

MIDCENTURY AMERICAN POETRY AND THE IDENTITY OF PLACE

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation argues that the midcentury period from 1945-1967 offers a distinct historical framework in American poetry that bears further study. This position counters most other literary history of this period wherein midcentury poets are divided into schools or coteries based on literary friendships and movements: the San Francisco Beats, the New York School, the Black Mountain poets, the Confessionals, the Black Arts poets, the Deep Image poets, and the New Critics, to invoke only the most prominent designations. Critics also typically share a reluctance to cross gender or racial lines in their conceptualizations of the period. Of the few books that survey this period as a whole, most propose the defining features of midcentury poetry as formal innovation (or lack thereof) and a renunciation of the past.

By contrast, I argue that such divisions and limiting categories do not attend to some of the most important features of midcentury poetry. I suggest that midcentury poetry most often demonstrates a renewed interest in locating a particular identity in a specific place. To illustrate this point, I explore depictions of identity and place in the works of three poets who are rarely studied together, Gwendolyn Brooks, Theodore Roethke, and Elizabeth Bishop. Each chapter examines the changes in poets' careers by focusing on how the relationship between place and identity differs in their early and late

work. I contend that the few generalizations we have about the trajectory of this period (that poets moved from using more traditional forms to more open forms, for example) are not entirely accurate and, even more, that the accounts that we have of the poets' individual careers could be enhanced by a comparison between their early and late depictions of identity and place. I argue that the concerted exploration of the intersection of place and identity calls for a reconsideration of midcentury poetry: not just the categories we have but the poets and poems we read.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Notes.....	26
II. FROM BRONZEVILLE TO THE MECCA AND AFTER: GWENDOLYN BROOKS AND THE LOCATION OF BLACK IDENTITY	28
Notes.....	72
III. FROM “LOST SON” TO “LOST SELF”: THE PLACE FOR IDENTITY IN THEODORE ROETHKE	77
Notes.....	130
IV. FROM “CORRESPONDENCES” TO CONNECTIONS: ELIZABETH BISHOP’S “GEOGRAPHY OF THE IMAGINATION”	133
Notes.....	177
V. CONCLUSION.....	180
Notes.....	186
REFERENCES CITED.....	187

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

After a hearty New England breakfast,
I weigh two hundred pounds
this morning. Cock of the walk,
I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey
before the metal shaving mirrors,
and see the shaky future grow familiar
in the pinched, indigenous faces
of these thoroughbred mental cases,
twice my age and half my weight.
We are all old-timers,
each of us holds a locked razor.

Robert Lowell

I'm with you in Rockland
where you will split the heavens of Long Island and resurrect your living human Jesus
from the superhuman tomb
I'm with you in Rockland
where there are twentyfive thousand mad comrades all together singing the final
stanzas of the Internationale
I'm with you in Rockland
where we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets the United States that
coughs all night and won't let us sleep
I'm with you in Rockland
where we wake up electrified out of the coma by our own souls' airplanes roaring over
the roof they've come to drop angelic bombs the hospital illuminates itself imaginary
walls collapse O skinny legions run outside O starry-spangled shock of mercy the
eternal war is here O victory forget your underwear we're free
I'm with you in Rockland
in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America in
tears to the door of my cottage in the Western night
Allen Ginsberg

There are several Puerto
Ricans on the avenue today, which
makes it beautiful and warm. First
Bunny died, then John Latouche,
then Jackson Pollock. But is the
earth as full as life was full, of them?
And one has eaten and one walks,
past the magazines with nudes
and the posters for BULLFIGHT and

the Manhattan Storage Warehouse,
which they'll soon tear down. I
used to think they had the Armory
Show there.

A glass of papaya juice
and back to work. My heart is in my
pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy.

Frank O'Hara¹

My three epigraphs represent the endings of three often-studied midcentury poems: Robert Lowell's "Waking in the Blue," from his 1959 *Life Studies*; Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" from his 1956 *Howl and Other Poems*; and Frank O'Hara's "A Step Away from Them," from his 1964 *Lunch Poems*. These poems are typically invoked as exemplars of midcentury American poetry from the 1945-1968 period. The two most common descriptors of this period as a whole are a renunciation of the past (especially past forms) and a freshness of language to contend with a changing cultural landscape. James E. B. Breslin summarizes the "radical transformation of poetic theory and practice" of the midcentury period in this way:

[These poets] proposed a range of alternatives to the established mode, and they provided the leading sources of the new paradigms for poetry that became visible in the late fifties and early sixties. These clusters of poets differed from each other in fundamental ways and in some instances were mutually antagonistic; but they agreed in their renunciation of the well-made symbolist poem and in their search for poetic forms that could capture temporal immediacy, for the language of a "breakthrough back into life." (xv)

The midcentury poetry of Lowell, Ginsberg, and O'Hara would certainly fall into such a framework. Lowell's "Waking in the Blue" provides such a "breakthrough back into life" (a phrase of his own) by painting an intimate picture of mental illness, a breakdown of a

sense of self that is both tenderly pathetic (“Cock of the walk, / I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor’s jersey”) and dangerous (“each of us holds a locked razor”). The jagged lines, lack of punctuation, and specific diction in “Howl” clearly reject “the well-made symbolist poem,” and its then-scandalous depiction of homosexuality and rejection of 1950s patriotism (“where we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets”) are equally clear examples of the “temporal immediacy” Breslin describes. Too, O’Hara’s quotidian observations of modern urban life (“the magazines with nudes,” “a glass of papaya juice”) demonstrate a “transformation of poetic theory and practice” of the past at the same time as they confirm a continuing conversation with it (“My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy”).

However, such an account cannot include other midcentury poems, works that do not prize a “radical transformation” through the rejection of previous forms or a new kind of language that accounts for the (mostly white and male) experience of contemporary life. It cannot contend with the black, urban poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks or explicate the subtly personal, anti-confessional poetry of Elizabeth Bishop. Theodore Roethke’s search for his own identity occurs during the same period as Allen Ginsberg’s lament for his generation but does not look to that larger culture as a source of identity.

In short, such an account cannot adequately explain the poems of major U.S. poets writing at midcentury—or many others like them. Thus, the scholarship of American poetry at midcentury falls into a dizzying array of categories. Most often, midcentury poets are divided into schools or coteries based on literary friendships and movements: the San Francisco Beats, the New York School, the Black Mountain poets, the Confessionals, the Black Arts poets, the Deep Image poets, and the New Critics, to

invoke only the most prominent designations. Surveys of the period that examine work at this historical moment do also, nevertheless, share an inclination to situate the poetry in relation to modernism, implicitly or explicitly, employing terms like “middle generation,” the “postmodern,” “late modernism,” or, most recently, “inter-modernism.” Books that examine the “middle generation” tend to focus also on poets’ personal struggles or literary friendships, such as Bruce Bawer’s 1986 *The Middle Generation: The Lives and Poetry of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman and Robert Lowell* or Eric Haralson’s more recent edited collection *Reading the Middle Generation Anew: Culture, Community and Form in Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, published in 2006.

Critics also share a reluctance to cross gender or racial lines in their conceptualizations of the period; in book-length studies, women and ethnic writers are most commonly segregated into their own chapters, while the rest of a book is dedicated to single-author treatments of the “major” poets of the period. Beach’s *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, for instance, includes chapters on “Gendered Modernism” and “From the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement.” Haralson’s *Reading the Middle Generation Anew* complicates this tendency with chapters on Lorine Niedecker, Elizabeth Bishop, and Robert Hayden, but “pride of place still goes to Lowell, whose continuing stature is attested by the recent publication of his monumental *Collected Poems*” (3). Here, and often, collections analyze work by women and minorities as long as the primacy of the “major” literary figures is upheld.

More recent work divides the period into two distinct formal categories that admit a degree of gender if not racial diversity. The first includes poets in the lineage of modernist formal experimenters like William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein: the

avant-garde. Marjorie Perloff's 1981 *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: From Rimbaud to Cage* traces this literary history, as does Eliot Weinberger's more recent collection *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders*, published in 1993. The second grouping generally includes everyone else judged worthy of note who isn't avant-garde, especially those affiliated with formalism, and considers these poets as antimodernist. Karl Malkoff's 1973 *Crowell's Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry*, for example, divides poetry into eight different schools (including Projectivism, Beat Poetry, the New York Poets, the Confessional Poets, the New Black Poetry, and Deep Imagism) and ends his discussion with the final category, "The Formal Poets," whom he calls the "nonaligned poets" (42). These poets, including Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell, and Richard Wilbur, use traditional forms only sometimes but always with irony because "the utter seriousness and security of form of Frost and Robinson, which at its worst degenerated into moralizing, is no longer available to the contemporary poet."

On the whole, then, there are clear trends that emerge in an overview of criticism of American poetry at midcentury. First, the poetry is most often considered in relation to modernism, and it is often defined by the rejection of certain modernist qualities. Second, poets are almost always examined as representative of (or in defiance of) established literary movements in the received history of American poetry. These categories are upheld along the lines of gender and race, so that typically women and poets of color are seen as footnotes or aberrations to the analysis of the canonical poetry in the period. Third, the poetry (and often the poets themselves) is termed avant-garde or formalist based on the use of traditional forms. While these measures are not necessarily inaccurate, their application can also reveal the difficulty of analyzing poetry that does

not fit neatly into their prescriptive assumptions. Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," for example, is a villanelle written later in her career; despite her earlier free verse poems, is she then a formalist (178)?² She did not participate in any poetic movements of the era, but does her friendship with Robert Lowell suggest that she, too, is truly a Confessional poet? Or does her friendship with Marianne Moore mean she is really a late modernist?

Given the limitations of these categories for midcentury poetry, the persistence of their use is surprising. This is especially evident when compared to perhaps the first book written about the period, *Mid-Century American Poets*, edited by John Ciardi and published in 1950. Ciardi invited poets who "are all part of what will be recognized as a poetic 'generation,' roughly that generation that arrived within the last ten to fifteen years" to submit a selection of their work and a statement in response to questions about their poetics (xxvi). The poets in the collection include Richard Wilbur, Muriel Rukeyser, Theodore Roethke, Karl Shapiro, Wilfred Townley Scott, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, Elizabeth Bishop, and Delmore Schwartz. The book is partly a defense of a style of poetics that was unfamiliar to contemporary readers accustomed to modernist poetry, and in the foreword Ciardi gives instructions toward better poetry reading that can aid in appreciation of these poets.

While Ciardi certainly shares the tendency to dismiss the contributions of women and people of color, his foreword offers very different observations about midcentury poetry from the trends I have been discussing. He is reluctant to offer an overview of the poetry of the period, noting "that the poets and the critics are considerably at odds in their view of modern poetry" and urges the reader to consider the poets on their own terms (xxv). Still, he makes two observations about poets of the period: first, that "these poets

want to be understood,” and even what may appear at first as obscure is not finally unintelligible. The poets’ main goal is communicating their self-understanding with their readers, “for pre-eminently this is a generation not of Bohemian extravagance but of self-conscious sanity in an urbane and cultivated poetry” (xxix). In his second observation, Ciardi defies nearly all assumptions about midcentury poetics. He suggests that poets do not write in response to modernism but with “the absence of authority,” so that

There is no evident grouping into programs and no hierarchy of arbiters in matters of taste. These poets are not imagists, nor vorticists, nor classicists, nor existentialist, and they bow to no Amy Lowell, or Ezra Pound, or Sam Johnson, or Jean Paul Sartre. They will *listen* to the authority of sense and talent, as it is, for instance, obvious that all of them have paid homage to Mr. Eliot’s poetry and criticism, but once they have listened, they all insist on their own freedom to accept or reject according to their own view. It is never, then, a poetry of movements and manifestoes. It is more nearly a blend of the classical and the metaphysical, a poetry of individual appraisal, tentative, self-questioning, introspective, socially involved, and always reserving for itself the right to meet experience in its humanistic environment—the uncoerced awareness of the individual man. (xxix-xxx)

Here, Ciardi rejects familiar modernist categories (Imagism and Vorticism) but also asserts that his poets lack the submission to authority that would place them in *any* categories (including the categories of “Confessional” and “Beat” to emerge later). In his account, the defining characteristic of the age is not the poets’ relationship to the authority of received categories or the defiance of them, but the absence of such a

relationship, so that poets are “uncoerced.” Despite our tendency to group poets together, Ciardi suggests the exploration of individual consciousness is the most defining feature of this poetry, noting its “individual appraisal,” “self-questioning” attitude, “introspective” tendencies, and its “awareness of the individual man.” Ciardi argues not for “tradition” but for the “individual talent.”

Somehow, though, these insights into midcentury poetics were lost as we instead sifted poets into definitions based on categories, friendships, and literary arguments. An important book complicated these categorizations, especially those that separate poets into thematic or formal categories, in 1984. The most commonly referenced analysis of poetry in this period is still James Breslin’s *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry 1945-65*, one of the first books since Ciardi’s to suggest commonalities among poets in the period as a whole. Breslin’s conceptualizations of midcentury poetics, as well as the premises underlying them, are now mostly familiar: the literary period began in a climate of fear and repression, and as conservative forces mobilized in the 1950s, poets were haunted by the specter of institutionalized modernism, dogmatic New Critical commands, and a feeling of belatedness in literary history. For Breslin and many other critics, midcentury poets encountered modernism in a variety of themes, most often dictated by Eliot and Pound. Modernism came down to midcentury literary culture in formulaic terms: formal innovation, the decentering of identity and subjectivity, impersonality, and the sense of a world crisis—with its symbolic Ur-place, the waste land—that nullifies local particularity. Despite their fears, descendant poets at midcentury eventually “included oppositional energies” against the predominant conservatism of their time, and what united them later in the period was “their deviation from the

dominant artistic [meaning, modernist] canons” (53, 59). This “antiliterary stance [. . .] permitted them a rough, ‘unpoetic’ authenticity, a return to the existential freshness of the world” (59). Midcentury poetics comes into its own when it creates new, “authentic” poetry against prevailing modernist expectations. Thus, for Breslin the different schools of poetry at midcentury represent different ways to accomplish the same thing: to oppose modernism in exchange for openness and immediacy. His chapters include Allen Ginsberg as a Beat, Robert Lowell as Confessional, Denise Levertov as a Black Mountain poet, James Wright as a Deep Image poet, and Frank O’Hara as a New York School poet.

While Breslin stands out against other critics who only categorize poets by the group they belong to, he also has much in common with them. The struggle with modernism is still the defining consideration, and even more, Breslin presupposes an active antagonism with literary predecessors. He acknowledges that modernism’s formalism diminishes for midcentury writers, but the spirit of modernism—experimentation, struggle, and revolution—remains the poetic tenor. Although modernism reached its end, “it was not exactly the case that the energies of the modernist movement had been exhausted” (12). Instead of responding to this opportunity for revolution or at least renovation, Breslin contends, poets retreated. The “modernist energies” evident in poems such as “The Waste Land” fizzled out in descendant poems, and poets were unwilling to fight to renew them. Early midcentury poetry thus reflected not a new, dynamic poetics but the acquiescence endemic to “the age of anxiety.”³

However, when Pound’s dictate to “make it new” becomes the measure of success for all poetic revolutions, critics often see midcentury poets as failures, or at the least as

failed modernists. Even more, judged against the standards of modernism, the response many later poets did choose—measured, reflective, and conciliatory—appears weak and inadequate. For example, Breslin takes issue with poets at midcentury who chose introspection over pyrotechnic modernism: “confronted with a stylistic abundance, these circumspect young poets constructed a garden wall and withdrew; from inside, they professed inclusiveness, eclecticism, and complexity of attitude” (38). Poets were not innovative but “eclectic,” not audacious but “circumspect.” Despite the plethora of literary resources invented by the modernists, poets at midcentury retreated—not even to an outdoor cage in Italy or a church in England but, shamefully, “inside” and behind a “garden wall” of their own making. Too, while their poetry appeared in a variety of schools and movements, their writing was all too similar: “the reality was that no period of modern literary history has been so dominated by a single idea of writing.”

If these seem like gendered criticisms of this generation of poets—weak and weeping into their tea, retreating to the garden of their own selves, quietly measuring their claims and avoiding Poundian bombast, struggling with their actual fathers instead of their poetic ones, reaching to traditional forms for substance and meaning—it’s because they are. Thus, Breslin criticizes Adrienne Rich for “avoid[ing] rivalry” and “connecting herself with a less threatening literary tradition” by echoing “Dickinson, Robinson, and Frost” (44). Qualities such as introspection, “complexity of attitude” and interiority become gendered thus and shameful, a way of hiding from the historical and literary imperatives to “make it new” in response to the problems of the age. Breslin is not the only critic to use such standards to judge the midcentury poets; many others make similarly gendered claims about the weakness of the early postwar period.⁴

In the past decade, critics have begun to question such limiting categories, examining poets of the period through a historical lens that encourages inclusion of women and writers of color. Edward Brunner's 2001 *Cold War Poetry*, for example, complicates "the view of the 1950s as a period of unprecedented placidity" and rejects the reputation of "poetry by women in the 1950s [. . .] as undisciplined, disorganized, and inconsequential" (x, xi-xii). John Lowney's 2006 *History, Memory, and the Literary Left: Modern American Poetry 1935-68*, examines Muriel Rukeyser, Elizabeth Bishop, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Thomas McGrath, and George Oppen as late modernists affected most profoundly by the Depression and the Cold War instead of by World War II. Lowney, too, notes how midcentury poets are often neglected or coopted to fit our currently inadequate periodization:

As a result of such normative definitions of modernism and postmodernism, poets whose literary reputations were formed in the 1930s or 1940s have fit neither of the dominant generational models. They have instead been relegated to such liminal zones as "the middle generation," "modern poetry after modernism," or "the first postmodernists," or they have been shuttled back and forth, often in disregard of chronological logic. (11)

Studies of poets such as Elizabeth Bishop no longer condemn her for failing to address the political questions of her time but instead seek to understand how she "is subtly yet critically engaged with the violence and destruction of twentieth-century warfare" (Rosenbaum qtd. in Haralson 53).

These rehabilitations, however, are few. Most often poets in this period are examined in single-author studies, grouped by literary friendships, and viewed either as

late modernists or early postmodernists. While books that examine literary friendships can illuminate aspects of the creative process and poetic development, they also miss the opportunity to understand common features of poetry of the period as a whole. The pervasive terminology of “mid-,” “middle,” “late” or “inter-” places the work of midcentury poets subordinate to the so-called high moderns or merely anticipatory to the contributions of the postmoderns. While these names are not entirely inadequate, many of them connote more than categorization; calling poets “late modernists” or “middle generation,” for example, also suggests their belatedness.⁵

More importantly, when we think of poets as “in between” these two ostensibly more important movements, we miss the historically significant contributions of their poetics and judge them by modernist or postmodernist standards that can only diminish their contributions. Instead of thinking about the way the midcentury poets made it new (or failed to do so), this dissertation seeks to understand what they reclaimed from literary history before modernism for representing the mid-twentieth century and beyond. Gwendolyn Brooks, Elizabeth Bishop, and Theodore Roethke—poets who do not fit neatly into any established categories or coteries—assiduously work to recover a unified subjectivity, and what makes this recuperation possible is their shared impulse to construct a subjectivity that emerges in a relationship with a specific place.

Place signifies different things to each of these poets, but all write out of a coherent sense of self that examines the historical and personal repercussions of their location. We have too long considered midcentury poetry that is invested in identity to be the exclusive purview of the Confessional poets. Even more, the exploration of self is often described by contemporary critics as an embarrassing and, predictably, gendered

indulgence. This stems partly from Eliot's doctrine of modernist impersonality, the prevailing standard of poetic identity by the end of the modernist period.⁶ Poets were expected to be conduits of great ideas, transforming the peculiarities of their own identity into universals through poetry. To remain mired in one's individual identity, then, was to ignore the poet's responsibility to transcend *himself* and join the tradition. Two decades later when Gwendolyn Brooks was asked to explain why her work did not speak to The Tradition (but to people in her own "Bronzeville" neighborhood), she responded by connecting her work not to the modernist Individual Talent but to an earlier literary predecessor: "'Vivify the contemporary fact,' said Whitman. I like to vivify the universal fact, when it occurs to me. But the universal wears contemporary clothing very well" (146). Brooks's poems attire the Individual Talent in "contemporary clothing," and they repeatedly find their poetic attire in a certain place.

That Brooks's poems find universal facts in contemporary clothing suggests an individual subject but also one who exists in a certain place. Modern poetry generally did not locate itself in a particular place; while a location might be specified, most famously, as London is in Eliot's "The Waste Land," it nevertheless functioned as a symbol of modernity itself—as the City, No Man's Land, Western culture—despite "The Waste Land"'s Baedeker structure. Of course, there are modernist poems that exemplify this tendency to make place symbolic (Ezra Pound's London in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley") and others that complicate it (William Carlos Williams's New Jersey in *Paterson* or Jean Toomer's South and North in *Cane*). Still, and especially with the dominance of Eliot, modern life was one version or another of the waste land, a place of sterility and condition of rootlessness. Instead of continuing to depict the individual as a symbolic or

transient waste-lander, midcentury poets were deeply engaged with a specific place—Brooks with her Bronzeville neighborhood, Roethke with his parents’ greenhouse in Michigan, and Bishop with her homes in Massachusetts and Brazil. To acknowledge the force of location in their emplaced poems is to recognize that the midcentury poets had greater involvement the problems of history than their reputations as Confessionalists or drop-out Beats suggest.

Poets of the midcentury period also faced a literary climate that viewed poetry of place, especially of non-urban place, with the kind of folksy provincialism associated with Robert Frost. This reputation persists, as Frost’s does, even in contemporary criticism; Breslin’s description, for example, of the midcentury poets’ rejection of modernism as a desire to “return to the existential freshness of the world” implies an innocence or nostalgia in their work (59). Their distinctive response to modernity is also described as an anomaly or as a weak form of modernism. As Scott Herring claims in his 2009 survey of modernist regionalism, there is a persistent impulse to pit regional texts against modernist texts; as the story goes, compared to the masculine, cosmopolitan, and universal modernists, regionalist work is “conflated with a quaint local color, [so that] ‘regionalism’ thus figures as an antiquated and effeminized (dainty, delicate, minute, skimpy) literary form that international modernisms eclipsed” (3). In recent years, critics have questioned this valorizing notion of transnational modernism as separate from regionalism; indeed, Mark Whalan has argued for the term “localist modernism” in order to articulate the importance of location to our understanding of both modernism and nation (105). But situated midcentury texts are still typically considered aberrations: “these sites have often been treated as geographic curiosities removed from larger global

impulses” (Herring 3). As regionalism is increasingly considered the “the other side of the transnational coin” and not a reaction against it, this dissertation proposes a more direct lineage between modernist regionalism and midcentury poetry of place (Manning qtd. in Whalan 102).

The concerted exploration of the intersection of place and identity calls for a reconsideration of midcentury poetry: not just the categories for ushering it into our received ideas but the poets and poems we read. Often, as with Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room” (159) or Brooks’s “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi, Meanwhile a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” (333), a particular place (Wooster, Massachusetts and Mississippi, respectively) is a necessary setting for the understanding of self to occur. For example, Bishop’s “Arrival at Santos,” the introductory poem in her 1965 book *Questions of Travel*, captures the location and renewal of self that I propose as a feature of midcentury poetics (89). That book is divided into two sections that are not coincidentally geographical markers for the poems they contain: “Brazil” (87) and “Elsewhere” (119). This first poem initiates the exploration of Brazil that continues in the rest of the section; here, the speaker surveys her strange, new surroundings at the port of Santos. Like many of Bishop’s poems, this one immediately identifies its place and the effect that place has on its speaker in the first stanza:

Here is a coast; here is a harbor;
here, after a meager diet of horizon, is some scenery:
impractically shaped and—who knows?—self-pitying mountains,
sad and harsh beneath their frivolous greenery. (89)

The occurrence of “here” three times in the first two lines locates the speaker as she

names the geographical features around her. While these phrases paint a picture of what surrounds her, the repeated “here” also suggests an estrangement from this location as she makes sense out of a foreign scene: she is coming to terms with here and not somewhere else.

In this poem, as with many Bishop poems, the speaker and the place where she is located have an intimate and often reciprocal relationship; Santos is not merely a setting. The place itself becomes metaphoric food for the speaker (after the “meager diet of horizon”), suggesting a hunger for place, even this foreign place. The mountains are personified—attesting to the association of self and place—and reflect the emotional and physical condition of the speaker (“impractically shaped,” “self-pitying,” “sad and harsh”). As a tourist she is similarly awkward in this unfamiliar landscape. Deriding the tourist in herself, she acknowledges her foreignness and her questionable motives in “arriving” here:

Oh, tourist,
is this how this country is going to answer you

and your immodest demands for a different world,
and a better life, and complete comprehension
of both at last, and immediately,
after eighteen days of suspension?

Bishop’s speaker admits that she has arrived at Santos as part of a search, one that is continued throughout the book. In it, the “immodest” quest for “a different world, / and a better life” will be negotiated through place and interiority. “Arrival at Santos” starts with

the speaker locating herself in relation to a new place and ends by setting off anew on another exploration: “We leave Santos at once; / we are driving to the interior” (90). Here, “interior” is both Brazil and her inner life; these dual journeys are charted in the poems that follow. In the end, typical connotations of “tourist” as outsider and recreational observer give way as this speaker reveals herself to be seeking a fresh start and self-understanding from this foreign place.

While I argue that these poets share an interest in reclaiming subjectivity through place, it is not enough simply to note the presence of subjectivity or attention to place in their work. Recent books, such as Eric Haralson’s edited collection *Reading the Middle Generation Anew*, have highlighted these aspects of midcentury poetics; it includes, for example, such chapters as “Theodore Roethke and the Poetics of Place.” But here, and typically, attention to place merely suggests a focus on the natural world. Similarly, the interest in investigating a sense of self is too often read as an indulgent or embarrassing confessional tendency. Instead, I want to understand how place and identity function in the work of Brooks, Roethke, and Bishop to situate their poetry in a responsible relation to history. Their places are not secret gardens or remote regions. They are bustling urban neighborhoods, expansive Midwestern prairies, and foreign port towns: they are places not removed from but in commerce with the world.

However, it must be acknowledged that I don’t seek consensus among the poets and their work but to understand their difference better. My project examines the common themes of place and identity in Brooks’s, Roethke’s, and Bishop’s poetry, but it still acknowledges the distinct circumstances that each of these poets faced during the same American epoch. For example, although they were written during a similar time

period, the places in Gwendolyn Brooks's 1945 *A Street in Bronzeville* (in Chicago's urban "black belt") are profoundly different from the places in Theodore Roethke's 1948 *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (in a rural Michigan greenhouse). As such, I consider the relationship between their poetries without ignoring the differing historical and cultural realities that informed their work.

Too, places like poets are not static, and each chapter examines the changes in poets' careers by focusing on how the relationship between place and identity changes between their early and late work. By using this framework to look at the period as a whole, more complicated poetic careers emerge: Brooks, Roethke, and Bishop each had long and productive careers during a turbulent and rapidly evolving period of American history. Each of these poets received accolades for their early work (among other honors, Brooks received a Pulitzer prize for her 1950 *Annie Allen*; Roethke received a Pulitzer prize for his 1953 *The Waking*; and Bishop received a Pulitzer prize for her 1955 *Poems: North and South—A Cold Spring*); each went on to produce later work in the 1960s that many critics consider to be their finest (Brooks, *The Bean Eaters*; Roethke, *The Far Field*; Bishop, *Questions of Travel*). To call these poets "midcentury" without attending to the changes that occurred in their work beyond those years minimizes the contributions of their later poetry. For example, Bishop certainly had "cold war poems" ("Roosters," for example, was first published in *The New Republic* in 1941), but to call her a "cold war poet" would not allow for a complete understanding of her later poems (such as "One Art" or "In the Waiting Room") (Travisano *Artistic Development* 73). Indeed, I suggest that the few generalizations we have about the trajectory of this period (that poets moved from using more traditional forms to more open forms, for example) are not entirely

accurate and, even more, that the accounts that we have of the poets' individual careers could be enhanced by a comparison between their early and late depictions of identity and place.

In Chapter II, "From Bronzeville to the Mecca and After: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Location of Black Identity," I examine Brooks' *In the Mecca* as a transitional book that bridges her early and late work. I acknowledge that Brooks is known as *the* Chicago poet and that she worked throughout her career to describe individuated black identities. Despite Brooks's unwavering focus on black people, her sense of the audience for her portraits of black life changed as the location of her subjects moved from Bronzeville to the Mecca and beyond, or "After" Mecca. In her early career, Brooks's characters are presented in their complex individual lives but also as part of a larger community: for example, with just one exception, in *A Street in Bronzeville* cohesive portraits of individuals together create the Bronzeville community. However, with "In the Mecca," despite the characters' close proximity in the Mecca building, the community is fractured, and ties between people have broken down. Early in the poem, Brooks emphasizes the distinctiveness of each character in the Mecca building by allowing them to speak in their own stanzas and using different forms for each character's descriptions. Melodie Mary's regular meter and lilting rhymes ("What if they drop like the tumbling tears / of the old intelligent sky? / Where are the frantic bulletins / when other importances die?" 412) are formally distinct from her neighbor Briggs's irregular rhythms and slant rhymes ("Gang / is health and mange / Gang / is a bunch of ones and a singlicity" 412-13). However, later in the poem, other subtle but unsettling formal effects work against the sense of the Meccans' isolation and distinctiveness; Brooks suggests ways that their "singlicity"

breaks down. For the characters in “In the Mecca,” overcoming isolation does not result in community but in cacophony.

While “In the Mecca” successfully provides a “countermemory” to prevailing racist myths of black life in that vast building, the poem is ultimately unable to find a place for black community there (Lowney 129). It is only in “After Mecca” where Brooks finds a new model of black community: after Mecca, the poems preserve black individuality but they do not associate it with a particular place. “Boy Breaking Glass” provides the most striking example; in it, the boy who breaks windows in his neighborhood is displaced both from the advantages of white privilege and a basic sense of belonging to America: “Who has not Congress, lobster, love, luau, / the Regency Room, the Statue of Liberty, / runs” (439). Bracketed in quotation marks, his words paradoxically attest to his invisibility and his utter placelessness: “Nobody knew where I was and now I am no longer there” (439). Compared to the characters from Bronzeville, who are named and identified with their particular place in their community, this boy is nameless, unknown, and now lost even from his hiding place. The “Boy Breaking Glass” represents the relationship of place and identity in Brooks’s later work. For the rest of her career, it is not place that defines the individuated black community in Brooks’s poetry but an urgent “call” to belonging in a black nation, a conceptual and not a geographical space within the United States. This change—from people bound together in a place to people united by black nationalist consciousness—is what most distinguishes Brooks’s pre-1967 and post-1967 work.

As I argue in Chapter III, “From ‘Lost Son’ to ‘Lost Self’: The Place for Identity in Theodore Roethke,” Roethke and Brooks’s poetry have entirely different concerns

despite their shared interest in identity and place. While Brooks articulates place and identity in the black community, Roethke defines his project as a single man's search for identity through careful attention to the natural world. Especially in comparison to Brooks's socially concerned poetry, it's easy to read Roethke's poetry as guilty of the criticism commonly leveled against midcentury poets: that they are too introspective and self-involved. However, exploring identity was not a way Roethke shirked his responsibilities to the world but rather the way he worked out his relationship to (and thus his responsibilities to) the world. To Roethke, the search for identity is tied to the act of seeing deeply and understanding life outside of himself. It is important precisely where observations about the natural world occur, and Roethke often lingers in the description of a scene with geographical specificity and minute detail. However, it is equally important how the self is located in that place—his poems chart the way speakers react to and interact with place. In "Weed Puller," one of the greenhouse poems from *The Lost Son*, the speaker describes the "indignity" of crawling in the dirt while plants peacefully grow overhead:

With everything blooming above me,
Lilies, pale-pink cyclamen, roses,
Whole fields lovely and inviolate,—
Me down in that fetor of weeds,
Crawling on all fours,
Alive, in a slippery grave. (37)

Here, as often occurs, the place leads directly to a located self. And just as this poem (and others in the greenhouse sequence) are focused on exploring inner truths, *The Lost Son*

poems are set in and concerned with interiors: the greenhouse, the cellar, his parents' kitchen, and the cemetery where his father is buried. These poems show a fascination with the sometimes gruesome workings of interior life. Identity and place are thus deeply intertwined in Roethke's poetics: identity is a correspondence between the interior self and the outside world.

Comparing his early book (*The Lost Son and Other Poems*, 1948) with his final book published posthumously (*The Far Field*, 1964) reveals the intricate and sometimes paradoxical relationship of identity to place across Roethke's career. The "lost son" persona is primarily concerned with the struggle to understand his identity as a son without a father. His emphasis on exploring his identity leads directly to a concern about place: *The Lost Son* poems are some of the most geographically specific poems in Roethke's career, largely set in his father's greenhouse and his childhood home in Michigan. Despite the attention to place, the identity explored in these poems is nevertheless "lost." While Roethke's preoccupation with his father does not change throughout his career, what does shift is the persona of the son addressing him. The "lost son" who begins his quest for identity in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* becomes a "lost self" in his final poems in the "North American Sequence" of *The Far Field*. In these instances, the word "lost" communicates both a statement of his identity (a son who has "lost" his father, a self who is "lost" in his purpose) and a statement of place (or lack thereof: both the "son" and the "self" are attempting to find their way in the world). However, in *The Far Field*, "lost" gains a positive association; in fact, becoming "lost" is the speaker's goal. Again and again in "North American Sequence," the speaker attempts to lose the self into the world and finds contentment in the moments when he achieves

such dispersal. While Brooks's later poetry grapples with the dispersal of the black community, Roethke's later poetry longs for the dispersal of the internal self to the exterior.

Bishop's poetry, however, is subject to a different tension between the internal and the external: it is known for its precise descriptions of the exterior world alongside a measured "reticence" about her internal life. While recent criticism has unsettled this reputation of Bishop as a reticent poet (and, indeed, has portrayed her as socially engaged and even politically progressive), it has not accounted for the complicated relationship between her internal search for identity and an external interest in place, as I explain in Chapter IV, "From 'Correspondences' to Connections: Elizabeth Bishop's 'Geography of the Imagination.'" Bishop is renowned for her careful and detailed descriptions of place (Brazil and Nova Scotia, for example), and her work is often subjected to common midcentury generalizations (that it moved from less to more personal, for example). Her changing descriptions of place and identity, however, reveal these generalizations are inadequate. I argue that there was a change in Bishop's larger aesthetic, not from impersonal to personal but from a precise description to a more imaginative, associative impressionism.

In her early poems that attempt to locate the self through careful description, external precision creates tension with an internal world where the speaker doesn't have the same control or command. These poems carefully describe the external world, but the speaker does not allow her descriptions to lead to other revelations about the self. When the poems do lead to an epiphany, the epiphany is carefully located in the world and forestalled, often, with a sudden ending, preempting a transforming effect on the self.

Thus, the descriptions add up to a closer look but not a new insight. The speaker maintains a reverence for what she observes, but remains at a distance from it.

By contrast, in Bishop's later poems of precise description the speaker is much more intimately involved with the subject of the poem. Instead of sudden endings that close off new discoveries, endings now open up as the speaker's descriptions of place lead to epiphanies that affect her own sense of identity: they are not just about seeing the world anew but about seeing her own imagination as congruous with the external world. Thus, Bishop's late poem "The End of March" does not end with the dry, precise tedium of earlier poems such as "The Bight" ("All the untidy activity continues, / awful but cheerful" 60) but endows images from the poem's descriptions of the beach (a kite string with no kite; large paw prints on the beach) with new, imaginative possibilities:

They could have been teasing the lion sun,
except that now he was behind them
—a sun who'd walked the beach the last low tide,
making those big, majestic paw-prints,
who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with. (180)

Bishop's early poems seek "correspondences" between disparate elements of the outside world, whereas her later poems seek connections between the internal "geography of the imagination" and those varied, external geographies of place.

A renewed periodization—one that reflects the work of a wider range of poets—benefits our understanding of midcentury American poetry. Gwendolyn Brooks, Theodore Roethke, and Elizabeth Bishop, certainly exemplify the increased interest in identity and place from 1945-1968, and they suggest a new way to read poets not

typically included in the studies of midcentury poetry. Robert Hayden, for example, occupies a vexed position in American poetry that makes his work difficult to categorize. In the lineage of the black writers who aligned themselves with Alain Locke and *The New Negro* in the Harlem Renaissance (in fact, Hayden wrote the introduction to a later 1968 Atheneum edition of *The New Negro*), Hayden rejected the Black Arts Movement's aims to create an exclusively black aesthetic. His 1948 manifesto for a new poetry anthology series, "Counterpoise," expresses his dissatisfaction with extant critical categories; he articulates his discontent with the reception of the black writer who is stuck between two equally unfavorable options: "we are violently opposed to having our work viewed, as the custom is, entirely in the light of sociology and politics / to having it overpraised on the one hand by those with an axe to grind or a conscience to salve / to having it misinterpreted on the other hand by coterie editors, reviewers, anthologists who refuse us encouragement or critical guidance because we deal with realities we find it neither possible nor desirable to ignore" (41-42). Similarly, Hayden rejects the widespread assumption at the time that the "realities" of racism must be represented in one, realistic mode and insists on the black poet's formal freedom: "we believe experimentation to be an absolute necessity in keeping the arts vital and significant in contemporary life . . . though we do not consider our work avant-garde in the accepted sense of the term" (41).

Perhaps as a way of subverting these constricting truisms about African American poetry, Hayden's work engages the politics of his time through a historical framework that makes place inevitable. Place, that is, does not just sketch contemporary geography in his poetry but also the history of specific locations. In a 1976 interview, "A

Conversation During the Bicentennial,” Hayden describes himself as “somewhat history oriented” because he sees history not as an event but as “a long, torturous, and often bloody process of becoming, of psychic evolution” (80). Thus, if history is an unfolding evolution, then it must be continually retold through new eyes. Indeed, many of Hayden’s poems about a historical place are collage poems that juxtapose competing versions of history through extraordinarily dissimilar speakers.

Periodization would not just improve our understanding of outsider poets such as Hayden, however. The three poems by Lowell, Ginsberg, and O’Hara quoted at the beginning of this chapter, for example, are often anthologized and thus confirm the outdated categorizations described above. But even these midcentury chestnuts attest to an interest in the intersection of place (“After a hearty New England breakfast”; “I’m with you in Rockland”; “the Manhattan Storage Warehouse, / which they’ll soon tear down”) and identity (“We are all old-timers”; “in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America”; “My heart is in my / pocket”). Certainly, the reconceptualization of twentieth-century poetry as proposed in this dissertation offers a fresh perspective on a too-often neglected and misunderstood period of American literary history.

Notes

¹ Quotations are from Robert Lowell’s “Waking in the Blue” (184); Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” (26); and Frank O’Hara’s “A Step Away from Them” (257).

² Unless otherwise noted, all poetry cited is from the following collections: Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry is from *Blacks*; Theodore Roethke’s poetry is from *The*

Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke; Elizabeth Bishop's poetry is from *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979*.

³ *The Age of Anxiety* is a 1947 book of poetry by W. H. Auden. Its title is often invoked (by Breslin, for example 15) to describe the prevailing attitude of the postwar poets.

⁴ Judging by the small number of books to survey the period as a whole, perhaps more often than participating in gendered assumptions about the poets at midcentury, critics avoid the subject of altogether. As Edward Brunner notes in the acknowledgments to his book *Cold War Poetry*, "Not everyone was quick to warm to the idea of a study on the fifties poem (one colleague, predicting ruin, urged me to write on anything *but* this topic)" (xvii).

⁵ Of these terms, "midcentury" frames the period in merely temporal terms and avoids both the homogenizing effect of "movements" and the evaluative charge of "later" and thus it will be the term I use in this exploration.

⁶ Eliot lays out this doctrine in his 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

CHAPTER II

FROM BRONZEVILLE TO THE MECCA AND AFTER:

GWENDOLYN BROOKS AND THE LOCATION OF BLACK IDENTITY

Gwendolyn Brooks's reputation rightly places her as *the* Chicago poet of her time, and she was famously committed to writing about what she saw in her neighborhood: "I wrote about what I saw and heard in the street. I lived in a small second-floor apartment at the corner [in my twenties], and I could look first on one side and then on the other. There was my material" (*RPO* 134-35).¹ Her long and productive career (from the 1945 publication of *A Street in Bronzeville* until her death in 2000) spanned an often-turbulent century from the post-WWII period through the Civil Rights and Black Power movements to the post-revolution period. It is no exaggeration to say that what Brooks "saw and heard in the street" changed a great deal over the course of her lifetime.

However, while the "material" she responded to varied dramatically, the subject of Brooks's poetry was always people. While her poetry has always prominently featured people and places, in interviews Brooks always insists that her primary concern is people:

Stavros: I know you've been living in Chicago and consider yourself a Chicago native, so there's a great feeling of place in your poetry [. . .] do you try to evoke place in your work?

Brooks: No, I start with the people. (*RPO* 161)

Indeed, in memorable portrait poems she explores a range of individual characters, from "chocolate Mabbie" (30), "Sadie and Maud" (32), and "Matthew Cole" (40) in Bronzeville to "Way-Out Morgan" (430), "Hyena" (408), and "Boontsie De Broe" (418)

in the Mecca. Her careful attention to these characters' inner lives counters stereotypes and clichés that see blacks as mere curiosities: "it is my privilege to state 'Negros' not as curios but as people" (146).

Despite Brooks's unwavering focus on black people throughout her career, her sense of the audience for her portraits of black life changed, as the location of her subjects moved from Bronzeville to the Mecca and beyond, or "After" Mecca.² Brooks's 1968 *In the Mecca*, written both before and after her legendary radicalization in 1967, signals a turning point.³ In her early career, Brooks's characters are presented in their complex individual lives but also as part of a larger community: for example, with just one exception, in *A Street in Bronzeville* cohesive portraits of individuals together create the Bronzeville community. However, with "In the Mecca," despite the characters' close proximity within the Mecca building, the community is fractured, and ties between people have broken down. Individuality—the factor that nuances black identity in Brooks's poetry—is threatened in the Mecca environment, and the narrator often seems at odds with her characters, frequently interrupting to correct or analyze them, further destabilizing their individual voices. While "In the Mecca" successfully provides a "counter-memory" to prevailing racist myths of black life in that vast building, the poem is unable to find a place for black community there.⁴

Indeed, the poem recognizes that the destruction of the Mecca building also resulted in the dispersal of the black community. The thousands of Mecca tenants struggled to find housing in other areas of Chicago's "Black Belt," and Bronzeville expanded beyond its boundaries.⁵ In a 1969 interview, Brooks comments on the dissolution of Bronzeville:

I started out talking about Bronzeville, but “Bronzeville’s” almost meaningless by now, I suppose, since Bronzeville has spread and spread and spread all over. [. . .] Once in a while you’ll see on a store “Bronzeville Tailor Shop” or something like that, but almost nobody talks about Bronzeville. (*RPO* 160-61)

The Mecca building was destroyed; so, too, was the existence of a black street or building that provided Brooks with a structure for bringing together the black community. It is only in “After Mecca” (written after 1967 and reflecting her recent affiliation with the Black Arts movement in poems such as “The Wall” and “The Sermon on the Warpland”) where the *Mecca* volume provides a new model for Brooks: after Mecca, black individuality is preserved but not associated with a particular place. For the rest of her career, it is not place that defines the individuated black community in Brooks’s poetry but an urgent “call” to belonging in a black nation, a conceptual and not a geographical space within the United States.⁶ In “After Mecca,” this nation within a nation is the “whirlwind” of the “Warpland”; thus, Brooks describes the whirlwind as a “commonwealth” [455]; a garbageman as a “diplomat” [456]; and Big Bessie as a “citizen” of this alternate black nation [456]. This change—from people bound together in a place to people called to a black nationalist identity—is what most distinguishes Brooks’s pre-1967 and post-1967 work.

Brooks’s “call” to belonging in “After Mecca” responds to Amiri Baraka’s famous call in “SOS” (“Calling black people / Calling all black people, man woman child” 218), but it also differs from it in significant ways. As Raymond Malewitz points out, part of the difference between Brooks’s and Baraka’s call is the clarity of what each calls you to do: “whereas Baraka’s plain style presents little room for political ambivalence,

Brooks's poem embraces and indeed requires a reader who actively interrogates the precepts upon which Black Power rests. As such, when Brooks finally employs imperatives [. . .] she couches them in opacity" (534). Brooks's directives are not calls to arms but calls to "Live" and, even less clear, a call to "endorse the splendor splashes; / stylize the flawed utility" (454). Baraka's "SOS" is a universal call, "Calling all black people, man woman child / Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in," using the generalized language of a radio call, and thus it does not distinguish where people are but commands that they "come in," "wherever you are" (218). In contrast, Brooks's call is not concerned with directing people to gather together; it is concerned instead with locating the black community in their dispersed locations. For example, she enumerates where, specifically, black people might be when she calls to them in her writing:

My aim, in my next future, is to write poems that will somehow successfully "call" (see Imamu Baraka's "SOS") all black people: black people in taverns, black people in alleys, black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate; I wish to reach black people in pulpits, black people in mines, on farms, on thrones, *not* always to "teach"—I shall wish often to entertain, to illumine.
(*RPO* 183)

This last qualification—"not always to 'teach'"—distances her new poems from her pre-1967 writing. In her early career, Brooks's depicted individuals in the black community in order to illustrate the shared humanity of blacks and whites: "to prove to others (by implication, not by shouting) and to such among themselves as have yet to discover it, that [black people] are merely human beings, not exotics" (qtd. in Kent 64). After her affiliation with the Black Arts movement, Brooks rejected the notion of proving black

humanity to a white audience. Her stated post-1967 aim is not to demonstrate something to whites but to communicate directly with blacks: “Today I am conscious of the fact that—my people are black people; it is to them that I appeal for understanding” (*RPO* 177). While the sense of her audience changed after 1967, her subject didn’t: “no, I believe I’ll go right on writing about black people as people” (163). As she explained it, the characters depicted in her poetry would not demonstrate the variety of black life to whites but would alert black people to the struggle for racial equality:

I imagine future poems will seem more like some of the poems in *A Street in Bronzeville*. [. . .] They’ll deal with people; that I know; and I won’t be trying to prove something as I write. I want them to be pictures of black life as I see it today. This of course would include people who do not think they’re about the great fight that’s going on. (159-60).

Brooks insists that her subject is the same (“pictures of black life as I see it today”), but two things differ. First, she “won’t be trying to prove something as I write” to a white audience. Second, she will depict “people who do not think they’re about the great fight that’s going on” for racial equality. Her word “include” signals a connection between these two goals: her portrait poems will not just “include” as their subject people who don’t think they’re part of the revolution, but her address to them will invite them to be “include[d]” in the struggle. In such statements, Brooks characteristically describes an ostensibly straightforward subject for in her post-1967 poetry (“black people as people”; “pictures of black life as I see it today”) that would be less straightforward as her relationship with a black audience evolved.⁷

These changes in Brooks’s thinking—about audience and representation—are

most evident when comparing *A Street in Bronzeville* and *In the Mecca*. Although the Mecca building was located in the heart of Bronzeville, the twenty-two years separating these volumes mark profound differences in the historical realities of each place, and, consequently, differences in Brooks's perceptions of black Chicago. In the 1930s and 40s, the Bronzeville neighborhood was almost exclusively black and, because of the large movement of black people from the rural south to more racially tolerant cities in the north, growing in size.⁸ While many, such as James Weldon Johnson, celebrated the influx of black residents to urban areas in the 1940s as a cultural renaissance similar to the one in Harlem, the migration of so many people to Chicago often meant high rates of joblessness, poverty, and overcrowding. Too, since Chicago was not racially integrated in the 1930s and 40s, few outside of Bronzeville knew anything about the neighborhood or the people there.⁹ *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, published the same year as Brooks's 1945 *A Street in Bronzeville*, was the first major survey of black life in Chicago. Street by street and statistic by statistic, *Black Metropolis* explicates urban black life to whites: "the Jim Crow lives that Negroes live in our crowded cities differ qualitatively from those of whites and are not fully known to whites" (Drake and Cayton xx). Later, Robert L. Boyd would argue that *Black Metropolis* made evident the effects of racism and segregation to whites who were not familiar with black Chicago, but it also depicted Bronzeville as chaotic and violent: "not surprisingly, during the first wave of the Great Migration, the black communities of northern cities were widely portrayed by contemporary observers as disorganized, dysfunctional, and pathological" (89). In the deterministic view of *Black Metropolis*, the "disorganized, dysfunctional, and pathological" Bronzeville residents were the product of their

environment since “after studying the social processes in this book, you cannot expect Negro life to be other than what it is” (Drake and Cayton xx).

It is precisely this stereotype that Gwendolyn Brooks writes against in her first book. In stark contrast to a sociological study that examines the general conditions of life in Bronzeville, Brooks’s poetry instead examines its characters’ inner lives, person by person. People and place are certainly central to *A Street in Bronzeville*. Of its thirty poems, for example, all but six refer to a person or place in their titles. Of the poems that do not, four out of six (“patent leather” [29], “the murder” [38], “the date” [52], and “the battle” [55]) identify a person or a place in the first line.¹⁰ As the book opens, it includes a single dedication to the people who were responsible for Brooks’s positive experiences growing up in Bronzeville: “To my parents, David and Keziah.”¹¹ This dedication acknowledges the parents who had a profound and beneficial influence on her life as a writer. With no other preliminaries, the book begins with the capitalized section title “A STREET IN BRONZEVILLE” followed on the same page by the poem “the old-marrieds” in lower case (19). Such typography establishes a sense of social hierarchy and location; it is clear “the old-marrieds” are small and anonymous people, but they belong to the street in Bronzeville where they live. Brooks’s *in medias res* beginning to the poem, and thus to the book, immerses us in an ongoing story, connecting us to a past, which is deeply familiar to the speaker. With its opening conjunction “but,” it also holds at bay an anticipated audience with wrong ideas about an old black couple in Bronzeville. Instead of stereotypes, the poem presents a short portrait of a couple so comfortable with each other that they do not need to speak:

But in the crowding darkness not a word did they say.

Though the pretty-coated birds had piped so lightly all the day.
And he had seen the lovers in the little side-streets.
And she had heard the morning stories clogged with sweets.
It was quite a time for loving. It was midnight. It was May.
But in the crowding darkness not a word did they say. (19)

The poem's AABBA couplets form an envelope stanza with perfect rhymes and exactly repeated first and last lines, suggesting a sense of enclosure and closure. On its surface, this is a lyric and even bucolic poem, with "pretty coated-birds" that "piped so lightly all the day" in the "little side-streets" of the city. If the first "but" responds to any prevailing ideas about Bronzeville a reader may bring to the text, the second "but" is changed by the argument of the poem and becomes part of a quite different picture of Bronzeville.

Instead of the "disorganized, dysfunctional, and pathological" scene some readers may expect, Brooks presents a quiet scene of a married couple at the end of the day. The final line asserts that there is an understanding between the couple that exceeds words—and the smooth prosody reinforces the idea of effortless.

At the same time, other aspects of the poem trouble this smooth surface. The romantic images of nature are unsuited to an urban scene, suggesting that the "pretty-coated birds" are Bronzeville residents wearing coats, and those who "piped so lightly" may be both urban birds and jazz musicians.¹² While the poem imports natural imagery into the urban setting, these positive connotations coexist with images of urban congestion: Bronzeville is "crowding" and "clogged" into the "little side-streets." Indeed, although the poem is mellifluous throughout, the cacophonous "clogged" interrupts the euphony of "morning stories" and "sweets." With three short declarative sentences in the

penultimate line, the speaker seems to to assert authority over the scene: “It was quite a time for loving. It was midnight. It was May.” However, her decisiveness is undermined by the return to the couple’s wordlessness. Even after the positive associations of blackness with “midnight” as a “time for loving,” it is difficult to read the “*crowding* darkness” in the final line as a hopeful picture of the larger Bronzeville neighborhood. The earlier metaphors of overcrowding suggest that the influx of black people into Chicago is a troubling “clogging” that may in fact prevent the couple from speaking to one another even though it is “a time for loving.”

Despite such stubbornly ambiguous descriptions of black urban life, it is clear that the speaker has an intimate relationship to the old marrieds. While the speaker is a third-person observer who comments on the old married couple, there is a sense that she knows them and is a part of the Bronzeville community herself.¹³ This intimacy of the speaker with her subjects is indicative of the poems in the book; for example, the speaker of “kitchenette building,” the poem following “the old-marrieds,” encompasses the collective “We” of the building’s residents. Here, the speaker with intimate knowledge of her neighbors asks: how can there be room for things like beauty, art, or dreaming when life is restricted by poverty and routine?

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan, A

Grayed in, and gray. “Dream” makes a giddy sound, not strong B

Like “rent,” “feeding a wife,” “satisfying a man.” A

But could a dream send up through onion fumes C

Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes D

And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,	E
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms	C
Even if we were willing to let it in,	F
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,	G
Anticipate a message, let it begin?	F
We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!	H
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,	I
We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it. (20)	H

“Dream” is associated with all things intangible and extraneous by the speaker, especially in the second stanza: “giddy,” “white and violet,” “flutter,” “sing,” “aria,” “wonder,” and “hope.” These things have no place in the “strong” world of deprivation and decay that is “dry,” “grayed in, and gray,” filled with “onion fumes,” “fried potatoes,” “yesterday’s garbage,” the “bathroom,” and “lukewarm water.” In the end, the poem appears to reject any opportunity for dreaming when the speaker returns to the “greyed in, and grey” hope of following the resident of Number Five into the bath while the water is still lukewarm. As in “the old-marrieds,” one line with three short sentences signals an attempt to assert control over the scene, dismissing the notion of a dream in a kitchenette building: “We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!” But the dream has already arisen: the beauty that appears in this poem is not removed from Bronzeville; it is the lyricism of “white and violet” that sprouts new life out of an old purple onion, a beauty that has the tenacity to “fight with fried potatoes / And yesterday’s garbage ripening” and then “flutter, or sing

an aria” afterwards. The assonance in these lines connects the beautiful “white and violet” flowering with the dirty and difficult aspects of the kitchenette building: “fight,” “fried potatoes” and “garbage ripening.” Each of these images is carefully located in the kitchenette building: “through onion fumes,” “in the hall,” and “down these rooms.” Although the speaker asserts that there is no space in a kitchenette building for dreams of beauty, these are not escapist dreams of elsewhere; it is precisely in the kitchenette building where the poem discovers beauty.

While these poems feature Brooks’s characteristic ambiguity, they are nevertheless fundamentally stable. There are many different speakers in *Bronzeville* with varying relationships to the subjects of their poems, but, with only one exception (“The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith”), each poem is from a single narrative perspective and the speaker is clearly part of the black community. Moreover, *Bronzeville* speakers are connected to the other characters in the neighborhood, often providing intimate details about their lives and histories, such as the speaker in “obituary for a living lady”: “My friend was decently wild / As a child. / And as a young girl / She was interested in a brooch and pink powder and a curl” (34). Such details enhance the continuity of the relationships described in the poems. While Brooks does not present an idealized or sentimental picture of the characters in *Bronzeville*, there is a sense that they know each other and belong to their community. In *Bronzeville*, there are no omniscient interruptions to correct, rebuke, or challenge the speaker’s authority. The structure, too, is stable within each poem. While there are rare instances of disruption to the stanzaic structure (such as an extra line in the second stanza of “kitchenette building” that may suggest the flowering of the dream), they underscore thematic tensions rather than create formal disruption (so,

for instance, “kitchenette building” ends with regularly rhymed three-line stanzas).

“kitchenette building” became representative to Brooks as the kind of poem appropriate to a revolutionary black poetics. After her 1967 involvement with the Black Arts movement led her to repudiate much of her earlier work, Brooks described poems like “kitchenette building” as both central to her ongoing poetic project and more important than others (especially the ornate poems in *Annie Allen*) that now seemed frivolous to her. In a 1969 interview, Brooks characteristically downplays all the complexities of the poem beginning “A light and diplomatic bird” from “The Womanhood” in *Annie Allen*:

It’s really a simple little thing that has no comparison, say, to a poem like “kitchenette building.” I believe I have written more “kitchenette building”-type poems than I have written about birds singing and feeling sorry for a girl who’s temporarily overwhelmed by grief. (*RPO* 158).

It is not only the “simple” story here that Brooks rejects (a story which, of course, is not simple at all), but also the use of traditional form and elevated poetic diction (“imminence,” “prosperous,” “barmecides,” “fantoccini,” “incorrigible,” “apostolic,” and “Valhalla,” for example) that she claims have no place in her post-1967 poetics (123). At the same time, she maintains that it is not form that changes but her subject matter: “No, I have not abandoned beauty, or lyricism, and I don’t consider myself a polemical poet. I’m a black poet, and I write about what I see, what interests me, and I’m seeing new things. Many things that I’m seeing now I was blind to before, but I don’t sit down at the table and say, ‘Lyricism is out.’ No, I just continue to write about what confronts me” (*RPO* 151).

But what confronts Brooks after 1967 is a dislocated black community that is no longer gathered in one place. Twenty-three years after the publication of *A Street in Bronzeville*, *In the Mecca* (1968) situates her story of “black humanity in general” inside a building destined to be destroyed. The demise of Chicago’s enormous Mecca building was by 1968 a well-known historical fact, and Brooks repeatedly points to the signs of its collapse not just early in the poem (the first stanza reports that “the fair fables *fall*” 407, my italics) but in the epigraphs before it begins (“There comes a time when what has been can never be again” 404). At the same time, the poem asserts that this story of the Mecca will be one of “Construction” for the black community not simply a narrative of destruction. The titles of *In the Mecca*’s sections change from designating a place (“*In the Mecca*”) to designating a time (“*After Mecca*”), reflecting a deemphasis on place in Brooks’s later work (italics mine). This changing focus away from place in her poetry was concurrent with the dislocations exemplified by the destruction of the Mecca building itself.

The dispersal of the Meccan residents was just one part of the building’s unusually complicated history. It was originally built in the 1890s to attract the white middle class to urban dwellings by offering a suburban feel in comforts such as privacy and light. The enormous U-shaped building, spanning the width and length of a city block, even simulated a suburban lawn in its enormous interior atrium. The atrium was an aspect of the Mecca that distinguished it from the more common buildings in Chicago (Bluestone 384). Unlike the exterior courtyard that became commonplace in Chicago architecture and allowed for privacy through separate entrances, the Mecca’s interior atrium connected large numbers of people and “made a spectacle of the comings and

goings of residents, of the concourse of daily human life.” Thus, the building “turned both outward toward its exterior courtyard and, most unusually, inward,” connecting the “tendency [. . .] for privacy” with the hope for community “represented in the skylit atria.” The Mecca building “cultivated the possibilities of a gregarious and cosmopolitan gathering of five hundred people under a single roof” (385).

But the Mecca’s utopian aspirations were never realized; urbanization did bring people to inner-city Chicago, but they were not the affluent, white suburban tenants that the architects imagined. Daniel Bluestone complicates the story of the Mecca’s decline with the racial tensions in Chicago in the first half of the century and details the “distorted historical narrative” that arose after the building became occupied by poor black tenants during the Depression. As a result of demographic changes and the Illinois Institute of Technology’s concern for the “deterioration of its neighborhood,” “a Mecca myth arose that followed a classical story of a fall from grace. In this rendering of Mecca history, the ‘last word in show apartments’ had fallen into a ‘slum tenement,’ brought on by ‘deterioration’ that originated when blacks moved into the building” (394, 398). The media promulgated this condemnation; in John Bartlow Martin’s account, not only had the building itself fallen into disrepair, but the interior atria had created a community teeming with crime and social chaos: “A toddler urinated from the balcony to the floor below. People reported the time when a pimp threw a prostitute from the balcony and when a man murdered the building’s janitor in a struggle over a woman” (399). In terms of “the logic of urban renewal,” Martin’s article reported little worth saving in the Mecca.

By the time Gwendolyn Brooks published “In the Mecca” as a poem seventy-five years after the building’s construction, the Mecca had become a symbol for urban blight

and had been “cleared as a slum” in 1952 (Melhem 158). Despite this popular myth of the Mecca as a failure, Brooks’s notes for the poem indicate her hope of describing the building in both its beautiful and brutal dimensions: “In the Mecca were murders, loves, lonelinesses, hates, jealousies. Hope occurred, and charity, sainthood, glory, shame, despair, fear, altruism. Theft, material and moral. ‘Mental cruelty.’ Mouse and moth. To touch every note in the life of this block-long block-wide building would be to capsulize the gist of black humanity in general” (*RPO* 190). These notes call attention to a tendency in Brooks’s work to illustrate “black humanity in general” by portraying a black community as unique individuals gathered together. One way Brooks wanted to avoid depicting blacks as “curios” is by showing how different they are from each other: “the city is the place to observe man *en masse* and in his infinite variety” (*RPO* 135). But this comment connects both the “infinite variety” of black life with a location for it: “the city is the place.”

In “In the Mecca,” the doomed building is the place where individuated black identities still reside together but cannot form a community. Though the building here is Brooks’s figure for the loss of a Bronzevillian neighborhood, black community people remain important, as the book’s epigraphs reveal. Brooks designs a framework for entering the poem that will emphasize the gathering of “black humanity” in the Mecca. In fact, as many as seventeen people appear on just the epigraph and tribute pages before the poem even begins, a stark contrast to the single epigram to her parents that opens *A Street in Bronzeville*. The numerous epigraphs that open the poem are ascribed to various speakers: one by John Bartlow Martin; the second, a tenant (“A Meccan”); and then quotations from Richard “Peanut” Washington and Russ Meek (gang members from

Chicago who also appear in “After Mecca”). The four epigraphs evoke a sense of the Mecca as a place but more importantly introduce who will be authorized to tell the building’s story. Brooks outnumbers Martin’s media coverage by another kind of “reportage” from members of the Mecca community, suggesting the way to understand the building is through the voices of its people.

Indeed, Martin’s quotation can only invoke the physical state of the building, a description perpetuating the Mecca myth of a “fall from grace” (Bluestone 398). His adjectives give evidence of the Mecca’s immense size and physical decay: “great grey hulk,” “ungainly,” “ancient and enormous,” “dirt,” “broken,” and “iron” (404). At the end of Martin’s description, the Mecca’s former glory as a “showplace of Chicago” is only a parenthetical aside, trailing off into an ellipsis: “(The Mecca was constructed as an apartment building in 1891, a splendid palace, a showplace of Chicago. . . .)” Brooks significantly omits the other half of Martin’s description that refers to the Mecca as “one of the most remarkable Negro slum exhibits in the world” (399). Here, Brooks dismisses the myth of a fall from grace and suppresses the accusation that the building has changed from an icon of white architectural virtuosity to one of black poverty and ineptitude. Martin’s remark is one of the only descriptions of the Mecca building in the book. Brooks strategically leaves the image of the place outside the poem proper and largely eschews descriptive imagery of place in the poem, creating instead a poetic architecture as a framework for the characters’ voices.

One of the ways Brooks constructs this textual architecture is through the graphic appearance of the epigraphs on the white space of the page. Martin’s quotation, for example, embodies the characteristics of the building it describes: the large block of text

takes up thirteen lines, more than four times as much as the second epigraph and dwarfing the one-line quotations from Bronzeville residents Peanut Washington and Russ Meek, standing as “ungainly” and “enormous” by comparison. Yet the second quotation from “a Meccan” recasts Martin’s vision of the Mecca from architectural to human terms: “How many people live here? . . . Two thousand? oh, more than that. There’s 176 apartments and some of ’em’s got seven rooms and they’re all full” (404). These two epigraphs establish two crucially different ways of measuring the scale of the Mecca building; Martin, a white journalist, measures by enormity of size and physical decay while an African American resident measures by the scale of human lives.

In her rebuilding, Brooks gathers her people into the poem, acknowledging not just the residents but those who inspired or contributed to the volume on the tribute page. Opposite the epigraphs is inscribed the heading “IN TRIBUTE —,” its importance signaled through capital letters and a type size nearly as big as the title of the poem. The list that follows includes thirteen fellow African American poets, friends, and students and once more orients the poem around people instead of the building, but it also draws them into a story of collapse that begins with the epigraphs. They are included “in tribute,” and thus their names stand as witness to the loss suggested even before the poem’s first lines begin.

Because Brooks wants readers to hear the story of this loss through the voices of the characters (and because she suspects readers would listen better to Martin’s description), the poem provides instructions on how to listen. As we have seen, “In the Mecca” opens by calling attention to the people in epigraphs and tributes, but, before the poem proper begins, one final epigraph appears alone on a blank page. It does not quote

or refer to a person but adapts a line from Matthew's version of the annunciation in the Bible: "Now the way of the Mecca was on this wise" (406). The line from Matthew, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise," completes the historical lineage linking Jesus to the line of David and alerts the listener to pay attention: the most important part of the story is about to begin (King James). Not only does this introduce the Mecca with an air of biblical prophecy, but this final epigraph also frames the role of the narrator in the retelling of the Mecca story. In the Biblical account, Matthew, the gospel writer, is the bringer of "good news"; the speaker's allusion in "In the Mecca" similarly announces that the story to come—a story we know will end in the destruction of the Mecca building—will be one of redemption.

After this crowd of introductory epigrams, the poem begins not with the characters in the Mecca but with instructions on how to listen. Similar to the opening of *A Street in Bronzeville*, the poem addresses what it suspects are the reader's previous beliefs; its opening lines suggest that common expectations of race or the Mecca myth should be dismantled before entering this Mecca. However, unlike the first stanza of "the old-marrieds," this stanza does not address the scene in the poem but provides advice on the best way to hear this story: "Sit where the light corrupts your face / Miës Van der Rohe retires from grace. / And the fair fables fall" (407). In contrast to the light of the annunciation, images of whiteness are suspect here, as "light corrupts" and "*fair* fables fall." The command to "sit where the light corrupts your face" places the reader in a fixed position, cognizant of the way light (and thus whiteness) defiles the face. In Brooks's retelling, it is not shadow (and thus blackness) that contaminates but the white glare of light that makes seeing impossible. Unlike the biblical annunciation, however, the

epigraphs have already warned that “the fair fables fall”: this is not the story of a birth but of an end. In fact, a triple collapse is figured in the beginning of the poem: the collapse of the Mecca building, the reputation of architect Miës Van der Rohe, and the myths of white superiority. Van der Rohe, who headed the architecture department of the Illinois Institute of Technology, designed the campus that would replace the Mecca after it was demolished, and according to Bluestone, “Miës’s style also reinforced the vision of a radical break with the historic and, in the minds of the institute officials, the blighted character of the neighborhood” (396). By proposing Van der Rohe’s “fall from grace” at the outset of “In the Mecca,” Brooks rejects the idea of the Mecca’s collapse into a “blighted character” as a failing of the black community.

Despite the attention to the architectural history of the Mecca at the outset of the poem, Brooks is interested in the building only insofar as it houses the Mecca residents. The introduction of characters in the poem follows another kind of architecture: people are presented through building features that subsequently give way to their voices. The first character appears as both a structural feature of the place—the nametag “S.Sallie” on the mailbox—and as a voice within the Mecca. Although Mrs. Sallie proceeds up the staircase after her job as a domestic worker, there is a feeling of a descent into something sick and tired as “She plans / to set severity apart, / to unclench the heavy folly of the fist” (407). The rest of the characters are not introduced by nameplate, but they are introduced by name in lines that function like a building index.

Embodying the portraiture for which Brooks is well known, “In the Mecca” includes over fifty residents, each introduced by name and given a brief profile. The stanza structure underscores these individual portraits: stanzas vary in length and often

begin when a new character is introduced. Mrs. Sallie first “Sees old St. Julia Jones, who has had prayer” at the beginning of the third stanza, followed by a new stanza each for her encounters with Prophet Williams, “young beyond St. Julia, / and rich with Bible, pimples, pout,” and Hyena, “The striking debutante. A fancier of firsts” (408). These blocks of text on the page, separated by white space, suggest separate apartments occupied by the different characters whom Mrs. Sallie meets on her search through the Mecca.¹⁴

As the poem proceeds through the search for Mrs. Sallie’s missing child Pepita, characters remain enclosed in their own stanzas and their own lives. Once she realizes Pepita is missing, Mrs. Sallie frantically pleads for help from people who cannot reach out beyond their own “apartments,” surrounded as they are by white space and enclosed by the stories of their suffering. This technique of dividing the stanzas by character (and announcing each character by name) reinforces the importance of understanding the Mecca building through its people but also reveals a community of isolated sufferers.

Yet one of the ironies of the poem is that such isolation exists in a building teeming with people. Taken separately, Brooks’s portraits of the Mecca residents provide compelling examples of characters in crisis. It is not simply a problem that Pepita is missing or Briggs has joined a gang (413) or that “Way-out Morgan is collecting guns” (430) or that for Insane Sophie “a cage is imminent” (429). These particular problems are exacerbated by the fact that they are all forced together into the Mecca and the larger problems it represents, as the narrator observes: “they are constrained. All are constrained” (416). Although individually isolated, the residents are collectively “constrained”; the

Mecca building is thus paradoxically a place of individual suffering and a place where the voices of that suffering are joined together.

Because the characters are so isolated in their own suffering, the search for Pepita is met with varieties of indifference, including replies such as “yawns,” the question “Pepita who?” and the rebuke that she is “a puny and a putrid little child” (423). Mrs. Sallie’s devastating question “WHERE PEPITA BE?” hangs unanswered throughout the poem as she knocks on doors and “screams and wants her baby. Wants her baby, / and wants her baby wants her baby” (421). Despite her plea, Mrs. Sallie’s question is not answered; instead, each character replies using the formulaic response “I ain’ seen her But,” ignoring the urgency of Pepita’s situation and instead telling the story of his or her own suffering. For example, Great-great Gram replies to Mrs. Sallie’s question with a memory of her time as a slave:

Great-great Gram hobbles, fumbles at the knob,
mumbles, “I ain seen no Pepita. But
I remember our cabin. The floor was dirt.
And something crawled in it. That is the thought
stays in my mind. I do not recollect
what ’twas. But something. (417)

Great-great Gram is stuck in her own apartment and in her own life, unable to worry about Pepita and trapped in a “thought” that “stays in [her] mind.” Stories like hers function as a choral refrain in the two-line stanza “*Ain seen er I ain seen er I ain seen er / Ain seen er I ain seen er I ain seen er*,” and the only time voices are joined together in the Mecca is in this song of negation (416). The futility of the search leads the narrator to

ask repeatedly, “How many care, Pepita?” (427, 429), but the narrator’s question, like Mrs. Sallie’s, remains unanswered.

Another way the poem creates a structure for the Meccans’ isolation is through the distinctiveness of their voices, emphasized in the formal differences among the characters’ modes of speaking. Not only do characters speak in their own stanzas but often in distinctive forms that provide a stark contrast with those of the other characters. For example, Melodie Mary’s name suggests she could be an innocent character from a nursery rhyme, but she describes her dispassionate fascination with violence in bouncing melodies and seemingly cheerful end rhymes:

What if they drop like the tumbling tears	A
of the old intelligent sky?	B
Where are the frantic bulletins	A
when other importances die?	B
Trapped in his privacy of pain	D
the worried rat expires,	E
and smashed in the grind of a rapid heel	F
last night’s roaches lie. (412)	B

The rhyme of the “sky” and “die” in Melodie Mary’s hypothetical questions disturbs the pat music of “the old intelligent sky.” The disjunction between the sing-song rhythms and the poem’s troubling subject matter is emphasized with the final rhyme of “lie” in the last line that describes the dead roaches crushed underfoot. The next stanza introduces Briggs with a rhyme scheme that appears to mirror the lilting rhymes and rhythms of Melodie Mary’s but quickly goes dissonant with slant rhymes and irregular line lengths:

Briggs is adult as a stone	A
(who if he cries cries alone)	A
The Gangs are out, but he must go	B
to and fro,	B
appease what reticences move	C
across the intemperate range.	D
Immunity is forfeit, love	C
is luggage, hope is heresy.	E
Gang	F
is health and mange.	D
Gang	F
is a bunch of ones and a singlicity. (412-13)	E

Compared to Melodie Mary's stanza, Briggs's is irregular, rhythmically halting, and visually angular. These rapid formal contrasts among characters are common in "In the Mecca" since Brooks wants to emphasize that the "singlicity" in the Mecca can only be heard through "a bunch of ones."

However, other subtle but unsettling formal effects work against the sense of the Meccans' isolation and distinctiveness; Brooks suggests ways that their "singlicity" breaks down. For the characters in "In the Mecca," overcoming isolation does not result in community but in cacophony. For example, the graphic signals of speech throughout the poem are irregular, especially to indicate who is speaking. Sometimes the poem differentiates between a character's thoughts and spoken voice with standard quotation marks, such as Mrs. Sallie's reflections on her kitchen:

“I want to decorate!” But what is that? A
pomade atop a sewage. An offense.

First comes correctness, *then* embellishment! (410)

Other times, the same character speaks with no quotation marks around the dialogue text, such as Mrs. Sallie’s frantic questions to her neighbors after she discovers Pepita is missing:

. . . Cap, where Pepita? Casey, where Pepita?

Emmett and Melodie Mary, where Pepita? (415)

There are also places where Brooks does not use quotation marks when the lines suggest direct discourse, such as Yvonne’s stoic resolution:

It is not necessary, says Yvonne,
to have every day him whom
to the end thereof you will love. (411)

Too, the stanzaic “apartments” that enclose each character become increasingly porous; especially after Mrs. Sallie’s revelation that Pepita is missing, stanzas contain more than one character’s perspective. One such instance occurs in a stanza that combines the Law’s nonchalant search for Pepita with the screams of Mrs. Sallie, referred to now only as “the mother,” suppressing an identity carefully established in the second stanza of the poem:

The Law arrives—and does not quickly go
to fetch a Female of the Negro Race.

A lariat of questions.

The mother screams and wants her baby. Wants her baby,

and wants her baby wants her baby. (420-21)

Taken together, these graphic practices introduce subtle inconsistencies that suggest the loss of barriers between people.

Increasing this sense of instability, the narrator's perspective shifts throughout, contributing to a confusion of voices in the Mecca. At times, the narrator speaks in the third person, such as in the description of Mrs. Sallie's hungry children: "Emmett and Cap and Casey / are skin wiped over bones / for lack of chub and chocolate / and ice cream cones" (414). However, this viewpoint shifts; throughout, the narrator moves in and out of the characters' perspectives, speaking to them and through them, and then suddenly abandons them to address the reader. Such changes occur most rapidly when Mrs. Sallie realizes her young daughter Pepita is missing. The narrator describes Mrs. Sallie's memory of her affluent white employer's toy, an image that contrasts a well-dressed doll with her own poor children. After this memory, Mrs. Sallie is interrupted by snippets of a song playing on the radio, and then the narrator moves to address the reader, commenting on the situation in the Mecca as a whole:

What shiny tended gold is an aubade
for toy-child's head! Has ribbons too!
Ribbons. Not Woolworth cotton comedy,
not rubber band, not string. . . .
"And that would be my baby be my baby. . . .
And I would be my lady I my lady. . ."

What else is there to say but everything?

SUDDENLY, COUNTING NOSES, MRS. SALLIE

SEES NO PEPITA. "WHERE PEPITA BE?" (415)

The capitalized lines return the narrative perspective back to Mrs. Sallie with a jolt, expressing her panic in direct quotation and capital letters. As suggested earlier, such rapid shifts are not consistently indicated by changes in stanza, nor do they change in accordance with the introduction of different characters. In this instance, Mrs. Sallie's lament about her children's poverty ends in an ellipsis, and her voice is displaced by a song on the radio. After both Mrs. Sallie's voice and the snippet of a song have trailed off into ellipses, the single-line question from the narrator—"What else is there to say but everything?"—appears simultaneously crucial and defeating. Brooks works to emphasize the importance of characters' voices, so it is critical to speak the "everything" that remains to be said.¹⁵ At the same time, there is a flattened equivalency between the disembodied voice on the radio and Mrs. Sallie's observations. The question "What else is there to say but everything?" blends with the other voices in the Mecca, including the other unanswered and more urgent question of "WHERE PEPITA BE?"

But the urgency of Mrs. Sallie's question erodes when it goes unanswered and eventually gives way to the voices of the other characters in the Mecca; Mrs. Sallie observes once more "One of my children is missing. One of my children is gone," but soon after she herself disappears from the poem (417). Her search for Pepita becomes obscured by the accumulation of other suffering and the narrator's accounting:

How many care, Pepita?

Staley and Lara,

the victim grasped, the harlot had and gone?

Eunie, the intimate tornado?

Simpson, the peasant king, Bixby and June,

the hollowed, the scant, the

played-out deformities? the margins?

Not those. (427)

Staley, Lara, Eunie, Simpson, Bixby, and June are counted among those who cannot care about Pepita; other Meccans are represented by what they lack, suggesting an inability also to hear the suffering in their own community: “the hollowed, the scant the / played-out deformities” and “the margins” cannot help Pepita, “Not those.” In this stanza, the list of individual names (“Pepita,” “Staley,” “Lara,” “Eunie,” “Simpson,” “Bixby” and “June”) and character descriptions (“the victim grasped,” “the harlot had and gone,” “the intimate tornado,” “the peasant king”) devolves to vague categories of the dispossed: “the hollowed, the scant, the / played-out deformities? the margins?” In the final line, even these categories fade to the most generalized description of the Meccans yet: “those.”

At last, “those” slowly disappear from the Mecca; characters’ identities often become obscured or silent in the end of the poem. Insane Sophie, for example, knows that “if you scream, you’re marked insane,” so she urges herself to “hush” (despite her protest that “silence is a *place* in which to scream”) (428). This loss of individual voice is especially troubling in a poem that suggests there is something redemptive in being able to articulate the self. The elderly “three Maries,” for example, are “horrible” largely because their aging has impeded their ability to speak and thus be known to their community:

a terrible battle of the Old:
speechless and physical: oh horrible
the obscene gruntings
the dull outwittings
the flabby semi-rhythmic shufflings
the bleary starings
the small spittings). (427-28)

Similarly, the tragedy of Marian's life is her silence; she "Sings / but sparsely" (431) and is not understood even by her family:

Never strides
about, up!
Never alters earth or air!
Her children cannot quake, be proud.
Her husband never Saw her, never said
her single silver certain Self aloud. (431-32)

In a sense, Sophie, Marian, and the three Maries are suffering because they are unable to hear their "single silver certain Self aloud." Although they all have some understanding of who they are, the narrator suggests that this sense of self is meaningless unless it is spoken to their community. Further, the alliteration in Marian's lament that her husband hasn't "said / her single silver certain Self aloud" exaggerates poetry into caricature, questioning whether the affirmation of self could be actualized. In a place where identities are blurred together, a "single silver certain Self" seems impossible (and, as a

flourish of sibilant poeticality, preposterous). And in the cacophony in the Mecca, would hearing one's truth "aloud" even matter?

Similarly, Alfred (who "is un- / talented"), an inept schoolteacher reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock, always pontificates out loud as if to confirm his thoughts (409). When "the Law" arrives to ask about Pepita, Alfred casts his knowledge of the Mecca in pretentious poeticisms:

No, Alfred has not seen Pepita Smith.

But he (who might have been an architect)

can speak of Mecca: firm arms surround

disorders, bruising ruses and small hells,

small semiheavens: hug barbarous rhetoric

built of buzz, coma and petite pell-mells.

No, Alfred has not seen Pepita Smith.

But he (who might have been a poet-king)

can speak superbly of the line of Leopold. (421-22)

His description of the Mecca includes end-rhyme ("hells" and "pell-mells"), internal rhyme ("bruising ruses"), and alliteration ("small hells, / small semiheavens," "built of buzz," and "petite pell-mells"). Throughout the poem, Alfred defines himself through his language, not only by what he thinks, but what he "can speak" out loud, from the truth of the Mecca to "the line of Leopold."¹⁶ However, his verbose pretensions are eclipsed by the observation at the beginning and the end of his stanza of what he "might have been." Although Alfred can "speak his self out loud" unlike Marian and the three Maries, that self is comprised of the unactualized possibilities of this life.

But how you can speak your self out loud is only one of the questions “In the Mecca” addresses—in light of such chaos in the Mecca building, what can be said? In fact, it is Alfred—along with Mrs. Sallie—who articulates Brooks’s concerns about the appropriate subject for revolutionary black poetics. As the poem makes clear, the dilemma in the Mecca is acute and certainly parallels the sense of racial crisis Brooks became immersed in after 1967. In such a situation, Mrs. Sallie’s desire for beauty seems unbecoming; she “sees her kitchen” and that “it is bad, is bad, / her eyes say” and yet she objects: “I want to decorate!” (410). The narrator immediately steps in to correct her and insist that more urgent things must be set right before there is room for beauty: “But what is that? A / pomade atop a sewage. An offense. / First comes correctness, *then* embellishment!” But even this dictum is undermined by an odd line break (“A / pomade atop a sewage”) and made ridiculous by the scolding tone of the italicized “*then.*” Similarly, what place is there in the Mecca building for Alfred, the poet and teacher who returns again and again in the poem with his lyrical observations that sound increasingly absurd in the chaos of the search for Pepita? Near the end of the poem, Alfred responds with his defense, his “Impression—his Apologie— / his Invocation—and his Ecstasie”:

“Not Baudelaire, Bob Browning, not Neruda.

Giants over Steeples

are wanted in this Crazy-eyes, this Scar.

A violent reverse.

We part from all we thought we knew of love

and of dismay-with-flags-on. What we know

is that there are confusion and conclusion.

Rending.

Even the hardest parting is a contribution. . . .

What shall we say?

Farewell. And Hail! Until Farewell again.” (429-30)

At first, Alfred rejects his white poetic predecessors (“Not Baudelaire, Bob Browning, not Neruda”) in lieu of “a violent reverse” appropriate to the crisis in the Mecca, “this Crazy-eyes, this Scar.” Despite the desire for “Giants over Steeples” to step in with authority and largesse, the change to a poetics equal to such crisis is not easy, as is evident from the poem’s diction: “a violent reverse,” “part,” “dismay,” “confusion and conclusion,” “rending,” “hardest parting.”¹⁷ After the expression of hope that something good may come out of the Mecca trails off into ellipses (“Even the hardest parting is a contribution. . . .”), the poem again calls attention to its own inability to say something appropriate to this hopeless situation: “What shall we say?” The “confusion and conclusion” results in Alfred not knowing what to say, a reversal from the narrator’s earlier question, “What else is there to say but everything?” Too, Alfred speaks in the third person plural “we,” trying to find the right language for himself and his community; these are the very questions Brooks grappled with after 1967.

When Alfred does come to the end of his speech in this stanza, he reverts to a high and pompous diction, almost comically defying his earlier dismissal of traditional poetry: “*Farewell. And Hail! Until Farewell again.*” Even more, ending on the word “again” suggests the possibility of other endings. Indeed, this speech of farewell is not his last one; later, it is Alfred who articulates the possibility of hope for the Mecca at the end

of the poem. In an inexplicable epiphany on the balcony, Alfred hears a constructive “call” that emanates from the building:

I hate it [life in the Mecca].

Yet, murmurs Alfred—

who is lean at the balcony, leaning—

something, something in Mecca

continues to call! Substanceless; yet like mountains,

like rivers and oceans too; and like trees

with wind whistling through them. And steadily

an essential sanity, black and electric,

builds to a reportage and redemption.

A hot estrangement.

A material collapse

that is Construction. (432-33)

Despite the suffering, poverty, and isolation in the Mecca, Alfred insists he hears “something, something” in the residents’ voices that remains to be heard; there is something still in the Mecca that redeems. Here, Brooks replaces the myth of the Mecca as fallen from grace—as well as the physical fact of its destruction—with an assertion of redemption, though a vague one. This vague generalization (“something, something”) appears at key moments in other Brooks poems, expressing “something” inarticulate that still needs to be voiced.¹⁸ In Alfred’s epiphany, the polyphony of isolated voices in the poem does not conclude in chaos but in “an essential sanity, black and electric” that “builds” instead of collapsing with the building.

This hopeful moment, however, is compromised by several factors. First, Brooks attempts to acknowledge both the Mecca's destruction and a new possibility for redemption by linking the two: it is thus not a reconstruction, but "A material collapse / that is Construction." These two paradoxical terms, "collapse" and "Construction," are aurally brought into a relationship through alliteration, while Brooks gives importance to "Construction" through capitalization. The earlier part of the stanza, however, is also full of similar alliterative pairings: "lean" and "leaning"; "continues" and "call"; "wind" and "whistling"; "steadily" and "sanity"; "reportage" and "redemption." By the time the stanza ends with "collapse" and "Construction," the alliterative formula is familiar and thus has lost some of its rhetorical power.

Also deflating Alfred's epiphany are his terms. In contrast with the rest of the poem, the description of the call from the Mecca is composed of windy abstractions and sentimental clichés. Brooks has described the lives of the Meccans with acute, specific details, from Aunt Dill's "antimacassars, spreads, silk draperies, / her silver creamer and her iron lamp" to Mrs. Sallie's stove where "six ruddy yams abide, / and cornbread made with water" (432, 410). The call from the Mecca, by contrast, is rendered only through simile, and in vague, "Substanceless" terms: "Substanceless; yet like mountains / like rivers and oceans too; and like trees / with wind whistling through them." The generalized, vacuous description contrasts most sharply with the vivid, gruesome reality confronted in the next stanza: the revelation of Pepita's dead body:

Jamaican

Edward denies and thrice denies a dealing
of any dimension with Mrs. Sallie's daughter.

Beneath his cot

a little woman lies in dust with roaches. (433)

While the description of redemption in the Mecca is breezy, abstracted, and hopeful, the reality of life in the Mecca is brutal and specific: a little body “in dust with roaches.” Despite Alfred’s abstracted hope for this murder to bring about something better in the Mecca, the poem refuses to ignore the terrible truth of Pepita’s lifeless body. Although Pepita is dead, swept under the bed “in dust with roaches,” the narrator refuses to look away. It is not Alfred’s “substanceless” call but this difficult fact of Pepita’s death that requires the narrator’s most careful reportage.

Pepita, then, and not the Mecca building, is the symbol for hope and redemption in the poem. Her Christlike martyrdom, foreshadowed in the epigraph from Matthew, is reinforced by the comparison of Jamaican Edward to Peter when he “denies and thrice denies / a dealing of any dimension with Mrs. Sallie’s daughter.” After she speaks, Pepita is compared to a robin, another traditional figure of renewal:

She whose little stomach fought the world had
wriggled, like a robin!
Odd were the little wriggings
and the chopped chirpings oddly rising.

Melhem notes that the image of the robin combines death and life, the kind of “redemption” through collapse that Alfred proposes: “Pepita’s physical reality, a hunger bravely confronting life—and death—has been ended. But the robin also means spring and renewal, paradox of the heartbreaking lines” (174). The narrator’s exclamation point emphasizes the surprise at hungry Pepita’s struggle to survive, especially in such a harsh

environment as the Mecca. Pepita cannot survive the Mecca building, the poem suggests, but her voice “calls” for something better for the black community. Concluding the poem with the an innocent murdered girl amidst the crumbling remains of the Mecca building, however, is a difficult symbol of hope for the black community, one that the speaker acknowledges is “odd” and ambivalent at best.

Despite the bleak condition of life in the Mecca, there is still a sense of a shared community that survives, if a broken one. The characters do not listen to each other, but they know each other and live together, as when Mrs. Sallie recognizes her neighbors on the way into the building: “sees old St. Julia Jones,” “speaks / to Prophet Williams,” “and Mrs. / Sallie sees Alfred” (407-08). Especially in the beginning of the poem before identities begin to blur, “In the Mecca” still often identifies the people in this community with a particular place. In the first few pages, we learn that Mrs. Sallie’s apartment is on “the final and fourth floor”; St. Julia Jones lives “inside the wide-flung door of 215”; Hyena is associated with “her dusty threshold”; Alfred “goes to bed with Telly Bell / in 309” (410, 408, 409). These associations of people with place occur less frequently in the end of the poem: “John Tom, twice forty in 420, claims / Life sits or blazes in this Mecca” and “Way-out Morgan is collecting guns / in a tiny fourth-floor room” (420, 430). More often, Mecca residents are described amidst their belongings (“Aunt Dill / has bits of brass and marble, and Franciscan / china; has crocheted doiles; has old mahogany” 432) or place is described metaphorically (“In the midst / of hells and gruels and little halloweens / tense Thomas Earl loves Johnny Appleseed” 414), or place appears as part of a dream of leaving the Mecca (“She is away and fond” [418] and “To be a red bush! / In the West Virginia autumn” [424]), or place does not appear at all. As the poem

progresses, the identification of a person with a particular place disappears, only to reappear in with jarring detail in the depiction of Pepita's body: "Beneath his cot / a little woman lies in dust with roaches" (433).

The loss of home and a specific place for the characters in the Mecca mirrors the loss of the black neighborhood that Brooks witnessed in Chicago. As much as the "Bronzeville-type poems" came to represent an appropriate mode for a revolutionary black poetics, Brooks also realizes that Bronzeville (and the idea of an exclusively black neighborhood) is a thing of the past. Mrs. Sallie seems to represent the domestic female perspective of many poems from *A Street in Bronzeville* and therefore the past; her eventual disappearance in "In the Mecca" is perhaps a dismissal of this earlier type of poetry.¹⁹ Even before Mrs. Sallie leaves the poem, she appears subservient ("The eye unrinsed, the mouth absurd / with the last sourings of the master's Feast" [407]), ridiculous when compared to a turkey ("this / low-brown butterball. Our prudent partridge" [407]), and poignantly self-deluding ("Pepita's smart," says Sallie. / Knowing the ham hocks are burning at the bottom of the pan" [419]). Mrs. Sallie's timidity and doubt appear paltry and inadequate compared to the rage and frustration from the other characters who come to populate the poem. Such character foils include Black Arts Movement leaders such as Don Lee who "does not want to / be exorcised, adjoining and revered," who "wants / new art and anthem; will / want a new music screaming in the sun" (423-24). Amos similarly questions hesitation such as Mrs. Sallie's ("Shall we sit on ourselves; shall we wait behind roses and veils / for monsters to maul us?") and advocates violence to change the course of injustice: "Great-nailed boots / must kick her prostrate, hell-grind that soft breast, / outrage her saucy pride, / remove her fine fair mask"

(424). Even Alfred comes to agree with Amos that what “[is] wanted in this Crazy-eyes, this Scar” is “a violent reverse” from the past (429).

In many ways, “After Mecca” is such a “violent reverse”; it marks Brooks’s inaugural poetic effort of her new black consciousness, the “new music screaming in the sun.” As in “In the Mecca,” the poems in “After Mecca” do not portray a united community gathered together in one place; instead, they testify to the characters’ displacement. “Boy Breaking Glass” provides the most striking example; in it, the boy who breaks windows in his neighborhood is displaced both from the advantages of white privilege and a basic sense of belonging to America: “Who has not Congress, lobster, love, luau, / the Regency Room, the Statue of Liberty, / runs” (439). Bracketed in quotation marks, his words paradoxically attest to his invisibility and his utter placelessness: “Nobody knew where I was and now I am no longer there” (439). Compared to the characters from Bronzeville, who are named and identified with their particular place in their community, this boy is nameless, unknown, and now lost even from his hiding place.

Brooks explains in *Report from Part One* that the poem’s dedication (“To Marc Crawford / from whom the commission”) responds to a prompt (from the “black writer and editor of *Time Capsule*” Melhem 176) that asks how such a displaced boy survives:

Marc Crawford asked me to consider: How ghetto blacks, overwhelmed by inequity and white power, manage to live. Does a black boy, for example, turn his eyes away from the Statue of Liberty? How does he talk to himself, comfort himself? What beauties are at his disposal? (*RPO* 184-85)

Certainly the poem answers these questions, considering the young boy's perspective ("How does he talk to himself, comfort himself?") and depicting his desire to make something from the "beauties [that] are at his disposal." Unlike the porous stanzas and crowding of voices in "In the Mecca," here quotation marks preserve his perspective and clearly differentiate him from the speaker of the poem:

"Each to his grief, each to
his loneliness and fidgety revenge.

Nobody knew where I was and now I am no longer there."

The only sanity is a cup of tea.

The music is in minors.

Each one other
is having different weather.

"It was you, it was you who threw away my name!

And this is everything I have for me." (438-39)

The poem is unequivocally sympathetic to the "Boy Breaking Glass" and, characteristically for Brooks, allows him to tell his own story. At the same time, the speaker is at an odd distance from the boy, understanding his plight but describing it from safe confines where "the only sanity is a cup of tea." The speaker's reflective posture, removed from the boy's world, suggests her safety and reinforces the realities of the

dispersed black community where “each one another / is having different weather.” And yet while the poem testifies to boy’s isolation and alienation (“each to his grief, / Each to his loneliness”), the speaker insists that he belongs to “us”: he is “Our beautiful flaw and terrible ornament. / Our barbarous and metal little man” (438). Whereas no one in “In the Mecca” could be troubled to find Pepita, this poem insists that the displaced and nameless boy belongs to the black nation. Still, the call to understand him as a part of the black community occurs in a context of isolation and distance.

The characters’ sense of place and identity is not the only change between “In the Mecca” and “After Mecca”; Brooks’s concern about getting art out to her people has also changed—she wants to make her poetry accessible to her audience:

Those of us who have not grown up with or to [art] perhaps squirm a little in its presence. We feel that something is required of us that perhaps we aren’t altogether able to give. And it’s just a way of saying, “Art hurts.” Art is not an old shoe; it’s something that you have to work in the presence of. It urges voyages. You can’t stay in your comfortable old grooves. You have to extend yourself. And it’s easier to stay at home and drink beer. (*RPO* 148)

Until now, Brooks’s art had not “urge[d] voyages” but encouraged readers to look with compassion and clarity at characters “at home.” After 1967, however, art is not a thing (“an old shoe”) but an impetus that actively encourages change. In this interview, Brooks uses language from her poem “The Chicago Picasso” to explain the sense of discomfort many feel in the presence of art. While the poem uses many of these same phrasings (“Art urges voyages,” “it is easier to stay at home, / the nice beer ready” 442), it does not also include the directives of her interview: “*you have to work* in the presence of,” “*you*

can't stay in your comfortable old grooves” and “*you have to extend* yourself.” The speaker of “The Chicago Picasso” takes a more detached posture, noting in the third person “our” common tendencies:

We
may touch or tolerate
an astounding fountain, or a horse-and-rider.
At most, another Lion.

Observe the tall cold of a Flower,
which is as innocent and as guilty,
as meaningful and as meaningless as any
other flower in the western field. (442-43)

The speaker’s final imperative in the poem is not impassioned (especially when compared to Brooks’s directives in the interview) but coolly ambivalent. While the speaker observes that “art urges voyages,” there are no voyages in the poem—after reflections on our discomfort in the presence of art, we are told simply to “observe.” Missing, too, is the specificity of place and character that has grounded so much of Brooks’s work. Instead of detailed character profiles, the abstracted flower in the final stanza is defined by its blandness and similarity to all the others: “as innocent and as guilty, / as meaningful and as meaningless as any / other flower in the western field.” Although art is now activism in Brooks’s formulation, some of her poems are still ambivalent in ways that her activist rhetoric is not.

These directives to bring art to the community were not passing ideas; Brooks worked tirelessly for the rest of her career to bring art to her people. She continued to organize workshops for gang members, she pursued readings in bars and other public venues in black Chicago, and she made an enormous impact on young writers, encouraging them through classes and lectures and prizes that she paid for herself. Brooks's "voyages" into activism for the black community were not only urged by poetry but also meant to encourage people to know poetry: "Brooks was also committed to reintroducing poetry to young people who had developed distaste for all things poetic in their school experiences" (Fisher 43). The very metaphor of the voyage speaks to a community that was no longer centralized into a neighborhood or a building. Art goes not provoke a closer look at your community at home but encourages growth and movement.

The dispersal of residents, anticipated in "In the Mecca," meant that instead of knowing one's neighborhood as in *A Street in Bronzeville*, the black community is spread out into an unfriendly city, encountering unknown people who threaten to keep blacks isolated and afraid. In "The Second Sermon on the Warland," the poem that ends the book, Brooks gives her most direct command:

All about are the cold places,
all about are the pushmen and jeopardy, theft—
all about are the stormers and scramblers but
what must our Season be, which starts from Fear?
Live and go out.
Define and
medicate the whirlwind. (455)

In contrast to the speaker from *Bronzeville*'s "a song in the front yard," who says she has "stayed in the front yard all my life," this speaker urges blacks to move beyond such comfortable confines, to "live and go out" (28). Also missing from this poem, especially in contrast to "a song in the front yard," is the exploration of the interiority of the speaker; it is replaced by an attempt to understand a new exterior life, noted especially in the repetition at the beginning of the lines in a row: "All about are." However, the speaker also acknowledges she is part of a community, asking in the first person plural, "What must our season be?" Brooks calls out to the black community spread out to the "cold places," asking them how they can come together. Here, and in the other poems from "After Mecca," Brooks's vision for her community is cohesive despite the fact that the characters therein lack the proximity of the Meccan or Bronzeville residents.

And thus the carefully detailed *Bronzeville* street and the eroding architecture of people in "In the Mecca" must give way to a new vision of building "The Sermon on the Warpland" that does not rely on a particular place. In fact, the speaker rejects the need for a physical place at all:

Build now your Church, my brothers, sisters. Build
never with brick nor Corten nor with granite.
Build with lithe love. With love like lion-eyes.
With love like morningrise.
With love like black, our black—
luminously indiscreet;
complete; continuous. (451-52)

Whereas the Christian church is built on “the stone the builders rejected,” Brooks here rejects the need for stone altogether in her rebuilding: “never with brick nor Corten nor with granite.” As Wheeler notes, this metaphor of a church is created instead out of the relationships within the black community: “this building will resemble a Church, will shelter and enclose, but it will exist as an imaginative, not a physical, structure. Its cement will correspond to the bonds between people” (232). Many of Brooks’s friends from the Black Arts movement remember her saying that the post-1967 era was “not a rhyme time” (Pollard, Ciccarelli, Strain, and Greene). But just as the phrase “not a rhyme time” wryly invokes a rhyme to make its point, so too does this aural rebuilding that includes a rhymed couplet: “Build with lithe love. With love like lion-eyes. / With love like morningrise.” The alliteration and euphony in these lines ease the cacophony earlier in the poem (“the brash and terrible weather, / the pains; / the bruising; the collapse of bestials, idols” 451) and even in the other descriptions of the challenges for the black community throughout “After Mecca” (“Thirty at the corner. / Black, raw, ready. / Sores in the city / that do not want to heal” 446).

These smooth sounds, of course, cannot “heal” the sores of the “thirty at the corner” without a real home in the city. At the same time as “The Sermon on the Warpland” rejects the need for a physical location, its title calls attention to the new place where the black community must live: in the warring land of the “Warpland.” Melhem unravels the many meanings inherent in this title:

“Warp” plus land forms a warped land. Compounding, however, involves the “war” in warp, so that the land is warped by war. The word may also be perceived as “war” and “plan” or “pland,” compatible with the call to organize for battle;

“pland” also suggests “plain” or “planed”—a leveling by war, by planes or airplanes. A sermon implies, furthermore, the need for moral guidance in such a land. The word “on” in the title conveys a message about the land, to it, for it, and also suggests simple location, as in the Sermon on the Mount, with which it bears comparison. (184)

Whereas Eliot’s “Unreal City” in “The Waste Land” is the desiccated and destroyed shadow of a once-vital London, Brooks’s “Warpland” names the land around her, which has been “warped” by the race wars in America. In the “Warpland” poems, Brooks provides perhaps less “moral guidance” and more a call to survive together in this new place that is no-place.

The speaker urges readers to make their way despite the chaotic “whirlwind” around them: “This is the urgency: Live! / and have your blooming in the noise of the whirlwind” (453), “know that the whirlwind is our commonwealth” (454), “Define and / medicate the whirlwind” (455), and “Conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the / whirlwind” (456). Wheeler suggests Brooks’s use of apostrophe such as this signals the “defining mode” of Brooks’s revolutionary poetics, and that it is this feature that politicizes her work: “Brooks forces her version of the lyric to become a public forum, to sustain the marks of and even participate in political struggle” (227). That political struggle is the new “place” in Brooks’s later work; “the noise and whip of the whirlwind” replaces the street, neighborhood, or building. Still, Brooks calls out to the black community to “conduct your blooming,” despite the difficulty, in this new, chaotic, placeless place.

Notes

¹ Quotations from Brooks's autobiography *Report from Part One* will be cited with the abbreviation *RPO*; her poetry is cited from *Blacks*.

² "After Mecca," indeed, is the title of the second section of *In the Mecca* that follows the title poem. The move from a focus on location to an emphasis on time ("In the Mecca" to "After Mecca," emphasizes mine) reflects Brooks's changing conception of the way her poems mobilize the black community.

³ Brooks's storied conversion as a result of her attendance at the 1967 Fisk University conference is well-documented; for example, see Kent, Melhem, Mootry, and Smith.

⁴ Lowney argues that by resisting the popularized narratives of the Mecca's urban decline in *Harper's* and *Life* magazines, the poem creates a black "countermemory": "Brooks's reconstruction of the Mecca from its postwar ruins is an 'incisive' intervention into the construction of African American cultural memory" (130).

⁵ Drake and Cayton describe these boundaries in *Black Metropolis* (58-64).

⁶ As Courtney Thorsson points out in *Women's Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Women's Novels*, "Cultural nationalism is the belief that people of African descent in the United States constitute a unique and separate culture" (14).

⁷ Similarly, later in her career, Brooks grew more qualified about who her poetry represented. True, after 1967 Brooks was more vocal about the importance of speaking to the black experience, as in her introductory comment to the 1971 anthology of black

writers *JUMP BAD*: “true black writers speak *as* blacks, *about* blacks, *to* blacks” (*RPO* 195). That is, she would not speak *for* blacks, a reserve that sat uneasily with the pressure she felt to be a spokesperson for black America. A 1986 interview reveals the inconsistencies in Brooks’s thinking about her role. First, she describes how her encounter at Fisk University altered her sense of audience:

I [had formerly] thought in terms of reaching everyone in the world with my poetry. But then I met some young blacks who had a different idea. They thought that black poetry was written by blacks, about blacks, to blacks. (*Conversations* 120).

Although she describes her new program—by, about, and to blacks—as an idea she gleaned from the “young blacks” she met, this crucial phrasing was hers, and she takes issue at the way it is often revised: “That last is often changed to ‘for blacks,’ which really throws it all off kilter as far as I’m concerned.” And yet, immediately following this clarification of how speaking “for” blacks inaccurately reflects her relationship with a black audience, Brooks claims her poetry is available not only to blacks but to anyone: “I think that poetry is for anybody who wants to take the time to consult it.” What is perhaps most surprising is how quickly these shifts occurred within just a few sentences. Too, there is a distinction here between the audience for the poet and for the poetry. In post-1967 interviews, Brooks often speaks about her poetry as separate from herself; Brooks, the poet, spoke “to blacks,” while her poetry stands on its own accord and “is for anybody who wants to take the time to consult it.”

⁸ Bronzeville is a neighborhood on Chicago’s south side where large numbers of African Americans settled during and after the Great Migration. See Drake and Cayton’s

Black Metropolis for detailed descriptions of the specific boundaries and character of the neighborhood in the 1940s.

⁹ For example, while many were aware of the large concentration of black people in south Chicago, not everyone knew the “Bronzeville” neighborhood’s name. In fact, Brooks retained the title *A Street in Bronzeville* despite Richard Wright’s objection that the name would be “obscure to anyone not familiar with Chicago, where the *Chicago Defender* had given the name to the black South Side section” (Kent 63).

¹⁰ This accounting considers the poems in the section “Gay Chaps at the Bar” as one poem, taking into consideration that all the poems in that section refer to people (“gay chaps”) and place (“at the bar”) although their individual titles do not always specifically reference people or place (such as “looking” or “piano after war”).

¹¹ This dedication was not retained in Brooks’s later collection of her poetry, *Blacks*, published in 1987. By contrast, all the dedications and epigraphs from her 1968 *In the Mecca*, discussed later in this chapter, were included in *Blacks*.

¹² The description of “pretty-coated *birds*” that “*pip*ed so lightly” likely alludes to the saxophonist Charlie Parker (“Bird”), suggesting the comparison to jazz musicians (*italics mine*).

¹³ When the gender of the speaker is not specified by the poem (as it is not here), I will use the gender of the author in my prose for the sake of clarity and making no other assumptions.

¹⁴ The visual orientation of characters separated into different stanzas is further reinforced by the secondary meaning of “stanza” as an apartment or room.

¹⁵ Jones, for example, rightly points out the individual voices in “In the Mecca” and their history within the African American tradition; however, she does not also attend to the way their individuality collapses in the poem: “Brooks’s ‘In the Mecca’ is precisely such a multidimensional poem, with blacks in the foreground, visible and individuated [. . . .] Each character in ‘In the Mecca’ could create an individual poem, but the integration of portraits and voices provides the sense of the Mecca as a world. And the multivoiced poem has a long tradition in Afro-American poetry; for example, such poems are found in the works of Sterling Brown, Robert Hayden, and Sherley A. Williams” (Jones 193).

¹⁶ Cheryl Clarke points out that in this reference, “‘The line’ [of Leopold] refers to the poetic line as much as to the ancestral line of Leopold Senghor, the black Senegalese who with Martiniquan, Aimé Césaire, and Haitian Léon Damas founded the Negritude Movement in Paris in the 1930s and from 1960 to 1980 was president of the West African country and former French colony, Senegal” (38).

¹⁷ Here we encounter another of Brooks’s endings that announce themselves as conclusive but do not truly end, similar to the myriad endings of “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith” (Ford, “Sonnets” 386). The line “A violent reverse” does not actually enact a change but precedes another declaration of an ending: “We part from all we thought we knew of love / and of dismay-with-flags-on.” And instead of ending with “we part,” this statement is followed by a further assertion of the fact of an ending: “What we know / is that there are confusion and conclusion.” Of course, the word “conclusion” does not conclude but leads to the single-line sentence that describes so much of the violent brokenness in the poem: “Rending.”

¹⁸ Another example of Brooks's inarticulable but essential "something"s occurs in "Maxie Allen": "Sweet Annie tried to teach her mother / There was somewhat of something other" (84). The speaker explains that Annie "did not know" what it was, exactly, but still "she tried to tell."

¹⁹ See Cheryl Clarke, for example, who identifies "In the Mecca" as a turning point from Brooks's earlier forms; she argues that it is "a post-modern elegy on the place of the lyric in African-American poetry" (138).

CHAPTER III
FROM “LOST SON” TO “LOST SELF”:
THE PLACE FOR IDENTITY IN THEODORE ROETHKE

In some ways, Theodore Roethke and Gwendolyn Brooks couldn't be more different, and it is no surprise that few studies group them together. Far from urban Chicago, Roethke was born and raised in Saginaw, Michigan, a small rural town where his father owned the largest greenhouse in the midwest. Although Roethke traveled and moved throughout his adult life (he held academic appointments in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Washington, for example), the rural Michigan setting for his second book, *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, held a mythic importance for him, as he describes in a 1953 interview:

The greenhouses themselves were [. . .] to me, I realize now, both heaven and hell, a kind of tropics created in the savage climate of Michigan, where austere German Americans turned their love of order and terrifying efficiency into something truly beautiful. It was a universe, several worlds, which, even as a child, one worried about, and struggled to keep alive. (*OPC* 22)¹

The greenhouse was no mere place: Roethke refers to it as “my symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth” (*OPC* 51). Indeed, for Roethke place was both literal (“the greenhouse”) and symbolic (“a universe” that is “my symbol for the whole of life”).

Roethke's description of the symbolism in his poetry also points to another distinction between the two poets. While Brooks's work depicts practical concerns (such

as those of Mrs. Small, who “went into the kitchen for her pocketbook / And came back to the living room with a peculiar look / And the coffee pot” [341] or Matthew Cole with a “gloomy housekeeper / Who forgets to build the fire, / And the red fat roaches that stroll / Unafraid up his wall” [40]), it is rather spiritual concerns that animate Roethke’s poems (“What’s left of my life? / I want the old rage, the lash of primordial milk!” [53]; “We think by feeling. What is there to know?” [104]). Of course, Brooks’s everyday objects have figurative meaning; for example, the “red fat roaches” in Matthew Cole’s room also suggest the missing fire that he cannot afford and hint at his hidden sexual thoughts. But Roethke, especially after his study of psychoanalysis and Jungian symbols, employs abstract symbols that often point to psychological or emotional states. Thus, he can observe that his “other obsessions begin to appear” in his poetry as animals, “symbolized by mole, nest, fish” (*OPC* 50).

In addition to his interest in spiritual subjects, Roethke often speaks of himself—his identity conflated loosely with the speaker throughout his poems—as a spiritual seeker on a long journey. Roethke describes “The Pit” and other poems from “The Lost Son” sequence as “in a sense [. . .] a stage in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual progress; an effort to be born, and later to become something more” (50). Roethke explains, “this struggle for spiritual identity is, of course, one of the perpetual recurrences” in the greenhouse sequence and indeed it is a perpetual recurrence throughout his career (*OPC* 53). By contrast, Brooks is interested in exploring black identity through a variety of individual perspectives. Known for her portrait poems, she wanted to illustrate not a single man’s spiritual journey but the “multitude” of black life through carefully differentiated people: “It is my privilege to state Negroes not as Curios

but as people” (*RPO* 146). Unlike the “Curios” who would exist only as symbols of undifferentiated black identity, the people in Brooks’s poems are unique individuals.

Roethke’s spiritual interest influences his rendering of place. He elevates his single spiritual seeker beyond the geographical place where he is located so that he also exists concurrently in a symbolic place. This paradox—of a speaker in a place rendered with careful geographical specificity who is also, symbolically, in a universal place—is one of many such paradoxes in Roethke’s work. For example, the characteristic Roethkean speaker undertakes a spiritual “quest for identity” that always seeks an ending point and yet always begins again:

But at least you can see that the method is cyclic. I believe that to go forward as a spiritual man it is necessary first to go back. Any history of the psyche (or allegorical journey) is bound to be a succession of experiences, similar yet dissimilar. There is a perpetual slipping-back, then a going-forward; but there is some ‘progress.’ Are not some experiences so powerful and so profound [. . .] that they repeat themselves, thrust themselves upon us, again and again, with variation and change, each time bringing us closer to our most particular (and thus most universal) reality? (*OPC* 51)

From the slow progress of a person attempting his spiritual journey again and again emerges an individual identity. It is the repetition of the search (“again and again, with variation and change”) that enables the “particular” reality. This passage also illustrates Roethke’s consistent reliance on paradox to explain these spiritual truths: “similar yet dissimilar,” “is a perpetual slipping-back, then a going-forward,” “our most particular (and thus most universal) reality.”

The tension between the universal and the particular is also one that occurred in Brooks's career. She explains in her "Poet's Premise" that she is more interested in the way the universal can be accessed through the "contemporary" particulars: "'Vivify the contemporary fact,' said Whitman. I like to vivify the *universal* fact, when it occurs to me. But the universal wears contemporary clothing very well" (*RPO* 146). Brooks's personification of universal facts wearing "contemporary clothing" is echoed in her poetry populated with a wide variety of individuated people: Hattie Scott, Maxie Allen, the "hunchback girl," Rudolph Reed, and Jessie Mitchell's mother, for example. Populating Roethke's poetry, instead, is the variety of natural life observed by a single spiritual seeker; his poems are filled with trees, light, plants, weather, air, dirt, and all varieties of animals: snakes, beetles, worms, bears, slugs, sparrows, eagles, hippos, and lambs, to name just a few in his menagerie. To extend Brooks's metaphor, for Roethke, contemporary truths wear universal clothing very well. Roethke's use of "universal" Jungian symbols, for example (the worm as a metaphor for spiritual stagnation) allows him to express contemporary or particular truths of his own experience:

I shook the softening chalk of my bones,

Saying,

Snail, snail, glister me forward,

Bird, soft-sigh me home,

Worm, be with me.

This is my hard time. (50)

There is no effort to explore the individual identity of these parts of nature—it is "snail," "bird," and "worm." However, the speaker's apostrophe to the small, often ignored

animals (snails, birds, worms) suggests a particular truth about his own emotional state: “this is my hard time,” he says, so hard that he appeals to animals that are diminutive in their size and limited in what they can do to help: “glisten me,” “soft-sigh-me,” “be with me.” In his essay “On ‘Identity,’” Roethke describes such creatures as the “lowest forms of life” that, if illuminated well in a poem, can nevertheless allow us access to the divine:

And it is one of the ways man at least approaches the divine—in this comprehensive human act, the really good poem. For there is a God, and He’s here, immediate, accessible. [. . .] He is equally accessible now, not only in works of art or in the glories of a particular religious service, or in the light, the aftermath that follows the dark night of the soul, but in the lowest forms of life, He moves and has His being. Nobody has killed off the snails. Is this a new thought? Hardly. But it needs some practicing in Western society. Could Reinhold Niebuhr love a worm? I doubt it. But I—we—can. (*OPC* 42)

For Roethke an individual expresses universal truths by coming closer to his or her own particular reality; it is one’s particular self-knowledge and its expression where “God. . . is immediate, accessible” (in “works of art,” “the glories of a particular religious service,” “the aftermath that follows the dark night of the soul,” and “the lowest forms of life”). It is this eternally frustrated and eternally beginning search that allows him to approach “our most particular (and thus most universal) reality” (51). Roethke’s biographer Allan Seager describes it this way: “He worked within the circle of his own emotions, and judging himself to be a sample of humanity, he conceived that his emotions would be common to all” (67-8). Or, in W. H. Auden’s recounting, “Ted had hardly any general

ideas at all”; instead, he had particular ideas that he described using universal symbols (qtd. in Seager 67).

However, it is easy—and not a little confusing, at times—to get lost in such logical and philosophical quandaries: how is “our most particular” reality “thus most universal”? How is God “immediate, accessible” and yet always, maddeningly, fading away? Seager describes such paradoxes as arising from a tension between Roethke’s gregarious and confident public persona (which he described as for “The Others”) and his private identity, “the sources of his poetry, the tenderness, the love, the terror, timidity, and guilt and the infrequent joy [. . .], the Self” (61). He describes the existence of these contradictory impulses in Roethke as ambiguous: “ambiguity, the perception of both inner and outer reality as a series of oppositions, seems to have been the very set of his mind” (61).

If ambiguity was the “set of his mind,” then Roethke’s stubborn refusal to resolve such ambiguities accounts for his paradoxical poems. Indeed, paradox is at the heart of Roethke’s poetry. Both recent critics and those contemporary to him note its presence, and Richard Allen Blessing can refer to a “Roethkean paradox” as a characteristic feature of the work (“Metaphysical Motion” 733). It is true that his speakers seem to want everything in two antithetical ways: to be fully immersed in the present by delving into the past, for example, or to discover permanence within the mutable natural world. For many poems, however, the paradox is not a problem to be solved but is itself the answer to the speaker’s search. In “The Waking,” perhaps Roethke’s most paradoxical poem and one of his best known, the paradoxes are not solved but resonate with different meanings in their repetitions: the speaker explains “I wake to sleep” and “learn by going where I

have to go” (104). From the repetition and sheer accretion of its paradoxes, a kind of beauty emerges, suggesting delight instead of frustration in the puzzle they present: “wonderment rather than regret, fascination rather than fear [. . .] repetition here suggests a rapt attention to the world” (Ford “Villanelle” 178).

Roethke’s repeated, underlying sense of joy and wonder—despite the lack of a clear ending or solution—demonstrates a particularly midcentury search for identity. Whereas modernist poems typically anguish over the loss of meaning (Yeats’s “The center cannot hold”; Pound’s “I cannot make it cohere”), the poems in “North American Sequence” are often hopeful. Even in poems that lament spiritual stagnation, such as “The Longing,” there is concurrently a sense of hope and belief in something more: “I would with the fish, the blackening salmon, and the mad lemmings, / The children dancing, the flowers widening” (182). The repetition and circularity of the search—of water, of seasons beginning again with the “blackening salmon”—do not produce frustration but possibility.

As he explains in “An American Poet Introduces Himself and His Poems,” the fact that the search does not have a clear ending is exactly the point: “sometimes, of course, there is a regression. I believe that the spiritual man must go back in order to go forward. The way is circuitous, and sometimes lost, but invariably returned to” (*OPC* 25). It is not progress that Roethke is after but a return to the circular search anew. The poem titles alone suggest such a movement, such as “The Return” (45); “The Cycle” (48); “The Sequel” (233); “The Restored” (241); and “Once More, The Round” (243). Too, this cyclical motion is often associated with interiority and self-knowledge, such as this

stanza from “The Cycle” where the speaker’s internal emotional state is compared with the movement of water underground:

Dark water, underground,
Beneath the rock and clay,
Beneath the roots of trees,
Moved into common day,
Rose from a mossy mound
In mist that sun could seize. (48)

The water, hidden “underground,” slowly moves up “into common day” and becomes “mist that sun could seize.” This description of evaporation (which becomes cyclical later in the poem when the “the full rain fell straight down” and the water returns “under primeval stone”) mirrors the cyclical process of the self being loosed from its interiority and becoming a part of the world, only to return to a hidden interiority when the cycle begins again.

Despite the differences between the type of identity that the two poets explored (Brooks, a variety of identities; Roethke, a single man’s identity) and the place for such an identity (Brooks, in an urban neighborhood or community; Roethke, in a natural setting that often symbolized a psychological state) neither describes a fractured identity as many modernists did. The identity these poets explore is not Whitman’s effusive, optimistic speaker proclaiming “I contain multitudes,” but neither is it an anguished modernist speaker such as T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock who dithers, “Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?”² Roethke instead wants to understand the identity of someone who grows and changes in spiritual stagnation and despair but also in moments

of clarity and growth. The self “need not be spare” (*OPC* 37) nor “a disgusting thing from which we should be delivered” (38), but it is akin to the vegetation that springs from the greenhouse: “it can grow gracefully and beautifully like a tendril, like a flower” (37). Thus, it is not the multitudes of other people his speaker contains (and can sing) but a multitude of selves to explain through processes of growth: “I am not speaking of the empirical self, the flesh-bound ego; it’s a single word: myself, the aggregate of the several selves, if you will” (*OPC* 37). Roethke’s description of the self as “aggregate” hints at his view of the paradoxical nature the self: it is not one self that gives way to another as it changes but both—all, somehow!—at once.

What is perhaps most surprising about Roethke, compared to his modernist predecessors, is his belief that poetry is equal to the challenge of this ever renewing quest: “And it is one of the ways man at least approaches the divine—in this comprehensive human act, the really good poem” (42). This is not the speaker in “The Waste Land” attempting to find meaning in the crumbling and desiccated modern world, describing poetry as “fragments [. . .] shored against my ruins” (50). Even in times of spiritual despair, Roethke’s speaker finds an opportunity for growth and renewal, as in the late poem “The Restored”:

‘I’m maimed; I can’t fly;
I’m like to die,’
Cried the soul
From my hand like a bowl.

When I raged, when I wailed,

And my reason failed,
That delicate thing
Grew back a new wing,

And danced, at high noon,
On a hot, dusty stone,
In the still point of light
Of my last midnight. (241)

The soul, personified as a “delicate” exterior being “small as an elf,” can still be “The Restored,” even in the dry landscape “at high noon, / On a hot dusty stone.” The speaker does not question poetry’s ability to meet such a crisis nor lament the loss of narratives that might have provided spiritual meaning. In fact, the soul healed itself (“grew back a new wing”) and did so after reason faltered. The poem’s sturdy rhymed couplets confirm Roethke’s belief that poetry can adequately describe this allegorical drama of the soul. The odd slant rhyme in the final stanza (“noon” with “stone”), however, suggests the happy ending is still paradoxical: it is “high noon” and concurrently “my last midnight” when the renewed soul dances. Too, in this final stanza, the soul dances but does not fly as it wants to (“I can’t fly / I’m like to die”), even with its new wing.

Such belief in the role of poetry came in spite of the fact that Roethke battled deep self-doubt about his work and his place in American poetry. His *Selected Letters* illuminate insecurity on nearly every page, chronicling his fears about his own talent, heavy drinking, literary gossiping, and serious mental health problems. The first in his family to go to college, Roethke tried for a short time to fulfill his family’s hope that he

would become a lawyer; after dropping out of law school to pursue a career in poetry, he felt constantly misunderstood and worried about his financial success (his “endemic fear of poverty” [Seager 104], perhaps first addressed in the final line of a college essay: “I’m either going to be a good writer or a poor fool” [*OPC* 19]). It is unclear, especially in retrospect, what the relationship of these beliefs was to his mental illness. In a chapter ominously titled “Trouble,” Seager describes Roethke’s first mental breakdown and hypothesizes about the possible causes and for future bouts of hospitalization: stresses from a new University position; his troubled romantic relationship with women (in this case, Mary Kunkel); “public and favorable criticism of his poetry” that had just come out and caused “a pervasive sense of guilt” (102); a belief or justification that, in his words, “I’m at my best when I’m slightly depressed” (106). Behind each of these explanations looms the figure “who could be wistfully appealed to but who could give no answer, render no decisions” and who thus “may account for some of the persistent ambiguities” of his thinking: Roethke’s father.

Nearly all critics acknowledge the centrality of Roethke’s father in his thinking and his poetry: “his father’s death was the most important thing that ever happened to him [. . .]. Otto Roethke seems to have been a lifelong presence in his son’s mind” (Seager 104). The death of his father had an immediate effect on him; after Otto’s death when Roethke was fifteen years old, he took up the role of “man of the house” and “became very quiet in the year that followed” (43). His sister recounts the way he assumed the literal and symbolic posture of this position:

Ted did not grieve openly. On the day of the funeral, after the family had come home from the burial, he sat in the living room reading the *Atlantic Monthly*. “We

didn't subscribe to it," his sister said. "He must have bought it." That night he took his father's place at the head of the table and he sat there from that day on.

(Seager 43)

The complicated repercussions of his father's death are apparent in his early poetry (including one of his most anthologized poems, "My Papa's Waltz") as well as in his last book of poems *The Far Field* (in the tender poem "Otto").

While Roethke's preoccupation with his father does not change throughout his career, what does shift is the persona of the son addressing him. This fundamental shift in his poetic identity is best understood by comparing his early book (*The Lost Son and Other Poems*, 1948) with his final book published posthumously (*The Far Field*, 1964) and tracing the complicated relationship of identity to place in these books. The "lost son" who begins his quest for identity in *The Lost Son and Other Poems* becomes a "lost self" in his final poems in the "North American Sequence" of *The Far Field*. In these instances, the word "lost" communicates both a statement of his identity (a son who has "lost" his father, a self who is "lost" in his purpose) and a statement of place (or lack thereof: both the "son" and the "self" are attempting to find their way). Within this one word, we hear the resonances from most of the major subjects of Roethke's poetry: the son who has been deprived and even wrested of his father; the man spatially lost who leaves the greenhouse of his youth for the far field of his mature years; the hopeless self that has been spiritually destroyed; the self that has been forgotten by the world. In his earlier *Lost Son*, these meanings of "lost" are clearly operative as the speaker looks back at his childhood in the greenhouse poems and finds a new way through the world without a father in the "Lost Son" sequence that ends the book. In *The Far Field*, however, this

last meaning of “lost”—being lost into the world—gains a positive association, far from the other definitions of lost as “groundless,” “depraved,” “ruined,” or “desperate.” In fact, becoming “lost” is the speaker’s goal. Again and again in “North American Sequence,” the speaker attempts to lose the self into the world and finds contentment in the moments when he achieves such dispersal.

While the quest for identity animates all of Roethke’s work, nature is the most common setting and subject. Plants and animals, not people, populate these poems. The few exceptions to this rule occur mostly in the beginning of his career, such as in *The Lost Son* that includes as its subjects “Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartze” (42); his father and occasionally his mother, as in “My Papa’s Waltz” (43); and the audience in “Double Feature” (45). The exceptions later in his career are poems to or about the beloved (such as “I Knew a Woman” [122] or poems from a woman’s point of view, such as his sequence “Meditations of an Old Woman” [151-67]). Even in this last sequence, however, the poems from a woman’s perspective still explore the question of identity.

While it is nature and not people that populate his poetry, the focus is still on the self: nature becomes a tool for Roethke’s self-exploration. Even when nature is the explicit subject of a poem, it is generally not explored on its own terms but rather as it relates to the self. One of the “Love Poems” from his 1958 *Words for the Wind* is representative of this tendency to instrumentalize nature:

1

I stand with standing stones

The stones stay where they are.

The twiny winders wind;

The little fishes move.

A ripple wakes the pond.

2

This joy's my fall. I am!—

A man rich as a cat,

A cat in the fork of a tree,

When she shakes out her hair.

I think of that, and laugh. (116)

The first stanza, as in many other poems, establishes the self in a landscape. Using repetition of the word “stand,” the speaker asserts his similarity to the stones (“I stand with standing stones”). And yet in the next line he emphasizes that his difference from them: “The stones stay where they are.” The shift from “stand” to “standing” connects the self to the stones (“I stand” and the “stones” are “standing”) and personifies them. Thinking of the stones as human prepares us for the observation in the next line that “the stones stay where they are,” as if staying still is their choice, that they might do otherwise. The self, of course (and not the stones), is at the center of this verbal play and the natural scene. The second stanza’s comparison of the self to nature is more direct: “I am!— / A man rich as a cat.” However, the cat reappears in the following lines (“A cat in the fork of a tree”), but it is unclear: is this a further detail of the earlier metaphor (so that the speaker means he is “A man rich as a cat / [that is] in the fork of a tree”)? Or does the “I am!—” from the opening line in the stanza extend to this line (so that the speaker

means that he is stuck and in need of help, “I am!— [. . .] A cat in the fork of a tree”)? Even more, is the “she” who “shakes out her hair” a real cat, a metaphorical cat who is compared to the self, the tree, personified, “shaking out her hair,” or even the beloved (who is the implied subject of the “love poems”)? What Roethke wants, of course, is to provoke all these possibilities: his poems play with a cascade of meanings that echo, extend, and complicate one another. The tension inherent in these cascades of meanings is what he savors: Roethke does not want to iron out the logical impossibilities but to let them resonate together, each another part of the complicated internal landscape he constructs in the world.

Playful and inconclusive explorations of identity, such as we see in “All the Earth, All the Air,” are common throughout Roethke’s work but so too are more painful and difficult questionings of the self. Many viewed the midcentury poets’ continual focus on the self as a liability or a lack of interest in more serious topical questions; they were often charged with being too introspective and self-involved. However, Roethke’s lifelong dedication to these questions of identity—as well as his interest in understanding how identity changes over time and in relation to different places—testifies to the way his search was responsive to the ever-changing cultural and political landscape. Exploring identity was not a way Roethke shirked his responsibilities to the world but was the way he worked out his relationship to (and thus his responsibilities to) the world.

For Roethke, the search for identity is tied to the act of seeing deeply and understanding life outside of himself, as he explains in his essay “On ‘Identity’”:

It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other beings—and in some instances, even an inanimate thing—brings a corresponding

heightening and awareness of one's own self, and, even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of oneness of the universe. [. . .] And both [feelings] can be induced, the first simply by intensity of the seeing. To look at a thing so long that you are a part of it and it is a part of you—Rilke gazing at his tiger for eight hours, for instance. If you can effect this, then you are by way of getting somewhere. (*OPC* 40)

The search for identity is built upon this basic paradox, as Roethke formulates it: understanding one's own identity requires a separation from others but begins with a response to something other, eliciting a feeling of "oneness" that comes with "the loss of the 'I'" (26). Observation is crucial to such a process; the "feeling of oneness with the universe" begins not only by seeing but also with the "intensity of the seeing." Moreover, this way of looking at the world is not mere passive observation but altering the self: "to look at a thing so long that you are a part of it and it is a part of you." Identity, then, is a correspondence between the interior self and the outside world.

For Roethke's speakers, attention to the outside world often entails attention to place. Thus, it is important precisely where observations about the natural world occur and Roethke often lingers in the description of a scene with geographical specificity and minute detail. However, it is equally important how the self is located in that place—his poems chart the way speakers react to and interact with place. In "Weed Puller," one of the greenhouse poems from *The Lost Son*, the speaker describes the "indignity" of crawling in the dirt while plants peacefully grow overhead:

With everything blooming above me,
Lilies, pale-pink cyclamen, roses,

Whole fields lovely and inviolate,—
Me down in that fetor of weeds,
Crawling on all fours,
Alive, in a slippery grave. (37)

Here, as often occurs, the place leads directly to identity. The poem begins by describing the outside world (“Grubs and snails and sharp sticks”) and then carefully calculates the way the speaker fits into this scene: “above me,” “me down,” and “crawling on all fours.” And just as the poems are focused on exploring inner truths, *The Lost Son* poems are set in and concerned with interiors: the greenhouse, the cellar, his parents’ kitchen, and the cemetery where his father is buried. These poems show a fascination with the sometimes gruesome workings of interior life.

Indeed, a “dark night of the soul” that is frequently also a “dark night of the soil” is often the subject of these poems; even more, his mental state is often associated with the place where the poems are set. Roethke is careful to state that the poems often “begin” in a dark place but that they do not remain there:

Some of these pieces, then, begin in the mire; as if man is no more than a shape
writhing from the old rock. This may be due, in part, to the Michigan from which
I come. Sometimes one gets the feeling that not even the animals have been there
before; but the marsh, the mire, the Void, is always there, immediate and
terrifying. It is a splendid place for schooling the spirit. It is America. (*OPC* 52)

Man is eternally stuck in the “mire” of the spirit, an inner darkness that traps him into “a shape” without an identity, “writhing from the old rock.” Roethke attributes this feeling of spiritual darkness “to the Michigan from which I come,” which is both particular and

eternal (“always there, immediate and terrifying”) and yet paradoxically solitary and new (“one gets the feeling that not even the animals have been there before”). Such terrifying emptiness and aloneness—“the marsh, the mire, the Void”—is nevertheless the very place for growth: “a splendid place for schooling the spirit.” In Roethke’s geography, such places are not to be avoided but cultivated. America is not a place to be conquered, explored, preserved, investigated—it is a place for learning more about the self, for “schooling the spirit.” Thus, for Roethke place is both a reflection of his interiority and a force for shaping it.

However—for Roethke, there is always a “however”—dark explorations of identity in the Void are not where his poems end. As he will claim in “The Longing” from his 1964 “North American Sequence,” “Out of these nothings / —All beginnings come” (182). Unlike other poets such as Plath or Lowell, exploring the “mire” of one’s identity is not the end—these dark places are always a ground for spiritual growth. As Roethke explains of his “Lost Son” sequence, “None the less, in spite of all the muck and welter, the dark, the dreck of these poems, I count myself among the happy poets: ‘I proclaim, once more, a condition of joy!’ says the very last piece” (*OPC* 52). Roethke is no starry-eyed idealist who would presume this happiness to be permanent or easily attained. In fact, his use of the word “condition” suggests that this state is temporary. Too, it alludes to the medical language of mental illness: it is not (only) a “mental condition” that he struggles with; out of such struggles comes another mental state, a “condition of joy.”

Roethke is careful to qualify that this “condition of joy” only occurs in “the very last piece,” a clarification that illuminates the importance he places on sequencing his

poems. Roethke experimented with poetic forms throughout his career, from the tightly rhymed quatrains in “My Papa’s Waltz” to the free verse and childlike rhyme in the third section of “The Long Alley”; from his famous villanelle “The Waking” to the long, Whitmanesque free verse lines in “Meditation at Oyster River.” While his poems did employ traditional forms most often earlier in his career, the generalization that he moved from formal poetry to free verse (like many midcentury poets) is not entirely accurate. For Roethke, the poetic form to which he adhered most consistently was the sequence.

Indeed, it is the habit of sequencing his poems that increased later in his career; “after *Open House* Roethke was always meticulous about the order and arrangement of poems within each book, often deleting poems because they did not fit into a sequence” (Sullivan 26). For example, three out of four sections in *The Far Field* include the word “sequence” (“North American Sequence,” “Mixed Sequence,” and “Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical”), suggesting Roethke’s interest in ordering even dissimilar poems. However, even in his earlier books, the sequence still predominates. In *The Lost Son* (1948), for example, poems are grouped into four sections that function as sequences: I, the “Greenhouse poems”; II, poems from childhood, including “My Papa’s Waltz,” “Pickle Belt” and “Last Words”; III, a short series of poems that trace a journey from darkness to light (describing a move from “Dark water, underground” [48] to “an open field” on a “summer day” [49]); and IV, “The Lost Son” sequence. In this last sequence, each poem is further divided into three to five numbered sections.

Moreover, as much as Roethke’s poetry is sequential, it is also oddly cyclical. The thematic journey from dark to light occurs again and again. Sometimes that journey occurs in the space of a poem; other times, it happens throughout a sequence. But just as

soon as his speaker finds himself in “a condition of joy,” he’s back in the “muck and dreck” again. Roethke used the sequence as a way of providing order on a chaotic writing process. An edited collection of Roethke’s unpublished writing, *Straw for the Fire*, testifies to his fact: its contents are taken from 277 spiral notebooks completed over the course of his career. Seager reports that Roethke’s living space was similarly disorganized, such as the apartment he moved into when he took his first teaching position in 1936: “he immediately and effortlessly turned his quarters into a mess, so much so that any guest had to stand patiently until Ted cleared a chair for him to sit on, so much so that Ted refused to let the maid into it for weekly cleaning—she would leave the clean sheets outside the door” (113). Along with the untidiness of his process, however, came a consistent output of writing that he would draw upon for his poetry:

Well or ill, he wrote poetry or took notes for poetry nearly every day of his adult life. Poetry was the central fact of his life, and everything else, his states of mind, his friendships, enmities, his loves and hatreds, even his amusements, clung to it like filings to a magnet. (109)

Many critics have traced the influences on his poetry and how his process changed throughout his career. Whatever his process, what did not change was that he carefully attended to sequencing his poems as a way of imposing order onto his wildly messy writing habits. For Roethke, sequential order presents an opportunity for making a kind of logical sense that was not available inside each lyric.

But at the same time, there is another tension between order and wildness at work in Roethke’s poetry: the order humans exert over the natural world. Roethke associated this type of order with his father, who made a career of controlling the growth of the

flowers and plants in his greenhouse. The fascination and terror Roethke felt at his father's dominance over nature is perhaps best illustrated in "The Return," the fourth poem in the Lost Son sequence. It is set in the greenhouse where the speaker has returned after visiting the cemetery where his father is buried:

Once I stayed all night.

The light in the morning came slowly over the white

Snow.

There were many kinds of cool

Air.

Then came steam.

Pipe-knock.

Scurry of warm over small plants.

Ordnung! ordnung!

Papa is coming!

A fine haze moved off the leaves;

Frost melted on far panes;

The rose, the chrysanthemum turned toward the light.

Even the hushed forms, the bent yellowy weeds

Moved in a slow up-sway. (54)

The speaker exclaims “ordnung!”—German for “order!”—as the “scurry of warm over small plants” enters the greenhouse, but its definition extends beyond the order of the greenhouse: “Ordnung customarily translates as ‘order’ or ‘arrangement,’ but the resonance is far wider, here offering connotations equal to those in religious communities, where the life of an entire society develops by way of an ‘order’” (Kusch 48-49). As other critics have observed, the exclamation also seems to imply that the plants should “watch out,” but “the proper German for ‘Look out! Look out!’ would be ‘Achtung’” (“An Evening with Roethke” 228). Order, then, is an arrangement; a way of living one’s life; a fatherly dictate; and an exhortation to “look out!” Even more, it becomes the directive that the plants respond to, as everything in the greenhouse responds to Papa’s imagined arrival: “frost melted,” “the rose, the chrysanthemum turned toward the light,” and even “the bent yellowy weeds / Moved in a slow up-sway.” While the speaker, of course, describes natural processes in the greenhouse (frost melting, flowers turning toward the light), the personification of the plants makes them appear to respond to his father’s fearful and ghostly presence.

In the “lost son” persona, Roethke’s speaker is primarily concerned with the struggle to understand his identity as a son without a father. This emphasis on exploring his identity leads directly to a concern about place: *The Lost Son* poems are some of the most geographically specific poems in Roethke’s career, largely set in his father’s greenhouse and his childhood home in Michigan. Despite the attention to place in these poems, the identity explored in these poems is nevertheless “lost.” While “The Lost Son” sequence is a relatively small part of the book (it includes just four poems in the fourth section of the book), the lost son persona can be traced throughout, from “Child on Top

of a Greenhouse” (one of the greenhouse poems from the first section) to “My Papa’s Waltz” (a poem from the second section).

In fact, Roethke believes a childlike persona offers readers the best opportunity to understand his work. His troublesome paradoxical poems, he argues, should not be submitted to the scrutiny of a close reading but apprehended with the curiosity and careful attention of a child:

You will have no trouble if you approach these poems as a child would, naively, with your whole being awake, your faculties loose and alert. (A large order, I daresay!) Listen to them, for they are written to be heard, with the themes often coming alternately, as in music, and usually a partial resolution at the end. Each poem [. . .] is complete in itself; yet each in a sense is a stage in a kind of struggle out of the slime; part of a slow spiritual progress; an effort to be born, and later, to become something more. (*OPC* 50)

Here, in these exhortations to the reader (from his “Open Letter”), is perhaps Roethke’s clearest statement of his poetics. His are poems whose sense comes largely from sound (“written to be heard”), whose “partial resolution at the end” makes each poem “complete in itself” and yet part of a sequence that is “a slow spiritual progress; an effort to be born.” Too, Roethke here imagines his ideal reader: one with “faculties loose and alert” who can understand his allusive and associative symbols “as a child would, naively.” Roethke’s expectations for his audience describe not someone versed in the poetic tradition but someone who can approach poems with “faculties loose and alert” and who can truly “listen to them.”

By this logic, the incomprehensibility of many of Roethke's poems is in fact a part of their aesthetic, as someone writing poems from a child's perspective "works intuitively, and the final form of his poem must be imaginatively right," not just logically correct (*OPC* 53). The challenge of such poems is precisely their art, a sign of poetic compression that can be unlocked all at once in a "dramatic revelation" for the "serious reader":

If intensity has compressed the language so it seems, on early reading, obscure, this obscurity should break open suddenly for the serious reader who can hear the language: the "meaning" itself should come as a dramatic revelation, an excitement. The clues will be scattered richly—as life scatters them; the symbols will mean what they usually mean—and sometimes something more. (*OPC* 53)

Roethke envisions poetic language (and the "clues" it contains) as seeds that are scattered "richly" for the reader to discover. Continuing with the vegetative metaphor, he describes the way his poems grow and open up from the obscurity of an "early reading" into the spiritual "revelation" of deeper meaning. Again, as is typical, Roethke refers to the apprehension of his poetry as a feeling, an "excitement" beyond what we traditionally refer to as the poem's "meaning."

Both of these passages from "Open Letter" end with an elusive promise: "something more." In the first, the "something more" is the imagined end of a process of spiritual growth that happens through poetry (each poem as part of "an effort to be born, and later, to become something more" *OPC* 50). In the second, the "something more" is an excess of meaning that grows from the typical associations of a symbol ("the symbols will mean what they usually mean—and sometimes something more" *OPC* 53). In both,

“something more” refers to the product of growth beyond the poet (or speaker’s) control.

Too, Roethke is careful to align the “something more” with a time that is not now:

“later,” and “sometimes” they “become” something more.³

Like the hushed opening of Brooks’s “the old-marrieds,” the quiet opening of *The Lost Son and Other Poems* provides a window into some of the themes and formal strategies that Roethke will rely on throughout his career. In the first two poems (a short sequence in themselves), Roethke observes a difficult emotional journey that ends in rampant growth:

Cuttings

Sticks-in-a-drowse droop over sugary loam,

Their intricate stem-fur dries;

But still the delicate slips keep coaxing up water;

The small cells bulge;

One nub of growth

Nudges a sand-crumb loose,

Pokes through a musty sheath

Its pale tendrulous horn.

Cuttings

(later)

This urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks
Cut stems struggling to put down feet,
What saint strained so much,
Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?

I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing,
In my veins, in my bones I feel it,—
The small waters seeping upward,
The tight grains parting at last.
When sprouts break out,
Slippery as fish,
I quail, lean to beginnings, sheath-wet. (35)

Here, Roethke explores not new growth but regrowth—the way plants, when transplanted, can become something new. In a book where the speaker is coming to terms with the identity of the son who has lost his father and is thus lost to the world, it is fitting that Roethke is interested in the way a plant can be severed (“cuttings”) from its source and yet grow again elsewhere. However, it is not the place itself that is important (we only know that it is within the “sugary loam” and the “musty sheath” of dirt): the focus on the soil suggests not geographical specificity but a place where growth might occur. In fact, it is not the cuttings but the process of growth itself that is the real subject of the poem, given an animal-like agency with “stem-fur” “nudging” and “poking” a “pale tendrilous horn.” By contrast, the speaker who comments on the plant’s microscopic detail (“small cells” and “one nub of growth”) is still just an observer. In “Cuttings

(later),” the speaker has a much more intimate relationship with the plant although it is still unclear where exactly he fits into the scene: is he “underground” so that he “can hear [. . .] that sucking and sobbing,” empathetically feeling the struggle “in my veins, in my bones”? Has he metaphorically become the plant, so “that sucking and sobbing” of the “delicate slips [. . .] coaxing up water” happen in him? In other words, is he the plant? Or is the plant an animal? Or is the plant a human, with “lopped limbs” “struggling to put down feet”? Of course, these meanings are all present and “slippery as fish.” For this is not simply a physical struggle but an emotional, spiritual one: here is the dark night of the soil where spiritual growth (“this urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks”) is figured as botanical growth.

Just as Brooks’s poem “the old-marrieds” that opens *A Street in Bronzeville* begins with a “But” that refutes the previous beliefs one may have about an old married couple (“But in the crowding darkness not a word did they say”), Roethke’s first stanza in *The Lost Son* employs “but” to assert growth is still possible despite our expectations for death. Here, perhaps, is the most clear refutation of the desiccated landscape of “The Waste Land”: yes, such death and barrenness exist, “but still” the new growth pokes through. Even more, the growth is specifically human, symbolically happening within one man’s search for a new place for his identity. This is not without difficulty (“urge,” “wrestle,” “resurrection,” “sucking,” “sobbing,” “quail”), but there is a “new life” as the speaker “lean[s] to beginnings,” from dry “stem-fur” to watching the “sprouts break out,” “sheath-wet.” It is not just death, paradoxically—“but still”—alongside it, growth and “beginnings.”

The form of the poems mirrors the expansion into a new identity that they chronicle. The two quatrains in “Cuttings” are reminiscent of the poems in Roethke’s previous book (*Open House* 1941), most of which followed rhyme schemes and stanzaic patterns. While Roethke never forswears fixed forms (he uses them regularly throughout his career; in the second section of *The Lost Son*, for example, is his famous ballad “My Papa’s Waltz”), many agree that *The Lost Son* announced a new poetics for Roethke: the personal, free-verse poems that would become most common later in his career. With the introduction of the “I” in “Cuttings (*later*),” the second stanza must expand to include this personal identity from four lines to seven. When the new growth finally comes and “sprouts break out,” so too does the stanza as it “lean[s] to beginnings” of self-exploration.

Self-exploration must involve understanding his identity as a “lost son.” Memories of Roethke’s father haunt *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, as one might expect from the title. However, his father never actually appears in the greenhouse sequence; the first time the speaker’s father appears explicitly in the book is the first poem of section II, “My Papa’s Waltz.” Knowing that Roethke’s father was an enormous presence in the greenhouse itself, his absence in these poems is pronounced. As Roethke attempts to understand his identity as a lost son without a father, this sequence is an attempt to reimagine his childhood experience without a father: perhaps he has been a lost son all along.

The time shifts throughout the greenhouse sequence also reflect the strange point of view of the speaker. There are times when the poems are in present tense and from a child’s perspective: “I can hear, underground, that sucking and sobbing, / In my veins, in

my bones I feel it,—” (35); “They lean over the path, / Adder-mouthed, Swaying close to the face” (37); “Watching hands transplanting, / Turning and tamping, / Lifting the young plants with two fingers” (40). Many of these sections attempt to replicate a child’s language and psychological state; as Roethke explains, some are “written entirely from the viewpoint of a very small child: all interior drama; no comment; no interpretation” (*OPC* 52). But other poems interspersed with these explicitly describe Roethke’s adult reflections on his childhood. This retrospective mode is often established in the opening line of each poem with the past tense: “Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch” (36); “Where were the greenhouses going, / Lunging into the lashing / Wind driving water” (39); “Gone the three ancient ladies / Who creaked on the greenhouse ladders” (42). The effect of these shifts (from an adult’s to a child’s perspective, from the experience of being in the greenhouse to contemplative reflections of the greenhouse) is disorienting. The identity that Roethke explores in this sequence is paradoxically both child and adult; the sequence describes an adult’s experience of grief for a lost father mixed with the child’s experience (joy, wonder, disgust, fascination, all at once) of similar cycles of life and death in the greenhouse.

The commingling of child and adult persona is even more prominent in the “Lost Son” sequence. The first section, “The Flight,” begins from an adult’s perspective as the speaker returns to Woodlawn (the cemetery where Roethke’s father is buried) to reflect on the “old wound” of his father’s death, entreating the worm to “be with me. / This is my hard time” (50). While the speaker has taken “flight” to the cemetery and located himself with geographical specificity (“Sat in an empty house” “At Woodlawn”), he still searches for direction:

Voice, come out of the silence.

Say something.

Appear in the form of a spider

Or a moth beating the curtain.

Tell me:

Which is the way I take;

Out of what door do I go,

Where and to whom? (51)

As with many Roethke poems, the journey (the “flight” to the cemetery) has taken him to a place where the more important interior journey can begin. Clearly, he does not wonder which door to leave in the house, but asks: which door should he open up to the rest of his life? The natural world that aided in his self-exploration in the greenhouse poems is now strange and even antagonistic: as the leaves are personified as unfriendly faces (“All the leaves stuck out their tongues”), and the natural world ignores him (“Nothing nibbled my line, / Not even the minnows came”) (50).

Indeed, in “The Lost Son” sequence, the speaker is lost in his relationship to the world, an experience that is painful, confusing, and difficult. Again and again, the speaker describes how the exterior world is against him as he attempts his interior journey:

Dogs of the groin

Barked and howled,

The sun was against me,

The moon would not have me.

The weeds whined,

The snakes cried,

The cows and briars

Said to me: Die. (52)

The “Lost Son” sequence chronicles a dark night of the soul that is the subject of so many Roethke poems, following a cyclical “journey into darkness and back again” trajectory.

The titles of the poem’s sections describe this progression: the speaker undertakes a journey (1. The Flight) into darkness (2. The Pit; 3. The Gibber); and back again (4. The Return; 5. “It was beginning winter”). For Roethke, a sense of identity is often identified with a sense of place; as his identity becomes more lost, so does the specificity of place that has been established earlier in the poem. Thus, the careful specificity of the speaker’s location in the first section (the “empty house” “at Woodlawn”) disappears by the third section, where instead the speaker’s description of his location is metaphorical (“Look, look, the ditch is running white!” and “I’m falling through a dark swirl” [54]) or generalized (“At the wood’s mouth” [52] and “How cool the grass is.” [53])

In these sections, the speaker is indeed lost from a specific place; by the third section of the “Lost Son” sequence, “The Gibber,” the speaker becomes lost into language itself. The child-and-adult persona sometimes combines simple diction with complicated ideas (“Is the seed leaving the old bed?”) and other times uses more complicated diction with a childlike cadence (“I have married my hands to perpetual

agitation”) (53). The poem reels through ever-changing figures, and the speaker’s search for identity is rendered opaque by associative play and aural effects:

Is this the storm’s heart? The ground is unstilling itself.

My veins are running nowhere. Do the bones cast out their fire?

Is the seed leaving the old bed? These buds are live as birds.

Where, where are the tears of the world?

Let the kisses resound, flat like a butcher’s palm;

Let the gestures freeze; our doom is already decided.

All the windows are burning! What’s left of my life?

I want the old rage, the lash of primordial milk!

Goodbye, goodbye, old stones, the time-order is going,

I have married my hands to perpetual agitation,

I run, I run to the whistle of money.

Money money money

Water water water (53)

The weather imagery in the first line (“Is this the storm’s heart?”) is a metaphor for an emotional storm as the speaker wonders about the dryness of the world three lines later, “Where, where are the tears of the world?” However, these same lines don’t relate to the other lines that follow, such as “these buds are live as birds.” Similarly, the authoritative, even god-like tone of “Let the kisses resound, flat like a butcher’s palm” obscures the fact that the simile is resistant to sense: how does the sound of kisses relate to the shape of a butcher’s hand? A clearer sense of the poem’s argument, however, is evident in an

examination of the paradoxically divergent lexicons in these stanzas. As we would expect from Roethke, there are lexicons of the natural world (“seed,” “bed,” “stones,” “ground”) alongside lexicons of the body or self (“veins,” “bones,” “palm,” “hands,” “gestures,” “life”). There are words that allude to romantic love (“heart,” “kisses,” “palm,” “tears,” “bed,” “primordial,” “married,” “whistle”) and also rejection (“cast out,” “leaving,” “decided,” “left,” “old,” “goodbye,” “doom,” and “tears”). There is the immediate crisis of natural disaster (“storm,” “unstilling,” “ground,” “fire,” “freeze,” “burning,” “doom”) and the simultaneous crisis of belatedness (“left,” “goodbye,” “time-order,” “perpetual,” “old,” “already”).

These paradoxical pairings (self and natural world; romance and rejection; disaster and belatedness) create a cognitive tension especially when they occur at the climax of the sequence. But at precisely this moment, place disappears from the poem. Although geographical place is clearly important for Roethke in his search for identity, it only serves as the starting point for the placeless journey into the self. The associative play of sound and sense such as we see in this section (appropriately titled the “Gibber”) is the place where the speaker confronts himself and the paradoxes of his own identity.

One such confrontation is the speaker’s acknowledgment of his essential aloneness and separation from the world during his interior journey. Choosing to reject the outside world, the speaker’s isolation is underscored by a string of unanswered questions (“Is this the storm’s heart?” and “Has the bird left?” for example [53]) and imagery of romantic love in which the speaker is both lover and beloved:

Like a slither of eels

That watery cheek

As my own tongue kissed

My lips awake (53)

Once out of the “Gibber,” the rest of the poem must again contend with the outside world and move past the interior journey. In the fourth section, “The Return,” the speaker goes back to the greenhouse and continues his careful attention to the outside world, describing the subtle changes in the air, light, temperature, and sounds of the greenhouse as he waits for his father to arrive:

Once I stayed all night.

The light in the morning came slowly over the white

Snow.

There were many kinds of cool

Air.

Then came steam.

The final section of the poem, however, does not depict the son accepting his identity or mourning for his father. Instead, the speaker contends that the end is the beginning of even more waiting: “It was beginning winter, / An in-between time” (55). Moving past the nonsense-play and darkness of “the Pit” and “the Gibber” does not bring answers to the speaker’s questions, but it does bring the promise of companionship with the outside world once again:

The weeds stopped swinging.

The mind moved, not alone,

Through the clear air, in the silence.

Was it light?
Was it light within?
Was it light within light?
Stillness becoming alive,
Yet still?

A lively understandable spirit
Once entertained you.
It will come again.
Be still.
Wait. (55)

The speaker does not specify what accompanies him in the dry, wintry landscape where “the bones of weeds kept swinging in the wind, / Above the blue snow” but knows that he is “not alone” (55). His inability to name the thing that keeps him from being alone results in a characteristically paradoxical string of questions that create even more questions: “light within light” and “stillness becoming alive / Yet still.”

Like so many modernist poems that came before it, “The Lost Son” cannot end in springtime with the world renewing itself again: “it was beginning winter,” the poem concludes, with “the landscape still partly brown.” His problem with being “lost” does not end happily either: the lost son does not recover his father nor fully realize a new identity. But for Roethke, a return to winter and loss is not cause for despair. While the poem acknowledges the impossibility of resolving these problems, it still maintains a

stubborn hope for something more, even if that something can't be named: "it will come again. / Be still. / Wait." (55)

In many ways, Roethke's 1963 "North American Sequence" from *The Far Field* is a return of the "lively understandable spirit" that the speaker was waiting for in the *The Lost Son*.⁴ While many of the poems between these two volumes clearly continued Roethke's lifelong search for his identity, critics agree that "North American Sequence" is a return to many of the questions that he addressed in *The Lost Son*. While the "lost son" attempts to find his identity through a journey into personal memory and into the dark recesses of the self, the speaker in "North American Sequence" undertakes a "long journey out of the self" which is (as the title from which this line is taken indicates) paradoxically a "Journey to the Interior" (187). As many have observed, this posthumously published book seems to carry with it Roethke's sense of his own impending death; as his health worsened in the years leading up to his death his output of writing increased and his subjects turned from love and nature to his own mortality.

Many consider "North American Sequence" to be Roethke's most accomplished and mature poetry. In the six poems that comprise the sequence, Roethke borrows from and amends previous poets: he uses Whitman's long lines and catalogues; responds to Eliot's suggestion from "East Coker" (that "Old men ought to be explorers / Here and there does not matter / We must be still and still moving / Into another intensity / For a further union, a deeper communion" [129] by suggesting that he will be "still and still moving" in a different identity: "Old men should be explorers? / I'll be an Indian" [183]); and brings Thoreau's nineteenth-century transcendental questions about the self into the twentieth century. Leaving behind the "lost son" of his earlier book, Roethke's memories

of his childhood are measured and reflective, evincing little of the sense of loss—and of being lost—that was fundamental in *The Lost Son*. Instead, these memories occur as associations with something the speaker encounters in the present, such as his reverie on the greenhouse after seeing the “rose in the sea-wind” in the final poem of the sequence:

And I think of roses, roses,
White and red, in the wide six-hundred-foot greenhouses,
And my father standing astride the cement benches,
Lifting me high over the four-foot stems, the Mrs. Russells, and his own elaborate
hybrids,
And how those flowerheads seemed to flow toward me, to beckon me, only a
child, out of myself.

What need for heaven, then,
With that man, and those roses? (197)

Roethke’s father, who never appeared in the greenhouse sequence of *The Lost Son*, is pictured in “North American Sequence” in a tender scene lifting his son to see over the flowers. The speaker is no longer interested in the dark roots growing underground (as in “Root Cellar” and “Weed-Puller”) but floats “high over the four-foot stems.” Too, these flowers do not provoke an inner journey but aid in the movement away from the self: they “seemed to flow toward me, to beckon me, only a child, out of myself.” Instead of the attention to microscopic detail (as in “Cuttings”) or the feeling of being lost in the maze of the greenhouse’s wild growth, the speaker can measure the life in the greenhouse

(“six-hundred-foot,” “four-foot”) and perceive the full immensity of the space: not just “greenhouses” but “the wide six-hundred-foot greenhouses.”

The poems themselves mirror the spatial expansiveness this section alludes to, both in their length (they each include three to five numbered sections) and their subject matter, spanning large areas of America from the Dakotas to Puget Sound. This attention to specific places in “North American Sequence” leads many critics to use geographical metaphors in their reading of the poems. Balakian’s discussion of “Meditation at Oyster River” is a representative example:

There is no aesthetic distortion or exclusively imaginative viewing of this scene. Imagination, sensibility, and the world out there are forever entwined. Roethke’s close and painstaking observation—his persistent seeing with accuracy—enables him to make the complex movements of water into a map of the self’s journey.

We are presented here with a topography of unknown danger and difficulty.

Indeed, this baptismal web of confluence recalls the lost son’s cry: “Bless me and the maze I’m in!” (Balakian 141)

Balakian describes the movements of water in the poem as a “map of the self’s journey”; the “unknown danger” is presented in a “topography”; the water merging together is a “confluence.” However, while such descriptive metaphors allude to the poems’ interest in place, they inaccurately suggest a teleology that the poems do not have. This is not a journey we can “map” or follow logically, and the shapes and contours of “Meditation at Oyster River” were not the result of a scientific study as the term “topography” suggests.

Such critical descriptions distract from the associative “illogic” (a term Bowers uses to describe Roethke’s lack of traditional logic) that is crucial to “North American

Sequence” (99): “Roethke offers no maps; he does offer an instinctive hunger for change, growth, and development [. . .] There is only the going, by which we learn at last where we have to go” (Blessing 144). The “illogic” of this “instinctive hunger” is, indeed, difficult to read and even more difficult to describe. As early as 1974, Richard Allen Blessing warned against traditional readings that try to uncover the narrative development of the poems:

The attempt to tell the rest of ‘what actually happens’ and how it happens has occupied various Roethke scholars since the “Open Letter” appeared in 1950. Those who have fared worst, it seems to me, have tried to do line-by-line ‘close readings’ of these poems; that is, they have tried to illuminate the obscurities of the non sequitur, the nonsense, the oracular pronouncement, and the cryptic command or question as each occurs, a step at a time. (83-84)

While those attempting “close readings” have fared worst, Blessing also cautions scholars who instead stray so far from the poems that they lose sight of what Roethke is doing altogether. It is not that there is no logic to these “obscurities” but that critics have attempted to “illuminate” them sequentially: “as each occurs, a step at a time.” Roethke’s own insistence on the sequence as a form of meaning contributes to the tendency to ascribe sequential logic to the poems. However, as Blessing suggests, this kind of meaning does not consistently exist in the poems themselves.

Indeed, all Roethke readers have to contend with this “illogic,” a confrontation that is especially difficult in what Neal Bowers calls the “gnomic verse” of the nonsense poems: “the determination to ‘crack’ the code of Roethke’s gnomic verse has frustrated many a reader” (100). Bowers points out that, as Roethke suggests, the sounds of the

poem can supersede rational meaning, so that in these stanzas from “I Need, I Need,” “it is less important to attach a specific meaning to ‘bibble’ than to hear the sound of the word itself as it rebounds off ‘pebble’ and is echoed by ‘Trouble’ and ‘pifflebob’ in the lines that follow (101):

I know you are my nemesis
So bibble where the pebble is.
The Trouble is with No and Yes
As you can see I guess I guess.

I wish I was a pifflebob
I wish I was a funny
I wish I had ten thousand hats,
And made a lot of money. (71)

The point of such sound play, he argues, is in part to create the frustration we feel at trying to understand it. By instead subsuming ourselves in the language play, subverting our need for logic, we become part of the world of the poem that has its own “illogic.”⁵ Such language play in the “Lost Son” sequence, for example, invites us to do away with our traditional ways of reading poems and become a child again:

By manipulating the sounds in his poems and at the same time confronting the reader with insoluble verbal dilemmas, Roethke hoped to subvert the rational mind and elevate the intuitive faculties [. . .] Roethke’s goal in the sequence is to create *in* us as well as *for* us the ‘as if’ of the child’s world. By confronting us with language that appeals more to the intuition than to the intellect and by

deliberately confounding our analytical minds with unanswerable questions,

Roethke attempts to make us feel rather than think. (Bowers 103-04)

Bowers rightly identifies the way the “Lost Son” poems challenge our traditional reading style and force us into a different and more intuitive posture.

But the poems in “North American Sequence” confound even this approach. The associative sound play in *The Lost Son* is also used in sections of “North American Sequence,” but it is more directionless without the fixed identity of the “son” to anchor it. For example, observe the position of the speaker in this “nonsense” section, “The Pit,” from “The Lost Son”:

Where do the roots go?

Look down under the leaves.

Who put the moss there?

These stones have been here too long.

Who stunned the dirt into noise?

Ask the mole, he knows.

I feel the slime of a wet nest.

Beware Mother Mildew.

Nibble again, fish nerves. (52)

The speaker is presumably talking to himself, investigating the darkness of the underground “Pit.” The questions of origins that in this section (“where do the roots go?” and “who put the moss there?”) have answers that are cryptic but related to what he asks; the speaker does not say where the roots go, for example, but replies that he should “look down under the leaves.” These riddle-type questions are in dialogue structure, reinforcing

the division between the questioner and answerer: the questions are each on one line with the answers indented in the next line. By contrast, compare the unified voice of the speaker in this “nonsense” section from “The Longing,” the opening poem from “North American Sequence”:

How comprehensive that felicity! . . .
A body with the motion of a soul.
What dream’s enough to breathe in? A dark dream.
The rose exceeds, the rose exceeds us all.
Who’d think the moon could pare itself so thin?
A great flame rises from the sunless sea;
The light cries out, and I am there to hear—
I’d be beyond; I’d be beyond the moon,
Bare as a bud, and naked as a worm.

To this extent I’m a stalk.
—How free; how all alone.
Out of these nothings
—All beginnings come. (182)

Many of the thoughts are expressly unfinished (as indicated by the ellipsis in the first line) or disconnected from the other ideas in the stanza (such as the rapid shifts between body, dream, rose, and moon). The speaker is presumably asking questions of himself, and yet many of the questions are unanswered and he speaks for “us all.” The speaker’s focus on place shifts repeatedly: the speaker is “there to hear” the light and yet wishes he

would be “beyond the moon.” The form, too, does not follow a predictable pattern: the lines end at the end of a sentence, and yet the punctuation suggests a continuation through the line break; such continuations are indicated with ellipses, dashes, commas, and semicolons. The dialogue with the self in the second stanza follows an observation/response pattern in the first two lines, and then a “finish the thought” pattern in the last two lines.

But this is not the end of self-exploration as it is in “The Lost Son,” where “The Gibber” sends the lost son back to the greenhouse again. Instead, such nonsense is “the nothings” from which “all beginnings come.” The speaker’s conclusion in the first poem of the sequence that “all beginnings come” from such a place sets up the sequence to move past the pared-down “nothings” to new “beginnings” and a different form. Indeed, the next section of “The Longing” locates the speaker with geographical specificity as he emerges into the wide night:

I have left the body of the whale, but the mouth of the night is still wide;
On the Bullhead, in the Dakotas, where the eagles eat well,
In the country of few lakes, in the tall buffalo grass at the base of the clay buttes,
In the summer heat, I can smell the dead buffalo
The stench of their damp fur drying in the sun,
The buffalo chips drying. (182-83)

The poem narrows down further and further to the peculiarities of this place, from the expansiveness of “the Bullhead” and the airy perspective of “where the eagles eat well” to minute details of the “tall buffalo grass” and below to “the buffalo chips drying.” These sensory details illuminate the scene and bring us closer to the speaker, who is so

immersed in the scene that he “can smell the dead buffalo.” This section inaugurates the style (catalogues, long lines, attention to specific place) and anticipates the content (a speaker’s journey out of the self, the expansive landscapes of North America) that characterize the rest of the poems. Indeed, the nonsense in the opening poem is not an ending point but the real starting point of the sequence.

The “lost self” of the “North American Sequence” does use these nonsense sections as productive, but compared to the “lost son” he does so with greater awareness of his own methods. The speaker in *The Lost Son* slips in and out of “the gibber” without commentary or a clear reason for doing so. By contrast, in “North American Sequence” the speaker acknowledges his methods in reflections afterwards: “To this extent I’m a stalk,” he explains, describing the simple, childlike persona of the previous section as comparable to a plant that has been stripped down to its essentials. Similarly, in the one other section of nonsense in “North American Sequence,” the speaker’s use of gibberish leads to revelations about the self:

Whether the bees have thoughts, we cannot say,
But the hind part of the worm wiggles the most,
Minnows can hear, and butterflies, yellow and blue,
Rejoice in the language of smells and dancing.
Therefore I reject the world of the dog
Though he hear a note higher than C
And the thrush stopped in the middle of his song.

And I acknowledge my foolishness with God,

My desire for the peaks, the black ravines, the rolling mists
Changing with every twist of wind,
The unsinging fields where no lungs breathe,
Where light is stone. (190)

The speaker gets lost in language in this first stanza, skipping from animal to animal (“bees,” “worm,” “minnow,” “butterflies,” “dog,” “thrush”) and sense to sense (“thoughts,” “wiggles,” “hear,” “smells”) within a rhetorical structure that suggests a logic that isn’t actually there: “Therefore I reject the world of the dog.” This joyful word play and associative logic leads to a straightforward and insightful statement of the speaker’s self: “And I acknowledge my foolishness with God, / My desire for the peaks, the black ravines, the rolling mists.” Such self-reflective passages that result from gibberish demonstrate that for Roethke, becoming “lost into language” is not actually loss but a generative experience.

The result is a speaker “lost” in the motion into and out of the self; “lost” into shapeshifting identity play; “lost,” ironically, in a specific place. The question the “lost son” confronts (“How can I find a place for my identity?”) is replaced by a much different question for the “lost self”: how can I lose my identity into this place? The persona that guides this exploration thus changes as well: “lost son” of the first book who is trying to find his way is replaced by a “self” trying to be lost in the world. “Lost” is thus not a part of his identity that the speaker must solve or mourn but the very thing that allows him to understand and claim his own identity as he paradoxically loses the self into the wholeness of the world.

One of the repeated “movements” of “North American Sequence” is this circular movement: out of the self into the world that is concurrently a motion deeper into the self. The final section of “Meditation at Oyster River” alludes to the desire for the dispersal of the self into the world, a desire that ends not in a singular place but with a “rocking” motion:

Now, in this waning of light,
I rock with the motion of morning;
In the cradle of all that is,
I'm lulled into half-sleep
By the lapping of water,
Cries of the sandpiper.
Water's my will, and my way,
And the spirit runs, intermittently,
In and out of the small waves,
Runs with the intrepid shorebirds—
How graceful the small before danger! (185-6)

The image of the “cradle of all that is” recalls the journey from cradle to grave and alludes to the motion in and out of the self: the “motion of morning,” “lapping of water,” “intermittently, / in and out of the small waves.” Such circular imagery can be found in every poem in the sequence, such as the “gulls” that “wheel over their singular garbage” in the urban wasteland of “The Longing” or the spinning wheels at the end of a journey into “a hopeless sand-rut / Where the car stalls / Churning in a snowdrift” (193).

Although the speaker fears the lack of growth such circularity represents, such motion also represents “the Oneness! Yes” (*OPC* 41) of the self lost into the world:

I learned not to fear infinity,
The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,
The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,
The wheel turning away from itself,
The sprawl of the wave,
The on-coming water. (194)

This circular motion in and out of the self is also figured in the repetition of the journey itself. The speaker explains such repetition as recurring dreams (“I dream of journeys repeatedly” 193) or rehearsals (“I rehearse myself for this: / The stand at the stretch in the face of death” 189), and indeed the poems themselves rehearse this journey into oneness that must be attempted again and again in the next section or the next poem of the sequence.

The idea of the inner journey as a rehearsal hints at another movement in “North American Sequence”: imaginative projections of the self into other identities. Although Roethke still pursues his inner journey, there is a playfulness and fluidity to his identity as a “self” that was not available to the “son.” In addition to picturing his spirit as a slug (“a slug, a loose worm, / Ready for any crevice, / An eyeless starrer 181), he also imagines himself as a stalk (“To this extent I’m a stalk. / —How free, how all alone” 182) and a stream (“I would be a stream, winding between great striated rocks in late summer”). These out-of-body images lead to him another human identity altogether: “Old men should be explorers? / I’ll be an Indian.” Here, Roethke assumes the identity of people

who are disappearing: as the speaker loses himself into the world, he identifies with “an Indian” whose presence has also been diminished in this landscape (I argue, here, that Roethke himself may have used this allusion to Native American tribes to suggest a kind of loss; this reading does not intend to perpetuate the myth of the disappearing Indian but to acknowledge Roethke’s use of it).⁶

The conditional tense with which Roethke’s speaker imaginatively adopts another identity in “The Longing” (“I would be,” “I should be”) changes in “The Long Waters” to the present tense, thus reflecting a more complete transformation:

I, who came back from the depths laughing too loudly,

Become another thing:

My eyes extend beyond the farthest bloom of the waves;

I lose and find myself in the long water;

I am gathered together once more;

I embrace the world. (192)

As the diction in this stanza demonstrates, the speaker’s identity changes as he shifts between active statements of identity (“I [. . .] become another thing”; “I lose and find myself”; “I embrace the world”) and a more passive construction that suggests a loss of the self (“I am gathered together”). Thus, the speaker’s relationship to the outside world changes: he is not firmly placed in the geographical specificity “on the Bullhead, in the Dakotas” (182) but in the more general place of water: “beyond the farthest bloom of the waves” and “in the long water” (192). Place is not only where he starts his journey (the greenhouse) or a reflection of the inner journey (the cemetery where his father is buried): there are moments here when the speaker “become[s] another thing”: the self is lost in the

world. This requires an alignment with the motion and rhythm of the outside world, the repetitive action of “breath[ing] with the birds”:

As a blind man, lifting a curtain, knows it is morning,

I know this change:

On one side of silence there is no smile;

But when I breathe with the birds,

The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing,

And the dead begin from their dark to sing in my sleep. (189)

The scrupulous visual observation that the speaker uses in other poems (such as the careful detail of plants in “Cuttings”) is superseded here by blindness that allows for a finer apprehension of the world.

Such dispersal of the self into the world results in a self that is not singular. One of the other “movements” of the poem is a dispersal or dissolution into an aggregate self that is a part of many places: “In the first of the moon, / All’s a scattering, / A shining” (186). The speaker identifies with “the glitter of light on waves” (189) and describes the way his “ body shimmers with a light flame” (192). This aggregate self is also present in the catalogues that enumerate the many selves with which the speaker can identify: “I would with the fish, the blackening salmon, and the mad lemmings, / The children dancing, the flowers widening” and “I would be a stream, winding between great striated rocks in late summer; / A leaf, I would love the leaves, delighting in the redolent disorder of this mortal life” (182). This speaker’s aggregate self, the sequence suggests, is how the speaker both makes sense of “the redolent disorder of this mortal life” and the attempts to

escape it into infinity, “this ambush, this silence, / Where shadow can change into flame,
/ And the dark be forgotten.”

In “The Rose,” the fourth and final section of the final poem in the sequence, many of these “movements” come together in what many identify as the climax of the sequence. In this penultimate stanza, the speaker makes perhaps the clearest statement of the circular, paradoxical journey out of the self and into the world:

Near this rose, in this grove of sun-parched, wind-warped madronas,
Among the half-dead trees, I came upon the true ease of myself,
As if another man appeared out of the depths of my being,
And I stood outside myself,
Beyond becoming and perishing,
A something wholly other,
As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive,
And yet was still.
And I rejoiced in being what I was:
In the lilac change, the white reptilian calm,
In the bird beyond the bough, the single one
With all the air to greet him as he flies,
The dolphin rising from the darkening waves; (199)

Here, the speaker finds not the self but the “true ease of myself,” which he finds, paradoxically, because he “stood outside myself.” This journey does not end in self-knowledge but in becoming “a something wholly other,” an experience compared to a deep unknowing of the self: “as if another man appeared out of the depths of my being.”

Like Brooks's Alfred in "In the Mecca" who insists that "something, something continues to call" (433) from the disconnection and brokenness in the building, the speaker's circuitous journey out of the self results in becoming "a something wholly other" that is not named but only described metaphorically: "As if," he says, "As if." Standing alongside of the "rose in the sea-wind" that "Stays, / Stays in its true place" is where the speaker comes into the "true ease of himself," becoming a "something" that exists in no true place (197).

The real ending of the sequence, however, is this quatrain wherein the speaker reassumes his own identity at the same time as he claims he is dispersed into the world. Structurally, this stanza is the second part of the sentence after a semicolon, listing what the speaker was. Thus, it would read:

And I rejoiced in being what I was:
[. . .]
And in this rose, this rose in the sea-wind,
Rooted in stone, keeping the whole of light,
Gathering to itself sound and silence—
Mine and the sea-wind's. (199)

The speaker, then, "was [. . .] in this rose," dispersed into the world, and yet still claims the "sound and silence" that is part of his own identity: "mine." For "North American Sequence" to end with a line that begins "Mine" suggests this journey of the lost self was not successful after all.

But to read teleologically—to locate the meaning of the sequence in its ending—is exactly what the poems caution us against. Instead, the sequence's logic would suggest

that any poem could contain an ending and another beginning again. Perhaps, then, an appropriate concluding note is the section where the speaker describes an ending most directly in imagining his own death. In the fourth and final section of “The Far Field,” the “lost son” becomes the “lost self” and confronts his own mortality as “the final man”:

The lost self changes,
Turning toward the sea,
A sea-shape turning around,—
An old man with his feet before the fire,
In robes of green, in garments of adieu.

A man faced with his own immensity
Wakes all the waves, all their loose wandering fire.
The murmur of the absolute, the why
Of being born fails on his naked ears.
His spirit moves like a monumental wind
That gentles on a sunny blue plateau.
He is the end of things, the final man.

All finite things reveal infinitude:
The mountain with its singular bright shade
Like the blue shine on freshly frozen snow,
The after-light upon ice-burdened pines;
Odor of basswood on a mountain-slope,

A scent beloved of bees;
Silence of water above a sunken tree:
The pure serene of memory in one man,—
A ripple widening from a single stone
Winding around the waters of the world. (195)

Here, in the second to the last poem of the sequence, Roethke finally names the identity that the speaker has been exploring throughout: “the lost self.” But this identity is immediately made different, as “the lost self changes, / Turning toward the sea.” The unavoidable mutability of life is the topic of these stanzas, in images of circular movement (“a sea-shape turning around”; “a ripple widening from a single stone”) or in images that depict the concurrence of youth and age, birth and death (“in robes of green, in garments of adieu”; “The murmur of the absolute, the why / of being born”).

This final stanza makes one more claim for the universality inherent in Roethke’s work of self-exploration. Through the lifelong commitment to exploring and understanding himself through his changes and paradoxes and unique struggles, Roethke argues, a small truth of the infinite emerges. But despite Roethke’s careful exploration of his own unique identity in its particular place, this stanza makes clear that such revelations are not uniquely Roethke’s own: “All finite things reveal infinitude.” The word “reveal” demonstrates so many of the themes Roethke has used to explore his identity throughout his career: to disclose something unknown or secret; to “communicate by divine or supernatural means”; “to make oneself or one’s true identity known.” The “lost self” thus gives himself over to his true identity that is not finite and unique (the son or the self) but infinite and universal (“one man”).

Indeed, this final stanza relinquishes identity altogether, moving from clear first person statements in the previous three sections (“I dream of journeys repeatedly” [193]; “I learned not to fear infinity” [194]; “I feel a weightless change, a moving forward” [194]) to more detached third person observations about “an old man”: “He is the end of things, the final man.” While the circularity in this section predicts that this “end of things” will not mean a permanent loss of the self into the world (a prediction that is confirmed by the next poem in the section, “The Rose,” wherein the speaker again attempts the same movement out of the self, “I sway outside myself” 196), it does suggest that the circle the speaker traces is not simply into and out of the self. “North American Sequence” instead moves past both the “lost son” and the “lost self” to show how both identities “reveal infinitude” where identity itself is lost into place: “The pure serene of memory in one man,— / A ripple widening from a single stone / Winding around the waters of the world.”

Notes

¹ Quotations from Roethke’s prose from *On Poetry and Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke* will be cited with the abbreviation *OPC*; his poetry is cited from *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*.

² Balakian suggests this difference between the modernist self and Roethke’s poetic self is that Roethke’s remains stubbornly individuated by its autobiographical personal details: “Roethke’s confessional voice in *The Lost Son* grew from the painful experience of his private life. Unlike his modernist predecessors, he did not attempt to transform his personal suffering into a medium that was impersonally mythic or

aesthetically self-contained” (Balakian 4). The line quoted from Whitman is on page 69; the line quoted from Eliot is on page 7.

³ The need to call attention to something important but unnamable recalls the speaker of Brooks’s “In the Mecca” (who claims that “Something, something continues to call” from the building 433), or the poem “Maxie Allen” from *Annie Allen* (when the speaker explains that “Sweet Annie tried to teach her mother / There was somewhat of something other” 84). Roethke here also asserts that “something” important is happening that is un-nameable or undefinable.

⁴ As Walter B. Kalaidjian argues, “This magnum opus can be read as a counterpart to the inward garden world of the greenhouse poems, realizing the poet’s quest for individuated dwelling in ‘The Lost Son’ [. . .] The poet’s career culminates in the movement beyond the lost son’s anxious quest for identity to the self-reliance of the final man” (122).

⁵ Blessing connects Roethke’s use of nonsense verse with his desire to escape the self and the limitations of carefully crafted modern poetry: “For one thing, even by 1938 he was tired of the ‘well-made poem.’ In that year he wrote, ‘Modern poetry has been cursed with too many ‘well-written’ poems: the tiny emotion expanded ludicrously beyond its own shape and size’ (23 #15). The antithesis of such poems, presumably, was described in the same notebook: ‘Elemental poems—when we are outside ourselves’ (23 #15). To achieve both the rhythm and the effect of being ‘outside’ of the self, the ‘right mind’ in which we ordinarily live, Roethke turned to nonsense cadences, the tunes of rants, mad songs, and children’s games. At one point in the notebooks he quotes William

Pitt, who says, ‘Don’t tell me of a man’s being able to talk sense; every man can talk sense. Can he talk nonsense?’” (65)

⁶ Other interpretations of this poem either suggest the reasons the speaker chooses the Ogalala over the Iriquois tribe (such as Balakian, who argues that by “identifying with the Iroquois rather than the Ogalala, Roethke seems to reject the bellicosity of the wild Sioux in favor of the more sedentary, cultivating Iroquois” 139) or they do not mention this allusion at all (such as Jay Parini, in *Theodore Roethke: An American Romantic* or Walter P. Kalaidjian’s *Understanding Theodore Roethke*, which only acknowledges that in the poem “the poet commits himself to discovering images indigenous to the American Midwest and Northwest” 130).

CHAPTER IV
FROM “CORRESPONDENCES” TO CONNECTIONS:
ELIZABETH BISHOP’S “GEOGRAPHY OF THE IMAGINATION”

It is almost too easy—too obvious—to include Elizabeth Bishop in a study about midcentury American poets concerned with place and identity. Indeed, these two themes are the most frequently identified in Bishop’s poetry: a simple survey of her book titles indicates her interest in place: *North & South* (1946), *A Cold Spring* (1956), *Questions of Travel* (1965), and *Geography III* (1976). One of her most anthologized and well-known poems, “In the Waiting Room,” characteristically combines the speaker’s epiphany about her identity (“But I felt: you are an *I* / You are an *Elizabeth*” 160) with careful attention to the specific place where she is located (“In Worcester, Massachusetts” 159). Another well-known poem, “The Map” is a telling introduction to her work: it anticipates her interests in both place and identity. The fact that she chose it as the opening poem in both *North and South* (her first collection of poems in 1946) and *The Complete Poems* (1969) suggests that she, too, viewed it as an appropriate preface to her poetry: “From ‘The Map’ onward, it is clear that, for Bishop, geography is a prime determinant of knowledge” (Cleghorn, Hicok, Travisano 4).

Because geography is a “prime determinant of knowledge” for Bishop, it is also a prime determinant of the self. Late in her career, Bishop compared her experience trying to understand her identity through geography with the sandpiper’s experience in one of her poems. In “Sandpiper,” the bird skirts the ocean shoreline frantically looking for “something, something, something,” both “focused” and “preoccupied” while the world

intervenes with the “millions of grains” of sand to reckon with (131). Throughout this frenzied activity the sandpiper remains attentive to the world yet introspective:

The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet
of interrupting water comes and goes
and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.

He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.

For Bishop, this sense of geographical understanding—how the sandpiper relates to the outside world (the “interrupting water” that “glazes over” his feet)—always comes alongside observations about the self (“he runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes”). Such a connection of self and place is readily evident in Bishop’s discussion of her life and work:

Yes, all my life I have lived and behaved very much like that sandpiper—just running along the edges of different countries and continents, “looking for something.” I have always felt I couldn’t *possibly* live very far inland, away from the ocean; and I *have* always lived near it, frequently in sight of it. Naturally I know, and it has been pointed out to me, that most of my poems are geographical, or about coasts, beaches and rivers running to the sea, and most of the titles of my books are geographical too: *North & South*, *Questions of Travel*, and one to be published this year, *Geography III*. (qtd. in Millier 517)

Bishop describes her extensive travels and years living abroad as “living along the edges of different countries and continents,” living “along” rather than “in” a place: “I couldn’t *possibly* live very far inland.” Indeed, although she discusses her love of being near “the ocean,” she expands her watery territory to include “coasts, beaches and rivers running to

the sea.” This last qualifier (“rivers running to the sea”) clarifies that the water itself is not bound to one place, such as an inland river that does not touch the boundaries of another ocean or country; her places are relational, the meeting points of water and land or river and ocean. Jan Gordon observes that Bishop is drawn to “geographical boundaries between land and sea” but also to places that are connected: “straits, peninsulas, icebergs, radio antennas (‘The Unbeliever’), wharfs and quais, capes (‘Cape Breton’), and promontories are the structures of her world” (12). Too, Bishop subtly equates these places of confluence with geography itself (“most of my poems are geographical” and “the titles of my books are geographical too”). In this formulation, place is both fixed and fluid. It is connected to water, both in motion and a transition between other places. Place is also geography itself, a predetermined conceptual understanding of where you fit in the outside world.

Bishop was always sensitive to the incongruity between the abstracted designations of a place (geography, maps, even poems about place) and her lived experience of a place. “The Map” testifies to her awareness of the mismatch between a map’s account of a place and the place itself. In the poem, any assertions about the map are immediately questioned or qualified, as in the first two lines: the poem begins with the ostensibly simple declarative statement “Land lies in water; it is shadowed green” (3). The next line, however, questions this “shadowed green”; perhaps it is not shadows at all: “Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges.” As the speaker continues investigate the map, she imagines even more ways to imagine the relationship between land and sea:

Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,
drawing it unperturbed around itself?

Along the fine tan sandy shelf

is the land tugging at the sea from under?"

Not only do these questions cast doubt on the earlier assertions, but the personification of the land ("lean[ing] down to lift," "tugging at the sea") changes the map from a static document to one alive with movement, motive, and possibility. Turning from these interior questions, the speaker assumes a broader "we":

We can stroke these lovely bays,

under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,

or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.

The names of seashore towns run out to sea,

the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains

—the printer here experiencing the same excitement

as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.

These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger

Like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods. (3)

Suddenly, the imaginative possibilities of the map are extended to others, and the

plurality of perspective assumes "we" would all join the speaker in thinking of the map as

"oiled" by "the moony Eskimo" and in "strok[ing] these lovely bays, / under a glass."

After proposing a tender caress that "can" occur with the map's "lovely bays," the poem

suggests similes for how to could do so: "as if they were expected to blossom, / or as if to

provide a clean cage for invisible fish." The lexicon of intimacy in this stanza ("moony,"

"stroke," "lovely," "neighboring," "excitement," "emotion," "thumb and finger,"

"women," "smoothness") personalizes the map, confirming that these questions are not

philosophical speculations but tender confidences. While the speaker begins with a confident attempt to understand the map's geographical markings ("Land lies in water, it is shadowed green"), the poem immediately makes clear that geography is not about assertions but questions, not about the speaker's authoritative control over the map but her intimate and nuanced relationship with it. These proliferating "or...or" statements suggest possibilities for multiple meanings of the map. Even more, the speaker suggests there are not just many interpretations but multiple points of view on geography, such as the mapmaker as another author of the text of place.

Bishop's biographer Brett Millier explains that this poem was "a breakthrough for Elizabeth" (76). It was largely composed in one sitting on New Year's Eve; this year, as would be true in many years that followed, the holidays were a difficult and lonely time for Bishop. On such occasions, alone while her friends tended to their family obligations, Bishop would often dwell on her lack of a home to return to:

This is the first mature manifestation of her undergraduate belief that poetry should portray the mind thinking rather than reposing as well as the beginning of a lifelong concern with shifting perspective and scale. [. . .] This part of the map ['emotion' that 'too far exceeds its cause'] depicts Elizabeth's "home," or as near as she had come to it. Alone as she was on New Year's Eve, acutely uncertain about what the future would bring, nostalgia might be that emotion. And months earlier, Elizabeth had written in her notebook: "Name it friendship if you want to—like names of cities printed on maps, the word is much too big, it spreads all over the place, and tells nothing of the actual place it means to name. (77)

While a solitary time may have occasioned the writing of "The Map," the poem itself is

not lonely or nostalgic but, again, intimate and tender: the “emotion that too far exceeds its cause” is “excitement,” not anger or sadness; interaction of the water and the shore is careful and responsive, “between thumb and finger / Like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods.” Her notebook entry concedes that abstractions such as geography are not sufficient: they “[tell] nothing of the actual place [they] mean to name.” “The Map” argues that the emotional “excitement” of the mapmaker is actually more “delicate” than the harsh lines drawn by our conventional geographies: “More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers colors.” While the abstraction of geography is preferable—or at least “more delicate” than our histories—the poem’s proliferating possibilities for making meaning from the map also underscore how subjective our understanding of geography is. In fact, the poem does not argue for one interpretive framework that will most accurately represent the world, but instead it describes the complex web of perspectives that affect our perceptions: “map-makers” and “historians”; “the printer” and “the moony Eskimo”; the “women feeling” the contours of the map and the “printer” overexcited about his project.

Bishop’s emphasis on the subjective nature of these interpretations is ironic, perhaps, given the immense precision that is the hallmark of her poetry. Countless critics have commented on Bishop’s “precise explorations”; David Kalstone points out that it is partly this feature of her work that allowed critics to “[praise] her descriptive powers and [treat] her as something of a miniaturist” (“Questions of Memory” 52). The early tendency to treat her descriptions as a quaint fascination (or to focus on them at the expense of other aspects of her work) is part of the uneven reception of Bishop’s poetry, where Bishop moves from outsider poet to central in the American canon, a change in

reputation that Thomas Travisano dubbed in 1995 “The Elizabeth Bishop Phenomenon.” With the 2006 release of Bishop’s unpublished poems in *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments*, her reputation became further complicated. Now critics view Bishop no longer as a descriptive minitaturist but “a poet crucially engaged with such vital cultural and political issues as outsiderhood, gender, sexuality, national identity, social class, war, the environment, power relations, and family intimacy and conflict” (Cleghorn, Hicok, Travisano 7). Certainly this attention has brought Bishop into greater prominence, but it has not attended to other important aspects of her work. For example, all critics acknowledge Bishop’s descriptive skill, but few have noted how her descriptions change over time. Attention to this shift illuminates a change in Bishop’s larger aesthetic and reveals that her deep interest in geography is a way of locating the self in the world: of working out the relationship between place and identity.¹

In her early poems that attempt to locate the self through careful description, external precision creates tension with an internal world where the speaker doesn’t have the same control or command. These poems carefully describe the external world, but the speaker does not allow her descriptions to lead to other revelations about the self. When the poems do lead to an epiphany, the epiphany is carefully located in the world and forestalled, often, with a sudden ending, preempting a transforming effect on the self. Thus, the descriptions add up to a closer look but not a new insight. The speaker maintains a reverence for what she observes, but remains at a distance from it.

By contrast, in Bishop’s later poems of precise description the speaker is much more intimately involved with the subject of the poem. Instead of sudden endings that close off new discoveries, endings now open up as the speaker’s descriptions of place

lead to epiphanies that affect her own sense of identity: they are not just about seeing the world anew but about seeing her own imagination as congruous with the external world. Bishop's early poems seek "correspondences" between disparate elements of the outside world, whereas her later poems seek connections between the internal "geography of the imagination" and those varied, external geographies of place.

A poem that exemplifies Bishop's early observational style is "The Fish," her "most anthologized poem" (Lombardi 63). Published in her first book *North & South* (1946), "The Fish" features a speaker in a boat who catches "a tremendous fish" and describes it with careful, precisely rendered details:

Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
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. (42)

The figurative language in this selection certainly depicts the fish in different ways ("like

wallpaper,” “like full-blown roses”), but the descriptions are all in service of a deeper look at the fish itself. The speaker sees that his skin is “in strips” “like ancient wallpaper,” but the pattern itself is also “like wallpaper,” and the shapes on his skin are “like full-blown roses.” Looking closer, the speaker describes the attached “barnacles” as “speckled”; this recalls the pattern of the wallpaper but clarifies that the barnacles are not “full-blown roses” but “fine rosettes of lime” with “tiny white sea-lice” hidden within. In the careful calibration of this description (the skin is “like wallpaper” in two different ways; the pattern is compared to two different kinds of roses, “full-blown roses” and “fine rosettes”), the speaker’s vision gets closer and closer to the fish, almost as if zooming in through a microscope. Indeed, the looking goes past the skin to the innards of the fish, as the speaker imagines the intricate arrangement of flesh, organs, and bones:

I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony. (42)

The dense and orderly arrangement inside the fish is awash with opposites, both “big,” “dramatic,” and “coarse” and yet delicate, “like feathers,” “little,” “shiny,” and “like a big peony.” The speaker envisions the fish beyond what she can see, and imagination here is in service of a deeper look at the fish.

And yet, despite the intimacy that such careful looking might suggest, the speaker

remains at a distance from the fish. She admires his stubbornness (describing him as “battered and venerable / and homely” [42] and observing the broken fishing lines that hang “like medals with their ribbons / frayed and wavering, / a five-haired beard of wisdom / trailing from his aching jaw” [43]), but there is an ineluctable difference between the fish and the speaker. This difference is rendered most overtly in their shared gaze, a moment when they both see but do not see each other:

I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises back and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not to return my stare.
—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light. (42-43)

After enumerating the differences between them (its eyes “far larger,” “shallower,” and “yellowed” than hers), the speaker is careful to explain that the fish does not “return [her] stare.” Using the pronoun “he” instead of “it” throughout the poem personifies the fish (as do several descriptions as we’ve seen), but then there are moments when the speaker casts the fish as a depersonalized thing: “like the tipping / of an *object* toward the light” (emphasis mine). In such an encounter there is the possibility for connection (“I looked into his eyes”) but a definite otherness (“They shifted a little, but not to return my stare”).

However, in this assertion of otherness there is also reverence: despite her careful looking, the speaker sees precisely that she cannot fully understand the fish. By maintaining the fish's difference from the speaker, Bishop insists that the fish is its own self, not a projection of her inner psyche or a symbol for the natural world. By contrast, in a Roethke poem, the fish would indeed symbolize an emotional state or point to a universal truth. Lowell admired this quality in Bishop's writing: "I felt very envious reading [the poem]" because in it, the fish remains a fish, unlike in his own work: "I'm a fisherman myself, but all my fish become symbols, alas!" (qtd. in Costello 166). Despite the emphasis on the separation between the fish and the speaker, its otherness does not mean that it is inconsequential: "we are not, however, left with some static, if peculiar ornament" (McCabe 95). The fish is other, and this is exactly what makes it worth observing.

The relationship between the speaker and the fish is not simply one of observation, of course: she has caught a fish that escaped capture many other times. Realizing this, the speaker describes a "victory" that overtakes the scene in an epiphany:

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. (43-44)

The victory is not just in catching the “tremendous fish” as a fisherman but also as a writer. The speaker apprehends him—and his very unknowability—through careful attention and description: “I stared and stared,” she explains. Indeed, as the speaker’s attention moves from the fish to the world again, she employs a specialized diction of boats (“engine,” “bailer,” “thwarts,” “oarlocks,” “gunnels”), rendering what she sees with increasing rigor. Even more, the speaker corrects her earlier careful descriptions (noting that it is not “five old pieces of fish-line” in the fish’s lip but, upon further consideration, “four and a wire leader / with the swivel still attached” 43), foregrounding her process of revision towards an even greater precision.

The epiphany in the poem is thus not a “victory” over the fish but the “victory” of being able to see the beauty of the world anew. Bishop is careful to locate this epiphany in the spreading messiness of the world and not in some perfect image of beauty. The rainbow is not in the sky but coming “from the pool of bilge,” not shining from an ideal boat but one that is “rusted” and “sun-cracked.” “The Fish,” then, describes the discovery of beauty in an imperfect world, a discovery that emerges through careful looking. The speaker can “let the fish go” not because she has mastered him but because she has mastered a way of seeing the world.

Some critics read the epiphanic ending of the poem as a momentary, fleeting expression of connection between the fish and the speaker. For example, Susan McCabe

argues that “the poem takes us two ways: into recognizing difference and apprehending unity, into perceiving connection and its frailty” (96). But if there is a connection here, it is between the speaker and the world, not the speaker and the fish. The connection between the fish and the speaker is carefully forestalled and, as David Kalstone observes, “the end of ‘The Fish’ is precisely a separation” (*Becoming* 87). Too, Bishop cuts off this revelation of connection between the self and the world (“until everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!”) suddenly and in one short line: “And I let the fish go.” What might such a revelation mean to a speaker navigating the connection between herself and the world? What insights about herself does this epiphany imply? These questions are left unanswered, testifying to the struggle to locate a self of precise description in relationship to a beautiful but complicated world.

1946, the year that Bishop published “The Fish,” was also the year she began working on another animal poem that would take her 26 more years to complete: “The Moose.”² This late Bishop poem also contains an encounter with an animal that ends in an epiphany, but both the epiphany and its occasion reflect Bishop’s changed aesthetic. Perhaps the most evident difference between the two poems is the position of the speaker. In “The Fish,” the speaker asserts her place in the scene in the first line, followed by a flurry of pronouns delineating the different between “I” and “him”:

I caught a tremendous fish
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. (42)

The verbs here are simple and declarative (“I caught” and “held”; “He didn’t fight”; “He hadn’t fought” “He hung”), and the pronouns establish identity (“held *him*”; “*my* hook”; “*his* mouth”) and space (“beside the boat”; “half out of water”). Most of the poem’s action, however, is about the speaker’s identity and her looking. Using first person throughout, the speaker is clearly in command of the action of the poem, from the declarative opening line (“I caught a tremendous fish” 42) to the assertive final line (“And I let the fish go” 44).

In “The Moose,” however, the speaker’s place in the poem is almost comically vague: there is no “I” in the poem at all.³ At the same time, the speaker is clearly a part of the action and not a detached observer. In fact, it takes four six-line stanzas of introductory clauses before the subject of the first sentence is revealed. After a long list of introductory contingencies (“where if,” “depends on if,” “and others”), the poem’s focus is not on the speaker but on the bus (where the speaker is apparently observing the scene): “From narrow provinces [. . .] a bus journeys west” (169). This first part of the poem demonstrates the speaker’s familiarity with this place throughout different seasons (“where, silted red, / sometimes the sun sets / facing a red sea, / and others, veins the flats’ / lavender, rich mud / in burning rivulets”) and a domestic familiarity, too (“provinces / of fish and bread and tea”). In addition to the command of the transitory landscape through which the bus drives, there is a command of the small, delicately rendered details

in it. These stanzas describing the gathering fog at night, for example, are reminiscent of the narrowing focus in “The Fish”:

Its cold, round crystals
form and slide and settle
in the white hens’ feathers,
in the gray glazed cabbages,
on the cabbage roses
and lupins like apostles;

the sweet peas cling
to their wet white string
on the whitewashed fences;
bumblebees creep
inside the foxgloves,
and evening commences. (170)

Like “The Fish”’s distinction between skin that is “like wallpaper” and wallpaper that is “like full-blown roses,” “The Moose” differentiates between two kinds of cabbage, both “gray glazed cabbages” and “the cabbage roses.” The speaker explains how the tiny “crystals” of fog and “bumblebees” burrow down inside the plants; all the vegetation is carefully named: cabbages, lupins, sweet peas, and foxgloves. Within these precisely rendered details, there is a sense of orchestration or dramatic presentation, as if the speaker is not just describing these events but deeming them to be so as a result of her descriptions: “and evening commences.” Although at this point her presence is largely as

observer, the speaker is in representational command of the scene.

When the speaker enters the nighttime of the “New Brunswick woods,” however, her precise descriptions are replaced by more general observations, signaling a move away from Bishop’s earlier poetics (171). In “The Fish” and other early Bishop poems, the descriptive command largely focuses on visual details: the way the fish’s skin looks like old, flowered wallpaper; the way the neat, dense lupin whorls resemble the haloed heads of apostles in iconography. Here, though, Bishop turns her attention to other senses, primarily sound and smell. In these stanzas from the middle of the poem, the speaker focuses on the sounds overheard on the back of the bus:

Moonlight as we enter
the New Brunswick woods,
hairy, scratchy, splintery;
moonlight and mist
caught in them like lamb’s wool
on bushes in a pasture.

The passengers lie back.
Snores. Some long sighs.
A dreamy divigation
begins in the night,
a gentle, auditory,
slow hallucination. . . .

In the creakings and noises
an old conversation
—not concerning us,
but recognizable, somewhere,
back in the bus:
Grandparents' voices

uninterruptedly
talking, in Eternity:
names being mentioned,
things cleared up finally;
what he said, what she said,
who got pensioned (171)

The moonlight is not visually compared to something else but rendered through synesthesia as having a tactile presence: “hairy, scratchy, splintery.” Until this point, the poem has only registered a few momentary sounds: “a loose plank rattles / but doesn’t give way”; “A dog gives one bark.” The sound the speaker describes on the bus is not contained in a discrete moment (“one bark”) but the varied murmurs of background noise: “snores,” “some long sighs,” “creakings and noises,” “talking.” This “dreamy divagation” into the “creakings and noises” of “a gentle, *auditory*, / slow hallucination” occasions the epiphany that will follow. Only by relaxing the exacting process of visual description can the speaker be arrested by the presence of the moose. The specific details about place in the poem (from the protracted opening account of the bus’s journey to the

specific geography they travel through, “One stop at Bass River. / Then the Economies— / Lower, Middle, Upper” 170) give way to vague and generalized references to the interior of the bus: “somewhere, / back in the bus.”

Too, the way that voices are depicted in “The Moose” undergoes a parallel blurring. Before the “dreamy divagation” on the bus, the one voice heard in the poem belongs to a “brisk, freckled, elderly” woman who talks to the driver, and her voice is distinguished from the speaker’s using quotation marks: “A grand night. Yes, sir, / all the way to Boston” (171). After the divagation, the speaker releases other voices without demarcating their sources:

Deaths, deaths, and sicknesses;

the year he remarried;

the year (something) happened.

She died in childbirth.

That was the son lost

when the schooner foundered.

He took to drink. Yes.

She went to the bad.

When Amos began to pray

even in the store and

finally the family had

to put him away. (172)

These lines express other passengers’ thoughts in their own dialect: “He took to drink.

Yes. / She went to the bad.” The use of free indirect discourse departs from the careful, precise diction of the speaker’s thoughts (“in gray glazed cabbages, / on the cabbage roses / and lupins like apostles”) and shifts to a colloquial, conversational diction of someone else on the bus (“She went to the bad”). Moreover, the speech is not from a particular, identified character; it’s unclear how many people are talking or who might be speaking which lines. Without the quotation marks around the text to indicate different speakers or points of view, the voices seem to come from the speaker herself, a speaker who has relinquished the first-person omniscient point of view in the rest of the poem.

The conversation itself is familiar and comfortable; these characters know one another’s lives and histories: “that was the son lost” suggests knowledge of a whole family’s history and “when Amos began to pray / even in the store” indicates shared knowledge of a family business and a time when Amos’s behavior wasn’t yet problematic. Bishop’s use of the parenthetical “(something)” is emblematic of this kind of intimate speech. The parenthesis around “something” wryly alludes to how repetitive and inevitable such events are: “the year (something) happened” is any year or every year. At the same time, the event itself is not important; it is one of many shared experiences that happened, simply another “(something).” The lack of details about the actual event is not cause for crisis in the poem, however. Now, the careful accounting of “twin silver birches” (169) and “two rubber boots” (171) earlier in the poem is replaced by a looser kind of measuring: the associations that arise from imagining a generalized “(something)” that happened in some undisclosed year. However, the quotation marks around speech return when the speaker describes the “peculiar / affirmative” that passes between the grandparents on the back of the bus:

“Yes . . .” that peculiar
affirmative. “Yes . . .”
A sharp, indrawn breath,
half groan, half acceptance,
that means, “Life’s like that.
We know *it* (also death).” (172)

The “peculiar / affirmative” is not peculiar to any one character but to the local, colloquial speech of this region, indicating the speaker’s knowledge of this place and further suggesting a shared community. In this instance, the parentheses around “(also death)” confirms that this knowledge is not just of the specific troubles of life but also of the shadowy territory of death.

As place becomes less specific and the descriptions less carefully detailed than the in beginning of the poem, the light in the poem slowly fades to darkness. In the beginning of the poem there are bright and momentary flashes of light, such as the “the windshield flashing pink / pink glancing off of metal” (169) as the sunset is reflected on the bus or the moment the speaker enters the “Tantramar marshes” and sees a “pale flickering. Gone” (170). Later, the light stands out against the darkness (“On the left, a red light / swims through the dark: / a ship’s port lantern” 171) and then becomes diffused, both atmospheric and a physical annoyance: “Moonlight as we enter / the New Brunswick woods, / hairy, scratchy, splintery” (171). Unlike the uncomfortable moonlight outside of the bus, the comfortable “dim lamplight” inside the bus causes the speaker to forget herself, culminating in total darkness when the driver stops for the moose:

Talking the way they talked

in the old featherbed,
peacefully, on and on,
dim lamplight in the hall,
down in the kitchen, the dog
tucked in her shawl.

Now, it's all right now
even to fall asleep
just as on all those nights.
—Suddenly the bus driver
stops with a jolt,
turns off his lights. (172)

This general movement from flashes of light to an overall darkness mirrors the way visual details command less authority as the poem progresses. The speaker's focus shifts from visual details outside of the bus to auditory details inside of the bus, suggesting a renewed focus on interiority. Thus, the encounter with the moose breaks the speaker's "dreamy divagation" as well as her ability to understand the moose through precise visual details; instead, she will apprehend the moose through other senses.

The poem is about the moose and, indeed, the event of the encounter with the moose is its narrative climax. However, there is no attempt to understand the moose through precise description; the speaker instead maintains its mystery. It has somehow "come out of / the impenetrable wood" (172), but the speaker does not speculate about where it came from; it is not compared to domestic objects such as wallpaper but is

“grand, otherworldly” (173). Of the few descriptions of the moose itself, most are similes: “high as a church, / homely as a house / (or, safe as houses).” Unlike those in “The Fish,” however, the similes describing the moose further increase its incomprehensibility. The moose is described not by what it looks like but by what it does: it “stands there, looms, rather,” “approaches”; “tak[es] her time,” “looks the bus over” (173).

Ultimately, however, encountering the moose leads the speaker to shift her focus, so she does not spend time carefully describing the moose but instead reports on other passengers’ reactions:

A man’s voice assures us
“Perfectly harmless. . . .”

Some of the passengers
exclaim in whispers,
childishly, softly,
“Sure are big creatures.”
“It’s awful plain,”
“Look! It’s a she!”

Taking her time,
she looks the bus over,
grand, otherworldly.
Why, why do we feel

(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

“Curious creatures,”
says our quiet driver,
rolling his *r*'s.

“Look at that, would you.” (173)

Indeed, the speaker's individual identity and perspective fade away as she instead becomes a part of the group of passengers on the bus: “a man's voice assures *us*,” the driver is “*our* quiet driver,” and the joy upon seeing the moose is one that “*we* feel / (*we all* feel).”

The appearance of the moose causes an epiphany, provoking the speaker to step outside her reporting of the events on the bus and share a sudden and surprising realization: “Why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?” This is not a moment of seeing the world anew, as in “The Fish,” but a moment of belonging, a sudden feeling of community with the other people on the bus. Although “The Moose” is the stated subject and meeting the moose is indeed the climax of the poem's story, the joyous revelation is not the appearance of the moose but the speaker's recognition of being part of the bus's community. Critics often dwell on the fear in this moment (usually because of the “man's voice” that “assures us” the moose is “perfectly harmless”), but more than fear the poem evokes a sense of wonder and reverence for the moose.

The speaker's wonder and sense of community affect her way of seeing, so what replaces precise descriptions are carefully recorded impressions of others. This epiphany

is not characterized by a mastery over the animal, as in “The Fish,” but by understanding the feelings of the other people on the bus, as the speaker emphasizes in parenthesis: “we feel / (we all feel).” This parenthesis, unlike the one used to describe “(something),” does not stand in for variety of uncounted, interchangeable experiences but denotes something ineffable. The diction is not the precise nautical terminology of the epiphany in “The Fish” but a more general, impressionistic lexicon (“big,” “plain,” “a she,” “curious”) combined with a provincial dialect (“It’s awful plain,” and “rolling his r’s”). Thus, the speaker does not declare a “victory” but asks a question: “Why, why do we feel [. . .] this sweet / sensation of joy?” The driver’s quiet “Look at that, would you” is not an answer but rather a simultaneous expression of awe.

Increasing the poem’s eschewal of precise visual descriptions, the ending emphasizes not sight but smell. The visual details appear in the conditional tense, imagining what “*can* be seen / on the moonlit macadam” after the bus pulls away, but only “by craning backward” (173, emphasis mine). Too, discharging the speaker’s descriptive visual control means there is not the type of decisive break that comes at the end of “The Fish” when the speaker “let[s] the fish go,” and it was gone (44). Instead, a faint residue of the encounter remains: “a dim / smell of moose, an acrid / smell of gasoline” (173).

The very “dreamy” dimness in the ending of “The Moose” characterizes it as one of Bishop’s later poems. In a 1978 interview, Alexandra Johnson asked Bishop about the subjects of these two poems and whether the act of observation is tied to her respect for what she observes:

[Alexandra Johnson:] *Your poems show a respect for seemingly ordinary*

things—a fish, a moose, a filling station even. Can one say: to respect is to see and to see and to see is to respect?

[Elizabeth Bishop:] I have a great interest and respect, if you like, for what people call ordinary things. I am very visually minded and mooses and filling stations aren't necessarily commonplace to me. Observation is a great joy. Some critics charge that I'm merely a descriptive poet which I don't think is such a bad thing at all if you've done it well.

(“Conversations” 100-01)

Bishop confirms that she does approach a fish and moose with “a great interest and respect.” However, she explains that whether her subjects are “ordinary” or unique isn't the point: it's the act of “observation” itself that “is a great joy.” While she agrees with Johnson that she is “very visually minded,” she differentiates seeing (“*to respect is to see and to see is to respect*”) from observing and describing something well in a poem.

What changes in Bishop's career, however, is her sense of what a descriptive poem achieves “if you've done it well.” She asserts that such change is inevitable for poets when, in a 1966 interview, she responds to a question about the “turn [Robert Lowell's] poetry has taken in the last few years—beginning with *Life Studies*”: “One does miss the old trumpet blast of *Lord Weary's Castle*, but poets have to change, and possibly the more subdued magnificence of his later tone is more humane” (“Conversations” 28). Bishop's poems don't make the same move from loud “trumpet blast” to a quiet “subdued magnificence” but rather from a carefully rendered descriptive precision to a more associative impressionism. Another pairing of poems from her early and late work illustrates this changed aesthetic: “The Bight” (from *A Cold Spring*, 1955)

and “The End of March” (from *Geography III*, 1976).

Although the subject of “The Bight,” the seashore, is a common topic for Bishop, the beach she depicts here is not a place for possibility or confluence but one of tedium and isolation. In the speaker’s description of what she sees, there is nothing particularly extraordinary: a dredge scoops up sand, birds fly overhead, and boats and detritus litter the shore. Even so, nothing seems to be working right. Paradoxically, “the water in the bight doesn’t wet anything”; the sound of the dredge is “perfectly off-beat”; the birds are “black-and-white man-of-war” (60). Even the animals don’t fit well into the landscape: “The birds are outsize,” and “pelicans crash / into this peculiar gas [the water] unnecessarily hard.”

It is also a reflective poem, as demonstrated by its contemplative tone (“At low tide like this how sheer the water is”) and its subtitle, placed in brackets and italicized: “[*On my birthday*].” As many critics have noted, the subtitle adds a curious autobiographical note to the poem’s otherwise impersonal subject matter: “the poem’s bracketed and italicized sub-title runs like an insistent dye through our reading of its various images, colouring every detail in an autobiographical hue” (Ellis 96-97). But in this exploration of the speaker finding her relationship to the beach, personal details are omitted. The speaker remains at a distance from her subject and does not narrow her focus closer, instead continuing to notice the details from a distance: birds alight in the wind, boats lying piled up on the beach, the marl dried on the cliffs or hauled up by the dredge. The speaker doesn’t use personal pronouns such as “you,” “he,” or “she” here but rather the more impersonal “one”:

One can smell it [the water in the bight] turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire

One could probably hear it turning to marimba music.

The little ocher dredge at work off the end of the dock

Already plays the dry perfectly off-beat claves. (60)

The speaker doesn't explore her own identity in this passage but imagines how her observations might be different with another identity ("if one were Baudelaire").

Despite the speaker's reluctance to disclose details about her own identity, the poem still remains subtly in conversation with personal details. The subtitle certainly makes such a reference as does the more veiled conversation about poetic identity that underlies the poem. This is evident in Bishop's letter to Robert Lowell describing Key West, in which the scene that will appear in the poem is first described:

The water looks like blue gas—the harbor is always a mess here, junky little boats piled up, some hung with sponges and always a few half sunk or splintered up from the most recent hurricane—it reminds me a little of my desk. (qtd. in Kalstone *Becoming* 117)

David Kalstone provides further context for this part of the letter: "The poem crystallizes out of a letter to Lowell about her writing, her apparently aimless life, her sense of being a 'poet by default'" (117). These personal themes—wondering about a sense of vocation and direction, of the disorganization of her writing process—are not the explicit subject of the poem. But the poem's anxieties about these topics hint at autobiographical details that the poem's impersonal tone holds at bay.

"The Bight," employs careful visual descriptions, as do other early Bishop poems. Like "The Fish," this poem employs a lexicon of nautical jargon in words such as "jackstraw," "gaff," "marl," and "dredge." Also characteristic of Bishop poems, the

speaker pays attention to the parts of the landscape that typically would not be considered beautiful:

The frowsy sponge boats keep coming in
with the obliging air of retrievers,
bristling with jackstraw gaffs and hooks
and decorated with bobbles of sponges
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. (60)

The speaker relishes the sounds of these descriptions, “frowsy sponge boats,” “bobbles of sponges,” and “jackstraw gaffs and hooks.” The metaphor of the boats as friendly, obedient dogs domesticates the scene and provides a contrast to the foreign and potentially dangerous “shark tails” that are “glinting like little plowshares” and bound “for the Chinese-restaurant trade.”

But in “one of Bishop’s most loosely descriptive poems,” these observations do not produce the descriptive mastery culminating in an epiphany such as the one in “The Fish” (Travisano *Artistic Development* 106). Instead, careful looking attends the speaker’s disconnection from this place, her sense of being out of sync with what she sees. For example, the verbs describing this landscape suggest aggression (“protrude and glare,” “crash”), nervousness (“tense,” “tremble,” “bristling,”), and rejection (“turned as low as possible,” “rarely coming up”). Even worse, the poem emphasizes the dry tedium of continuing these activities: “keep coming in,” “still piled up,” “continues” (60, 61). While

the activities at the bight are tediously continual, they are paradoxically also premature (“already”), sporadic (“rarely”), and belated (“if they ever will be,” “not yet”).

Despite the steady work of the dredge on the beach, there is also a sense of futility in the poem. The poem’s title suggests as much. A bight is a bend in the coastline, a bay or curve that delineates it as a distinct part of the coast. Its secondary meaning, “a loop in a length of rope,” certainly mirrors the geographical formation of a coastline, but it also alludes to a kind of slackness or disuse that is also operative in the poem (“Bight”). The birds’ constant effort is futile, for example, as the pelicans that dive under the water “rarely [come] up with anything to show for it” (60). Following these images of futility, the end of the poem figures boats as letters that have been opened—and perhaps read—but not answered:

Some of the little white boats are still piled up
against each other, or lie on their sides, stove in,
and not yet salvaged, if they ever will be, from the last bad storm,
like torn-open, unanswered letters.

The bight is littered with old correspondences.

Click. Click. Goes the dredge,
and brings up a dripping jawful of marl.

All the untidy activity continues,
awful but cheerful. (60)

As many critics have observed, “correspondences” not only refers to the “torn-open, unanswered letters” but also alludes to Baudelaire’s aesthetic theory that involves synesthesia. In Baudelaire’s application,

(i) sounds, and all other classes of sensa, images, emotions, notions, can suggest, or even be substituted for one another in communication—‘correspondences’ on terms of equality—and (ii) all these diverse elements of artistic language, as well as answering to one another, are all symbols in a universal hierarchy, in which that which is symbolized is some aspect of an ultimate transcendent reality.

(Lehmann 207)

Baudelaire’s “Correspondences” were not just a connection between things (“‘correspondences’ on terms of equality”) but represented his belief in a higher order of nature and a pattern for the world. Bishop’s allusion to the “old correspondences” and unfulfilled connections in the landscape rejects the premise that the world connects together meaningfully to “an ultimate transcendent reality.” Things are put together in this landscape, but they don’t correspond: the “outsize” birds crashing into the water and “rarely coming up with anything to show for it”; the shipwrecked boats that no longer work (and are figured as discarded letters of unfulfilled connections); the funny noise of the dredge that should produce a new way of thinking about the scene (“if one were Baudelaire”) but instead just makes a mechanical thud (“Click. Click. Goes the dredge”).

Critics insist that this poem demonstrates a victory of the sort that the speaker experiences in “The Fish,” a “celebration” that is not about discontinuity but about her mastery of such discontinuities in verse. Travisano, for example, argues that “this poem actually enjoys the ‘awful,’ just as it relishes the awful rhyming of *awful*, *jawful*, and *cheerful*, which lend its final lines a droll, off-key sort of conclusiveness. The achievement of this birthday is its capturing of the vitality and color of a place—a place that needs all kinds of untidy effort if it will thrive” (*Artistic Development* 108). Similarly,

Kalstone sees the speaker as the orchestrator of quaint connections through her careful descriptions: “What animates the scene this time is the observer’s deliberate activity, celebrating her birthday in an off-key way with an unrelenting and occasionally mischievous series of comparisons [. . .]. This is what she allows for her birthday: the pointed celebration of small-craft victories in a storm-ridden inlet” (“Questions of Memory” 60). But to be “deliberate” in her observations is not necessarily to be victorious: what “small-craft victories” does the poem demonstrate? In what ways does the poem suggest the bight might “thrive” or that the speaker hopes that it will do so?

In fact, this poem is about miscommunication and missed connections. These themes are even more evident when considered alongside the poem that immediately precedes it in the book, “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance.” Like “The Bight,” one of the questions “Over 2,000 Illustrations” attempts to answer is how we bring together disparate elements into a meaningful coherence: a “Complete Concordance.” The poem’s three long stanzas question the kinds of logic we use to make sense of the world. The first stanza presents a mosaic of biblical narratives that are “serious, engravable” (57). The pictures in these biblical illustrations are not mismatched or ill-fitting as are the things on the seashore in “The Bight.” But these depictions are dry and bland:

The cobbled courtyard where the Well is dry,
is like a diagram, the brickwork conduits
are vast and obvious, the human figure
far gone in history or theology,
gone with its camel or its faithful horse.

Always the silence, the gesture, the specks of birds
suspended on invisible threads above the Site,
or the smoke rising solemnly, pulled by threads. (57)

It's not that these pictures don't fit well together but that they fit too well together: they don't attend to the imperfect realities of the world. In other poems, Bishop's speaker can attest to the ineffable mystery of encountering a moose, but in this patterned courtyard, painted to be "like a diagram," she finds not a subject of mystery and awe but something "vast and obvious." In these scenes of biblical revelation, the artist's way of rendering the mystery is tired and passé: "Always the silence, the gesture, the specks of birds / suspended on invisible threads above the Site."⁴ The speaker's discomfort with such staid scenes is mirrored by the "human figure" in the illustrations, which is always "far gone in history or theology," too wrapped up with these subjects to be meaningful in the real world.

While the speaker finds these illustrations to be irrelevant, she admires the way they cohere. The speaker first admonishes herself, "Thus should have been our travels: / serious, engravable." Later, she describes her travels around the world as they actually were: chaotic, strange, and paradoxical. There is no clear larger narrative to connect her disparate experiences of travel. But at the same time, these experiences attest to a careful attention to the realities of the world; these scenes are not hollow but alive. The speaker jaunts from continent to continent in the space of a few lines, observing a wide variety of the human experience:

In Mexico the dead man lay
in a blue arcade; the dead volcanoes

glistened like Easter lilies.

The jukebox went on playing “Ay, Jalisco!”

And at Volubilis there were beautiful poppies

splitting the mosaics; the fat old guide made eyes.

In Dingle harbor a golden length of evening

the rotting hulks held up their dripping plush.

The Englishwoman poured tea, informing us

that the duchess was going to have a baby. (58)

There is no “diagram” connecting the disjointed scenes such as the one that seemed to be etched over the courtyard in the first stanza. Instead, the speaker presents an unordered catalog of what she has seen during her travels: a dead man, a jukebox, poppies growing out of an old art piece, a lustful guide, a fancy tea. As quickly as the speaker changes subjects, she moves geographically; in just these ten lines the scenes move from Mexico to Morocco (Volubilis) to Ireland (Dingle harbor) to England. Unlike the dry and staid images from the Bible, these images are alive and interesting, bespeaking the variety and cyclical processes of life. The “dead man” in Mexico is compared to “dead volcanoes,” but those volcanoes somehow bristle with the promise of new life, as when they are compared to “Easter lilies.” The poppies are not etched into a perfect scene but are disruptively “splitting the mosaics”; the beauty of “a golden length of evening” is tempered by “the rotting hulks” the speaker finds there. The very disjointedness of the travel narrative is exactly the point, as Bonnie Costello notes: “For this speaker, in the aftermath of travel, the pictorial harmonies have already been refuted. ‘Thus should have been our travels: / serious, engravable’ she sighs in response to the epistemic happiness

of the boasting title, thinking back over the irreverent, ephemeral world she witnessed” (“Vision and Mastery” 356).

Despite the differences between the tired biblical stories and the world, the third stanza suggests a way they might correspond. The speaker begins by summarizing what has come before, acknowledging the lack of connection among her travel experiences just enumerated: “Everything only connected by ‘and’ and ‘and’” (58). Instead of ending on this note of resignation to the disconnectedness of her experiences, the speaker urges herself to “open the book” and examine the picture of the nativity anew:

Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges
of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.)
Open the heavy book. Why couldn't we have seen
this old Nativity while we were at it?
—the door ajar, the rocks breaking with light,
an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,
colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,
and, lulled within, a family with pets,
—and looked and looked our infant sight away. (58-59)

The book, full of tired stories that cohere but do not respond to contemporary life, is transformed by the experience of travel, becoming as alive as a flower that “pollinates the fingertips” with possibility. The speaker has been seeking connections among her disparate travel experiences, but here she discovers a correspondence between text and world: the “gilt” of the book “rubs off” on the world, and the experiences of traveling the world lead to a truer seeing of the book. Other critics have observed a secular drift in this

stanza, noting that the holy family at the nativity is simply “a family with pets.” But there is the concomitant sanctifying of the world as the book “rubs off at the edges,” causing a new way of seeing that can only be termed “redemptive”: “and looked and looked our infant sight away.”

This new way of seeing does not come from having “a Complete Concordance,” as the title humorously suggests, but from moving beyond a need for such a unifying narrative. In light of these questions in “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” the anxiety over “correspondence” and connection in “The Bight” becomes clear. In “The Bight,” Baudelaire’s “correspondences” do not provide an adequate way of representing the world. To be clear, this anxiety is not the deep-seated despair that Yeats confronts when he observes “things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” in “The Second Coming” (187). But neither is it the passive acceptance of a disjointed world. In “Over 2,000 Illustrations,” the speaker seeks a way that poetry can attend to a complicated world; she refuses to accept the old myths but acknowledges the difficulty in creating new ones. “The Bight” takes up these concerns, but with a balder look at just one landscape instead of an attempt to connect a variety of places. The bight has no particular beauty or fascinating misery to offer the world but only promises persistence: “all the untidy activity continues.” The speaker forestalls any revelation or epiphany that might come from her observations, ending with an image of tedious continuity. What results is indeed not a celebration but a testament to the difficulty of seeking “correspondence” in a disconnected world.

Bishop’s early poetry seeks meaningful correspondence between apparently disconnected elements of the outside world, and in doing so the speaker typically remains

at a distance from the places of the poem. In her later poetry Bishop's speakers are more overtly interested in the connections between identity and place. Thus, her poems do not seek correspondence (a sense of commonality or a unifying representation) to explain the places she encounters but connection (a sense of relationship or conversation) between the self and place. Many critics argue that Bishop's later work does, indeed, become more overtly interested in her own personal history and identity. But few have observed the ways her poetry uses place to connect identity to the self. Often, her later poetry is not only about her personal connection to a place (and how she fits there) but about the imaginative opportunities it affords her. In a 1978 interview, Bishop explains the way she negotiates this difference between real and imagined places: "any place has to be different from the way you imagined it, but that doesn't mean what you imagined is in any way inferior. The imagination does have its own geography" ("Conversations" 101). It is the imaginative, internal geography that Bishop's later poetry explores, a territory still deeply in conversation with the exterior geographies of her earlier career.

Bishop's later poem "The End of March" (published in her 1976 *Geography III*) illustrates this shift from external geography to internal geography. Like "The Bight," it, too is a seashore poem. The speaker describes a walk on a "cold and windy" beach with unnamed friends observing the ocean and the birds at low tide. The group comes across a long tangle of string along the shoreline, and the speaker conjectures that it might be from a lost kite. She explains that she wanted to walk to a funny disheveled house she remembers seeing before. Suddenly, the poem shifts to a focus not on external place but on the speaker's interior geography; the speaker imagines herself retiring to its "two bare rooms" where she could "read boring books" and watch the rain. Even though the house

she describes is not real, it is the subject of the most vivid descriptions in the poem. In the end, however, the fantasy is dismissed (“perfect! But—impossible”) and the group returns home while watching the sun alight on the stones left exposed and wet by the low tide.

One of the most evident differences between “The Bight” and “The End of March” is the position of the speaker relative to the place she examines. The subtitle of the poem, “For John Malcolm Brinnin and Bill Read: Duxbury,” identifies the speaker as part of a specific community and in a particular place. Compared to the sly impersonality in “The Bight,” this poem is immediately clear about where its speaker is positioned. The speaker of “The End of March” is not at a distance but intimately involved in the scene on the beach: it is clear that she is part of the place and also affected by the place. For example, she describes the way the wind affects herself, the geese, and the waves:

The rackety, icy, offshore wind
numbed our faces on one side;
disrupted the formation
of a lone flight of Canada geese;
and blew back the low, inaudible rollers
in upright, steely mist. (179)

While “The Bight” is in present tense (“At low tide like this how sheer the water is” 60), “The End of March” is in past tense, with the speaker looking back on her experience on the beach. Even in this more reflective mode, however, the speaker still emphasizes her interaction with the place, not observing the scene from afar but remembering the feeling of the wind on her cheeks and the how she needed boots for the wet beach: “Along the

wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed / a track of big dog-prints (so big / they were more like lion prints)” (179).

The speaker’s direct participation in the action of the poem is also emphasized by the way she conveys the memory of the event. Bishop’s drafts of “The End of March” show how Bishop settled on the speaker’s recounting of the walk, a decision that reflects the speaker’s active involvement with the landscape:

The crucial decision Bishop made in the first draft of the first stanza was to have the speaker begin walking out to the house instead of having the speaker completing her journey in a couple of lines. She probably made this judgment quickly. Crossing out ‘then the other (as we turned back)’ [in the first stanza] was imperative for the movement of the poem. Instead of having the journey end, the narrative over, Bishop extended the moment of the poem, the memory, by bringing the closure of this line down to the last stanza on the same draft. It begins: ‘Turning back, our faces froze on the other cheek.’ The choice resulted in a lyrical treatment of time, with the speaker’s meditation taking place on the beach; the first choice, a more narrative mode of reflection, would have emphasized the passage of time, with the speaker positioned in the wings. (Biele 56)

This “lyrical treatment of time” also supports the poem’s thematic emphasis on interiority. The poem starts using the first-person plural (“numbed our faces on one side” and “in rubber boots, we followed”) but then moves to the first-person singular during the speaker’s fantasy of her “proto-dream-house,” a place where she imagines herself alone and inside “look[ing] out through binoculars.” The final stanza returns to the first-person

plural (“On the way back our faces froze on the other side”), but at the same time the speaker pays attention to the “individual shadows” of the rocks in the sand (180). Even though the poem invokes a “we,” there is no discussion or description of the other people on the walk; instead, it focuses on the observations and imagination of the speaker.

The poem’s emphasis on interiority is also evident in its many self-corrections and qualifications that emphasize the movement of the mind. These refinements and asides create an imperfect, playful construction of thought that mirrors the haphazard dream house that the speaker imagines further down the beach:

I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house,
my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box
set up on pilings, shingled green,
a sort of an artichoke of a house, but greener
(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?),
protected from spring tides by a palisade
of—are they railroad ties?
(Many things about this place are dubious.)
I’d like to retire there and do *nothing*,
or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:
look through binoculars, read boring books,
old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
talk to myself, and, foggy days,
watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light. (179-80)

Here and throughout the poem, asides fulfill several different functions. Some of her

parenthetical statements are intimate confidences, almost stage whispers that create a sense of intimacy: “(Many things about this place are dubious)” and “(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?).” Other times, the speaker uses repetition and refinement to qualify an earlier assertion. Unlike the speaker’s qualifications in “The Map” that provide alternative perspectives, the speaker’s corrections in “The End of March” often build on earlier assertions to illustrate her process of deeply understanding “this place.” The “proto-dream-house” becomes a “crypto-dream-house” in the next line; it is “shingled green,” like an artichoke, “but greener”; the speaker longs to do “*nothing*” but qualifies this in the next line as “nothing much”; she imagines reading “boring books” in her dream house, but explains she means “old, long, long, books.” These corrections and refinements accrue, giving the poem itself a loose and associative precision, like the “shingled green” “artichoke of a house.”

Compared to the hard-edged descriptions in “The Fish” where the speaker attempts to get closer and closer to a more accurate way of seeing, here the speaker’s descriptions cast doubt on her earlier observations. Some asides call into question what the speaker saw in the first place, as when she wonders what the wall around the house was really made of:

protected from spring tides by a palisade
of—are they railroad ties? (179)

Other freely associative asides emphasize a mental break, as the speaker lets imagination take over her careful descriptions. For example, her comparison of the house to an artichoke leads her to wonder, humorously, if it was “(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?).”

The speaker's observation of the "lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string" on the beach causes her to imagine the string as a ghost:

a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,
rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,
falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost. . . .
A kite string?—But no kite. (179)

The long ellipsis at the end of the penultimate line suggests the speaker is giving herself over to these imaginative possibilities, imagining the string as holding "a sodden ghost" that is somehow drowned in the waves, "sodden, giving up the ghost." After these revisions and repetitions ("a sodden ghost" changed to "sodden, giving up the ghost" in the next line), the speaker comes back to descriptive reality: "A kite string?" But even this more likely conjecture is qualified: "But no kite."

These asides all enact how imagination and reality intermingle and demonstrate that imagination is a force in apprehending reality. Bishop's goal is not to achieve carefully rendered descriptions of the external world as she does in poems like "The Fish" or "The Bight" but to show the ways that internal imagination and external reality interact to create an equally precise rendering. In fact, these more associative descriptions, there is not always a clear delineation between reality and imagination. Although some asides do indeed suggest a break or discontinuity, these instances exist alongside others where the shifts between reality and imagination are not so disruptive. For example, the definitive emphasis of the italicized "is" in this first line is undermined by the less certain "possibly" and "—at least" in the subsequent lines:

There must be a stove, there *is* a chimney,

askew, but braced with wires,
and electricity, possibly,
—at least, at the back another wire
limply leashes off the whole affair
to something off behind the dunes.
A light to read by—perfect! But—impossible.
And that day the wind was much too cold
Even to get that far,
And of course the house was boarded up. (180)

The poem shifts back and forth between what is (“must be,” “*is*”) to what might be (“but,” “possibly,” “—at least,” “something”). Bishop’s drafts show that she revised one line (that eventually reads “A light to read by—perfect! But—impossible”) eight times to find the right punctuation and pacing (Bielle 58). The careful orchestration of these pauses was essential in demonstrating the journey out of the dream house and back to the reality of the walk on the beach. The speaker’s dream house is thus both a personal fantasy and an extant house in Duxbury; a house that is both “perfect” and “impossible”; a place where the speaker visits to escape and a place the speaker knows she cannot visit, “of course”; it is a “*proto*-dream-house” that might exist someday (“at an early stage of development, primitive; incipient, potential”) and a “*crypto*-dream-house” that does exist but is hidden away (“concealed, not visible, not apparent”). The crisis of “correspondences” that occurs in “The Bight” and “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” is notably absent in this poem. “The Bight” is all connected

together by dashes, ellipses, and turns of thought, dream and reality, the “perfect” and the “impossible,” the “we” and the “I.”

The quiet epiphany that results from the speaker’s trip into the dream house is not a collective revelation in “The Moose” but a brief moment (“for just a minute”) when the beach appears different to the speaker from the way it did before in the fleeting sunlight:

On the way back our faces froze on the other side.

The sun came out for just a minute.

For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand,

The drab, damp, scattered stones

Were multi-colored,

And all those high enough threw out long shadows,

Individual shadows, then pulled them in again. (180)

Like the speaker’s experience in “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,” her trip to the dream house has changed her way of seeing and sanctified the ordinary.

The “scattered stones” are compared to jewels “set in their bezels of sand,” uniquely “multi-colored” and beautiful as opposed to their previous “drab, damp” appearance.

They are portrayed as having agency and individuality when they “threw out long

shadows, / individual shadows, then pulled them in again.” Millier attributes the

realization of the beach’s beauty to the speaker’s “thoughts about the future—careful,

detailed thinking that names things and places them—makes the poet receptive to a

modest epiphany” (493).

Indeed, the “modest epiphany” is an outgrowth of the “careful, detailed thinking” about the dream house in the previous stanza, but, more than an affirmation of “thoughts

about the future,” her epiphany affirms a playful, associative imagination that has affected reality. Thus, the epiphany does not end here, as it does in “The Fish,” but continues to other possibilities, privileging the imagination over careful descriptions of the world:

They [the individual shadows] could have been teasing the lion sun,
except that now he was behind them
—a sun who’d walked the beach the last low tide,
making those big, majestic paw-prints,
who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with. (180)

This ending is not concerned with finding a descriptive reality: it does not conclude with a definitive answer to the mystery of the missing kite string or provide an explanation for the big paw prints on the beach. Instead, the imaginative possibilities the speaker has considered previously generate other, new ideas. The speaker imagines the “big dog-prints (so big / they were more like lion prints)” are from “the lion sun,” a playful creature that “perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with.” The “correspondences” that were missing in “The Bight” are here replaced by metaphorically playful connections that turn a mysterious reality (paw prints on the beach) into an imaginative possibility (a “lion sun” who walked on the beach): the paw prints and the kite string may not be explicable but they are nevertheless resolved by the poem’s figurative logic. Thus, the figures that troubled the speaker earlier in the poem (for example, the odd and eerie kite string that is compared to “a sodden ghost” that is “giving up the ghost”) are now not troublesome at all but filled with new creative possibility: perhaps the “lion sun” has playfully “batted a kite out of the sky to play with.” The “long

beach” that was “withdrawn as far as possible” at the beginning of the poem is at the end covered in “multi-colored stones” that “could have been teasing the lion sun.” This newly imagined world is just as carefully described as the actual landscape on the beach and, in fact, is not separate from it but a part of it: the beach’s geography is overlaid with the “geography of the imagination.” In this poem, Bishop moves from a “proto-dream” world of potential or possibility to a “crypto-dream” world clearly realized in the imagination but hidden away from our visible geographies.

While Bishop’s attention to geography is uncontestedly present from “The Map” onward, the poems from the end of her career explore “the geography of the imagination”—a geography that mingles internal identity with external place. Criticism of Bishop’s later work often focuses on the “correspondence” of her poems with the biographical details of her life (for example, the famous controversy over which issue of *National Geographic* Bishop depicted in “In the Waiting Room”). However, much more is gained by examining the how the later poems’ imaginatively conceived places affect the speaker’s sense of her own identity. While Bishop is, indeed, a descriptive poet throughout her career, the more associative and imaginative descriptions of place in her later poems are the settings for an identity that is more connected to the outside world.

Notes

¹ Many critics describe her poetry’s search to locate the self in the world as “homelessness” (see, for example, Millier 119; Cleghorn, Hicok, and Travisano 118). The description of her poetry’s “homelessness” alludes also to her biography, of course,

moving and traveling during her whole life from the time she was a child in Nova Scotia and New England through her houses in Florida and Brazil until the end of her life in Boston. Indeed, Brett Millier's biography details Bishop's travels with incredible detail, including an observation of how often Bishop moved: a six-month stay in Key West, Florida when she was 33 was the longest "she had ever stayed in one house or one place" (170). Bishop herself maintained the inadequacy of the term "homeless"; when asked in an interview about the "search for and definition of home" that seems to haunt her poetry, Bishop responded, "I've never felt particularly homeless, but, then, I've never felt particularly at home. I guess that's a pretty good description of a poet's sense of home. He carries it within him" (*Conversations* 102). The description of the "homelessness" of Bishop's poetry is used so often that it has become a commonplace. And while it does allude to Bishop's struggle to find her place in the world, the negative connotations of this word make it a less apt descriptor for her poetry. I suggest a more useful term for her poetry is itinerant.

² "In the course of writing the poem, Bishop also took her time, 26 years in fact from first draft to final completion" (Ellis 176).

³ Indeed, the position is so vague that some critics misread the position of the speaker entirely, as does Ellis in his reading: "In the seventh stanza, perspective shifts inside the bus as if the 'lone passenger' giving 'kisses and embraces / to seven relatives' were Bishop, yet at no point in the poem is this ever made clear. Instead, Bishop hides behind a genderless 'we' or 'us'" (Ellis 183-84).

⁴One can hear the same complaint the speaker has in another early poem, “Large Bad Picture,” where the birds are similarly suspended aloft but do not bring any real revelation to the poem:

And high above them, over the tall cliffs’
semi-translucent ranks,
are scribbled hundreds of fine black birds
hanging in n’s in banks.

One can hear their crying, crying,
the only sound there is
except for occasional sighing
as a large aquatic animal breathes. (11)

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

There are those to whom place is unimportant,
But this place, where sea and fresh water meet,
Is important—
Where the hawks sway out into the wind,
Without a single wingbeat,
And the eagles sail low over the fir trees,
And the gulls cry against the crows
In the curved harbors,
And the tide rises up against the grass
Nibbled by sheep and rabbits.

A time for watching the tide,
For the heron's hieratic fishing,
For the sleepy cries of the towhee,
The morning birds gone, the twittering finches,
But still the flash of the kingfisher, the wingbeat of the scoter,
The sun a ball of fire coming down over the water,
The last geese crossing against the reflected afterlight,
The moon retreating into a vague cloud-sheet
To the cries of the owl, the eerie whooper.
The old log subsides with the lessening waves,
And there is silence. (Roethke 196)

These opening stanzas from Theodore Roethke's "The Rose" imagine the sun setting over a quiet coastal scene as animals find their places in the landscape ("the hawks sway," "the eagles sail," "the gulls cry") and prepare for the night: "the moon retreating into a vague cloud-sheet," "and there is silence." While this picture of nature is subdued and consoling, the poem is inaugurated with an unsettling proposition: "There are those to whom place is unimportant, / But this place, where sea and fresh water meet, / Is important—."

Roethke opens the poem with an acknowledgment that some people see place as "unimportant," a charge that could as easily be leveled as at modernist poets as it could at

his contemporaries. Modernist poets tended to see place as a symbol of modernity, thus considering the actual place portrayed in their poems in a crucial sense “unimportant” compared to its figurative import; even his contemporaries who rejected modernist symbolism tended to think of place merely as a backdrop or setting for their lives and poems. While Roethke’s career certainly testifies to the importance of place, the admission that it is not so for everyone is singular in Roethke’s poetry; rarely do his poems depict a perspective outside of the speaker’s own.

The place he describes in “The Rose,” then, is not merely a bucolic scene but evidence for his claim to the contrary that “this place [. . .] is important.” Roethke does not attempt a philosophical defense of place as essential to the modern condition, but instead he provides a defense of the importance of “this place” and the speaker’s perspective of it as he watches the tide. Again, we see that individual identity and a particular place are inherently related and, as he argues, crucial. Like Bishop’s coastal landscapes and Brooks’s busy neighborhoods, Roethke’s place here is one of confluence, “where sea and fresh water meet.” Part of what makes *this* place important is that it connects things and brings them together.

“The Rose” exemplifies the turn toward particular place and individual identity, features that characterize American poetry not just at midcentury but in the latter half of the twentieth century. As discussed previously, midcentury poetry opened the door to a variety of poetic styles and movements (the San Francisco Beats, the New York School, the Black Mountain poets, the Confessionals, the Black Arts poets, the Deep Image poets, and the New Critics). After midcentury, this proliferation continued with no lack of diversity as the post-1968 era saw the rise of ethnic poetry (Asian American poetry and

Native American poetry, for example), nature and environmentalist poetry, feminist poetry, and New Formalist poetry; many of the poets working in these different styles embraced place and identity as central to their work as movement names like San Francisco Beats, New York School, and Black Mountain poets make evident.

Although place and identity have featured prominently in late-twentieth-century poetics, these aspects have often been considered to be in conflict with postmodern and avant-garde movements such as Language poetry and Conceptual poetry that eschew the relevance of place and self in an age of capitalism and globalization.¹ Charles Bernstein's "Dark City," for instance, does not make a symbol of the dark city but rather renders places and their names as part of the slur of postmodern discourses:

I think it's time we let the cat out
its bag, swing the dog over the
shoulder, so to say, let the hens
say "hey" to the woodpeckers, doled
out some omniaversions to the
too-tapped-upon, the tethers without
toggles, the field-happy expeditioneers
on the march to Tuscaloosa, Beloit,
Manual Fall, Florid Oasis.
"Damn but you're a beautiful
cow / of a / bell! Haven't
I seen you on the radio?"
Where are those fades (arcades, shades)

when you need them? Who
was that text I saw you with
last night? Is there life after
grammar (glamour)? The Czech
is in the jail (the wreck is
in the wail, the deck is in the
sail, the Burma shave's shining over the
starry blue skies, Waukeegan, New Jersey,
1941). (142)

The dark city is not a real place but a conceptual and linguistic space made up of a jumble of ideas and cacophonous sounds. The poem combines puns (“The Czech / is in the jail” replaces “the check is in the mail”); popular culture (“the Burma shave’s shining”); language play and games (the alliteration of “doled / out some omniaversions to the / too-tapped-upon, the tethers without / toggles” and the playful, repetitive rhymes of “the wreck is / in the wail, the deck is in the / sail”). When places are mentioned, the list begins with actual cities from the south (“Tuscaloosa”) and midwest (“Beloit”), and then moves to imaginary places (“Manual Falls”) and contorted versions of real places (“Florid Oasis,” an allusion to a “Florida oasis” where a lush, tropical state becomes an excessive, overwrought paradise). Within this cacophony, the hints of history and high culture (“Waukeegan, New Jersey, / 1941” and “Is there life after grammar (glamour)?”) are lost in the welter of information-age noise.

More recently, however, even this distinction between modern and postmodern poetry has come under scrutiny as critics consider other ways of classifying twentieth and twenty-first century poets:

Although the traditional subject-centered, epiphanic lyric has understandably come under a suspicion of irrelevance in a global age, viable alternative forms of expression need not center on the estranged materiality of a language without speakers. There is a third way between identitarian power plays and postidentity decenteredness. One way out of paranoia is to experience a change of world, to move among many meaning-giving, local, and practically incommensurate worlds without referring outside of the encounter between worlds, either to a grounded subject or to any singular systemic description of the world. (Keller 187-88)

Jim Keller argues that the categories for poetry need not be only either lyric and avant-garde, but that we must also include a category that allows for speakers invested in identity (without positing “a grounded subject”) and place (or “many meaning-giving, local, and practically incommensurate worlds”). Indeed, globalization need not imply the absence of place and identity, especially when we consider that the larger movement toward identity and place in midcentury poetry occurred during the Cold War, precisely when the secure boundaries of nation came under threat in an age of surveillance and espionage.

While the impulse to ground identity in a place during a time of uncertainty might imply a certain individual obstinacy or political conservatism, careful reading of midcentury poetry suggests otherwise. Brooks, Roethke, and Bishop testify to the fact that an interest in place and identity implies neither provincialism nor a fixed identity

unequipped to handle a changing world. These three poets represent a variety of responses to the historical situation that poets confronted at midcentury; readings of the poetry of Charles Olson, Lorine Niedecker, Denise Levertov, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbury, Robert Hayden, Sylvia Plath, Gary Snyder, James Merrill, and countless others would further illuminate the myriad of ways that poets grounded their work and identities on a particular *ground*.

At the same time as midcentury poets reinvested in place and identity, their work also reveals a contrary impulse: the acknowledgement and even the reverence of the mysterious and unknown. Each preceding chapter mentions a time (or times) when Brooks's, Roethke's, and Bishop's poetry confronts a "something" that cannot be named:

something, something in Mecca
continues to call! Substanceless; yet like mountains,
like rivers and oceans too; and like trees
with wind whistling through them. ("In the Mecca," Brooks 433)

And I stood outside myself,
Beyond becoming and perishing,
A something wholly other,
As if I swayed out on the wildest wave alive,
And yet was still. ("The Rose," Roethke 199)

His beak is focused; he is preoccupied,
looking for something, something, something.

Poor bird, he is obsessed! (“The Sandpiper,” Bishop 131)

I do not mean to suggest that these “somethings” refer to the same or even a similar thing that inspired and eluded midcentury poetry, but it is striking that poetry so grounded in the particulars of place and identity finally discovers the mysterious. This “something” is utterly paradoxical, named as unnamable; it is a way of understanding your own identity, not as yourself but as another (“a something wholly other”); it is both the thing that is sought after (“looking for something, something”) and the thing that is seeking (“something, something in Mecca / continues to call”). These midcentury poets write about real places and particular identities, getting their bearings in an unstable, turbulent world. Perhaps the greatest measure of the steadying influence of place is that it allows Brooks, Roethke, and Bishop to be preoccupied by *something* that exceeds specific places and individual identities.

Notes

¹ As always, the boundaries between these styles of poetry are contested and permeable. Paul Hoover’s edited collection, *Postmodern American Poetry*, for example, includes chapters from Robert Creeley (a Black Mountain poet) and Allen Ginsberg (a Beat poet) along with chapters by Steve McCaffrey on “Language Writing” and Kenneth Goldsmith on “Conceptual Poetics.” Thus, this collection does not identify postmodern poetics as one with a decentered subject but one that aligns with the American avant-garde tradition.

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