

## EXACT AS HORROR

Elizabeth Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments* ed. Alice Quinn, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, pp. 367.

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In a letter to John Taylor on 27 February 1818 Keats offered the axiom that “if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all.” Elizabeth Bishop saw it differently. “Writing poetry is an unnatural act,” she wrote in a prose fragment printed here, and “It takes great skill to make it seem natural. . . . Most of the poet’s energies are really directed towards this goal: to convince himself.” One sadness clinging to *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-box*, this invaluable gathering of unpublished materials, is not so much in the story it shadows of her difficult life, its lost relatives, friends, and lovers (“the art of losing isn’t hard to master”), but in the record it presents of her various failures to convince herself that the work underway, at whatever stage, the candidate poem, “is really an inevitable, *only* natural way of behaving under the circumstances.” Despite her lifelong devotion to the art of poetry, both Bishop’s authorized oeuvre and her other writings would suggest that she was by no means easily convinced. An aphoristic note dated c. 1937 finds her describing poetry as “air transportation (in its present state)” and concludes: “Some poems ascend for a period of time, then come down again; we have a great many stranded planes.” Alice Quinn’s labor of love, with its fascinatingly detailed notes, appendix, and facsimile reproductions is a long exemplification of the lines from William Empson’s villanelle “Missing Dates” about how “It is the poems you have lost, the ills / From missing dates, at which the heart expires.”

That “you” appearing for the first time at line 16 in Empson’s poem appears to be echoed in Dylan Thomas’s equally famous villanelle with the same irrupting pronoun: “And you, my father.” Bishop had written to May Swenson on 4 November 1956: “I’ve tried for years to do a villanelle, I like them so much, but without much luck—like Thomas’s—‘*Do not go gentle into that good night.*’” Twenty years later, she does the very same thing at the same line in “One Art” with “Even losing you I shan’t have lied.” These three villanelles variously focus down, by means of that new pronominal note, on personal issues of breaking or broken relationship as they approach a completing close. Bishop’s parenthetical “(Write it!)” draws attention to the poem’s completion as a resolving achievement of emotional equilibrium, of attachment and detachment—absorbing into the texture of her poem

an implication that “the art of losing” would inevitably include the poems you couldn’t get, or get right. Bishop’s villanelle is then also about the risk of “losing” poems because the crisis feeling out of which they grow swamps the will required to complete them. The circumstances in which the poem might be made to seem the only natural thing overwhelm the poet’s energies in their efforts to achieve a workable balance between the evocation of crisis and its purposeful shaping—emblemized in this case by the completion of the villanelle form itself.

“One Art” is not an uncollected poem; but Quinn most helpfully reproduces the sixteen preserved draft sheets in her appendix. Reading these prompts the thought that composing a poem requires the writer to establish a relationship (one of trusting possibility, of purpose and potential) with the words being shaped; and it’s this sense of potential relationship which releases the ability to add, subtract, rephrase, reorder, develop and curtail that may be involved in completing the work. Equally, completing a poem means establishing and settling that sense of possibility, that potential for action, change, growth, and development, as a trustworthy structure that readers can use to activate such relationship-building skills in and for themselves. Notwithstanding the overwhelming evidence of the poet’s need to nurture and sustain relationships *through* writing in Robert Giroux’s edition of Bishop’s *One Art: Selected Letters*, Quinn’s book evidences the poet’s faltering and at best partial success to establish them *in* these writings and in the endlessly difficult processes of poetic and literary composition. A fragmentary passage towards the close of “Homesickness,” which never got beyond a handwritten sketch of materials with a couple of indicated rhymes, might stand as an epigraph for many of these painfully thwarted pieces: “It was too late—for what, she did not know.—/ already—, remote, / irreparable (rhyme) irreparable.” If the experience approached here proved too remote for reparation (the draft is subtitled “1900”), only too soon the candidate poem would prove so as well.

One of Bishop’s gifts lay in being able economically to describe the look of things. Quinn opens her introduction by noting some of the stray materials contained in the Vassar archive from which she has drawn the texts collected here: “Begonias ghostly in a galvanized bucket” is one. Yet this only goes to show that creative writing, and poetry especially, is not exactly or accurately described as descriptive or description. Such stabs at vivid notation as that phrase about the begonias in a bucket have to be activated, turned into purposeful evocations, by means of an occasioning difficulty. One of Bishop’s best poems, “The Bight,” a piece that gets along by means of some seaboard scene-painting in which, enviably perhaps, “birds soar /

on impalpable drafts,” has to work into that stalking-horse procedure signs of an urgent stock-taking purpose—one signaled by its subtitle “[*On my birthday*].” The poet herself was only too skeptically aware of her descriptive abilities and to what they could lead: whether calling herself “a minor female Wordsworth”, denigrating “our beautiful old silver’ school of female writing”, or noting the boredom of nothing to do but “registering their flora / their fauna, their geography” in the “infinities / of islands” nightmare from “*Crusoe in England*.” She knew what it was like to have sets of descriptive fragments in the notebooks, but nothing resembling a verb to join those bits together.

The frontispiece to Quinn’s book shows a hand-written completed draft of the title poem. Though its first sentence is promisingly confident (“Easily through the darkened room / the juke-box burns; the music falls”), the rest of the first stanza sidles to a close without the satisfaction of a main verb:

Starlight, *La Conga*, all the dance-halls  
in the block of honkey-tonks,  
cavities in our waning moon,  
strung with bottles and blue lights  
and silvered coconuts and conches.

Alongside this stanza Bishop has written “blue as gas, / blue as the pupil / of a blind man’s eye.” Are these words for use in a subsequent but never-written draft? Quinn notes a link between this blind man’s eye and that of the narrator’s neighbor in Poe’s “*The Tell-Tale Heart*.” She doesn’t connect them to the lines in “*The Bight*” where “the water...doesn’t wet anything, / the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible. / One can smell it turning to gas; if one were Baudelaire / one could probably hear it turning to marimba music.” Could “*The Bight*” be a poem that sublimates, intimating without dwelling on, some of the bitter matter that “*Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box*” too directly tries to address? The associations of water, gas, Baudelaire and marimba music might hint that this hangover-like poem has some such material behind its “awful but cheerful” seaside clutter.

In the frontispiece facsimile “*Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box*” has been firmly struck through with a heavy diagonal line. The reasons why poets put lines through apparently completed work are many and various, ranging from momentary pique, through temporary self-doubt or creative depression, exhausted self-disgust, all the way to definitive critical rejection of the draft from further consideration. I’m going to explore the idea that Bishop deleted the poem because she came to view its concluding speculations as tentatively forced and muddled:

Poe said that poetry was *exact*.  
 But pleasures are mechanical  
 and know beforehand what they want  
 and know exactly what they want.  
 Do they obtain that single effect  
 that can be calculated like alcohol  
 or like the response to the nickel?  
 — how long does the music burn?  
 like poetry, or all your horror  
 half as exact as horror here?

This is a troubled and troubling attempt to address the relations between poetry, alcohol, and sexual compulsion. It appears to want at least partially to contradict Poe, but only obliquely questions him. This concluding verse may well be responding to the passage in “The Philosophy of Composition” where Poe describes his writing of “The Raven”—an attempt to show that “not one point in its composition is referrible either to accident or intuition” and that “the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.” Thomas Hardy, a cunning poet himself, described Poe’s account as “a fiction,” and Fernando Pessoa, who imitated and translated the author, thought Poe deluded. Quinn’s extensive and somewhat rambling note does mention “The Philosophy of Composition” in passing, but not the notorious account of “The Raven”—though she does cite a passage by Baudelaire on Poe’s obsession with “the adjustment of means to effect.” When the inventor of the detective story describes poetry as exact, by reflecting on such calculated causal links, he makes the poet an equivalent of his own Auguste Dupin, whose imaginative leaps of association are presented to readers as analytical deductions. Poetry is not “exact” in this way, however *attuned* its parts, because the *effects* of a work of art can never be exactly correlated to its means. There is no strictly causal relationship between the promptings embedded in the work and anyone’s possible responses to them at any time.

Nor are pleasures “mechanical.” You can’t know in advance, for sure, what will give you pleasure. You can only assume and hope. The mechanical causal relationship between the nickel being put in the juke-box and the music selected being played—though that word “selected” interrupts any strictly mechanical link—is by no means the same as the even more associative relationship between the music and the selector’s variably unpredictable pleasure in hearing it (“the appetite may sicken,” as Shakespeare noted), to say nothing of the varieties of possible responses by other listeners to the same song. The effects of alcohol can be predicted, with varying degrees of skill and capacity to act on the self-perceived evidence, but they can’t be cal-

culated exactly, as can be commonly noticed when we stand up from a table or go outside and find ourselves more tipsy than we thought. Bishop is not likely to have been good at such calculations either, given her documented problems with lost weekends.

“Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box” takes place in one of those honky-tonks, where people are drinking hard, playing music, and then engaging in some casual sexual groping which the poem doesn’t detail. Quinn’s note does, however, refer us to manuscript materials that mention “the full and final degradation of our love.” Those appear to be its exact horrors, far more specific (though not specified) than Poe’s pseudo-scientific creations of mystery and imagination—as, for example, in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” where the horrific events aren’t murders, or even crimes, since the Ourang-Outang that is revealed to have killed the victims can’t be attributed with legal intent. Bishop’s poem evades its subject, questions but fails to address its theme, and appears unable either to reflect on, or benefit from analysis, of the relationships, or lack of them, between its suggestively associated materials. Her need to understand and also detach herself from the poem’s subjects is only too clear, but so too is her apparent failure to do either. That’s why I think she may have put a line through it.

What is the difference between the sadness sticking to many of these poems and drafts, and Bishop’s authorized poems? Urges, drives, and compulsions are what may motivate the writing of poetry, and may be made into its subject-matter; but her completed poems manifest ways in which these energies are transformed into objects pleasingly useful to others. Sexual compulsion, alcoholism, grief, loss, depression or despair may seem to occasion art, but they are as likely to be its dispersers too. Bishop’s uncompleted poems have the air of works in which the compulsive will, afflicted by what it seeks to represent, cannot extricate itself to the point at which it may be able to observe itself in art as a form of life. The world, which includes others’ representations of it, can thus only too easily overwhelm the will in poets’ efforts to achieve a workable balance between circumstantial description and purposive shaping. The poet is prompted to acknowledge the mass of surrounding objects, the “silvered coconuts and conches,” but then to resist them or to put them in their place by the action of verbs and the agencies not only of inanimate subjects but human pronouns—sentient presences implied by exclamatory, or vocative, verbal behavior. Bishop’s poems that either don’t wholly work or don’t get finished show ways in which what Coleridge called the “shaping spirit of imagination” may be differently stymied by situations that are also crises of description, or collapses in the face of the overwhelmingly quotidian, or the burdens of maintaining

control without defenses and supports. Bishop's attempt at an "Aubade and Elegy" for her friend Lota de Macedo Soares, who had committed suicide in New York in 1967, is the most painful example of such collapses: "No coffee can wake you no coffee can wake you no coffee / No revolution can catch your attention / You are bored with us all. It is true we were ["were" deleted] boring."

Quite a number of the pieces presented in this collection have human relationships, or their failures, as themes or occasioning subjects. One of the most successful, "It is marvellous to wake up together...", has been in circulation since Lorrie Goldensohn published it in 1992. This was the poem that led me to hope that Bishop's uncollected verse would be the equivalent of a new book by an over-scrupulous poet who, it now seems, proved only rarely self-deceived about her own writings. Here is the middle verse of three:

An electrical storm is coming or moving away;  
 It is the prickling air that wakes us up.  
 If lightning struck the house now, it would run  
 From the four blue china balls on top  
 Down the roof and down the rods all around us,  
 And we imagine dreamily  
 How the whole house caught in a bird-cage of lightning  
 Would be quite delightful rather than frightening;

Bishop's reasons for not publishing this completed, though untitled, poem are also not known. Did the poem depend too much on a personal relationship? It cannot have been held back because she feared the exposure of her sexuality; the gender of the bedmate is not revealed in the first-person plural pronoun. Perhaps she came to think the association between the electrical storm, and the electrocuting-electrifying power of love to transform the world risked the charge of sentimentality? Is there whimsical falsity in the poem's central metaphorical relationship? Whatever it was, the unpublished poem remained carefully preserved—and, strictly speaking, so it remains.

Quinn, or her publisher, made the decision to present some of the material included in this volume as facsimile only. The contents inform us that "It is marvellous to wake up together..." is on page 44. However, the book designer seems to have added the style-feature that facsimile pages don't have page numbers. The only way of finding page 44 is to realize that it must be the "illustration" between pages 43 and 45. This is a particularly bad decision for "In a Room," a poem covering two facing pages in facsimile, and one that has no orientating page numbers in sight when you

attempt to decipher the holograph-annotated but un-transcribed text. This also leaves students or critics who would like to quote the facsimile-only poems with the task of editing a text (in the verse cited above I have not transcribed the first use of the word as “lightening”—with the “e” deleted by hand). Still chasing “It is marvellous to wake up together...,” you look across to read the transcribed text, the poem published from the surviving typescript—and feel justified in doing so because this is the policy elsewhere (with “The Traveller to Rome” on pages 74 and 75 for example). But on page 45 the text is a different one called “Florida Deserta.” Where is “It is marvellous to wake up together...?” By the time you’ve worked out that the low-resolution reproduction of the creased typescript is all you are going to get, a degree of trust in the relationship sustained by the book has evaporated.

Something similar is true if you try to track the note to the same poem. Quinn’s annotations are keyed by a marginal page number and a title in quotation marks, but not picked out in italics or capitals or larger type. If the notes go on for more than two facing pages, as they often fascinatingly do, then readers must flick about to orient themselves with more of their time and attention lost. Continuous running heads signaling which poem or page is being annotated would have been more helpful. The effect of this decision is to strand the notes in their own evident absorption with Bishop, her life, contacts, and writings. Once found, the note on “It is marvellous to wake up together...” begins with four brief paragraphs listing its two extant copies, noting the minor variants between them, reporting on Goldensohn’s finding and printing the poem, then giving some biographical context: was it written at Key West or earlier? Is the other person Marjorie Stevens or Louise Crane? (It’s probably the former). Then follow two pages of interesting, but loosely associated, researches that inform us, for instance, how “Bishop has numerous entries in her notebooks about rain (see the note for ‘After the Rain’).” Here the editor’s weakly focused associations of topics underlines the triviality of description without occasion. Her book contains no index of titles. So you head back to the contents pages and run your finger down until you find “After the Rain” on page 55. Then you do more flicking to locate the note, then read more associative citations of descriptions of rain. Later in the note you come across: “In Bishop’s poem ‘Rain Towards Morning,’ the conjunction of birdcage and bedroom occurs, too, along with ‘an unexpected kiss.’” That’s all. There’s no page reference for this work; so, momentarily at a loss, you head back to Quinn’s contents page—where you don’t find it. Is the title a variant of some other draft? No, it’s one of her published works, the subtitled second of “Four Poems,” and can be found

on page 77 of *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*. That fact might have graced Quinn's text. Sadly, her annotations frequently unravel into not so much notes for the poems, as, rather, typeset collections of loosely associated material accumulated while working in the archives.

*Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-box* is thus an important but slightly bungled hotchpotch. Quinn's appendix with the unpublished prose materials and the manuscripts of "One Art" also contains two pieces of verse. The fragmentary "Ungracious Poem" is placed there because the editor admits in a footnote that she "could not determine where to place it chronologically in the volume proper." The completed "Verdigris" is "included with reference to the prose fragment 'Villanelle' because it is a villanelle." No explanation is given for why it is not in the volume proper, besides the reported fact that "Bishop did not consider it successful." Yet she also sent it to *The New Yorker*, and had it rejected in January 1950 on a split decision. Given the other works that Bishop neither thought successful nor completed enough to send out, the relegation of this poem to the appendix is a puzzle.

One question addressed by a number of the volume's reviewers was whether publication of these texts would harm Bishop's reputation. That seems a dated anxiety, because the mere existence of the book implies a reputation that can sustain the interest in these occasionally trifling and often painfully aborted works. The question might have been whether the moment was right for the presentation of this work, and whether a commercial publisher could cope with what this publication abundantly reveals was required. *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-box* is a partial assemblage of some five separable items. One of them is a poetry collection, perfectly suited for inclusion as an appendix of a future *Complete Poems*, of works both uncollected and unpublished (perhaps the book's subtitle is not quite correct in opting for the former term). It would include the Edgar Allan Poe title poem, "It is marvellous to wake up together . . .," and a fairly large number of others, some of them featured in newspapers and journals to advertise the existence of the book, such as "Syllables" and "Apartment in Leme." This collection of more or less completed poems would have been valuable and enjoyable as a book in its own right. As a collection, it might have better suited a title like the one chosen, not wholly inexplicably, for this more various and apparently authoritative gathering. These completed poems, though ones not thoroughly convincing to their author, form the most satisfying part of Quinn's volume.

Then there is a specialist publication, containing more than Quinn includes, of Bishop's definitely uncompleted drafts, fragments, false starts and tailings off, her notes for unwritten poems, and related matter. I have

attended a Power Point illustrated lecture by Barbara Page of Vassar College that included material not published here. This work might prove so complex and tangled as to require a database publication. Then, as sampled by the “One Art” drafts in facsimile, there is the equivalent of a Cornell Bishop in which her various authorial collections, plus the unpublished or uncollected but completed poems, receive the honor accorded to William Wordsworth and W. B. Yeats—fully transcribed texts of manuscript materials with complete editorial apparatus. Further, there are the uncollected review essay and memoir drafts gathered in the ragbag appendix, which could form some of the materials for an enlarged complete prose. Finally, there are Quinn’s annotations, which constitute both a useful draft of core matter for editorial work on the above volumes—as well as the extensive, but under-organized raw material for Quinn’s own as yet unwritten, but broadly sketched, book on the poet at work.

Do Bishop’s writings have sufficient standing to sustain such industry? There’s room for disagreement here. A commercial publisher would likely only contemplate undertaking a definitive *Complete Poems* and a companion prose volume. Very probably Elizabeth Bishop’s reputation is here to stay; but the decisions and work required to present the full corpus of completed poems, both authorized and not, in variorum, as well as unraveling the mass of drafts and fragments, will require many more years yet. In the meantime, Alice Quinn’s *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-box* must surely provide hours of incalculable pleasure through which her readers, like the John Ashbery on the jacket for whom “there can never be enough of her writing,” may work on their own relationships with more of her—second- and third-best, maybe, but nonetheless fascinating—words.