the bleeding heart by
the crab-apple tree, but it is never found again” (257). Substi-
tute sources of maternal creativity and containment are like-
wise scream-stained. The dressmaker puts things together,
helps the outside world “fit” the self, but with “a bosom full of
needles” (258) she hardly offers a “breast” (in Bion’s explana-
tion of containment) in which the child’s “feeling that it is dying” can “sojourn” and thus be “made . . . tolerable to the infant psyche.” Even though the needles are “to make nests with,” the possibility of violence seems nigh, and, indeed, the child sniffs infanticide in the air: “A gray kitten once lay on the treadle of her sewing machine, where she rocked it as she sewed, like a baby in a cradle, but it got hanged on the belt. . . . But another gray-and-white one lies now by the arm of the machine in imminent danger of being sewn into a turban.”

If danger is in the air, sadness spills over into the food; nourishment itself is infused with pain, and Bishop is a long way from a world where her fears can be modified and “safely reintrojected”: “My grandmother is sitting in the kitchen stirring potato mash for tomorrow’s bread and crying into it. She gives me a spoonful and it tastes wonderful but wrong. In it I think I taste my grandmother’s tears” (259). Anything so problematically introjected can’t be left at home. When the child goes out and looks in a shop window, she sees in “something new” the old, devastating story of her parents: “In the other window is something new: shoes, single shoes, summer shoes, each sitting on top of its own box with its mate beneath it, inside, in the dark” (262). And when she ventures beyond the village to the pasture, the natural world, seemingly at first a safe haven, finally is “stripped of such meaning as it has”: “For a while I entertain the idea of not going home today at all, of staying safely here in the pasture all day, playing in the brook and climbing on the squishy, moss-covered hummocks in the swampy part. But an immense, sibilant, glistening loneliness suddenly faces me” (265).

The few times Bishop writes of even earlier experience with her mother reflect this anxiety about containment. Her memory of a “first ride on a swan boat . . . at the age of three” centers on a “live swan” who bit the finger of her still-mourning mother (1952, 282). Rather than giving shape to, and thus making bearable, the intensity of feeling—if we can read the swan’s bite as expressing Bishop’s own early (oral) rage, a biting of the hand that failed really to feed her—all her mother does is bleed, the inside seeping out beyond a containing boundary (both her skin and the black glove), in muted anticipation, perhaps, of the scream.
But if the scream persists in “In the Village,” it is not the only sound that does. When the child “vanishes,” she heads to Nate’s blacksmith shop and its “beautiful sound” (252), the “Clang” of metal being worked into shape. The clang can’t erase the scream from memory, but it at least offers the prospect of another sort of interaction. The scream signals a self shattered by the intensity of its feelings; the clang sounds the *shaping* of elemental forces, as Nate neither denies nor is overcome by them. The mother’s final breakdown and return to the sanitarium is precipitated by a fire that destroys part of a nearby barn; a fire is present at Nate’s too, but, rather than going uncontained, it is made meaningful, focused in the forge. Nate controls it with bellows, and when the “coals blow red and wild,” he doesn’t scream but “laughs.”

The smithy is but a temporary refuge. Soon the child is removed from the Nova Scotia village to live in Worcester, Massachusetts, with her father’s parents, a period Bishop writes about in her prose memoir “The Country Mouse” (1984). This transplantation offers no escape from the threat of the scream, as “there was something ominous, threatening, lowering in the air” (17), but the most immediate threat isn’t an explosion but its opposite, suffocation. From the start, a rigid, conventionalized external world imposes itself on the child: “I had been brought back unconsulted and against my wishes to the house my father had been born in, to be saved from a life of poverty and provincialism.” These new caretakers themselves seem depersonalized, a “surprising set of extra grandparents” who “until a few weeks ago [were] no more than names.” Indeed, their oppressiveness takes the form of an inflexible symbolic order, generic (and gendered) phrases that displace, rather than negotiate, individual identity and thus produce a “depressing” sense of unreality:

if only Grandma hadn’t such a confusing way of talking. It was almost as if we were playing house. She would speak of “grandma” and “little girls” and “fathers” and “being good”—things I had never before considered in the abstract, or rarely in the third person. In particular, there seemed to be much, much more to being a “little
girl” than I had realized: the prospect was beginning to depress me. (16)

What might have served as a “transitional object” (Winnicott 1953, 2)—something the child experiences as both under its control and having objective existence, thus enabling meaningful relations between inside and outside—is colonized. Instead of making possible a “finding of the familiar in the unfamiliar,” Bishop’s doll isn’t a transitional object but a bizarre one, “stripped of meaning.” The grandmother asks:

“Where’s your doll? Where’s Drusilla?”

Oh dear. I had dolls, back home in Nova Scotia; I was even quite fond of one or two of them. But Grandma had found them all in no condition to go traveling in Pullmans. She had bought me the best our country store could provide, and made her a checked dress herself. And when I had been reluctant to name her, she had even given her that unappealing name. The doll (I couldn’t say that name) was totally uninteresting. . . . I could scarcely conceal my real feelings about her. But that seemed to be one of Grandma’s ideas: a “little girl” should carry a doll when she went traveling. (Bishop 1984, 16)

The child herself becomes a kind of doll. As it did for her mother, being literally ill-fitted to the world yields what Winnicott might call “unthinkable anxiety”: “The dressmaker came. . . . She made me four hideous dresses, too long, too dark, and with decorations made from leftovers of Grandma’s dresses. (Forty-three years later I can scarcely bear to think of those dresses.) . . . Then Grandma decided I should have long hair and braids, like ‘nice little girls’” (29).

The consequences of enforcing upon the child such generic and unresponsive cultural forms emerge as “The Country Mouse” culminates in the waiting-room episode re-worked later in “In the Waiting Room.” Like the explosive scream, such rigid forms preclude a relationship between self and world that might make both seem real. Language having been presented as alienating, when the child is left to read she
feels an “absolute and utter desolation” (33); but she doesn’t feel this feeling (it isn’t contained) so much as she is defined by it: “I felt . . . myself. . . . I felt I, I, I.” To be is to be desolate, to be and no one else. For the child here, being someone doesn’t derive from being both like and unlike others, but from sheer differentiation; she has the “awful sensation” that “You are you . . . You are not Beppo, or the chestnut tree, or Emma, you are you and you are going to be you forever.” Insofar as she feels herself to be “one of them,” this isn’t a self-substantiating connection, but a usurpation by external forms such as that of a “nice little girl”; the only alternative to “utter desolation” (if it is one) is Winnicott’s “false self” (1960, 140): “‘You’re in for it now,’ something said. How had I got tricked into such a false position? I would be like that woman opposite who smiled at me so falsely” (Bishop 1984, 33). The memoir ends with the child vanishing into desolation or into its double, falsity: she is either uncontained (“It was like coasting downhill, this thought, only much worse”) or else rigidly quashed (this thought “quickly smashed into a tree”).

Which is worse, the catastrophe of being uncontained or the falsity of being a nice little girl? Nameless dread or the dread of being named? The attempt to represent this dilemma is extended in “In the Waiting Room.” As the first poem in Geography III, Bishop’s last and most directly autobiographical book, it evinces a concern with origins, though these origins are destabilized and destabilizing. The volume’s epigraph, from a schooltext “First Lessons in Geography,” frames the issue: can earliest contact with otherness (e.g., maps, representation) offer a sense of location? Initially, the series of questions in the lesson is answered, but soon—as it turns to the volcano, a violent threat to containment—unanswered questions proliferate dizzyingly:

This vertiginous list ends the epigraph, as “First Lessons” leaves a student wondering: where am I? “In the Waiting Room” expands this question: if I don’t know where I am, how do I know who I am?15

It is important that such questions emerge in a waiting room. Whereas “potential space” is a way of describing a realm in which self and world can find each other, a waiting room is a zone where time is killed and nothing is supposed to happen; it is not a place of interplay “between me-extensions and the not-me” (Winnicott 1967, 100), but a nowhere that excludes both.

Winnicott holds that potential space arises only from “a confidence related to the dependability of the mother figure or environmental elements” (100), but it is the very absence of such confidence that marks Bishop’s experience here. Indeed, one of the ways that “In the Waiting Room” exceeds “The Country Mouse” is in its closer examination of how the child’s initial reading of National Geographic suggests this absence. In the memoir, the “desolation” is triggered when the child merely “looked at the magazine cover” (32), while the poem details the photographs she “carefully / studied” (159), photographs that, for all their exoticism, evoke an uncannily familial—or familial—history and set of anxieties. “A dead man on a pole” conjures her fatherlessness, while the bizarre caption, “Long Pig,” pretending but really failing to explain, suggests the inexplicability of such a loss, the failure to make it nameable or thinkable through containment. The image of “Babies with pointed heads / wound round and round with string” evokes the imposition of thwarting external forms upon the emerging self and the dread of being named—that is, defined as a nice little girl—in such a context. The grown women are similarly thwarted, “with necks / wound round and round with wire / like the necks of light bulbs,” a condition that produces an “undependable” maternal presence, not breasts in which infantile fears can, as Bion puts it, “sojourn” and be “made tolerable,” but rather, in Bishop’s own words, breasts that are “horrifying” and “awful.”

This anxiety about maternal containment, indeed, is the ground note of the child’s reading, evident in the first photograph she encounters, underlying all the others:
the inside of a volcano,
black, and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire. (159)

“First Lessons in Geography” defines Earth as “The planet or body on which we live,” but here the planet/body doesn’t help to constitute an initial potential space, an interplay, and thus a sorting out, of inside and outside; rather, the inside explodes out, the intensity isn’t made bearable, the original object, we might say, doesn’t shape but rather screams. Something wound tightly with wire might well want to unwind with a vengeance, to blow its top.16

Confronted by this “spilling over,” by her whole dislocating history, the child tries to keep things in place, to sort inside from out, to attend to a series of boundaries: “And then I looked at the cover: / the yellow margins, the date.” But the initial failure of containment is repeated as “Suddenly, from inside, / came an oh! of pain” (160): another eruption, another shattering of language and its meanings, another scream. Although the “oh!” was “not very loud,” it “could have / got loud and worse” (161), just as the original scream “was not even loud to begin with, perhaps” (251). As Edelman (1985) emphasizes, the source of the “oh!” is crucially indeterminate;17 it came “from inside” the office, was “Aunt Consuelo’s voice,” but just as the mother’s scream came “to live forever” in Bishop’s memory, so too this exclamation “was me: / my voice, in my mouth.” As with the volcano, meaningful relations between inside and outside dissolve, questions of place are revealed to be questions of identity, and the unthinkable cry of pain causes the child to vanish:

the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space

... ...

The waiting room was bright
and too hot. It was sliding
beneath a big black wave,
another, and another. (160–61)
To “stop / the sensation,” the child resorts to language and number, to a symbolic order of absolute demarcation: “I said to myself: three days / and you’ll be seven years old.” But at what cost? Even if language is not by definition alienating, in this context being culturally positioned is as estranging as falling, and, again, the only alternative to nameless dread is the dread of being rigidly named. To stop falling, Bishop reassures herself, “you are an I, / you are an Elizabeth,” but to be “an I” or “an Elizabeth” is to be just an example, to be no one in particular, to be not herself but “one of them,” a placement experienced as arbitrary and “awful”: “Why should you be one, too?” she wonders:

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities—
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the National Geographic
and those awful hanging breasts—
held us all together
or made us just one?18 (161)

Coming in out of the cold, blue-black, isolating space means renouncing any degree of the crucial difference necessary for relatedness. Self and others, inside and outside, aren’t related but are “just one,” a realization Bishop is loathe to confront, as she “scarcely dared to look” at the other people in the waiting room “to see what it was I was” (160). If she is the others (if they are “all just one”), she isn’t like them, a distinction she quietly insists on by calling this experience of ostensible kinship “unlikely.” Indeed, as unthinkable as vanishing is, “nothing / stranger could ever happen” than this being relocated in the social world. What is “unlikely” and “strange” is just what might seem to fend off strangeness, so Bishop goes back and forth. After the initial falling off the world, she comes back to be one of them, but then again the world slides away, “beneath a big black wave” (161), and, once more, at the poem’s end, it comes back. If “The [First World] War was on” in that outside world, with intense forces going uncontained,
the poem makes us see how containment’s failure has loosed an even earlier war from her childhood. The waiting room is the antipode of Winnicott’s “resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated” (1953, 2)—a room where the failure of containment precludes such an intertwining, not a potential space but the nowhere of war.

In tracing how “In the Waiting Room” seems to hover between nameless dread and the dread of being named, I have elided the distinction between “the child” and the adult poet, between the events recalled and the act of writing about them. To some degree, the poem itself asks us to do this: adopting a childlike trimeter and a humble, sometimes markedly childlike diction (“grown-up people” [159]), the poet pretends to sound seven years old, and the poem keeps its focus entirely on the child’s experience as it unfolds—in contrast, say, to “Crusoe in England,” structured by the distance between past experience, on the island, and the present scene of recounting it, in England. But we can’t think “In the Waiting Room” is too invested in this pretense (and couldn’t think so even if, like “The Moose,” it was cast in the present tense). Indeed, the transparency of the pretense is crucial. The child “didn’t know any / word” (161) for her predicament, but the poet knows the poem’s words; the child remains in the nowhere of the waiting room, neither in nor out, but the poet’s stanzas—the term derives from the Italian for “room”—form a potential space where the inner world can find language, a place for “the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated.” If young Elizabeth continues to suffer from the failure of containment, the older Bishop, as poet, keeps up that perpetual task (and we might think again of how Merrill sees her “juggling relative sizes”): the task of writing her way between nameless dread and the dread of being named.

Department of English
Hofstra University
Hempstead, NY 11549
Englzz@Hofstra.edu
Notes

1. All quotations from Bishop’s poems are to *The Complete Poems* (1983), with page numbers included in the text.

2. Brett Millier summarizes Bishop’s history of loss: “As a child, she had lost her father before she knew him, when he died of Bright’s disease eight months after she was born. Her mother was deeply disoriented by her husband’s death and spent the next five years in and out of mental institutions until, in 1916, she was diagnosed as permanently insane. Her five-year-old daughter would never see her again. Little Elizabeth had managed . . . to construct herself a secure world in the home of her maternal grandparents in Great Village, Nova Scotia. But her father’s wealthy Boston family, worried that their only grandchild would grow up backward there among the ignorant, uprooted her a year later, and she began what would become a lifetime of living as guest in other people’s homes. In 1967, the most secure of these guest homes, in Petropolis, Brazil, was violently disrupted when her hostess, friend, and lover of fifteen years suffered a breakdown and committed suicide, and Bishop was once again cast out” (1990, 233; see also Millier 1993).

3. In working with this kind of psychoanalysis, I do not mean to shift attention away from Bishop’s poems and prose to her biography. I am not aiming, that is, to trace the sources of the trope of instability, but rather to ponder its underappreciated suggestiveness. The events of Bishop’s life and her responses to them perhaps have a role in the argument, but only insofar as these are the explicit concerns of her writing. Thus, if I am going against the grain of much previous psychoanalytic work on Bishop, I think I am going with the grain of her own work.


5. The previous sentence of this letter refers to the “surrealism of everyday life,” and what I’ve called the trope of instability—especially weirdness of scale—can certainly be read as Bishop’s witty engagement with the literary strategy of surrealism. Indeed, it can be read tellingly in a number of ways. By stressing the anxiety implicit in weird scales, I’m hoping to help us grow more acute to the complexities of Bishop’s attitude and tone, certainly not trying to obscure the playfulness and bravery that are never too separable from anxiety and terror in her work.

6. Kalstone is quoting from the Bishop notebooks at Vassar College Library.

7. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations from Bishop’s prose are to *The Collected Prose* (1984), with page references included in the text.

8. Winnicott stresses that the “capacity to be alone” depends upon an early sense of maternal presence: “Although many types of experience go to the establishment of the capacity to be alone, there is one that is basic . . . ; this experience is that of being alone, as an infant and small child, in the presence of mother. Thus the basis of the capacity to be alone is a paradox; it is the experience of being alone while someone else is present” (1958, 30).

9. As Rudnitsky comments, both in Britain and the United States “the perspective on psychoanalysis adopted by most academics has been filtered through the French postmodernist lens of Jacques Lacan, rather than the humanist lens of the English Winnicott. There must be ten literary critics conversant with Lacan’s *Écrits for every one who has read Winnicott’s Playing and Reality*” (1993, xi). For an overview of the British object relations tradition out of which Bion and Winnicott both emerge, see also Greenberg and Mitchell (1983).

10. As James S. Grotstein emphasizes: “it is important to differentiate Bion’s conception of containment from the mirroring mother as denoted by Lacan, Winnicott, and Kohut. . . . Bion’s conception is of an elaborated primary process activity which acts like a prism to refract the intense hue of the infant’s screams into the components of the color spectrum, so to speak, so as to sort them out and relegate them to a hierarchy of importance and mental action. Thus,
containment for Bion is a very active process—which involves feeling, thinking, organizing, and acting” (1981, 134n).

11. R. D. Hinshelwood, whose Dictionary has informed my discussion of containment, writes that “nameless dread” is “a term first used by Karin Stephen” in 1941, and “was later given a fuller and specific meaning by Bion to describe a state of meaningless fear that comes about in the context of an infant with a mother incapable of ‘reverie’” (1989, 349). I wonder whether Bion fixed on this sort of melodramatic term as a reminder of the predicament of trying to give the nameless a name.

12. This failure of containment is aptly summarized in Alan Williamson’s (implicitly Bionian) observation that “if Bishop characteristically distanced emotion, it was partly because emotion for her—and especially feelings of despair, loneliness, apprehension—tended to become immense and categorical, insusceptible to rational or, in poetry, to structural counter-argument” (1983, 96).

13. Contrast this child going forth with Whitman’s, who also wonders “whether that which appears so is so, or is it all flashes and specks?” but who finally believes in his real connection to things. Rather than screaming, the mother in “There Was a Child Went Forth” is characterized by her “mild words”; rather than one with broken china, there is a “mother at home quietly placing the dishes on the supper-table.” Vendler cites Whitman’s poem as another instance of the “momentary vertigo” (38) she finds in “In the Waiting Room,” but while the comparison is suggestive it serves in my view to highlight the crucial differences between the two children going forth.

14. Patricia Yeager perceives in the story “the alienating necessity—for the woman writer—of escaping from the mother’s scream into the father’s speech” (1988, 136). This formulation typifies the way Lacanian-inflected readings assume a fixed set of conditions: the mother can only scream, the father’s speech is necessarily alienating, and gender determines the child’s response. Although it is true that Winnicott gives insufficient attention to gender (see Flax 1990, 120–26, and Kahane 1993), all of Yeager’s assumptions are debatable, as I have argued above.

15. Perhaps the paradigmatic posing of this question in American literature occurs in Huckleberry Finn. Having been (falsely) told that an agonizing episode of separation from Huck was really a dream, Jim replies, “Is I me, or who is I? Is I heah, or whah is I? Now dat’s what I wants to know” (1885, 103).

16. Marilyn Lombardi writes, “Like the volcanoes that the child finds pictured in her magazine, Bishop’s own mother threatened to erupt in unpredictable ways; emotionally numb one moment, she would spill over in rivulets of fiery, hysterical emotion the next” (1995, 27).

17. Edelman’s reading is acute, especially in its parsing of how issues of gender inflect Bishop’s predicament, though he assumes that language by definition alienates or objectifies the self. Thus, he interprets the “Oh!” not merely as the cry “against that text” she is reading that it surely is (though it is not self-evidently against the text as a text, but rather against a particular kind of language), but also as “a cry of the female refusal of position in favor of dis-position” (107), a view that seems to me to underestimate what is at stake in Bishop’s very ungiddy “falling.”

18. As this passage suggests, and as Edelman and others emphasize, the dread of being “one of them” is the dread of being defined as a (heterosexual) “woman” (or, as in “The Country Mouse,” a “nice little girl”) by a patriarchal cultural system. Even if, as I have implied, gender is not the only structure that can be rigidly imposed, it is certainly a crucial one in Bishop’s experience of this dilemma.
References


