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Body My House

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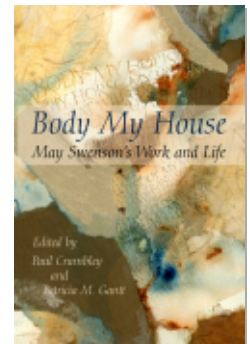
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MAY SWENSON AND ELIZABETH BISHOP

Kirstin Hotelling Zona

Writing about Elizabeth Bishop's treatment of sexuality, Lorrie Goldensohn observes that for Bishop, "to be personal meant to be misread, to be trapped within the conventional feminine" (62). I would reword this slightly: to be personal risks being misread as reinforcing the conventional feminine, a category that Bishop's poetry challenges consistently. I augment Goldensohn's important point in order to emphasize both the strategic element of Bishop's restraint and the degree to which this aspect is often elided when discussing Bishop's sexual poetics. Indeed, a methodological gap seems to be growing in Bishop critics between those who address her interrogations of self and those who focus on her depictions of sexual desire. While critics such as Langdon Hammer and Bonnie Costello assert Bishop's challenges to essentialist notions of identity, a pervasive tendency persists, especially among feminist critics, to read her sexual reserve according to the very standards of self-expression that underwrite those same essentialist ideals—standards that privilege the explicit over the indirect, as if the truth is something we can attain by proclaiming its presence.

May Swenson, an intimate correspondent of Bishop's and one of her most astute readers to date, struggled to reconcile exactly those aspects of Bishop's poetic that underpin this critical gap.¹ With this in mind, it is

1. Between their first meeting at Yaddo in the Fall of 1950 and Bishop's death in 1979, Bishop and Swenson exchanged over 260 letters. Like Marianne Moore, Swenson kept carbon copies of nearly every letter she wrote to Bishop, and for this reason the majority of their correspondence is extant. Swenson's carbons and Bishop's letters to Swenson are housed in the Special Collections of Olin Library at Washington University, St. Louis; all subsequent archival references in this

perhaps no surprise that the correspondence between Swenson and Bishop echoes so precisely the exchange between Bishop and Marianne Moore. Just as Bishop was both fascinated and frustrated by Moore's morality, so Swenson was intrigued and exasperated by Bishop's sexual reserve. Likewise, while Bishop's struggle to make sense of Moore traced the defining paradox of her mentor's poetic, Swenson's effort to understand Bishop charted a similar tension. Throughout their correspondence Swenson was often frustrated with her friend's "prudish ears" (MWW 252–53)—ears that bore a notable likeness to Moore's. Nevertheless, Swenson was inspired deeply by Bishop's ability to produce poems that are "exacting, flawless, and plain," poems that allow "no self indulgence."² Negotiating these ostensibly opposing aspects of Bishop's poems meant arriving at an understanding of the powers of self-restraint. While it is increasingly common to emphasize Bishop's honesty at the expense of her reserve, Swenson was determined to articulate the ways in which the two go hand-in-hand. In the process, however, Swenson needed to confront the conflict in her own poetry between, as she put it in "The Experience of Poetry in a Scientific Age," a "craving to get through . . . to things as they *are*" and her awareness that the world is always "*becoming*" (147).

Like Bishop and Moore, Swenson believed that explicitness often works against the process of revelation that poetry should engender: "the poetic experience is one of constant curiosity, skepticism, and testing—astonishment, disillusionment, renewed discovery, re-illumination. It amounts to a virtual compulsion to probe with the senses into the complex actuality of all things, outside and inside the self and to determine relationships between them" (Nemerov 148).

At the same time, Swenson implied that to emphasize only the self that is seeing instead of the thing being seen is to curtail the discoveries that a poem might otherwise spark. Swenson was distinct from Moore and Bishop in her passion for effusive, erotic detail. Reconciling these aspects of her own poetry enabled Swenson to make sense of the tension at the heart of her friend's work. We encounter such awareness in "Her Early Work," the last of the poems Swenson wrote about Bishop. Begun

chapter refer to this collection. A handful of original letters from Swenson to Bishop may be found in the Bishop Papers at Vassar College. Approximately 160 of the 260 letters between Bishop and Swenson were from Bishop, 14 of which have been published in *One Art: Elizabeth Bishop Letters*, henceforth referred to as OA. Forty-one of Swenson's letters to Bishop appear in McFall, *Made with Words*; hereafter, MWW.

2. Swenson's comments quoted here were recorded when she delivered an introduction for Bishop at Bishop's October 1977 reading at the 92nd Street Poetry Center in New York City.

in March of 1983, almost five years after Bishop's death, this short poem pivots upon a grasp of Bishop's sexual reserve. The title begins the poem, which then continues:

Talked to cats and dogs,
 to trees, and to strangers.
 To one loved, talked through
 layers of masks.
 To this day we can't know
 who was addressed,
 or ever undressed.
 Because of the wraparounds,
 overlaps and gauzes,
 kept between words and skin,
 we notice nakedness.
 Wild and heathen scents
 of shame or sin
 hovered since childhood,
 when the delicious was always
 forbidden. "A Word with You"
 had to be whispered,
 spoken at the zoo,
 not to be overheard
 be eavesdropping ape or cockatoo.³

While it would be a mistake to overlook the costs of closeted desire to which this poem calls our attention, we limit our readings no less by discounting the subtle logic of these lines: "masks," "overlaps," and "gauzes" do more than hide—they have the power to reveal, to emphasize, to help us "notice nakedness." I will return to this poem in more depth, but for now I want to stress that Swenson's reading granted Bishop's "whispered" words a conscious agency, and hence respect, that they are sometimes denied. Swenson's instructive grace lay in her commitment to spin clarity from contradiction, to nurture complexity where oppositions more readily triumph; though Bishop clearly struggled against the confines of hetero-sexist culture, her careful explorations of sexual desire can't be chalked up to coded cries of repression. On the contrary, Swenson's readings revealed that Bishop's silences were often strategic, in the service of unearthing assumptions instead of giving answers.

3. This poem appeared in *In Other Words: New Poems*, (hereafter, *IOW*) 58.

Little has been made of the correspondence between Bishop and Swenson, and I suspect that this is due in part to the portrait of Bishop that emerges from these letters. In response to the curious, attentive Swenson, Bishop appears most often in these pages as the Bishop of self-restraint, an advocate of personal distance, a remarkably Moore-like mentor in diction and self-expression.⁴ Moreover, while Bishop's genuine love and respect for Swenson are obvious, she appears also at times condescending, competitive, elitist, and, as she herself put it, "nasty" when giving advice to her junior of only two years.⁵ When the bulk of Bishop/Swenson correspondence became available to scholars in 1990, the wave of criticism devoted to emphasizing Bishop's autobiographical bent was just starting to pick up speed. Readers looking for clues to Bishop's intimate life details will find few in these pages. But what we do find is no less rewarding: a nearly thirty-year discussion between two of America's best poets about why they write the kinds of poems that they do.

Swenson and Bishop were drawn to one another by way of their writing. They met at Yaddo, and letters from the first ten years of their correspondence (when their exchange was heaviest) are weighted with close readings and critiques of each other's poems, most of which elicited lengthy responses. Throughout their relationship Bishop assumed and was granted the role of established superior. Particularly with regard to her early work, Swenson sought her friend's advice regularly and received it

4. Because it was Swenson who, for the most part, kept the correspondence in tact, the majority of the letters have been available to scholars only since Swenson's death in 1989. Kathleen C. Johnson, an independent scholar living in Lake Linden, Michigan, presented an unpublished paper, "Two Poets: The Correspondence of Elizabeth Bishop and May Swenson," at the Elizabeth Bishop Poetry Festival and Scholarly Conference in Worcester, Mass., October, 1997. Gardner McFall gives a brief commentary on their correspondence in her introduction to *MWW*. See also Richard Howard, "Elizabeth Bishop - May Swenson Correspondence," *Paris Review* 131 (Summer, 1994), 171-86. Rozanne Knudson provides details of their meeting and ensuing friendship in *The Wonderful Pen of May Swenson* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), chapters 7 and 8, and *May Swenson: A Poet's Life in Photos*, with Suzanne Bigelow, (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1996), chapter 4. In her critical biography of Bishop (1993), Brett Millier gives a brief account of their relationship; see chapters 9 and 11. In chapter 1 of *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy* Victoria Harrison mentions the correspondence, claiming that Bishop "played the role of mentor in this relationship" (26). And finally, I offer a brief analysis of the correspondence between Swenson and Bishop (parts of which are reprinted here) in "Urged by the Unknown You: May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop," my afterword to *Dear Elizabeth: Five Poems & Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2001.

5. Bishop titled her June 4, 1958, letter to Swenson "NASTY REMARKS ABOUT 'SOMETHING GOES BY' BY MAY SWENSON"; the letter can be found in special collections at Washington University.

unsparingly: “There’s a favor I want to ask of you—a big one, I hope you can do it—to read the manuscript of my book and help me strike out the no-good poems. I find myself vacillating so about my own opinions of them that I haven’t been able to decide in certain cases what to leave in—and then, too, it’s too big a collection I suspect even though I’ve weeded and weeded” (October 3, 1961).

In response to this letter, Bishop mailed Swenson a dense, five-page critique of *To Mix With Time: New and Selected Poems*, Swenson’s third book (for which Bishop would also write a dust-jacket blurb). Bishop’s letter, its tiny margins overflowing with microscopic notes, advises Swenson on everything from punctuation to content, addressing the text page-by-page and almost line-by-line.

While Swenson was not shy in sharing her opinions of Bishop’s work, Bishop was far less solicitous of those opinions than Swenson was of hers. This situation makes sense: at the time of their meeting, Bishop was a fairly well-known and certainly a well-respected poet, with literary liaisons securing her firmly in the folds of American contemporary poetry. *North & South*, for which Bishop received the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award, had been published four years earlier. She had been awarded a Guggenheim, and the year before she met Swenson at Yaddo, Bishop served as poetry consultant at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. In contrast, Swenson’s career was just beginning in 1950. Though she had published several poems in various places (the most notable being James Laughlin’s *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*), it would be another four years before Swenson’s first book of poems, *Another Animal*, appeared in print. But despite these differences and other more substantive ones, each recognized in the other a related way of approaching poetry that set them apart from the current of self-expressive verse that was beginning to swell poetry circles at midcentury.

In 1963, after Bishop had endorsed Swenson’s two most recent books with dust-jacket comments, Swenson broached the issue of Bishop’s influence as candidly as she ever would:

I guess it’s because you endorsed my book that reviewers have decided I’m following in your tracks—a foolish conclusion to jump to . . . the fact is I have been influenced by you a lot—not as to method, but as to attitude. I’d like to be more so. But when I write I find I can’t do just as I intend to—it goes its own way. I would like to find the casual and absolutely natural tone that you have

in your poems—they are never over-colored or forced the least little bit—they are very honest, and never call attention to their effects. Their brilliance is inside, and not on the surface. And they are subtle, not obvious. I think my greatest fault is being obvious—and I never know it until the poem's been printed—quite long after that, and it's too late. (MWW 242–43)

This passage provides a telling backdrop to the oft-quoted response Swenson gave to Karla Hammond in an interview in 1979: “Have I been influenced by [Elizabeth Bishop]? Not necessarily, although neither of us writes confessional poetry. Elizabeth Bishop has always stayed with the objective, the large view, the impersonal which contains the personal if you look deeply. I have this tendency, but not because of any influence of hers. I think we share some of the basic perceptive equipment” (MWW 61).

What interests me here is not the degree to which Bishop directly did or did not influence Swenson's poetry (nor Swenson's discomfort with the idea), but the “absolutely natural” way in which Swenson slid from Bishop's “casual” honesty to her beneath-the-surface subtlety, from the “objective, large view” to the “personal” that always lurked between the lines. To Swenson, honesty and subtlety were not antonyms; these aspects of Bishop's poetry nurtured one another, and the “attitude” Swenson shared with Bishop was made manifest in her intuitive grasp of this relationship and her insatiable efforts to achieve an articulate understanding of its logic—efforts, like those between Bishop and Moore, that would stoke the fire in this friendship for years to come.

From the start, Swenson's admiration of Bishop was both fueled and furrowed by this characteristic of Bishop's poetry, what she once referred to as Bishop's “cagey” poetics (MWW 252–53). Especially in the early years of their friendship, Swenson's comments on Bishop's poems turned again and again to this aspect of Bishop's work:

THE SHAMPOO I like *very* much . . . but would have a deuce of a time saying why . . . that is, it feels like something has been left out—but this makes it better, in a way . . . a mysteriousness, although the expression is perfectly straightforward. . . . I remember a poem of yours about his ‘green gay eyes’ that seemed even more mysterious in the same kind of way. I felt the emotion or the impression being expressed, but couldn't seize an outline of what was behind it. Guess maybe I try to read symbolism or special

significance into this, when it [is] simply a comparison between someone's hair streaked with gray and the lichen on a cliff. No, that's not all—it's a kind of tribute to someone. . . . Well, it certainly has *occupied* me, hasn't it? It's ridiculous to try to say in reportorial fashion what a poem 'means'—but I so frequently never find out whether other people receive the same basic associations I think I've put into something—they will never tell you in so many words what they think it is saying. (MWW 199–202)

Though Bishop liked Swenson's interpretation, her response was just as cagey as the poem it attended to:

I am awfully pleased with what you say about the little *Shampoo* & you understood exactly what I meant and even a little bit more. . . . The Shampoo is very simple: Lota has straight long black hair,—I hadn't seen her for six years or so when I came here and when we looked at each other she was horrified to see I had gone very gray, and I that she had two silver streaks on each side, quite wide. Once I got used to it I liked it—she looks exactly like a chickadee. . . . Shiny tin basins, all sizes, are very much a feature of Brazilian life. . . . And I am surrounded with rocks and lichens—they have the sinister coloration of rings around the moon, exactly, sometimes—and seem to be undertaking to spread to infinity, like the moon's, as well. (September 19, 1953)

Bishop's rather transparent attempt to brush aside the "special significance" of the *little* "Shampoo" was belied by her affirmation of Swenson's critique.⁶ Though Bishop explained "in so many words" the imagery of the poem for her friend, she did not make explicit the link between the depictions of life with Lota and what Swenson called the "mysteriousness"—the erotic desire, that "little bit more"—that hovered among her words.

In summoning a likeness between "The Shampoo" and "While Someone Telephones" (the third in a series of poems called *Four Poems*, from which Swenson recalled the image of "his green gay eyes"), Swenson hinted to Bishop the "little bit more" she understood about her friend's "cagey" motives.⁷ Like "The Shampoo" and "Varick Street" (another

6. *Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems 1927–1979*, (hereafter EBCP) 84.

7. Swenson would have seen "The Shampoo" in *Partisan Review* in 1951, when it was published as part of a three-part poem titled "Rain Towards Morning."

poem Swenson comments on along these lines), *Four Poems* is typical of Bishop in that anxious love and tender desire are woven into a sequence of stark yet slippery images: “The tumult in the heart / keeps asking questions” while

Beneath that loved	and celebrated breast, . . .
I cannot fathom	even a ripple.
(See the thin flying	of nine black hairs
four around one	five the other nipple)
	(EBCP 76–79)

Swenson’s handling of Bishop’s caginess here is characteristic; while Swenson pushed relentlessly the limits of Bishop’s poems, she saluted them with a caginess of her own. Without naming that “little bit more” that she intuited, Swenson made it obvious in a letter she sent to Bishop in 1955, two years after her interrogation of “The Shampoo”:

I don’t understand the Four Poems, that is, I get their *mood*, but I can only imagine what they’re talking about—my imagination goes pretty wild and comes back with strange answers, none of which fit exactly. It’s like smelling a strong odor, or hearing a keen sound and not being able to discover what it comes from. Didn’t “While Someone Telephones” used to have a different title? . . . Reading these four poems now I have to furnish them with my own experiences because you’ve left yours out (their labels)—you had to, I suppose, to get them said at all. . . . So I’m left outside here, sniffing and listening, and no use pounding on the door. (MWW 207–8)

Bishop’s response to this letter is almost apologetic: “The *Four Poems* are pretty mysterious, I’m afraid. I hoped they’d have enough emotional value in themselves so that I wouldn’t have to be more specific—a little like a few lyrics from *Maud*, say, with the narrative parts left out. Any meanings you want to attach are all right, I’m sure—the wilder the better” (September 6, 1955).

It is tempting to catalog the palpable caginess of this correspondence as the symptom of sexual masking. Swenson and Bishop were both lesbians who would not lodge themselves within a growing climate of woman-identified poetry, and maintaining this distance perhaps made them wary of identifying with each other in these terms. To acknowledge openly the relationship between one’s “cagey” poetics and one’s desire may well have

meant sacrificing the distance that, ironically, allowed them to maintain their friendship over the years. Moreover, an unfinished poem addressed to Bishop that Swenson wrote sometime between 1961 and 1962 suggests that their friendship had the potential, at least from Swenson's perspective, for sexual intimacy. The most explicit lines of this sort appear near the end of this untitled poem:

I was nuts
about you. And I couldn't say
a word. And you never said the
word that would have loosened
all my doggy love. . . .⁸

Whether or not Swenson's feelings were reciprocated (I have found nothing in Bishop's archive that suggests they were), Bishop was clearly unwilling to unleash the "doggy love" that she perhaps detected in her friend. At the same time, though, Swenson's attraction to Bishop turned upon this very resistance. Although she seemed to long at times for a more forthright and open communion with Bishop, Swenson was drawn insatiably to the process of *implication* to which their relationship was wed. Thus, Swenson's unfinished love poem concludes with these lines:

Little Elizabeth who still keeps me
wild at the end of your chain—. . .
because because
I have never known you years
and years—and love the
unknown you.
(14)

Read in isolation, this confession seems to be a response to unrequited love, a hunger for the hard-to-get. But if we consider it alongside the published poems that Swenson wrote about Bishop and the letters from which these poems were gleaned, this admission reveals a mind far more complex. While Bishop found Swenson's understanding of the lesbian desire in her poems reassuring, Swenson was both exasperated and intrigued by her friend's unwillingness to make that desire more explicit.

8. This poem appears in full under the title "Somebody Who's Somebody" (taken from the first line of the poem) in *Dear Elizabeth: Five Poems & Three Letters to Elizabeth Bishop*, 12–14. I offer an extended analysis of this poem in my afterword to the collection.

But Swenson's response to this aspect of Bishop's work had as much to do with her own developing poetic as it did with her friend's. As we've seen, Swenson would eventually confide to Bishop that her "greatest fault is being obvious," a fault made more manifest when compared to Bishop's "very honest" verse that never called "attention to its effects." No doubt it was in part Bishop's early criticism that helped shape Swenson's sense of her "greatest fault"; while Swenson was busy prodding Bishop about her "cagey" depictions of desire, Bishop was persistently calling Swenson to task for her use of explicit anatomical words. In response to Swenson's second book, *A Cage of Spines*, Bishop sent Swenson a four-page letter in 1958 that was packed with criticism, if laced with praise. At the heart of Bishop's concern about the book was its use of "ugly words," "words [that] stick out too much and distort the poem":

My next point . . . will make you think I am a hopeless reactionary and prude as well, probably. I don't like words like 'loins,' 'groins,' 'crotch,' 'flanks,' 'thighs,' etc. . . . Also the poems I like best, those I think almost everyone would agree *are* your best, almost never use them. . . . I am NOT saying this from any Puritanical feeling, I swear. They are in general ugly words that startle the reader in a directly physical way, perhaps more than you realize. We have come a long way in the last 100 years in freedom of speech and writing—but we are still not comfortable with those words, *usually*. . . I imagine that now you'll say that that's exactly why you use them, to startle and make the poem 'strong,' give it impact,' etc. . . . [But those words] are, or some of them sometimes are, euphemisms, and that's what makes them extra-indecent.⁹

Bishop's critique of Swenson's "ugly words" echoes unmistakably Moore's discomfort with the "sordidities" in Bishop's own "Roosters." We may recall that almost twenty years earlier, when Bishop's career was only somewhat less advanced than Swenson's at the time of this letter, Moore spent an entire night rewriting her younger friend's poem. Moore defended her actions to the startled Bishop in the following manner: the "trouble is, people are not depersonalized enough to accept the picture rather than

9. I find it interesting that Robert Giroux chose not to include this rather telling letter, dated June 4, 1958, in Bishop's selected letters, though he did include the much less explicit letter of July 3, 1958 (OA 360–61).

the thought . . . few of us, it seems to me, are fundamentally rude enough to enrich our work in such ways without cost" (*Selected Letters of Marianne Moore* 403–4). Nearly twenty years after the infamous "Roosters" episode, Bishop stood where Moore once stood, advocating subtlety over starkness in an effort to explain that the most poignant expression is often enabled by restraint, a belief she articulated most succinctly in her next letter:

It's a problem of placement, choice of word, abruptness or accuracy of the image—and does it help or detract? If it sticks out of the poem so that all the reader is going to remember is: 'That Miss Swenson is always talking about phalluses'—or is it phalli—you have spoiled your effect, obviously, and given the Freudian-minded contemporary reader just a slight thrill of detection rather than an esthetic experience. . . ." (OA 360–61)

Unlike her mentor, however, Bishop was distinctly uncomfortable with this role, as her repeated qualifications ("I am NOT saying this from any Puritanical feeling, I swear") make clear. Indeed, in a rather suggestive moment, Bishop invoked the "Roosters" exchange in an effort to deflect the prudishness that Swenson's interrogations sometimes implied. Returning to Swenson's comments about "The Shampoo," Bishop confided to Swenson:

No one but you and one other friend have mentioned *The Shampoo* . . . I sent it to a few friends and never heard a word and began to think there was something indecent about it I'd overlooked. Marianne among others. . . . I'm afraid she never can face the tender passion. Sometime I must show you her complete re-write of *Roosters*—with all rhymes, privies, wives, beds, etc. left out . . . It is amazing, and sad, too. (September 6, 1955)

Once again, the oppositional thinking that underwrites Bishop's simplified portrait of Moore is belied by the sensibility she adopted in her less guarded moments. Many critics have remarked on Bishop's dualistic character, both in her person and her poems. What I find most relevant about this manifestation of Bishop's dualism is not so much Bishop's ambivalence toward Moore, but the way in which Swenson's interrogations brought this ambivalence to a head. Throughout their correspondence, and especially in the first ten years, it is striking how often Bishop's manner resembled Moore's in the early years of *their* correspondence. Instances like the one

above abound in these letters, adding weight to other, more subtle moments that might otherwise go unnoticed. For example, in an undated letter handwritten in November of 1962, which contained her dust-jacket comments for *To Mix With Time*, Bishop wrote, “I hope you can read this. Use what you want—& turn it around any way you want. The only things I want to keep especially are the ‘ungrudging’ business (I’m proud of that) and ‘one’s pleasure is in hers,’ etc.” Swenson was thrilled with what Bishop wrote, and of course took it to press in its original state. The phrases Bishop felt a special fondness for read as follows: “A great part of one’s pleasure in her work is in *her* pleasure; she has directness, affection, and a rare and reassuring ungrudgingness” (MacMahon 137). If these words seem strangely familiar, it is because we encountered their ancestral shapes in Moore’s first review of Bishop, “Archaically New,” in which the older poet praised the younger for her “ungrudged self-expenditure” that is as “automatic, apparently, as part of the nature” (M. Moore 82–83). That Bishop summoned these phrases with particular pride suggests not only that Bishop’s pleasure in Swenson’s poetry derived from the ways it reflected *her* own, but that Swenson’s poetry conjured that conflicted place in Bishop’s mind where her poetic crossed with Moore’s—that slippery line where self-assertion parts from self-consciousness, where the “very honest” recoils from the “obvious.”

For Bishop, this line became especially knotted around the issue of sexuality, which is in part why Swenson’s sensuous poetry struck such a conflicted chord. In reply to Bishop’s Moore-like critique of her “ugly words,” Swenson defended that aspect of her poetic with which Bishop had taken issue:

The physical is the beautiful to me—it’s awfully strong in me—and then I don’t see, logically, why buttock is an uglier word than, say, thumb. Or that groin is an ugly word, or image either. It depends on the poem’s intentions, of course. The effect of all words, I grant you, comes from their associations. I guess I like physical associations. Worse, there is almost a compulsion to employ them. . . . I think my taken-for-granted belief is that, as human animals, we have *nothing but* our sensual equipment, through which all expressions and impressions flow: thought and philosophy, reason and the spiritual all included. (MWW 224–28)

This conception of the “physical” has more in common with Moore’s explorations of materiality and embodiment than it does with Bishop’s labyrinthine poems about lesbian desire. As I have suggested elsewhere, Moore’s asexual reputation has occluded an understanding of the ways in which her poetry reveals a fascination with the contingency between language and corporeality, with “our sensual equipment, through which all impressions and expressions flow.” Likewise, Swenson’s effusive fleshiness is often read at the expense of her skepticism of bodily innocence or truth.¹⁰ But it is exactly this sort of cost that Bishop warned against when she took to task those “ugly words,” a price that she herself inflated unwittingly when she labeled Moore’s similar caution a lack of “the tender passion.”

As we have seen, Swenson was inspired by Bishop’s ability to render startlingly honest observations without, as Moore once put it, being “insultingly unevasive” (Goodridge 92), a balance that Swenson strove after with no less impressive success. Nevertheless, Swenson’s desire for Bishop to explicate the “mysteriousness” in her love poems in particular betrayed a lingering belief that sensuality—the “physical”—signals authenticity, a realm of experience unmediated by language or cultural context. At the same time, though, Swenson’s skepticism of the “obvious”—her understanding that “the effect of all words . . . comes from their associations,” even as all “expressions flow” through “our sensual equipment”—checked and challenged this impulse.

Swenson’s early letters to Bishop are charged with her relentless efforts to work her subliminal sense of this conflict into conscious comprehension, and her poetry of this time bears the stamp of this struggle. In addition to her discomfort with Swenson’s “ugly words,” Bishop took issue with Swenson’s early experiments with punctuation, specifically her poems that abandoned it altogether. Swenson defended her motives in the following manner:

The non-punctuation, I’m afraid I’m committed to. . . . You say no punctuation limits one’s range, but I’ve found that frequently an effect can be gotten from the absence of punctuation itself, that adds to the particular quality of a poem. And it causes one to work for exactness and compactness, the whole burden being on the *words* and how they are combined. The reader is induced to concentrate a little harder, too—must drop his “for granted” attitude,

10. See *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and May Swenson*, chaps. 1 and 5.

can't skim over the surface so easily. Doesn't it lure him deeper into it—force him to follow more subtle clues to understanding? (MWW 199–202)

Bishop's disapproval was gentle but clear: "If the qualities you expressed can be better expressed by using no punctuation (that's a better way to put it than 'without') that's all right—but I don't think you want to label yourself with a style that you may soon want to abandon" (September 19, 1953). Bishop's objection was a symptom of her keen understanding of the relationship between language and meaning, what James Longenbach describes as her comfort "with the idea that poems cannot break through their linguistic fabric, just as the self cannot be separated from the social codes from which it's made" (47). Swenson's attempts to elicit from Bishop a more explicit expression of sexual desire are linked to her experiments with form by a mutual logic: both efforts imply the possibility of breaking through form or formality to an essential authenticity, an *a priori* coherence that Bishop's poems routinely called into question.

But once again, Swenson's essentializing was checked. The "particular quality" that Swenson hoped to achieve in her poems by forsaking punctuation was not transparency, but just the opposite; she wanted to force the reader "to follow more subtle clues to understanding." Characteristically, Swenson's enthusiastic interrogation of her own logical tangles led her to a sense, however rough, of the disjunction:

Of course there are other ways to snare the reader—I mean, one does want to capture him and make him like it. I remember, though, how opposite my earlier defense was—something about poetry must be so clear it doesn't need guides. Maybe this inconsistency in argument proves not using punct. is only a conceit. You've made me think about it at any rate. (September 14, 1953)

Just as Swenson eventually abandoned her experiments with punctuation, she also achieved a deeper understanding of Bishop's sexual restraint. Both processes, however, took almost a lifetime to unfold. Guiding this growth throughout was Swenson's generous courage, her thirst for pushing the limits of her own creative perspective. For Swenson, making sense of the relationship between Bishop's sexual reserve and her hallmark honesty meant refining the balance in her own poetry between a "compulsion" toward the "physical" and her disdain of the "obvious."

In 1963, at the height of their correspondence, Bishop wrote Swenson a letter typical for its fusion of personal life details and observations of everyday life in Brazil. While Bishop often described her fifteen years in Brazil as the happiest of her life, her contentment was at the start of its decline at the time of this letter. Bishop's lover, Lota, was immersed in her high-profile job directing the construction of a public park in Rio, an intensely demanding commitment that Bishop would eventually blame in part for Lota's suicide four years later. While the two women had enjoyed a relatively secluded life together in Samambia (the home that Lota designed among lush mountain foliage above Rio), Lota, who hated being alone, spent most of her time without Bishop in their city apartment. The stress Lota encountered at work resulted in a deteriorating state of health, from which she was never to recuperate.

After some routine remarks about the mail system, Bishop's letter began with a reference to Lota's latest hospitalization for "intestinal occlusion":

Lota is recovering and went back to work two weeks ago—much too soon. But there was a big show at the Museum of Modern Art here—models, airplane photographs, etc., of all her 'job'—It opened last week and was a huge success—almost 5,000 people. . . . Lota had to cut a ribbon, receive sheathes of roses, etc—and we watched the whole thing over again on TV Monday night.

Two paragraphs later Bishop's tone shifts from anxious pride to unchecked exuberance as she describes her latest delight, a new collection of birds:

Oh—I have three new birds—Betty T had about 20 and gave them all away except one lonely little yellow and green creature she handed to me—it turns out to be a female wild canary and I think I'll have to get it a husband. Then I couldn't resist a pair of Bica Lacquas—(Lacquer beaks—or maybe sealing-wax beaks—the word's the same)—I wish I could send you a pair and I wonder if they import them. They're the most adorable bird I know—about 3" long, including the tail—extremely delicate; bright red bills and narrow bright red masks. The male has a sort of mandarin-drooping mustache—one black line—otherwise they're just alike. They're tiny, but plump—and the feathers are incredibly beautiful,

shading from brown and gray on top to pale beige, white, and a rose red spot on the belly—but all this in almost invisible ripples of color alternating with white—wave-ripples, just like sand ripples on a sand flat after the tide has gone out—all so fine I have to put on my reading glasses to appreciate it properly. They're almost as affectionate as love-birds, and they have a nest—smaller than a fist—with a doorway in the side, that they both get in to sleep. The egg is about as big as a baked bean—rarely hatches in captivity—but I'm hoping— From the front they look like a pair of half-ripe strawberries— You'd like them! But now I have two unwed female wild canaries—must find them husbands in order to have a little song around here— We're all silent together at present.

(August 27, 1963)

Inspired perhaps by the proximity of domestic unrest and the lavish descriptions of “affectionate” “love-birds,” Swenson began a poem composed largely of Bishop’s own words from this letter. “Dear Elizabeth,” Swenson’s best-known poem about Bishop, is a mischievous, riddled exploration of lesbian love and desire, which Richard Howard describes as “an intricate meditation on sexuality and exoticism . . . a kind of causerie between the two lesbian poets about their situation as lesbians, as poets” (171).¹¹ It is also the product of twenty-two drafts and fifteen letters that when read together reveal a determined evolution in Swenson’s understanding of Bishop’s “cagey” poetics, a private forging of the path that links her early unrest to the distanced acceptance she possessed in late life.

Swenson began working on the poem immediately after receiving Bishop’s letter. Her first draft is dated September 17, 1963. A week later she wrote of her efforts to Bishop, enclosing a draft with her letter: “Elizabeth, I’ve written a poem about those *Bica Laquas* that you described in a recent letter—I’ve used *your words*, almost exactly, because the way you expressed their appearance and habits, etc., is so charming. . . . It’s written like a letter. . . . Have the wild canaries got husbands yet?”

The copy of the poem that Swenson enclosed on September 25 was, however, several drafts away from the first; in the week preceding this

11. Early drafts of “Dear Elizabeth,” written in September of 1963, can be found in the May Swenson Collection at Washington University in St. Louis. The poem was first published in *The New Yorker* on October 9, 1965. It was reprinted in Swenson, *Nature: Poems Old and New*, hereafter cited as *N*. Richard Howard’s comment appeared in the *Paris Review*, in “Elizabeth Bishop—May Swenson Correspondence.”

letter, Swenson completed eight different drafts of “Dear Elizabeth,” and an examination of these early versions reveals why Swenson never showed them to Bishop. By draft number eight, Swenson had untangled what appears to have been the most knotty part of the poem for her to write, the passage that received the most attention in drafts. In the final, published version, the passage appears as follows:

They must
 be very delicate, not easy to keep. Still,
 on the back porch on Perry St., here, I’d
 build them a little Brazil. I’d save every
 shred and splinter of New York sunshine
 and work through the winter to weave them
 a bed. A double, exactly their size,

 with a roof like the Ark. I’d make sure to
 leave an entrance in the side. I’d set it
 in among the morning-glories where the
 gold-headed flies, small as needles’ eyes,
 are plentiful. Although “their egg is apt
 to be barely as big as a baked bean . . .”
 It rarely hatches in captivity, you mean—

 but we could hope!
 (N 133–34)

These two stanzas mark the exact middle of this eight-stanza poem. They also contain the point at which Bishop’s words give way most notably to Swenson’s—the moment when Swenson’s careful, gradual pastiche assumes a mission, a determined eagerness that seems to say, “Yes! Don’t you see?”:

I’d save every
shred and splinter of New York sunshine
and work through the winter to weave them
a bed. . . .
 [Emphases mine]

The speaker’s insistence clearly builds on the excitement in Bishop’s descriptions, but her enthusiasm turns to urgency as the stakes of this poem are made clear: while the tiny egg lies unhatched in Bishop’s Brazil, it

just might come to life on Swenson's back porch, where the flies "small as needles' eyes" share a world more their size.

Bishop ended her letter by drawing a parallel between her own domestic strain and the birds' inaudible song: "We're all silent together," she confessed. Swenson seized upon this parallel, sighting a moment pregnant with possibility for working through her thoughts about Bishop. "Dear Elizabeth" is Swenson's most sustained published effort to process the frustration she felt toward Bishop's sexual reserve. What began as a straightforward response—"Yes, I'd like a pair of *Bicos de Lacre*" (N 133)—became a gentle critique of her friend's songless love. Stifled by "captivity," the "affectionate" birds can't hatch their eggs; there is a cost, implied Swenson, to Bishop's "cagey" ways. In contrast, she portrayed the porch on Perry Street as teeming with life—the "gold-headed flies" are "plentiful," buzzing amid blossoms whose hungry vines find food in this urban haven.

The importance of this image for Swenson is emphasized by the prominence it assumes in the very first draft. While the Perry Street porch doesn't appear until halfway through the published version of the poem, it is immediately introduced in the original. After ten or so lines describing the *Bicos de Lacre*—the same lines that launch all twenty-two drafts—we arrive in this first draft at the following passage:

"Extremely delicate," you say.
Never mind. On the back porch
on Perry St. here, I will
build them a little Brazil.
I will save every shred of
sunshine, from June to September,
and sew them a bed.

This was the first of several scribbled-over, scratched-out versions in which Swenson struggled to contain the pulse of her poem. Though the image of Swenson's "little Brazil" remained much the same throughout the poem's development, the tone with which it was delivered went through many transformations. Indeed, the tone of this passage may be said to bear the burden of the poem's purpose, since Swenson's revisions were focused largely upon its modulations.

As it appears in this first draft, the juxtaposition between Swenson's liberating porch and Bishop's barren Brazil is as abrupt as it ever gets. By placing quotation marks around Bishop's description of the birds' delicacy ("Extremely delicate," you say") Swenson distanced herself from

this image of refined fragility and perhaps from a diction that echoes an earlier displeasure with “ugly words.” With one clipped flourish Swenson dismissed this emphasis as insignificant: “Never mind,” she asserted and quickly moved on to the business at hand—the porch on Perry Street, where delicacy is neither here nor there. In the next draft Swenson moved this passage to the place it would occupy henceforth in the poem. At the same time, she removed the quotation marks from Bishop’s description of delicacy, only to put them back the next time around; abrupt impatience softened as Swenson cautiously blurred Bishop’s words and her own.

Swenson explored this image of delicacy and her discomfort with it in the next several drafts. Eventually, Bishop’s “extremely” was blunted to “very,” and by draft number five, Swenson’s curttness allowed some empathy: “I understand they’re delicate, not easy to keep. But never mind. . . .” At the same time, as if to make up for an escaped edge of exasperation, Swenson repositioned herself as wanting to please. “I’ll do my best to manage their care,” she wrote in the margins. “You can depend on it.” For seven days straight Swenson worked on this poem, engrossed largely by this section and her attempts to curb the “obvious.” In draft number seven Swenson paused over this passage, setting it apart in a shape distinct from the rest of the poem. With number eight she blended it back into the structure at large:

“Their nest,” you say, “is smaller

than a fist, with a doorway in the side just wide
enough for both to get in to, to sleep. They’re very
delicate . . .” I understand. Not easy to keep.

Well, never mind. On the back porch, on Perry
St. here, I will build them a little Brazil.
I will save every shred of New York

sunshine, from June to September, and work
through the winter to weave them a bed—
a double, exactly their size—inside a house with

the right kind of door, in among the morning-
glories, where the gold-headed flies,
minute as needles’ eyes, are plentiful.

“ . . . Although their egg is apt to be barely
as big as a baked bean . . .” It rarely hatches
in captivity, you mean. Still, we could hope . . .

While this version of the poem still bears an impatience (“Well, never mind”) that is not present in the final draft, Swenson was satisfied enough to show it to Bishop; it is less oppositional, more invitational. As a result the driving issue of this poem is made both clearer and more complex. No longer is the thrust of this central passage determined by the distance between Bishop’s Brazil and Swenson’s back porch. In her determined effort to make sense of her own frustration, Swenson developed, however reluctantly, a degree of sympathy for Bishop’s ways—“I understand,” she assured. The focus of the poem shifted from Swenson’s exasperated sense of her difference from Bishop to the murkier, more interesting place where commonality breeds opposition: crafting a fertile nest for these birds is a delicate matter—no matter where, they’re “Not easy to keep.” Building a little Brazil on the Perry Street porch is more complicated than it first seemed to be; just any bed won’t do—it must be “exactly their size—inside a house with / the right kind of door.” Presumably this door differs from the locked sort that left Swenson “outside,” “sniffing and listening” several years earlier as she read “The Shampoo.” Nevertheless, in writing “Dear Elizabeth,” Swenson came to understand that her vision of liberation had to contend with a “captivity” that linked her life to Bishop’s as well as the birds’: the heterosexual imperative that the Bicos de Lacre both symbolized and shook up with their unhatched eggs—that pervasive presence that, like the sun in this poem, both bathed Swenson’s porch and spawned the birds’ bed.

As Swenson’s sympathy grew, so did her emphasis on the birds as a *couple*, hence the contingency above, between the birds’ sleeping arrangements and Swenson’s back porch, a contingency that would be maintained for all subsequent drafts. At the same time, Swenson made the heterosexual presumption that usually underpins such imagery more explicit in the poem. Shortly after Swenson first sent the poem to Bishop, the following lines appeared in her drafts: “I’d weave them a bed . . . *shaped like an Ark* . . .” (my emphasis). In the final version of the poem, these lines appeared as follows:

I’d save every
shred and splinter of New York sunshine
and work through the winter to weave them
a bed. A double, exactly their size,

with a roof like the Ark.
(N 133)

While most of Swenson’s readers may visualize any number of sun-woven beds, our imaginations converge immediately upon this familiar image of

primordial, naturalized love—we can easily recall pages in picture books of happy animals filling the ark, two-by-two, “one of each.” But Swenson’s placement of this image also stresses the degree to which this narrative failed the “affectionate” couple, for inside the ark-covered nest lay the tiny, infertile egg. This double gesture, with its simultaneous summoning and subversion of heterosexual tropes, became central to Swenson’s evolving poetic, a poetic that gained shape in part through Swenson’s struggle to make sense of Bishop’s sexual reserve.

Bishop was pleased by the draft of “Dear Elizabeth” that Swenson sent her: “I think the poem might work out rather well,” she wrote in return (OA 418–19). In her next letter to Swenson, Bishop transcribed a passage about the Bicos de Lacre from a “big, colored-photograph, children’s Bird Book,” in which the male bird describes himself:

My great grand-parents were born in Africa. They came to Brazil long ago. They adapted themselves so well to the new land that they seemed like natives. Frankly, I consider myself as Brazilian as you are . . . My voice is very nice, but weak, and I have no song. Even so, people like me, and find me pretty and “simpatico” . . . I do not mind being caged (?) as long as I am well-treated and have plenty of seed. I can live with other small birds and make friends with them. I get along beautifully with my wife. Occasionally we fight, but it’s nothing, and we soon make up. My nest is small and round and I help to hatch the eggs.

Bishop followed this passage with a subtle critique of its contents, further complicating the opposition upon which “Dear Elizabeth” turns.

A young botanist & natural historian who’s working with Lota has lent me some books, including the one I’ve quoted from. One is called “The Bird-Lover,” and besides all the birds, it gives complete and rather awful instructions how to catch them, build traps and cages, etc. . . . I know some dull men who know all about birds and keep 40 or 50 in their apartments—take them for airings the way the Chinese do, etc. I don’t really approve—but at least they see them and that’s something. . . . I’m about to buy another pair of Bicos de Lacre tomorrow—seeing they’re so sociable. (October 12, 1963)

Bishop's coda to the picture-book portrait of the Bicos de Lacre focuses on captivity, that laden image that distinguishes Bishop's Brazil from Swenson's back porch in the poem. In criticizing the "dull men" who hoard birds in their cages and the authors who show them how, Bishop subtly cautioned Swenson against a reductive reading of her reserve. Moreover, Bishop capped her critique of the "dull men" by acknowledging her complicity with their greedy ways; she was, she told Swenson, "about to buy another pair of Bicos de Lacre."

In her reply, dated October 31, 1963, Swenson did not respond directly to Bishop's commentary, and she addressed the picture-book passage in only a cursory way. But what she did say is rather revealing:

About the *Bicos Lacres*. . . . I will go up to the Bronx Zoo (where they have a splendid bird pavilion with everything in the world in it) and meet the little wonders personally. I was up there . . . about six weeks ago. Zambesie and Ranee, the lioness and tigress that I once wrote a poem about, are *gone*. I saw in another cage an old lioness that *looked* like Zambesie—but all alone. . . .

Written in 1955, "Zambesie and Ranee" is an unusually caustic condemnation of homophobic zoo-goers, those who would "prefer these captives punished, who / appear to wear the brand some captivated humans do" (N 152–54). In sparking a return to this poem, Bishop's letter urged Swenson to revisit the pervasive intolerance and injustice that can darken even a trip to the zoo. As a result, Swenson was forced once more to rethink her stance in "Dear Elizabeth." Indeed, in the same draft in which the ark first appears, the brusque "Never mind" is quietly dropped, to be replaced by the softened "Still, on the back porch of Perry St. here . . ." Concurrently, Swenson's assertion that she "will build" shifts to the more deferential "I could," eventually becoming "I'd build them a little Brazil."

In her determination to find a balance between her frustration and fascination with Bishop, Swenson needed to make peace between her celebratory thirst for goodness—"but we could hope!"—and her uncomfortable understanding that Perry Street was no less captive than Bishop's Brazil, that the dominant ideology, like the linguistic structure of poems, couldn't be so simply dismissed. Guiding this process was a growing awareness of how her kinship with Bishop's restraint ("I understand") might instruct her own strategies of resistance. After all, as Bishop herself observed in the postscript to her picture-book letter, "Apparently all of the Bicos de Lacre here are descended from some that escaped—"

Above all else, “Dear Elizabeth” is a poem about language, an exploration of that mysterious slippage between our mind’s eye and our tongues, a probing of the sometimes rich, sometimes wearing path from impassioned intention to the vagaries of interpretation. It is a poem woven from the threads of overlapping letters, a poem whose intricate evolution reveals the contiguity between language and being, writing and meaning. As Swenson worked through the tangles that inspired “Dear Elizabeth,” she developed a deeper awareness of the issues that fed her attraction to Bishop. What began as intrigued exasperation with Bishop’s sexual reserve shifted to a more subtle emphasis on the contingencies that determine all kinds of expression. Swenson never stopped flirting with the desire to break free—of convention, of tradition, of language itself. “The past,” she once wrote, “is so settled, trampled over. It’s no fun unless you stand on the end of the diving board, alone, naked, not thinking of ‘how’ or ‘why’ or the best technique, but just the sensation—let impulse do it, instead of heavy knowledge” (MWW 237–38). But Swenson’s thirst for pushing the limits led her, paradoxically, to an everwidening understanding of their productive capacity. In its redeployment of Bishop’s descriptions, “Dear Elizabeth” dramatizes the relationship between captivity and creativity: in her effort to unravel her uncomfortable attraction to Bishop’s reserve, Swenson was literally bound by the very language she struggled against. And while the final lines assert Swenson’s distinction from Bishop, they conclude a poem that also flaunts the terms of their debt. As Swenson struggled to decipher her conflicting feelings toward her friend, she came to realize that behind her fascination with Bishop’s restraint lurked the power of language, its ability to both reveal and conceal, to hold captive and create.

The next poem that Swenson wrote about Bishop builds upon this realization. “In the Bodies of Words” takes place on the occasion of Bishop’s death in 1979. It is both a mourning and a celebration of the friendship these poets shared. It is also a poignant meditation on the nature of language itself:

Until today in Delaware, Elizabeth, I didn’t know
 you died in Boston a week ago. How can it be
 you went from the world without my knowing?
 Your body turned to ash before I knew. Why was there
 no tremor of the ground or air? No lightning flick
 between our nerves? How can I believe? How grieve?
 (N 135)

The unnerving displacement Swenson felt upon hearing of Bishop's death mirrored the conflicted currents that charted their thirty-year correspondence. Like the song of the Bicos de Lacre, whose "note is" not "something one hears, / but must watch the cat's ears to detect," the bond between Swenson and Bishop was both intuitive and elusive. Swenson and Bishop shared an implicit, unspoken understanding that was, despite its inaudible song, made manifest in their mutual love of linguistic measures. At the same time, as we have seen, the unnamed pulse of their exchange sparked both frustration (there's "no use pounding on the door") and connection ("I understand. Not easy to keep."). In her effort to break through Bishop's self-restraint, Swenson was led again and again to the dynamics of their exchange, to the "cagey" nature of communication:

How can it be
you went from the world without my knowing?
.....
For a moment I jump back to when all was well and ordinary.
Today I could phone Boston, say Hello. . . . Oh, no!
Time's tape runs forward only. There is no replay.
(N 135)

"In the Bodies of Words" is saturated with this sense of missed messages, failed expressions, perverted attempts at understanding.

I meet a red retriever, young, eager, galloping
out of the surf. At first I do not notice his impairment.
His right hind leg is missing. Omens. . . .
I thought I saw a rabbit in the yard this morning.
It was a squirrel, its tail torn off. Distortions. . . .
(N 135)

Those small but exquisite moments that bear life's beauty are deployed in this poem as reminders of the pain, without which joy would have no meaning. Images that appear full of promise and communion yield disappointment and isolation: "Light hurts," "Ocean is gray again today, old and creased aluminum / without sheen. Nothing to see on that expanse"; the sandy beach is scraped "hard as a floor by wind," and a "life is little as a dropped feather. Or split shell / tossed ashore, lost under sand. . ." (N 135–36).

But this sad and silent expanse is pierced by emotional contact when the speaker spots "a troupe of pipers— / your pipers, Elizabeth!—their racing

legs like spokes / of tiny wire wheels" (N 136). For a brief but ecstatic moment Swenson appears to feel a connection with Bishop once more. The image of these birds seems to have evoked Bishop's sandpiper, who looks

for something, something, something.
 Poor bird, he is obsessed!
 The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray,
 mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.
 (EBCP 131)

Hope emerges in this instant, born of the realization that while language sometimes fails us, it also exceeds our limits. "In the Bodies of Words" mourns the loss of a friend, but perhaps more to the point, it signals the abrupt arrest of an exchange that for Swenson was left unfinished. In an effort to grapple with her loss, Swenson returned to the poetry that attracted her from the start, and it is at this moment that she received from Bishop the unambiguous answer she'd always sought: "But vision lives! / Vision, potent, regenerative, lives in bodies of words. / Your vision lives, Elizabeth, your words / from lip to lip perpetuated" (N 135). It is through language that we grow our selves, with words that we learn to see; reserve becomes regeneration when language turns from masking to that which "multiplies . . . in the bodies of words" (N 136).

In its title alone, Swenson's commemorative poem immediately announces the contingency between the corporeal and the linguistic; words in this poem are *embodied*: "vision lives . . . in the bodies of words." By celebrating the productive (as opposed to prohibitive) quality of Bishop's language in overtly physical terms (terms that are emphasized through the refrain of the poem), Swenson bridged her love of "the physical" and her early mistrust of Bishop's "cagey" ways. In doing so, Swenson reveled in her articulation ("But vision lives!") of that elusive, intuitive "attitude" she indeed shared with her friend.

It is no surprise, then, that in her last poem to Bishop, Swenson returned overtly to the issue that divided them most. "Her Early Work" is a concise, explicit reckoning with the difficult problem of sexual restraint. While Swenson admitted to her lingering desire to get beyond Bishop's "masks" ("To this day we can't know / who was addressed, / or ever undressed" [IOW 58]), she also suggested that such a desire in some sense misses the point:

Because of the wraparounds,
overlaps and gauzes,
kept between words and skin,
we notice nakedness.

Or in other words, Bishop's reticence spawned revelation. All of the unpublished drafts of "Her Early Work" underscore the importance of these lines for Swenson herself: "*But* because . . .," they insist, as if answering an unrest that the poem initially poses (my emphasis). And indeed, this poem provides Swenson's last homage to those instructive frustrations that Bishop inspired.

"Her Early Work" is a response in part to Bishop's early poem, "A Word with You," in which the speaker uncharacteristically confides

how hard it is, you understand
this nervous strain in which we live—
Why just one luscious adjective
infuriates the whole damned band . . .
(2)

Swenson must have smiled knowingly upon reading this passage, recalling how Bishop had taken her to task for those "ugly words" years ago. But in her late-life response to Bishop's poem, Swenson articulated an awareness still nascent in her earlier reply to Bishop's critique. While "Her Early Work" clearly speaks to a persistent longing for a more authentic, more personal truth, it just as emphatically answers that longing with a discovery more profound: linguistic "masks" don't simply compete with the "physical" truth; they accentuate, they regenerate—indeed, they impart "nakedness." Moreover, this poem offers its concession within the terms of a conversation and thus provides a quiet conclusion to the correspondence from which it grew. Though "A Word with You" "had to be whispered, / spoken at the zoo," Bishop's poetry engulfs the "obvious" in its embrace of a more subtle truth. As Swenson once put it in "Introduction for Elizabeth Bishop," "Good poets—there are few, they have always been few—are couriers of consciousness and yes, of conscience, too."