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Breath of Restraint: Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish" in Conversation with Asthma

Although she was writing during a period where Confessional poetry was at its height, Elizabeth Bishop remains characteristically distant and restrained in her own craft. Though she appreciated the Confessional movement and the poet's ability to come face-to-face with his or her own trauma, Bishop herself wondered whether "this form of heroism [had] anything to do with poetry" (Ellis 24) and chose to remain objective in publications despite her "personal tragedies" (Lombardi 161). Unlike her contemporaries, such as Robert Lowell or Anne Sexton, the "I" narrator that appears in Bishop's poems does not function as explicit, cathartic release; instead, Bishop uses it to take on poetic persona to create a cloak and shield herself within her poetry—she does not unequivocally engage her readers in conversation because she requires that they be immersed in her impressions of a purely observational and physical world. However, in spite of her efforts to remain veiled through her poetry, many poems are still laden with autobiographical information, and her worldview still manages to peer through her distanced and controlled language. In *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop*, Jonathan Ellis argues, "In art (as in life), Bishop's 'whole purpose' is to stave off crisis. She does so by not ignoring feeling, but by placing formal controls on it" (23). Such a reading transforms Bishop's poem "The Fish" from simply a nature poem into one detailing her struggle with asthma and her subsequent attempts at controlling her breath through poetry and language.

A unique feature of “The Fish” readers should notice upon a first reading is its lack of stanza breaks; the poem itself appears relatively uniform and physically tight, as a result, or purely homeostrophic on the page. The seventy-six lines include forceful enjambment, with only three lines as an exception to this rule: “He didn’t fight,” (5), “He hadn’t fought at all” (6), and “And I let the fish go” (76). As a result of the enjambment, the meter alternates between dimeter, trimeter, and tetrameter, though Bishop does not adhere to a particular order between the three considering the poem is in free verse. Many of the lines are generally made up of iambs, though consequently are substitutions dispersed throughout the poem due to the enjambment. An example of a typical iambic line in the poem is at the beginning of the poem in line nine: “and homely. Here and there” (- / - / - /). Lines such as “shapes like full-blown roses” (/ - / / / -) demonstrate Bishop’s variability in foot with a trochaic substitution at the beginning of the sentence and a spondee that comes after (14). Despite this, Bishop still shows a consciousness to the structure and arrangement of the sentences within the poem, following grammatical rules regarding capitalization of only the beginning of sentences and not the beginning of every poetic line. Aside from a single exception, the end of each sentence is end-stopped, allowing the reader to take a breath before moving to the next line.

In considering Bishop’s attention to form with respect to the actual subject matter of “The Fish,” her intention is clear: the poem’s form mimics its content, and Bishop’s desire to control the formal aspects of her poetry mimics her desire to control her complications with her illness. Much of the poem contains descriptions of this creature that has been forcibly removed from the water by the narrator, and the only valid actions that take place occur when Bishop’s speaker catches the fish, observes it, and then sets it free. In an article titled “A Tremendous Fish,” Mark Doty begins with a quote from Bishop, who advocates that the poem describes “*exactly* how [the

event] happened” (58). While this may be true, and Bishop may have indeed caught such a grotesque and “tremendous fish” at some point in her life (Bishop 1), the poem’s structure is more noteworthy when compared to the way an asthmatic, like Bishop, breathes. Marilyn May Lombardi argues in “The Closet of Breath: Elizabeth Bishop, Her Body and Her Art” that “while asthma is not the central subject” of Bishop’s poetry, “knowledge of Bishop’s condition opens up new ways for the reader to approach crucial images of respiration, suffocation, and constriction” (154). This interpretation of how to read Bishop is certainly applicable to “The Fish:” the poem’s form must naturally contort into a stiff, monolithic structure that contains a breath-like cadence, teetering on the edge of potential suffocation since it not only mirrors the way an actual fish out of water would breathe, but how Bishop saw her own respiration.

This concept of breath is further supported by Bishop’s use of caesura through the dashes scattered throughout the poem. One section in particular that relies on caesura to emphasize tone and the necessity to pause is when the speaker notices the hooks still attached to the fish’s lip:

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. (47-51)

The dashes isolate the line “if you could call it a lip,” and tell the reader how that line should be produced vocally, implying that a pause before and after the line is required for the line to come across as it physically looks on the page (48). Another notable moment including caesura occurs at the beginning of line forty-four, when the poet’s speaker describes the fish’s eyes:

They shifted a little, but not

to return my stare.

—It was more like the tipping

of an object toward the light. (41-44)

Bishop additionally builds the breathiness with the insistent usage of the word “and,” one that appears twenty-four times in the poem. Although this feature may seem arbitrary or insignificant on the surface, one cannot forget how much attention to restraint Bishop has demonstrated in just the poem’s form alone, which is representative of Bishop’s control and restraint against the pull towards blatant confession. Her decisiveness to connect independent clauses and say “I stared and stared / and victory filled up / the little rented boat” instead of “I stared and stared. / Victory filled up/ the little rent boat” (65-67) is the last push that builds up to the last line of the poem, which contains the last “and” unsurprisingly: “And I let the fish go” (76). This building of longwinded sentences connected by “and,” as well as the poem’s line breaks parallels the way asthma affects the body. Considering asthma “is an allergic response to foreign substances” where “mucous membranes of the respiratory system secrete excessive amounts of mucus,” “narrow[ing] the passage ways, making it difficult to expel air,” it is not difficult to draw such conclusions (Lombardi 155).

Another fascinatingly deceptive manner in which Bishop reveals personal experiences is through the imagery she relies on to describe the encounter with the fish. Indeed, the implications of her descriptions give way to her struggle with the disease; the language she uses sets the poem’s tone as observational and distant, but it eventually becomes more emotional as the speaker continues to look at the fish’s “sullen face” (45). Though Bishop’s diction is stark and almost jarring at times with her visceral word choice—phrases such as “the coarse white flesh” (27), “shiny entrails (31), “tarnished tinfoil” (38)—the guttural feeling she evokes

certainly poetic in its conventions despite feeling almost scientific at times due to her distance. One of the major images Bishop uses in her descriptions of the fish is war or soldier imagery. Its lip is “grim, wet, and weaponlike” (50), and its gills are “fresh and crisp with blood / that can cut so badly” (25-26). Not only do the fish’s gills help it breathe, but have the power to physically harm the speaker, just as Bishop’s lungs—she relates to this colossal fish because she has figured a part of herself into it: “The homesick fish, literally suffocating on oxygen, seems to be a relation to the perennially homesick bishop, whose displacements and losses were also felt in terms of suffocation” (Ellis 77). Like Bishop’s battle with asthma, the fish has been caught many times, with “five old pieces of fish-line” (51) and

a wire leader
with the swivel still attached
with all their five big hooks
grown grimly in his mouth. (52-55)

The fact that the fish still has evidence of its past confrontations is enough relation to Bishop’s personal struggles with her health, and the scars of the disease stay with her for the entirety of her life: “Bishop’s wheezing lungs prevented her from taking up a comfortable and lasting residence in the places she loved, contributing to an already intense feeling of homelessness... she confides that asthma has become the single most frustrating impediment to her happiness” (Lombardi 155). However, curiously enough, the “battered and venerable” fish is a wounded soldier who does not resist capture or make any attempt to escape (9): “He didn’t fight. / He hadn’t fought at all” (5-6). Instead, the fish chooses to inhale the “terrible oxygen” with his “frightening gills,” a feeling of which Bishop is all too familiar (23-24). The nonexistent resistance may be a result of Bishop’s feelings during an asthma attack: “Her notebooks show

just how closely she tended to relate poetic control and a stoical and disciplined approach to physical discomfort. Indeed, once we fully appreciate the impact of the poet's allergic inflammations on her life... we gain a better understanding" (Lombardi 162). Furthermore, this lack of effort causes the war imagery to merge with Bishop's images of decay. The fish, whose "brown skin [hangs] in strips / like ancient wallpaper," (10-11) is also

speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice. (16-19)

Compared to what a person typically envisions when a fish is conjured into the imagination, Bishop's fish is not only distorted and grotesque, but clearly aging—possibly the reason why it gives up before it even attempts to escape. Bishop also relies on competitive language, where the fish is in competition with the nature it belongs to in addition to the poem's speaker: "Like medals with their ribbons" (61) and "victory filled up" (66). This can be seen as a corresponding competition between Bishop and her struggle for breath; the poet's attempt to conquer the physical and emotional tolls body associated with asthma.

However, it is important to note that though the fish is the ultimate winner, so to speak, by the end of the poem when it is released back into the water. The most notable shift when Bishop moves from description of the fish to focusing on the poem's speaker, where the language literally brightens with images of a "rusted orange engine" (71), "sun-cracked thwarts" (72) and a "rainbow" (69) formed by the boat's oil leaking onto the water, though the context of the images is not necessarily positive. Most significantly, Bishop brings back the image of the rainbow right before the very last line in a puzzling turn: "until everything / was rainbow,

rainbow, rainbow! / And I let the fish go” (74-76). Perhaps this line alludes to the ability for beauty or perseverance to come out of something that seems ugly and easily defeated on the surface, such as the fish who has been captured over and over again, or Bishop’s constant struggle with asthma. After all, Bishop successfully paints a sympathetic portrait of the animal, asking her readers to take pity on the old, decrepit creature—a creature that eventually triumphs and returns to freedom despite ostensibly not having much fight left inside him, not too unlike Bishop herself.

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