When asked to teach any course in which there will be an opportunity to assign the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop I, like many of my colleagues, jump at the chance. All the reasons to find her so appealing—the impressive mastery of forms, the seamless integration of form and content, the open-ended investigation of self and world, the painterly eye and the golden ear—all make Bishop an author that no undergraduate student should be able to complete a four-year college experience without having encountered.

Given the "Bishop Boom" of the last twenty-five years, in which scholars and instructors of every theoretical orientation have claimed her as one of their own, have assessed her influences and her influence on others, have debated whether she belongs in the modernist or postmodernist camp, most students are not likely to have graduated without having at least gotten their feet wet in the Bishopian sea. In fact, the sea is as good a place as any to begin a discussion of Elizabeth Bishop in the classroom, since, arguably, "The Fish" is her most anthologized poem. Accessible, but like the sea the eponymous creature inhabits, revealed to be a world of greater depth and complexity the longer one "stare[s] and stare[s]" into it, this poem and so many others by this superlative writer, offers undergraduates the opportunity to cast their lines into the often intimidating ocean of poetic discourse.¹

Because students frequently encounter Bishop in their freshman or sophomore years, they usually come to upper level American literature classes with some degree of familiarity with her work. It is no accident that the latest edition of the Norton Anthology of Modern and

Contemporary Poetry, working chronologically from 1910 (a high modernist moment that allows the editor to include poets born just prior to WW I who came of age in the 1930s and 40s), includes Bishop as its second author, giving her a disproportionate amount of space (nearly thirty pages). In teaching a class on "American Poetry from 1950 s to the Present" I have found it necessary to violate the ostensible chronology in order to include Bishop's poetry, in fact to start off there. A setting such as this, an upper level seminar with twelve to fifteen students, provides the opportunity to explore a wide range of Bishop's work in depth, including several longer poems like "Roosters," "The Moose," and "Crusoe in England." By this stage in their academic careers, many students have acquired the appropriate degree of literary competence to appreciate the pleasure and power of her work. Many of them have by the time they are ready for upper level course work acquired a degree of familiarity with the texts that have informed Bishop herself as a poet, whether it is the work of George Herbert, the Romantics, Hopkins, T. S. Eliot, or her friends Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell. With students at this stage of aesthetic appreciation and literary knowledge, issues of Bishop's placement within the canon, and the validity of either reading her as the vital though last gasp of modernism, or as the first, fresh breath of postmodernism, come to the fore. Elizabeth Bishop may provide, then, a window into how we go about deciding such things as periodization and canon formation, and therefore can be used as a touchstone for discussing why we read the things that we read. Bishop also offers the example of traditional form and free verse in abundant if not equal measure, and can therefore act as a bridge from formalism to free verse for those rare students who may be resistant to view anything that doesn't rhyme as poetry.

2 Elizabeth Bishop, The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, ed. Jahan Ramazani (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003) 15-44. The poet that precedes Bishop in the anthology, Charles Olson, receives about fourteen pages of space; the one that follows her, May Swanson, gets a little over six.
The above justifications for teaching Elizabeth Bishop in the undergraduate classroom make a couple of fairly bald assumptions, the most difficult perhaps can be defined as follows: not everyone who encounters Bishop in the classroom cares a great deal about canon formation, Bishop's alleged importance, or even the genre of poetry. Further, not everyone in an undergraduate classroom is going to consciously admit to any genuine investment in literature at all, except for the term that they are fulfilling one of their GE humanities requirements (mark off the box, move on to the next onerous requirement of a liberal arts education, my imagined worst case student may be thinking). How might Bishop's work function in a classroom such as the one I have just described?

The university where I presently teach offers a two semester “American Literature Survey” course that begins with the age of exploration and ends with postmodernism. Because these courses are offered as fulfillment for general education requirements, they include people taking degrees not only in English, but also in history, physical education, sociology, psychology, business, and sometimes math or science. Given this diversity of student background, I have to assume that a lot of what the students know concerning poetry has lain dormant for some time, only recently revived as we look at the Puritan and Enlightenment eras (represented by poets Bradstreet, Taylor, and Wheatley), interspersed with the requisite prose stylists, before moving on to the American Renaissance, realism, then modern and postmodern writers.

Although such a course may function unfortunately or not as a “greatest hits” approach to the field of American literature, I think it is imperative that students have a chance to encounter the work of Elizabeth Bishop, whose position historically allows her to serve as a bridge between the modernism of T. S. Eliot and Langston Hughes (the two poets who precede Bishop on my syllabus), and contemporary poets like
Robert Pinsky and Li-Young Lee, who I frequently teach during the final portion of the semester. Importantly for my purposes here, I also think that Bishop can be taught in a manner that allows students to feel that the tools of her trade are available to them. Despite the fact that a certain percentage of students might moan and groan at the prospect, and regardless that students in the American literature survey have not signed up for a creative writing class per se, I have found it pedagogically productive to have students try their hands at writing a collaborative sestina.

Naturally, this requires a bit of set up: given that the class in question can be fifty minutes in length three days a week or seventy-five minutes twice per week, and the survey format requires that we move rather quickly through the different periods, not all the poems assigned will be discussed. I have rotated my selections over the years, but usually make sure to assign at least the five following poems: "The Fish," "At the Fishhouses," "The Armadillo," "Sestina," and "One Art." As mentioned previously, "The Fish" provides a good first encounter; students become so engaged in the poem that they take personally the apocryphal suggestion that after the real life event on which the poem is based, Bishop ended up eating the fish in question. A moment like this can generate lively discussion about the value of authentic experience in a poem, since for many students ideas of romantic subjectivity are an unacknowledged, hazy background to their understanding of how poems function, whether for reader or for writer. If the poem speaks to them in a voice without the obvious rhetorical sophistication and idiosyncratic solipsism of a Prufrock, or the self-incriminating slang of the southern racist speaker found in a Langston Hughes poem, they are inclined to think that what they are reading must be factual or "true."

Although I hope that students will read all the poems on the syllabus, I move rather quickly on to Bishop's "Sestina," since this is the chance for students to both analyze and create, to become for the short
time we have together in the classroom poets in the literal sense of the term. I begin by having students read the six stanzas and envoy of the poem before explaining the intricacies of one of two favored French forms for Bishop and others of her generation (I have found that the difficulty of the other popular French form, the villanelle, despite my suggestion that forms can be "broken" in some sense and still be considered "formal poems," requires the more intense commitment of a creative writing class). I next ask questions about the speaker, setting, situation, and tone, offering Helen Vendler's assertion that Bishop's work hovers—like the almanac in "Sestina" itself—between the world of the "domestic and the strange."³ We work our way into the poem in an investigative manner, trying to establish the setting the poet has allowed us to enter in on, and to determine the characters involved in this miniature poetic drama. As you will recall, "Sestina" places a child in the kitchen of a care providing grandmother who conceals the tears she apparently sheds for the biological parents whose absence draws attention to itself. As the discussion evolves, I begin to provide biographical information that provides the possible seeds for Bishop's work, operating theoretically under George Steiner's proposition that such information functions as "vulnerable aids" that, rather than providing totalizing comprehensibility or mastery to a reader's understanding of a text, nonetheless allow a platform for dynamic encounters with it.⁴

I need not rehearse for my present audience the ways in which Bishop's poetry both reveals and conceals in ways characteristic of a great many American female writers the circumstances of her personal background. Suffice it to say that students are, whether we encourage it or care to acknowledge it, very interested in making personal connections to


the works they read, however tenuous. Allowed the chance to consider the emotional context in which such a poem might have arisen from increases students’ engagement with the text. Students can relate to the experience of being separated from a care provider, if only during the course of their time away at school, and a poem that originally strikes some of the students as off-putting and opaque begins to come into sharper focus. If the class seems more or less comfortable with the introduction of biographical material, I sometimes also bring Melanie Klein's ideas about childhood play and what it possibly reveals about developmental psychology into the discussion.5

The remainder of class time will be spent in the composition process itself. I first ask for the entire class to randomly select six words that will serve as our repetends (that is, the words that will be repeated in the pattern established by the sestina form),6 finding that students can be both perceptive and playful in their choices. I usually ask them to write out the rhyme scheme of the poem the night before class, which makes this stage of the activity go more smoothly. I tell them that it is often useful to choose words that can work as both nouns and verbs, further preparing them up for the creative work ahead. In the example student sestina provided below, the undergrads chose, after some lively discussion, the words "grave," "smooth," "walk," "swing," "care," and "ring." I get them in groups six groups of between three to four members depending on class size (these particular American literature GE sections have between eighteen to twenty-two students), and have them choose a "scribe" and an

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5 Brett Millier tells us Bishop had been heavily absorbed in the work of pediatrician Benjamin Spock and child psychoanalyst Melanie Klein during the composition of this poem. Brett Candlish Millier, Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1993), 274.

6 Lewis Turco's The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968) provides a useful description of this, and many other, important formal poems. According to Turco, the sestina is a French, traditionally syllabic (I allow students leeway with this aspect) poem of thirty-nine lines divided up into six sestets and one triplet. Rather than relying upon rhymes, the end words in stanza one occur in a particular order in the remaining stanzas of the poem. The concluding envoy must bury one of the repetends within each line, and end with another, making a total of two per line. The symbolic significance of the form has been lost to us. 113-114.
"orator" (I choose these somewhat anachronistic and stagy terms because I find that my increased theatricality often opens up a space for students to be similarly free in their own performance as poets-for-a-day). Each group is assigned to work on one of the six stanzas (sestets); they are encouraged to try their hand at the envoy (concluding triplet) if time permits (at least one group—or one student—should be asked to create this final three-line stanza). While they are working, I visit each group, making sure they are keeping on task, helping out when asked. I usually write a couple of Richard Hugo’s useful though admittedly romantic maxims on the whiteboard: "It is impossible to write meaningless sequences. In a sense the next thing always belongs. In the world of imagination, all things belong."\(^7\) Frost’s "no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader" also finds itself up on the board before students have gotten very far into the writing process.\(^8\)

In cases when the poems do make an odd kind of logic, by virtue of traceable intuitive associations, students are thrilled. They view themselves as successful makers of something that had perhaps previously been off-putting or boring. Even when the poems can only generously be considered an artistic train wreck, the students still find their exercise in spontaneous creativity worthwhile. The complete sestina included below, composed by undergraduate students following the classroom activity guidelines described above, succeeds I think not only because Hugo’s idea that in sequences the next word is always the right word applies here, but because the students became genuinely engaged in the poetic process, and would turn back to Bishop’s poem as an exemplary model. Through trying their hand at the craft of poetry, their understanding of Bishop’s accomplishments became all the more tangible.

In Class Sestina Exercise, "I Think an Awful Lot about the Grave"

I think an awful lot about the grave
They put me in; spacious, nice and smooth.
Life was rough. I got tired of the walk,
Hanging on tight, my life stuck on a swing.
The funeral: dull, but I don't care.
Won't you watch them wave farewell: church bells ring.

In his left pocket, he felt around for the ring.
His countenance was oh so very grave.
She laid her head on his chest without a care.
In the world. She felt his stubble against
Her smooth skin. He grabbed her hand and began to swing
It back and forth as they went along the walk.

Burdened by confinement of mind, I walk
To silence the menacing, cryptic ring
Of my thoughts that vacillate like a swing.
My mind resurrects from its place in the grave.
My inner path that once seemed uneven is smooth
And the breeze steals away every toil and care.

The foolish Americans don't care
About the road paved by Eskimos on which they walk.
The path to the igloos used to be smooth.
The snow bejewels our figures like a ring
Of liberation, holding our bodies like a grave
Our grave state of oppression; onward, where our fates swing.
What a way to feel you, feel you swing.
Sometimes I don't even try to pretend I care
About my life which sadly seems so grave.
Always moving down the road, my clumsy walk.
If only you would agree to take my ring
And feel it sliding on so smoothly.

The sullen sidewalk feels far too smooth
As worn out legs ache, my limp arms swing.
I think I heard my cell phone ring
About nothing from no one who has time to care.
This would turn out to be my last walk
For now I must travel alone to my grave.

We ring our arms around those we care
For, accept the smooth, flowing, pendulum swing
Of Fate that walks us to our early graves.

If you can find yourself in agreement with Richard Hugo's poetics, or if you enjoy the surreal open-endedness that in class creative writing exercises can provide, you and your students will appreciate this collaborative class effort. The highpoint of our time together, as you might imagine, comes when we share the poem aloud together as a class and students discover that things actually worked out in artistically sensible ways. This is a good point to draw Bishop's "Sestina," and her work in general, back into the discussion. I ask them if there are any similarities between what they have composed, and the Bishop poem we have used as a template, hoping they might better understand the tension between craft and inspiration behind the artistic process. I have found that the feeling of accomplishment for students for whom English classes have not always
been encouraging or enjoyable is palpable. This exercise provides an ideal context for in class intellectual stimulation and focused play, bonding students with each other as they seek to make language communicate meaningfully following the formula of an undisputed master.