One

THE SCREAM
1911–1930

NOT UNTIL 1952, when she set up a stable and happy life in the household of Lota de Macedo Soares, could Elizabeth Bishop take objective account and make direct artistic use of her difficult childhood. During this time, she became deeply interested in her family's circumstances in her early years, and she wrote anxiously to her aunt and cousin asking for artifacts, family treasures, firsthand historical accounts of life in Nova Scotia in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Elizabeth dreamed aloud in letters of buying a house in Nova Scotia, an authentic old house "exactly like my grandmother's."[1] The accounts of her childhood that poured out of her in prose, poetry, and letters in this the only extended period of security in her adult life contrast with her earlier attempts at an autobiographical novel. They explore in frank first-person flashbacks how it felt to be a child in those circumstances, fatherless and essentially motherless, among people two generations removed, conversation and events circling ominously around unspoken tragedy concerning her.

Hard facts about Elizabeth Bishop's childhood, as about anyone's, are few. And yet, few writers have been as consistent and complete in writing about childhood. Bishop claimed a very literal sort of

accuracy as her highest poetic value, and she is rarely caught in an error or a contradiction. Her own accounts, in poetry and prose both published and unpublished, are the main source of information about her earliest years.

Elizabeth Bishop was born the only child of William T. Bishop and Gertrude May Boomer Bishop on February 8, 1911, in Worcester, Massachusetts. William Bishop was born in 1872, the eldest of eight children, only four of whom survived to adulthood. His father, John W. Bishop, was a native of White Sands, Prince Edward Island, and his mother, Sarah Anne Foster Bishop, was born in Massachusetts. William at the time of his marriage was thirty-six years old. "One of the most capable estimators in the structural world," he was vice-president of his father's highly successful contracting firm, the J. W. Bishop Company, builders of such noted Boston landmarks as the Public Library, the Museum of Fine Arts, and the old Charlestown jail. Gertrude Boomer was born the second of five children of William Brown Boomer (the family name was variously spelled Boomer or Bulmer, with the *l* silent) and Elizabeth Hutchinson Boomer, of the British Hutchinson sailing family. Elizabeth liked to point out that her great-grandfather Hutchinson had been lost at sea off Cape Sable, and she once visited this "graveyard of the Atlantic," either to fulfill her destiny by drowning, she said, or to write about the place. The piece was never finished, but Elizabeth saw her temperamental origins in these adventurous ancestors: "That line of my family seems to have been fond of wandering like myself—two, perhaps three, of the sea-captain's sons, my great uncles, were Baptist missionaries in India."[2] She was three-quarters Canadian and one-quarter New Englander and claimed to have had ancestors on both sides of the Revolutionary War. The Boomers were New York State Tories given land grants in Nova Scotia by George III.

William Bishop and Gertrude Boomer met in 1907 and were married at New York's Grace Church in June of the following year. They honeymooned in Jamaica and sailed to Panama before return-

ing to Massachusetts to set up house at 875 Main Street in Worcester. Elizabeth spent the earliest part of her life in wealthy circumstances in this house. Her father was a frank and cheerful man who wrote to the Boomers four days after Elizabeth's birth that her mother "has more milk than she knows what to do with, so we shall make butter probably. We started to have twins and when we changed our minds forgot to cut off half the milk supply."[3] His pleasure in his daughter was sadly brief; he died of Bright's disease on October 13, 1911, when Elizabeth was eight months old. He had been ill, off and on, for six years. A *Worcester Magazine* obituary described him respectfully as a "well-read" and "deep student," and "a self contained man" and lamented that "his love of home and quiet environment kept him from becoming very well known socially."[4]

Gertrude Bishop was a complex and intelligent young woman and a talented ice skater, but she was deeply disoriented by her husband's death. For the next five years, she was in and out of mental hospitals and rest homes and moved between Boston, Worcester, and her hometown of Great Village, Nova Scotia. Elizabeth described this from her childhood point of view in her autobiographical short story "In the Village": "First, she had come home, with her child. Then she had gone away again, alone, and left the child. Then she had come home. Then she had gone away again, with her sister; and now she was home again."[5]

Elizabeth left published accounts of only two memories of this period, and the first seems a condensed version of any number of disappointing or frightening episodes. In a 1952 review of Wallace Fowlie's autobiography, *Pantomime: A Journal of Rehearsals,* she criticized the unrelieved cheerfulness of Fowlie's treatment of Boston places and events she had experienced herself at about the same time. She wrote, "My own first ride on a swan boat occurred at the age of three and is chiefly memorable for the fact that one of the live swans paddling around us bit my mother's finger when she offered it a peanut. I remember the hole in the black kid glove and a drop

of blood."[6] As in a Bishop poem, the unbelabored assumptions behind the detail are what make the passage moving. The glove is black because her mother still wears mourning three years after her husband's death. There is an implicit contrast between the two kinds of paddling swans: "live" and artificial. The simple interaction between mother and daughter is fragile, unexpectedly dangerous, easily intruded upon.

In the second account, the elegy "First Death in Nova Scotia," Elizabeth is given a lily of the valley by her mother to place in a dead cousin's hand. The death of little Arthur (whom she was later surprised to discover had actually been named "Frank") is confused in the child's mind with a number of Canadian national symbols: the red and white of Arthur's casket invites the confusion, for those are the colors of the royal family's velvet and ermine costumes, the Canadian flag, and the two dead creatures in the poem—the shot loon and little Arthur himself. The poem conveys child-consciousness through intense identification of memory and desire with objects—the loon's red-glass eyes, "much to be desired"; a lily of the valley from her mother's hand; the "frosted cake" of Arthur's coffin; the stuffed loon's "caressable" white breast. The confusion of images of things dead and far away speaks to the child's precocious familiarity with loss, and the poem's title not only suggests the first death among pioneers in a new country but also predicts a series of losses, ordered in memory by the years between the event and the poem.

Among Elizabeth's papers are several unfinished literary accounts of her brief time with her mother. One is a poem entitled "A Drunkard," apparently begun in 1959 or 1960 and worked on over ten years, in which she remembered being with her mother at a Bishop family summer home in Marblehead, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1914 at the time of the great Salem fire. The poem attaches the memory of the fire to Elizabeth's later alcoholism and is equally important as a tiny summary of the two poles of Elizabeth's mind, even at the age of three. On the one hand, she is amazed, not afraid,

of the fire as she stands in her crib watching the red light play on the walls of her room. Her memory of the fire is a compendium of vivid details:

> People were playing hoses on the roofs
> of the summer cottages in Marblehead . . .
> the red sky was filled with flying moats,
> cinders and coals, and bigger things, scorched black
> burnt
> The water glowed like fire, too, but flat . . .
>
> In the morning across the bay
> the fire still went on, but in the sunlight
> we saw no more glare, just the clouds of smoke
> The beach was strewn with cinders, dark with ash –
> strange objects seemed [to] have blown across the water
> lifted by that terrible heat, through the red sky?
> Blackened boards, shiny black like black [feathers] –
> pieces of furniture, parts of boats, and clothes –

On the other hand, she is alone and in trouble. She stands in her crib terribly thirsty and cannot get the attention of her mother, whom she sees out on the lawn greeting refugees, distributing coffee. In the morning, as they walk among the refuse,

> I picked up a woman's long black cotton
> stocking. Curios[ity]. My mother said sharply
> Put that down!

As an adult, Elizabeth remembered this event as a profound rejection of herself, her curiosity, her observant eye, and, because the forbidden object was a piece of a woman's intimate clothing, perhaps some aspect of her sexuality as well. Combined with the neglect she had felt the night before during the fire, this rejection seemed sweeping. She identifies it as the incipient event of her alcoholism

("Since that day, that reprimand . . . I have suffered from abnormal thirst"), and in no later memory did she recall wishing for her mother's presence. She became, in the language of attachment theorists, an avoidant child.

Elizabeth began trying to tell in prose the story of her mother's unsatisfactory presence and ultimate disappearance shortly after Gertrude Bishop's death in May 1934. As a high school writer, Elizabeth had invented a semiautobiographical character named Lucius, a small boy living in Nova Scotia with his brother and his father, an intensely thoughtful child given to vivid and frightening fantasies. In 1934–1935, as Elizabeth began to plan for a novel about her childhood, she resurrected Lucius, first named "Gillespie" and then "de Brisay"—both names of families she had known in Great Village. The cover of the notebook containing these sketches quotes Gerard Manley Hopkins: "Enough: Corruption was the world's first woe."

This Lucius arrives in the village and leaves it at intervals he cannot predict in the company of his mother, whom he calls "Easter," her given name. Easter is clearly unwell. Her mental state is the constant concern of her family, especially of her sister, Grace, and her mother, and is discussed just out of Lucius's hearing but not out of his perception. Most of the Lucius stories rehearse material Elizabeth later treated in "In the Village"—the last visit of Easter and her son to the home of her parents in Nova Scotia and the events that precipitated her departure—but they are even more attentive than the published story is to how his mother's presence or absence affects Lucius. They record his dreams and fantasies as well as his childish misinterpretations of the events taking place.

In the first Lucius story, the boy and his mother arrive unannounced at her native village in Nova Scotia in the fall of 1913. Lucius's pleasure at being back in the village is tempered by his anxiety about his mother's feelings and about the reception they will get when they arrive at his grandparents' house. Other stories tell

about what it is like for Lucius to be in the house with Easter, whom he identifies only once as his mother:

> We became quite stolidly a family when he [Grandfather] read the Bible. My wicked Aunt looked devout, and my poor grandmother almost a matriarch or "manager." Easter never joined in with our feeling for Grandfather's reading. . . . Almost always she lay on the sofa with an arm across her eyes, her other arm hanging down so that the white hand lay on the floor.

The family's conversations, which Lucius half-hears, are ominous to him. He is aware of constant tension in the air, of implied dangers, and he feels (indeed, is made to feel) that he is somehow responsible for it.[7]

> In the night she began to cry very gently and complainingly like a good child that has stood all it can. She made little imploring noises, asking someone for something. I sat up & pulled my boots on & took the stick from under the window & shut that, then I sat on the edge of the bed waiting for Aunt Grace. ~~She began to cry louder.~~ Suddenly the door opened & Aunt Grace, holding the little lamp, stuck her head in and said very low: "I guess you'll have to come, Lucius. Maybe she wants you." We walked along the hall – I took the lamp. Just as we got to the door Aunt Grace said, "Oh – I don't know what to do–"

Lucius's nights are haunted by his mother's needs; they are present in his dreams. He tells us that his mother never appears directly; but in one, he dreams of the large moths that inhabit Nova Scotia in the summertime. They grow frightening and then in a linguistic turn—"Easter came into it somehow"—become identified with "mother." "I woke up, horrified with all the fluttering moths, and just as I woke, so that the feeling was neither a sleeping one nor a waking one, I became certain that the enemy was she."

In the summer of 1952, a few months after she had settled herself in Petrópolis, Brazil, Elizabeth returned after nearly fifteen years to the material in the Lucius stories. "In the Village" describes a period of several weeks in the life of a five-year-old girl who lives with her grandparents on a farm in Nova Scotia. During this time, her mother returns to the farm from a stay in a mental hospital, suffers a relapse, and goes back to the hospital with a troubling air of finality. In the central event, the mother screams in fear as her dressmaker fits the first colorful dress she will wear after five years of mourning, terrifying her imaginative daughter. The story traces the scream's echoes through the child's days and nights in the weeks following, indicating its results in her fragmentary perception. The memory is framed by a brief introduction and a brief closing, both written in the adult narrator's voice.

Elizabeth told her *Paris Review* interviewer that one of the discoveries she made during a brief period of therapy in the mid-1940s was that she could "remember things that happened to me when I was two. It's very rare, but apparently writers often do." She continued:

> I think I remember learning to walk. My mother was away and my grandmother was trying to encourage me to walk. It was in Canada and she had lots of plants in the window the way all ladies do there. I can remember this blur of plants and my grandmother holding out her arms. I must have toddled. It seems to me it's a memory. It's very hazy. I told my grandmother years and years later and she said, "Yes, you did learn to walk while your mother was visiting someone." But you walk when you're one, don't you?[8]

These remarks explain the vivid way "In the Village" conveys the five-year-old's impressions of loss without the artificiality or self-pity an adult might add. Elizabeth's memories of her childhood, when they became conscious, were extraordinarily detailed.

The method of "In the Village" is essentially the same as in Bishop's poetry; memory, and the pain and pleasure associated with it, mixed up poignantly with touch, hearing, smell, taste, and sight. Memory and the meaning of memory inhere in objects that can be touched (or are forbidden to be touched), held, put in one's mouth, even swallowed accidently; in the sounds of a scream, a hammer and an anvil, a brook, a cow making "cow-flops," muffled front-room voices; in the smells of a broken perfume bottle, sachets, mint leaves, and burnt hay; in the taste of chocolates or tears, the feel in one's mouth of a nickel or a tiny glass button.

Bishop opens "In the Village" in an adult voice, with a preamble that speaks to the way adult consciousness has learned to live with what the story describes. But the story is very much about what the *child* "knows" and does not know, what parts of her world become refuges and what parts are imperiled by loneliness, talkative adults, or objects associated with "the scream." Told primarily in the first person, the story never identifies the hysterical "she" as "Mother," although in occasional third-person descriptions, the pair appears as "the woman" and "her child." The child's other relatives—"grandmother," "grandfather," "older aunt," "younger aunt," and intricate relations among the village residents—are all very clear to her. "She" is essentially a stranger whom the child feels she must please and in whose company she is decidedly uncomfortable. "She" also brought the child to the village and has come and gone in a confusing pattern of flight, that the child mimics in her dealings with "she." "The child vanishes" at the sound of the scream and "slide[s] out from under" a pat on the head; postcards from her mother's trunk and the illustrations in a drummer's Bible take her on imaginary trips; the daily journey through town to the cow pasture is a flight through the wonders and dangers of store windows and angry or fanatical neighbors. Once in the pasture, however, the child cannot stay "safely here . . . all day, playing in the brook and climbing on the squishy, moss-covered hummocks in the swampy part"

because "an immense, sibilant, glistening loneliness suddenly faces" her. She goes back to the dangerous house.

The blacksmith's shop is the child's favorite refuge, for though it is dark, full of "night black" cooling tanks, where "things hang up in the shadows and shadows hang up in the things," and though many of the blacksmith's creations are "too hot to touch," the child is an honored guest in the shop, like the horses brought to be shod, "very much at home." This child of makeshift circumstances yearns for things of her own, to keep and hide so that nothing will ever happen to them. When she cries to the artisan blacksmith, " 'Make me a ring, Nate!' . . . instantly it is made; it is mine."

The mother's scream, as she stands draped in brilliant purple fabric while her dressmaker, with pins in her mouth, crawls around pinning up the hem "as Nebuchadnezzar had crawled eating grass," is indicated in one sentence early in the story: "The dress was all wrong. She screamed." In the Lucius stories the scene is fleshed out; Easter is even more obviously disturbed:

> Easter stood stiff and straight and happy. She waved at me. "Look, Lucius, I'm having a new dress! It will have gold on it. All around the hem & around the neck and sleeves, real gold. Come & kiss my hand."
>
> Miss O'Neil [the dressmaker] picked up a large pair of shears & took hold of the extra cloth, to cut it away. At once Easter fell to her knees and snatched the cloth away from her. "Oh, oh!" she cried. "You hurt me, you mustn't cut it. It shan't be cut. It's mine. . . . No, you take the scissors away. Grace! Make her stop– it will bleed. I shall bleed.". . .
>
> She jumped up & ran to the other end of the room, trailing the cloth in a wonderful swirl behind her. ~~She stood there and screamed. You want to take my dress away.~~ "The only dress I have in the world, you want to bare me naked. It's mine, it's mine. You can't have it. You want to make me all naked." But–Aunt Grace said to me, "Lucius, please take Miss O'Neil down stairs." We

went out together. Half-way down there was a louder scream from the bedroom.

"In the Village" takes up the story at this point, following the child through the earliest consequences of the scream as she makes her way in the usually safe and peaceful days of spring in the tiny town. But fear and suspicion subvert the earthy pastoral of the child's life in recurring images of darkness that shadow all her efforts to compensate: the sense of "something darkening over the woods and waters as well as the sky," the presence of profound darkness in the underworld workings of the cheerful blacksmith shop. (Lucius had noticed, "The darkness favored my family in some way.") When the child takes from her mother's "things" an ivory embroidery tool, "to keep it forever," she buries it "under the bleeding heart"; the mother's irrationally prolonged period of mourning ("morning" to the child) teaches her the mystery of blackness; her grandmother cries into her potato mash, which tastes "wonderful but wrong" because of the tears; loneliness invades the cow's pasture; the child is embarrassed while taking a package addressed to the sanatorium to the post office.

When the mother went away following the scream, she went away forever. Despite the best available care at great expense, Gertrude Bishop never recovered her mental health. (Elizabeth believed her mother had been hospitalized for a time at McLean's in Belmont, Massachusetts, though the hospital has no record of a stay there.) Many other frightening scenes between child and mother may be surmised from the few that Elizabeth recorded, but she recorded at length only this last one. "In the Village" is an account of the child's final experience of her mother in the spring of 1916. Because Gertrude Bishop lost her U.S. citizenship with her husband's death, she was hospitalized in a public sanatorium in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, where she was diagnosed as permanently insane and where she died in late May 1934, without seeing her daughter again.

Among Elizabeth's unpublished poems are a very few other, more tentative attempts to write about this time when Gertrude Bishop and her daughter were together. All present a truncated mother, as she might be seen by a confused child, represented by her clothes, her "things," the "front-room voices" little Elizabeth overheard, and a few crystalline memories:

A mother made of dress-goods
white with black polk-dots,
black and white "Shepherd's Plaid."
A mother is a hat . . .

A long black glove
the swan bit
in the Public Gardens

Hair being brushed at night
and brushed
"Did you see the spark?"
Yes, I saw the spark
and the shadow of the elm
outside the window
and

A naked figure standing
in a wash-basin shivering half [crouched]
a little, black and white
in the sloping-[ceilinged] bedroom.

A voice heard still
echoing
far at the bottom somewhere
of my aunt's on the telephone –
coming out of blackness –
the blackness all voices come from

The snow had a crust, they said, like bread –
only white – it held me up but it would not hold
her
she fell through it
and [said she'd] go home again for the snow-shoes –
and I could slide in shine and glare while she
stepped wide.
on the

"Sestina," which followed "In the Village" in *Questions of Travel* (1965), also evokes this time, perhaps shortly after Gertrude's final departure from Great Village. The story prepares us with grandmother crying into the potato mash for the poem's intricate play with the same elements: grandmother, child, house, stove, tears, and the harsh and inevitable symbol of Elizabeth's lifelong anxiety about the passage of time, an almanac. The child displaces the grandmother's tears to the rain, to drops of water on the stove, to the cup of tea, to buttons. Here are the middle stanzas:

It's time for tea now; but the child
is watching the teakettle's small hard tears
dance like mad on the hot black stove,
the way the rain must dance on the house.
Tidying up, the old grandmother
hangs up the clever almanac

on its string. Birdlike, the almanac
hovers half open above the child,
hovers above the old grandmother
and her teacup full of dark brown tears.
She shivers and says she thinks the house
feels chilly, and puts more wood on the stove.

The child in the poem also draws a "rigid house," a pictorial version of the tension that dominated Elizabeth's childhood.

Despite the anxiety lurking behind the pastoral of "Sestina," the Lucius stories, and "In the Village," Elizabeth Bishop's recollections of her Nova Scotia childhood were essentially positive. She described her grandparents as simple and loving people of conservative politics and Scots financial temperament. The stories and the poem show grandmother, "Gammie," carrying on her work despite the sadness in the house, crying into the potato mash she stirs on the stove, but stirring nonetheless. The Baptist and Presbyterian hymns she sang were her granddaughter's introduction to poetry and stayed with her all her life. Gammie's characteristic phrase in times of trouble—"Nobody knows"—became almost a mantra for Elizabeth, and she tried for years to write a poem about it. The grandfather, "Pa," Elizabeth described as her favorite grandparent. He was a deacon in the Baptist church and had owned the local tannery until machine tanners took over. In the short story "Gwendolyn," his presence in the house is captured in this line describing his reaction to extravagant displays of affection: " 'Oh, lallygagging, lallygagging!' said my grandfather, going on about his business." And in his response to Elizabeth's spontaneous tears: " 'Heavens, what ails the child now?' " A girlhood poem, "For C. W. B.," addresses Grandfather Bulmer in romantic terms: "Let us live in a lull of the long winter-winds / Where the shy, silver-antlered reindeer go / On dainty hoofs with their white rabbit friends / Amidst the delicate flowering snow." "Manners," a poem Elizabeth hoped would be the first in a book for children, also warmly characterizes Pa: "My grandfather said to me / as we sat on the wagon seat, / 'Be sure to remember to always / speak to everyone you meet.' "

Two of her mother's sisters—the oldest, Maud, and the second, Grace—had already left home, but Grace was a frequent visitor to the farm. Younger brother Arthur, the subject of Bishop's "Memories of Uncle Neddy," was an alcoholic ne'er-do-well tinsmith who lived out his life across the village green from his parents. His wife, called "Aunt Hat" in the story, was a fiery, red-haired object of fascination to the child. "Aunt Mary," Gertrude's youngest sister

and a high school student when Elizabeth entered primer class, or kindergarten, appeared in her memories as an altogether normal teenager; she had "a great many suitors" and "wore white middy blouses with red or blue silk ties, and her brown hair in a braid down her back." She was frequently late to the one-room school that housed all twelve grades.

Elizabeth began her formal education in that schoolhouse, and later, when she wrote her memoir of her first school year, "Primer Class," she remembered sensations: the fascinating black writing slates, the smell of the rags used to clean them, her terror at seeing long columns of numbers on the chalkboard, and her passion for the large roll-down maps used to teach geography to the lucky third- and fourth-graders:

> They were on cloth, very limp, with a shiny surface, and in pale colors—tan, pink, yellow and green—surrounded by the blue that was the ocean. . . . On the world map, all of Canada was pink; on the Canadian, the provinces were different colors. I was so taken with the pull-down maps that I wanted to snap them up, and pull them down again, and touch all the countries and provinces with my own hands. Only dimly did I hear the pupils' recitations of capital cities and islands and bays.[9]

Not so dimly, however, that she would not remember them, and the catechism of questions they answered, when she went looking for an epigraph for her last book, *Geography III:* "In what direction is the Volcano? The Cape? The Bay? The Lake? The Strait? The Mountains? The Isthmus? What is in the East? In the West? In the South? In the North?"

Great Village, despite its paradoxical name, is a tiny town about twenty miles northwest from Truro, Nova Scotia, in the lowlands between the Cobequid Mountains and the Minas Basin. (Fifty years later, Elizabeth lived in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil.) In the summer, it is green with thick grass, elm trees, and evergreens run-

ning down to the rocky shore. The sky is as blue as "In the Village" described it, "pure . . . too dark, too blue," and the houses and churches are white, or green and white, with an occasional dark brown. The village's half-dozen streets are now paved, and its residents remember the Boomers but not Elizabeth herself, except by reputation. People in Great Village now make their livings in dairy products, eggs, and cattle or in fishing and small, sweet strawberries and blueberries grown for commercial sale. There are apple orchards but not much other agriculture. The post office is still as tiny and lopsided as Bishop described it in her stories and memoirs. Great Village is a bigger place than it was in the early part of the century, but not much wealthier.

Living in Great Village put one, as perhaps it still does, in automatic relation with neighbors. The village itself was an expanding household whose familiar rooms for Elizabeth included the Baptist and Presbyterian churches, Nate's blacksmith shop, Mealy's candy store and town switchboard, various barns, Uncle Arthur's tinsmith shop and store, the Hills' store, a river, the pasture where Nelly grazed, the schoolhouse, the iron bridge, the dressmaker's house, the post office, the village green, houses named for the women who ran them (Mrs. Peppard's, Mrs. McNeil's, Mrs. Geddes's, Mrs. Captain Mahon's, Miss Spencer's), the McLeans' farm, the Chisolms' farm, Layton's store, and the shore. Not until Elizabeth established her place among the Brazilian inhabitants of Lota Soares's household in Petrópolis, Brazil, was she able to recapture this sense of broad and happy relations among neighbors and relatives, hospitality on a grand scale ordering a simpler life.

Fragments of unpublished poems among Elizabeth's papers, also dating from her first years in Brazil, attempt to memorialize this simplicity, identifying it as refuge from the rush of passing time:

> We lived in a pocket of Time.
> It was close, it was warm.
> Along the dark seam of the river,