**A Bell to Toll Me Back**

By: DS Waldman

A couple hours north of LA, nestled in the foothills of the Los Padres National Forest, there's a little valley town where I spent most of my 20s. Mostly agrarian—square miles of citrus and avocado groves in the east end—though recently the economy seems to rely just as heavily on meditation and wellness retreats as it does on tangerines. Fliers posted outside the grocery store and the business center advertise workshops titled, for example, "Journey into the Self: Breathwork to Release Your True Purpose." Yogis, hands in their pockets, stroll beneath the pepper trees, rapt in some long-running conversation with the infinite, the divine.

One day, late for class—I'd been working at a local high school—I ducked quickly into a coffee shop where, outside, circled closely around a little two-top, a group of such yogis were having a lively conversation and, as I passed, caught my attention. "It's *pure being!"* announced one, sweeping his arm out across the street, gesturing, it seemed, to include the whole world, "The falling *is* the rain… the flying *is* the bird."

I didn't have time to stop, of course, and wouldn't have anyway (surrounded so often by similar conversations, one grows weary of such grand reachings). But I was nevertheless interested enough in what he said—and its possible implications for my field, poetry—to go home and look up that phrase. *Pure being.*

The term, as after some poking and asking around I've come to understand it, refers to a state in which that distinctly human impulse for self-reflection dissolves for a time and is supplanted by a clear, unbroken experience of…well, I'm not sure what. Being?

To borrow from the guru outside the coffee shop, a bird doesn't think about flying or about how, mechanically, it's going to go from park bench to lamppost; it just flies. The action is so inherent in the animal's being that it really isn't an action, but a part of the animal. Or maybe it just *is* the animal. The bird *is* flight and flight, the bird.

The poetry of this dynamic was not lost on me, though it has taken time to make the edges line up neatly—to name more precisely how the reading of an effective, well-crafted poem so closely relates to the "pure being" of a bird in flight. The reader, rapt in, say, the prosody and formal mastery of Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," isn't really aware of the linguistic and formal devices at play, or that they are reading a poem at all. The reader instead *becomes* the poem which, in the case of "One Art," was written some 50 years ago by a poet who likely also had the experience of *being* the poem, rapt as she was in its crafting. And so, in the case of poems as well-made as Bishop's, reader becomes poem and, in so doing, becomes poet—all three, together, joining into a shared experience of *being*.

This shared experience I'm referring to, this oneness between reader and poem and poet, is different from, say, the effect achieved by Whitman's "Dear reader…," an invitation which has for over 100 years been, and continues to be, borrowed and re-purposed by poets hoping, I presume, to remove the nagging barrier between the reader and themselves—see, for example, Hanif Abdurraqib's "How Can Black People Write About Flowers at a Time Like This." What I am referring to, perhaps clumsily, is not just a gesture or a device, not merely a poet's invitation for the reader to walk with them through the poem, but rather a poem's holistic crafting which, through close attention to form and language and content, makes the reader genuinely forget they

are reading a poem, feeling instead a sense of oneness with the poem and, as a consequence, the poet. This effect is of course difficult, if not downright impossible, to qualify or quantify in concrete terms—but what feelings, poetically evoked, are easily discussed in an objective way?

Lest we be criticized for not trying, let's look more closely at that poem of Bishop's, one of her (and the English language's) most well-known:

**One Art**[i]

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster.

It's worth noting that the poem is a villanelle, which, with its repeated lines, regular meter, and A-B-A rhyme scheme (B-B-A-B in the final stanza), lends the poem an incantatory quality such that even while Bishop, as she so often does, takes liberties with the form—leaning on slant

rhymes with feminine/Italianate endings like *faster* and *fluster*—the poem has a hypnotic effect on the reader, a product of both the form and the poet's execution of the form[ii]. At some point—for me it happens in the second stanza, second line, "the hour badly spent"—Bishop's losses, both the mundane (lost keys) and the fantastic (two cities… two rivers, a continent), become *our* losses, their burden squarely on *our* shoulders[iii]. We, as we move line to line, stanza to stanza, are practicing Bishop's "one art," allowing the grief, unwieldy as it is here, to build within the orderly framework of the villanelle, within its regularity, repetition and rhyme.

But what happens—more specifically, what happens to that villanelle-induced hypnosis—in the final stanza, the final line? We know and are prepared for the penultimate line,

The art of losing's not hard to master

as it's been repeated, now, four times in a six-stanza poem; but in the final stanza, marked with italics and framed by parentheses, we have a rupture:

though it may look like (*write* it!) like disaster.

It is, of course, one of the most well-known moments in American poetry—but who, in this parenthetical, is Bishop addressing? Us, the reader? Herself?

Bishop, at the beginning of stanza six, has just deepened into the interpersonal, making intimate the second-person *you* which, in stanzas one through five, has been limited to the generalized third-person[iv]. This *you* is ostensibly a lover, a love lost, which loss carries more weight than, say, the lost keys or the two rivers. The emotional stakes, as we approach the parenthetical, are

high and I've always imagined Bishop, here, at her desk, eighteen lines into an especially challenging (technically and emotionally) villanelle, pen hovering over the last line, having to will herself forward, having to will that last rhyme (which, fittingly, is *disaster*) into place. (*Write it!)*

This simple, two-word command marks a hard turn, a meaningful disruption of the poem-poet-reader unity, the experience of oneness we, through the hypnosis of form and relatability of subject (loss), had previously been lulled into. By addressing—or, more accurately, commanding—herself in the body of the poem, Bishop makes us aware of the poet, of the poem, and in so doing—because if there's a poet and a poem, there is a reader—makes us again aware of ourselves as distinct. She leaves us there, poem in hand, its weight ours alone to bear. The experience of pure being which Bishop, for eighteen lines, built around us and fortified has, in this moment, been shattered. And intentionally.

The question, of course, is why do this? How does it add, ultimately, to the experience one has with this poem?

Consider the final stanza—and the poem—without that interjection:

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like disaster.

As in the rest of the poem, the prosody, paired with largely colloquial language, is lovely. That lulling effect is no doubt present. But what I feel upon reaching the end of the poem is a faint dissatisfaction. Yes, the boxes have been checked, the form executed masterfully. But it feels too measured, to me. Too contained. The emotional tension, as I mentioned, is building throughout the poem, swelling especially with the sixth stanza's introduction of the second-

person *you*, the lost love. So to end with music, with uninterrupted prosody and rhyme, feels somehow inauthentic—and Bishop, I'd like to imagine, felt similarly.

Thus we get this interruption, this unexpected punch in the last line, revealing the artifice of the poem, telling us it is but a piece of crafted writing behind which, having pushed the received form (and consequently, the poem) as far as it will take her, there is a poet ready to reveal herself to the reader, to reach through the poem and pull us into the room.

Remember, this is a poet who, in one of her widely-known letters to Robert Lowell, said, "When you write my epitaph, you must say I was the loneliest person who ever lived." Only a few years prior to "One Art's" publication, Bishop's long-time lover, Brazilian heiress Lota de Mace Soares, committed suicide in Bishop's presence. Her subsequent lover, Alice Methfessel, of whose blonde hair and dazzling eyes of "blue blue blue" Bishop wrote extensively, left her to marry a man[v].

We *see* the impact of these losses in the poem's first eighteen lines and understand how they might inspire a poet to write about the "art of losing," but it's not until the interjection, that moment when Bishop pushes aside the poem and brings us, through her self-address, into the struggle of its crafting, that we see *her* and feel more completely the depth and extremity of her sadness. It's a moment that, to me, takes a musical, expertly-crafted villanelle and pushes it to a point that transcends the "transcendent moment" we often associate with the early Romanticists like Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Poems from this movement, like Coleridge's "This Lime-tree Bower my Prison," tend, in their arc, towards an opening of wonder and possibility, of awe and the sublime (That we may lift the soul and contemplate / with lively joy the joys we can not share) and once the poem reaches the transcendent moment, it often ends there.

"One Art," on the other hand, follows more closely the arc of late Romanticist poems such as John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," which does indeed reach for the transcendent (Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!) but breaks away, ultimately, from the transcendent and falls back to the cold hard ground of realism (Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!). This is to say that there exists a tradition within which Bishop, with this poem, its moment of intentional disruption, is writing.

With Bishop—and Coleridge and Keats—in mind, now consider Ada Limón's 2020 sensation, "The End of Poetry":

**The End of Poetry**[vi]

Enough of osseous and chickadee and sunflower
and snowshoes, maple and seeds, samara and shoot,
enough chiaroscuro, enough of thus and prophecy
and the stoic farmer and faith and our father and tis
of thee, enough of bosom and bud, skin and god
not forgetting and star bodies and frozen birds,
enough of the will to go on and not go on or how
a certain light does a certain thing, enough
of the kneeling and the rising and the looking
inward and the looking up, enough of the gun,
the drama, and the acquaintance's suicide, the long-lost
letter on the dresser, enough of the longing and
the ego and the obliteration of ego, enough
of the mother and the child and the father and the child
and enough of the pointing to the world, weary
and desperate, enough of the brutal and the border,
enough of can you see me, can you hear me, enough
I am human, enough I am alone and I am desperate,
enough of the animal saving me, enough of the high
water, enough sorrow, enough of the air and its ease,
I am asking you to touch me.

We know from the title that this poem, one way or another, is going to be addressing, and likely critiquing, Poetry—as a field, that is, or a craft—and is thereby put into direct conversation with

countless antecedents such as Sir Philip Sidney's "Astrophil and Stella 1" (Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love) and Marianne Moore's "Poetry" (I, too, dislike it). Limón's title serves as a sort of invocation, calling together all poets and readers of poetry, past and present, into the poem to partake in a thoughtful or meditative allegory—an allegory which, in the case of "The Death of Poetry," amounts to a litany, an unbroken list of poetic tropes, devices and images.

And with this litany, Limón—like Bishop—proceeds to lull us into that now familiar sense of oneness, of *pure being*. But whereas Bishop employs the regular patterns of rhyme, repetition, and meter of a received form to achieve the hypnotic quality of "One Art," Limón, in crafting this free-verse poem, leans heavily on the music of her lines—music, poetically-speaking, is of course hard to define; as far as I can tell, which admittedly isn't very far, a poem's music (or prosody) manifests itself in the individual qualities of syllables (pitch, duration, stress, loudness/softness), in syntax, and in the various sound effects lended by assonance, consonance, and alliteration.[vii] Ultimately, though, as Gregory Orr reminds us, "Music is irrational." Perhaps we just know it when we hear it (enough of the pointing to the world, weary / and desperate, enough of the brutal and the border).

Note here that the poem, all but the last of whose 21 lines are ten or more syllables, is presented as a single sentence. Rhythmically, this helps facilitate that hypnotic or incantatory quality which, not unlike Bishop's villanelle, encourages the reader deeper into their experience of the poem. The rhythm would of course be very different if each line were, say, five syllables in length and if the poem, rather than flowing as a single sentence, were divided into many short sentences:

Enough of the longing
and the ego and the obliteration
of ego. Enough of the mother
and the child and the father
and the child. And enough
of the pointing to the world,
weary and desperate. Enough
of the brutal and the border.
Enough of can you
see me, can you hear me.
Enough I am human. Enough
I am alone and I am
desperate. Enough of the animal
saving me. Enough of the high
water. Enough sorrow.
Enough of the air and
its ease. I am asking you
to touch me.

The hard pauses created by the many periods and linebreaks prevent us, through constant interruption, from falling under the poem's spell. It's the long musical lines, then, running uninterrupted from image to image, trope to trope, that take us (the reader) always more completely into the poem. The experience of a one-sentence poem, especially one with long and musical lines, is akin to taking a deep breath, holding, and swimming underwater from one end of the pool to the other—the only way through is, well, through. No breaks. No coming up for air. Limón's choice, to let this poem unfold with no sentence breaks, thus in a sense seals the experience of the poem, leaving little opportunity for the reader to be taken out of the piece.

So, thanks to decisions made at the levels of form and language, we have an architecture that facilitates an uninterrupted experience—but not, I would argue, an experience of *pure being*, of oneness between reader, poem and poet. Oneness, here, isn't achieved with form alone, but with a marriage of form and content.

"The End of Poetry," as I mentioned before, is essentially a litany, a list of images and phrases, sentiments and tropes on which we poets have, for centuries, time and again relied in making our poems. Of course, some from this list are particular to Limón's work—anyone who's read *The Carrying* will find familiar the enumerated natural elements or "the animal saving me"—but by and large this is a cleverly comprehensive list, which is to say that any poet, living or dead, past present or future, will be able to look at the poem and find in it some thing they always go back to, or fall back on, in their own work. I, for one, at line 7–"enough of the will to go on and not go on"—felt at once seen and called out, as though Limón had read my poems, smiled, handed them back to me and said *Enough, already. Try something new.* And this is only uncomfortable until one realizes that we, by way of our poems, are all contained within "The End of Poetry," and so are all sharing the burden of this critique.

I see myself in this poem, and I see Limón. I see past luminaries such as Whitman and Emily Dickinson (the stoic farmer and faith and our father and 'tis / of thee), and I see some of my contemporary favorites like Tracy K. Smith (skin and God, / not forgetting and star bodies) and Carl Phillips (how / a certain light does a certain thing). Rather than inviting us all in, rather than telling us—as Whitman does in "Song of Myself,"—*I am large, I contain multitudes*, this poem actually *contains* multitudes (how many times, in workshop, have you heard or been told to "show, not tell?")[viii]. It is in this effect, what amounts to the *e pluribus unum* of poetics, that the poem achieves that elusive experience of oneness—a unified experience. *Pure being.*

And the poem could very well go on like this, listing familiar tropes and, through the vastness and music of its listing, fold more and more poets into the shared experience of the poem. Or the poem could end at line 20, with "enough of the air and its ease." Either choice, in this reader's opinion, would result in a compelling poem—though neither, I contend, would reach that coveted stratum of poetry that transcends the transcendent. We need the final turn, that ultimate revelation which, when it comes, brings greater meaning to every one of the poem's preceding lines and grounds us again, collectively, in reality.

Limón, again harkening back to Bishop and "One Art," delivers this final stroke in the poem's final line, which stroke amounts ultimately to a breaking of the seal, disrupting that experience of oneness she crafted for us over the poem's first 20 lines:

I am asking you to touch me.

Whereas every one of the poem's previous statements was generally-directed (enough of bosom and bud… enough I am alone) in an almost oratorial fashion—one might envision the first 20 lines as a speech, delivered not to anyone in particular, but to all of Poetry—this last line, delivered in the familiar second-person, is firmly directed. She's talking to *me*. And *you*. And individually to any- and everyone writing poems now and in the future (herself included). "Enough with the tricks and devices," she's telling us, "make me *feel* something."

The moment calls to mind, for me, the last scene in one of my favorite movies, wherein, having gone the full two-plus hours without doing so, the main character stops, turns—and looks straight into the camera. *Cut*.

One might say, then, that this final line affects the reader in much the same way as when, in film, an actor breaks the fourth wall. And perhaps, ultimately, that is what both Bishop and Limón, in their respective poems, are doing—creating, through the poem, a state in which the reader, much like a rapt moviegoer, loses themselves in their experience of the art, and in which, with the final line, they pull back the curtain, leaving us holding a piece of paper, looking at nothing more than words on a page.

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[i] Bishop, Elizabeth. "One Art." *Elizabeth Bishop: The Complete Poems 1927 - 1979*, FSG, 1982, p. 178.

[ii] Kumin, Maxine. "Gymnastics: The Villanelle." *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art*, edited by Finch & Varnes, 1st ed., University of Michigan Press, 2002, pp. 314–21.

[iii] Perrine, Jennifer. "The Poem That Won't Leave You Alone." *At Length*, Chad Parmenter, 2016, atlengthmag.com/poetry/the-poem-that-wont-leave-you-alone.

[iv] Phillips, Carl. "At Length." *At Length*, 2018, atlengthmag.com/poetry/muscularity-and-eros-on-syntax/?back=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2Fsearch%3Fclient.

[v] Harriet Staff. "Elizabeth Bishop, 'the Loneliest Person Who Ever Lived.'" *Poetry Foundation*, 19 Oct. 2017, www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2017/10/elizabeth-bishop-the-loneliest-person-who-ever-lived?back=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2Fsearch%3Fclient%3Dsafari%26as_qdr%3Dall%26as_occt%3Dany%26safe%3Dactive%26as_q%3Dpoetry+foundation+Elizabeth+bishop+the+loneliest+person+who+ever+lived%26channel%3Daplab%26source%3Da-app1%26hl%3Den.

[vi] Limón, Ada. "'The End of Poetry,' by Ada Limón." *The New Yorker*, 27 Apr. 2020, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/04/the-end-of-poetry?back=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2Fsearch%3Fclient%3Dsafari%26as_qdr%3Dall%26as_occt%3Dany%26safe%3Dactive%26as_q%3DAda+Lim%C3%B3n+the+end+of+poetry%26channel%3Daplab%26source%3Da-app1%26hl%3Den.

[vii] Orr, Gregory, and Ellen Bryant Voigt. "Four Temperaments and the Forms of Poetry." *Poets Teaching Poets: Self and the World*, First, University of Michigan Press, 1996, pp. 164–70.

[viii] Lerner, Ben. "The Hatred of Poetry." *A Bard Projected into the Future*, First Edition, FSG Originals, 2016, pp. 44–47.