Connotations
Vol. 4.1-2 (1994/95)

Subjected People: Towards a Grammar for the Underclass in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry

JONATHAN AUSUBEL

Robert B. Shaw hints that many questions besides biography vex Bishop studies, calling the bulk of the discussion about her work "tentative" because of its newness.[1] Shaw points to a persistent problem in Bishop criticism: like biography, many other clichéd modes of discourse tend to dominate discussion of the poetry and in turn shape our reading of it. While Harold Bloom iterates a typical Bishop lineage,[2] David Kalstone insists on not only biographical exegesis but on Bishop's famous "eye" as well.[3] Kalstone notices other features in Bishop's work: her sense of scale and her meticulous grammar (16, 17); other critics pay token attention to these elements, subordinating them, like Kalstone, to common critical stances. Lois Cucullu, in her precise reading, posits a questioning eye / I and seems restricted by her feminist reading because gender is frequently absent from the poetry.[4] Indeed, while many feminist readings of Bishop elide significant factors in their bind to gender, many other readings are blinded by the eye. Rather than reading the poetry with a view towards the eye / I and gender positioning, this paper will broadly examine structures of domination and submission in Bishop's poetry. A look at her use of grammatical subjects and objects and passive voice and then at her use of passive-voice subjection and objectification shows a persistent social subtext emerging from her arrangement of people and things in her poems that extends well beyond gender. Frequently, the servants (the objects) are children although women and minorities appear in that position too. By examining "First Death in Nova Scotia," "Cootchie," "A Norther—Key West," "Squatter's Children," "In the Waiting Room," "A Miracle for Breakfast" and "Sestina,"[5] I will show how the cycle of domination extends in Bishop's work from childhood to adulthood on both personal and societal levels.

For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at <http://www.connotations.de/debausubel00412.htm>.

"First Death in Nova Scotia" is written entirely in the past tense, with a young narrator recounting the circumstances of an even younger cousin's death. The poem is characterized by frequent shifts in grammatical subject which reveal Bishop's great attention to dominant and submissive positioning. The poem begins, oddly, with Arthur's aunt: "In the cold, cold parlor / my mother laid out Arthur." Dead, Arthur is not an agent to the narrator, but is arranged, an object, "beneath the chromographs" of royalty. In contradiction to the title, neither death nor the dead is the subject. In fact, Arthur receives scant direct attention, appearing as only one of ten unique subjects. Rather than eulogy to remember the dead, Bishop delivers funeral rites, performed on the dead. The narrator quickly shifts attention to the loon, "shot and stuffed by Uncle / Arthur, Arthur's father" and placed, like Arthur, "Below [the royalty] on the table." The narrator does not discuss her dead cousin directly, nor does she allow us to forget him—as repetition of his name assures.[6] His positional equivalence to the loon extends as the transition to the second stanza is marked by a confusion of object and then subject:

> Since Uncle Arthur fired
> a bullet into him,
> he hadn't said a word.
> He kept his own counsel
> on his white, frozen lake,
> the marble-topped table.

The conflation of the loon and Arthur is deliberate, heightened by Bishop's choice of an inappropriate idiom: the loon "hadn't said a word"; indeed, how alike are the loon and Arthur, each laid out on its table, objects of the taxidermist's and undertaker's art. Grammatically, Arthur hasn't acted. In the narrator's perception, he is identified through metonymy and metaphor with objects—the chromographs and the loon—and so Bishop solidifies his position in the world of objects. The third stanza continues Arthur's inertness: the narrator is commanded to "say good-bye / *to* [her] little cousin Arthur" and is given a flower "to put *in* Arthur's hand" (emphasis added). In both instances, Arthur is clearly the indirect object. Further, we note here that like Arthur and like the loon "shot and stuffed by Uncle," the narrator is now acted upon:

she "was lifted up and given" a flower. Arthur and the narrator occupy the same spatial and metaphorical position as the loon. Yet, raised to this level, the narrator still has difficulty focusing on little, dead Arthur where she had not had trouble scrutinizing the loon: the flower is not for Arthur, but "to put in Arthur's hand." The evasion of the "Arthur" as subject continues when Arthur's coffin becomes a white cake eyed by the loon. This evasion heightens the distance between the narrator and her cousin, "dispassions" the event.[7]

Lest the reader forget Arthur entirely, though, he finally becomes the subject: "Arthur was very small. / He was all white, like a doll / that hadn't been painted yet." As soon as the narrator has fixed on Arthur as subject, he is again objectified, an unfinished doll: "Jack Frost had dropped the brush / and left him white, forever." The royalty, we find, "invited Arthur to be / the smallest page at court"; perhaps it will be Arthur's job to wrap up the royal feet. Even when Arthur is finally seen clearly ("clutching his tiny lily, / with his eyes shut up so tight"), he is cast in the role of a stranded attendant—a page who cannot attend court because the snow prevents him.

Prevented by the ocean from attending her master, Cootchie is absent in her death and is unrelated to the narrator. Characterized by the same subject shifts as "First Death," "Cootchie" contains eight unique grammatical subjects, most of which move. Where Arthur was a doll, Cootchie is presented in life, eating her dinner over the sink. Both fluidity of verb tense[8] and placement of Cootchie solidly in the subject position (her name is title, first word and first grammatical subject) enable the shift from the stillness of "First Death" to the motion of "Cootchie." As in "First Death," the other subjects help us discover the scene. The lighthouse and the sea become part of her churning, "white" sea death as the chromographs and loon have become part of Arthur's glacial death. However, Cootchie's position as subject counterpoints her subjection. She is from the poem's first line "Miss Lula's servant":

> Her life was spent
> in caring for Miss Lula, who is deaf,
> eating her dinner off the kitchen sink
> while Lula ate hers off the kitchen table.

Her position was clear. With the opening of the second stanza, the narrator provides a different perspective on Cootchie's subjection:

> Tonight the moonlight will alleviate
> the melting of the pink wax roses
> planted in tin cans filled with sand
> placed in a line to mark Miss Lula's losses. . . .

The roses will melt, not fade; they stand not in direct tribute to Cootchie, but mark the impact of her death on Lula, to whom Cootchie was subjected. Cootchie is absent and so never becomes the object Arthur has become; she is instead dissolved in the sea-change, perhaps as quickly forgotten by Lula as the wax roses are melted.

Latent in these details is a paradox: Cootchie's funeral marks Lula's loss. Indeed, Lula is helpless without a servant: there is no one to care for her, no one to "shout and make her understand." We can even link the artificial roses planted in sand and tin to the loss of Cootchie's fecundity. Like the lighthouse, Cootchie did things "for someone else." In the poem, the machine discovers the servant's grave and understands "all as trivial." To describe the sea, Bishop chose "desperate," pointing to frantic, violent and great motion, suggesting both the storm's danger and the tumult Cootchie's death has brought about in Lula's life. The etymological kinship of "desperate" with "despair" suggests a dearth of despair for the lost servant, a detail manifest in Cootchie's "artificial" funeral with its wax roses. Where the young narrator offered Arthur a fresh lily, the sea "will proffer wave after wave" and Lula will presumably replace her dead servant with another—"wave after wave." The crucial difference between the circumstances of Arthur's death and of Cootchie's has less to do with gender and race than with simple presence or absence. Arthur was viewed (or avoided) and placed as an object because he was present; Cootchie's absence puts her firmly out of the control of society. Her drowning seems related to Elizabeth's "sensation of falling off / the round, turning world / into cold, blue-black space" in "In the Waiting Room." Where Elizabeth is able to stop from falling but unable to impose her separation, Cootchie has had exactly the opposite success. The cost, of course, has been her life, a solution which Arthur's example shows not fully effective.

The bonds of subjection of both child and adult come out more clearly, however, when Bishop focuses on the world of children. Many of the children occupy a similar position to Arthur; although alive, children are generally cast in the role of the unwitting or unable servant (somewhat like Cootchie), either to their parents, to forces they do not understand or to both. In most cases, the children are acted upon; they invariably replace one mantle of servitude with another. "A Norther—Key West" illustrates this neatly. In the poem, Hannibal's and Herbert's mother, Mizpah Oates, "brings out the ancient winter coats" to protect her sons from a storm. Paradoxically, in asserting her control over the children, mother Oates at least partially relinquishes her grip on them. The coats were "once worn by an immense white child"; the "careful" mother protects her children from the storm by dressing them in the hand-me-downs of the dominant race. Under the storm, driven wild by his mother's obtuseness and practically smothered by the enormous coat, Hannibal cries, an act which itself expresses a lack of control. The narrator links the donning of the coat with "worldliness"; the term is, of course, meant as a negative, for both physically and socially, the dominance the coat asserts (on Hannibal, at least) paralyzes the child.

Helplessness is juxtaposed with the *joi de vivre* of the "Squatter's Children." Theirs is a powerless bliss for they are oblivious to their position. Indeed, the title of the poem defines its subject as without rights even before naming the children. Under the control of parents without title to land, the children are diminutive, "specklike." Set in an expansive landscape, the children are initially only elements in the scene:

> On the unbreathing sides of hills
> . . . .
> The sun's suspended eye
> blinks casually, and then they wade
> gigantic waves of light and shade.

The conspicuous iambic meter at the end of this passage rhythmically illustrates the children's joy, suggesting their runs and jumps, their frolic out of doors. To strengthen the disparity in sizes, "A dancing yellow spot, a pup, / attends them." "Spot" and "pup" both express smallness which itself is emphasized by Bishop's word play. Like the tiny children

(Isn't a speck smaller than a spot?), the dog is dwarfed by the storm that approaches. Although the children's play is fraught with difficulty ("The ground is hard"; the mattock, which "the two of them can scarcely lift," has "a broken haft"), they seem undaunted: the mattock "drops and clangs. Their laughter spreads / effulgence in the thunderheads."

The children's happy obliviousness to the oncoming storm is not shared by the narrator, who observes that "their little, soluble, / unwarrantable ark" is answered by senseless rolls of thunder. The "ark" signifies the inefficacy of the puppy's bark and the children's laughter to stop the storm in addition to their lack of protection from the storm.[9] It is one thing to be weak and unsheltered, another to know it. Moreover, the thunderous "echolalia" is echoed by their mother's voice, which "keeps calling them to come in." The juxtaposition of storm and mother's voice suggests a number of things: the children have a choice of submitting to the storm or submitting to mother; further, she can offer little protection from the forces to which the children are subjected and so is herself diminished. By and large, the poem conveys lack of control through diction and perspective rather than through the passive voice of "First Death." Nevertheless, the ends are similar. We find in the narrator's address to the children that the storm has affected them, albeit not as seriously as it could have: they are "wet and beguiled," but (unlike Cootchie) have survived. Nevertheless, the narrator offers a strong, if veiled, admonition: today, the children play "among / the mansions [they] may choose"; as squatters, the children are not allowed to enter mansions. Moreover, only "soggy documents retain / [their] rights in rooms of falling rain." "Soggy" papers are halfway destroyed. The "falling rain" will hit the ground and run off or be absorbed, the rights disappearing in either instance. We see that in "Squatter's Children," as in "A Norther—Key West," both of which involve children negotiating storms, the children's control is frustrated at every turn: ignorant of danger or happy in the face of it, the children understand the situation no more than they control it.

Dianna Henning asserts that the loss and separation she sees permeating Bishop's poetry about childhood are subverted by the fact that the screams and cries in the poetry never consume the narrator, child or world.[10] While it is clearly true that screams in Bishop's poetry

do not consume the world of the poem, Henning, I feel, misses the essential reason; because Bishop positions children in passive roles, no action of theirs is capable of dominating. Rather than asserting self control by suppressing the screams and cries, Bishop asserts an utter lack of efficacy because screams and cries do not dominate by making the screamer/crier the center of attention. Bishop's clearest treatment of this idea is found in "In the Waiting Room," which immediately places the narrator in a passive position "in the dentist's waiting room," sitting and waiting for her aunt. Like the children in "First Death" and "A Norther," Elizabeth is attendant on an adult. To entertain herself and to avoid contact with the others in the waiting room, Elizabeth reads *National Geographic*. Jacqueline Vaught Brogan has observed that in the pictures she mentions, the young narrator finds only victims and objects.[11] Indeed, the victims here are apparent: the "dead man slung on a pole" is called "Long Pig," recalling the loon on the parlor table, objectified like little Arthur; the

> Babies with pointed heads
> wound round and round with string;
> [and] black, naked women with necks
> wound round and round with wire
> like the necks of light bulbs

are designed like objects, as Arthur was "laid out" and Hannibal dressed. We may also note here that the second and fourth lines above echo each other: as Bishop used iambics to amplify sense in "Squatter's Children," here she emphasizes the extent of domination ("wound round and round" in great coils) and, perhaps, the cycle of dominance ("round and round," mothers and children). Brogan's fine but brief exegesis of "In the Waiting Room" focuses on its representation of the "violated human condition" and observes that Bishop parallels the narrator and aunt with the children and women in *National Geographic* (44). As the children and women in the magazine are connected by the coils placed on them, so Elizabeth finds herself connected to Aunt Consuelo by "an *oh!* of pain." Paradoxically, identification with others occasions a frenetic search for definition which seems to heighten the tenor of otherness, nearly to "a cry of pain that could have / got loud or worse." Henning correctly

understands "In the Waiting Room" as an instance of a child's sudden and frightening sense of self; she proceeds to argue that the only "grounding [for Elizabeth is] to be found in language itself" (70-1). Contrarily, Helen Vendler has observed that many of Bishop's poems take a sinister view of the efficacy of language (826). Bearing both critics in mind, we see that Elizabeth's sudden sense of self is terrifying precisely because it occasions grounding, highlighting for the young narrator the enormity of the company in which she finds herself. The trap Elizabeth falls into, to quote Groucho Marx, is that she does not wish to be a member of any club that would have her. Aunt Consuelo is "a foolish, timid woman." The poem insists on Elizabeth's distance from others: the waiting room is "full of grown up people," the magazine shows dead men and grotesque babies and women whose breasts are "horrifying." Elizabeth is able to maintain her distance as long as she has reading material; she hears and makes a cry of pain immediately after she has "looked at the cover: / the yellow margins, the date." But the *"oh!"* of pain, itself a transcultural signifier, was uttered alike by the young narrator, Aunt Consuelo and the babies with pointed heads.

Unlike "First Death," which is told in the first person but contains only one first person pronoun, "In the Waiting Room" is full of I's, me's and my's. This way of speaking emphasizes the dichotomy of self and other and counters the connection expressed by *"oh!"* In fact, the second stanza is marked by a shift from third person (Consuelo) to first ("it was *me*: / my voice, in my mouth"). Nevertheless, Elizabeth cannot maintain her distance: the stanza shifts to equation and conflation of persons: "I was my foolish aunt, / I—we—were falling, falling, / our eyes" fixed on the magazine. Elizabeth's reflex to combat the horror of her society makes her thought reflexive: "I said to myself: three days / and you'll be seven years old." The integration with others occasions the assertion of self ("I," "myself," "you" referring to herself in the second person)

> . . . to stop
> the sensation of falling off
> the round, turning world
> into cold, blue-black space.

This is the very space where Cootchie "went / below the surface of the coral-reef" and by which separation imposed. The vastness of this space frightens the young narrator and *"oh!"* it exists in the Worcester night: Elizabeth will never again be able to keep herself completely separate from her Aunt and society at large.

Elizabeth has at least glimpsed her relation to society unlike the "Squatter's Children," Hannibal and the young narrator of "First Death." Because she is "too shy," Elizabeth is unable to look the grown ups in the face. Even after her realization, she finds she "couldn't look any higher" than their knees, clothing and hands. Thus, she casts herself in a similar light: as she sees others piecemeal or as objects, so others will see her as "arctics and overcoats," "shadowy gray knees," "boots, hands, the family voice" and "awful hanging breasts." Elizabeth's understanding of her status threatens to objectify, even disfigure, her. Attending her Aunt and looking at others from below, she tries to keep the grown ups at a distance; she fails and understands that they and she are "just one" and yet she cannot accept the company she finds herself thrust into. Subjection is self defeating either because its propagators are subject to others' shipwrecks (like Lula—"who will shout and make her understand?") or because its propagators end up loathing themselves (like Elizabeth—"How had I come to be here, / like them . . . ?"). Brogan reads the perversion of lyric voice as illustrative of Bishop's acute awareness of the political and social realms (31 and *passim*). Indeed, the features we have been examining primarily in Bishop's handling of children easily extend to the larger realms; Bishop conveys ideas about other subjected groups by the same grammatical, physical and figurative positioning, as is most evident in "Cootchie." In another social context, a Bishop narrator negotiates an attempt to free herself from the cycle of servitude and passivity. "A Miracle for Breakfast," written during the Great Depression, portrays its subjection as those "waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb" served from a balcony are immediately in subordinate positions socially and physically; they attend from below like serfs to "kings of old." But the dichotomy of other and self reverses the one that appeared in "In the Waiting Room." Here, the individual dominates the group. Like Elizabeth attending her aunt, the narrator of "A Miracle" and her peers wait for

the man on the balcony (for an hour). Indeed, the man is the center of attention and the most frequent grammatical subject, curious facts given that "man" is not one of the line-ending words in the sestina. Even structurally, the last words of each line are dominated by the man and the poem's action hinges on his ability to provide a miracle.[12]

Coffee and "the charitable" crumb initially constitute the miracle. In the first stanza, the food for the hungry "was going to be served from a certain balcony, / . . . like a miracle." Certainty marks the miracle[13] and puts an edge on the beggars' appetites;

> It was so cold we hoped that the coffee
> would be very hot, seeing that the sun
> was not going to warm us; and that the crumb
> would be a loaf each, buttered, by a miracle.

The huddled mass suddenly desires a greater miracle. Coffee and a crumb are not enough to sustain these hungry. The servant amplifies the difference between those who wait and the man on the balcony, who looks "over our heads toward the river" as attention fixes on his food for the poor, "one lone cup of coffee / and one roll." Indeed, each individual receives far less: "Each man received one rather hard crumb, / . . . / and, in a cup, one drop of the coffee." Without buttered loaves and thirsty for very hot coffee, the majority of the beggars leave; the man has been unable to provide a miracle today and the disenfranchised remain abject.

Critics cite "A Miracle For Breakfast" in discussing Bishop's resemblance to Wallace Stevens.[14] Like Stevens' characters, Bishop's narrator tries to make a miracle when one is not provided. Imaginatively, the "beautiful villa" she sees "with one eye close to the crumb" represents an attempt to replace a non-miracle (a crumb, not a loaf) with greater satisfaction—a house of her own. Where the man on the balcony cannot provide a miracle, the narrator tries to find one made for her by nature itself, to build, if only for a moment, her own balcony: the villa, she says, was constructed for her "through ages, by insects, birds, and the river." However, nature's bounteous villa would in fact have to be rather paltry to fit into a crumb. Moreover, the narrator makes clear that "it was not a miracle" but an imagining. To clarify the futility

of the flight which sets nature's bounty in the narrator's service, the poem returns with a stark reminder of true social position: "We licked up the crumb and swallowed the coffee." Desperate for even "one rather hard crumb" and "one drop of coffee," the narrator knows that there has been no miracle. Neither God nor nature has sufficiently provided for those in soup lines. The poor have only their imagination on which to depend. Yet, even if the fruits of imagination are dazzling ("My crumb / my mansion"), even if they constitute a miraculous sestina, the poem is finally neither nourishing to the body nor capable of building a real balcony for the narrator, of effecting change in social relationships. Like Elizabeth, who leaves the waiting room with Aunt Consuelo, the narrator of "A Miracle" is finally in the company of those she would leave behind: where "*We* licked up the crumb," "Every day, in the sun, / at breakfast time *I* sit on *my* balcony / with my feet up, and drink gallons of coffee" (emphasis added). Dianna Henning reads the inability to change existing relations as a "passive consent to life" and emphasizes Bishop's propensity for understatement "—as though such a matter-of-fact acceptance endowed one with more power or released one from remorse" (72).

Although written about "One Art," Henning's words apply equally well to "A Miracle" and to "Sestina," a poem of quiet acquiescence that neither empowers nor releases, in which the ritualization of action and of poetic form can, at best, prevent decline. The scene is of domestic security from September rain and hunger, a considerable improvement from the situation of "A Miracle." The cost of the security, however, is that everything becomes tears[15] amid the autumnal decline the poem so clearly evidences. Episodic from the start, the "action" of the poem is confined and quiet, even desperate. As the rain falls at dusk,

> the old grandmother
> sits in the kitchen with the child
> beside the Little Marvel Stove,
> reading the jokes from the almanac,
> laughing and talking to hide her tears.

The cause of her sadness is and remains unclear. That she does not want to cry in front of the child seems more certain. Whether the old

grandmother laughs and talks with the child or alone, she cannot hope to cry on the child's shoulder. A great distance separates the two human actors of "Sestina" despite the small sphere of action; unlike the beggars in "A Miracle," neither grandmother nor child has a peer in "Sestina." The grandmother feels the gap most acutely:

> She thinks that her equinoctial tears
> and the rain that beats on the roof of the house
> were both foretold by the almanac,
> but only known to a grandmother.

While the almanac may offer a horoscope and weather table, it cannot know the truth of its predictions and cannot shed tears. As if to accentuate her pain, the kettle "sings." To further hide her tears,

> She cuts some bread and says to the child,
>
> *It's time for tea now*; but the child
> is watching the teakettle's small hard tears
> dance like mad on the hot black stove,
> the way the rain must dance on the house.

The adversative conjunction "but" expresses a lack of coordination of effort; as the grandmother had perhaps laughed and talked with herself, so the child is lost in the imaginative world of the narrator of "A Miracle" and ignores the grandmother.

The narrative abruptly cuts to after tea time: the "old" grandmother tidies up and the almanac hovers like a bird above grandmother and child. The thrice-old grandmother "shivers and says she thinks the house / feels chilly, and puts more wood in the stove." The stove is fixed at the center of the house-universe, providing warmth and food; however, the adult and child move around it like planets whose orbits do not cross. The grandmother's words are again non-communicative and she stokes the fire herself. Echoing the grandmother's *"It's time for tea,"*

> *It was to be,* says the Marvel stove.
> *I know what I know,* says the almanac.
> With crayons the child draws a rigid house
> and a winding pathway. Then the child

puts in a man with buttons like tears
and shows it proudly to the grandmother.

Now the grandmother is excluded from the circle of forecast and knowledge; the very item to which she had contrasted her knowledge replaces her. Whether the "It" of *"It was to be"* equals growing chilly and putting more wood in the stove, whether "it" is the grandmother's sadness or whether "it" is both, seems moot. Resignation marks the statements of both stove and almanac. Counter to the cryptic pronouncements, the child steps in as maker, drawing a house, populating it with the poem's only man and displaying the work for the grandmother. Again, Bishop introduces a "but" which expresses a lack of coordination because of the apparent narrative cut: the grandmother is busying herself as "little moons fall down like tears" from the almanac. It seems that the almanac has responded to the child's drawing where the grandmother's response has been omitted. Further, the almanac's response promises renewal:

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.
The grandmother sings to the marvellous stove
and the child draws another inscrutable house.

The tears it speaks of planting are perhaps tears for a future generation, the generation of the grandchild. The renewal it promises is rather a repetition of the present cycle as the little moons fall unseen, hidden like the grandmother's tears. As the narrator of "First Death" could not fix on little, dead Arthur, the grandmother sings to the stove, not to the child. The cycle of stagnation remains in tact. It may be unnecessary to point out that the thrice-old grandmother lacks both spouse and children, but this situation amplifies the distance between grandmother and grandchild as they fail to communicate directly. Moreover, the almanac becomes the most powerful agent in the poem, displacing the people entirely: it helps to ease the grandmother's pain even as it accurately predicts the pain; it asserts its cryptic knowledge and waters the child's garden with its own tears. The almanac alone from among the six, seven-fold repetitions posits renewal—*"Time to plant tears"*—even if renewal brings new sorrow. For certainly there appears no escape from

the tears and the waning of life in "Sestina"; rather the child makes another drawing the grandmother will not look at and Bishop completes another poem in which avenues out of powerlessness themselves remain "inscrutable."

Although the meticulous grammatical positioning in "First Death" and in "Cootchie" is less prominent in the other poems I have examined, the theme of subjection and domination remains central throughout. To assert, as Cucullu, that Bishop's narrative viewpoint is "a seditious act against patriarchal discourse and the locus of the female subject within it" (249) is perhaps too specific; ungendered narrators abound in Bishop's poetry. We see that imagination is the main defense for the subjected: the narrator of "A Miracle," the child in "Sestina" and the others all attempt escape through it. However, Bishop's grammar does not allow their escape and they remain at the power of absent others—the man on the balcony and (perhaps) the absent head of household in "Sestina." Whether or not the act of writing constituted empowerment for Bishop herself is moot: the characters she has left us remain subjected.

University of Delaware
Newark

NOTES

[1]Robert B. Shaw, "Elizabeth Bishop and the Critics," *Poetry* [Modern Poetry Association] 161 (October 1992): 34-45. See 36.

[2]See *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil Estess (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1983) ix. Here Bloom links Bishop's poetics to Emerson, Dickinson, Stevens and Moore.

[3]David Kalstone, "Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Memory, Questions of Travel," *Five Temperaments* (New York: OUP, 1977) *passim*. Kalstone notes that Bishop's eye was already a critical commonplace in 1977. He writes, "We need to know what is seen" (13) and so places his whole essay under the control of the eye anyway.

[4]See Lois Cucullu, "Trompe l'Oeil: Elizabeth Bishop's Radical 'I,'" *TSLL* 30 (1988): 246-71.

[5]Quotations are taken from *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991).

[6]Here as in several other poems I discuss, the narrator's gender is never mentioned. Out of deference to Bishop, I will employ feminine pronouns when referring to the narrator.

[7]Helen Vendler, in "The Poems of Elizabeth Bishop," *CI* 13 (1987): 825-38, sees this feature as a recurrent motif in Bishop's work, calling it Bishop's "cold capacity for detachment" (837).

[8]The poem moves from the factual (present tense) to the past to the future, thus closing on the potential for and promise of action.

[9]For an interesting account of Bishop's word-play in other poems, see Eleanor Cook, "From Etymology to Paronomasia: Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and Others," *Connotations* 2 (1992): 34-51.

[10]Dianna Henning, "Shards of Childhood Memory," *Pembroke Magazine* 22 (1990): 68-76. See especially 68 and 73.

[11]Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, "Elizabeth Bishop: Perversity as Voice," *AmerP* 7.2 (1990): 31-49. Brogan makes this observation on p. 44.

[12]The man's dominance has obvious implications for any reading of gender in Bishop's poetry; however, the absence of gender in the narrator (see note 6) along with the fact that the first person plural also denotes disenfranchised men make a strictly gendered reading unwieldy.

[13]The verb form indicates this, as do the specificity of the balcony and the attendance of the dispossessed.

[14]To note but two of many, Henning and Brogan make extended comparisons between the two writers. See also Bloom (n2 above) and Cook (n9 above).

[15]Initially, the old grandmother's tears are tears. The child watches tears of water dancing on the stove. Next, the tea is tears, then the buttons and moons. See also Henning 75.