

Elizabeth Bishop's Pink

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ABSTRACT

This article argues for the significance of the colour pink in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop. While Bishop's interest in painting, architecture and sculpture has been widely noted, the importance of colour—and the specific resonance of pink—has hitherto been overlooked. I propose that across Bishop's career, from early New York and Key West poems and drafts through the poetry of Brazil, such as 'The Armadillo', to the late great poems, 'In the Waiting Room' and finally, and disturbingly, 'Pink Dog', shades of pink operate to crucial effect. This is the case even, or especially, where pink is only tacitly registered (see, for example, 'In the Waiting Room' where the pink body is strategically covered by 'gray' clothes). Whether directly or by allusion, Bishop uses pink to suggest difference, unease and alarm, particularly in relation to gender, sexuality and the temptations and risks of self-exposure. In pursuing the point, I look to representations of pink in contemporary popular culture, to colour theory such as the work of Johannes Itten, and to the psychology and physiology of shame. By tracing the significance of pink, I suggest, we reach a better understanding of Bishop's aesthetics of self-knowledge, subjectivity and display.

I. ELIZABETH BISHOP'S PINK

Elizabeth Bishop has been much acclaimed for her 'painterly' eye. Her ekphrastic poems, the influence of artists including Paul Klee, Max Ernst and Joseph Cornell, and her interest in cognate arts such as architecture, sculpture and collage, have been convincingly argued over the years. The 1996 exhibition and catalogue, *Exchanging Hats*, has drawn attention to her own drawings and paintings.¹ In the essay that follows, I take one aspect of this painterly sensibility—Bishop's sensitivity to colour,

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1 Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge, MA, 1991); Peggy Samuels, *Deep Skin: Elizabeth Bishop and Visual Art* (Ithaca, NY, 2010); Lorrie Goldensohn, 'The Homeless Eye', in Sandra Barry, Gwendolyn Davies and Peter Sanger (eds), *Divisions of the Heart: Elizabeth Bishop and the Art of Memory* (Kentville, 2001), 103–11; Linda Anderson, 'The Story of the Eye: Elizabeth Bishop and the Limits of the Visual', in Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott (eds), *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery* (Newcastle, 2002), 159–74; Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (Berkeley, CA, 1993); Joelle Biele, Dan Chiasson and Lloyd Schwartz (eds), *Elizabeth Bishop: Objects and Apparitions* (New York, NY, 2001); William Benton (ed.), *Elizabeth Bishop: Exchanging Hats* (New York, NY, 1996).

and specifically to the colour pink—as the focus of a meditation on subjectivity and self-exposure in her poetry. I argue that pink operated in a peculiar, by which I mean both a distinctive and an unsettling, way in her work. In tracing the significance of pink, I touch on pink's resonance in contemporary and popular culture, including in film and fashion, I consider contemporary colour theory, and I explore the many different meanings and registers of the pinks she uses in poetry ranging from the early 'Large Bad Picture' through middle-period works such as 'The Armadillo' to late poems including 'In the Waiting Room' and 'Pink Dog'.

Of course, pink is not the only colour that Bishop uses. Her colour palette includes blues, greens and shades of red (see, for example, 'Love Lies Sleeping'), golds, greens and blues ('Roosters'), blues and blacks ('Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore' and 'In the Waiting Room') and weighty monochromes, for example in 'The Man-Moth' and 'Five Flights Up'. Pink occurs infrequently in comparison to some of these shades. Nevertheless, when pink does appear, it is used to devastating effect. And even when it goes unnamed, as for example in the early poem, 'The Map', the first in her first collection, *North & South* (1946), or in the late poem 'In the Waiting Room' from *Geography III* (1976), its presence is felt. In the case of 'The Map' with its shadowy greens and 'simple' blues, its tans and yellows, it is the 'map-makers' pink which, although never specified, is the shade that informs the whole poem.² The colour pink, after all, would have demarcated the edges of empire on the chart in question.³ William Benton points out the map-like contours and colours of the pink tablecloth in Bishop's undated watercolour, 'Table with Candelabra'.⁴ It is the silent hue which establishes relationships of power and dependence; as Linda Colley explains, by tinting the territories on the map a 'common roseate colour' the 'different sectors of the British Empire' were given 'a far greater degree of unity and susceptibility to possession than ever characterised them in fact'.⁵ Thus we can say that pink in Bishop's poetry is never accidental, never unremarkable, and never mere scene-setting. In his 1961 study, *The Art of Colour*, Johannes Itten argues that 'colours should be experienced and understood, not only visually, but also psychologically and symbolically'. Likewise, Wassily Kandinsky observes that colour gives first 'a purely physical sensation' which then gives way to a 'whole chain of related sensations'.⁶ Bishop's pink, I propose, bears just such a psychological and symbolic, or metaphorical, weight. It is always charged, always purposeful, and often, if disturbingly and unwittingly, self-revealing.

In American culture at this time pink had acquired a certain set of associations, with particular inflections in Bishop's own experience. Vassar College, Bishop's alma

2 Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems* (New York, NY, 2011), 5. Unless otherwise indicated, further quotations from Bishop's poetry are taken from this collection and shown by page number in parentheses.

3 For more on the maps Bishop encountered as a schoolchild, see 'Primer Class' in Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems, Prose, and Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz, Library of America Series (New York, NY, 2008), 402–9.

4 Benton, *Exchanging*, 58–9.

5 Linda Colley, "'This Small Island': Britain, Size and Empire', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 121 (2002), 171–90, 172.

6 Johannes Itten, *The Art of Colour: The Subjective Experience and Objective Rationale of Colour*, tr. Ernst Von Haagen (New York, NY, 1973), 16. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, tr. M. T. H. Sadler (New York, NY, 1977), 23.

mater, had early adopted 'the pink and the gray' as its emblematic colours—a choice which persists into the present day. These were said to signal 'the rose of sunlight breaking through the gray of women's intellectual life' and although there is some doubt about the source of this rationale, the sentiment was documented in some form as early as 1868.⁷ This image of the pink sun breaking through against a more sombre background is one to which, as we will see, Bishop returned repeatedly—sometimes in contemplation of deeply personal circumstances.⁸ By 1903 the colours had been adopted as an informal uniform; an article on 'Athletics for College Girls' in *Century Illustrated Magazine* reported that 'A pink V on a Vassar girl's sweater means that she has broken a record. Symbol of ability, key to many of the good things of life, the athletic freshman longs for this letter with all her soul'.⁹ Pink in this context also had political connotations, signalling communist affinities. As Bishop recalls in her essay 'The U.S.A. School of Writing', her Depression-era college class was 'radical; we were puritanically pink'.¹⁰ More broadly, across the late 1930s and early 1940s as print technology developed and as movies, magazines and advertisements turned to colour instead of black and white images (this was the case in popular women's magazines from the 1930s and in Bishop's beloved *New Yorker* from 1942/3), shades of pink and red were increasingly identified with domesticity, femininity and girlishness even though, as Kassia St Clair usefully points out, only a generation or so earlier, pink would have been associated with boys and blue with girls. St Clair quotes a 1918 magazine's assertion that pink was the 'more decided and stronger color', while blue was 'more delicate and dainty'.¹¹ By the middle of the century, though, the transition appears to have been complete. In the affluent post-war period, fashion and film embraced the connection between pink and femininity. Writing in 1961, Itten reports that pink is identified with 'pure love' and innocence ('sweet, angelic pink').¹² The 1957 film *Funny Face* starred Audrey Hepburn as an ingénue caught in the enthusiastic sights of fashion editor, Maggie Prescott, whose adage 'think pink' paid homage both to Diana Vreeland of *Vogue* fame and to the trademark colour of designer Elsa Schiaparelli.¹³ Pink, then, is a loaded shade for Bishop which bears ambivalent and contradictory signals of strength and powerlessness; agency and vulnerability.

II. BAD PICTURES

Bishop's first express reference to the colour pink comes in another poem from *North & South*, 'Large Bad Picture' (13–14). Here, as in many later poems, pink signals something slightly odd, unusual, or plain 'bad'. 'Large Bad Picture' describes a

7 'Rose and Silver-Gray', <<http://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/early-vassar/rose-and-silver-gray.html>> accessed 12 Aug 2018.

8 A number of her own paintings, such as 'Palais de Senat' (1938) and the undated 'Harris School' feature rose-tinted skies (Benton, *Exchanging*, 9, 21).

9 Rebecca C. Tuite, *Seven Sisters Style: The All-American Preppy Look* (New York, NY, 2014), 30.

10 Bishop, *Poems, Prose, and Letters*, 449–60.

11 Kassia St Clair, *The Secret Lives of Colour* (London, 2016), 115.

12 Itten, *Art of Colour*, 133, 135.

13 Schiaparelli first started using her distinctive pink in around 1934. Her work featured on the cover of *Time* magazine (13 August 1934). See Dilys E. Blum, *Shocking! The Art and Fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli* (New Haven, CT, 2004), 56–7, 35.

'big picture' painted from memory by a 'great uncle'. The uncle in question, George Hutchinson, Bishop's maternal grandmother's brother, was a cabin boy at the age of 14 and later an accomplished artist.¹⁴ The tone of the poem as the speaker carefully catalogues the painting's key features is part deliberative and part critical. In characteristic Bishop style, it is the adjectives that steer our response. This is after all, as the title makes emphatically clear, a picture that is both 'bad' and, worse still, 'large'. The painting's primary distinction, as stanza one continues, is simply that it is 'big'. Its features include 'perfect', and thus literally incredible, 'waves' (stanza three) and cliffs whose defining aspect appears to be that they are unremarkably 'tall' (stanza five). Nevertheless, there is something about the picture or, more accurately perhaps, about the scenario in which the speaker remembers having viewed the painting as a child in Nova Scotia—her scene of reading—that is both compelling and, exponentially, disturbing.

By way of background with regard to Bishop's childhood story, she was born in 1911 in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her father died later the same year and Bishop spent her early years between Boston and Great Village, Nova Scotia (home of her mother's family). Bishop's mother was institutionalized in 1916 and Bishop was taken in by her paternal grandparents in Massachusetts for what proved to be a short and unhappy period. Thereafter, she lived a peripatetic childhood between various family members and, until late adolescence, took extended summer vacations back in Nova Scotia, followed into adulthood by occasional brief visits.¹⁵ For the poem to evoke such a picture now is to summon a set of deeply troubling circumstances comprising (and indeed compressing) an unprepossessing painting, childhood loss and the impossibility of bringing the dead back to life. Bishop returns to a similar scene in the later 'Poem', from *Geography III*, where the offer of a much smaller painting by the same uncle heralds an equally painful mediation on time, place and the legacies of the past (196–7).

In 'Large Bad Picture', the blush of pink in the penultimate stanza ('In the pink light | the small red sun goes rolling, rolling') picks up the 'flushed, still sky' from stanza two and thereby reflects some of the ambivalence, distress and shame attached to the family context in which this painting loomed so 'large'. Again, the ominous light brings to mind the backdrops of some of Bishop's own paintings, for example the yellow-tinged pink of the sky in 'Nova Scotia Landscape'.¹⁶ In the poem, the 'flushed' sky, contrasted with 'pale blue cliffs' offers a vision that is strangely somatic, even erotic ('flushed', 'pale'). But it also summons another crucial childhood memory, that of the terrible fire of Great Salem in 1914 which Bishop had witnessed as a young girl while her mother was on the cusp of her final mental breakdown. The later and incomplete poem, 'A Drunkard', evokes the experience and draws on many of the same images as 'Large Bad Picture'.¹⁷ In the former, what the child sees as she

14 Elizabeth Bishop, *Prose*, ed. Lloyd Schwartz (New York, NY, 2011), 425; Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau (eds), *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography* (Amherst, MA, 1994), 7.

15 Fountain and Brazeau, *Remembering*, 1–19; Bishop, *Prose*, 400–1.

16 Benton, *Exchanging*, 17.

17 Elizabeth Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Jukebox: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments*, ed. Alice Quinn (New York, NY, 2006), 150. Thomas Travisano dates 'A Drunkard' to the 1970s (qtd. in Bishop, *Edgar*, 345).

looks through the frame of her window is the 'bright red' sky (line four) and later, a 'red sky . . . filled with flying motes' (stanza two); both are thrown into relief by something pale and pink—a glimpse of 'my mother's white dress' which 'looked | rose-red' in the reflected glow of the flames. Later in 'A Drunkard', the child is admonished for picking up, out of curiosity, a discarded black stocking. Thus, in both poems, the girl child's—and the adult woman's—memory of the past is tinged red with danger, and pink with shame.¹⁸ Both are associated with signs of femininity that the speaker struggles to understand.

As Gillian White has shown so convincingly in *Lyric Shame: The Lyric Subject of Contemporary American Poetry*, it is rewarding to read Bishop in terms of the 'lyric shame dynamic' which pertains in contemporary American poetry.¹⁹ White defines lyric shame as 'shame experienced in identifications with modes of reading and writing understood to be lyric' and she sees Bishop's work and its reception (alongside that of contemporaries such as Anne Sexton) as being shaped in important, if various, ways by a cluster of anxieties around poetic expression, poetic reading and poetic interpretation.²⁰ White's approach offers an invaluable way of capturing the deep self-consciousness and meta-discursive edge of Bishop's poetry, especially in 'poems that stage dramas of embarrassing likeness making' amongst which we might consider 'Large Bad Picture' with its troubled portrayal of an unsettling picture.²¹ White is not primarily interested in 'expressions of shame in lyric or even shame about lyric'.²² Nevertheless, what I take from her critique is an interest in showing how shame operates and is manifested in the metaphoric and metonymic use of shades of pink.

In 'Large Bad Picture', we are caught with the viewer in a 'motionless' scene, frozen in a moment of time wherein, as the final stanza shows, nothing moves—or, more accurately, those things that do move, such as the 'rolling sun', are caught in a ceaseless cycle of repetition without any real progress:

In the pink light
the small red sun goes rolling, rolling,
round and round and round at the same height
in perpetual sunset, comprehensive, consoling.

Like in 'A Drunkard', the metaphor represents the speaker's inability to break free of traumatic childhood memories. There is something alarming both aesthetically and affectively about the saturated pink sky and the small, angry ('rolling, rolling') red sun which, like the Salem Fire that 'burned all night' in 'A Drunkard', permits no escape. The red sun against a pink sky provides an apt metaphor for the speaker/

18 The inadvertent flushing, or blushing, that we see in 'A Drunkard'—transposed onto the landscape but at heart a sign of the child's response to her circumstances—is a visible response to moral transgression. See W. Ray Crozier and Peter J. de Jong (eds), *The Psychological Significance of the Blush* (Cambridge, 2012), xi.

19 Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The 'Lyric' Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 57.

20 White, *Shame*, 2.

21 White, *Shame*, 83.

22 White, *Shame*, 25.

child for whom the domestic arrangements of this particular home (suggesting one of several extended family houses in which Bishop spent part of her unsettled childhood) offer little by way of comfort or consolation. The speaker is caught in perpetual recollection, ‘remembering’, as the first word of the poem explains, both the ‘Large Bad Picture’, and the site of childhood trauma and shame, frozen in livid colour against a backdrop of startling ‘pink light’ (13–4).

For Itten, the juxtaposition of red against pink ‘acts with quiet, extinguishing heat’.²³ This seemingly contradictory effect encompasses the aesthetic of the poem with its still sky, its view of a ship’s ‘spars like burnt match-sticks’ (stanza four)—again anticipating a metaphor from ‘A Drunkard’ of the ‘Blackened boards, shiny black like black feathers – | pieces of furniture, parts of boats’ (stanza two)—and its closing, if rather sceptical, moment of stasis: ‘Apparently they have reached their destination’. And although the final words of this stanza seek, and indeed urge, consolation, nothing about the preceding lines offers this. Instead the strictures of the rhyme (*abcb* in all but the first and seventh stanzas) and the relentless repetitions (‘crying, crying’, ‘rolling, rolling’ and ‘round and round and round’) exacerbate the sense of constriction. What stays with us at the poem’s end is the insistent sound of ‘crying, crying’ which anticipates the image of the child stranded at the window in ‘A Drunkard’ as she ‘called and called’ for the mother who does not come. ‘Large Bad Picture’ is a poem about composition, about the visual representation of a scene with a foreground and background, both carefully framed. It uses colour emphatically to trouble or upset what we see, to make us think again about the relation between objects and to say something about the subject’s own position as mediator of the poem’s meaning. Pink here is the backdrop, the source of uncertainty (anxiety and pleasure) and the catalyst which enables other colours to act.

Similarly, in ‘Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance’ from Bishop’s next collection, *A Cold Spring* (1955), a glimpse of pink towards the end of this stubbornly monochromatic poem about the study of an illustrated Bible, alerts us that something is not quite right or is about to change (57–8).²⁴ The ‘serious, engravable’ compendium, presented in ‘stippled gray’, shades into ‘white-and-blue’ at the end of the long opening section and then leaps into colour as the mind’s eye shifts from the pages of the book to ‘glimpses from travel held in memory’.²⁵ Is it too much to liken this to the sudden move from black and white into Technicolor film in the 1930s, including in the famous scene in *The Wizard of Oz* from 1939 where the monotone landscape gives way to the vivid colours of Oz?²⁶ Here are ‘red-dish’ goats, implicitly green ‘weeds’, and the yellows and oranges of the ‘butter-and-eggs’ plant (the yellow toadflax). Each makes a vivid impression. But as the painstaking description continues, the sight becomes increasingly disturbing. Here are ‘rotting hulks’, ‘pockmarked prostitutes’ and finally, ‘what frightened me most of all: | A

23 Itten, *Art of Colour*, 134.

24 For an illustration of the family Bible to which the poem possibly refers, see Sandra Barry’s post <<http://elizabethbishopcentenary.blogspot.com/2010/07/nova-scotia-connection-bulmer-family.html>> accessed 1 March 2019.

25 Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge, 1991), 132.

26 For more on the history of Technicolor, see Richard W. Haines, *Technicolour Movies: The History of Dye Transfer Printing* (Jefferson, NC, 1993).

holy grave, not looking particularly holy' and 'open to every wind from the pink desert'. The pink seems particularly lurid—a perception that is confirmed by the ensuing description of the 'gritty, marble trough . . . half-filled with dust' (lines 59, 62).

The short closing stanza of the poem turns away from these vivid hues and back towards the monochrome palette of the opening lines and the pages of the Bible, towards images of 'unbreathing flame, | colorless, sparkless' and finally, as though leeches of all light, and thus of any colour, to the final image of the speaker or speakers who 'looked and looked our infant sight away'.²⁷ As Bonnie Costello argues, this is an 'antithetical' image, signalling both the perpetuation of the gaze and its curtailment.²⁸ What we also see here is an example of the 'shame dynamic' that White's *Lyric Shame* describes. The child wants to look; wants to see what is otherwise occluded or proscribed. 'Why couldn't we have seen [?]', the final stanza asks. At the same time, the poem recognizes that with insight (knowledge, experience) comes the loss of innocence. If we give in to a (shameful) desire to 'look and look', we paradoxically lose the clarity and purity of 'infant sight'. The subtle but nevertheless relentless use of the past tense in this poem suggests that the Fall has already taken place; the viewer is already knowing, and all is already known.²⁹

In another poem, 'Love Lies Sleeping', first collected in *North and South*, the colour pink again indicates that something is, or is about to go, awry (18–19). This early poem is one of several over Bishop's lifetime to suggest the alienating properties of the urban streetscape (in this case, the architecture of New York where Bishop lived intermittently from 1934 when she graduated from Vassar College, through to 1936/1937 when she left for a trip to Europe). The poem opens at daybreak with a view from a city window. In stanza two, the speaker rhetorically summons the 'daylight' to:

put out the neon shapes
that float and swell and glare
down the gray avenue between the eyes
in pinks and yellows, letters and twitching signs.

In an unexpected reworking of Homer's metaphor of the 'rosy fingered dawn' (and in a construction which recalls the 'pink and the gray' of the Vassar colours), pink is identified with night rather than with day. Sunrise, as it approaches, is summoned in order to subdue rather than illuminate the garish synthetic pinks of the neon signs. The 'neon shapes' and 'twitching signs' refer to the still-new neon technology, also known as electric fire, then flourishing in cities such as New York. The effect is threatening. The uncanny shapes 'swell and glare', the grey avenue seems to punch the viewer between the eyes with its lurid colours, and the 'twitching' signs

27 Colour is a product or feature of light: 'Physically speaking, objects have no colour. When white light – by which we mean sunlight – strikes the surface of an object, the latter, according to its molecular constitution will absorb certain wave lengths, or colours, and reflect others' (Itten, *Art of Colour*, 124). Bishop had read Newton's *Optics* (which identifies the visible spectrum) and would thus have been aware of this effect (*Prose*, 416).

28 Costello, *Questions*, 137.

29 Similarly, in the closing lines of 'At the Fishhouses', the acquisition of 'knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown' (62–4).

suggest a body contorted by an electric shock. The poem later refers to the ‘Danger’ signs in an industrial plant and to ‘hairs bristling | on backs of necks’. A similar charge, this time natural instead of synthetic, features in a rather later poem, set in Brazil, ‘Electrical Storm’, where a lightning strike produces ‘One pink flash; | then hail, the biggest size of artificial pearls’ (98).

What the ‘twitching’ and ‘glar[ing]’ signs, picked out in pinks and yellows, tell us is that all is not well.³⁰ The colour and the warning are repeated towards the end of the poem (stanza 13) where the speaker imagines the relationships between a host of lovers (‘queer cupids of all persons getting up’) and urges a curious, inverted, kind of punishment: ‘Scourge them with roses only’. The figure of cupid in contemporary popular culture would likely have been figured in the same shades of pink and yellow as we saw in stanza three (see also the image of the cupid, or ‘Love’, in the later poem, ‘Three Valentines’: ‘See, up there, pink and plump and smug in sashes, | The little bastard grin’ (223)). Cartoon cupids featured in print advertisements for products such as Lux Soap (with Mae West) and Jergen’s Lotions throughout the time this poem was written. Bishop’s rather later collage, ‘Anjinhos’, which commemorates ‘the drowning of a young girl in Rio de Janeiro’ uses rows of paper cut-outs of girl angels rendered in pink and yellow and mixed up with sand and beach detritus.³¹ In the poems, the cupids are purposefully qualified; they are ‘queer’ and ‘bastard’, and their punishment—scourging with roses—conveys an equally disturbed, and disturbing, confluence of romance (the roses) and pain (the implied thorns). The effect is to cast sexuality and specifically queer sexuality in an ominous, pinkish light.

Another daybreak poem from the same period, ‘Roosters’, similarly establishes an early morning scene which is full of threat (36–40). The poem opens ‘At four o’clock | in the gun-metal blue dark’ and describes the fight to the death of pairs of roosters. Like in ‘The Map’, the colour pink silently delineates the boundaries of the territory wherein each yard or henhouse is marked by a weather vane in the form of a ‘tin rooster’. The cumulative effect, as stanzas 13 and 14 show, is like one of ‘Rand McNally’s’ maps (Rand McNally was a publisher of geography text books, road atlases and maps) punctured by:

glass-headed pins,
oil-golds and copper greens,
anthracite blues, alizarins,

Alizarin is a red/purple compound used in the manufacture of the pigment Rose Madder. The allusion to ‘alizarins’ thus gives us an initial flash of pinkish red which joins other reddish hues (the flare of a match in stanza four, for example) to punctuate the unrelenting blue, black and grey of the background and to give it a jolt of something animate, revealing and perhaps even sexual. What the speaker gradually makes out against the gloomy backdrop are various shades of pink, orange and red: the roosters’ ‘Raw throats’ (stanza 10), ‘rusty iron sheds | and fences made from old bedsteads’ (11), a ‘crown of red’ and ‘fighting blood’ (20), then the ‘first flame

30 According to Itten, yellow is ‘the brightest and lightest colour’ and ‘pertains symbolically to understanding, knowledge’ (*Art of Colour*, 132). It contrasts sharply with violets and pinks.

31 Benton, *Exchanging*, 50–1.

feather' and later, and more explicitly still, 'bloodied feathers' (22, 24). This is a deeply disturbing revelation; a primal scene of violent defloration rendered inescapable by the relentless triple rhymes. The whole is set against the 'low light' of morning where 'lines of pink cloud in the sky' begin to appear (40, 42). These 'lines of pink cloud' bring to mind the folk adage 'red sky at night, shepherd's delight; red sky in the morning, shepherd's warning' (see also the 'windshield flashing pink, | pink glancing off of metal' in 'The Moose').³² In each case, the colour pink instils a sense of deep foreboding.

III. VAGUELY ROSELIKE

Bishop's ambivalence about pink and the associations that it accrues is sometimes manifested in the metonym of the rose. The 1937 poem, 'Cirque d'Hiver', is an early example (32). 'Cirque d'Hiver' explicitly references the work of early surrealist painter Giorgio de Chirico (perhaps his 1935 painting, 'Horses of Tragedy') and implicitly invokes Alexander Calder and his kinetic 'Circus' from 1926–1931.³³ 'Calder's Circus' was a work of moving art which Calder designed and performed to friends in Paris in the late 1920s and early 1930s.³⁴ There is no evidence that Bishop saw it in performance but she lived in Paris in 1937 and mixed in artistic circles with her travelling companion, Margaret Miller, who was later to work as a curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Bishop herself was to become a friend and collector of Calder's work in later years.³⁵

In 'Cirque d'Hiver', we are introduced to a little mechanical horse with a ballerina balancing on its back; her skirt is 'stitched' with 'artificial roses' and tinsel, and on her head as she 'poses' is 'another spray of artificial roses' (stanza two). Her femininity, which is also her artifice, are overdetermined by the decoration and by the rhyme.³⁶ The repetition mimics the motion of the woman as she revolves round and round the circus ring before our very eyes. The subsequent null rhyme ('roses', / 'roses') undermines any attempt at authenticity on the part of the imitation-rose clad doll/woman. A similar effect is evident in the slightly later Key West poem, 'Jéronimo's House', where the hyphen and line-break in the description of the 'four pink tissue – | paper roses' emphasize their status as precious objects of care, but also—especially when read in relation to the 'perishable clapboard walls' at the

32 'The Moose' was drafted at the same time in the late 1940s even though it was not completed until 1972. Lorrie Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry* (New York, NY, 1992), 252–9.

33 Bishop may also have had the earlier Chirico painting, 'The Rose Tower' (1913), in mind. See also the 1939 poem, 'Pleasure Seas' for an allusion to pink in another painter, Georges Seurat: 'The pink Seurat bathers are dipping themselves in and out' (279).

34 Now held at the Whitney Museum of American Art <<http://collection.whitney.org/object/5488>> accessed 1 March 2019.

35 For more on Bishop and Calder, see Samuels, *Deep Skin*, 176–201 and 'Composing Motions: Elizabeth Bishop and Alexander Calder', in Angus Cleghorn, Bethany Hicok and Thomas Travisano (eds), *Elizabeth Bishop in the Twenty-First Century: Reading the New Editions* (Charlottesville, VA, 2012), 153–69.

36 See also 'The Table', one of Bishop's *Translations from the Portuguese* (1969), where the addressee's sister is referred to as 'a rose by name', 'rose-amelia', a 'more delicate flower | than any of the rose-roses' and a 'scattered rose' (145).

beginning of the poem and the threat of ‘hurricane’ at the end—as a measure of vulnerability (35).

‘Cirque d’Hiver’ establishes stylized gender roles. The emphatic pronouns ‘He’ or ‘his’ are used at the beginning of eight out of the 25 lines while the decorative ‘She’ features only once. At the exact centre of the poem (line three of the third of five five-line stanzas), the surface is stripped away and we see what the horse can only feel—an unexpected flash, or ‘pierc[ing]’ sight, of pink flesh:

He feels her pink toes dangle toward his back
 along the little pole
 that pierces both her body and her soul

and goes through his, and reappears below,
 under his belly as a big tin key.

Such a moment of intimacy comes as a shock in part because of the contrast between living skin and the artificiality of the costume and in part because, like in the poems discussed previously, the colour pink stands out against the monochrome background (the white-haired, black-eyed horse of stanza one and the ‘formal melancholy’ tones of Chirico’s subdued paintings). The ‘pink toes’ which ‘dangle . . . | along the little pole | that pierces’ her body provide a profoundly sexual image, conveying the erotic tension which joins the two figures (he pierces her body just as she dangles, or tangles, or absorbs him into hers). The fact that the toes ‘dangle toward’ rather than ‘against’ implies, though, that there is a tantalizing degree of separation; that, in a reworking of Keats’ ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, the longing is there but is destined to go unfulfilled—at least for as long as the two figures are caught in their endlessly circular rotation.³⁷

Lorrie Goldensohn, Lloyd Schwartz and Bonnie Costello all suggest that Bishop identifies with the horse in this poem. For Schwartz this is ‘among Bishop’s most obliquely revealing self-portraits.’³⁸ I would counter that it is the dancer with whom Bishop dares to side; it is the dancer’s pleasure and power that simultaneously trouble and fascinate her. And although Goldensohn has pointed to the phallic properties of the clockwork toy’s ‘big tin key’, is it not the ‘pink toes’ to which we should attend? What must it feel like, the poem asks, to be in this position, to be turning and turning on the horse’s back, caught in a perpetual present, dressed up in a costume of (pink) roses that—inadvertently or otherwise—cannot hide the vulnerable ‘pink toes’ as they ‘dangle’ helplessly towards the horse’s back, joining both? Might we not see these dangling toes as an example of automimicry ‘in which the appearance of the genital region [here the vulva] is depicted on another part of the body’?³⁹ The move from pink roses to exposed flesh is one to which Bishop returns—again in an

37 Costello notes the Keatsian debt in a number of other Bishop poems including ‘Large Bad Picture’ (*Questions*, 215–8).

38 Goldensohn, *Biography*, 56; Schwartz, ‘Elizabeth Bishop’s “Finished” Unfinished Poems’, in Cleghorn, Hicok and Travisano, *Twenty-First Century*, 54–65, 58; Costello, *Questions*, 50.

39 Jan A. R. A. M. van Hooff, ‘Colours of the Face: A Comparative Glance’, in Crozier and de Jong, *Psychological Significance*, 77–99, 81.

ekphrastic context—almost 30 years later in a draft fragment, 'After Bonnard', tentatively dated 1965, where:

The small shell-pink roses have opened so far . . . The pink is fleeing – it is more mauve this afternoon. – The centers stick up further and are faded, too, almost brown. Still delicate, but reaching out, out, thinner, vaguer, wearier – like those wide beautiful pale nipples I saw somewhere, on white, white and strong, but tired nevertheless, breasts.⁴⁰

Although at the end of 'Cirque d'Hiver', horse and speaker (like seal and observer in the later 'At the Fishhouses') meet each other's eyes, the more interesting, if overlooked, figure is that of the dancer, dressed in rose, showing her pink toes and now mired in shame or blushing pink:

The dancer, by this time, has turned her back.
He is the more intelligent by far.
Facing each other rather desperately –
his eye is like a star –
we stare and say, 'Well, we have come this far'.

The rose-hued dancer's confusion and mortification (she has 'turned her back') are central to the poem. Frans de Waal describes blushing, epitomized here by the 'turning' dancer 'turning' pink and 'turning' her back, as a mechanism that shows 'more than appeasement or subordination. It communicates to others that we are aware how our actions affect them'.⁴¹ Charles Darwin notes in his 1872 book, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* that 'blushing is the most peculiar and the most human of all expressions' (Bishop, we know, was a keen reader of Darwin's work).⁴² The horse cannot experience or show shame, hence his frank, fearless gaze at the reader. The human (the dancer) can, hence her refusal or inability to show her face. This is a crucial point; one that shows Bishop troubling the boundaries between women and men, humans and animals, animate and inanimate objects, the observer and the observed, and pushing to the limit—to her own limit, even—the 'initially startling' insight that, as Elspeth Probyn notes in connection with the work of psychologist and pioneer of affect theory, Silvan Tomkins, 'interest and shame are intimately connected'.⁴³ The point recalls the closing of 'Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance' with its confession that 'we looked and looked our infant sight away' (57–8). The turning away of the dancer in 'Cirque d'Hiver' provides an example of Tomkins' shame-humiliation affect and a means of self-protection: "The innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy. Such a barrier might arise because one is suddenly looked at by another who is strange; or because one wishes to look at, or commune with,

40 Bishop, *Edgar*, 346.

41 'Foreword', in Crozier and de Jong, *Psychological Significance*, xi–xii, xii.

42 Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (Cambridge, 2009), 310. See also Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art: Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux (New York, NY, 1994), 257, 544 and Susan Rosenbaum, 'Bishop and the Natural World', in Angus Cleghorn and Jonathan Ellis (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop* (Cambridge, 2014), 62–78, 71.

43 Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis, MN, 2005), ix.

another person but suddenly cannot because s/he is strange'. Moreover, Tomkins continues, it might 'arise as a consequence of discouragement after having tried and failed, and then lowered one's head in apparent "defeat"'.⁴⁴ The poem evokes something of the fascination with, which is also the fear of, being exposed. We might also read this poem, in White's terms, as a meta-discursive evaluation of lyric shame, or of the 'dynamic tensions' which exist between expression and 'a kind of self-repression'.⁴⁵ It is this position with which Bishop identifies and which is also the primary impulse of 'Pink Dog', the poem to which we will turn in closing.

The rose as a problematic metaphor for feelings of shame, desire and exposure recurs in poems written a little later in Key West including 'Cootchie' and 'Faustina, or Rock Roses' (46; 70–2). In the former, the colour of the 'pink wax' roses to which we are introduced in stanza two, seems particularly resonant. The pinkness is deployed, deeply ironically, to 'mark' the loss of Miss Lula's (black) servant, the 'Cootchie' of the title. The form of the poem serves to exacerbate the irony while the tight rhyme scheme (*abcbdeac*) coupled with the rapid and often contrapuntal metre (with dactyls, spondees and anapaests providing a rhythm which refuses to stay *en pointe*) both emphasize and undermine the position of the bereaved mistress. The poem opens by establishing relationships of colour, race and power or possession: 'Cootchie, Miss Lula's servant, lies in marl, | black into white she went'. 'Marl' describes a light grey-coloured rock (see also 'The Bight', written in Key West in the same period, which observes: 'how sheer the water is. | White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare' (59)). 'Black' refers to Cootchie and 'white' in this immediate context is the sea, while also reminding us of the relationship between black servant and white (pink?) mistress which forms the larger frame of the poem. The fundamental connection between black and white is reiterated in the final lines of the first stanza where 'The skies were egg-white for the funeral | and the faces sable'.

In such a context, the pink wax flowers, laid out in lines by or on behalf of the white mistress, seem singularly inappropriate. At the beginning of stanza two:

Tonight the moonlight will alleviate
the melting of the pink wax roses
planted in tin cans filled with sand
placed in a line to mark Miss Lula's losses.

There is something quite complicated going on here. The black woman, rendered in shades of grey, has been committed to the white sea. Her death is marked by 'pink wax roses' whose (necessary) decay is stopped first by the cold moonlight and then by the fire-retardant sand.⁴⁶ The roses themselves might be read as an emblem of Miss Lula's 'losses' (emotional, practical, even financial) as much as a commemoration of Cootchie's life. Pink in this poem, then, although harnessed to mark the passing of the black woman, stands in for the power of whiteness. It also suggests a

44 'The Varieties of Shame and its Magnification', in *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan Tomkins*, ed. E. Virginia Demos (Cambridge, 2010), 397–410, 399.

45 White, *Lyric*, 28, 51.

46 Bishop's Key West painting, 'Grave with Floral Wreaths', fills the page with the same shades of white, pink and sandy grey. Benton, *Exchanging*, 28–9.

degree of discomfort on Miss Lula's and even on the speaker's part. In this regard, the pink wax roses, caught in the chill moonlight, register Miss Lula's shame and unease as much as her grief.

Another poem from the same period and place, expressing a similar ambivalence as 'Cootchie' and drawing on some of the same motifs as 'Cirque d'Hiver', is 'Faustina, or Rock Roses'.⁴⁷ Again, the poem traces the uneasy relationship between white mistress and black maid or servant.⁴⁸ Again, the rose is used both to suggest and to undermine the promise of romantic love. In 'Faustina', the 'vaguely roselike | flower formations' that hang above, or are carved on the headboard of, the 'white woman's' bed in the first stanza are not even, quite, roses but, instead, an approximation. They are not roses, they are 'flower formations'; they are not roses, they are 'roselike'; they are not, in fact, wholly 'roselike' but only 'vaguely' so. Their inauthenticity troubles our sense of their signification and of the relationship between the two women at the heart of the poem. There is a kind of distraction—a Freudian dispersal avoidance—at play. The poem is so busy applying layers of description that the object at its heart is purposefully hidden. The scene is one of decay and the mood is of generalized despair. Nothing is quite as it should be. Other colours are used, often in conjunction with the implied pink of the roses, in order to exemplify this sense of unease. In stanza three, for example, the speaker ('the visitor') observes 'two glow-worms | burning a drowned green'. This is another contradictory image (the glow worms are both burning and drowning just as we saw the melting pink candles meeting the white sea in the cold moonlight of 'Cootchie'). As Itten and Kandinsky note, green is a complementary colour to pink casting each shade into relief. Bishop exploits the contrast in several of her own paintings, for example, 'Begonias and Coleus'.⁴⁹ A similar effect is achieved in stanza five where a 'pallid palm-leaf fan' gives way to 'white disordered sheets | like wilted roses'. The image returns us to the 'vaguely roselike | flower-formations' of the opening stanza and again connotes decay, decrepitude (hence 'wilted') and a reversal or inversion of our expectations of the relationship between the women.

The metaphor recurs in the later (c.1963) draft, 'Vague Poem (*Vaguely love poem*)' where 'rose rocks' (a geological formation) and 'rock roses' (the plant *cistacaea*) are used, at first interchangeably, to suggest a confusion or inversion of forms: in stanza one, 'They talked a lot of "Rose Rocks" | or maybe "Rock Roses"'.⁵⁰ By the end of the poem, the memory of the rose rocks, or rock roses, has given way to something else altogether, a vision of a lover's body from the nipples to the clitoris rendered in shades of pink and in subtle degrees of softness (flesh, roses) and hardness (rocks, crystals):

47 Goldensohn, *Biography*, 74–5 provides a useful reading and an account of the context. See also Bethany Hicok, 'Becoming a Poet: From North to South', in Cleghorn and Ellis, *Cambridge Companion*, 111–23.

48 Kirstin Zona discusses the racial relationships in the poem in 'Bishop: Race, Class, and Gender', in Cleghorn and Ellis, *Cambridge Companion*, 49–61.

49 Benton, *Exchanging*, 35.

50 Bishop, *Edgar*, 152–3.

Just now, when I saw you naked again,
I thought the same words: rose-rock, rock-rose . . .

Rose-rock, unformed, flesh beginning, crystal by crystal,
clear pink breasts and darker, crystalline nipples,
rose-rock, rose-quartz, roses, roses, roses,
exacting roses from the body,
and the even darker, accurate, rose of sex – ⁵¹

There is an immediacy to these lines, hence ‘Just now’ at the beginning of the final stanza. The poem is characterized by movement and stasis, playing on the possibilities of the verbs (to rise, to rock) even as it establishes their roots in objects (roses and rocks). The motion is complemented by chiasmic patterns of flickering dark and light, shifting from ‘darker, crystalline’ through ‘clear pink’ back to ‘darker, accurate’ tones, and by the dialectic of protean shapes (‘Rose-rock, unformed, flesh beginning’) and established forms (the ‘exacting’ and ‘accurate’ rose). As Maureen McLane has so elegantly noted in her essay ‘My Elizabeth Bishop/(My Gertrude Stein)’, there is an echo here of Stein’s style and a perhaps unexpectedly shared sensibility.⁵²

The images of organic and mineral pinks also recall the work of Bishop’s close contemporary, the artist Georgia O’Keeffe. O’Keeffe used emphatic dark pinks and organic images to suggest female sexuality and deployed pink roses in sometimes unexpected places, for example in ‘Horse’s Head with Pink Rose’, a painting that was reproduced in *Life* magazine’s 1938 profile of the artist. See also her ‘Horse’s Skull with Pink Rose’ from the same period (1931). The image of the rose returns one last time in the final stanza of Bishop’s ‘Faustina, or Rock Roses’ where the visiting speaker stands to leave and ‘awkwardly proffers her bunch | of rust-perforated roses’—a blighted bouquet which picks up the threads of previous allusions and also other poems on the theme. William Blake’s ‘The Sick Rose’ (‘O rose thou art sick’) is an obvious palimpsest suggesting something of the malaise at the poem’s heart.⁵³

The metaphor of the sick, blown, ‘wilted’ or ‘rust-perforated’ rose seems particularly to have caught Bishop’s imagination. It appears, too, perhaps unexpectedly, in ‘The Fish’, which was written in Key West at around the same time (43). Here the image of the desiccated rose establishes the longevity of the fish and casts it in a particular relationship with the speaker. When we are first introduced to this ‘tremendous fish’, we are told that its ‘skin hung in strips | like ancient wallpaper’ and, to affirm the point, that its ‘pattern of darker brown | was like wallpaper’. Not satisfied with these similes, Bishop digs a little deeper, reeling in the memory of a particular wallpaper to which the fish might be likened: this wallpaper had ‘shapes like full-blown roses | stained and lost through age’. The pink, like the ‘rust-perforated’ rose in the previous poem, shades through red into brown, hinting at a relationship between pink (the colour of life and love), rust (the colour of decay) and a ‘darker’

51 Victoria Harrison offers an incisive reading of this poem in *Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetics of Intimacy* (Cambridge, 1993), 203–5.

52 Maureen McLane, *My Poets* (New York, NY, 2012), 26–53.

53 For a useful example of Bishop quoting Blake—this time in the context of the poem, ‘Pink Dog’—see Bethany Hicok, *Elizabeth Bishop’s Brazil* (Charlottesville, VA, 2016), 119.

presumably pinkish 'brown' which in turn suggests menses. Note the references to the 'frightening gills, | fresh and crisp with blood' and the 'dramatic reds and blacks' of the fish's entrails a few lines later.⁵⁴ The image of the fish as fragment of stained wallpaper invokes domesticity (hence 'homely' in line nine) and the heavy chintzes of a lost age. It is a curious assignation for something as forceful and as animate as this tenacious fish. Bishop seems to sense as much. And as she continues in her attempt to describe the fish, layering simile upon simile in a practice that is as likely to bury the object as to reveal it, she turns to another flower—this time one that seems better to capture the fish's life force. The fish has, she notes, a 'pink swim-bladder | like a big peony' (lines 32–3). The peony has long been associated with bashfulness, an identification confirmed by the fish's reluctance in the next lines to return the observer's gaze: 'I looked into his eyes | which were far larger than mine' but they only 'shifted a little, but not | to return my stare' (lines 34, 41–2). By likening the fish to a succession of pink flowers (first the 'full-blown roses' then the peony) the speaker is able to dominate him. It is at this crucial point, when the fish bashfully averts its eyes (we recall the rose-bedecked dancer's unwillingness to meet the viewer's gaze in 'Cirque d'Hiver') that the speaker wins control. She moves on from here to catalogue the many and various ways in which the fish has been snagged or overpowered in the past before exercising her ultimate authority by summoning the full spectrum in the redemptive closing image, 'rainbow, rainbow, rainbow', and finally choosing to 'let the fish go'.

IV. FEEBLE PINKS AND WICKED TAILS

In the 1965 collection *Questions of Travel*, particularly in the first section's poems about Brazil, new shades of pink emerge from this unfamiliar terrain. In the opening poem, 'Arrival at Santos', the initial view from offshore gives us the 'greenery' we might have anticipated but this is leavened by splashes of 'feeble pink' paint on the warehouses that come into view as the speaker's boat draws near (87–8). Bishop's painting, 'Brazilian Landscape', similarly uses tiny flashes of pink earth in the distance and a stucco pink house in the centre to help animate the scene.⁵⁵ In the poem, 'Brazil, January 1, 1502', which otherwise overwhelms us with the intense greens, blues and olives of the scenery ('every square inch filling in with foliage'), it is the occasional glimpses of mauve and pink (flowers of 'purple, yellow, two yellows, pink') which convey the character of the landscape (89–90). A similar effect is achieved in the title poem, 'Questions of Travel', where trees on the side of the superabundant hillsides are 'gesturing | like noble pantomimists, robed in pink'. Why 'pantomimists', we might ask? Is Bishop herself 'gesturing' to the pantomime tradition wherein the central comic character, the dame, is played by a man in an exaggerated, and usually pink-clothed, caricature of femininity?

The greens and pinks of this Edenic backdrop soon give way to a rather more troubling depiction of a scene of gender confusion and sexual power.⁵⁶ In the long

54 Note also the blurring of white and red (blood) in Bishop's poem 'Trouvée' (172).

55 Benton, *Exchanging*, 63.

56 For an extended reading of this poem, see Eleanor Cook, *Elizabeth Bishop at Work* (Cambridge, 2016), 178–86.

central stanza, we are suddenly confronted with: ‘Sin: | five sooty dragons’. In a reworking of the creation story, the moment of the Fall—of the loss of innocence, of temptation and of punitive shame—is captured in the exchange between these semi-mythical creatures:

The lizards scarcely breathe; all eyes
are on the smaller, female one, back-to,
her wicked tail straight up and over,
red as a red-hot wire.

Here, like in ‘Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance’, the observer has ‘looked and looked [their] infant sight away’. The sexuality in this case is simultaneously passive (the female lizard is prey to the male lizards’ gaze) and active (hence her flamboyant, titillating, ‘wicked’ display). As we saw in the earlier ‘Love Lies Sleeping’ and the contemporaneous ‘Electrical Storm’, the flash of colour—the ‘red-hot wire’—brings with it a charge powerful enough to discomfort the viewer (it looks ‘red’ and it feels ‘red-hot’). The observation suggests an anxiety on Bishop’s part about unexpected displays of gender and of sexual desire, especially, as here, when it is unclear whether the display is given freely, coerced, or, worse still, instinctive and thus uncontrollable. With such revelation comes the risk of punishment. The post-Lapsarian setting is crucial, hence the reference to the ‘Christians, hard as nails’ at the beginning of the third and final stanza. The poem’s oblique epigraph (‘... embroidered nature . . . tapestried landscape’) from Kenneth Clark’s *Landscape into Art* (1949) sustains this reading. The allusion is to the description in the opening chapter of his book of the ‘Hortus Conclusus’, or ‘enchanted’ garden, which is typically portrayed as a symbol of the presence of the Virgin Mary. Clark’s chapter establishes the tone for Bishop’s encounter with the strange new environment of Brazil: ‘We are surrounded with things which we have not made and which have a life and structure different from our own: trees, flowers, grasses, rivers, hills, clouds’.⁵⁷

Most important among these mid-period poems is ‘The Armadillo’ (101–2). Here the colour pink assumes a more central figurative importance. In this hugely influential poem, written in 1956–1957 and retrospectively dedicated to Bishop’s close friend, Robert Lowell, Bishop traces a magical moment in Brazil.⁵⁸ The scene is set at:

the time of year
when almost every night, the frail, illegal fire balloons appear.
Climbing the mountain height.

The balloons are launched by the locals as offerings to a saint. As they climb into the sky (stanza three), they become indistinguishable from the stars and planets, or

57 Clark, *Landscape into Art* (London, 1949), 1.

58 See Bishop’s letter to Lowell of 2 August 1965: ‘I finally decided to put your name under the armadillo poem, since you have liked it’. *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, ed. Thomas Trivisano and Saskia Hamilton (London, 2008), 582–3. Lowell had written to Bishop on 9 February 1959 that he had dedicated ‘Skunk Hour’ to her (*Words*, 287).

'the tinted ones'. The ritual is fraught with risk. When one of the balloons fails, it falls to earth like an incendiary device, startling a 'pair // of owls', and unseating them from their nest in a way that, as with the lizards in the previous poem, seems simultaneously violent and exposing. What we see as they flee is:

...their whirling black and white
 stained bright pink underneath, until
 they shrieked up out of sight.

The owls, possibly the Mottled or Striped Owls (*strix virgata* or *asio clamator*) which were native to the region in which Bishop lived, are two of the 23 species known in Brazil. Owls were at this time, 'all over Brazil, especially in countryside areas' regarded as 'bad omens'. The violent disruption of their domestic order seems to bear out the superstition.⁵⁹ The phrase 'stained bright pink underneath' takes us back through the dark brown pink of 'The Fish' to the 'dangling pink toes' of 'Cirque d'Hiver' and beyond that to the 'rose-red' reflection of firelight on the mother's dress in 'A Drunkard'. It also echoes a strikingly similar image in 'At the Fishhouses', written in Nova Scotia in the summer of 1946, where a capstan (a device for winding rope) displays 'melancholy stains, like dried blood, | where the iron-work has rusted' (62). 'The Armadillo' does not specify whether the 'bright pink' is the reflection of the lantern flames, or the unwitting exposure of soft underbelly, or evidence of singed flesh. Nevertheless, the image suggests something that is at once dirty ('stained'), compelling ('bright pink') and furtive ('underneath'). The whole implies guilt (note the appearance of the 'illegal' fire balloons) and shame (in stanza two, 'the paper chambers flush' or blush) but also complicity. As van Hooff explains of the function of the blush: 'changes in the red hues of the face and other areas of naked skin . . . are informative about the state of the "sender". Moreover, the signals are noticed by "receivers" and have an influence on their behaviours'. That is to say, blushing has been 'adaptively tuned to convey social messages'.⁶⁰ Again, the colour pink is a sign of the vulnerability of the object, the culpability of the subject and the relationship between them.

There is something unseemly about this moment—about the dirt, the bright pink which seems as vulgar as the 'illegal fire balloons', and the self-consciously coy euphemism, 'underneath'.⁶¹ This is an astonishing scene of unbidden but unforgettable revelation. Like an imprint on the retina when exposed to a sudden flash of light, the image 'stained bright pink underneath' persists as the poem proceeds. We see it again in the glimpse in the next (eighth) stanza of a 'glistening armadillo' which also flees, 'rose-flecked, head down, tail down'. The armadillo, unlike the owls, and unlike the lizard of 'Brazil, January 1, 1502', is able to hide its genitals under its tail and thus to

59 Jose Motta, Jr, Marco Granzinolli and Ana Braga, 'Owls of Brazil', in *Neotropical Owls: Diversity and Conservation*, ed. Paula L. Enriquez (San Cristóbal de Las Casas, 2015), 115–69.

60 van Hooff, 'Colours', 85–6.

61 Goldensohn suggests a comparison between 'Cirque d'Hiver' and the draft poem, 'The Soldiers and the Slot Machine' (Bishop, *Edgar*, 57) especially with reference to 'the awful underneath' which is usually hidden from view. See 'Bishop's Posthumous Publications' in Cleghorn and Ellis, *Cambridge Companion*, 183–96, 194–5.

avoid placing them on embarrassing public display. This particular animal could be one of several types found in the region, including the Long-nosed Armadillo (*dasypus septemcinctus*) and the Three-banded Armadillo (*tolypeutes tricinctus*); the former are notable for having hair 'sparsely scattered on the underparts' which they protect by curling up 'as much as possible'.⁶² The latter are the only species that can 'completely enclose themselves by rolling into a sphere'. In either case, the armadillo is only 'flecked' with shame; it has the armour that the owls lack, and thus it manages to escape. We, though, are left with the lingering horror of that sudden moment of the owls' awful, forced, act of self-exposure.⁶³

'The Armadillo', as we have noted, was retrospectively dedicated to Lowell who had previously dedicated his 1957 poem, 'Skunk Hour', to Bishop. Lowell was later to explain in his 1962 essay, 'On Skunk Hour', that his poem was 'modelled' on Bishop's 'much better' one, which he had 'heard her read and had later carried around with me'. Both poems, as he points out, use the same 'short line stanzas', and both 'start with drifting description and end with a single animal'.⁶⁴ Lowell's poem does not use the colour pink, but it does pick up Bishop's image of the rust-red stain (in stanza three of 'Skunk Hour', 'A red fox stain covers Fox Hill') and it shares an important subtext: the threat (which is also the thrill) of exposure.⁶⁵ It invites, in other words, the shame which 'The Armadillo' imbues in its own readers, through stanza five's image of the speaker as peeping Tom: 'my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull; | I watched for love-cars'. Almost two decades later, Seamus Heaney's poem 'Skunk' (from the 1979 collection, *Field Work*) invokes both of these predecessors.⁶⁶ It uses the same stanza structure and short lines and it features, this time at the beginning instead of the end, the image of a single animal. Heaney, like Lowell, chooses not to explicitly use the colour pink, although the soft orange hues in stanza two recall the rust-red tones of Lowell's and Bishop's poems. What he does do, though, is implicitly gesture to that moment of exposure, the flash of pink which is seen in both of its predecessors. The 'stained bright pink' suddenly glimpsed amidst the black and white tail feathers of Bishop's poem becomes at the end of Heaney's poem, the covert image of the speaker's wife's body (her 'bottom'?) as she bends over to retrieve her nightgown: 'Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer | For the black plunge-line nightdress'. The desire to look and the burning pink shame—or thrill—at having seen lie at the heart of this poem, just as they do of Lowell's and Bishop's.

V. PINK DOG

Another even more unsettling moment of exposure dominates the late poem, 'Pink Dog', first published in *The New Yorker* on 26 February 1979. Set in Rio de Janeiro, the poem's 13 three-line stanzas trace the unexpected sight of a hairless 'pink dog' as it 'trot[s] across the avenue' (212–3). The effect is not unlike one that Kandinsky

62 R. M. Novak, *Walker's Mammals of the World* (Baltimore, MD, 2018), 580, 597.

63 See Barbara Page, 'Home, Wherever That May Be: Poems and Prose of Brazil', in Cleghorn and Ellis, *Cambridge Companion*, 124–40 for an account of the relationship between 'The Armadillo' and an earlier unfinished poem, 'The Owl's Journey' (Bishop, *Edgar*, 91).

64 Robert Lowell, *Collected Prose*, ed. Robert Giroux (London, 1987), 227.

65 Robert Lowell, 'Skunk Hour', *Life Studies* (London, 1959), 103–4.

66 Seamus Heaney, *Fieldwork* (London, 1970), 48.

describes when imagining the sight of a red horse: "The very words put us in another atmosphere. The impossibility of a red horse demands an unreal world. It is possible that this combination of colour and form will appeal as a freak."⁶⁷ In Bishop's poem, it is the sudden and—yes, freakish—flash of naked pink canine which startles us, compels our gaze and powerfully steers the narrative. For this reason, I want to suggest that 'Pink Dog' represents the culmination and supreme expression of Bishop's preoccupation with pink.

In the opening lines, the incongruous pinkness of the 'Pink Dog' of the title is amplified by the glare of the sunlight and by the contrast with the striking blue backdrop of the sky: "The sun is blazing and the sky is blue. | Umbrellas clothe the beach in every hue". This is, at first, an idyllic scene (as Fiona Green has shown, many of Bishop's Brazil poems including, we might add, this one, appeared first in *The New Yorker* alongside glossy advertisements for the seductions of foreign vacations).⁶⁸ The tetrameter lines and reassuringly complete rhymes ('blue',/'hue') suggest that all is well with the world.⁶⁹ Our complacency is radically disrupted, though, by the sudden turn in line three where the opening epithet, 'Naked', and the accusatory apostrophe, 'you': 'Naked, you trot across the avenue', evoke in us the self-same shock as must have been experienced by the speaker. Moreover, as the poem proceeds it becomes apparent that the 'dog' of the title is a troubling misnomer which seeks to hide, but in fact merely exacerbates, the fact that the dog is a bitch. Suddenly, the relentless rhymes seem oppressive, and the 'blazing' sun a metonym for the sense of burning shame that accompanies the act of witnessing this pitiful, exposed creature. It is unclear whether the dog's 'trot' is a nonchalant lope or a rush to flee the scene. The initial exclamation and emphatic superlative register her astonishment and momentary confusion as though experienced in real time (note the use of the present tense at this point in the poem): 'Oh, never have I seen a dog so bare! | Naked and pink, without a single hair'.

In stanza three, as though to calibrate and corroborate her own confusion, the speaker steps back a little to show us the 'startled' reaction of other onlookers who also 'draw back and stare', and then to provide something of the context which might help us make sense of this scene. This is an environment where the 'passersby' are, 'of course . . . mortally afraid of rabies', a city of slums (stanza four), of 'idiots, paralytics, parasites' and of drunks (stanzas six and seven). Which is more obscene, the poem asks, the pitiful pink dog or these signs of human deprivation? The context for 'Pink Dog', as Bethany Hicok has usefully explained, and as Elizabeth Neely has further elaborated in relation to the specifically Cariocan history, is a period during Carlos Lacerda's rule as Governor of Rio De Janeiro. Lacerda was an acquaintance of Bishop's partner, Lota, and in time, of Bishop too.⁷⁰ In 1962, in an attempt to rid the

67 Kandinsky, *Concerning*, 49. Note also Leslie Fiedler's observation that bald femininity disturbs our habitual perception of gender norms and thus seems freakish. *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York, NY, 1978), 143.

68 Fiona Green, 'Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil and the *New Yorker*', *Journal of American Studies*, 46 (2012), 803–30.

69 The setting and rhythm owe a debt, as George Monteiro and others have noted, to Vinícius de Moraes's 1962 pop song, 'The Girl from Ipanema'. See *Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil and After: A Poetic Career Transformed* (Jefferson, NC, 2012), 80.

70 Bethany Hicok, *Bishop's Brazil*, 75, 80, 97.

city of beggars and vagrants, his euphemistically named Beggars Recovery Service took to rounding up assumed miscreants and casting them into the river to drown.⁷¹ It is a horrifying situation, of which the sight of the ravaged, emaciated pink dog is but an emblem.

For Hicok, the poem is a 'brilliant political satire' which indicts Bishop's adopted country's 'poverty [and] murderous government'. Steven Axelrod, meanwhile, reads 'Pink Dog' as a sympathetic portrayal of 'Rio's homeless and hungry masses'. To George Monteiro, the dog itself serves as 'a metonym for the city's beggared poor'.⁷² All have a point. But I think that as well as looking outward at these particular social and political circumstances, Bishop's sympathies are turned inward, and that the immediate context serves first and foremost as a way of encoding the experience of feeling vulnerable, misunderstood, out of place and other as a white woman and as a lesbian in an unfamiliar culture. Renée Curry argues that although Bishop's poems and correspondence can be seen to focus attention on 'issues of alterity' this is often 'without attention to her own markings as a white person'.⁷³ I would counter that in this poem the opposite is the case and that it is precisely Bishop's bodily experience of whiteness that the sudden experience of this naked 'pink dog' reifies. The figure of the dog is a manifestation, writ naked and pink and turned object of public scrutiny, of her own sense of dislocation and isolation. In this respect, Lloyd Schwartz's observation, that 'it's an ugly hairless mongrel bitch with whom Bishop, with her "dog hair", clearly identifies', seems to me to be apposite.⁷⁴ Even so, I don't think that it is the hairlessness of the 'poor bitch' (stanza four) with which she has an affinity, it is the fact that the dog is, incongruously, 'naked and pink' (stanza two, my emphasis). And it is in spotting this strange sight that the speaker comes face to face with herself, with her own incongruity, her vulnerability and her blushing pinkness. These features are displaced onto and reflected back from the poor creature. The connotations of the epithet 'dog', signalling something worthless, surly or miserable, coupled with the cultural contempt reserved for the 'bitch', come into play. The sight of the pink dog represents a moment of epiphany akin to that in 'In the Waiting Room', a poem which I will discuss shortly. It is from this moment of mutual recognition (pink woman blushing at what she sees in the mirror image of the pink dog) that the poem draws its power.

Having experienced and shared the shock in stanzas two and three, the speaker then turns her attention and sympathy to the dog ('you are not mad') and seeks out redeeming points of identification including the observation: '[you] look intelligent' and, at the end of stanza four in what is surely a metaphor for the poet's art: '[you live] by your wits'. 'Pink Dog' recognizes the risks taken by those who appear different, those whose bodies, desires or sexuality do not conform to a norm (those who,

71 Hicok, *Bishop's Brazil*, 114–7; Elizabeth Neely, 'Cadeira Carioca: Bishop's 'Pink Dog' in its Brazilian Cultural Context', *South Central Review*, 31 (2014), 99–113, 106–7.

72 Hicok, *Bishop's Brazil*, 99, 117; Axelrod, 'Bishop, History, and Politics', in Cleghorn and Ellis, *Cambridge Companion*, 35–48, 42; Monteiro, *Brazil and After*, 75.

73 Renée Curry, *White Women Writing White: H. D., Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath and Whiteness* (Westport, CT, 2000), 75–6.

74 'Back to Boston', 152. Elsewhere, Schwartz describes the dog as 'her chilling mirror image, another creature out of place among the Cariocan revelers'. 'Elizabeth Bishop, "Sonnet"', <<https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/poetry/soundings/bishop.htm>> accessed 16 March 2019.

from certain perspectives, are viewed as degenerate, hence the oblique reference in the penultimate stanza: 'They say that Carnival's degenerating | – radios, Americans, or something'). The pink dog and her counterpart, the speaker/observer, are both vulnerable to the gaze of others, at risk of vilification or scapegoating and under pressure to hide their difference, or their pinkness, under the guise of a 'fantasia'. In the final stanza, 'A depilated dog would not look well. | Dress up! Dress up and dance at Carnival!'

Crucial to the poem, as we saw in 'Cirque d'Hiver', 'At the Fishhouses', and others, is the narrative of seeing and being seen, or of 'look[ing] and look[ing] our infant sight away' as 'Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance' has it. This is a persistent thread in 'Pink Dog', from the initial denial, 'never have I seen' to the judgmental 'the passersby draw back and stare' in stanza two to direct accusation in stanza five: 'Didn't you know?' and the final admission in the closing stanza that the dog does not 'look well'. These images are matched by metaphors of concealment (the dog's 'hidden' puppies in stanza four, the larger context of the covert murder of Rio's beggars, the images of disguise in stanzas 10, 11 and 13). In each of these poems, we join with the speaker in acquiring knowledge, and with it a sense of sin and a profoundly unsettling feeling of culpability.

In closing, I would like to look again at the opening lines of 'Pink Dog' with particular attention to the way in which they take us from the puzzling 'Pink Dog' of the title, past an image of the 'blazing sun' to the sight of umbrellas lining the beach (presumably hiding the pink and brown and 'naked' flesh of the sunbathers below) and from there to the interloping 'pink dog': 'Naked, you trot across the avenue'. And I would like to suggest that this movement from innocent pleasure to horrified cognizance mirrors the hot wave of horror and shame in a contemporaneous poem, 'In the Waiting Room' (179–81). In the latter, the dentist's 'waiting room' in which the young girl awaits her aunt is described as 'bright | and too hot' (like the dazzling beach lit by a 'blazing sun'?). This is an awful but entirely apt setting for that adrenaline-filled moment when the girl, flicking through the pages of the *National Geographic*, lands on some pictures of 'black, naked women' with 'awful hanging breasts' and in that moment realizes her gender and her destiny.⁷⁵ In 'In the Waiting Room', what is not said is as important as what is. The unspoken horror rests in the un-named, but nevertheless powerfully present, 'naked and pink' bodies of the other patients, carefully hidden under 'shadowy gray knees, | trousers and skirts and boots' and glimpsed only as 'different pairs of hands' or the gaping (pink?) mouth of the Aunt's 'oh! of pain' (180). Like the image of the woman's nightgown in Heaney's 'Skunk', the clothing operates as a fetish, drawing attention to and focusing desire on the hidden body. The moment of exposure in this poem (to the unspoken flashes of pink in the waiting room, and to the 'horrifying' breasts of the women featured in *National Geographic*) anticipate the same in 'Pink Dog'—the sight of the naked bitch, with its 'hanging teats' parading through the streets of an unfamiliar culture. Similarly, in 'In the Waiting Room', there is something horrifying about the unexpected and at first incomprehensible sight of 'A dead man slung on a pole | — 'Long

75 Schwartz dates it to July 1971. 'One Art: The Poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, 1971–1976', *Ploughshares*, 3 (1977), 30–52, 31.

Pig”, which I propose is analogous to the awful and equally unexpected sight of the ‘Pink Dog’ trotting across the street. In both cases, the speaker—with an almost visceral feeling of mortification—identifies with the object made abject, pitiful and finally and fatally exposed.

In ‘Pink Dog’, Bishop’s pink is spectacular—and all the more awful for it. In ‘In the Waiting Room’, which in turn looks back to ‘The Armadillo’, ‘Cirque d’Hiver’, ‘A Drunkard’, and ‘Large Bad Picture’, amongst others, the covert truth, as dreadfully and shamefully revealed, is that Bishop herself is pink. In both of these late poems, the colour pink comes into its strength not only as a determining aesthetic but as a catalyst for and sign of a deep and abiding ambivalence about (white) femininity, sexuality and the temptations and risks of self-revelation. Elizabeth Bishop’s pink, then, is a profoundly resonant and highly suggestive hue. More than simply incidental or decorative, she deploys it to carefully judged effect, using shades of pink—often in contrast with other colours—to establish difference, to set the mood, and to draw the viewer’s attention to particular moments and motifs. As importantly, pink carries a set of historical, political, psychological and physiological associations which Bishop draws on in exploring and riskily, and shamefully exposing, an uncertain and often vulnerable subjectivity.

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