

C. K. Doreski: On "One Art"

The simple sentence of the opening stanza seems to subvert the title, declaring that this poem is not about art; rather, it is concerned with an acquired skill, the "art of losing." Critics anxious to commiserate with poets will find this reading psychologically appealing. Not only does it guarantee numerous opportunities to rehearse this art, but (Bishop suggests through the acceleration of enjambment) supplies materials branded "with the intent / to be lost." This perishable quality simultaneously allows for repeated practice and diminishment, if not extinction, of the pain. The poet offers a primer for the mastery of disaster, couched in the Puritan form of the sermon to others for their moral improvement.

Mindful always of the common auditor, Bishop forces the second stanza to visualize with the philosophical ruminations of the first. Readers learn precisely how to master this art, and are urged to practice, to make it into a virtuous habit: "Lose something every day." A further injunction counsels the reception and approval of that resulting disorder?the "fluster"?produced by haste, undue agitation. Loss, art, master, disaster?the lofty conceptual diction of the first stanza crumbles in the mockery of this near rhyme. The "lost door keys, the hour badly spent" become concrete entities and lost time. The refrain vulgarly collides with "fluster"?to master fluster??in an uneasy rhyme casting the very tone of the poem into doubt.

Bishop enforces a progressively dynamic, almost uncontrollable, schedule of loss in the third stanza. Then simply shifts the focus to the next lesson. No longer does the homilist tally manageable, sympathetic incidents; the poem has moved beyond them to over-whelming concerns: places, names, and destinations. Each reader must supply concrete examples. The "intent" of the first stanza blossoms into the broader intentions of "where it was you meant / to travel" of the third stanza. Bishop continues to induce specific details from the reader as the pace and range grow. Soon drained of places, names, and travel plans, the reader must struggle to fill the lists. The muted refrain rings hollow as these clustered categories of loss and faster/disaster cacophonize.

After the impersonal professorial tone, the abrupt introduction of the lyric I requires immediate reappraisal of all that comes before this stanza. The homilist's experiential knowledge, suppressed in the first half of the poem, surfaces as the teacher has obviously experienced frustration in the auditor's ability to comprehend these lessons of loss. Bishop draws to the heart of the matter and summons the ultimate parting gift, her mother's watch?an artifact that links the living and dead, recalling a time, expressing a generation?making tangible the feeling of irretrievable loss. Bishop literally lost her mother's time, as the stories "In the Village" and "Gwendolyn," and the poems "Sestina" and "Manners" all demonstrate. Looking beyond autobiography to the truth of this loss, however, Bishop exploits what is, after all, only one more "minor family relic."

The exemplum confounds conventional ideas of the subjective and objective, and demonstrates that loss is grave and universal, but too conventional to be deeply personal. She defers the threat of sentiment by the sweeping rhetorical gesture of "And look!" Her life, no longer a chaos of events, seems orderly and safe as Bishop inventories and schedules her losses: "my last, or / next-to-last, of three loved houses went." Her autobiography assumes an

oddly reassuring linearity and predictability as the poem hurtles toward its closure. In spite of approximate knowledge?"my last, or next- to-last"?the end is palpable by its very proximity.

This registry of loss proceeds to the missing "three loved houses." Even that great modifier loved cannot convert these houses into homes. In spite of the wisdom of Bishop's crusade?"Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?" (see "Crusoe in England")?the expatriot narrating this poem remains homeless.

The narrator, further emboldened by self-knowledge, begins again with "I lost." The scale has tipped; forsaking the personal for "two cities, lovely ones" the poet supplies lineaments and character to these scenic vagaries. Like the child-artist of "Sestina," the speaker approaches the unspecified, the unembraceable, yet concrete, type of loss: "two rivers, a continent," the loss of which suggest the impermanence, the unpossessable nature of the earth itself.

Though there remains a tension between the public and private exempla, that tension is ill-defined and ill-conceived. Bishop has adhered to the standards and expectations of her aesthetic; she has captured knowledge within the language and form of the villanelle. Yet with the displaced utterance delivered sotto voce, Bishop conveys a struggle between growing self-knowledge and her poetic of reticence in this dialogue between the self and the lost. "Even" moors this hierarchy of loss to that always poorly articulated world of extremity?without you, I can't go on, I can't live without you?those contracted conditionals meant to express the inexpressible love between two people. What threatens to emerge is that very thing her rhetoric strives to cloak: the self, naked to the vagaries of language. This ultimate series of I-You dependencies is the final protest against human perishability. Herein lies the true lesson of loss: "?Even losing you." Turning from her common audience, Bishop allows the parenthetically ensnared qualities to create a caesura: "(the joking voice, a gesture / I love)." Readers participate in the auditory and visual recall of pleasure (not pain) reduced to this synecdoche for the severed other. The positive qualities of this ultimate sacrifice displace the irritations and categorizations that came before in the poem. The situation challenges not the pupils but the master herself. In the almost processional resignation of "I shan't have lied. It's evident" rests the captive wisdom of the poem. In the extended refrain?

the art of losing?s not too hard to master though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

?readers see that parenthetical cure for the only true disaster. This encapsulated lesson is for the master alone; unlike the free, gestural "And look!" designed to deflect attention from the self, the parenthetical injunction maps a course for only one. The poet knows that only knowledge, not wisdom, can be shared. Like the child in "Sestina," the adult must also make something of absence. Her reward is the knowledge with which to write. In this rare command?"(Write it!)"?Bishop distinguishes herself from even Stevens?s "Snow Man," who is "nothing himself," emerging as she does in this dramatic echo of William Carlos Williams?s "Say It!"

The formal constraints of the sestina and villanelle freed Bishop to work with personal material without inducing the maudlin self-despairing tone she despised. The most forbidding and private sorrows, monumentalized in art, oddly affirm human dignity, emotion, and care.

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