

## David Kalstone: On "The Man-Moth"

A figure effectively dead turns up in the notebooks, in New York material that Bishop would adapt for "The Man-Moth." She had observed a woman in the subway about whom everything had died ? her face dead white, her clothes, her handbag ? except her eyelashes. Bishop remembers that in a dream her friend Margaret Miller "had looked into the inside of a small mask someone had pulled from his face, and caught in it all around the eyeholes were the little hairy eyelashes. The woman?s face made me think of that ? its expression was a concave one, like an empty interior expression, and its only markings were the little eyelashes." The woman?s eyes were shut, and the lashes seemed like those on a sleeping doll. "It is rather strange the way the eye is surrounded with inhuman stuff ? hair grows, I?ve heard, even on the dead." The incident contributes obliquely to "the Man-Moth," a kind of morbid counterpart to the man-moth himself, who has, on rare occasions, the capacity to escape and make his romantic ascents to the surface of the city, each one a doomed foray. We know that a newspaper misprint, reading "manmoth" for "mammoth," prompted the poem: the idea of a doomed spirit trapped in a subway rider?s form, sitting always backward, racing under the city streets (in the world of the third rail "running along silently, as insincere as poison," she wrote in her notebook). In the conditional clauses of the poem?s last stanza she transforms her own notebook observations of the deadened woman on the subway into a glimpse of residual purity and spirit:

[Kalstone quotes the last stanza.]

The observer?s curiosity and effort is rewarded by extracted signs of life, but as in her windowpane illumination, as in "the Weed," there is a link between vision and tears. ?

from David Kalstone, "From the Country to the City," Chapter 1 in *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989 19-20

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