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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “the exacting commitment of the memory to paper, even two decades later.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

A LONG ENGAGEMENT

A close look at Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “The Moose” shows why it took her twenty years to write it.

By Toby Eckert

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Elizabeth Bishop claimed that it took her around 20 years to finish her poem “The Moose.” Even for a poet as methodical as Bishop, that seems like an unusually long time. Taking up a theme she explored in poems such as “The Fish” and “The Armadillo,” “The Moose” meditates on the transcendent power of nature, and its often startling intrusion into our modern lives. The poem also maps the terrain of Nova Scotia, where the young Bishop was taken to live with her maternal grandparents after being effectively orphaned by her father’s early death and her mother’s institutionalization for mental illness. (The poem is dedicated to Grace Bulmer Bowers, one of her aunts and surrogate mothers.) “The Moose” opens on a lyrical note, describing the landscape and towns along the Nova Scotian coast:

From narrow provinces
of fish and bread and tea,
home of the long tides
where the bay leaves the sea
twice a day and takes
the herrings long rides,

The phrase “narrow provinces” in the first line not only establishes a geographical anchor but also serves as a commentary on the provincial lives of the inhabitants. The local diet “of fish and bread and tea,” with its repetitive syntax and tight, iambic cadence, invokes a simple, somewhat monotonous existence. Life’s rhythm is reflected in the predictable rise

and fall of water, “the long tides / where the bay leaves the sea / twice a day . . . ,” which also manifests itself in the consistent rhyme scheme that evokes the sound of the ebbing and surging ocean.

Despite the poem’s travel theme, Bishop is clearly in no hurry to get anywhere in particular. Not until the fifth stanza does the opening phrase, “From narrow provinces,” find its verb. Only then does the narrative that propels the rest of the poem truly begin:

a bus journeys west,
the windshield flashing pink,
pink glancing off of metal,
brushing the dented flank
of blue, beat-up enamel;

The effect is unsettling, as Bishop suddenly introduces an ungainly metal machine into what heretofore had been a bucolic scene. From that point on, the reader is conscious of being separated from the landscape, moving through it in an artificial environment in which the outside world flits by the bus windows like scenes in a film: a woman shaking out a tablecloth after dinner, a ship’s lantern shining red off the coast, a rubber-booted pedestrian. As the bus picks up speed, the lines do too. It is full night as the bus enters the woods of New Brunswick. Here, another significant turn occurs, with the landscape becoming

hairy, scratchy, splintery;
moonlight and mist
caught in them like lamb’s wool
on bushes in a pasture.

It is wilder than the more human-inhabited world of the previous stanzas. The woods have a clinging, dense, claustrophobic feel. The atmosphere of menace outside the bus contrasts sharply with the one inside, where it is cozy and safe:

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

The narrator herself starts to drift off, and Bishop’s syntax becomes incantatory and hypnotic. But the reverie comes to an abrupt end with the appearance of the poem’s titular character:

—Suddenly the bus driver
stops with a jolt,
turns off his lights.

A moose has come out of
the impenetrable wood
and stands there, looms, rather,
in the middle of the road.

The domestic dream is punctured, as something huge and wild intrudes. Someone assures the passengers that the animal is “‘Perfectly harmless. . . .’”—a sentiment Bishop undermines, or at least questions, by setting off the phrase with quotes and ellipses.

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. . . .

The driver’s observation that moose are “‘Curious creatures’” could as easily be applied to the passengers. The poet, even as she shares some of the giddy excitement, questions the emotions stirred up by the animal:

Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

The answer is never given. For Bishop, it seems to lie in the curious power of nature to transform a rather ordinary moment into a transcendent one. The creature’s sudden appearance reminds these “civilized” humans of that other world they are simultaneously surrounded by and alienated from. The poet is reluctant to leave the scene, craning backward to see the moose “on the moonlit macadam.” As the bus moves on, Bishop invokes the scents used to mark territory—the primeval and the mechanical:

Then there’s a dim
smell of moose, an acrid
smell of gasoline.

The moment has passed. But for Bishop, those dim and acrid smells lingered powerfully enough to compel the exacting commitment of the memory to paper, even two decades later.

Toby Eckert is an editor and writer who lives in Alexandria, VA. This article first appeared on www.poetryfoundation.org. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Elizabeth Bishop, and her poetry, at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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