



# One Art

by Elizabeth Bishop

## Content Synopsis

One of the finest examples of the form, Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle "One Art" is a tightly structured poem that actively works against its own structure. It resists the stringent demands of its form, erecting a kind of psychological dam, where the calm surface belies the enormous strain of welled-up grief. Though Bishop wrote during the rise of "Confessional" poetry—a term usually applied to a poet, like Sylvia Plath, whose power is in unconcealed emotion—Bishop's poem is nothing if not an exercise in restraint, working both with and against a challenging form. The way she works with, and against, this formalist aesthetic creates a poem that is ambiguous, layered with meanings and possibility.

The first line of the poem begins with a statement that is itself full of ambiguity: "The art of losing isn't hard to master" (1). On one hand, the poet seems to be announcing something important, something decisive. Yet what is the art of losing? Are we meant to recognize it as something else, or literally, as in losing our keys? The second stanza, with its playful "lose something every day" (5), does not sound serious at all. After all, nothing lost so far is irreplaceable. However, as the refrain returns, the poem seems straining to keep its playfulness. The voice proclaiming, "The art of losing isn't hard to master," sounds less and less sure of itself as the poem goes on, and the losses are

added up. First, there are some pedestrian things like keys or an "hour badly spent" (6). However, the losses grow like weeds: "places" and "names" (8) in the third stanza, then "my mother's watch" (11) and "three loved houses" (12) in the fourth. By the time the poet has lost "two cities," (13) "rivers, a continent" (14) the refrain feels as hollow as a supermarket condolence card. At the end, when the final loss—"you"—is incurred, the poet has clearly "lied," or at least, denied the pain of these disastrous losses.

When we reach the last refrain, a parenthetical directive—"(Write it!)" (22)—provides the necessary crack in the formal armor of the poem. The poet is revealed as someone urging herself to be happy, as someone might repeat a mantra in order to calm herself. In this case, however, the mantra is the refrain of "no disaster," which in the end turns out to have been a lie: they are disasters, every one. The voice that takes over for two words in the last line has been the poet's true voice, masked (mastered, you might say) by the form and the tone of the poem.

## Historical Context

The villanelle as a form traces its roots to 15th Italian pastoral poetry—the word itself means "rural" or "rustic" and is derived from villano, Italian for "peasant." However, the 16th century poet Jean Passerat probably codified its modern form

requirements. The form consists of five tercets and a final quatrain, with the first and last lines of the first tercet reoccurring as a refrain, and then, in the final quatrain, as the final couplet. An old pastoral poem might begin its first tercet thus:

The fields are flowering, the roses bloom  
Where Alessa my fair-haired beauty walks  
Toward the blue ocean in the afternoon.

The built-in strength of the villanelle is its repetition. As the reader hears, and comes to expect the refrain, the refrain itself often changes its mood. Here, for instance, the scene is happy: we take the image of the sea and the roses to mirror the beauty of Alessa. In the middle tercets of the poem, however, she might drown, and the refrain “Down to the bright blue sea” becomes ominous instead. At the ending quatrain, the refrain “Down to the bright blue sea” might be elegiac:

Now the rains have come and the autumn  
moon,  
The crops have been cut to the stalks.  
No fields are flowering, no red roses bloom,  
Just the cold blue ocean in the afternoon.

The refrain, as it progresses, relatively unchanged syntactically, undergoes a full change in emotion. In addition, because we hear the refrain—this would have been sung, not read—repeatedly throughout the poem, we not only expect it, but we become particularly attuned to any slight change. This is the power of form at its most basic: it provides a structure where the reader thinks he knows what is coming. It is then up to the author to either fulfill that expectation or—as Bishop does here—subvert it.

“One Art” appears in the collection “Geography III,” published in 1976. Although she had won numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for “Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring” twenty years before, Bishop remained insecure about her poetry. Additionally, the poetry zeitgeist of the 70’s

was the Confessional style, an intimate, sometimes claustrophobic approach to poetry that relied on secrets and events of the poet’s life to create shock, sympathy, or anger in the reader. Many of the Confessional poets wrote in free verse in an attempt to liberate themselves from the constraints of form, a gesture that symbolically liberated them from the canon. Formal perfection was out; raw energy and unsettling honesty, such as one found in Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath’s poems, was in. In this context, the formality of Bishop’s verse must be appreciated for what it says as well as what it refrains from saying. Where Lowell and Plath were comfortable with including biographical information no matter how personal and detailed (Lowell went so far as to include letters from his wife, verbatim, in “The Dolphin”), Bishop’s poetics were far more armored; she censured Lowell after this in a letter, reminding him “art isn’t worth that much” (Goldensohn 227). Although free, confessional-sounding verse has ultimately triumphed in poetry journals and classrooms, “One Art” survives as one of the great formal successes of this period of American poetry.

### Societal Context

“Elizabeth Bishop is spectacular in being unspectacular,” wrote the poet Marianne Moore in a review of “North and South” (“Complete Prose” 406). Indeed, Bishop’s poems often are not spectacular, nor do they overwhelm with virtuosic cascades of language. However, today Bishop stands as perhaps the most celebrated mid-century American female poet.

Moreover, she stands as the most relevant figure from that era, having survived the Modern, Formalist, Confessional, and Post-Modern eras with her reputation and admirers intact. During her lifetime, in comparison, esteem for her work was limited to a small number of admirers, her close friend and widely acclaimed poet Robert Lowell among them. Today, Lowell, as well as other then-popular

poets like Theodore Roethke, Weldon Kees, and John Berryman lags behind Bishop in anthologies and academic studies; her poems are more widely read than any female author save Emily Dickinson.

In 1976, when “Geography III” was published, Bishop was teaching at Harvard. She was well regarded but by no means the major presence in the canon that she is today. Dana Gioia, who was a student at the time, sent in an appreciative remembrance after her death in 1979 to “The New Yorker” because, as he later writes in the “New Criterion,” “I was worried that she would be forgotten” (2). The 10 poems of “Geography III,” which are some of her best—“One Art” and “In the Waiting Room” among them—were well-received, but when she died three years later her relatively slim collection of work was not seen as the major contribution it is today. In a prophetic moment, Lowell, who himself was America’s premier poet at the time, wrote in a letter that Bishop’s language and images seemed to “belong to a later century.” This description has proved correct, as the 20th and 21st centuries have seen an incredible increase in the volume of study on her life and work.

In an article in “The New Criterion” Gioia speculates that Bishop’s later ascendancy can partially be attributed to the academy’s increased interest in marginalized and displaced voices. Bishop occupied an almost constant status as outsider, since she was often a stranger to her surroundings, living a peripatetic life from such a young age. Additionally, Bishop’s status as a lesbian has encouraged study of her poems using ideas from gender studies and Queer theory.

However, Gioia concludes, these factors are secondary to the poems themselves in making Bishop so popular. Comparing her to Keats, Gioia writes that Bishop possessed what Keats described as “negative capability,” a term describing the poet’s state of ambiguity and mystery. “She had a native genius for reflecting the rich complexity of experience without reducing it into abstraction

or predetermined moral judgment,” writes Gioia, echoing Moore’s description, “She is inclusive by being artfully inconclusive” (8). “One Art,” ending as it does with an inconclusive, mysterious conclusion, is emblematic of this quality.

### Religious Context

Although not immediately apparent, Bishop counted the devotional poetry of George Herbert as a major influence on her work. In their modesty and relentless pursuit of accuracy, Elizabeth Bishop’s poems do resemble Herbert; both of them seeking to put into words what Herbert calls in his poem “Prayer(I),” “A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear.” Like Herbert, Bishop’s “One Art” possesses a kind of humility in the face of loss, never defiant or boastful. What might be called the reverent aspect of Bishop’s work is never explicitly religious—her awe is reserved for the natural and unnatural world—and though the poem may not be about God, it is certainly about belief. Herbert’s quality of doubtful belief and resolution, so central to the tension of his poems, is shown here in the last lines of “The Affliction”: “Ah my dear God! though I am clean forgot, / Let me not love thee, if I love thee not” (65-6). The ambition of the poem is simply to be as true to the poet’s emotion, a task that requires enormous courage. It is quite similar to “One Art,” where Bishop dramatizes the tension between what we would like to feel—what we say we feel—and what we do feel.

### Scientific & Technological Context

Though her writing is not directly interested in science, Bishop has always been noted for an obsession with accuracy and classification. As a tourist and perpetual visitor in Brazil and on her other journeys, she often made studies of birdlife, plants and people. Her interest, however, is not in finding the correct scientific names of things, but in determining the most effective and honest way to describe them. Technologically speaking, the

advent of air travel shows up as an influence on some of her poems—it certainly facilitated some of her globetrotting as well. There are not enough poems, however, that explicitly deal with technology to rightly call it a concern of hers. A rare example is “Night City,” where her description of the city from the plane is both surreal and dangerous: “Broken glass, broken bottles, / heaps of them burn” (3-4). The plane’s vantage point, far from a convenience, reveals the destruction on the ground.

### Biographical Context

Although she maintained that one need not know the biography of a poet in order to appreciate the poem, Bishop’s life certainly informs and enlarges the scope of her own poetry, which often alludes to real experiences of her life. “One Art,” for example, is a kind of biography of loss, and each item lost does have a corresponding biographical loss. When she was five years old, her mother was committed to a sanitarium in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia after a prolonged period of mental illness. Her father died when she was eight months old and Bishop was left in the care of her mother’s parents, who took her to the Nova Scotia town of Great Village. Bishop was to move from Nova Scotia in 1917 to Worchester, Mass, to live with her father’s parents, and then to her aunt’s house a year later. At the age of eight, she had lived in four households with four different families; the themes of travel and loss became intertwined at a young age.

In 1930, Bishop enrolled at Vassar, where she majored in English Literature and co-founded the school’s literary magazine, *Con Spirito* and served as the editor of the college yearbook. The most important event of her college life occurred in 1934, however, when she first met the poet Marianne Moore. The friendship between them lasted until Moore’s death, and was instrumental in bringing Bishop to New York, where she moved after graduation. Moore wrote an introduction for the first publication Bishop received, a group of poems

in the anthology “Trial Balances.” Moreover, the two women discussed and criticized each other’s work; Bishop was heavily influenced by the interplay between formal structure, rhyme, and rhythm that is a hallmark of Moore’s work.

Bishop traveled extensively throughout her life. In the three years following her graduation she lived mostly in Paris, and took multiple trips throughout Europe, Morocco, and Florida, where she lived briefly in Key West. In 1942, on a trip through Mexico, Cuba, and Haiti, she met Lota de Macedo Soares, a Brazilian woman from a prominent family in Rio de Janeiro; in 1951 the two would begin living together in Brazil. By this time, Bishop was an acclaimed, if not wildly popular poet, having been offered a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1947, an appointment as Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress in 1949 (similar to the current position of Poet Laureate), and an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1950. However, she continued to have trouble with depression and alcoholism, problems that had not been helped by her lifestyle in New York. Her trip to Brazil was part of an around-the-world tour she hoped might be a welcome break from the pace and anxieties of the city—she later wrote to Lowell “I was miserably lonely there most of the time” (Goldensohn 9). However, upon arrival, Bishop had a violently allergic reaction to a cashew she ate, and was hospitalized for five days. Soares, who Bishop had planned to visit, invited her to extend her stay and recuperate her home, which was a meeting place for many Brazilian architects and writers. Bishop accepted and ended up staying for over a decade.

Bishop and Soares lived together intermittently in Rio, in Petropolis, and in a 17th century house in Ouro Preto, Brazil. At the beginning, Bishop’s life in Brazil had a cathartic effect on her health and poetry; she began to confront her longstanding addiction to alcohol and her depression. As her career flourished, though, their relationship began to deteriorate. The publication of “Poems:

North & South—A Cold Spring,” which combined her first book with new poems, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1955. “Questions of Travel,” her third collection, was also well received, and dealt with familiar themes of travel, displacement, and tourism: “Should we have stayed home and thought of here?” she asks in the title poem (14). However, there were significant strains in her relationship with Soares at this time, who was afflicted by her own problems with depression and anxiety. Bishop spent less and less time in Brazil, teaching instead at universities in the U.S. and coming back to Brazil intermittently. In September of 1967, while visiting Bishop in New York, Soares overdosed on sleeping pills in an apparent suicide.

After her partner’s death, Bishop lived primarily in Boston, teaching at Harvard and writing the poems that would be published in “Geography III.” She continued to travel extensively (a partial list of places includes Yugoslavia, Ecuador,

Norway, Sweden, and the Galapagos Islands), and in 1976 received the prestigious Books Abroad/Neustadt Award, the first American and first female recipient. On October 6, 1979 she died at home in Boston.

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### Works Cited

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### Discussion Questions

1. The difficulty, and pleasure, of “One Art,” is the masterful tone of the poem, which manages to incorporate many emotional registers. Where specifically do these changing tones—happy, melancholy, sardonic—surface in the poem? How are they created?
2. Read “One Art” aloud. How do its rhymes and rhythms affect a recitation? What differences do you see between the poem on the page and aloud?
3. The final command to “Write it!” is direct and urgent. But who, exactly, is being told what? Who is speaking to whom, and why is the command so striking?
4. For all the repetition, the first lines of the poem remain ambiguous. What, exactly, is “The art of losing”? Why is it an art? What other clues in the poem lead the reader to consider other meanings of “losing” and “art”?
5. “One Art” began as a piece of prose. Imagining what it might have looked like, compare its first versions to the final villanelle form. What does the poem gain by its present form? More generally, how do poems in form—sonnets, sestinas, rhymed verse—differ from free verse?
6. How much about Bishop’s life do you think we need to know in order to make the poem effective? Does the biographical “truth” matter in a poem?
7. Bishop’s language is emphatically plain: Marianne Moore said she was “spectacular in being unspectacular.” How does her style here prove this paradox? What is “unspectacular” about the poem?
8. What role does travel play in “One Art”? How many kinds of travel are represented here? How does travel appear to relate to “losing”?
9. “One Art” can be read as a kind of lesson: “Practice losing,” she tells the reader. Why would Bishop choose to frame the poem in this context? Who is giving the lesson, and who is learning it?

### Essay Ideas

1. Write a villanelle. The poem must be 6 stanzas, with 5 tercets and 1 quatrain. You may change the refrain only slightly. After you have finished, write a short paper describing the difficulties you faced in the composition—what are the factors for success in this form? What makes it challenging or interesting?
2. Bishop's "Armadillo" is a poem in conversation with Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour." The poems are addressed to the other poet, and the vision of the natural world, as it comes into contact with humans, is central to both. What fundamental differences are there in the poets' styles? How do the poems speak to these differences?
3. How would you describe the tone of "One Art"? Do its rhymes and asides seem playful or old-fashioned; formulaic or technically deft? How and why does the tone change in the poem?
4. "You'd just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves," Bishop told "Time" in 1967 for their cover story on Robert Lowell, whose Confessional style included brutal truths about his own troubled life, even excerpts from his wife's anguished letters. In the ensuing 30 years, poetry, at least in the popular imagination, seems to mean something closer to the free verse confessions of Lowell and Sylvia Plath than Bishop's formal poem, "One Art." In what ways does Bishop keep things to herself in this poem? What clues—or even confessions—does she make to the reader?
5. Compare Bishop's "The Fish" with Marianne Moore's poem of the same name. Bishop sent Moore the poem, writing that she is "afraid it is very bad, if not like Robert Frost, perhaps like Ernest Hemingway!" ("Letters" 87). How do these two poems reflect the differences and similarities of the two? How do they illustrate Moore's influence and Bishop's resistance to it?

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