

ENGL 126: Readings in English Poetry II
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Simon Billings

Asking Her to Stay: A Close Reading of Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Shampoo'
by Simon Billings '23

In the world of the 'The Shampoo,' under the moon, perhaps outside *Fazenda Samambaia*,¹ two lovers are running out of time. The 'heavens will attend on' them only so 'long' (7-8). But if the speaker at first troubles herself over how much or how little 'Time' she has with her lover in the first two stanzas (11), by the end she finds a way to express her love regardless of how much time they have. She finds a way to tell Lota exactly what she wants: for her to 'come' (17).²

'The Shampoo' works within the tradition of the 17th-century *carpe diem* lyric. There is the same sense of *tempus fugit* (7-8) as we might find in Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' or Robert Herrick's 'To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time.' (Indeed, Bishop's 'rings around the moon' refer to a lunar halo, which traditionally portends stormy weather and means that you should – à la Herrick – gather ye harvest while ye may.³) There is the same apostrophizing of 'Time' (11). There is – as we will see – the same sexual tension, though it is less explicit than in Marvell or Herrick. There is even the same stock image of a plant as in Marvell (with his 'vegetable love,' 11) and Herrick (with his 'rose-buds,' 1), even if 'the lichens' represent a less romantic choice.

The poem's occasion, however, the emotional motivation that compels its speaker from speech to silence, is almost exactly the opposite as we find in Marvell's or Herrick's poems.

¹ Where Elizabeth Bishop lived with her partner Lota de Macedo Soares in Brazil in the 1950s and 60s.

² Rightly or wrongly, I will take Lota to be the addressee of this poem.

³ 'If the moon shows a silver shield, / Be not afraid to reap your field,' as the Irish proverb goes.

Rather than importuning her to have sex with her as Marvell did his addressee, the speaker asks hers simply to let her wash her hair. In Bishop's version of the *carpe diem*, it's the addressee who is more sexually forthcoming than the speaker (more 'precipitate and pragmatic,' 10). While Herrick's speaker hurried his 'virgins' to lose their innocence, and Marvell's urged his 'coy mistress' into bed, Bishop's speaker is shy, her language opaque. Most importantly, unlike Marvell and Herrick in their hurry, this speaker prefers to take things slow. If she has to choose an image of vegetable love, she will choose lichens, a plant that takes thousands of years to 'grow' (2). What better way to get Marvell and Herrick to slow down: if it is a lichen, 'This same flower that smiles today / Tomorrow [*won't*] be dying' (Herrick, 3-4). And if 'the heavens will attend on' the speaker and Lota as long as on the lichens – if the lichens are a proxy for how much time they have together – then they seem to have plenty of time!

But can they really know how fast the lichens grow? And by extension, can they really know much time they have? On the one hand, the lichens – to the human eye – seem 'still' (1). On the other hand, over *their* lifespan – to the lichen eye, if you will – they will be seen to 'grow' (2). If we sped up the reel fast enough, they might well appear to 'explo[de]' over a David Attenborough voice-over (1). 'Explosions' (1) and 'shocks' (3) mark a quick pace of growth; 'grow' (2) and 'spreading' (3) mark a slower one. In her stereoscopic word choice, Bishop makes the time frame seem arbitrary: in one time frame lichens grow slowly, but in another (non-human one) they grow quickly. She challenges whether the *carpe diem*'s pressing question – of how much time we have – can be answered at all.

Within the imagery of the lichens, then, Bishop furthers her subversion of the *carpe diem*. The speaker may not be running out of time, like Marvell with his 'wingèd chariot hurrying near' (23). And yet, neither can she be said to have lots of time. Whether she has lots of time or little

of it simply depends on how she looks at the matter. Just as how quickly the lichens grow depends on what time frame she uses to look at them. Rather than side with or against the *carpe diem* tradition, Bishop transcends it. As the second stanza will make clear, the speaker's experience of 'Time' is paradoxical, and this is what renders the question *how much time?* a bad one, an unanswerable one.

By analogizing the lichens to the lovers (the heavens attend 'as long' on both, 8), Bishop lets questions about the lichens raise questions about human beings in love. *Do the lichens grow discretely or continuously?* becomes, in addition, *Does the speaker experience 'Time' discretely or continuously?* Does she feel a continuous flux ('grow' 'spreading'), or does she jump from second to second (each moment a little 'shock' or 'explosion')? The oxymoron 'still explosions' subtends the union of these two opposites, the discrete and continuous. One can only render an 'explosion' 'still' by taking a picture of it. In this case, the 'explosion' of the lichens' growth can only be 'still[ed]' by the speaker's look – a kind of mental picture. At what point does that series of frames – of looks – become a film? The lichens seem to make that impossible leap in the speaker's imagination. They seem to straddle a categorical difference between discrete and continuous.

Can her love, then, too? Can a series of (discrete) sexual encounters amount to a (continuous) sustainable relationship? The 'still explosions' call to mind orgasm, in which a sexual partner remains perfectly 'still' while experiencing 'explosions' of feeling on the inside. Literally, the lichens are colorful feats accomplished by the symbiosis of fungus and alga. Figuratively, they are sexual feats accomplished by the symbiosis of speaker and addressee, to the background music of Bishop's purring alveolars (grow, spreading, gray, arranged, rings, around). Bishop's lines are so short that we are almost tempted to read 'spreading gray,

concentric shocks' as a phrase in line 3. In reality, of course, the comma between 'spreading' and 'gray' renders 'gray, concentric shocks' a qualifier of the noun 'lichens' rather than an object of 'spreading.' (In effect, read: 'the lichens grow / by spreading, [*and the lichens are*] gray concentric shocks' instead of 'the lichens grow *by spreading gray concentric shocks.*') Just as, in reality, the lichens cannot actually 'spread' 'shocks.' Something continuous (like a romantic relationship, or the verbal action of 'spreading') cannot be made out of discrete material (like a series of orgasms, of seconds, of 'shocks'). The lineation raises that hope in the *mise-en-page* of the poem; the comma frustrates it, in the grammar of the poem.

If the lichens grow in 'concentric' (3) 'rings' (5) where is the center around which the speaker and Lota can grow (*con-centric* [having a center in common])? Where is the '[un]chang[ing]' center they can share, in the midst of all this movement? Perhaps it can be found in their 'memories,' which 'have not changed' (6). Out of these 'memories,' the speaker can fashion the 'still'-lives that are her poems: she can freeze her relationship in verbal icons,⁴ she can 'still' the 'explosion.' '*Within* our memories,' however, gives the lie to this false consolation. It is not that today is like yesterday: it is the much humbler fact that the memory of today is like the memory of yesterday. 'Within' (as opposed to 'in') stresses that things 'have not changed' only in the speaker's head, while the setting outside remains in constant motion: spreading, growing, exploding. Perhaps, the speaker fears, her sense of something long-term with Lota is just as illusive. Perhaps her reality with Lota is only the 'shocks,' while the stringing of them together into *a relationship* is all in her head. The promise of a perfectly contained

⁴ William K. Wimsatt's phrase.

ABABAB rhyme scheme eludes us, as the promise of a self-contained time capsule in ‘memory’ disappoints the speaker.⁵

If memory cannot ground this relationship, the speaker worries, nor can sex:

And since the heavens will attend
as long on us,
you've been, dear friend,
precipitate and pragmatical;
and look what happens. For Time is
nothing if not amenable.
(7-12)

The speaker is reflecting on something (the ‘what’) that has ‘happen[ed]’ (11). Lota ‘[has] been’ forward, ‘precipitate,’ perhaps – in keeping with a trope of the *carpe diem* – encouraging the speaker to have sex (9-10). Reading between Bishop’s lines, perhaps the thing that has ‘happen[ed]’ is intercourse: an ‘explosion,’ a ‘shock.’ All hinges on how we understand her tone. On the face of it, the speaker seems to be thanking her ‘dear friend’ for initiating. ‘Since the heavens will attend’ only so ‘long’ (7-8), one of them has to, and it certainly won’t be the speaker, inhibited as she is. When she goes along Lota’s impulsive approach, she seems grateful for it: great things ‘happen’ (11), ‘Time’ becomes ‘amenable’ to them (12), and each new moment brings forth (literally in the French root, *amener*) yet another opportunity for an ‘explosion’ of lovemaking ‘on the rocks’ (1). On this reading, we understand ‘nothing if not’ as a formulaic expression (12): Time is very amenable indeed!

But equally, the speaker could be cautioning Lota. ‘Look what happens’ when they do what Marvell and Herrick recommend their mistresses and virgins do: they have sex, that ‘happens’ – and then ‘nothing’ (12). The ‘explosion’ is here and then gone, leaving them in the same place as last time. (On this reading, ‘look what happens’ now carries a more deploring,

⁵ The first three lines (ABA) prime us to expect alternating pairs of rhymes for the rest of the stanza (ABABAB). But after the third line, the introduction of a third pair (C) creates an overhang, with one line between the As and Cs but two lines between the Bs.

I-told-you-so tone.) Living in a future of sexual gratification – waiting always for the next ‘shock’ – never actually brings them any more time.

Indeed, rather than as a formula, we could just as equally understand ‘nothing if not amenable’ as a proposition: if Time is amenable, then it is something. If Time is not amenable – if the orgasm does not last, and the ‘explosion’ cannot be stilled (or if, so only factitiously ‘within [their] memories’) – then Time is ‘nothing.’ Then it is simply an upper-case, bloodless abstraction, language’s failed attempt to pin down an ever ‘spread[ing]’ *durée*. Is Time amenable to the speaker’s and Lota’s desires, then? From one point of view, it does seem so: every second, Time ushers in a new moment for these lovers to make use of. From another point of view, it doesn’t: in ushering in these new moments, it must take away present ones against their will. Inasmuch as ‘Time’ both is and is not amenable from different viewpoints, Bishop’s speaker seems to be both thanking Lota and politely recommending another approach – one not ‘center[ed]’ in sex (3). The nature of ‘Time’ is paradoxical, leaving room for this ambiguity.

Besides, whether Bishop and Lota have lots of time or little does not really matter if the present moment is all the two will ever experience. Whether Time is amenable or not – whatever their answer to this abstract question – they will always live in the same present moment. (Whether one sees the lichens as growing in quick bursts (‘shocks’), or in thousands of years of barely noticeable ‘spreading,’ they are still the same lichens.) In her ‘precipitate and pragmatical’ hurry to have sex, Lota is trying to solve a problem that doesn’t exist in the first place, a ‘nothing’ (12). In this *carpe diem*, there is no ‘Time’ that is running out. There is no chariot, no hourglass, but always and only this moment. Thus, the rabbit-and-duck quality of Bishop’s ‘Time is nothing if not amenable’ polemicizes against Marvell and Herrick: whichever way we

understand it (proposition or formula?) does not ultimately matter, in the same way that whichever way we view the lichens does not.

There may also be a more emotional reason for this paradoxical quality to Bishop's language in the first two stanzas. The speaker is still reserved. In Bishop's costive syntax, difficult vocabulary and choppy line breaks, she has a hard time communicating with Lota.⁶ To admit openly that she needs her is, perhaps, to be more vulnerable than she is yet capable of being. She prefers to hedge, saying one thing and meaning another. She says 'dear friend' (9), but really she means 'lover.' She says '*they* [the lichens and the rings around the moon] have arranged to meet' (4), but she also means *we* have arranged to meet 'by the rocks' (1).⁷ And 'shooting stars,' 'where' are you going? (13-15) really means 'Lota, where are you going?' (The metaphor lets her keep a measure of plausible deniability about her feelings – the pose of: Oh it's not *your* leaving that I'm anxious about, it's *the stars*!) Just as Bishop needs the reader to complete the meaning of her queer, coded poem in 1955 ('dear friend,' said with a wink), so the speaker needs Lota to come through for her. If the speaker will be forward enough to write this code, she wants Lota to meet her halfway and interpret it to *mean* something forward. ('Precipitate'? Lusty.) She asks her 'friend' to be bold enough to read between platonic lines.

After sex ('what happen[ed]' in the second stanza), Lota gets up to leave, but the speaker detains her. The 'moon' is still up, and the 'stars' still out. Though sex has 'happen[ed],' it is still before dawn: this is not yet an aubade or a parting poem. So where is Lota going, 'so straight, so soon'?

⁶ To take just one example: 'You've been precipitate and pragmatical, dear friend' would have a little easier than 'You've been, dear friend, precipitate and pragmatical.' Bishop makes her rhythms stop-and-star, and thereby her speaker stilted.

⁷ Her shyness comes across in the poet's passive attribution of creativity to the lichens: '*they*' – meaning the lichens and the rings around the moon – seem to be arranging *themselves* into this poetic correspondence. Really, we know that the lichens are not doing anything to assimilate themselves to the rings; it is of course the poet who has 'arranged' for them to meet (in her mind) by noticing a common 'concentric[ity]' in them. As self-effacing a poet as she is shy a romantic partner!

The shooting stars in your black hair
In bright formation
Are flocking where,
So straight, so soon?

(13-16)

As the lines flow more easily, the speaker is finally managing to express her desire to Lota more easily: *stay*. In the two previous stanzas, Bishop's lines were clogged by medial commas;⁸ but here, we clip right through mostly comma-less lines. In the first stanza, Bishop 'arranged' (4) the poem's first lines to suggest stasis, 'still[ness]' (1). (She placed her line breaks such that nouns rather than verbs predominated in each of the lines: still explosions in line 1, lichens in 2 and concentric shocks in 3.) But this stanza runs with the 'stars.' A 'bright formation' is proposed in one line – a 'still' snapshot – only to be dashed by the 'flocking' movement of the next. 'Are flocking where' will get its own full line, only a verb and an interrogative in magnificent chaos – without a single noun or article to ground it. No 'formations' hold; nothing stands 'still' anymore. Phrasing doubles itself in quick parataxis: 'in your black hair / in bright formation,' 'so straight, so soon.' If the speaker spent the first stanza 'arrang[ing]' (4) the perfect 'formation' (14) of a tenor (2) literally 'ringed' by its two vehicles (1 and 3) like 'rings around the moon' (5), no such pleasing mimetic patterning is to be found here. Though the speaker laments the departure of the stars (or Lota) 'so soon,' there is also a quality of relishing this new movement. Lota's departure presents an opportunity for the speaker to detain her, to *express* love. From the abstractions of the second stanza ('the heavens,' 'Time'), the speaker has dared to take a step into the continuous present of this poem ('*are* flocking'), its actual action. And that continuous present enacts her preference for a relationship that is more than just a succession of moments, of nouns, of 'shocks.'

⁸ 'The lichens, grow / by spreading, gray, concentric'; 'around the moon, although'; 'you've been, dear friend'; 'look what happens. For Time.'

Granted, this might mean her metaphors will be less organized. But that might simply be the price for extemporaneity, which she is now willing to pay. In the first stanza, she tried rather awkwardly to bring all her metaphors into agreement. Her symbiotic love was like that between a fungus and alga in a lichen, lichen which in turn looked like a series of ‘explosions’ or ‘rings around the moon’ (and ‘explosions’ also have ‘rings’ of energy ‘spreading’ out in the form of ‘shocks’ – so the ‘explosions’ and lunar ‘rings’ could resemble each other too), and – to come full circle – she felt her love in ‘explosions.’ (*See, reader? It works!* we feel Bishop trying to say). By this stanza, she has become far more at ease with incongruity. She mixes metaphors. She lets one pick up where the other left off: Lota gets up to leave ‘so soon’ like the stars, which in turn ‘flock’ like sheep...

Indeed, she will go on to compare the basin to the moon for no better reason than that they are both curvy, white things. And how endearing a simile it is! How superficial the comparison! The speaker delights in this more childish outlook, this manner of seeing the moon as a big basin in the sky – and using words like ‘big’ for that matter. Indeed, her opening up to Lota finds expression in those more inviting word choices: ‘big,’ ‘shiny.’ (No more Latinate diction; no more ‘precipitate and pragmatical,’ ‘amenable’ and ‘concentric’; no more shutting the reader and Lota out.) She alliterates her dentals with a jaunty energy (big, tin, battered, basin). Her tropology is no longer as layered as the ‘lichens’ of earlier, but it is also more fun.

If the speaker and Lota can have a center in common, it will not be as grand as memory or sex. It will be nothing more than Lota’s little head in a little basin, around which ripples of water and ringlets of hair ‘ring’ (5). Though it is small, it is ‘battered’ (18): it holds sentimental value. Rather than her ‘straight’ departure (16), the speaker longs for something longer and curvier, taking its time around the bend – more like the edge of a basin, or a moon, or the

circularity of the latter's waxing and waning (rather than the 'shock' after 'shock' of having sex over and over again). Rather than rushing head foremost into the next moment (*prae* (before) *caput* (head), giving 'precipitate'), the speaker has Lota lean back into the moment, head hindmost, as she washes her hair.

For all this, the shooting stars were still only a coded (metaphorical) way of asking Lota to *come*. It is only by the final lines of the poem that she works up the courage to be direct with Lota. At last she dares to tell her what to do, to 'come.' At last she is explicit, and deictic – come *here*, to '*this*' basin – and joyfully so:

Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin,
Battered and shiny like the moon.
(17-18)

She asks Lota not to get up right away after the sex that 'happen[ed]' in the second stanza (11). She asks it in a grammatical mood impervious to inflection by tense, and therefore timeless: 'come.' And she asks to wash her hair. To the problem of the *carpe diem* – that time flies – washing hair is a 'pragmatical' solution. Not of thought (in the indicative mood) but of action (in the imperative), not constative (describing the poem's world in the first stanza, reflecting on it in the second) but performative (this utterance finally *achieves* something within the world of the poem). If the second stanza found time's flight to be a paradox – time is both always 'a-flying' and ever-present,⁹ both amenable and not (the lichens both spreading slowly and exploding quickly) – the solution cannot be found in thought. It must be an act (*pragma*), like shampooing a lover's hair. That will be even better than intercourse. It slows things down. It diffuses the 'shock' of sexual release. It can even be done with a cute, battered basin.

The speaker has seized the day not by having sex, but by washing hair. In that action of 'spreading' (3) her hands through Lota's hair, she finds something more meaningful and lasting

⁹ 'Old Time is still a-flying' in Herrick (2).

than the ‘shocks’ (3) of intercourse. In the first two stanzas, she tripped up over big questions in even bigger words. But by the end, she has learned how to communicate affection – more simply, more warmly – to ‘you.’

And the moment she finally expresses her desire directly to Lota is the same moment we understand why the poem was titled ‘The Shampoo’ all along. It is, after all, the first time Bishop mentions anything to do with hair. Bishop ends her poem with this chiming coincidence of the speaker finally opening up to Lota and the reader finally understanding the poem *in toto*. If we finally feel Bishop’s love, after all those long words, hopefully Lota can too.

