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The Homely and the Wild in Elizabeth Bishop

Michael Malay

In *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge writes that ‘otherness’ only makes sense in relation to what is known,

The other can emerge only as a version of the familiar, strangely lit, refracted, self-distanced. It arises from the intimate recesses of the cultural web that constitutes subjectivity, which is to say it arises as much from within the subject as from outside it.¹

Attridge’s discussion of otherness is primarily literary: he is occupied with the issue of what makes literature ‘singular’. In particular, the above passage explores how an artist brings the otherness of an art-work into being, the ways in which he or she converses with it and calls it forth. To invoke otherness, according to Attridge, is also to draw upon aspects of the self: literary creation ‘blurs the distinction between that which is “inside” and that which is “outside”’.²

Attridge’s literary definition is also an apt characterisation of our relations with animal others, for animals also confound the boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. At once neighbours and strangers, familiar and enigmatic, animals hover at the edges of what we know while occupying the ‘intimate recesses’ of our imagination. ‘I know noble accents / And lucid, inescapable rhythms’, Wallace Stevens writes in ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird’. ‘But I know, too / That the blackbird is involved in what I know’.³ The first half of this passage is generally taken to refer to poetic inspiration – Robert Buttle, for instance, calls these ‘lucid’ rhythms the ‘music of the imagination, shimmering, fine-spun’; but the second half connects these rhythms with the music of daily things.⁴ The poet’s imagination, that is to say, is of a worldly nature: it draws inspiration from a landscape of trees, snowy mountains, blackbirds.

Entangled in our histories as we are in theirs, animals are therefore part of what we know: their ‘otherness’ is not absolute but relative. At the same time, animals are also very different from us, sometimes radically so. As Stevens says of his fleeting bird,

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.⁵

Stevens seems mindful of an ancient trope in which vision is related to insight and understanding: Plato speaks of the ‘eye of the soul’, Augustine of ‘spiritual vision’, Emerson of the ‘eye of Reason’.⁶ But Stevens’s blackbird, passing beyond the circle of our vision, also passes beyond our understanding. ‘A man and a woman and a blackbird / are one’, Stevens writes in part IV of his poem, but he might equally well have written that men and women and blackbirds are *not* one.⁷ In the context of the poem, both statements are true: ‘involved’ in what we know, the blackbird is also peripheral to our ways of knowing, both wild and familiar.

A similar doubleness animates Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘The Moose’, a poem inspired by a bus journey from Nova Scotia to Massachusetts in 1946. ‘Just as it was getting light’, Bishop writes of the overnight journey, ‘the driver had to stop suddenly for a big cow moose who was wandering down the road. She walked away very slowly into the woods, looking at us over her shoulder.’⁸ ‘The Moose’, published 26 years after this journey, records the encounter:

a moose has come out of
the impenetrable wood
and stands there, looms, rather,

in the middle of the road [...]

Towering, antlerless,
high as a church,
homely as a house
(or, safe as houses).⁹

The tension Attridge identifies – that the other is both unknown and familiar – is captured in Bishop's fine balance of domestic and sublime language. 'Homely', for instance, registers the closeness of the encounter: the animal is hailed in intimate, neighbourly terms. And yet 'homely' might presume an intimacy with the moose which is also a kind of conceptual mastery, a point the poem seems both to acknowledge and to work against. If 'homely' figures the moose within a human framework, a containment visually emphasized through parenthesis – '(safe as houses)' – the animal also eludes, or at least seems to elude, the images which the poem constructs for it. 'High as a church', a sublime trope, suggests that which exceeds or transcends our knowledge. The 'towering' moose therefore stands (or 'looms, rather') somewhere between our claims of intimacy and the unknown:

she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.
Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?¹⁰

The question seems honestly posed. For, mixed in with the thrill of recognition – "Look! It's a she!" one of the passengers exclaims – is the thrill of mystery. Like a 'dreamy divagation' (the speaker's description of the bus's night-time journey), the encounter with the moose takes on the slightly heightened quality of a dream: the creature is both completely ordinary and 'otherworldly'.

Penelope Laurens says that Bishop's writing is characterized by a 'quality of restraint', a balance between metrical intensity and understatedness that 'keeps the poetry from sentimental excess', and which allows Bishop to retain a 'lyric quality' in her poems while 'strictly delimiting lyric effusiveness'.¹¹ In relation to the ending of "The Moose", which moves from wonder ('high as a church') to droll comedy ("Curious creatures," / says our quiet driver, /rolling his r's) to mysteriousness, Bishop's 'quality of restraint' seems to imply a respect for what it cannot possess,

by craning backward
the moose can be seen
on the moonlit macadam;
then there's a dim
smell of moose, an acrid
smell of gasoline.¹²

The 'sensation of joy' the encounter prompts is suggested rather than asserted: a 'dim smell of moose' hangs in the air. In ending this way, the poem seems to want to avoid 'lyric effusiveness', which might centre the importance of the occasion on the subjectivity of the speaker, and closely attends to concrete, external details: the acidity of the gasoline, or the moose standing alone on the 'moonlit macadam'. We might also see how the poem's ending, its tone of deeply felt but unemphasized joy, is shaped by highly controlled formal elements. Throughout the poem, for instance, Bishop establishes rhymes between 'passengers' and 'creatures', 'wood' and 'hood', and 'shawl' and 'hall', all of which create a musical regularity as we begin to read in anticipation of other rhymes. But the poem also offsets these rhymes with no rhymes at all or with much weaker ones

– as in ‘creatures’ and ‘gears’, for example, or ‘noises’ and ‘voices’. Similarly, the end of Bishop’s poem slips loose of strong rhyme altogether: ‘The Moose’ concludes with a trace of a musical structure, with only one clear rhyme between ‘seen’ and ‘gasoline’ and faint rhymes between ‘backward’ and ‘acid’ and ‘macadam’ and ‘dim’. Is there a sense in which rhyme is made to dissipate, perhaps even to ‘dim’, by the poem’s end? And is the moose, lingering in our smell and in our memory, held aloft for us – and from us – through such modulations of rhythm and tone? ‘Homely’ and ‘otherworldly’, neighbourly and enigmatic, the poem’s terms are richly incompatible. This tension seems to keep the moose at a respectful distance.

The figure of the animal in Bishop’s poetry has been discussed fruitfully by various critics;¹³ but relatively little of the criticism has been about the intricate methods Bishop used in writing about animals. And, similarly, little has been said about the ethical challenges she experienced in writing about nonhuman life, or about her desire, expressed in poems, letters and essays, to find a way of writing about animals that did not master them. One index of her success, I want to argue, is how Bishop’s animals feel much stranger at the conclusion of her poems than they do at the beginning, ‘homely’, in the first instance, but also ‘strangely lit’, ‘refracted’, and unknowable.

‘Go in fear of abstractions’ Ezra Pound wrote in 1913, advising poets not to mix the abstract with the ‘concrete’.¹⁴ However, as Robert Pinsky argues, Pound was making a technically impossible demand. Every single word, Pinsky writes, ‘is an abstraction or category, not a particular’.¹⁵ All words are part of a system of signs, standing in conventional relation to things, and even the most precise descriptions of objects are, by this definition, ‘abstractions’. In Pinsky’s account, the distinctiveness of modern poetry emerges from the attempt to reconcile language’s abstractions with the singularity of experience. Whereas language is ‘more or less discursive’, he remarks, the poet’s ‘convictions about reality and art are likely to be pervaded by the idea that reality inheres in particulars, not abstractions; in experience, not in discourse and convention’. Experience, ‘fluid and instantaneous’, is constantly betrayed by a language which is not only ‘sequential’, but, ‘once uttered, relatively fixed’, and such ‘conflict’, Pinsky concludes, ‘inspired the dazzling solutions and accomplishments of modernism, an extraordinary, manifold transformation of poetry in English’.¹⁶

Of Bishop’s various ‘solutions’ to the ‘conflict’ of poetry, one of her most distinctive is her use of simile, a figure of speech which she adapts in complex ways and for intricate ends. More particularly, Bishop uses simile both as an instrument of precision and irony: precision, in the first instance, because her similes consistently provide detailed renderings of the natural world, descriptions which register something singular or peculiar about the ‘other’; but also ironic because Bishop continually advertises the provisional, arbitrary and mediated aspects of her figures of speech, strongly qualifying what language can say vis-à-vis otherness. ‘Exactly like the bubbles in champagne’, she writes in her poem ‘A Cold Spring’ (1955), describing the flight of fireflies above a clump of ‘thick grass’.¹⁷ The *tone* of that observation, in which fastidiousness and wryness occupy the same breath, is a recurring feature of Bishop’s work. For, as ‘exact’ as the description is – the movement of the fireflies does indeed recall the bubbles of champagne – the image also draws attention to itself as conceit. Just as she invokes the movement of the fireflies, Bishop also exposes the mechanics of her image-making, developing a complex simile in which language seems to look critically inwards even as it looks out onto the world.

The combination of precision and disavowal is a distinctive feature of Bishop’s poetry about the natural world. Another characteristic of her poetry is the sense of responsibility with which she confronts the limits of what can be said. Animal life, Bishop accepted, was always outside the analogies we made for it, but this did not disburden the poet from careful and considerate looking. ‘My passion for accuracy might strike you as old-maidish’, Bishop wrote to Robert Lowell, in order to correct an error he had made about the physiognomy of raccoons. ‘But since we do float on an unknown sea’, Bishop continued, ‘I think we should examine other floating things that come our way very carefully; who knows what might depend on it’.¹⁸ This ‘passion for accuracy’ is reflected in Bishop’s praise of other writers, not least in her admiration of Charles

Darwin and his 'endless, heroic *observations*' of the natural world. Darwin's capacity to keep one eye on the object being described, even as he slid 'off giddily into the unknown', was analogous, Bishop thought, to the work of the poet, whose writing also combined accurate noticing with a 'self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration'.¹⁹

But while Bishop seeks to apply the rigour of the scientific observer to poetry, she is also alert to the limits of this endeavour. Unlike the scientist's methodical analysis of data, the poet is intimately involved in the subjects she describes. Her poems not only 'represent' reality but alter reality through description. In her study of Bishop, Bonnie Costello puts the point succinctly: 'figurative language is no longer transparent but rather a condition in which we think and which determines our conceptions'.²⁰ One corollary of this 'condition' is that the world beyond language can only be registered in and through language's limited figures: as Susan Rosenbaum writes, 'Nonhuman nature can only be fathomed, pointed to, or intuited through an understanding of human capacities and limits'.²¹ These observations partly account for the conspicuousness of Bishop's figures of speech. By emphasising language's mediated relationship to the world, her poems foreground the impossibility of describing the world head-on, showing how, in the act of representation, language always brings the world indoors. In the poem 'Cape Breton', Bishop draws attention to the song of sparrows which float 'upward / freely, dispassionately' but which also mesh in the 'brown-wet, fine torn fish-nets' surrounding the island, and, in 'Florida', Bishop describes the flight of 'long S-shaped birds' in the distance.²² Such gestures, often found, suggest a considered aesthetic approach to writing about the nonhuman world, underscoring the ways in which language contains animal otherness through reductive figures of speech.

'The Bight' (1948) offers an extended meditation on the ways in which language meshes with the natural world.

At low tide like this how sheer the water is.
White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare
and the boats are dry, the pilings dry as matches.
Absorbing, rather than being absorbed,
the water in the bight doesn't wet anything [...]
The birds are outsize. Pelicans crash
into this peculiar gas unnecessarily hard,
it seems to me, like pickaxes,
rarely coming up with anything to show for it,
and going off with humorous elbowings.
Black-and-white man-of-war birds soar
on impalpable drafts
and open their tails like scissors on the curves
or tense them like wishbones, till they tremble [...]
There is a fence of chicken wire along the dock
where, glinting like little plowshares,
the blue-gray shark tails are hung up to dry
for the Chinese-restaurant trade.²³

There is a muted violence to Bishop's language here. The sharks are reduced, figuratively speaking, to instruments of human use, and, literally speaking, to objects of consumption; likewise, the man-of-war birds (also known as 'frigatebirds') wear human names associated with conflict and weaponry. Does Bishop's poem similarly objectify the more-than-human world, not least by cutting animal life according to the cloth of language? The poem is pervaded by images of cutting. The 'man-of-war' birds 'open their tails like scissors', the pelicans crash into the water 'like pickaxes', and the shark-tails look 'like little plowshares'. Cutting and digging can also be seen in the poem's background, as in the 'ocher dredge' hauling up 'dripping jawful[s] of marl', and, as Jamie

McKendrick has observed, cutting might be heard on the level of sound. “The word “bight”, meaning a wide bay, is [...] made to jostle with and suggest the homophonic “bite” by way of the word “jawful””.²⁴ But if the poem is full of digging and exhumation, the speaker also foregrounds how little is being achieved. The pelicans, for all their diving and pickaxing, seem to catch few fish and fly away with ‘humorous elbowings’. And the dredge is involved in a kind of Sisyphean activity: when the bay fills up with more silt, it will be redeployed, to repeat the same activity it pursues now. Is there a sense in which Bishop’s poem also digs, cuts and chips, but has little to show for its efforts?

Colm Tóibín speaks of the ‘calm austerity’ that characterises Bishop’s writing, her studied refusal to allow an ‘easy drama into her poems’.²⁵ At the level of imagery, however, it is clear that ‘The Bight’ is preoccupied, perhaps obsessed, with *something*. Later in the poem, for instance, the speaker describes a group of ruined ‘white boats’ on the beaches, whose hulls, ‘stove in’ from the ‘last bad storm’, look ‘like torn-open unanswered letters’. ‘The bight is littered with old correspondences’ she notes, dryly. As critics have pointed out, one of the ‘old correspondences’ Bishop might have in mind is the poetry of Baudelaire, a figure mentioned explicitly in the poem’s opening lines, and famously the author of a poem entitled ‘Correspondences’. In the context of ‘The Bight’, however, reference to Baudelaire can only be ironic and wistful. Whereas Baudelaire’s poem meditates upon the ‘forest of symbols’ that permeates language, and the ‘deep’ but ‘shadowy’ unity between words and the objects they name, the ‘correspondences’ of the ‘The Bight’ seem arbitrary and fickle. Pelicans, man-of-war birds and sharks have little to do, evidently, with pick-axes, scissors and ploughshares, terms which are brought together by the fierce yoking of the poet’s imagination. Bishop alludes to Baudelaire, in other words, partly to scrutinise his notion of correspondence, or indeed any view of language which would posit a metaphysical relationship between words and things. ‘Baudelaire’s “Correspondences”’, Costello writes, ‘employs memory to gain access to ideal truths, of which nature is the temple’. For Bishop, however, ‘nature is not a temple but an amorphous sea’.²⁶ Against the ‘shadowy’ yet essential connection Baudelaire discerns between words and things, Bishop’s poem points to the operations of the poet’s mind, the artificiality of its images, and the objectifications of the poet’s language (which can so easily cut nonhuman others down to size).

Priscilla Paton evidently has these and other moments in mind when she speaks of Bishop’s ‘critical anthropomorphism’.²⁷ Like all poets who write about the natural world, Bishop cannot escape the domestications of language. Yet her ‘anthropomorphism’ is ‘critical’ in the sense that it continually foregrounds the provisional of her figures of speech: her poems emphasise that our understanding of animal others cannot extend beyond the circumference of our thought. But if these observations imply a kind of poetic solipsism, a view of the world as merely the product of the poet’s mind, Bishop continually emphasises the life on the other side of language. Poetry may be artificial, but it might also point to something real – as in the fireflies of ‘A Cold Spring’, who move

up and then down, then up again;
lit on the ascending flight
drifting simultaneously to the same height
– exactly like bubbles in champagne.²⁸

This, on one hand, is straightforward observation: the fireflies move in an ‘ascending flight’. The next line, however, delicately suggests that the fireflies extend beyond what the poet can see, say and know of them,

– Later on they rise much higher

Like the moose stepping out of the ‘impenetrable wood’ in ‘The Moose’, or the man-of-war birds who ‘soar / on impalpable drafts’ in ‘The Bight’, the fireflies of ‘A Cold Spring’ are essentially mysterious even as they are partly constrained (bottled) by language. Like Stevens’ blackbird, they hover at the ‘edge / Of one of many circles’.

‘The Fish’ (1940) is the poem in which the poet’s characteristic techniques are most fully on display: fastidious description, the wry use of simile, and ironic qualification. Although ‘The Fish’ has received a substantial amount of critical attention, an ‘ecocritical’ approach might call a more focussed attention to the ethical challenges Bishop seems to have encountered in writing it, and heighten our appreciation of the distinctive techniques she drew upon to make the fish ‘come alive’ on the page. Her poem, like her capture of the fish, involves an act of mastery; and by letting the fish ‘go’ by the poem’s end the speaker may be said to have redeemed herself, releasing the fish from both physical and conceptual cages; but the poem is actually quite studiously ambivalent about the meaning of its final act, which may be an earnest gesture or an ironic one, or perhaps, more complexly, both at the same time.

‘The Fish’ was inspired by a particular encounter with a fish. It happened during of her many fishing expeditions in Key West, Florida, perhaps not unlike the one she related to Marianne Moore in a letter from January 1939. ‘The other day I caught a parrot fish, almost by accident. They are ravishing fish, all iridescent, with a silver edge to each scale, and a real bill-like mouth just like turquoise; the eye is very big and wild, and the eyeball is turquoise too’.²⁹ Not long after this letter, Bishop published what would become one of her most famous poems in *The Partisan Review*. ‘I caught a tremendous fish’, the poem begins,

and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn’t fight.
He hadn’t fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. [...]
He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.³⁰

The opening lines are matter-of-fact and even a little prosaic. A fish has been caught and is being held beside a boat. In the eight and ninth lines, however, Bishop slips in two odd words, ‘homely’ and ‘venerable’, that subtly alter the poem’s tone. The first word, ‘homely’, appears also in Bishop’s ‘The Moose’, and reprises the technique of embarrassing one’s figures of speech into self-awareness. The fish has not only been transposed, quite literally, into an alien environment, but is also being figured through the (for it) unnatural element of human language. The speaker’s capture of the fish, in other words, is both physical and figurative. As we speak (notice the poem’s immediate gendering of the fish, ‘He’), and as we search for adequate descriptions (the speaker likens the fish’s skin to ‘ancient wallpaper’), we necessarily render the other through what we know. And there seems to be no help for this: to describe the fish is to bring it within human terms. As with ‘The Moose’, however, ‘The Fish’ counterpoints the ‘homely’ with the ‘venerable’, which works against the poem’s more constraining terms. Caught in the nets of language, the fish is also beyond what we might say of it: the fish as ‘tremendous’ is clearly a reference to its size – it hangs a ‘grunting

weight' – but 'tremendous' refers also to the creature's vital strangeness.³¹ The fish remains 'half out of water', still part of the nonhuman depths from which it has emerged.

This imbrication of the familiar and the strange is also intricately registered in the poem's description of the fish's body, which troubles any neat distinction between the 'natural' and the 'domestic'. The weeds caught beneath the fish are '*rags* of green weed', its skin is 'speckled' with 'fine *rosettes* of lime', and, later, the speaker compares the fish's 'pink swim bladder' to a 'big peony'. These and other fastidious details evoke a clear sense of the fish's size, colour and shape. As precise as the images are, however, Bishop's comparisons are also knowingly imperfect: for the fish, in its natural element, has nothing to do with a world of peonies, rosettes, wallpaper, pillows. The poem evokes, through a kind of negative outline, a singularity it cannot touch or name, paradoxically, by pointing to that which exceeds its grasp by registering otherness in familiar terms.

The speaker looks into the fish's eyes,

which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare. [...]
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
–if you could call it a lip –
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line
grown firmly in his mouth.³²

At first glance, the fish's stare and the speaker's stare appear to be wholly asymmetrical. Whereas the speaker can subject the animal to close looking, remarking upon its 'yellowed' irises, for instance, the fish seems to have no real gaze or agency: 'It was more like the tipping / of an object toward the light'. As David Kalstone points out, however, 'The Fish' also enacts a subtle criticism of the human look:³³ The poem may describe the fish at close quarters, but it also owns up to the fact that the lens through which it looks is slightly cracked, a drama of partial vision that is expressed as the profession of linguistic insufficiency, as when the speaker describes the 'old pieces of fish-line' that have grown into the fish's 'lower lip'. The subsequent hesitation – 'if you could call it a lip' – points both to the limitations of the description (might there be a better term?) as well as the impossibility of avoiding anthropomorphism (what else to call the fish's ... lip?). In rhyming 'lip' with 'lip', the poem seems to acknowledge this dead-end: 'lip' is not quite right and yet the only word at our disposal.

'The Fish' is partly about the necessary incompleteness of human vision, then; but it is also careful to distinguish itself from what might be called ecological solipsism. In this context, solipsism would involve a belief that we can never know the world 'out there' because that world is incorrigibly distorted by the 'scratched isinglass' of our looking. In a more extreme version of this idea, the world 'out there' might be said to be a projection of the mind. But 'The Fish', though persistently aware of what Kalstone calls the 'flawed instruments of [our] vision', implicitly rejects such solipsism by attending to nonhuman ways of being in the world – the fish's eyes 'shifted a little, but not / to return my stare'.³⁴ The poem places the human in humble relations with other ways of perceiving – other ways of seeing, breathing, sensing and being in the world. What does the fish see when it looks out at the world? What 'experiences' does it have of the speaker? By gently raising questions without presuming to answer them, the poem registers a perspective it

cannot own or inhabit. The 'lower lip' is not exactly a 'lip', and the fish looks out, but not to return the observer's gaze: in the hesitations opened up by these lines, the fish reminds us that there is more than meet the poet's eye.

The poem ends with a strange description of 'victory'.

I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels – until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.³⁵

'Victory' is a tough word. In a letter to Moore in 1938, Bishop recalls watching a fisherman in Florida perform an 'impromptu dance on the beach after a fish haul', and describes how he 'twirl[ed] round and round' with the bone of the stingray he had caught 'between his teeth'.³⁶ Is the 'victory' of 'The Fish' like the victory of this fisherman, a kind of primitive affirmation of the human as hunter. Or, conversely, does 'victory' belong to the fish? The creature, after all, has survived encounters like this before: five fishing lines are displayed 'like medals' from its jaw. In this context, might victory refer to the fish's amazing capacity for survival, its animal toughness? Or does 'victory' refer, finally, to the speaker's imminent release of the fish – an act which is victorious because it involves the charitable exercise of power? 'I'm sending you a real "trifle"', Bishop wrote Moore, when she sent over the first draft. 'I'm afraid it's very bad and, if not like Robert Frost, perhaps like Ernest Hemingway'. As Bishop continues, 'I left the last line on it so it wouldn't be [like Ernest Hemingway], but I don't know...'.³⁷ Bishop seems guilty that her poem was only possible because a fish had been caught, worried about the masculinist implications of this Hemingwayesque mastery. The final line, from this point of view, imaginatively rewrites celebrations of hunting – by affirming the act of letting go.

But is releasing the fish enough? The ambivalence of 'victory', I think, suggests a reluctance on Bishop's part to absolve the poem from its domestications of the other, as well as a refusal to sentimentalise the costs and difficulties of this particular interspecies encounter. The price of recognising the other *as other*, it seems, is the fish's suffering, its exposure to 'terrible' air. The uncertainty of 'victory' in 'The Fish' is connected to the poem's dramatization of the difficulty of knowledge and of the painfulness certain kinds of knowledge will bring to us. The speaker's changing perceptions of the fish do not trace a simple development from mastering the fish to letting it go, but moves more elliptically, a combination, on one hand, of deflections, delays and adjournments, and, on the other hand, sympathy, a quickening of the pulse, and a visceral recognition of the creature's vulnerability, which culminates in seeing the fish not only as an animal other but as a *fellow* other. Such a movement is perhaps what Seamus Heaney has in mind when he writes that, although Bishop's 'detachment is chronic', her 'detachment almost evaporates' by virtue of the 'attentiveness and precision which she brings to bear upon things'.³⁸ The 'characteristic shift' of a Bishop poem, Heaney remarks, 'might be more precisely described as being from self-containment to an acknowledgment of the mystery of the other, with the writing functioning as an enactment of all the bittersweet deferrals in between'.³⁹

Bishop's animals are observing subjects as well as the subjects of observation. The moose 'looks the bus over / grand, otherworldly', and the eyes of 'The Fish' 'shifted a little, but not / to

return my stare'. Another way of putting this is that Bishop's poems are open to the unpredictability of the other's gaze. Her animals are individualized beings, encountered face to face, and they may or may not 'return' the speaker's look. In 'At the Fishhouses', published in 1955, Bishop offers another sustained description of experiencing, and being experienced by, another animal – in this case a seal encountered by a small fishing settlement in Nova Scotia,

Down at the water's edge, at the place
where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp
descending into the water, thin silver
tree trunks are laid horizontally
across the gray stones, down and down
at intervals of four or five feet.

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,
element bearable to no mortal,
to fish and to seals . . . One seal particularly
I have seen here evening after evening.⁴⁰

According to Seamus Heaney, there is a 'rhythmic heave' in this, the second section, of Bishop's poem, a heightening of imagery which 'suggests that something other is about to happen'.⁴¹ But just as the poem seems poised to fall into reverie – what will the speaker say about this 'element bearable to no mortal'? – the poem is surprised by the appearance of another animal, a seal the speaker has 'seen here evening after evening'. The 'temptation to inspired utterance', Heaney writes of this moment, 'is rebuked by the seal who arrives partly like a messenger from another world, partly like a dead-pan comedian of water'.⁴² 'He was curious about me', the poem continues,

He was interested in music;
like me a believer in total immersion,
so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.
I also sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."
He stood up in the water and regarded me
steadily, moving his head a little.
Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge
almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug
as if it were against his better judgment.⁴³

Does the seal come across deeper meanings during his deep dives into the water, that 'element bearable to no mortal'? Is he, like the speaker, a 'believer in total immersion'? The seal's answer seems to be: 'who knows?'. In any case, and by interrupting the speaker's 'temptation to inspired utterance', the seal brings the speaker back to the source of all inspiration, the world itself. For a brief moment, speaker and seal hold each other in each other's gaze, curious about the other but also enigmatic to each other. Even as the poem is unable to communicate the experience of the water's depths, then, this quizzical, intimate, and humorous gaze between speaker and seal is suggestive of extraordinary depths, of emotions that are felt but which are ineffable. The seal, Heaney writes, 'is a sign which initiates wonder as he dives back into the deep region where the poem will follow, wooed with perfect timing into the mysterious'. The speaker of 'At the Fishhouses' acknowledges this 'wonder'. She is 'wooed' to it by the seal's extraordinary presence. But the speaker also acknowledges that her experience of the world's depth is ineffable, not least because 'our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown', and therefore beyond the scope of any fixed utterance. The poem intimates, however, that this incommunicability is not a loss but part of the nature of the mysterious itself.⁴⁴

In 'Song for the Rainy Season', Bishop describes what she calls the 'open house' we share with the natural world.

Home, open house
to the white dew...
to membership
of silver fish, mouse,
bookworms,
big moths.⁴⁵

The pun on 'bookworms' (are these insects or humans?) suggests one way of reading 'open house'. Open houses are spaces where human and nonhuman presences come together, where 'big moths' flow through the same doorways used by human inhabitants. 'Open house' also seems to imply its own ethics of hospitality, namely a way of looking at nonhuman others as fellow residents with whom we share certain spaces in common. Their habits, as with people we might meet in a slightly quirky hotel, might strike us as odd, but we are nevertheless bound to them by a common 'membership', even if that 'membership', in the end, is nothing more than the fact that all creatures are mortal: Bishop might say, that is still a 'something'.

NOTES

- ¹ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (New York, 2004), p. 76.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ Wallace Stevens, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', in *The Collected Poems* (New York, 1990), pp. 92-95 (p. 94).
- ⁴ Robert Buttle, *The Making of Harmonium* (Princeton, 1967), p. 106.
- ⁵ Stevens, *The Collected Poems* p. 94.
- ⁶ Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII; Augustine, *De trinitate* 11.1.1; 1.1.2; Emerson, 'Nature', in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York, 2003), p. 64.
- ⁷ Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, p. 93.
- ⁸ Bishop, *One Art: Letters* (New York, 1994), p. 141.
- ⁹ Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems*, ed. Saskia Hamilton (2011), pp. 192-93.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 193.
- ¹¹ Penelope Laurens, "'Old Correspondences": Prosodic Transformations in Elizabeth Bishop', in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess (Ann Arbor, 1983), pp. 75-95, (p. 76).
- ¹² Bishop, *Poems*, p. 193.
- ¹³ See especially the work of Bonnie Costello and Susan Rosenbaum. Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge, MA, 1991); Susan Rosenbaum, 'Bishop and the Natural World,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. Angus Cleghorn and Jonathan Ellis, (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 62-78.
- ¹⁴ Ezra Pound, 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste,' *Poetry*, March 1913.
- ¹⁵ Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and its Traditions* (Princeton, 1976), p. 5.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ¹⁷ Bishop, *Poems*, p. 56.
- ¹⁸ Bishop and Robert Lowell, *Words in Air*, p. 553.
- ¹⁹ Bishop quoted in *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art*, ed. Lloyd Schwartz and Sybil P. Estess, p. 6.
- ²⁰ Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), p. 97.
- ²¹ Rosenbaum, p. 64).
- ²² Bishop, *Poems*, p. 66 and p. 33.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- ²⁴ However, McKendrick adds: 'In the only recording of Bishop reading this poem, she spells out the title so the audience doesn't confuse the word with its homophone' (p. 126). Jamie McKendrick, 'Bishop's Birds', in *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery*, ed. Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott (Newcastle, 2002), pp. 123-42 (p. 126).
- ²⁵ Colm Tóibín writes that Bishop's 'search for pure accuracy', sometimes 'forced' her to 'watch the world helplessly, as though there as nothing she could do'. She 'shared with Hemingway a fierce simplicity, a use of words in which the emotion seems to be hidden, seems to lurk mysteriously in the space between': *On Elizabeth Bishop* (Princeton, 2015), p. 47.
- ²⁶ Costello, *Questions of Mastery*, pp. 186-87.
- ²⁷ Priscilla Paton, 'You Are Not Beppo: Elizabeth Bishop's Animals and Negotiation of Identity', *Mosaic* 39.4 (December 2006), 197-214.
- ²⁸ Bishop's 'details', Costello writes, 'are embedded in human perspective; they neither rise to the status of pure metaphor nor bare themselves as objective reality': *Questions of Mastery*, p. 24.
- ²⁹ Bishop, *One Art*, p. 79.
- ³⁰ Bishop, *Poems*, p. 43.
- ³¹ Historically, tremendous was synonymous with words like 'awful' and 'sublime'; it is also etymologically connected to the verb 'tremble' (OED).
- ³² Bishop, *Poems*, pp. 43-44.
- ³³ Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet*, p. 87.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ Bishop, *Poems*, p. 44.
- ³⁶ Bishop, *One Art*, p. 71.
- ³⁷ Bishop, *One Art*, p. 87.
- ³⁸ Seamus Heaney, 'Counting to One Hundred: On Elizabeth Bishop', in *The Redress of Poetry* (1995), pp. 164-185 (p. 172).
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- ⁴⁰ Bishop, *Poems*, p. 63
- ⁴¹ Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (1988), p. 105.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 106
- ⁴³ Bishop, *Poems*, p. 63
- ⁴⁴ Bishop's refusal to turn animals into allegories of experience evidently impressed Robert Lowell, who commended 'At the Fishhouses' in the following terms: 'I felt very envious reading it – I'm a fisherman myself, but all my fish become symbols, alas!': *Words in Air*, p. 7. Bishop's refusal of the symbolic, however, is clearly not the same as a refusal to acknowledge what Heaney calls 'wonder'. As Bishop puts it in one her notebooks, reflecting on the issue of how the poet might express this wonder in ordinary language, 'It's a question of using the poet's proper material, with which he's equipped by nature, i.e., immediate, intense physical reactions, a sense of metaphor and decoration in everything – to express something not of them – something, I suppose, spiritual. But [this sense of the spiritual] proceeds from the material, the material eaten out with acid, pulled down from underneath, made to perform and always kept in order, in its place [...] Miss Moore does this – but occasionally I think, the super-material content in her poems is too easy for the material involved' (quoted in Costello, *Questions of Mastery*, pp. 3-4).
- ⁴⁵ *Poems*, pp. 99-100.