

Emma Enters a Sentence of Elizabeth Bishop's *William H. Gass*

EMMA WAS AFRAID OF ELIZABETH BISHOP. Emma imagined Elizabeth Bishop lying naked next to a naked Marianne Moore, the tips of their noses and their nipples touching; and Emma imagined that every feeling either poet had ever had in their spare and spirited lives was present there in the two nips, just where the nips kissed. Emma, herself, was ethereally thin, and had been admired for the translucency of her skin. You could see her bones like shadows of trees, shadows without leaves.

Perhaps Emma was afraid of Elizabeth Bishop because she also bore 'Bishop' as her maiden name. Emma Bishop—one half of her a fiction, she felt, the other half a poet. She imagined Elizabeth Bishop's head being sick in Emma's kitchen sink. Poets ought not to puke. It was something which should have been forbidden any friend of Marianne Moore. Lying there, Emma dreamed of being in a drunken stupe, of wetting her eraser, promising herself she'd be sick later, after conceiving one more lean line, writing it with the eraser drawn through a small spill of whiskey like the trail . . .

In dawn dew, she thought, wiping the line out with an invented palm, for she knew nothing about the body of Elizabeth Bishop, except that she had been a small woman, not perhaps as thin as Emma—an Emma whose veins hid from the nurse's needle. So it was no specific palm which smeared the thought of the snail into indistinctness on the table top, and it was a vague damp, too, which wet Miss Bishop's skin.

Emma was afraid of Elizabeth Bishop because Emma had desperately desired to be a poet, but had been unable to make a list, did not know how to cut cloth to match a pattern, or lay out night things, clean her comb, where to put the yet-to-be dismantled elms, the geese. She looked out her window, saw a pigeon clinging to a tree limb, oddly, ill, unmoving, she. the cloud

Certain signs, certain facts, certain sorts of ordering, maybe, made her fearful, and such kinds were common in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, consequently most of Elizabeth Bishop's poems lay unseen, unsaid, in her volume of Bishop's collected verse. Emma's eye swerved in front of the

first rhyme she reached, then hopped ahead, all nerves, fell from the page, fled. the bird

So she really couldn't claim to have understood Elizabeth Bishop, or to have read Elizabeth Bishop's poems, or fathomed her friend Marianne Moore either, who believed she was better than Bishop, Emma was sure, for that was the way the world went, friend overshadowing friend as though one woman's skin had been drawn across the other's winter trees. a cloud

Yes, it was because the lines did seem like her own bones, not lines of transit or lines of breathing, which was the way lines were in fine poems normally, lines which led the nurse to try to thump them, pink them to draw blood—no, the violet veins were only bone; so when death announces itself to birds they, as if, freeze on the branches where the wind whiffles their finer feathers, though they stay stiller there, stiffer than they will decay.

When, idly skimming (or so she would make her skimming seem), Emma's eye would light upon a phrase like "deep from raw throats," her skin would grow paler as if on a gray walk a light snow had sifted, whereupon the couplet would close on her stifled cry, stifled by a small fist she placed inside her incongruously wide, wide-open mouth. ". . . a senseless order floats . . ." Emma felt she was following each line's leafless example by clearing her skin of cloud so anyone might see the bird there on her bone like a bump, a swollen bruise. She was fearful for she felt the hawk's eye on her. She was fearful of the weasel 'tween her knees. fearful

Emma owned an Iowa house, empty and large and cool in the fall. Otherwise inhospitable. It had thin windows with wide views, a kitchen with counters of scrubbed wood, a woodshed built of now wan boards, a weakly sagging veranda, weedy yard. At the kitchen table, crossed with cracks and scarred by knives, Emma Bishop sat in the betraying light of a bare bulb, and saw both poets, nearly breastless, touching the tips of their outstretched fingers together, whereas really the pigeon, like a feathered stone, died in her eye.

Emma was living off her body the way some folks were once said to live off the land, and there was little of her left. Elizabeth Bishop's rivers ran across Emma's country, lay like laminate, created her geography: cape, bay, lake, strait . . . snow in no hills

She would grow thin enough, she thought, to slip into a sentence of the poet's like a spring frock. She wondered whether, when large portions of

your pleasure touch, you felt anything really regional, or was it all a rush of warmth to the head or somewhere else? When Marianne Moore's blue pencil cancelled a word of Elizabeth Bishop's—a word of hers, hers only because of where it was—was that a motherly rebuke or a motherly gesture of love? Thou shalt not use spit in a poem, my dear, or puke in a sink.

There'd been a tin one once, long ago replaced by a basin of shallow enamel. It looked as if you could lift it out like a tray. It was blackly pitted but not by the bodies of flies. A tear ran down one side, grainy with tap drip, dried and redried.

How had she arrived here, on a drift? to sit still as pigeon on a kitchen stool and stare the window while no thoughts came or went but one of Moore or two of Bishop and the hard buds of their breasts and what it must have meant to have been tongued by a genius.

She would grow thin enough to say "I am no longer fastened to this world; I do not partake of it; its furniture ignores me; I eat per day a bit of plain song and spoon of common word; I do not, consequently, shit, or relieve my lungs much, and I weigh on others little more than shade on lawn, and on memory even less." She was, in fact, some several months past faint.

Consequently, on occasion, she would swoon as softly as a toppled roll of Christmas tissue, dressed in her green chemise, to wake later, after sunset, lighter than the dark, a tad chilly, unmarked, bones beyond brittle, not knowing where

or how she had arrived at her decision to lie down in a line of verse and be buried there; that is to say, be born again as a simple set of words, "the bubble in the spirit-level." So, said she to her remaining self, which words were they to be? grave behaving words, map signs

That became Miss Bishop's project: to find another body for her bones, bones she could at first scarcely see, but which now were ridgy, forming Ws, Ys, and Zs, their presence more than circumstantial, their presence more than letters lying overleaf.

She would be buried in a book. Mourners would peer past its open cover. A made-up lady wipes her dark tears on a tissue. Feel the pressure of her foot at the edge of the page? see her inhale her sorrow slowly as though smelling mint? she never looked better, someone will say. heaven sent

Denial was her duty, and she did it, her duty; she denied herself; she refused numbering, refused funds, refused greeting, refused hugs, rejected

cards of printed feeling; fasted till the drapes diaphanated and furniture could no longer sit a spell; said, “I shall not draw my next breath.” Glass held more heaviness than she had. Not the energy of steam, nor the wet of mist, but indeed like that cloud we float against our specs when we breathe to clean them. Yet she was all care, all

Because now, because she was free of phlegm, air, spit, tears, wax, sweat, snot, blood, chewed food, the least drool of excrement—the tip of the sugar spoon had been her last bite—her whole self saw, the skin saw, the thin gray yellow hair saw, even the deep teeth were tuned, her pores received, out came in, the light left bruises where it landed, the edge of the stool as she sat cut limb from thigh the way a wire passes the flesh of cheese, and pain passed through her too like a cry through a rented room. Because she had denied herself everything—life itself—life knew she was a friend, came near, brought all

Ask nothing. you shall receive

She was looking at the circular pull on the window’s shade, her skin was drawn, her fingers felt for it, her nose knew, and it was that round hole the world used to trickle into her. With Emma down to her E, there was plenty of room, and then she, she would, she would slip into a sentence, her snoot full of substance, not just smell, not just of coffee she hadn’t cupped in a coon’s age, or fresh bread from back when, or a bit of peony from beside a broken walk, but how fingers felt when they pushed a needle through a hoop of cloth, or the roughness of unspread toast, between her toes a memory of being a kid, the summer’s sunshine, hearty as a hug, flecks of red paper blown from a fire cracker to petal a bush, the voices of boys, water running from a hose, laughter, taunts, fear they would show her something she didn’t want to know

red rows the clapboard shells her reading eye slid swallowing solemnly as if she’d just been told of someone’s love, not for her, no, for the sea nearby in Bishop’s poems, a slow wash of words on a beach hissing like fat in the flame, brief flare up before final smoke

Aunts trying hats, paper plates in their laps—no—dog next door barking in his sleep, how about that? the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes I spell against my will with two ells, how about that? her ear on the pull, the thread wrapped ring, swell of sea along sunsetted shore, Maine chance, I’m now the longing that will fill that line when I lie down inside it, me, my eye, my nips, finger tips, yes, ribs and lips aligned with Moore’s, whose hats,

maybe, were meant in the poem, the poem, the poem about the anandrous aunts, exemplary and slim, avarnial eyed, shaded by brim, caring for their cares, protecting their skin. a cloud

Now I am the ex of ist I am the am I always should have been. now I am this hiss this thin this brisk I'm rich in vital signs, in lists I in my time could not make, the life I missed because I was afraid, the hawk's eye, owl's too, weasel's greed, the banter of boys, bang, bleeding paper blown into a bush, now I urinate like them against the world's spray-canned designs and feel relief know pride puff up for their circle jerk fellowship and spit on spiders step on ants pull apart peel back brag grope, since it is easy for me now, like sailing boats, making pies, my hair hearing through the ring the rumble of coastal water, rock torn, far from any Iowa window, now I am an ab, a dis, pre's fix, hop's line.

Out there by the bare yard the woodshed stood in a saucer of sun where she once went to practice screaming her cries and the light like two cyclists passing on a narrow road, the light coming in through cracks between the shed's warped boards, the ax she wouldn't handle, its blade buried in a white oak stump the shed had been built around so the stump would still be of service though its tree had had to come down, dad said, it would have a life like an anvil or a butcher's block because as long as you had a use you were alive, birds flew at the first blow, consequently not to cry that the tree'd been cut, groaning when it fell its long fall, limbs of leaves brushing limbs of leaves as though driven by a wind, with plenty of twig crackle, too, like a sparky fire, the heavy trunk crashing through its own bones to groan against the ground, scattering nests of birds and squirrels, but now she was screamed out, thinned of that, or the thought of the noble the slow the patiently wrought, how the oak converted dirt into aspiration, the beautiful brought down, branches lofty now low and broken, the nests of birds and squirrels thrown as you'd throw a small cap, its dispelled shade like soil still, at toppled tiptop a worm's web resembling a scrap of cloud, it should have been allowed to die in the sky its standing death, she'd read whatever there is of love let it be obeyed, well, a fist of twigs and leaves and birdspit rolled away, the leaves of the tree shaking a bit yet, and the web
whisperating
what was left

The house, like herself, was nowhere now. It was the reason why she fled facts when she came upon them, words like "Worcester, Massachusetts,"

dates like “February, 1918.” Em had decided not to seek her fate but to await it. Still, suppose a line like that came to claim her. It was a risk.

I have lost this, lost that, am I not an expert at it? I lost more than love. I lost even its glimpse. Treefall. Branchcrash. That’s all. Gave. Gave. Gave away. Watched while they took the world asunder. Now even my all is smal. So I am ready. Not I hope the prodigal or the brown enormous odor . . . rather a calm cloud, up the beach a slowing run of water