

A GIRL'S GEOGRAPHY: DOLLS IN ELIZABETH BISHOP

by

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(Under the Direction of Aidan Wasley)

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores Elizabeth Bishop's use of dolls as a trope in her poetry, prose and memoirs. Works explored in depth include the memoir "The Country Mouse" and the short story "Gwendolyn." Overall, dolls are read in light of their contribution to Bishop's identity as an author and as symbols of status, sentimentality and retreat.

INDEX WORDS: Elizabeth Bishop, Dolls, Gwendolyn, The Country Mouse, First Death in Nova Scotia, Elegy, Aesthetics, Childhood

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Dr. Mary Erlanger, who has been a great source of support and inspiration throughout my academic career at the University of Georgia.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In Elizabeth Bishop's stories, memoirs and poems a fascination with maps, magazines, almanacs and other manmade objects that document the natural world makes the reader question the codes and symbolism of human records. Her stories and poems suggest that the presented "guide" has intrinsic value beyond its intended use, or perhaps that by misreading or bypassing its borders, the reader may arrive at an understanding of the world greater than that which lies strictly within the bounds of correct use. Critics often suggest this is a method of retreat for Bishop, inviting the reader to imagine that a greater meaning exists, but is outside or beyond the grasp of literature or other symbolic works. When works correspond to a supposed actual occasion in Bishop's life, this evasion becomes personal, engaging biography as another manmade tool. As Anne K. Hoff summarizes this effect in "Memory: Elizabeth Bishop's Authorial Restraint," "Bishop's poems, in particular, present a fascinating study of the autobiographical pact, because they project the feeling that the author — in the very act of sharing a memory — is hiding something crucial from the reader."¹

When Bishop writes through a child's view of the world, however, this technique ceases to dissemble and instead becomes a potent echo of the narrator's own limited perspective. Uninitiated, or at least unskilled, at deciphering the symbols of the adult world, the narrator grapples with the contained codes in a roundabout way that honors the world's (and her own) complexity. The unconventional reading, or even misreading, which opens the world beyond the text is then not a conscious or concerted effort on the child's part, but a natural attempt at

understanding which forms a chiasmic intersection with the reader's own process of discovering meaning. The reader is presumably familiar with the contained objects (maps, quilts, magazines) from their descriptions and strives to understand the significance of the space outside them, which the narrator freely inhabits. Meanwhile the narrator struggles to understand the inscribed language and fills in gaps with conjuncture and imagination (in the following examples the narrator will be female, although not necessarily Bishop herself).

When the paths of the narrator and the reader intersect, the indeterminate world of the narrator becomes overlaid with the logical and linguistic expectations of the reader. As a result, the narrator adapts objects and codes to fit a growing understanding of the forces and people around her. Yet these objects and codes approximate an external reality for the narrator: a way to understand geography, both human and natural. Through these approximations the reader is then privileged with a view of the narrator as an emotional and intellectual character — a view that often leads to biographical readings of Bishop's work. Yet the narrator is not necessarily Bishop, and the approximations are often disconnected from actual events, despite Bishop's insistence to the contrary. Under the reader's eye, therefore, a character develops, one who may or may not correspond to aspects of Bishop as a child or adult. The reader then observes this character by seeing over her shoulder or through her perspective, gradually completing a picture of how the narrator fits into her surroundings. That character's understanding of herself, however, is a complex process which not only involves expansion into an "adult" form of knowledge, but also the recognition of her own boundaries and limitations in the world as a girl.

In approaching those boundaries, Bishop uses dolls in much the same way she uses maps—as an intellectual guide to the questionable or permeable borders of the physical world. Through this ambiguity, dolls represent a multivalent exploration of identity: from the aesthetics

of the human body they are modeled on, to the emotions they inspire but cannot reciprocate and finally, to the overarching question of the animation and the capacity of the inanimate to represent the living. Through these potential themes, dolls are ultimately subject to the manipulations of the narrator's imagination. Bishop's complex use of dolls is then consistent with their place as part of the greater class of toys which Susan Stewart discusses in her work *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*; "To toy with something is to manipulate it, to try it out within sets of contexts, none of which is determinative." In a literary context, the doll as a toy then becomes "the physical embodiment of the fiction" and "a device for fantasy, a point of beginning for narrative" as it "opens an interior world, lending itself to fantasy and privacy."² Considering that the doll has, in multiple instances, the figure of a young girl, this opening of a fictive and fantastic dimension has special significance for Bishop in a literary context.

In the greater scope of Bishop's work, dolls, their indeterminacy and their invitation to imagine or play with reality, engages the young female subject in literature. Literary influences then come into question, both with respect to the girl and the doll, in the ways in which they might be conflated. As a foil to the character of the young girl in Bishop's own work, meanwhile, the doll helps articulate her aesthetics, her limitations and, ultimately, her potential to transcend a limited place in the world through the written word.

CHAPTER 2

DOLLS AND LITTLE GIRLS: A LYRICAL DIALOGUE

Bishop's short memoir, "The Country Mouse," is generally read primarily as a key to understanding the childhood of Bishop's biography.³ This approach makes Bishop's memoirs tangents to her poetry and prose, and "The Country Mouse" becomes little more than a way to establish Bishop's childhood alienation, making the final scene an explanation of the events inspiring *Geography III*'s "In the Waiting Room." I will argue that the events of "The Country Mouse" are more composed and edited than these readings allow; the girl figure of the narrator is not an isolated childhood memory that inspires the author's later work, but a precursor to the author in the way in which she crafts her own stories. In *The Restraints of Language*, C.K. Doreski uses the idea of rhetorical strategies to locate Bishop's childhood in a process of her own myth-making as an author: "The language-awareness and available vocabulary of an adult informs and directs the return to childhood, the place where Bishop mythologizes as social reintegration what is in fact her self-creation ... This narrative requires a powerful series of meditative tropes... [which] empowers the child-persona with language and purpose beyond her years."⁴ Through this end, the memoir then becomes a cohesive explanation of the narrator's discovery of fiction and her own development as both a character within it and an author capable of creating it, ultimately questioning authorial power.

This idea of an underlying agenda applies particularly well to "The Country Mouse," which reads as a series of vaguely strung together recollections if not approached through the purpose of self-invention. With this purpose, however, these powerful tropes emerge and connect the vignettes to a greater narrative.

Among guiding tropes, the doll stands out as a metonym representing girlhood that recurs through the text to define the narrator and her view of the world. Furthermore, scenes explaining dolls and the fiction of their “lives” seem to mirror supposed actual events related later in “The Country Mouse,” suggesting some playing with reality, or at least using the doll-scenes as a source of inspiration for later action. Connecting these real and toy scenes leads to the “three great truths [that] came home to me during this stretch of my life, all hard to describe and equally important.”⁵ The doll scenes which come earlier then can be read as scenes setting the tone, at least, for the revelation of the three great truths which conclude the memoir.

Woven through the specific scenes that lead to the tripartite conclusion, Bishop establishes a fascination with the small scale that makes dolls or doll-like figures a medium of expression. Within this dynamic of discovery and crafting, the idea of dolls recurs to enhance diminutive descriptions, provoking the narrator’s desire to handle or manipulate the given objects, raising the question of her permission to do so.

Notably, the story begins on the train to Boston, with a rejection of the narrator’s grandfather on the basis of him being large for the setting: “this grandfather himself seemed too tall—at any rate, too tall for the train we were on” (CM, 13). In *On Longing*, Stewart posits the large scale, or giant, as a force of change, which both animates and devours: “The giant is viewed as a consuming force, the antithesis of the miniature whose objects offer themselves to the viewer in a utopia of perfect, because individual, consumption.”⁶ Fittingly, the narrator’s first description of grandfather entails him “descend[ing], god-like and swearing,” after which he “[sweeps] Grandma out of the way” (CM, 13). The juxtaposition of her grandparents — “a powerful but aging Poseidon with a small, elderly, curly Nereid” — makes the narrator “dazed, almost scandalized” as she watches her grandfather “writhe and grunt,” clearly too large for the

stage of the “dramatically lit, mysterious, dark-green-curtained niche.” Later, the narrator finds another niche that echoes the image of the bunk; her Grandmother’s unused carriage is “dark green” marked by “black lamps on either side” (CM, 19). In contrast, this space makes “the most beautiful little house imaginable” and the narrator wants “to stay in it forever” (CM, 20). The appeal of this space, similar to the train car, suggests that the discomfort experienced on her journey arose entirely from the locomotion of the train embodied in the grandfather. For example, at night as the train moves, the narrator lies awake listening to “grandfather growling savagely to himself in the pitch dark... above the other noises” (CM, 14).

In contrast to the grotesque power of her grandfather on this introductory journey, her grandmother is appealingly and fascinatingly miniature and still. On the same journey, the narrator “begins to enjoy this trip, a little” outside of her grandfather’s presence, while sitting contemplating the view out the window and her grandmother. Her grandmother seems held in the narrator’s vision by “a small structure of the net stretched on little bones, around her neck, like a miniature fish weir.” In this relative, and miniaturized, captivity of her own dressing, Grandma becomes a subject of the narrator’s observation and imagination. The grandmother’s pince-nez serves as a fascinating focal point: “On the left of her bosom was a small round gold case that held a fine gold chain to her pince-nez coiled up tight, on a spring. One could pull it down and it would snap back—not that anyone was allowed to do this, but one was aware of it.” Here the narrator observes the detail of a device used for observing detail, the gold pince-nez remains fascinatingly encased and inaccessible. The way the narrator generalizes its appeal: “one was aware of it” speaks to a desire to snap the chain that is so powerful “anyone” would want to perform the forbidden action. The object then acts as a mechanical component to her grandmother-as-toy, a theme which emerges later in the story. Later the narrator is introduced to

an aunt who, while tall, is also “flat, like a paper doll” and wears a “wonderful chatelaine belt, all little chains, boxes and metals,” which exudes the same forbidden appeal of the pince-nez. Returning to the description of the grandmother, the narrator summarizes her appearance as “very pretty, in a doll-like way” (CM, 15). First, the narrator notes: “she had already told me that she wore a size 3 shoe.” In contrast to the grandfather’s swearing, “the strongest exclamation I had heard her use was ‘Pshaw,’ and occasionally, ‘Drat,’” (CM, 15-16) making even her interjections small-scale and inoffensive.

The only caveat to Bishop’s narrator’s enjoyment is the grandmother’s apparently ongoing monologue which overlays the narrator’s life and outlines her place in the new situation; “almost as if we were playing house.” The endeavor of “playing house” imposes the grown up world of domestic duty onto the participant by assigning specific roles. Yet it is also a game of imagination, which suggests that the grandmother’s assignation of roles is not founded in reality, but in her own desire to play out a domestic scenario. Regardless, the narrator seems most perplexed by the linguistic generalizing the grandmother uses: “She would speak of ‘grandma’ and ‘little girls’ and ‘fathers’ and ‘being good’—things I had never before considered in the abstract, or rarely in the third person.” The invocation of the third person makes the narrator aware of being a character in a narrative over which she has little control, instead of the relatively powerful “I” of her own, first person perspective.

Through this abstraction, the narrator then becomes, or understands that she will play the part of, the “little girl.” The narrator quickly realizes that the role is oppressive and that the expectations for her performance are high: “In particular, there seemed to be much, much more to being a ‘little girl’ than I had realized: the prospect was beginning to depress me” (CM, 16). Grandmother’s “little girl” is an outdated vision of society and a young girl’s role, one that the

narrator both learns from, using the dolls as a tool, and eventually sees through. “Little girl” then recurs in the text as her grandmother attempts to further mold and shape the role of the narrator through “indirect questions” and other linguistic techniques, which lead concretely to piano lessons and a change in hairstyle and clothing to correspond to the grandmother’s vision of “nice little girls” (CM, 29). Grandmother, despite her doll-like dimensions, is not then a toy for the narrator, but a more powerful narrator who makes a plot for the protagonist in which she is relegated to a “nice” and “little” role, which is emphasized by the use of the third person.

The narrator has entered a seemingly fictional toy world, albeit not one of her own making, characterized by extremes of scale; the miniature realm of dolls and little girls is framed by hyperbolically over-sized surroundings. The tree under which she later meets her friend, for example, is characterized by “big hanging pale green leaves and those long beans” that the narrator dislikes, presumably for their size.⁷ The narrator’s piano lessons are also recorded within “enormous” staves that require notes “as large as watermelons” (CM, 26). This manipulation of scale is another example of what critics have variously called her love of “juggling relative sizes”⁸ or “antimimetic manipulations of perspective and scale”⁹ and, more abstractly, “the continuing vibration between two frequencies—the domestic and the strange.”¹⁰

Ultimately, the narrator’s grandparents’ house is at once familiar and yet disproportionately large for her expectations of a house: “The front of the house looked fairly familiar, very much the same kind of white clapboards and green shutters that I was accustomed to, only this house was on a much larger scale, twice as large, with two windows for each of the Nova Scotia ones and a higher roof.” Within the house, which she explores “like a cat,” again emphasizing the scale, the billiard room epitomizes this relative sizing: among the “large furniture” and “enormous rubber plant in a gigantic brass pot” is “a fireplace with magnificent

brass fenders and fire tongs” above which, “high on the mantel was a tiny pair of top boots that had belonged to my father” (CM, 25). The detail of the boots is a signal of the narrator’s legacy in the house. In this room, the narrator then carves out her own place, which is large and evocative of motion, while also being a reduction of the greater space of the room and a still retreat: “I sat under a big table, and pretended it was a ship... one of the table’s large bulging legs became a sturdy mast” (CM, 26). Against a large-scale background that diminishes the narrator, the small comes to represent her heritage and an imaginative escape. Even as her grandmother reduces the narrator’s place in the world, this restriction balanced by the even-further-reduced scale and fiction of dolls, a trope which makes the vignettes less serious, and leads the narrator to hone her own growing power over both reality and fiction. The gift of the doll, “*Drusilla*,” marks the beginning of this dynamic:

And now she said, “Where’s your doll? Where’s *Drusilla*?”... She had bought me the best our country store could provide, and made her a checked dress herself. And when I had been reluctant to name her, she had even given her that unappealing name. But that seemed to be one of Grandma’s ideas: a “little girl” should carry a doll when she went traveling. I meekly dug the horror from under a pillow and held her on my knee until we got to Boston. (CM, 16)

While the narrator “meekly” agrees to the doll’s presence because “that seemed to be one of Grandma’s ideas: a ‘little girl’ should carry a doll when she went traveling,” she internally subverts the meaning her grandmother would assign to the doll. The doll’s purchase is driven by a desire to buy the “best” the “country store could offer,” a pretension that makes the doll a symbol of her grandparents’ wealth and condescension. Notably, while the grandmother refers to the narrator by the abstract of little girl, the doll is given an actual name, promoting its

importance. The narrator, meanwhile, rejects both the supposed physical superiority of the doll and her name. Using the negative “un” the narrator judges the doll as “totally uninteresting” and the name as “unappealing.” She then refers to Drusilla as “the doll (I couldn’t say that name)” and calls the blond hair “yellow-brown hair that smelled like stale biscuits.” This unappetizing description, which makes “bright blue eyes, and pink cheeks” uninteresting, ends in the doll’s finally becoming the comically exaggerated “horror.”

While Drusilla the doll does not re-emerge in the text, dolls continue to serve as status symbols in little girls’ interactions. Emma, the narrator’s neighbor and playmate, has “an aura of wealth surrounding her, like a young Scott Fitzgerald” which is born out by her “overpowering” (CM, 22) display of dolls. At their first meeting, the narrator experiences the power and control a little girl may have through her dolls:

Emma’s grandmother said, “Aren’t you going to show your new friend your playroom and your toys? Emma looked put out. She said, ungraciously, “I’ve just put everything in *apple-pie order*.” It was the first time I had heard that expression and it baffled me. However, her grandmother finally persuaded her to show off her possessions and we went upstairs together.

While Drusilla has already taught the narrator dolls’ value as objects for show, here while dolls and toys are supposed to be used to “show off” for friends, they are also property that may be guarded, creating a sense of privacy and order for the girl in possession. The dolls give Emma the power to “put everything in *apple-pie order*”¹¹ exerting both control and a logic of order. Furthermore, this ownership allows privacy, unlike the public display on the train, and Emma must be persuaded to show it off. The narrator then connects the dolls to the development of her social interactions.

The doll, however, also emerges in the narrator's formal education, this time emphasizing coding and evoking history, ultimately leading to the narrator's indirect participation in a school tableau. When the narrator's teacher makes a "model of "The Landing of the Pilgrims" on a large tabletop," the model comes to represent Stewart's summary of the miniature, which incorporates "nostalgic versions of childhood and history, [as] a diminutive, the thereby manipulable, version of the experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination."¹² For the narrator, the assembling of this model, which has "some little ships, some doll people, and ... log cabins," begins with the "spectacular way" her teacher "makes" the ocean: "she took large sheets of bright blue paper, crumpled them up, and stretched them out over the table. Then, with the blackboard chalk, she made glaring whitecaps of all the points: an ocean grew right before our eyes" (CM, 24). The image is no less than a creation story, making the ocean out of paper and chalk, turning the tools of writing into a physical approximation of the natural world.

This model is also an appropriation of the past, which then offers the narrator a connection to history in general and her father specifically. The model offers the power of juxtaposition and misprision¹³ which allows her father to become a pilgrim father and her to celebrate both through the poem/song, "My Country 'Tis of Thee" (which is in itself an appropriation of the tune of the British national anthem). Considering the model inspires this collapse of history and nationality and causes the narrator to note: "But I felt closely related to them all: "*Land where my father died / Land of the pilgrims' pride*" — for a long time I took the first line personally." To this scene, the narrator herself contributes four "real little trees, just the right size with snow on them... from the toy village my grandparents let me play with." This forestation (or its converse, the deforestation of the village at home) both places the narrator

obliquely in the scene and speaks to her hidden desires. The overarching desire to participate in the magic of scale and (re)creation embodied in the model contains both the rebellious act of subtracting from “the toy village my grandparents let me play with,” and the “conceit” of inspiring “the wonder and admiration of my class, I hoped” (CM, 24). While the miniature world links the narrator to history and aesthetics, it is also an act with social potential. Expanding to the level of the author, the trees may also be an oblique, ironic reference to a greater level of creation—the narrator does not orchestrate the scene or provide the people, but positions herself as the miniature trees.

The three great lessons of the memoir then build on this idea of creation within a social context. The first two involve the narrator and other “little girls,” echoing the scenes with dolls that raised awareness of social position. In the first, the narrator is with Emma, “making conversation in the way both children and adults do,” emphasizing the normalcy of, and thereby drawing attention to, the child-speakers when Emma asks the narrator about her mother:

I thought for a moment and then I said in a *sentimental* voice: “She went away and left me ... She died, too.” Emma was impressed and sympathetic, and I loathed myself. It was the first time I was aware of falsity and the great power of sentimentality, although I didn’t know the word. (CM, 31)

In the above scene, the narrator crafts her own identity and in the process becomes “aware of falsity and the great power of sentimentality.” The identity she claims is then that of an orphan, making herself both alone and the progeny of the dead, emphasizing both her uniqueness and a sense of deprivation. Most significantly, the narrator consciously develops and rejects a narrative tone: the sentimental. Embedded within the sentimental evocation of sadness and nostalgia are connotation of self-indulgence and superficiality. Combined with “falsity” this

makes the narrator a “monstrous self” even in her power to provoke her audience’s emotions. This awareness of the narrator’s ability to manipulate her situation and self then concludes with an escape from the created self, which is hopelessly entangled in the lie of its creation: “I jumped up, to get away from my monstrous self that I could not keep from lying” (CM, 32). This sense of undesirable or unwanted power through narrative then informs the narrator’s discovery of the next two truths.

Setting the scene for the next lesson, the narrator’s grandmother has insisted that she bring another child home to play with. The narrator chooses “an inoffensive small blond whose name and features I can’t remember.” This combination: the grandmother’s insistence, the blond hair and the narrator’s overlooking the name, establishes a dynamic much like her feelings towards Drusilla on the train ride. In the same way that the doll was a questionable corollary to the narrator being a privileged little girl, this other little girl is only an “ostensible playmate,” again casting an adult’s vocabulary of a child’s subtle understanding of the situation, this time to interrogate the common experience of being a little girl. The main event of their playtime together then revolves around another untruth, or narrative derived from the feeling of elevated status, which Drusilla’s purchase was intended to instill:

Social consciousness had struck its first blow: I realized this pallid, nameless child lived in a poorer world than I (for the moment, at least, for I had never felt at all secure about my status), and that she thought we were in an apartment house. Fairly quickly, I think, I said tactfully, “Oh a *family*...” and since the servants were all speaking Swedish, this was safe enough. (CM, 32)

While the narrator has been metaphorically “struck” by “social consciousness,” the narrator’s ability to tactfully maintain an illusion of social equality mitigates the violence of the realization.

While the falsity of the previous situation inspires feelings of self-loathing, this one creates a feeling of safety for the narrator. While the narrator deceives the other little girl, it is not to set herself apart or draw out emotions and admiration, but to blend in to the unstratified world the girl inhabits, in which there are no servants or questions of status. The narrator then weaves a narrative both to camouflage herself while building a greater understanding of the world.

The conclusion of the story, and the third “great truth,” is then both a culmination of the two previous scenes and a negation of them. While the previous scenes involved a linguistic manipulation of the narrator — effectively a lie, whether from the intention of elevating the narrator’s importance, or a polite white lie of omission — this scene, in the waiting room, is a confrontation with the collapse, or the reduction of those manipulations. The other occupants of the room are not children, pushing away all suggestion of toys and imaginative games. The scene involves two voices; one speaker is the narrative I, another voice, referred to simply as “something,” which refers to the speaker in the second person. This hallucinative quality divides the narration into a dialogue of the by-now-familiar narrator and an echo, either omniscient or a representation of the author. The exchange begins with the narrator’s unspoken feelings: “I felt, *I, I, I*, and looked at the three strangers in panic. I was *one* of them too, inside my scabby body and wheezing lungs.” The italics and repetition emphasize the I, which is equated to a unifying and singular “*one*.” The reply to this panic is the humorous, know-all of the voice ““You’re in for it now,’ something said.” What the narrator fears and predicts is becoming “like that woman opposite who smiled at me so falsely every once in a while” as the woman seeks attention and placation, imitating the narrator’s actions from the two previous scenes” (CM, 33). This revelation makes the narrator aware of inhabiting her own body and differentiating between herself and the other characters around her: “How strange you are, inside looking out. You are

not Beppo, or the chestnut tree, or Emma, you are *you* and you are going to be *you* forever.” Again using italics, the voice seems to be offering some incantation of identity following the narrator’s perception of being “tricked” into her position. This position both fixes the narrator, preventing the imaginative expansions of playing with her identity, and confers the responsibilities of being a person and lyrical voice. The final sentence of “The Country Mouse” is then the question: “*Why* was I a human being?” this “why” question recalls a young child’s repeated question of the world and this why carries her to her identity as a person. Her choice of words — a “human being” — then simultaneously contains the action of being and the static identity of humanity.

CHAPTER 3

THE DEAD BODY AS A DOLL: PLAY ELEGY AND SENTIMENTALITY

Most of Elizabeth Bishop's work lends itself to elegiac readings as pieces largely dealing with loss in some capacity: loss of people, places and even systems of knowledge. While the majority of these works comprise a shifted paradigm of elegy, which can be read through a critical shift in the role of poetry in mourning,¹⁴ Bishop also appropriates a more traditional elegiac tone, establishing both the genre's strengths and shortcomings. In the short story "Gwendolyn," for example, Bishop creates an explicit elegy using the specific conventions of sentimental aesthetics, even as she dismisses the confessional expansions of that genre. As a highly lyrical work focused on the mourning child, "Gwendolyn" establishes an aesthetic dialogue with Bishop's poetics and poetic antecedents. "Gwendolyn," however, deals in the abstracts of a doll's beauty and perfection, placations that seem antithetical to the specific language of Bishop's greater project. As an experiment in the series that led to "In the Village," however, "Gwendolyn" perhaps reveals much about Bishop's thematic concerns, and it is in this light that I am interested in exploring it—as a prose poem, or work of lyrical fiction.

Elizabeth Bishop's correspondence, collected in *One Art*, however, resists this impulse. Bishop refers to her short story "Gwendolyn" only in context of its lucrative publication in *The New Yorker*, despite her opinion that it "isn't very good."¹⁵ She goes on to remark that "I am not proud of ["Gwendolyn"]."¹⁶ Yet, this supposed inferiority, very likely due to its sentimental overtones — which caused Bishop to disregard "Gwendolyn" — also aesthetically engages

darker Romantic sources, which may vary from Wordsworth to Poe, both of whom have a well-documented position of influence in Bishop's work.

Considering Wordsworth or Poe's potential influence in "Gwendolyn," expands the critical framework generally applied to Bishop's work. Wordsworth's presence in "Gwendolyn" for example, is not that of a fellow "nature lover," but instead that of another poet of border figures, connecting Bishop's work and Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*.¹⁷ Beyond writing figures at the border of society, both Bishop and Wordsworth (like Poe) explore "border figures" in a broader sense: extending the borders as far as fiction/reality and even life/death. For this latter border, the doll comes to symbolize a character on the edge of, or beyond, life. As Stewart explains this aesthetic resonance: "Although the transcendence of such objects [as dolls] allows them to endure beyond the flux and history, that very transcendence also links such objects to the world of the dead, the end of organic growth and the beginning of inaccessibility to the world of the living."¹⁸

If, through the doll, Bishop potentially aligns herself with the mystical, folkloric and lyrical aspects of Poe and Wordsworth in their engagement of death, she does so in a conscious and critical effort. The doll may be read here as an especially potent symbol of the female body written in the greater, male tradition, as every detail of the doll body is crafted and fetishized. As McCabe suggests of Bishop in *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Mourning*: "She often inserts herself into the male tradition, camouflaging her identity and exchanging hats, to show its limitations and liabilities...especially within a tradition that extols the powerful and controlling isolated ego."¹⁹

Overall, “Gwendolyn” is a complicated narrative elegy in its own right: while written from the particular tradition of childhood-mourning, it interrogates the conventions of that genre and poses fundamental questions about the use of the child’s perspective and the elegiac mode.

Gwendolyn forms the unquestionable center of the story with an intense focus and intimacy reminiscent of Wordsworth’s *Lucy Gray* or Poe’s *Annabel (Lee)*. As Bishop’s work emphasizes, “Gwendolyn” has multiple manifestations and significations—she is the doll as well as the girl—all encapsulated within the word of her name. Gwendolyn is firstly “dactyl trisyllables.” The very materiality, and linguistic dimensions of the name create a rhythmic pattern (stressed, unstressed, unstressed), which produces its own phonetic identity. Notably, this is the same meter found in *Annabel (Lee)* and other tragic heroines, suggesting a conscious appropriation of form. The name itself therefore gestures at an independent immortality of language central to an elegiac or idealistic project: “her name could have gone on forever, as far as I was concerned” (G, 216).

A correlation between sound and meaning then suggests Gwendolyn’s positioning as prototype for the narrator in the story. This symbolic ordering suggests a correspondence between the linguistic and the physical; for example, Gwendolyn’s family name, *Appletree* appropriately marks her as “blond, and pink and white, exactly like a blossoming apple tree.” To the narrator, Gwendolyn then “stood for everything that the slightly repellent but fascinating words ‘little girl’ should mean.” *Little girl*, another trisyllable, adds to the hypnotic quality of the meter encompassing the first and last name. It also creates a level of meaning, alluding to the diminutive properties of the name as “little” and identifying the femininity of “girl.”

Yet, “little girl” as a category is “repellent” as well as “fascinating.” This conflicted reaction both situates Bishop’s story in the above tradition and distances her from it. “Fascinating” suggests the almost-compulsive fetishizing of the dead, pre-pubescent girl in the Romantic tradition, which elevates her to the status of an ideal. “Repellent” suggests the narrator’s own position as another ‘little girl,’ but one who would resist the strictures of such an ideal, and even find such perfection repulsive. Ultimately, this relationship rests on the phrase “should be,” which suggests the existence of an objective ideal, but marks a disconnect between such an ideal and the narrator’s own reality. This symbolic gap comprises the narrator’s growing awareness of self and the beginnings of an comparative understanding of the world; for example, through observing Gwendolyn, the narrator is able to make the judgment: “she was ‘delicate’ which, in spite of the bronchitis, I was not” (G, 216).

The narrator’s awakening consciousness through her friend rests on an awareness of death, which defines Gwendolyn and gives her value in the world, at least as the narrator begins to perceive the situation. Continuing the logical symbolism of Gwendolyn, her fatal condition governs her appearance to the narrator. The vague understanding of diabetes as “too much sugar” manifests itself in Gwendolyn’s body, making her “even more attractive, as if she would prove to be solid candy if you bit her, and her pure-tinted complexion would taste exactly like the icing-sugar Easter eggs or birthday candle holders, held to be inedible, except that I knew better” (G, 216). Through this imagery, Gwendolyn’s condition becomes enviable from a child’s perspective. Not only does the candy suggest a process of increasing desirability, but it also creates a space for secret consumption and enjoyment on the part of the narrator: she alone possesses the secret knowledge of edibility with respect to Gwendolyn.

Through the general desirability of Gwendolyn's state of health, the narrator witnesses scenes of affection from Gwendolyn's parents. The narrator perceives the disapproval of her grandparents, and yet relishes describing melodramatic "scenes of tenderness" in which "her parents almost ate her up, alternately, as if she were really made of sugar, as I half suspected" (G, 217). The logical accumulation of indulgences, in the diabetic metaphor of accumulating sugar, satisfies the narrator as she takes almost voyeuristic pleasure in Gwendolyn's life: "I watched these exciting scenes with envy until Mr. and Mrs. Appletree drove away, with Gwendolyn standing between them... still being kissed from either side." In such capacity, Gwendolyn's presence in the narrator's world creates a sense of idealized order: names correspond to people and experienced sweetness signifies an objective good. This order manifests itself in the girls' interactions and the "wonderful occasions" of Gwendolyn's visits, in which carefully planned activities are executed without any "quarrel," and in which coloring water and arranging blocks create designs "completely satisfying in their forthrightness" (G, 219). The block motif and idea of coloring reemerges later, in the last conversation between Gwendolyn and the narrator:

I remember the feeling of profound originality I experienced when I insisted, although it had just occurred to me, that I had always liked black and brown together best. I saw them floating in little patches of velvet, like the crazy quilt, or smooth little rectangles of enamel, like the paint-sample cards I was always begging for. (G, 221)

Whether the narrator's expressed preference for the colors of mourning is real, her statement, made in the shared space of her bed (a physical "novelty" with which the narrator is "overwrought"), demonstrates Gwendolyn's symbolism in relation to death and physical intimacy. This insistence, and its creativity stem from Gwendolyn's earlier answer that she says

prayers in bed “because I’m going to die” connecting permissibility of the shared bed with an ironic vision of religious practice (ironic because the imminence Gwendolyn’s death should logically produce more strict religiosity in the environment of delineated Baptist and Presbyterian churches).

In this space, the concept of death then becomes conflated with intimacy and sexuality, as Susan McCabe reads “Gwendolyn” to examine loss in Bishop: “Hesitation, anxiety, and excitement about intimacy involve an awareness of impending death.”²⁰ McCabe goes so far as to find the awareness of death and sex simultaneous in “Gwendolyn:” “The self finds coincident the knowledge of dying with gender identity, pointing... to female sexuality as simultaneously repulsive and alluring.”²¹ “Gwendolyn” fully supports such a reading, yet the critical connection McCabe makes between the two abstracts, I would argue, must ultimately fall apart, which becomes the great realization of the story.

From the beginning the narrator controls the activities the girls engage in, and her vague invocation of “rustic corruption” in their play within the locked privy suggests unsanctioned, potentially sexual, activities. It is significant that this play takes place in the “whitewashed” but symbolically dirty and private space. Following this unplanned activity, Gwendolyn looks “more angelic than ever” (G, 220). From this previous scene the suggestion of sexuality is already present in the text, making the following vignette, when the narrator finds Gwendolyn’s drawers before getting in to bed, an original exploration of sexuality only to the extent of internalizing Gwendolyn’s death: “Her drawers had lace around the legs, but they were very dirty. This fact shocked me so deeply that I recovered my voice and started asking her more questions” (G, 222). As McCabe comments: “the lace drawers are apparently evidence of Gwendolyn’s gender and her imperfection.”²² What makes this moment so catalytic for the narrator is not simply the

discovery of the sexual or physical potential in Gwendolyn, which is arguably present beginning as early as the privy and intensified in anticipation of sharing the same bed, but the perception of Gwendolyn's flaws as central to her appeal, instead of a candy-like perfection. Accordingly, this discovery serves as inspiration for the narrator's questions and presumably leads her to profess a love of mourning colors, explicitly connecting Gwendolyn's lovability with her impending death, and imaginatively grabbing at those colors in paint chips and fabrics to gain the promised intimacy. This revelation, however, is quickly displaced by the experience of the actual death that follows. Just as the reality of diabetes and death destroys any lingering sweetness, the narrator's own, vicarious enjoyment of Gwendolyn's condition must logically fall apart.

The scene for this climatic realization is carefully established, delineating an atmosphere of community versus individuality. The narrator learns of Gwendolyn's death through overheard "sad and ancient phrases," an indication of the ritualistic and euphemistic quality of elegiac language. She is overwhelmed by her grandmother's front-porch-observation of the funeral (which she is not supposed to be aware of), in which her grandmother is "crying and crying between her own peeks at the mourners on the other side." The narrator, however, chooses to watch, albeit through a "lace patterned view of everything" with "the foxgloves and bees just outside" as imagistic echoes of her recent visit with her friend. Her fear of "being in the parlor alone" leads to a pleasant reminiscence of visiting the children's graves, which gather above ground as a number of low marble rectangles, each "with a little lamb on top" over which the narrator is accustomed to presiding: "I adored these lambs, and counted them and caressed them and sat on them" (G, 222-23). McCabe reads this general scene of communal mourning, or joined monuments, as indicating "mortality, not as a purely individual plot, but as an invitation to record family history and relations, our...restitution for the loss of a transcendental account."²³

This scene of the community in mourning fades into the background against something so horrifying that “my concentration on the one thing was so intense that I could see nothing else” (G, 223). The reality of death presents itself as two men “carrying Gwendolyn’s small white coffin” who set it down at an angle “with Gwendolyn shut invisibly inside it forever, there, completely alone on the grass by the church door” (G, 224). At the end of the indulgent companionship of the dying and the hallowed, privileged space of the sickroom, the narrator confronts the final reality of death as complete and eternal isolation. It is this sense of the girl’s abandonment, something akin to a forgotten, decayed and unrecognizable toy (the marble of the next anecdote), which terrifies the narrator. This emotion reveals death, not as the presupposed unity, but as a complete isolation. The desire to join with Gwendolyn and gain companionship through death is then a logical fallacy. Considered as an elegy, “Gwendolyn” engages with the ethics of loss surrounding both the idealized, girl companion, and also the ideal death, as both of these losses combine in the image of the abandoned coffin. This idea of the elegy as a failed gesture, or, at most an elegy for the art of elegy, supplants the narrative’s earlier embrace of mourning.

The emotion that the coffin elicits is both vicariously cultivated by the narrator and imposed on her: “If I care to, I can bring back the exact sensation of that moment today, but then, it is also one of those that from time to time are terrifyingly thrust upon us” (G, 224). This dichotomy of almost-masturbatory melancholy and a passive terror with respect to death interrogates the elegiac mode, particularly in the former context. Throughout the story, the narrator approaches her friend’s death as an imaginative game, overlaying the events of the story with her own desire to perform a part in it and understand it as a compelling taboo. The narrator’s reaction is then emotional, steeped in a sentimental culture of death, but paradoxically

constructed by her logic and observations. For example, the narrator expansively judges: “the graveyard belonging to the village was surely one of the prettiest in the world,” taking pride and making a surface placation with respect to the memorials (G, 223). This engagement with a child’s perspective on—and desire to participate in—the sentiments of mourning creates the complicated conceit of the doll as representative of Gwendolyn’s dead body.

The narration of “Gwendolyn” becomes a self-critical, elegiac *ars-poetica*. Bishop marks the experience of Gwendolyn and the friendship between the girls with the narrator’s desire to write Gwendolyn’s part and assign particular meaning to her, beginning with the linguistic appeal of her name. As a constructed mode, fidelity to the story, and therefore to the subject of the story, is questioned through re-remembering and unabashed tampering of events in the pursuit of appropriate emotion and gravity — for example the qualification, “I must, in reality, have seen something like it and imagined the rest,” (G, 223) that precedes the image of the coffin. This imagining, or fictionalizing, emphasizes a crafting that is both revealing to the experience of the self and problematic to the memorializing of others. In retrospect, this impulse is performative and furthermore creates the greater narrative structure: “I remember three episodes of that summer in which Gwendolyn played the role of beautiful heroine—the role that grew and grew until finally it had grown far beyond the slight but convincing talents she had for acting it.”²⁴ Significantly the archetypal role Gwendolyn embodies for the narrator is translated to a doll in an act of disobedience which places the idea of Gwendolyn back in the narrator’s grasp: “finally I did something really bad” (G, 226).

The experience of the previously-unnamed doll regulated through the narrator’s Grandmother, who only permits the experience in convalescence, making possession of the doll in health compelling and transgressive. The anthropomorphizing of the doll begins with the

materiality of the doll, after having “lain in her drawer so long... the elastic in her joints had become weakened” leading to the symptomatic demonstration of “her outstretched hand,” which “would rest on yours for a moment and then slip wearily off” (G, 214). The doll, as “preliminary” (G, 215) to the story, then embodies weakness and refinement: “The looseness of the skates didn’t bother me. It went very well with the doll’s personality, which in turn was well suited to the role of companion for an invalid” (G, 214). The doll’s superlative delicacy translates to her performance, outfitted in a wardrobe gesturing at, yet unsuited for, refined activities such as ice-skating.

This material range echoes in the presence of the crazy quilt in the sick room, which acts as a catalog of appropriated, real wardrobes. The quilt is significantly composed of the fabrics from others’ clothes and inscribed with the symbolic spelling of their names, with each fabric and material representing emotional attachment; for example, “that that was from a necktie one of her [Grandmother’s] brothers, since dead and buried in London” (G, 215). The quilt is recognized as a past “fad” in Nova Scotia, pointing to sentimentality as an obsessive cultural practice as well as the feminine construction of the quilting. The process of naming then becomes that of embroidery: emotional and painstaking documentation or ornamentation, but not originality. The doll, meanwhile, is the unnamed material of femininity: “It was a girl doll, but my grandmother had forgotten her name.” While Gwendolyn’s name comes “firstly,” as a synonym for little girl, the girl doll is the unnamed occupant of her significations: “packed in a toy steamer trunk of green tin embossed with all the proper boards, locks, and nailheads” wearing “wonderful” and “old fashioned garments” (G, 213).

The doll’s reemergence following Gwendolyn’s funeral becomes the symbolic recognition of her potential as an elegiac figure. The elegy is then the simultaneous funereal and

baptismal act of play-recognition in which “wild joy” accompanies the revelation that “it was Gwendolyn’s funeral, and that the doll’s real name, all this time, was Gwendolyn.” With the recognition that she has used Gwendolyn as a doll, the use of the doll as Gwendolyn exposes the process of elegy wherein the flattened and passive symbol of the deceased is symbolically exhumed for the purposes of beautification. The appearance of “perfect beauty” is created with the combination of the “embroidered” name and body whose outlines are ornamented with flowers.²⁵ Accordingly the author of an elegy becomes an emotional manipulator, and the reenactment of the funeral scene is revealed as a sham, even more marked from the child’s perspective, which, instead of conferring purity or innocence, simplifies the compulsory act of writing the dead. Here the symbolic “game” of the funeral is “more exciting than ‘operation,’” (G, 226) making the adorning of the body in wreathing and signifying its idealized and memorialized beauty even more compelling than the process of exposure above.

This game, however, is not ultimately the abstracted and expansive process of perfecting, but the idea that such an ideal state may be reached through the addition of detail: for example “a pink cosmos in one limp hand.” The dominance of such detail over “vague” (G, 226) and metaphysical abstractions refutes the aesthetic direction of the sentimental, Romantic elegy. The word “Gwendolyn” is not an “eternal” name or even the unique name of the deceased, but a linguistic label that may be appropriated and used for the author’s own ends. These ends are neither personal nor exclusive; the narrator implies her own lack of importance to Gwendolyn, and in this final scene, shares the doll Gwendolyn with her cousin. The play funeral is not only a secularized reenactment of the funeral, but a refutation of the ‘real’ funeral’s singularity, making “funeral” a theme to be reused in the author’s work. As McCabe suggests: Gwendolyn “underlines...reading Bishop’s poetics as hinging upon the active experience of loss, which does

not disappear with the writing of it”²⁶ — yet, without disappearing, the attitude of “active experience” rejects a tradition of Romantic passivity; emotions do not overwhelm the author permanently, but become constructive projects.

The ends of these projects are then, however, the materials of construction: details such as the flowers. Flowers in “Gwendolyn” offer a level of signification through material containment; the flowers adorn the body of the doll as surface features, yet individually, they are also the imprisoning dimensions of foxgloves, which the narrator uses to capture dangerous bees. In prioritizing the quilt, outfits or flowers, the narrator locates the process of mourning in an aestheticized and feminized space, a tradition of creation that surpasses Romantic appropriation and fetishizing of its conventions. In her discussion of *Reading in Detail*, Naomi Schor develops the detail as:

bounded on the one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the *everyday*, whose ‘prosiness’ is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women.²⁷

Bishop’s discussion of the doll is hemmed by both of these boundaries; the doll is ornamental and yet located in the prose space of a narrative of village life in Nova Scotia. Yet, as Schor discusses, the detail also forms an assertion of power as a focus that threatens patriarchal hierarchy and the abstract. Without reading the grandfather as simply a symbol of patriarchal power, the aspect of his public maintenance of the grave-space, attendance of the funeral and inability to comprehend his granddaughter’s outpouring of emotion following the marble incident marks a gendered boundary of regulated elegy that recurs in Bishop’s poetics. Bishop and the grandfather are not so different in some respects: both seem incapable or unwilling to acknowledge effusive “lallygagging,” (G, 215) an emotionalism Bishop resists in her writing.

What sets Bishop's use of the narrator apart from the patriarchal regulation of the grandfather in "Gwendolyn," however, is the fascination with public emotion she strives to feel originally. Her work, like that of the narrator, becomes the placing of flowers around a symbolic body, which, while becoming its own end, does not adequately symbolize what is lost at the center. "Gwendolyn" poses as a manifesto with respect to sentimentality; the short story describes a fascination with grief and the inadequacy of representing it in literature.

"First Death in Nova Scotia:"

While elements of "Gwendolyn" echo throughout Bishop's work — for example, the hollow grave erected in the child's play could be juxtaposed with "The Monument" — the narrator's fascination with the consumption of death in "Gwendolyn" resonates most with the images of the funeral in Bishop's poem "First Death in Nova Scotia."²⁸ The poem is similarly related through the perspective of a young child in Nova Scotia. Here death is also originally viewed as a state of desirable perpetuity, in this work embodied in a taxidermy loon, who is "cold and caressable" with red glass eyes "much to be desired." The loon is both a static image which combines real and imagined elements—the marble table becomes "his white, frozen lake"—and an invitation to narrative, both of the loon's past, ("Uncle Arthur fired / a bullet into him,") and of the present and future of the family. The loon then becomes a witness to the ongoing events of the family, including the funeral that he "eyes," along with the narrator.

Echoing the images of death's edibility in "Gwendolyn," the funeral here features a coffin that is "a little frosted cake." Within the coffin, her cousin then takes on the appearance of a doll, again blurring through death the boundaries of what may be played with: "Arthur was very small / he was all white, like a doll / that hadn't been painted yet." While the rest of the poem uses repetition and end rhyme occasionally, the first two lines above form the only rhymed couplet,

creating a nursery rhyme quality, which is enhanced by the repetition of the doll trope. This invocation of the nursery tradition creates a well-worn inevitability out of the novel situation (this is the first death), which allows the narrator to imagine a scenario to explain her cousin's fate, using more familiar phenomena. Here, the narrator sees her cousin not as a figure from whom life and color has been subtracted, but instead as an unfinished surface which remains to be painted. Yet, even in imagining her cousin's hair painted by "Jack Frost," the same anthropomorphized force of nature that colors the autumn leaves, the narrator shows some understanding of death's finality. Here the job is unfinished and Jack Frost has "dropped the brush / and left him white, forever."

The conclusion of the poem allows an imagined community through death, unlike the funeral in "Gwendolyn" yet, as in the above reverie, the reality of death intrudes (if only obliquely, or by the standards of the imagined space), ultimately leaving Arthur alone. In the final stanza, the narrator imagines Arthur's life after death beginning with an invitation "to be / the smallest page at court" to the "gracious royal couples / ... warm in red and ermine." These royal couples, likely inspired by the royal portraits hung in the room, are then both real, as they exist in the photographs, and imagined, as the young child has no real experience of death or royalty. The warmth and honor of the imagined invitation is then no less plausible than any other version of death from the child's perspective; the logistics of joining the royal couple in this imagined role are what intrude on the fantasy, instead. The poem then concludes with a rhetorical question that leaves the understanding of death open-ended: "But how could Arthur go / clutching his tiny lily / with his eyes shut up so tight / and the roads deep in snow?"

As a companion piece to "Gwendolyn," "First Death in Nova Scotia" addresses many of the same issues of aesthetics, community and the death of a child, again told through a child's

perspective. Perhaps inspired by the doll-like form of her cousin, the child's imagination creates euphemisms for the death invoking Jack Frost and the royal couples as unseen representatives of death. Where "First Death" diverts from "Gwendolyn" however, is in the unattainability of this imagined ending which leaves the narrator questioning as the poem ends, similarly questioning, the meaning of death.

CHAPTER 4

WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE DOLL IN BISHOP

The doll continues as a symbol of the lyrical and the elegiac throughout Bishop's work. The doll recurs in poems and prose works, in fragments and as part of the material and narrative fabric of Bishop's creation. Outside the child's perspective, however, this symbol carries consciousness of being manmade — no longer indistinguishable or interchangeable with elements of the natural world. Additionally, besides its place in "The Country Mouse" and "Gwendolyn," the concept of the doll is largely cast in a supporting role—explicating artificial, or socially-constructed aesthetics of the feminine and roles both within and beyond social strictures. While the "meaning" of the doll is then indeterminate, and again often multivalent, the doll in Bishop's work may be considered under two, broad categories: the doll as aesthetic object and the doll as vocation:

Glass Eyes and Other Surfaces: An Aesthetic of Shallows:

Considering the aesthetic appeal of the doll is a contemplation of craft that both falls short of and surpasses its original usage. The doll's original form is a stylized imitation of the young body and as such it will never become a "real" body. With imagination and manipulation, however, the doll becomes more, representing an ability to adhere to a fetishized, aesthetic vision that is beyond human attainment and to embody that vision for longer than a human lifespan. This tension, between what may be accounted for as human in the doll and what surpasses or falls short of this distinction, creates the aesthetic basis for the doll—aesthetic not only as an examination of beauty but, as in Freud's examination of the uncanny, what provokes or inspires

emotion.²⁹ Because the doll is void of organic or intellectual function, and perhaps even materially hollow, this tension is played out along the dolls' surfaces in their ability to contain and reflect the beholder.

Approaching the exterior of the doll becomes a contemplation of both found surfaces and their crafting. The surfaces, however, need not be the literal surfaces of the doll, but may include layers of context, as the way an object is seen in Bishop often changes the meaning of an object. Bishop's fiction piece "Memories of Uncle Neddy" uses frames of memories and ekphrasis to relate a memoir-styled tribute to the eponymous Uncle Neddy. In the process the surface of a doll is added to, stripped and exposed to the effect of questioning commemoration, legacy, decay and the passage of time. The story is a contemplation of a pair of portraits, one of which shows a young Uncle Neddy with a "neatly stuffed" body and "cheeks as pink as a girl's or a doll's."³⁰ The doll then marks the beginning of this angelic figure's transformation into the somewhat sinister alcoholic the narrator is familiar with. In remembered stories, the mother's doll from France is first endowed with a fine, wax surface until Uncle Neddy "dug all the wax off the face ... with his fingernails and chewed it like gum."³¹ Another side of Uncle Neddy emerges in this grotesque and wanton act of consumption, which is underscored by the mastication of material without ingesting it. The doll's aesthetic value is furthermore based on this surface: "The delicacy of the doll's complexion depended on this wax; without it, she was red-faced and common" (UN, 233). The doll's violent treatment continues to the doll's possessor, the narrator's mother, as she is pushed down the stairs for protesting and pretends unconsciousness.

This connection between Neddy's sister and the doll continues as memories are recorded on the surface of the tintype, which the narrator posits as a source for the portraits. In the tintype the doll commands all of the narrator's attention, becoming more life-like than the girl on whose

lap she is seated in her unselfconscious command of the image: she is “showing fat legs in striped stockings” and “stares composedly at the camera under a raffish blond wig, in need of combing.” The final comment — “this must have been before the doll had lost her waxen complexion” — then serves a reminder of mortality; her partial destruction leads to a reminder that her owner is, in fact, dead. Yet they remain together in the tintype, and the tintype man has furthered the connection and “tinted the cheeks of both the doll and my mother a clear pink.” The blush, signaling life, equates the image of the doll with that of the girl. As such, the image persists to inspire, both the story and the featured portraits, which the narrator concludes are drawn not from life alone, but “the clothes from tintypes, and the rest from [the painter’s] imagination” (UN, 234). The painter’s process is then analogous to the author’s own (this is a work of fiction), as both take life and tintypes as inspiration, but provide much of the material through imagination and conjecture. Within the story, these portraits or surfaces, all described as “doll like” (as in the portrait of Uncle Neddy), take on new life in the narrator’s possession. She imagines the interactions of the images with their new place in Brazil. The narrator ultimately foresees the encroachment of mold to tint the images with a sense of death the narrator is aware of but the figures in the portraits lack: “That grey-green bloom, or that shadow of fine soot, is just enough to serve as a hint of morbidity, attractive morbidity—although perhaps mortality is a better word. The grey-green suggests life, the sooty shadow—although living, too—death and dying” (UN, 228).

Separating the doll from the context of the above story, however, leaves the reader with the image of the tintype on its own. In it, while hindsight must attribute her attraction to the wax dip, the doll’s true legacy is her composed stare, from within an otherwise unapologetic pose.

When considering these doll-surfaces in Bishop's work, the glass eye becomes one of the most compelling synecdoches. In the fragment "Where are the dolls who loved me so?"³² Bishop states that her childhood dolls approached her "Through their real eyes." The dolls of course, as her other works suggest, are entirely artificial, material figures. For Bishop, however, the doll's eyes combine a real depth with their artificiality in a way that relates to her own subjectivity as a viewer and author. Whether through illusion, or a different standard of reality, what makes the eyes real in this selection transcends artificial surface of the dolls through the imaginative engagement that gives dolls a unique place among the tropes in Bishop's work. For Bishop, this contradiction is especially significant given her envisioning of writing as an unreal, or more exactly unnatural act in which reality and fiction combine to yield "the curious effect... of being as normal as *sight* and yet as synthetic, as artificial, as a *glass eye*."³³ Dolls, and other toys, as inherent possessors of glass eyes then have a special relationship to poetry for Bishop, as they embody the contradiction of her poetic project.

Exploring the glass eyes of the dolls then opens a dialogue between the "normal" sense of sight in Bishop's subjects and the artificiality of glass as a medium. The first context recalls the importance of eye-contact in Bishop's poems, as the climax of encounters between subject and narrator often takes the guise of prolonged staring. For example, "The Man-Moth" ultimately advises the reader: "If you catch him / hold up a flashlight to his eye" to initiate contact from which the man-moth will be compelled to "stare back" and offer up "one tear, his only possession," provided that the reader watch him.³⁴ Similarly, in "The Fish" the "victory" that fills the boat until "everything [is] / rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!" begins with the narrator looking into the fish's eyes, "seen through the lenses / of old scratched isinglass" and is brought to fruition through "star[ing] and star[ing]"³⁵ These scenes show contact between the speaker and

the subject that is normal and revealing of the natural (or in the man-moth's case, supernatural), yet strange — the man-moth's eyes contain a "haired horizon" and "an entire night in itself" while the fish's appears as an "object" that may tip "towards the light." In contrast, the toy's eyes are not strange, in that they are modeled on the human eye, but they join what should be the outward-looking normalcy of sight to glass as an artificially crafted medium that allows both looking in and looking out.

In the world of the doll and the miniature, glass also has special significance as a shield- or display-material. The presence of glass around an object suggests a greater gloss of meaning, or at least a constructed spectacle for visual, but not tactile, consumption. Stewart focuses on glass as a material through which the contents on display become cultural artifacts: "glass eliminates the possibility of contagion, indeed of lived experience, at the same time that it maximizes the possibilities of transcendent vision. Thus the miniature world may always be seen as being over-coded as the cultural."³⁶ The doll as a cultural artifact then takes the medium of glass as both a creator and protector of imagery, posing a reflection of the beholder's eyes and creating an imaginative (if impenetrable) opening to the other surfaces that comprise the doll.

A Meditation on Vocation:

Personifying the doll from Bishop's adult perspective rephrases the question of the doll's imperviousness. The doll is no longer imaginable as dead, as the adult understands that the significance of death may only be applied to the once-living. The doll, through its human form and imagined potential, however, is also excluded from consideration among more utilitarian objects. The doll's bodily persistence into and beyond its owner's adulthood with minimal apparent change becomes a fascinating and engrossing quandary to the female author in whose work the doll similarly persists.

One imaginative solution to this problem is in envisioning the doll-body as a physical retreat, making embodiment an act of retreat and fitting a vocation to the doll's withdrawal from the volatility and struggles of the surrounding world. The doll then becomes a witness without actually participating in human lives. In "The Country Mouse" the narrator's favorite toy among her friend's collection plays out this compelling narrative of emotional safety through its mechanized reaction: "What I liked best was a milk can that wound up, played a little tune and, with his long ears first, up came a white wooly rabbit, who looked around him and sank down again" (CM, 23). While the girls at play may summon the rabbit's appearance and a musical performance, built into his body are the rabbit's means to survey and reject, leading to a slow retreat in which the milk can becomes both a shelter and an extension of his body. Using the rabbit as a model, the adult writes a narrative of doll characters freed from returning sentimental attachments and also liberated from any pressures exuded by an imaginary world—this rabbit, even to the young narrator's eyes, shows none of the White Rabbit's stress (in Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*) nor any of the other sorrows and frustrations that accompany retreat from the human world for other toy-based characters.

Building on the toy as a state of escape grounded in the real world, the draft, "Where are the Dolls Who Loved Me So?" answers the disappearance of the narrator's childhood dolls with the response that they have gone: "To meditate in trunks or closets / To let [life and] unforeseen emotions / glance off their glazed complexions."³⁷ Bishop then writes these infinitives as an appealing permission for the dolls that allow them to reach a state of meditative transcendence, which appears perceptively intellectual if unemotional ("To let" etc.). This imbues the dolls' immobility with a level of depth and complication that surpasses her former distinction as an

aesthetic object. Considered as a mental exercise, the dolls' impassivity may be personally desirable as well as compelling to the author as an intellectual, particularly a female intellectual.

Inhabiting the doll then becomes a fantasy of vocation that resonates with the symbolic remove of literary pursuits from the quotidian. In another of Bishop's fragments, the beginning of a story entitled "True Confessions," this vision is played out through "an elderly little girl with little yellow eyes and slightly harlequin glasses"³⁸ modeled on Bishop's friend Pauline Hemmingway. In "True Confessions," the shift between the girl and her doll is complete and stretches into adulthood, carrying the doll into the girl's would-be fate and presumably allowing the child to grow into an avid reader unconcerned by superficial aesthetics:

Just about at the point [the girl] was able to read Dickens as a child — say "Little Dorrit" — she and her doll had decided it would be better all round for them to change places. I don't know where the doll had gone — off being an unfaithful wife somewhere, probably — but the doll's looks were becoming in an unnatural way so that you looked twice at the tiny chin and dimpled cheeks, and the little laugh, open to have crumbs poked in by birds, maybe.

The upshot of the exchange is that the "doll (child)" suffers many frustrations because of the wife (conjecture based on Quinn's draft). In writing a tacit agreement between doll and child Bishop cements the doll's ultimate role in her writings: as that of a literary representative, and an avenue open to 'little girls' who were previously-forgone wives if they did not die a premature and poignant death. The doll, this draft implies, remains in fiction not as a reminder of the outside commercial and literary standards, but of the power of imagination of the girl, which may be applied to her doll and against the ensuing expectations of the world, in this case: matrimony. In making the doll such an avatar, Bishop deals with the issue of aesthetics by

describing dolls as fit inheritors of the human life that crafts them to be “becoming in an unnatural way” without glorifying the ornamental roles they are supposedly designed to fulfill.

This anecdote, while buried in an abandoned draft, suggests something essential about Bishop’s view of the doll. The doll becomes more than an aesthetic object — when written into the page, she offers her own vocation as part of the literary world the author is only able to delve into periodically as the greater demands of life and societal expectations impose on her. The doll as a trope becomes a meta-character representing the author’s work as a means of escape.

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- 1 Ann K Hoff, “Owning Memory: Elizabeth Bishop’s Authorial Restraint,” in *Biography* 31.4 (Fall 1997), 578.
 - 2 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 56
 - 3 Even Robert Giroux’s introduction to the collected prose (admittedly written at the height of biographical criticism) indicates that the piece should be read as “central to understanding her biography.” *The Collected Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), Introduction, *xix*.
 - 4 CK Doreski, *Elizabeth Bishop; The Restraints of Language* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 71.
 - 5 Elizabeth Bishop, “The Country Mouse” (“CM”) *The Collected Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 31.
 - 6 Stewart, 86.
 - 7 Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, 23.
 - 8 James Merrill, *The Changing Light at Sandover* (New York: Atheneum, 1989) 256. qtd. in Zimmerman.
 - 9 Bonnie Costello, “Vision and Mastery in Elizabeth Bishop” in *Twentieth Century Literature* 28.4 (1982). 352.
 - 10 Vendler, “Domestication, Domesticity and the Otherworldly” (1977) qtd. Zimmerman, 498.
 - 11 Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, 22.
 - 12 Stewart, 69.
 - 13 See Charles Rzepka, “Elizabeth Bishop and the Wordsworth of *Lyrical Ballads*: Sentimentalism, Straw Men, and Misprision” (Romantic Praxis, 1999).
 - 14 See Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1994).
 - 15 Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art: Letters*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994) 155.
 - 16 Bishop, *One Art*, 155.
 - 17 See Rzepka’s discussion of the “minor female Wordsworth comment.”
 - 18 Stewart, 57.
 - 19 Susan McCabe, *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss* (University Park: The Penn State UP, 1994) 114.
 - 20 McCabe, 23.
 - 21 McCabe, 22.
 - 22 McCabe, 23.
 - 23 McCabe, 22.
 - 24 Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, 218.
 - 25 Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, 226.
 - 26 McCabe, 21.
 - 27 Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, (New York: Routledge, 1989), 4.
 - 28 Elizabeth Bishop, *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2004) 125-126

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- ²⁹ Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*, Section 1.
- ³⁰ Bishop, *The Collected Prose*, 230.
- ³¹ Bishop, “Memories of Uncle Neddy” (UN), *The Collected Prose*, 232-233.
- ³² Bishop, ed. Alice Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Jukebox: Uncollected Poems, Drafts and Fragments* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 201.
- ³³ Bishop, *EAP*, 208. Original emphasis, “Writing Poetry is an unnatural act...” While the context here refers to her grandmother’s glass eye, the statement applies convincingly to the dolls’ glass eyes as well.
- ³⁴ Bishop, *Collected Poems*, 15.
- ³⁵ Bishop, *Collected Poems*, 43.
- ³⁶ Stewart, 68.
- ³⁷ Bishop, *EAP*, 102.
- ³⁸ Bishop, *EAP*, 191.

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