

The Maritime Micro-Gestures in Elizabeth Bishop's Brazil Poems and Translations

“too many waterfalls here [...] hurry too rapidly down to the sea”

ABSTRACT: The North American poet Elizabeth Bishop published poems about Brazil as well as translations of the work of some of her Brazilian contemporaries, including Clarice Lispector and Carlos Drummond de Andrade. This essay examines a selection of Bishop's Brazil poems and translations that perform maritime micro-gestures—that is, subtle movements of the sea and connected bodies of water—in order to consider the insights and dangers contained therein. I discuss these gestures in the spirit of the new media theorist Vilém Flusser and argue that Bishop's poems can teach us to better examine our own ways of looking at the world and ourselves and to recognize that things are often not quite what they seem.

KEYWORDS: Vilém Flusser; Clarice Lispector; Carlos Drummond de Andrade; poetry; translation; gesture; micro-gesture; sea; water; ocean; maritime; Brazil

RESUMO: A poeta norteamericana Elizabeth Bishop publicou poemas sobre o Brasil e traduções de alguns dos seus contemporâneos brasileiros, incluindo Clarice Lispector e Carlos Drummond de Andrade. Este ensaio examina uma seleção de poemas e traduções de Bishop sobre Brasil que cumprem micro-gestos marítimos —ou seja, movimentos sutis do mar e das águas ligadas— para considerar os conhecimentos e perigos incluídos. Eu analiso os “gestos” de Bishop pensando no teórico da cultura da mídia Vilém Flusser e argumento que os poemas de Bishop nos podem ensinar como melhorar nosso processo de examinar nosso olhar para o mundo e ao nossos mesmos, para entender que as vezes as coisas não são exatamente o que parecem ser.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Vilém Flusser; Clarice Lispector; Carlos Drummond de Andrade; poesia; tradução; gesto; micro-gesto; mar; água; oceano; marítimo; Brasil

The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911–79) was North American, but she lived in Brazil for more than fifteen years and wrote extensively about it in her poems. She also translated into English the work of several contemporaneous Brazilian poets and the prose writings of Clarice Lispector. In 1972, she co-edited (with Emanuel Brasil) the first bilingual twentieth-century Brazilian poetry anthology for Wesleyan University Press. In this essay, I consider how Bishop navigated her position as a traveler, visitor, tourist, and expatriate by looking at the maritime micro-gestures in her Brazil poems and translations. By *maritime micro-gestures* I mean the subtle shifts in her texts that both evoke the sea or other connected bodies of water and show them in movement. My use of the word *gesture* follows the lead of the new media theorist Vilém Flusser (1920–91), who defined it as a physical movement that we read as holding specific meaning.¹ Flusser writes, “To understand [gesture], one must know its ‘significance.’ That is exactly what we do continually, very quickly and effectively. We ‘read’ gesture” (*Gestures* 2). He is specifically concerned with human gestures—movements of the human body: his chapters have titles such as “The Gesture of Writing,” “The Gesture of Painting,” and “The Gesture of Smoking a Pipe.”

In many of her poems and translations, Bishop, too, plays with the notion of gesture. She pushes us to read bodies of water and their movements, as well as the movements within movements and the micro-movements belied by stillness. They serve as a portal through which to read the human as a fundamentally dynamic condition or experience while honing in on complex moments of human gesturing—sometimes on the meta-level of the poet, writer, or translator; sometimes through the poetic voice or narrator; sometimes within the texts themselves. Her poems and translations teach us to read her maritime micro-gestures “continually, very quickly and effectively”; she makes the sea and its connected bodies of water move in her work in order to give them meaning. Cumulatively, they create meaning across her oeuvre, revealing a relationship to and reading of Brazil’s waters, land, and people. Of course, she also reads herself in and through Brazil and its waters.

Bishop’s maritime micro-gestures do not begin with her Brazil poems. “The Map,” the first poem in her first book, *North & South* (1946), not only lays out an *ars poetica*, or blueprint, for reading all of Bishop’s oeuvre but also offers a template for the maritime micro-gestures traceable throughout her work, from “The Imaginary Iceberg” to “The Bight” to “At the Fishhouses” to “Cape Breton.” “The Map” begins with a confident declaration: “Land lies in water.” But quickly the poem questions

itself: “Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under?” And then: “Is the land tugging at the sea from under?” What is the relationship between the land and the sea from the land’s perspective—lying, lifting, tugging—and how does the sea conduct itself? In the last stanza, Bishop provides a double promise of more to be revealed: “Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is” and “More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors.” She sets the human gesture of writing against the gesture of painting, in which mapmaking is evoked as a kind of painting. Significance deployed through written language (by the historians) is pitted against meaning crafted through visual techniques (by the map-makers), and the implication of the poem’s title is that the poet, in comparison to historians who make “History” with words, is a kind of mapmaker or painter too.

This is, of course, a contradiction, because the poet (and her poetic voice, the speaker), as painterly as she might be, relies on words to make her art. When Bishop’s poetic voice describes the sea or a connected body of water, she uses written language; and often what is being described is a visual experience, the process of looking at the reflective surface of water, a kind of mirror in which the image (the self) might look back. In his chapter “The Gesture of Painting,” Flusser discusses “specific phases of the gesture, a specific stepping back from the canvas or a specific look,” which he calls “autoanalysis”: “the gesture is constantly monitoring and reformulating its own meaning” (*Gestures* 65). The map-maker who paints water or the painterly poet who describes mapped waters, then, engages in an autoanalytical gesture that is continually in movement in regard to its own meaning.

If we look back at the goings-on over the course of “The Map,” we see that Bishop’s mapmaking speaker is not on clear footing at all, and the maritime gestures she uses to “investigate the sea,” while meaningful, are not predictable or coded in ways that are stable or constant. An unexpected and dynamic moment happens between the eleventh and thirteenth lines of the twenty-seven-line poem: “We can stroke those lovely bays, / under a glass as if they were expected to blossom, / or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.” Who are we? You and me? Me and the poetic voice, maker of maps with verse? Without question the reader is implicated here in the act of looking and reading. We’re on the hook. This is an important moment to remember as we move forward into the rest of Bishop’s oeuvre, for in the Brazil poems and translations the poetic voice becomes a traveler, visitor, and tourist steeped in the visual, in the gesture of painting with words and the autoanalytic.

Bishop's poetic voice in "The Map" invokes "we"—you and me, the reader and her—to consider a physical, sensual gesture. The potential action in which "we" might stroke the "lovely bays" is filled with unexpected possibility, as if the mapped inlets and their curves are suddenly three-dimensional and can be petted like a friendly dog, stroked erotically like a lover, or even coaxed into transformation, "as if they [are] expected to blossom" "under a glass" like a houseplant that thrives in a bell jar. Bishop transposes a section of the two-dimensional map, with its "lovely bays," into a possible three-dimensional ecosystem that we might observe under glass. And something may happen as we watch; the bays may "blossom." Now she takes another turn in the same sentence: "We can stroke these lovely bays, / under a glass as if they were expected to blossom, / or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish." The "or as if" gives us the most surprising scenario of all: "to provide a clean cage for invisible fish." The cloche, an observable ecosystem for the plantlike bays expected to blossom, suddenly becomes a "clean cage" for fish we cannot see with the naked eye. The poetic voice recalls, as if in a daydream, that the "lovely bays" are indeed comprised of water and that in those waters live sea creatures. The thought experiment that turns the mapped bays from two to three dimensions, so that they might be stroked and blossom like plants under glass, now brings back the water and the invisible fish that were there all along.

Bishop contradicts the possibility of a contained ecosystem—the lovely bay, the cloche, the aquarium—in the next movement, the fourteenth line: "The names of seashore towns run out to sea." The text on the map is here personified as something that moves along the map's surface and spills into the water. If we keep the notion of the poet as a mapmaker in mind, we might note that "The Map," with its twenty-seven lines, is a double sonnet, with the central fourteenth line functioning as an equator shared by both sonnets, north and south. The second sonnet runs from the fourteenth line into the fifteenth to complete the sentence two lines later: "the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains / —the printer here experiencing the same excitement / as when emotion too far exceeds its cause." The excess of letters tumbling across the map's landscape, into the water or across the adjacent mountains but always beyond the bounds of the place those letters are meant to name, is paralleled by the emotional excess or excitement of the printer. It is "too far," it is beyond, and it is a kind of blossoming. The earlier image of the "lovely bays...expected to blossom" also comes to fruition within the structure of the poem as the first sonnet begets (blossoms into) a second sonnet in its fourteenth line. And yet there is a comma

at the end of the fourteenth line that creates a pause, a kind of edge: “The names of seashore towns run out to sea, / the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains.” Boundaries, mapped edges, and ecosystems, though present, are not tidy; and Bishop demands our participation in her poetic thought experiments. The “lovely bays” have the possibility of blossoming because of human contact through stroking. Similarly, “The Map” has the possibility of blossoming into a meaningful text through the reader’s close attention. If Flusser had written a chapter called “The Gesture of Reading,” he might also have written a chapter called “The Gesture of Blossoming.”

Bishop first docked in Brazil in November 1951. A late November letter to her dear friend and fellow poet Robert Lowell (1917–77) is addressed from the “Merchant Ship *Bowplate*” stationed “Somewhere off the coast of Brazil”:

I sent you a postcard just as I was leaving N.Y. but I had to put so many stamps on it I probably completely covered up my message.... It wasn't until I had decided on this crazy trip and went down to see the Rahvs one evening before sailing (as I then thought—I was held up a couple of weeks by the dock strikes) that I knew where you were. Philip said you intended spending the winter in Amsterdam, which somehow surprised me, but maybe no more than my decision to go through the Straits of Magellan will surprise you. At least I think that's where I'm bound for. At present we're approaching Santos—a couple of days late because of storms—and first I'm going to visit in Rio for a while.... Oh dear—there is so much to talk about. (*One Art* 224)

Many of the observations in this letter found their way into “Arrival at Santos,” the first poem in her third collection, *Questions of Travel* (1965), which is divided into two sections: “Brazil” and “Elsewhere.” This is a telling dichotomy and an autoanalytical moment, given that Bishop ended up living, accidentally, in Brazil for fifteen years (1951–66) and then on and off until 1971. “Arrival at Santos” conveys a sardonic self-awareness of the speaker’s position as a traveler, visitor, and tourist who is never quite at ease in transit, never quite at home anywhere. It sets the tone for the entire book: “Oh, tourist, / is this how this country is going to answer you // and your immodest demands for a different world, / and a better life”? This moment of self-address, the tourist talking herself off a ledge, comes in the seventh line of the poem. What precedes is the setup of the poetic ecosystem, which of course Bishop will ultimately blur, boundaries and all. How

she accomplishes this and creates the maritime micro-gestures within the poem provide clues as to how one might answer Bishop's own inquiry set up by the title of her collection *Questions of Travel*.

"Arrival at Santos" begins tidily enough, with the poetic voice painting a quick visual scene for the reader:

Here is a coast; here is a harbor;
 here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:
 impractically shaped and—who knows?—self-pitying mountains,
 sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery,

with a little church on top of one. And warehouses,
 some of them painted a feeble pink, or blue,
 and some tall, uncertain palms. Oh, tourist,
 is this how this country is going to answer you

and your immodest demands for a different world,
 and a better life, and complete comprehension
 of both at last, and immediately,
 after eighteen days of suspension?

Finish your breakfast. The tender is coming...

The poetic voice is pat, overconfident—here is this and here is that—as if the limit between coast and water, harbor and sea, were entirely obvious; as if we were listening to a real estate agent trying to sell us the property, quick! Here is the kitchen, here is the dining room, and here is the fireplace with architectural accents...“but of course” (to borrow a phrase from the fifth stanza) we know, as readers of Bishop's "The Map," that such confident demarcation only holds—if at all—at first glance. In the third line of the first stanza, the poetic voice's pat absolutes begin to collapse, as the tone shifts from confident clarity to unimpressed, judgmental, and dismissive notes—"who knows?" and "self-pitying mountains" and "frivolous greenery"—until she turns the judgment on herself: "Oh, tourist." How does the tourist look at "this country"—presumably in a list of countries visited, photographed, checked off—and how does the place offer the tourist what she wants, given her "immodest demands for a different world" and "a better life" and "complete comprehension." Is this why the tourist travels? To find herself anew, reframed, understood at last?

The poetic voice then changes the topic, and thus she abandons her awkward and failure-ridden attempt to use travel to understand herself: “Finish your breakfast. The tender is coming.” Let’s get on with it, shall we? And soon enough it’s time: “we climb down the ladder backward” and get off the mother ship and onto the tender, the smaller boat that will take us to land or the dock. Who is the “we” here? Most immediately it’s the poetic voice and Miss Breen, who “is about seventy, / a retired police lieutenant, six feet tall.” Bishop met a woman named Breen during her travels, as she tells Lowell in her 1951 letter: “[a] lady [...] I like very much [...] a 6 ft. ex-policewoman who has retired after being head of the Women’s Jail in Detroit for 26 years. She’s about 70; very gentle and polite” (*One Art* 225). Miss Breen’s name finds its way into the poem because it rhymes with the “green coffee beans” that are about to be loaded into the “twenty-six freighters.” Meanwhile, the use of the pronoun “we” brings us, dear readers, along for the ride. Ultimately, when we arrive, the poetic voice realizes that “Ports are necessities, like postage stamps or soap, // but they never seem to care what impression they make,” and neither does the poetic voice: “We leave Santos at once; we are driving to the interior.” The fact is that in “Arrival at Santos” the water is only implied, never directly painted, through words like “coast” and “harbor” and “tender” and “freighter” and “port” and the “blue” of the warehouses and Miss Breen’s “beautiful bright blue eyes” that may as well reflect the sea. The key is that the arrival at the port of Santos, where the waters mapped by the poem prove to be extremely quiet, is a mere formality, and travel will continue as the poetic voice drives to the interior.

In the next poem in *Questions of Travel*, “Brazil, January 1, 1502,” we find ourselves in the interior, no coast in sight, surrounded by lush and abundant “foliage” that is “hell-green” (a variation on the land “shadowed green” in “The Map”), “fresh as if just finished / and taken off the frame.” The landscape is compared to a freshly made work of art, and the poem aligns itself with visual art immediately with an epigraph from Sir Kenneth Clark’s *Landscape into Art*: “embroidered nature...tapestry landscape.” The only blue here appears to be embroidered in the leaves—“big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves, / blue, blue-green, and olive”—and in the “blue-white sky, a simple web.” There are “flowers, too, like giant water lilies / up in the air—up, rather, in the leaves,” but no water, no sea. The poem ends with a terrible colonial scene in which the Christians in their armor—“each out to catch an Indian for himself”—pursue their prey, comprised of “those maddening little women who kept calling, / calling to each other (or

had the birds waked up?) / and retreating, always retreating.” The tone of these final lines is decidedly rapacious. However, Bishop’s poetic voice invokes the colonial history of the place more subtly in the poem’s opening lines, which focus on the view, noting simply that it is the same one the Christians saw in the early sixteenth century: “Januaries, Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs.” This turns out to be a gentle warmup for what is to come.

The poem’s final line about the maddening women “retreating, always retreating” leaves the reader in suspense, until the Christians, “hard as nails, / tiny as nails, and glinting, / in creaking armor” catch them. The line contains a borrowed phrase from Bishop’s translation of Lispector’s short story “The Smallest Woman in the World”: “The tiny race [of pygmies], retreating, always retreating, has finished hiding away in the heart of Africa, where the lucky explorer discovered it.” The explorer in Lispector’s story, Marcel Pretre, is a colonial Frenchman in Africa, where slaves were taken and transported to Brazil. The Christian soldiers in their “creaking armor” in Bishop’s poem seem to be Portuguese or French (they are “humming perhaps / *L’Homme armé* or some such tune”) who are stationed in colonial Brazil. Because of the retreat of the pygmies and the women, both Bishop’s Christians and Lispector’s explorer go further into the interior of the territories they are plundering. One of the impossibilities of translation is the fact that the word “to explore” in Portuguese —*explorar*— also means “to exploit.”

In her translation Bishop adds a detail to Lispector’s story that is not in the original. The ambiguous setting “no Congo Central” (which translates as “in the Central Congo”) (*Laços de família* 68) becomes, in Bishop’s version, “the Eastern Congo, near Lake Kivu” (*Kenyon Review* 501). Why did Bishop do this? Lake Kivu, one of the African Great Lakes, rests on the border between the Republic of Congo and Rwanda. If you look at a present-day map you will see a boundary line between the two countries that goes through the lake itself. Bishop’s choice exemplifies her interest in blurry boundaries and the less-than-tidy nature of limits and containment. Her decision to add a geographic detail to her translation and specifically evoke a lake that contains fish species and endemic crabs and is on the border of two countries is an example of a maritime micro-gesture. How so if Lake Kivu is freshwater? The answer lies in the way in which it is ultimately connected to the Atlantic Ocean, through a system of interconnected bodies of water: Lake Kivu connects to the Ruizi River, which then flows to Lake Tanganyika through a delta, and this lake ultimately connects via the Lualaba River to the Congo River (the second-longest in the world, after the Nile), which goes to the Atlantic.

Bishop's reference to Lake Kivu and everything it contains appears once in the story and could very easily go unnoticed, a reminder of the "invisible fish" that appear in the middle of "The Map." But her rendering of Lispector invites us to read carefully: "In the Eastern Congo, near Lake Kivu [Marcel Pretre] really did discover the smallest pygmies in the world. And—like a box within a box within a box—obedient, perhaps, to the necessity nature sometimes feels of outdoing herself—among the smallest pygmies in the world there was the smallest of the smallest pygmies in the world." Lispector personifies nature—"the necessity nature sometimes feels of outdoing herself"—and a similar moment of personifying female nature, Mother Earth, appears in the opening of Bishop's "Brazil, January 1, 1502": "Januaries, Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs." How might nature have greeted the explorer and shown the "necessity" "of outdoing herself" if he had visited Lake Kivu and its freshwater ecosystem, like a "box within a box within a box"? There are always more places to look. We are never done looking inside.

For Flusser, "The Gesture of Searching" occurs when "one does not know in advance what one is looking for." He wrote, "This testing gesture known as the 'scientific method,' is the paradigm of all our gestures. It now holds the dominant position that religious ritual gesture did in the Middle Ages" (*Gestures* 147). In "Brazil, January 1, 1502," the confluence of religious ritual gesture ("the Christians" and their "Mass" and ritual songs such as "L'Homme armé or some such tune") and the gesture of searching as the discovery of the unknown (they "came and found it all," "wealth, plus a brand-new pleasure," and "they ripped away [...] / each out to catch an Indian for himself") plays out in colonial Brazil while echoing into the present-day moment of Bishop's poem. Five centuries later, the poetic voice is a tourist who finds herself standing in the place of those early sixteenth-century Christians. The "maddening little women" who are "retreating, always retreating" invoke Lispector's Little Flower and how she contests Marcel Pretre in Bishop's translation of "The Smallest Woman in the World," a story that precisely unveils the "crisis" Flusser sees bound to erupt in the gesture of searching and the scientific method upon which it rests. The story investigates how Marcel Pretre "really did discover" and name Little Flower. This is his version of events, as a white European male on a voyage of discovery, described in the story's first line as "the French explorer, Marcel Pretre, hunter and man of the world." Little Flower (with her "flat nose" and "black face" and "splay feet," who "looked like a dog") negates his narrative with a gesture: at the very moment

Pretre names her, “Little Flower scratched herself where no one scratches.” Little Flower’s tribe of pygmies, the Likoualas, “use few names; they name things by gestures and animal noises,” and Pretre chooses to read and respond to her gesture of scratching with a gesture of his own: he “look[s] the other way.”

Little Flower and her gesture of scratching remind us that we must always read gesture, even if we struggle as Pretre does. “The Smallest Woman in the World” also pushes us to read ourselves, to engage in the autoanalytic process Flusser identifies with the gesture of painting. It seems no accident that Bishop’s “Brazil, January 1, 1502” is ultimately a meditation on visual art, the “embroidered nature...[and] tapestried landscape” referred to in the poem’s epigraph. Art, both the making and reading of it, pushes us to be autoanalytic.

During her time in Brazil, Bishop published poetry, prose, journalism, and translations, which included three stories by Lispector and poetry by Manuel Bandeira, João Cabral de Melo Neto, Joaquim Cardozo, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, and Vinicius de Moraes. Her translation of Drummond’s “Travelling in the Family” (“Viagem na família”) is of particular interest here because of the poem’s relationship to Bishop’s *Questions of Travel*, notably the eponymous poem with its “streams and clouds [that] keep travelling, travelling.” “Questions of Travel,” the third poem in the collection, begins with excess: “There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams / hurry too rapidly down to the sea.” The poem enacts the movement from interior streams to the ocean in a way that parallels the movement from Lake Kivu to the Atlantic Ocean in Bishop’s translation of “The Smallest Woman in the World.” The poetic voice watches the waterfalls and the “pressure of so many clouds” that “spill over the sides in soft slow-motion / turning to waterfalls under our very eyes,” and the sight leads her to go even further than the sea and think of home in the next stanza.

Bishop’s poetic voice commands herself and the reader to “think of the long trip home. / Should we have stayed at home and thought of here? / Where should we be today?” Her inquiry into the ethics of travel and her question about whether she should be home offer the inverse of Drummond’s poem, in which the speaker is taken “by the hand” by “the shadow of my father” to visit his father’s home and past. Though Drummond did not leave his country in the way Bishop left hers for Brazil, he did move from his home in Itabira, Minas Gerais, in 1934 to live in Rio de Janeiro until his death in 1987. His poem “Travelling in the Family” ends with water—specifically, a “river of blood” in abundance, if not excess. Though

this moment is part of a dreamlike apparition in which Drummond's poetic voice embraces his father and addresses him directly, it feels altogether real:

...and in this ghostly embrace
 it's as if I were being burned
 completely, with poignant love.
 Only now do we know each other!
 Eye-glasses, memories, portraits
 flow in the river of blood.
 Now the waters won't let me
 make out your distant face,
 distant by seventy years...

I felt that he pardoned me
 but he didn't say anything.
 The waters cover his moustache,

 the family, Itabira, all.

The power of the waters and the memories they carry in "Travelling in the Family" recall Bishop's early poem "At the Fishhouses," in which the poetic voice chats with a friend of her grandfather's and in this way enters into a meditation with the past that is facilitated by the sea. Here, the water burns, recalling Drummond's speaker, who says it's "as if I were being burned / completely, with poignant love":

[...] The water seems suspended
 above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.
 I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,
 slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,
 icily free above the stones,
 above the stones and then the world.
 If you should dip your hand in,
 your wrist would ache immediately,
 your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn
 as if the water were a transmutation of fire
 that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.
 If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,

then briny, then surely burn your tongue.
 It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
 dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
 drawn from the cold hard mouth
 of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
 forever, flowing and drawn, and since
 our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

The waters of the “same sea” have a temperature (“your hand would burn”) and a taste (“bitter, / then briny, then surely burn your tongue”) and a movement (“dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free” and “flowing and drawn” and “flowing, and flown”) that connect to “knowledge” and its “historical” quality. This recalls Bishop’s “The Map” and its final line: “More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors.” The poet as mapmaker not only contends, in her arguably more delicate way, with history and the historical in her poem-maps, but does so with the help of those “mapped waters” that are “more quiet than the land is,” as seen in “At the Fishhouses” and Bishop’s translation of Drummond’s “Travelling in the Family.”

Bishop read her translation of Drummond’s poem alongside her own poems during readings she gave in the United States in the late 1960s. In a May 31, 1969, letter to Drummond, she wrote: “During the past year and a half, I have given six or seven public readings of poetry, most of them at universities, including Harvard and the University of California, and at all of them I have read my translation of your poem, ‘Viagem na familia,’ with a few explanatory remarks of my own. This was [...] received with great interest.”²

“Travelling in the Family” is a prime example of how the act of translation enriched Bishop’s own creative process, and how her translations shed light on her original work. Of particular interest is the connection between Drummond’s voyage through family guided by his dead father and her poem “First Death in Nova Scotia,” in which her poetic voice, now quite childlike, recounts saying goodbye to her “little cousin Arthur” who is “laid out” in the “cold, cold parlor.” The death of a young contemporary is much different, though perhaps no less haunting, than the absence and shadowy presence of the adult speaker’s father in Drummond’s poem. Bishop lost her father at a young age: William Thomas Bishop died of Bright’s disease in 1911, when his daughter was eight months old. Her father’s death was, in fact, the “first death” she experienced, but at that time the family lived in Worcester, Massachusetts. For this reason, the poem

about “little cousin Arthur” is called “First Death in Nova Scotia,” where she later moved to live with her mother’s family.

Bishop never wrote the poem that could have been called “First Death in Massachusetts,” where she, too, died in 1979. Instead she translated “Travelling in the Family,” in which the speaker’s walk with “the shadow of my father” leads to a realization that no doubt struck Bishop: “Only now do we know each other!” Her translation, first published in the June 1965 issue of *Poetry*, allowed her to return to “First Death in Nova Scotia,” which had appeared in the March 10, 1962, issue of the *New Yorker*, in order to address the even earlier death she had encountered as a child, the loss of her father. While it seems highly unlikely that her translation of “Travelling in the Family” influenced the composition of “First Death in Nova Scotia,” especially because Bishop first wrote to Drummond on June 27, 1963 (more than a year after her poem’s publication), to ask for his opinion on her translation, the thematic confluence between the two poems is significant.

“First Death in Nova Scotia” appears in the second half of *Questions of Travel*, in the section titled “Elsewhere.” The poem contains an interesting double moment that could be considered a maritime micro-gesture. The poetic voice’s “little cousin Arthur” is laid out for viewing in the parlor that contains several objects that impress the childlike poetic voice as much, at times even more, than her cousin’s body does. The chromographs, or lithographic prints, of two pairs of royals—Prince Edward and Princess Alexandra, and King George and Queen Mary—are neighbors to another item that commands attention:

Below them on the table
stood a stuffed loon
shot and stuffed by Uncle
Arthur, Arthur’s father.

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.
His breast was deep and white,
cold and caressable;

his eyes were red glass,
 much to be desired.

“Come,” said my mother,
 “come and say good-bye
 to your little cousin Arthur.”

I was lifted up and given
 one lily of the valley

To put in Arthur’s hand.

Arthur’s coffin was
 a little frosted cake,
 and the red-eyed loon eyed it
 from his white, frozen lake.

This is a strange set of moments, and movements. The stuffed loon, shot by Arthur’s father, is an object of fascination: its breast is “deep and white, / cold and caressable”; its red eyes are made of “glass, / much to be desired.” It sits atop a “marble-topped table” that the childlike voice describes as “his white, frozen lake.” This metaphoric maritime micro-gesture, the loon’s frozen lake in the parlor, appears a second time in the poem and rhymes with “little frosted cake” — the metaphor that Bishop’s childlike poetic voice uses to describe her cousin’s coffin.

The perfect rhyme of “cake” and “lake” is terrible, shocking, even grotesque, yet emotionally complements the moment in which the mother, who has not appeared in any of Bishop’s other poems to this point, engages with the child. Without question “First Death in Nova Scotia” is a fundamental starting point for talking about Bishop’s later poem “One Art” from her final collection, *Geography III* (1976), and its reference to her mother: “I lost my mother’s watch.” When Bishop’s poetic voice loses her “mother’s watch” in “One Art” —and as the poem tells us “the art of losing’s not too hard to master / though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster”—it is the lost timepiece as well as time with her mother and her mother’s gaze (watch) on Bishop as a child that prove disastrous. We see the poetic voice’s mother as quite involved in the earlier poem: “I was lifted up and given / one lily of the valley / to put in Arthur’s hand.” The voice’s gesture of saying goodbye to the little boy is impossible without her mother’s coordinated cooperation, though once the voice finds herself next to Arthur to deposit the flower, the mother’s presence is no longer visible: “Arthur was very small. / He was all white, like a doll / that hadn’t been painted yet,” white like the “white, frozen lake.” The comparison is

apt because cousin Arthur's body is an ecosystem, like the lake, now frozen, in the boy's case, "Forever." The frozen lake in "First Death in Nova Scotia," metaphorical or not, contains knowledge, "historical, flowing and flown," and the red-eyed loon, who sits atop the frozen lake and has "kept his own counsel" since being shot by Uncle Arthur, at last can be part of a pairing, like the paired-off royals in the chromographs, at least for a time. The loon is paired with little Arthur as he eyes him, and the loon is paired with the poetic voice, who may turn to him soon enough for counsel regarding her and her family's past.

It is never made clear in "First Death in Nova Scotia" if the poetic voice says the words her mother tells her to speak: "say good-bye / to your little cousin Arthur." One does not have to say the word "good-bye" to complete the gesture of saying good-bye, which is universally understood as the wave of a hand, but can also simply be communicated through the eyes. For Flusser "The Gesture of Speaking" is relational—"the speaker seeks others; his words are tentacles in the direction of others" (*Gestures* 30)—and within the gesture itself is the relationship between silence and language. Flusser addresses "the question of silence": "Silence is, of course, not stillness but the gesture that arrests the word before it comes into the mouth. To grasp the gesture of speaking, one must first observe that of being silent, for in silence the word speaks and glows" (*Gestures* 28). Silence is maintained in the poem by little cousin Arthur, who is dead, and by the loon, who "hadn't said a word" since being killed by Uncle Arthur's bullet. The poetic voice seems to remain silent too, though this is not clear because she speaks to us intimately throughout the poem. It is clear that she manages to follow her mother's instructions to put "one lily of the valley / [...] in Arthur's hand" because in the final stanza she asks the reader: "But how could Arthur go, / clutching his tiny lily, / with his eyes shut up so tight / and the roads deep in snow?" There is no answer other than the silence at the end of the poem. However, we must remember Flusser's assertion that "silence is, of course, not stillness." Silence speaks.

Bishop wrote a trio of poems published in the *New Yorker* between 1978 and 1979, the year she died, and each engages in maritime micro-gestures. Two are set in Brazil, the other in Maine. "Santarém" concerns the meeting of two rivers, the Tapajós and the Amazon, and the poetic voice's memory of seeing it: "Of course I may be remembering it all wrong / after, after—how many years?" The poem begins by instantly questioning itself and interrogating the process

of remembering as well as the process of experiencing something: “I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place. / Two rivers. Hadn’t two rivers sprung / from the Garden of Eden? No, that was four / and they’d diverged.” The poem meditates on the impossibility of “literary interpretations / such as: life/death, right/wrong, male/female” because “such notions would have resolved, dissolved, straight off” in the meeting of the “watery, dazzling dialectic.” In many ways we find ourselves back in the territory of “The Map,” where we cannot entirely be sure of the relationship between things, whether the land and the sea, the colors used on the map, or the names of cities and how much space they take up. In this late poem, the question of mortality lingers. Bishop quietly slips in a meditation on death at the end, which offers a more specific memory inside the memory of her having visited Santarém “after—how many years?” In the poem’s final lines, the voice finds herself in “the blue pharmacy” where she “admired” an unexpected souvenir: “an empty wasps’ nest [...] / small, exquisite, clean matte white, / and hard as stucco.” The pharmacist gives it to the speaker and then, suddenly, “my ship’s whistle blew. I couldn’t stay.” Once she is back on board, she engages with a “fellow-passenger, Mr. Swan,” who “wanted to see the Amazon before he died” and who asks her, “What’s that ugly thing?”

Bishop wrote “North Haven,” set on an island off the coast of Maine, in memory of Robert Lowell. Here, the relationship between land and sea shifts in the poetic voice’s mind because she wants to imagine “that they’re free within the blue frontiers of bay”:

The islands haven’t shifted since last summer,
 even if I like to pretend they have
 —drifting, in a dreamy sort of way,
 a little north, a little south or sidewise,
 and that they’re free within the blue frontiers of bay.

The imagined shifts in the islands are miniscule—“a little north, a little south or sidewise”—and these impossible micro-gestures imply land that is “drifting” and “dreamy,” set “free within the blue frontiers of bay.” The bay here recalls the “lovely bays” in “The Map” that “we can stroke” and might “blossom.” The poetic voice seeks freedom, change, and renewal by using her imagination to “pretend,” but she knows that she is wishing for the impossible. The question of death’s permanence, the final change, versus what does not change even when a loved one dies looms throughout the poem. In the final lines the poetic voice

addresses her “sad friend”: “And now—you’ve left / for good. You can’t derange, or re-arrange / your poems again. (But the Sparrows can their song.) / The words won’t change again. Sad friend, you cannot change.” The voice recalls Lowell telling her a memory he had of North Haven from his childhood: “Years ago, you told me it was here / (in 1932?) you first ‘discovered girls’ / and learned to sail, and learned to kiss.” We enter into Lowell’s past through Bishop’s recollection of what he told her, and sailing in the waters around North Haven is part of that memory, “historical, flowing and flown.”

“Pink Dog” shifts to a focus on the deaths of the most vulnerable and invisible members of society. It is one of Bishop’s most overtly political poems. (Though she was not a *poet engagé* in the strict sense, politically significant meditations appear throughout her work.) “The Map” and its careful considerations about the role of mapmakers and historians and the implied politicians, military or otherwise, who determine a nation’s boundaries, opens her first collection *North & South* (1946), published the year after the end of the World War II. “Pink Dog,” first published in the February 26, 1979, issue of the *New Yorker*, is set in late 1970s Rio de Janeiro during Carnival time, at the midpoint of Brazil’s long military dictatorship (1964–85). The poem offers the portrait of a dog, and begins innocently enough: “Naked and pink, without a single hair... / Startled, the passersby draw back and stare.” The passersby are “mortally afraid of rabies,” but the poetic voice knows what the dog is really suffering from: “you have a case of scabies / [...] Where are your babies? // (A nursing mother, by those hanging teats.) / In what slum have you hidden them, poor bitch, / while you go begging, living by your wits?”

The pink dog is a conduit for speaking and thinking about the human slum dwellers and how the government deals with them:

Didn’t you know? It’s been in all the papers,
to solve this problem, how they deal with beggars?
They take and throw them in the tidal rivers.

Yes, idiots, paralytics, parasites
go bobbing in the ebbing sewage, nights
out in the suburbs, where there are no lights.

If they do this to anyone who begs,
drugged, drunk, or sober, with or without legs,
what would they do to sick, four-legged dogs?

In the cafés and on the sidewalk corners
 the joke is going round that all the beggars
 who can afford them now wear life preservers.

Rio de Janeiro's beggars are being thrown into the tidal rivers of Guanabara Bay, which empty into the Atlantic Ocean, a quick solution by the powers-that-be to get rid of undesirable people. Of course, the implicit critique is that the poetic voice cares more about the dog than she cares about the human beggars who "go bobbing in the ebbing sewage," especially as the poem goes on and the poetic voice continues her meditation, not on the humans but on how to help this particular dog to evade capture. Because the dog cannot "float, much less [...] dog-paddle," the poetic voice suggests that "the sensible // solution is to wear a *fantasia*," or a Carnival costume, so it won't be detected. Then the voice moves on to more pressing details: "What sambas can you dance? What will you wear?" This line suggests that all will be well, while also folding in a reference to Bishop's translations of four anonymous sambas, first published in 1965 in the *New York Times Magazine* with an accompanying article.³ Meanwhile "Pink Dog" ends with a kind of grotesque glee: "Carnival is always wonderful! / A depilated dog would not look well. / Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival!"

In "Pink Dog" the kind of knowledge, "historical, flowing, and flown," carried by Rio de Janeiro's waters is something we have not seen in Bishop's work before and demands a closer look. The poem tackles the challenges of human society when we do not want to see what is in front of us. It begs the question: what is the difference between ignoring the beggars on the street and throwing them into the river where they will drown? One gesture is intentional, and the other is not. Flusser asks about "The Gesture of Destroying" and its relationship to "the question of evil" (*Gestures* 55): "Disturbance and destruction are not evil, however, as long as they have an intention" (*Gestures* 59). How would he read the gesture of destroying the visible presence of the beggars as eyesores on the streets of Rio de Janeiro by throwing them into rivers, as a matter of intentional government strategy? The poem highlights the intentionality at hand: "Didn't you know? It's been in all the papers, / to solve this problem, how they deal with beggars? / They take and throw them in the tidal rivers." The poetic voice's response to this startling and uncomfortable fact is to echo the response of society in general, to make a "joke" of it so the situation can be (somewhat) palatable. What lingers potently in the backdrop of the poem is a scary human truth: while most of us

do not commit intentional gestures of destroying other people, (nearly) all of us traffic in the unintentional destruction of others. The poem is emphatic about the challenges of paying attention because the destruction around us can be covered up, by “sewage” and night and distance and the lack of “lights”: “Yes, idiots, paralytics, parasites / go bobbing in the ebbing sewage, nights / out in the suburbs, where there are no lights.” We must look at, and struggle to see, our neighbors, strangers, ourselves.

Bishop’s maritime-micro gestures span the range of her oeuvre, from North to South America, from Brazil to elsewhere, from the private to the political. The movement of “mapped waters” may be more quiet, delicate, and divergent than the land is, but no less urgent and in need of careful study.

NOTES

1. Flusser’s life as a traveler, visitor, and foreigner in Brazil and elsewhere influenced his work as a new media theorist. Born in Prague into a family of Jewish intellectuals, he moved to Brazil in 1940 and stayed there for thirty-one years. In 1963, he published his first book, *Lingua e realidade* (*Language and Reality*), in Portuguese in São Paulo. Over the course of his career he eventually published essays and books in four languages: German, Portuguese, French, and English. Flusser also practiced self-translation (*autotradução*), rewriting his work into those languages and publishing various versions. According to Nancy Ann Roth, the English-language translator of *Gestures*, “he was articulating a theory of translation closely bound up with his own sense of himself as leading a nomadic, ‘bodenlos’—literally, ‘foundationless’—life” (vii).

2. Arquivo Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Museu Casa de Rui Barbosa, Rio de Janeiro.

3. Bishop published an article about Carnival in Rio titled “On the Railroad Named Delight” — accompanied by her translations of “Four Sambas” — in *The New York Times Magazine* (March 7, 1965). Her discussion, in many ways, centers on the political climate in Rio, “a city that reflects the uncertainties of the entire nation since an army coup last March and April” (84).

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