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# What She's "Supposed To Do": The Lunar Erotic Poetics of Elizabeth Bishop and Brenda Shaughnessy

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**What She's "Supposed to Do": The Lunar Erotic Poetics of Elizabeth Bishop and  
Brenda Shaughnessy**

By: Jessie P. Strasbaugh

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Professor Moffat  
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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**Part 1: *Introduction. (Foreplay. Some Sexy Questions.)*.....1.**

**Part 2: *Introduction Continued. Erotic Poetics of Restraint and Directness. (Not So Much, Give Me More.)*.....4.**

**Part 3: *Lunar and Solar Language. (The Man’s in the Moon. Penetration.)*.....11.**

**Part 4: *Erotic Poetics of Restraint and Directness, Redux. (Sexual Promise. B.’s and S.’s Lunar Language(s).)*.....19.**

**Part 5: *Grounding the Dream of a Lunar Language. (Melting. Unfolding.)*.....26.**

**Part 6: *Conclusion. (Bon Voyage.)*.....37.**

**Works Cited.....40.**

## Part 1

### *Introduction. (Foreplay. Some Sexy Questions.)*

Both Elizabeth Bishop and Brenda Shaughnessy express anxiety with their erotic poetry – as well they should! For one, erotic poetry runs the risk of slipping into the pornographic, which David Lehman – in his introduction to the anthology *The Best American Erotic Poems from 1800 to the Present* – defines as that which only “appeals to the prurient interest,” losing its “literary or artistic value” (xxi). Indeed, in a letter to May Swenson about the reception of her erotic poem “The Shampoo,” Bishop intimated,

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 [Moore] among others...I'm afraid she never can face the tender passion. (qtd. in Zona 104)

She displays nervousness in this letter regarding the reactions (or lack thereof) of her friends to her erotic poem: her first instinct in wondering why it was so little mentioned is that “there was something indecent about it,” i.e. prurient, and lacking in poetic worth. And Shaughnessy exhibits a similar anxiety in her first book *Interior With Sudden Joy*: in “Simulcra,” the speaker says that “My own touch/feels like porn/in a museum still being designed” (ll.2-4), and in “Glossary [of the body, performed in absentia]” the speaker worries that “*Writing*” as “Tonguing” could “[smear]” her “place” (ll.44-46).

Yet Bishop and Shaughnessy, even after this letter and these poems, continued to write erotic poems. As a result, the concern that their erotic poetry might wander into the realm of the pornographic seems to take a backseat to their desire to articulate their erotic experiences. Indeed, there seems to be a necessity in it. Bishop, though worried about

what Moore thought, still believes her erotic experience to be of “tender passion” and not truly indecent; Shaughnessy feels that the “museum [is] still being designed.” For these women, there is a belief that their poetry *does* have poetic merit – and that it contributes somehow to the newness, the “design[ing]” of something. They kept on.

I believe that the poetic merit of Bishop’s and Shaughnessy’s erotic poetry lies in the fact that it *is* “design[ing]”: their poetry takes part in a desire to dismantle traditions that not only have prevented women from writing, but have told them the “whys” and “hows” of their bodies – and to start building from the ground up. As a result, Adrienne Rich argues, this re-building as a kind of “re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes” is an “act of survival” (35) for women. Thus, erotic poetry by women such as Bishop and Shaughnessy takes up all of these issues at once, out of necessity: the necessity to articulate their own “whys” and “hows.”

However, as I stated, Bishop and Shaughnessy still would have good reason to be concerned about erotic poetry. What *kind* of artistic merit does their erotic poetry have? What are they helping to design? What shape does the erotic poetry of these poets – as women of the twentieth century and beyond – take, and why? More concisely: what can we glean about their poetic goals from their erotic poetics?

## **I'm Over the Moon**

*-Brenda Shaughnessy*

I don't like what the moon is supposed to do.  
Confuse me, ovulate me,

spoon-feed me longing. A kind of ancient  
date-rape drug. So I'll howl at you, moon,

I'm angry. I'll take back the night. Using me  
to  
swoon at your questionable light,

you had me chasing you,  
the world's worst lover, over and over

hoping for a mirror, a whisper, insight.  
But you disappear for nights on end

with all my erotic mysteries  
and my entire unconscious mind.

How long do I try to get water from a stone?  
It's like having a bad boyfriend in a good  
band.

Better off alone. I'm going to write hard  
and fast into you moon, face-fucking.

Something you wouldn't understand.  
You with no swampy sexual

promise but what we glue onto you.  
That's not real. You have no begging

cunt. No panties ripped off and the crotch  
sucked. No lacerating spasms

sending electrical sparks through the toes.  
Stars have those.

What do you have? You're a tool, moon.  
Now, noon. There's a hero.

The obvious sun, no bullshit, the enemy  
of poets and lovers, sleepers and creatures.

But my lovers have never been able to read  
my mind. I've had to learn to be direct.

It's hard to learn that, hard to do.  
The sun is worth ten of you.

You don't hold a candle  
to that complexity, that solid craze.

Like an animal carcass on the road at night,  
picked at by crows,

haunting walkers and drivers. Your face  
regularly sliced up by the moving

frames of car windows. Your light is drawn,  
quartered, your dreams are stolen.

You change shape and turn away,  
letting night solve all night's problems alone.

*(Human Dark With Sugar 5-6)*

## **The Shampoo**

-Elizabeth Bishop

The still explosions on the rocks,  
the lichens, grow  
by spreading, gray, concentric shocks.  
They have arranged  
to meet the rings around the moon, although  
within our memories they have not changed.

And since the heavens will attend  
as long on us,  
you've been, dear friend,  
precipitate and pragmatical;  
and look what happens. For Time is  
nothing if not amenable.

The shooting stars in your black hair  
in bright formation  
are flocking where,  
so straight, so soon?  
-- Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin,  
battered and shiny like the moon. (*Bishop: Poems, Prose, and Letters* 66)

## **Part 2**

***Introduction Continued. Erotic Poetics of Restraint and Directness. (Not So Much, Give Me More.)***

In a letter to her mentee, friend, and fellow poet May Swenson regarding Swenson's book *A Cage of Spines*, Elizabeth Bishop wrote:

I don't like words like "loins," "groins," "crotch," "flanks," "thighs," etc....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. (qtd. in Zona 103)

Delicately criticizing her friend, Bishop still makes clear her aversion to Swenson's use of "ugly," anatomical words in her poetry. She anticipates Swenson's response, that they make a poem stronger, more meaningful – showing that, while aware and even understanding of the intention (she knows what has been accomplished "in the last 100 years" to enable female poets to write thus), she disagrees that such "ugly words" are necessary to accomplish these ends. Indeed, writing "strong" and "impact" in quotation marks indicates discreetly that even the use of direct terms – saying something outright – will not necessarily lead directly to a strong poem as a result. In contrast to Swenson, Bishop shows she chooses reticence in her own poetry; her reticence is also reflected in this carefully critical letter, in which she never explicitly states that she disagrees with Swenson. In response, countering Bishop's request that she not employ such "ugly words" in her poetry, Swenson became frustrated with Bishop's refusal to include what she called "a more explicit expression of sexual desire" in her own poetry" (Zona 106).

There is a myriad of criticism regarding Bishop's reticence in her poetry; Marilyn May Lombardi's *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics*, Victoria Harrison's *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy*, and in particular Kirsten Hetelling Zona's *Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and May Swenson: The Feminist Poetics of Self-Restraint* are only a few. Regardless of the reason for her aversion to unrestrained, "ugly words" in her poetry – whether it be a decision to "remain relatively mute" due to the fact that she was "condemned as a lesbian" (Lombardi 49-50), attributable to "the more conservative tenets of New Criticism or to her own shyness and sense of privacy" (Harrison 20), or an "artistic choice" (Zona 103) – all agree that this "self-restraint" is particularly characteristic of Bishop's poetics. Furthermore, in several of her early letters

to poet and friend Donald E. Stanford, she hints that she admires his “clearness...yet without...directness” (*One Art* 10), and that she hates the “ugly” nicknames her friends had given to her when she’d rather “[be] thought of as Elizabeth,” her real name (13). Written in 1933 at the age of 22 (she had begun writing poetry only a few years prior), these letters show the foundations for the mindset in which Bishop would write to Swenson in 1958.

Brenda Shaughnessy, on the other hand, tells her poetry students at Princeton University to “cut loose on the page, risk something big,” and says she “[tries] to remind them that this is their voice, this is their shot. Are they going to take a stand? Are they going to say something powerful?” (Altmann 1). To “cut loose” for Shaughnessy, then, means to cut loose from the restraint and reticence favored by Bishop; like Swenson, she favors “say[ing] something powerful” in her poetry. Furthermore, when asked in an interview about her deviation in her second book *Human Dark with Sugar* (2008) from the previously “ornate diction” of *Interior With Sudden Joy* (1999), Shaughnessy responded: “I love beautiful words, but I’ve come to mistrust them” (Casper 139). Unlike Bishop who mistrusts “ugly words,” Shaughnessy states that she has come to realize she would rather not “euphemize something harsh” (134) with “beautiful words.” That is, to utilize the “ugly words” is – for Shaughnessy – to produce a poem more “true” than it otherwise would be (140); they are more “powerful” in that they create a stronger, more meaningful poem.

The first section of Shaughnessy’s less “ornate,” more direct second book of poems *Human Dark with Sugar* is ironically entitled “Anodyne,” which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “unlikely to provoke a strong response; innocuous;

inoffensive; vapid; bland.” Yet in the first poem of this section and of the book – “I’m Over the Moon” – Shaughnessy is clearly intent on provoking just such a response, using direct and powerful language, using “ugly” and anatomical words. The tone of this poem is angry and heated, anything but “inoffensive”: the speaker is incensed with the moon, and decides – following Shaughnessy’s advice to her students at Princeton – to “take a stand” against it. She views it as a representation of that which keeps her sedated, “a kind of ancient date-rape drug” (ll.3-4) that seduces and restrains her; its light is “questionable” and untrue, incapable of producing “a mirror, a whisper, insight” (l.9) for the speaker to understand her “entire unconscious mind” (ll.12). In every respect, the speaker doesn’t “like what the moon is supposed to do” (l.1), because it restrains her from articulating herself in a way that is un-seduced and un-questionable.

As a result, the speaker of “I’m Over the Moon” decides to “take back the night”(l.5) and fight being restrained with directness; “I’ve had to learn to be direct,” she says (l.30). Using graphic, sexual language, the speaker tells the moon that she will “write hard/and fast into you, moon, face-fucking” (ll.15-16), berating it because it has “no begging/cunt. No panties ripped off and the crotch/sucked” (ll.20-22). The speaker uses an act of graphic sex to penetrate her direct language into the moon, effectively silencing its voice – insufficient for the speaker – with her own. And, after face-fucking the moon, the speaker tells it that she prefers “the obvious sun, no bullshit” (l.27), reiterating her desire for “obvious” language that does not “euphemize the harsh.” “I’m Over the Moon” exemplifies Brenda Shaughnessy’s poetics of directness – a poetics which is commandingly erotic in this poem.

Elizabeth Bishop's "The Shampoo" of her book *A Cold Spring* is also an erotic poem exhibiting the moon. However, unlike the angry, heated tone of "I'm Over the Moon," "The Shampoo" harbors a cool and silvery tenderness. Bishop's poetics of restraint are apparent from the start: though this is an erotic poem, the speaker does not imply intimacy with her lover until later on in the poem. The first stanza avoids her lover's body altogether, choosing instead to describe the natural scenery surrounding them. Even the "explosions" of the lichens are restrained, as they are "still" (l.1); nothing about this stanza is explosive, shocking, or direct. Only in the third and final stanza of the poem does the speaker finally address her lover; though, certainly, she could choose to address more various and graphic parts of her lover's body, she chooses instead to describe only her graying hair – and very indirectly, re-naming the gray as "shooting stars" (l.13). Further showing Bishop's restraint, the poem becomes erotic only at the end: the speaker is washing her naked lover in a tub (l.17). However, this nakedness – like the graying hair – is only very loosely implied; the strongest images in the poem are of lichens and the moon.

Mirroring her restraint in "The Shampoo" in her erotic description of her lover, Bishop's response to May Swenson's interpretation of the poem is "just as cagey as the poem it attends to" (Zona 100):

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. (qtd. in Zona 100)

Even here in an open letter to her friend May, Bishop only very restrainedly explains the poem, choosing not to “make explicit the link between the depictions of life with Lota and...the erotic desire...that hovers among her words” (Zona 101).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Bishop downplays the poem, calling it “little” and “simple”; she knows she does not use large, direct language to convey her erotic experience. And, though the moon plays a role in the sexuality of “The Shampoo” – it casts its light on the women and becomes the “big tin basin” (l.17) in which the speaker bathes her lover – the speaker is not “angry” with it, nor does she feel the need to “take back the night.” Indeed, the speaker reminds her lover that “the heavens will attend/as long on us” (ll.7-8); the moon of “The Shampoo” is not “a bad boyfriend in a good band” (“I’m Over the Moon,” l.14), unavailable and insufficient for the speaker’s needs. Instead, it “attend[s]” to the lovers, matching the landscape of their love (ll.2, 4-5), serving as the “big tin” vessel for their erotic relationship.

In these poems, Bishop’s and Shaughnessy’s poetics are knotted around two themes: sex and the moon. However, it is their treatment of these themes that differs so greatly. Shaughnessy’s poetics of directness means graphically sexual language in “I’m Over the Moon,” in which she configures the moon as that which restrains her; Bishop’s poetics of restraint means inexplicit language, in which she configures the moon as, not restraining, but “attending” on the erotic scene between her and her lover. It seems, to me, clear why eroticism would be entwined with such questions of restraint and directness, of

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<sup>1</sup> Lota is Lota de Macedo Soares, Bishop’s lover from 1951 to 1967 when she was living in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. (*One Art* xiii)

limiting and oversharing; these are questions of how we convey meaning poetically, of why and in what way poetry is capable of articulating both emotional and physical experience. The erotic, then, as a deep meshing of the two, is a particularly ripe poetic subject. The methods of holding back and cutting loose, of taking away and giving more, are also inherently erotic; which feels better, according to the poet's preference? Which accomplishes the desired result?

More compelling to investigate, then, is the other common denominator in these poems that exemplify the erotic poetics of each poet: the moon. Why does the moon become an anchor for the erotic poetics of both Bishop and Shaughnessy? What about the moon invites questions of not only sex, but of the limits and capabilities of language?

### Part 3

#### *Lunar and Solar Language. (The Man's in the Moon. Penetration.)*

Though the moon is figured in both of these poems, it binds them to one another in much more profound ways than by its presence alone. The moon is imbued with masculine ideals of femininity and sexuality; any poem which uses it must echo the male voice. For female poets as Bishop and Shaughnessy, then, to make use of the moon in their poetry becomes a complicated task. Do they gaze upon it in the same way as male poets? Does it matter, if the latter have historically been the moongazers, and if we only know the moon through their eyes? And, if so, how do Bishop and Shaughnessy re-figure the moon on their own terms?

Inevitably, the question of using the moon as a poetic symbol becomes a question of gender and agency; it becomes a question of how and why male poets have made the moon female. The centrality of the masculine as the definer of terms and exclusions, as the set of ideals which projects itself onto that which it determines determines it, Judith Butler calls “phallogocentrism”:

Disavowed, the remnant of the feminine survives as the *inscriptional space* of that phallogocentrism, the specular surface which receives the marks of a masculine signifying act only to give back a (false) reflection and guarantee of phallogocentric self-sufficiency, without making any contribution of its own. (*Bodies That Matter* 39)

The moon is just such a “specular surface,” its light a reflection that is “false” because it is not equal to the bodies that matter: the moon itself, and the woman *herself*, which the moon is “supposed” (Shaughnessy, “I’m Over the Moon” 1.1) to represent metonymically.

Indeed, all it truly represents is “phallogocentric self-sufficiency”: the capability of the phallus, or the summation of masculine power to create and uphold binaries by penetrating/signifying the “specular surface,” to act on its own. Thus, the phallus alone – not the “receptacle,” as Butler calls that space it penetrates (41) – can say what is and what is not.

However, according to Butler, understanding that what we “know” of masculinity and femininity is determined – and therefore limited – within a phallogocentric system of belief is not enough to disassemble this system. Indeed, it may even take part in it. She examines Luce Irigaray’s deconstructionist criticism of Plato’s *Timaeus*, in which Irigaray exposes his production of the feminine as the “constitutive outside” to a “phallogocentric economy”; that is, the production of the feminine by the masculine, in order to define the masculine by that which it is not (47). Butler questions Irigaray’s deconstruction of *Timaeus* via the strategic mimesis of Plato’s rhetorical technique, arguing that Irigaray relies on the idea of the feminine as that which is perpetually “outside”; in this respect, she cannot escape the phallogocentricism – or, more specifically, the gender binary it forges – that she wants to dismantle through its exposure.

Similarly, in *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick describes the nature of the binary as something inherently inescapable; the categories of the masculine/feminine binary, for instance,

actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinate to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B. (9-10)

Here, Sedgwick reiterates that the categories of the binary depend upon one another to exist, and that their identities are predicated upon agency and subordination, inclusion and exclusion; term A, the masculine, is “ontologically valorized” because it possesses the power to shape its existence by shaping term B, the feminine. Furthermore, like Butler, Sedgwick argues that to deconstruct the binary – as Irigaray does – is not adequate to mediate it (10); rather, to attempt to disable it in this way will invariably re-engage in it, in a “[competition] for the material or rhetorical leverage required to set the terms of, and to profit in some way from, the operations of such an incoherence of definition” (11). Both Butler and Sedgwick nod to Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* here; power, as he argues, is omnipresent (93) and inextricably entwined with knowledge (98). Binaries frame the all-encompassing, cosmos-shaping power struggle for epistemological agency: the agency to hold the upper hand in a contestation of two “opposites,” to articulate that which is “true” about each in a system of identification through difference. For Butler and Sedgwick, there is no space, no means of identification outside of these binaries.

Adrienne Rich, like Irigaray, sees this problem of the phallogocentrically-created gender binary as a problem entwined with rhetorical agency, and more generally language; however, she is keenly aware that mimesis –the “penetrat[ing], occup[ying], and redeploy[ing] [of] the paternal language itself” (Butler 45) – will not solve it. The title of her 1976 collection of poems, *The Dream of a Common Language*, encapsulates her desire for an escape from “othering” as a masculine means to establish identity;

Rich's "common language" means a non-referential language for women, existing without the "master's discourse" (Butler 52) and within that which it *is* rather than what it is *not*.<sup>2</sup>

I argue that this "Dream of a Common Language" is very much a nighttime dream, a desire for a purely lunar language that does not require a solar language to exist. The solar language is the language of the masculine term A in the gender binary, that which uses term B – the feminine – as a "specular surface" onto which it projects and articulates masculine ideals. Sunbeams, therefore, are phallic: they penetrate the moon, illuminating its existence as something other, something unmasculine – that is, feminine – while simultaneously illuminating their own power to do the projecting and penetrating.<sup>3</sup> The feminine moon, then, is only a "receptacle" for the sun's light; it does not possess its own. As Butler and Sedgwick would argue, the sun and moon – in such a binarism – are dependent upon one another for existence. However, the sun remains the primary identifier, the perpetual term A; solar language is the masculine, "master's discourse," elucidating its identity because it has the agency to elucidate that which is outside it. It is this solar language with which female writers – Bishop, Shaughnessy, Rich, Butler, Sedgwick, and Irigaray are only a few – contend. Is solar language, a phallogocentric expression of power, sufficient to articulate the feminine experience outside it? Or, rather, is a lunar language – Rich's "common language," the language of women – possible without sunlight, without the masculine? Can the moon possess its own non-reflecting,

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<sup>2</sup> "Whatever happens, this is." (Rich, "(The Floating Poem, Unnumbered)" l.12)

<sup>3</sup> For a history of the sun as a masculine poetic symbol, see Erich Neumann's essay "The Moon and Matriarchal Consciousness" in *The Fear of the Feminine and Other Essays on Feminine Psychology*.

non-referential light, phasing out of the gender binary to express its existence on its own terms? What must a lunar language entail?<sup>4</sup>

These questions of solar and lunar language become erotic in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and Brenda Shaughnessy. Understandably so: the sun/moon binary – as an expression of the larger masculine/feminine binary – means penetration and reception, sex and childbirth. The moon, in particular, is highly eroticized, because male poets have historically linked the moon to the female body as an object of heterosexual desire. Thus, the moon becomes a receptacle for heterosexual ideals: its lunar cycle mirrors the woman’s menstrual cycle, its connection to water – where life begins, where life is promoted – connects it to the womb. As a result, its “claim” upon the mothering aspects of the female anatomy results in what Adrienne Rich calls in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* “the maternal principle” (83): the phallogocentric principle that dictates the ultimate purpose of the female body as a vessel for new life, the principle of the female existence as mother. The moon is mother, and the mother is woman; this metaphor has wound its way into poetry for centuries. To conflate woman with the maternal principle inherent to the moon as symbol is to imply several things about women, or what women ought to be: fertile, mothering, and heterosexual. Regardless of whether or not the moon is poetically drawn into a catachresis – what Butler defines as “those figures that function improperly as an improper transfer of sense, the use of a proper name to describe that which does not properly belong to it” (37) – sex is inherent to this symbol, and the sum of

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<sup>4</sup> I use the terms “solar language” and “lunar language” from here on as a method of bridging the gap between the sun and moon as celestial objects and the binary of the masculine/feminine as a terrestrial construct which assigns meaning to them via language. Ultimately, solar and lunar languages 1) are the languages of the masculine and feminine, respectively; 2) take shape metaphorically in the images of/relationship between the sun and moon, but are not limited to these; 3) are interdependent; 4) are dissimilar in that “lunar language” is also bound to the desire (“dream”) to escape this interdependence.

woman becomes her sexual organs and nurturing breasts. The moon is, therefore, a traditionally erotic poetic figure; more important to note, however, is that its connotations are erotic because male poets have deemed them so.

However, it is not only the moon's given connotations that feminize and eroticize it; the act of giving it these connotations is in itself erotic. As argued, to project female principles onto the moon – in particular the maternal principle – is simultaneously to project the necessity of the male onto her. That is, the concepts of fertility, motherhood, and heterosexuality are all entwined with the existence of a male other; he is necessary to bring these female characteristics to full fruition. Such poetic, male moon-gazing, then, is not only scopophilic appreciation of the eroticism of her celestial body; it is a penetration of the essentiality of the male existence into the female. Thus, I add to Rich's definition of the "maternal principle" and argue that heterosexuality is its most important aspect – and that, subsequently, moon poetry with all of its implications has been a male-perpetuated endeavor for centuries. For Bishop and Shaughnessy, then, as female poets gazing upon the moon, these implications are especially troublesome; particularly if, as Adrienne Rich argues, "biological motherhood has long been used as a reason for condemning women to a role of powerlessness and subservience in the social order" (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* 77). It is these tensions – of agency versus powerlessness, the gazer versus the gazed-upon – to which the female, poetic re-figuring of the moon is tied. I argue that these tensions, like the feminine characteristics of fertility and motherhood, are erotic by nature; the woman's naked, heterosexually-sexy, mothering body as a metonymic extension of her existence is where this eroticism resides. However, the eroticism *exists* because – as Rich argues – "these principles (truly male vs. truly female)

have been split apart and set in antagonism within each of us by a male-dominated intellectual and political heritage” (78). That is, the female body – and the moon – became erotic in poetry only when the eroticism was “gazed” onto them by solar language, penetrated into them out of a “truly male,” phallic necessity couched in desire. The concept of the “man in the moon,” then, does not imply that the moon is male, but rather that the moon is a reflection of male ideals. Thus Bishop and Shaughnessy, in re-figuring the moon as symbol in their poetry, must also re-figure the eroticism inherent to this voyeuristic “antagonism” by which the man projects himself onto it.

John Donne’s poem “A Valediction of Weeping,” for instance, exemplifies this erotic projection. Using solar language to figure his lover, the speaker describes her as moon-like (“more than moon” [l.19]), asking her “draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere” (l.20) and telling her that she bears his tears; her “face coins them” as though they were her children, and they are “fruits of much grief” (ll.4,7). And in John Milton’s poem “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” as well as in *Paradise Lost*, the moon is represented by Ashtaroth or Ishtar, Phoenician goddess of the moon and fertility; the eroticism of the image comes forth with particular clarity in Book IV of *Paradise Lost* when she “unveil[s]” herself, “and o’er the dark her silver mantle threw” (ll. 598-609), showing her naked light. These poems, though both written during the Renaissance era, exemplify the stronghold which the moon as an erotic, feminine symbol has had on canonical works; in essence, they exemplify the tradition with which female poets such as Bishop and Shaughnessy – when “unveil[ing]” the moon in their own poetry – must contend. Bishop, certainly, was no stranger to the works of Donne or Milton; in letters to Donald E. Stanford, she discusses Donne’s own poetics which she admires (*One Art* 10,

13) and, in a letter to Robert Lowell, she teases that “no one in that village [in which her grandmother grew up] has opened a Milton...for years now” (408). And I would argue that Shaughnessy, too, is familiar with the same canonical works; she received her B.A. in literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz (Bishop graduated with the same from Vassar in 1934). I feel it safe to assume both Bishop and Shaughnessy as well-read, with an understanding of the masculine, poetic traditions they are deliberately re-figuring in their poems; by no means is it a coincidence that both women go to the moon as a highly meaningful place to begin this re-figuring.

#### Part 4

#### *Erotic Poetics of Restraint and Directness, Redux. (Sexual Promise. B.'s and S.'s*

#### *Lunar Language(s).)*

How do Bishop and Shaughnessy, then, accomplish this re-figuring of the moon as a powerfully gendered poetic symbol – and do they attempt to establish a lunar language to do so? As argued, the moon and the eroticism of Bishop and Shaughnessy's poems go hand in hand. However, the erotic poetics of each poet – in this case, *how* they make the moon erotic – differ not only from the masculine conception of the same, they differ from one another, and greatly.

Knowing the layers of meaning which permeate the moon – including their origins, and the methods by which they have come to reside there – elucidates why the speaker of “I’m Over the Moon” would be so angry with it. That is, “what the moon is supposed to do” (l.1) has been assigned to it by a phallogocentric economy, by solar language, implicating the poet as a woman; it is “supposed” to control her ovulation (l.2) and fertility, as well as “all [her] erotic mysteries/and [her] entire unconscious mind” (ll.11-12). The moon lays claim to the woman's “erotic mysteries” because it represents the sexuality of her body; these are part of her “unconscious mind” because she is “supposed” to know unconsciously (that is, inherently, and without needing tangible proof) that the principle of her existence is that she is feminine (that is, not masculine) and erotic. However, the moon as a representation of the “unconscious mind” has another implication for a female poet: it is associated with the “unsystematic spiritual or intellectual productivity of original humankind” which belongs to the “Feminine,” according to Erich Neumann's essay “The Moon and Matriarchal Consciousness” in *The*

*Fear of the Feminine and Other Essays on Feminine Psychology*. The moon, therefore, is a locus of deep creativity because “it is the regenerative power of the unconscious that does its work during sleep, in the darkness of the night or in the light of the moon, as a mystery and in mystery, from out of itself, from nature, without the influence of consciousness” (Neumann 101). Thus, not only does the moon control the female speaker’s body, it is also the point where her creative energies must converge; it is “supposed” to be her muse, as it was for male poets of yore. But the speaker knows that the moon is not a true “mirror” (l.9), or “specular surface” (Butler 39) for her experience which she wishes to express poetically; there is no “woman in the moon,” and she uses the idea of the new moon – when it disappears – to indicate that it is not adequate for her erotic poetic endeavors. She understands, most of all, that the moon has “no swampy sexual/promise but what we glue onto [it]” (ll.18-19); the traditional poetic use of the moon as metaphor for woman’s existence will *always* be inadequate, because what it is “supposed to do” has been assigned to it phallogocentrically. “How long do I try to get water from a stone?” (l.13) the speaker asks, and it is a logical question: how exactly can the moon, little more than a stone floating in space, afford water – the womb-water, where life and creativity begin? The speaker is angry with the moon because the eroticism – with which solar language has imbued it – is not attuned to her own “erotic mysteries.”

More importantly, however, the speaker knows that this solar language is insufficient for her creative expression; to counter what “the moon is supposed to do,” she says she will “*write hard/and fast into you, moon, face-fucking*” (l.16, my emphasis). By making writing an act of face-fucking the moon – very direct language – the speaker

wants to overcome its words with her own; in this way, the speaker indicates her desire for lunar language, a language sufficient to articulate her erotic female experience without necessitating the solar. However, the speaker's poetic face-fucking – a desire for lunar language – becomes complicated for two reasons. First, in order to establish a lunar language, the speaker must acquire a phallus herself to effectively silence the moon's "voice." For the speaker to face-fuck the moon is not only a masculine sexual act, but it is a re-penetration of her ideas into the moon; though she acknowledges that the moon has

...no swampy sexual

promise but what we glue onto you.

That's not real. You have no begging

cunt. No panties ripped off and the crotch

sucked...(ll.18-22)

she still anthropomorphizes it, "glue[ing]" "sexual promise" onto the moon in order to poetically face-fuck it. Here, the speaker deviates from the feminine sexuality the moon is supposed to represent in her; she becomes masculine, the one with the penis, the penetrator rather than the penetrated. Yet in the act of re-penetrating the moon, the speaker does not fully establish a female, non-referential language; like Luce Irigaray, she uses "mimesis" to expose that the feminine is created by the masculine – acquiring a phallus herself and re-engaging in the binary by re-establishing the moon as feminine, other, and receiving (a "receptacle" [Butler 41]) using large and graphic, solar language. Second, the speaker acknowledges that she prefers the direct light of "the obvious sun, no bullshit" (l.27). The speaker admonishes the moon because its "light is drawn,/quartered, [its] dreams are stolen" (ll.39-40); it can't "hold a candle" (l.33) to the sun's light because

its light is reflective and not original. Thus, the speaker exhibits her desire for a lunar language – an independent, feminine language, which does not “euphemize” her experience – and yet sees no other solution but to acquire a phallus and use the more powerful solar language to express herself. In this way, the speaker seeks “the material or rhetorical leverage required to set the terms of, and to profit in some way from, the operations of such an incoherence of definition [in the binarism of solar/lunar relations]” (Sedgwick 11). Shaughnessy’s erotic poetics of directness, then, arises from a desire to establish a lunar language – to escape this binarism which provides no true “mirror...whisper, insight” (l.9) for a female poet as the perpetual term B. However, the speaker cannot fully escape; her “mimesis” of the solar language – though couched in a desire for a lunar – only puts a different face on the moon.

Bishop’s “The Shampoo” also becomes more meaningful when considering the implications of the moon as a phallogocentrically-formed poetic symbol. Foremost, the poem is removed from the heterosexual, “maternal principle” within the moon; as Bishop intimates to Swenson in her letter, it was written for her lover Lota. The poem is an erotic love poem, therefore, between two women. No phalli are involved, and neither woman’s purpose, nor “principle” in their relationship is to produce children. Furthermore, the moon of “The Shampoo” is no longer a symbol of fertility; the speaker implies that the body of her lover is aging, saying,

The shooting stars in your black hair  
 in bright formation  
 are flocking where,  
 so straight, so soon? (ll.13-16)

Bishop describes these lines in the same letter to May Swenson: “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” (Zona 100). Lota’s hair is graying as is Bishop’s; she wrote “The Shampoo” when she was forty-two. The lovers, then, are nearing menopause, and the moon further loses its connotations of fertility and childbirth; Ashtaroth is noticeably missing in this poem. Yet the moon as symbol of mothering remains: the speaker is washing her lover’s hair “in this big tin basin,/battered and shiny like the moon” (ll.17-18) as a mother washes her child. The moon is still the vessel by which mothering takes place – and in this sense is womb-like, retaining echoes of solar language – yet not in the traditional sense; it is not fully a “receptacle” (Butler 41) for masculine ideals because it does not require a male body, nor does it command the menstrual cycles of the speaker or her lover. Instead, the mothering itself is erotic and not the product of an erotic experience, i.e. sexual intercourse between a man and a woman; the speaker is washing her naked lover in a tub. In these respects, “The Shampoo” is removed both from the heterosexuality projected onto the moon by solar language, as well as from the heterosexuality which the speaker of “I’m Over the Moon” feels forced to retain. The women experience an eroticism with one another, regardless of the absence of men.

Moreover, the moon of “The Shampoo” is not directly linked to the erotic experience: the moon is not equated with the lover as in Donne’s “A Valediction of Weeping” or in “I’m Over the Moon.” Yet its presence still casts an erotic light on the poem, and one that is much more tangible than for male poets gazing with longing into

the sky; the terrestrial and the celestial bind in “The Shampoo,” as “The still explosions on the rocks...have arranged to meet the rings around the moon” (ll.1, 4-5), the stars shoot through the lover’s hair (l.13), and the tub itself is moonlike (l.18). By removing the distance between the speaker/gazer and the metaphor-laden moon, Bishop mediates the “antagonism” (Rich 78) that exists between them; she and her lover, both women, both entwined with the moon and with each other, experience a lunar eroticism very different from what they are “supposed” to experience. Shaughnessy accomplishes a similar feat: tired of a moon that “spoon-feed[s] her longing” (l.3) – that is, forces her to know the distance between herself and it in a relationship – she forces herself upon it in turn, using direct (and solar) language to bind the terrestrial and celestial and place herself in it. In this sense, both Bishop and Shaughnessy show their desire to have the moon know *them*. By becoming one with the moon, by bridging the gap between the human body and the heavenly, they hope to use it as an accurate “specular surface” (touching flesh instead of glass) by which they can poetically articulate the feminine realities of their erotic experience.

## Why Is the Color of Snow?

*-Brenda Shaughnessy*

Let's ask a poet with no way of knowing.  
Someone who can give us an answer,  
another duplicity to help double the world.

What kind of poetry is all question, anyway?  
Each question leads to an iceburn,  
a snownova, a single bed spinning in space.

Poet, Decide! I am lonely with questions.  
What is snow? What isn't?  
Do you see how it is for me.

Melt yourself to make yourself more clear  
for the next observer.  
I could barely see you anyway.

A blizzard I understand better,  
the secrets of many revealed as one,  
becoming another on my only head.

It's true that snow takes on gold from sunset  
and red from rearlights. But that's occasional.  
What is constant is white,

or is that only sight, a reflection of  
eyewhites  
and light? Because snow reflects only itself,  
self upon self upon self,

is a blanket used for smothering, for  
sleeping.  
For not seeing the naked, flawed body.  
Concealing it from the lover curious, ever  
curious!

Who won't stop looking.  
White for privacy.  
Millions of privacies to bless us with snow.

Don't we melt it?  
Aren't we human dark with sugar hot to melt  
it?  
Anyway, the question—

if a dream is a construction then what  
is not a construction? If a bank of snow  
is an obstruction, then what is not a bank of  
snow?

A winter vault of valuable crystals  
convertible for use only by a zen  
sun laughing at us.

Oh Materialists! Thinking matter matters.  
If we dream of snow, of banks and blankets  
to keep our treasure safe forever,

what world is made, that made us that we  
keep  
making and making to replace the dreaming  
at last.  
To stop the terrible dreaming.

*(Human Dark With Sugar 9-10)*

**Vague Poem (*Vaguely Love Poem*)***-Elizabeth Bishop*

The trip west –  
 -- I think I dreamed that trip.  
 They talked a lot of “rose rocks”  
 or maybe “rock roses”  
 -- I’m not sure now, but someone tried to get  
 me some.  
 (And two or three students had.)

She said she had some at her house.  
 They were by the back door, she said.  
 -- A ramshackle house.  
 And army house? No, “a Navy house.” Yes,  
 that far inland.  
 There was nothing by the back door but dirt  
 or that same dry, monochrome, sepia straw  
 I’d seen everywhere.  
 Oh she said the dog has carried them off.  
 (A big black dog, female, was dancing  
 around us.)

Later, as we drank tea from mugs, she found  
 one,  
 “a sort of one.” “This one is just beginning.  
 See –  
 you can see here, it’s beginning to look like  
 a rose.  
 It’s – well, a crystal, crystals form –  
 I don’t know any geology myself ...”  
 (Neither did I.)  
 Faintly, I could make out – perhaps – in the  
 dull,  
 rose-red lump of, apparently, soil

a rose-like shape; faint glitters ... Yes,  
 perhaps  
 there was a secret, powerful crystal at work  
 inside.

I almost saw it: turning into a rose  
 without any of the intervening  
 roots, stem, buds, and so on; just  
 earth to rose and back again.  
 Crystallography and its laws:  
 something I once wanted badly to study,  
 until I learned that it would involve a lot of  
 arithmetic,  
 that is, mathematics.

Just now, when I saw you naked again,  
 I thought the same words: rose-rock, rock-  
 rose ...  
 Rose, trying, working, to show itself,  
 forming, folding over,  
 unimaginable connections, unseen, shining  
 edges.  
 Rose-rock, unformed, flesh beginning,  
 crystal by crystal,  
 clear pink breasts and darker, crystalline  
 nipples,  
 rose-rock, rose-quartz, roses, roses, roses,  
 exacting roses from the body,  
 and the even darker, accurate, rose of sex –

(*Edgar Allen Poe & The Juke-Box 152-153*)

**Part 5*****Grounding the Dream of a Lunar Language. (Melting. Unfolding.)***

The problems of engendered poetic agency, lunar versus solar language, and the erotic as a medium in which these steep do not revolve solely around the moon in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and Brenda Shaughnessy. Though the moon serves as an anchoring point for these issues in “I’m Over the Moon” and “The Shampoo,” they take

varying shape in the poets' other poems. The moon is a space of intense contention between female poet and masculine tradition, signified and signifier, receptacle and beam; in this sense, it is no wonder that Bishop and Shaughnessy both choose to go to the moon to re-configure their subject position and to effect change. Yet equally important is how these endeavors play out in their moonless poems: how are these problems configured outside of the moon? Do these poems help us determine if the poets believe they can establish a lunar language? Do they help us determine if *we* believe Bishop and Shaughnessy can?

Shaughnessy's poem "Why Is the Color of Snow?" of *Human Dark With Sugar*, like "I'm Over the Moon," exemplifies Shaughnessy's erotic poetics of directness – and her desire for a lunar language – without face-fucking the moon to do so. The speaker discusses the need to decide "What is snow?," which she views as a representation of that which keeps the truth of the self hidden:

Because snow reflects only itself,  
self upon self upon self,  
is a blanket used for smothering, for sleeping.

For not seeing the naked, flawed body. (ll.20-23)

Snow, as something that "reflects," hides the reality of the body and its experience. In her interview with Robert N. Casper, Shaughnessy discusses this reality as a "flawed" beauty:

It seems to me like beauty has turned into the concept of perfection, or youth, or something that's much more computer-generated. And I just cannot accept that definition of beauty. [It's] about truth being beauty, about the reality of what it is to be a human being as something

beautiful...perfection is not the goal. If you imagine perfection or the merely pretty as being some kind of apex of human experience, you're not ever going to be surprised. (135-136)

This imperfect yet real beauty is what the snow, like the moon, hides, because it possesses an indirect and “questionable” light; neither moon nor snow is the source of the illumination itself, and – because both serve as a receptacle for light (“snow takes on gold from sunset/and red from rearlights” [ll.16-17]) – they ultimately only “conceal” (l.24) the erotic reality of the body. As in “I’m Over the Moon,” the speaker wants to break the mirror that poorly reflects; she says, “melt yourself to make yourself more clear/for the next observer./I could barely see you anyway” (ll.10-12). The speaker realizes that the subject is bound to the snow that “defines”/conceals her; she becomes herself a reflection of solar light and language, and must “melt” into true clarity before the truth of her “naked, flawed body” can be seen.

The poem “Voluptuary” of *Interior With Sudden Joy* also uses the “naked, flawed body” as an emblem of this erotic truth:

If you haven't known the true faulty  
 pleasure of half-beauty, the sublime uncomely,  
 dreamt without vision two hot marble arches  
 round your vague orca trumpet of a thigh,  
 then why would you love me? And how does  
 fever break without liquid, without spilling?  
 What woman cannot speak of strumpets? (ll.13-19)

Here the speaker shows she is aware that real beauty is “faulty” (she uses the example of thighs comparable with whales and trumpets!); however, this “half-beauty” is “true,” and cannot be truly loved if it is not “known” or understood. To understand such beauty, then, requires “break” and spillage of language; it necessitates that Shaughnessy “speak of strumpets” regardless of what a phallogocentric economy says that feminine beauty is. Throughout the poem, the speaker uses unconventional, “uncomely” language to describe beauty and love (which, like the moon, are two traditional themes for poetry; Petrarch comes particularly to mind) – language such as “kink” (l.1); “vinegar love” (l.6); “uriny fire” (l.7); “blister, wizen” (l.25); “a thick,/ dark, hairy heart, full to pluck or comb” (ll.30-31). After all, “Who wants pretty, when pretty is plain/and the heart is gnarled...” (ll.26-27)? Shaughnessy re-addresses this theme in “Dear Gonglya” of *Interior with Sudden Joy*: “The most inscrutable beautiful names in this world/always do sound like diseases” (ll.1-2). “Voluptuary” and “Dear Gonglya” as well as Casper’s interview show that Shaughnessy believes to “learn to be direct” as in “I’m Over the Moon” often means learning ugliness. In this way, it is possible to clear the snowy veneer from the “naked, flawed” truth of experience.

However, unlike in these poems, the speaker of “Why Is the Color of Snow?” also shows awareness that “If a dream is a construction, then what/is not a construction? If a bank of snow/is an obstruction, then what is not a bank of snow?” (ll.31-33). That is, she knows that everything – dreams, banks of snow, moons – are simultaneously constructions and obstructions; there is nothing but the symbol and terms A and B, who fight for the right to signify it. These, she says, are the vital questions which she poses to the poet (l.30); however, she knows the poet (like Shaughnessy herself) has “no way of

knowing” (l.1) and will only provide an answer that is part of “another duplicity to help double the world” (l.3). Regardless of whether the poet adopts a solar language or a lunar language, both only reflect off of the snow that “smother[s]” all (l.22); the poet is caught, constantly, in duplicity – in a binary. Yet the speaker still desires a lunar language – a non-referential language that shows the beautiful imperfection of the “naked, flawed body” – which becomes her demand, “Melt yourself.” Indeed, the lunar language of the poem, as in “I’m Over the Moon,” harbors Shaughnessy’s poetics of directness; it is characterized by these direct imperatives – “Let’s ask” (l.1), “Poet, decide!” (l.7), “Melt yourself” (l.10) – and aggressive declarations: “But that’s occasional.” (l.17), “White for privacy.” (l. 26), “Oh Materialists! Thinking matter matters” (l.37).<sup>5</sup> Though Shaughnessy’s lunar language – comprised of her poetics of directness – is not graphically sexual here as in “I’m Over the Moon,” she still leaves us with the image of the “naked, flawed body”; perhaps her lack of graphic language is representative of the “smothering” snow which prevents us from seeing it clearly. However, her poetics of directness is still apparent in the strong, authoritative voice in “Why Is the Color of Snow?” This is a marked difference from Zona’s explanation of Bishop’s poetics of restraint, in which her vagueness arises largely from a “surrender of ultimate authority that authorship can seem to confer” (2). Shaughnessy’s lunar language necessitates, by contrast, an *assertion* of this authority – which is apparent in both “I’m Over the Moon” and “Why Is the Color of Snow?”. On the other hand, the speaker seems to be trying out

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<sup>5</sup> I have to believe Shaughnessy is referring to Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* here; I also think they would disagree with each other, at least in part. Butler says, “I want to ask how and why ‘materiality’ has become a sign of irreducibility” (28) – essentially, how and why matter has become an essentialist notion – arguing that matter only “matters” when it is constructed to matter. And though Shaughnessy seems to take issue with materialists thinking that matter has its own, inherent meaning, I would argue that she still believes (or wants to believe) that there is a “naked, flawed” truth in the matter of the body which needs to be conveyed.

a different voice here; the poem uses direct language to look at the mimesis more than enacting it. Yet the only conclusion the speaker comes to is

If we dream of snow, of banks and blankets  
to keep our treasure safe forever,  
what world is made, that made us that we keep  
making and making to replace the dreaming at last.

To stop the terrible dreaming. (ll.38-42)

The end of the poem illuminates an important facet of Rich's "Dream of a Common Language" and of my definition of lunar language; we dream of a common, lunar language outside of the antagonistic binary of engendered poetic agency, so that ultimately we no longer have to dream it – so that we can "stop the terrible dreaming" to live it. Lunar language is bound to this hope. Yet the speaker can only dream of "snow...banks and blankets" and moons; all she can do is "[make] and [make]," constructing the world around her. "Why is the Color of Snow?" seems to be a sobered afterthought to the caustic and even violent "I'm Over the Moon"; here, the speaker believes that neither lunar nor solar language can melt the snow, nor "stop the terrible dreaming."

Bishop's speaker, as well, returns to the same themes in "Vague Poem (*Vaguely Love Poem*)."

Like "The Shampoo," Bishop's poetics of restraint are apparent in this poem, though (as Harrison argues) it is the "most intimate" (204) of her works. Its title, for instance, indicates that it will not be overtly erotic; rather, it will be "vague." This vagueness, indeed, characterizes the entire poem; though it is intended to be a "love poem," the intimacy between the speaker and the lover (as in "The Shampoo") is never

stated explicitly, and the poem itself takes on a “*dreamed*” tone – with unclear and shifting images, with a general uncertainty about that which is true. This uncertainty is already apparent in the first stanza:

The trip west –  
 --I think I *dreamed* that trip.  
 They talked a lot of “rose rocks”  
 or maybe “rock roses”  
 --I’m not sure now, but someone tried to get me some.  
 (And two or three students had.) (ll.1-6)

The first stanza shows that this poem will be “vague” and only “vaguely” about love; not only has the speaker not yet introduced her lover, but her “trip west” seems “*dreamed*,” and she is “not sure” of the difference between ““rose rocks”” and ““rock roses”,” nor about who “tried to [get] her some.” What Zona calls the “surrender of ultimate authority that authorship can seem to confer” as characteristic of Bishop’s poetics of restraint is apparent here; she restrains herself from delving into the love in the “love poem” right away, as well as from making even the most basic claim that what she is about to address is real and has “authority” – that is, that it is not “*dreamed*.” The tentativeness, the “mysteriousness” which Swenson found difficult to understand, pervades the poem in its hesitant prose: ““a sort of one.”” (l.16); ““I don’t know any geology myself...’ (Neither did I.)” (ll.19-20); ““Faintly, I could make out – perhaps –” (l.21); ““I *almost* saw it” (l.25). Unlike Bishop’s authoritative and direct lunar language in “I’m Over the Moon” and “Why Is the Color of Snow?,” Bishop’s lunar language in “Vague Poem (*Vaguely Love Poem*)” is characteristically restrained – and, based on the title, self-consciously so.

Perhaps the greatest point of self-restraining vagueness in this poem is the image Bishop chooses to stand in for its eroticism: the rose-rock. In *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics*, Marilyn May Lombardi provides an interesting reading of the implications of the rose rock as a metaphor for female sexuality. Lombardi argues:

[Elizabeth Bishop] came to recognize that the use of the rose as a literary symbol of the most secret and treasured recesses of the female body was hopelessly mired in an ancient misogynistic tradition. The quest romance, with its rapacious hero and its mutely yielding prize, provided the basis for the way literature traditionally viewed woman (an object to be won) and nature (a body to be mastered). ... Her published poems for and about women tend to subvert [this] courtly love tradition, which so often describes the aroused female body as a welcoming rose. (75)

As she had treated the moon in "The Shampoo," Bishop subverts a phallogocentric poetic tradition again in this poem, utilizing the metaphor of the rose as woman only "vaguely": the woman is not actually a rose, but a "rose-rock" – a crystalline formation shaped *like* a rose – that the speaker thinks of when she sees her lover naked again. In this sense Bishop's rose-rock is a metaphor for a metaphor, removing itself from a phallogocentric poetic institution in its obscurity. However, the speaker, though knowing that hers is a "Vague Poem" and remaining tentative about displaying the "ultimate authority that authorship can seem to confer" – that is, calling a rose a rose – feels regardless that "Yes, perhaps/there was a secret, powerful crystal at work inside" (ll. 24-25) the rose-rock, a truth that is "trying, working, to show itself" (l.35): the "even darker, accurate, rose of sex" (l.42). The lover's body is only described in terms of this rose-rock: "clear pink

breasts and darker, crystalline nipples” (l.39), which is *very* restrained in comparison to Shaughnessy’s “begging cunt” and “the crotch sucked.” Yet though these images be more



**Rose-rocks, known for their abundance in Oklahoma, are crystalline formations of barite crystals and sand, shaped like a rose and of a reddish hue.<sup>6</sup>**

obscure and “darker,” they can still be “accurate”; the accuracy may be there “in the dull,/rose-red lump of, apparently, soil” (ll.32-33) Furthermore, it is important that this “accurate rose of sex” be a rose-rock, and that it be “vague” in this respect: real roses, the “rock-rose” bush with which the speaker initially confuses the rose-rock, have “intervening/roots, stem, buds, and so on” (ll.37-38). If the rose is traditionally representative of the “aroused female

body,” the “roots, stems, buds, and so on” are the body parts; their names are too graphic, too exact, too “intervening.” Bishop chooses to utilize, instead, the rock-rose – which is “just/earth to rose and back again” (ll.27-28) to convey the “even darker, accurate, rose of sex.” In this respect, Bishop beats around the bush: she rejects the metaphor of the “rock roses” shrub for the more solid, “accurate” (if metaphorically more vague) image of the rock-rose, using indirect language to avoid “intervening[ly]” graphic terms (like “bush,” for instance).

Bishop, interestingly, re-connects the idea of poetic accuracy to the moonlight in “The Man-Moth” of her book *North & South*. Kathleen Spivack, in her article “Conceal/Reveal: Passion and Restraint in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop, or: Why We Care About Elizabeth Bishop’s Poetry,” offers an analysis of these themes; the man-moth

<sup>6</sup> “Nature’s Oddities.” *Two Guys Fossils*, 17. Dec 2009. <http://www.twoguysfossils.com>. Web. 21 April 2010.

is a creature who desperately desires to see the moon, because he “is seeking contact, light, the outside of things” (498). Though he “does not see the moon” (l.6) – as the speaker of “Vague Poem (*Vaguely Love Poem*)” does not understand “crystallography and its laws” (l.28) – he still longs for it, desirous of kicking himself loose from the “artificial tunnels and dream recurrent dreams” (l.33). Again, this is the dream for a lunar, poetic accuracy, in which the speaker of “Why Is the Color of Snow?” feels immersed; the man-moth, too, seeks communion with the moon, a communion which would remove him from the artificiality of the life he knows, from the “recurrent dreams” of escape which are never realized. However, “he fails, of course, and falls back scared but quite unhurt” (l.24); the dream remains a dream.

Nor is there such success in “Vague Poem (*Vaguely Love Poem*).” Again, though she is no longer re-configuring the moon to write an erotic poem – she has replaced one phallogocentrally-appropriated symbol with another – her poetry still shows a desire for a language that can peel away the petals of the rose-rock (melt the snow, as Shaughnessy’s speaker would translate, or “push [her] head through that round clean opening” [The Man-Moth” l.20]) to get at the “accurate rose of sex.” However, unlike in “The Shampoo,” Bishop’s vague erotic poetics becomes uncertain in “Vague Poem (*Vaguely Love Poem*).” She only thinks “perhaps” that this poetic accuracy exists in the rose-rock, and indeed, she is not even sure that she would know it when she sees it (she doesn’t comprehend “crystallography and its laws”). Nor is she convinced that she has not “*dreamed*” the entire thing: like the speaker of “Why Is the Color of Snow?,” the speaker of “Vague Poem (*Vaguely Love Poem*)” feels that a lunar language is perpetually encased within a dream. It may never be fully realized; the rose of sex may only be a rock,

forever in a state of “trying, working, to show itself”...and after all, “how long do[es she] try to get water from a stone?”

## Part 6

### *Conclusion. (Bon Voyage.)*

Though I have delved into only a fraction of Elizabeth Bishop's and Brenda Shaughnessy's oeuvres in this essay, I believe the relative density of each poem – regarding their representation of the themes of engendered poetic agency, eroticism, and lunar versus solar languages – enables me to establish four claims. First, that solar and lunar language, though seemingly as separate as the sun and moon themselves, are framed in a binary parallel to that of the masculine/feminine as Butler and Sedgwick define it. That is, they are inextricably entwined in a system of identification through difference by which term B (feminine, lunar language) is established by term A (masculine, solar language); in turn, solar language is dependent upon the feminine to determine what it is not, while lunar language remains the “specular surface” for masculine ideals. Second, lunar language is comprised of an additional component: the dream that it will one day be free of this binary, that it will one day radiate its own light. In this respect, lunar language contains both echoes of solar language as well as the *desire* to be non-referential. Third, the erotic poetics of Elizabeth Bishop and Brenda Shaughnessy represent two different brands of lunar language – that is, varying methods to the same goal – with Bishop's characterized by restraint while Shaughnessy's is characterized by directness. Bishop's erotic poetics of restraint, by which she depicts her erotic experience vaguely, discreetly disconnects the moon's phallogocentric connotations from her poem and re-connects it in new ways to herself and her female lover; thus, she can begin to transform the moon's light into something more illuminating of her reality. Shaughnessy's lunar language, by contrast, is formed by an erotic poetics

of directness to seize the words, wielding them more accurately to her experience than the “questionable,” “sliced up” (ll.6, 38) language projected onto the moon by the solar. These methods function similarly in their other poems; each poet’s desire for a lunar language (and the poetics they employ within it) is resonant even in their moonless works.

Fourth, however, is that ultimately Shaughnessy is right: “You’re a tool, moon” (l.25). Even if the moon becomes completely disconnected from the connotations of erotic femininity penetrated into it by a “phallogocentric economy” (Butler 47), it is still just a tool – something to be used – a symbol. Both Bishop’s and Shaughnessy’s poems exhibit echoes of solar language as they work to establish a purely lunar; but, regardless, these are inextricably tangled in a binary of antagonism, in a competition for the power to name the symbol. There is nothing beyond the symbol in articulating our experience.

I am reminded of George Méliès’ short film *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902) and its parody: the music video by the Smashing Pumpkins for their single “Tonight, Tonight,” produced ninety-four years later in 1996. In the first, a large group of male astronomers enter a penis-like space rocket, and in the most famous scene of the film, land by penetrating the moon’s eye. They spend their time on the moon battling “Selenites” (moon creatures named after the Greek lunar goddess) and are eventually chased back into the rocket, with which they flee. In “Tonight, Tonight,” by contrast, the group of astronomers is replaced by a man and a woman; they travel to the moon together in a much rounder spacecraft, falling onto the surface instead of landing in its eye. There, they encounter the Selenites and are chased away – enjoying the stellar view the entire way home.

Ultimately, I think the best way to describe the difference between the film and the music video is that the latter, simply, is less phallogocentric. More importantly, though, I think the differences between *Le Voyage dans la Lune* and the music video of “Tonight, Tonight” speak to what Zona says about Bishop: that she was “never convinced that truth is something a poem could unearth,” but rather, that it is the “*process*” of approaching this truth that is most meaningful in her poetry (9). I believe the same is true for the poetry of both Bishop and Shaughnessy: deep within the lunar language each shapes and employs is the *awareness* that it is bound to the dream of its independence, to the process by which it strives to achieve it. This process – like the process by which the Smashing Pumpkins’ music video transforms Méliès’ film – is what Bishop and Shaughnessy re-configure and re-imagine, intimately, via the articulation of their erotic truths. Space travel, erotic poetry – at the very least, now these women can show they are along on the ride.

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